

How Many Dreams Are There in Murdoch's *Bruno's Dream*? Dream as the Symbol of Reality, Imagination and Death

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Abstract:

Iris Murdoch is famed for her numerous novels, full of symbols entwining the improbable and fantastic elements of her characters' imagined worlds with the real facts of their actual lives. In *Bruno's Dream*, the central symbol appears in the very title of the novel, and it then permeates the entire narrative, becoming a symbol of reality, imagination, and finally death for the main hero. The paper follows the dreams of all the protagonists, some of which come true, while others remain in the land of the imaginary.

Once upon a time, I, Chuang Chou, dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of my happiness as a butterfly, unaware that I was Chou. Soon I awaked, and there I was, veritably myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man.

(Chuang Tse, "On Levelling All Things")

I. Introduction

Iris Jean Murdoch, born in Dublin on 15th July 1919, was an extremely prolific writer and a philosopher in her own right. She is the author of several works of philosophy and twenty-six novels, written during a career that spanned over forty years – from *Under the Net*, published in 1954, to her last novel – *Jackson's Dilemma* (1996). Among her many honours and awards were the James Tait Black Memorial Prize (for *The Black Prince*, in 1973), the Whitbread Literary Award (for *The Sacred and Profane Love-Machine*, in 1974), and the Booker McConnell Prize (for *The Sea, the Sea*, in 1978), while five more of her novels were also short-listed for this prestigious prize – and among them *Bruno's Dream*. Iris Murdoch died of Alzheimer's disease on 8th February 1999, having achieved world-wide critical acclaim.

Although some critics highlight the fact that Murdoch – whose works were greatly influenced by French Existentialism – advocated *a return to realism* and thought that the duty of a novel was "to portray the world as it is, and to strive to tell the truth about it" (Bran 2004:3), others express differing opinions. Thus, P. J. Kavanagh regrets her "tendency towards extravaganza" (cited in Thomson 1969:277), while Walter Allen points to the *predictability* of Murdoch's novels, in which the plots are petrified into formulae after the initial excitement, in addition to some other elements typical of her prose writing, such as *overloaded* fiction, "so that it breaks down under a superfluity of characters often too diverse in kind or rendered according to too diverse laws of creation" (Allen 1969). In any case, the truth is that – alike the leading Existentialist, Jean Paul Sartre – Murdoch is "an 'intellectual' whose interest in depicting human lives and their environment is largely analytical [...who] wants to pass judgement on human life [...but] does not decide in advance on the answer" (Wilson 1962:64).

II. The Main Protagonists of *Bruno's Dream*

In *Bruno's Dream*, which is generally regarded as one of Iris Murdoch's best books, the author tackles all her favourite topics: love, death, the essence of life, and the eternal question of good versus evil. The new element in this novel, when compared to her earlier works, is the strength of love when it faces death, since – as has been noted – “[d]eath cancels the body, the senses, material possessions, attachments and passions of all sorts; but something like love holds out to the end; the last and greatest, it is the only force that is coeval with death.” (Baldanza 1974:148) The main character in the novel, Bruno Greensleave, who is nearly ninety, is slowly dying of cancer and his illness represents the framework of the novel. The people in his life – some of whom are already dead – are linked to him through either blood ties or emotional ones, woven by destiny; and, within the novel's plot, Bruno resembles a huge spider at the focus of a complex web of relationships with all the other characters. Although in his youth Bruno led an eventful and dynamic life, he is now bed-ridden and feeble, confronting his fears, guilt and repentance. Confined to an upstairs bedroom in his son-in-law's house, from which he can no longer go out into the *real* world and participate in everyday life, the old Bruno is surrounded by his books on spiders – a symbol of his unfulfilled *dream* of becoming a scientist, by forever jumbled piles of stamps – a symbol of the wealth inherited from his father, which *really* does exist, and by his thoughts about the women he once loved and lost – his wife Janie and mistress Maureen, as well as his estranged son Miles, whose respect he is striving to regain.

Bruno's widowed son-in-law, Danby Odell, is related to him only by his marriage to Bruno's late daughter Gwen, but he has invited the sick, old man into his home and devoted a lot of his free time and care to him. Nothing can be compared to Danby's love for Gwen, with whom he spent the best days of his life, so his affairs with the maids and his romantic flirting with his brother-in-law's wife – Diana, are all far beneath that love of his *dreams*. Such strong emotions only arise again when he meets Diana's sister – Lisa, and thus rediscovers true love. In this novel, Danby is a character of exceptional importance,¹ stemming from the fact that he has had first-hand experience of both passionate love – with his wife, and later on with Lisa, and death – while taking care of Bruno; and that is why he has been described as “a fully fleshed out character” (Dipple 1982:172).

Contrary to Danby, Miles is so self-obsessed that he is even afraid of seeing his own father one last time before the old man dies because it might upset him and further hamper his efforts to write, which have in any case been fruitless. Miles was offended many years earlier by Bruno's mockery of his Indian fiancé, Parvati, and since then he has not seen his father, not even after her death in a plane accident, which hurt him so much that he has spent the rest of his life in pain. Although he later married Diana, Miles has continued to live in seclusion and to *dream* of becoming a successful poet.

Diana is another crucial character in the novel, although in the beginning she is also confined to her home, since she has chosen to devote her life to domesticity and exists through her husband – in a marriage which was the fulfilment of her *dream*. However, her dream world will be shattered twice – first, by the appearance of Danby, and then by her husband's love for her sister – and only at the end will she again find her rightful place, next to Bruno during the last minutes of his life.

Diana's sister, Lisa Watkin, is a charismatic being who *dreams* of a love affair with her sister's husband, Miles. In spite of this, having suddenly upset the lives of all the other characters in the novel, including the old Bruno who sees in her both his late daughter and somebody new who might love him, she finally chooses – contrary to all expectations – to accept Danby's affections.

The remaining characters in the novel are Adelaide, Danby's maid, and her twin cousins: creepy Nigel, Bruno's nurse, and his brother – wicked Will, whom Adelaide marries in the end. Their importance to the plot is highlighted by the following remark: “By adding the servant triangle of Adelaide, Nigel, and Will, Murdoch sets the stage with the props of a Shakespearean domestic comedy.” (Whitton 1999) Moreover, through Nigel, the author expresses some of her philosophical views, again using certain symbols, like candles and black clothes. Nigel, who is as charismatic as Lisa, represents an *all-seeing omniscient force* (see Todorović 1973:585), which is why Murdoch lets him save the lives of both Danby and Diana. Likewise, the love affair between Will and Adelaide, marred by Nigel's occasional intrusions, is just the mirror-image of the romantic ties that exist among

¹ As will be demonstrated here, he is even more important than Bruno's own son, Miles.

the quartet created by the four more important protagonists (Miles, Diana, Lisa, Danby) – which is also a common occurrence in Murdoch’s novels.²

III. The Importance of Symbols in Murdoch’s Works and Some Typical Murdochian Elements

It is obvious that all these characters form a kind of a network, or a spider’s web at the centre of which is Bruno, who is closely connected to each of the other persons, but they are also mutually related within that web. Most critics emphasize the “highly patterned symbolic structure” (Drabble 1994:679) of Murdoch’s books, pointing to the fact that “[a]n unavoidable feature of Murdoch’s novelistic poetics in all her works is the abundance of symbols”³ (Todorović 1973:586) – and *Bruno’s Dream* is no exception in that sense. There are those that are placed at the centre of the novel – such as the spider’s web and dreams, and then a series of smaller, intermittent symbols, which support and supplement the main ones. It must also be borne in mind that, as Derrida argues, the *symbolized* is naturally connected to the *symbol* and it is in this way that the word *dream* – as a symbol, and not a *sign* – makes ‘etymological reactivating’ possible (see more about this in Derrida 1990:12).

In this novel, one of the central symbols is the web woven by Bruno with his tales of past loves, unrealized dreams, and priceless stamps. Although he is confined to bed, he remains the focus of that web, or mesh, in which all the other characters become entangled sooner or later. Smaller symbols stem from their relations with Bruno and their reciprocal ties: a symbol of love is the power station; a symbol of death in general is the cemetery in which Danby tries to tell Lisa about his newly discovered love for her; while the symbol of Bruno’s impending end is “his old red dressing gown hanging on the door” (Murdoch 1969:14); the old man’s grip on the lives of all the people in the novel is symbolized by his fascination with spiders; and finally, there is the permanent Murdochian symbol of water, occurring here as incessant rain, the flooding of Danby’s house by the Thames, and Adelaide’s insuppressible tears, reflecting her frustrated dream of marrying Danby. Cunningham gives the following interpretation for this recurring symbol: “The extraordinary multitude of waters in Murdoch’s novels [...] into which Murdoch’s people keep dunking themselves, going for a swim, having a bathe, the waters that are put to use constantly as representing the invitations of contingency, water as wild, chaotic, messy, the swimming that’s an essence of the individual freedom Murdoch preaches up – are all of them some sort of version of old Christian baptism.” (Cunningham 2002:170) This interpretation also applies to Danby plunging into the Thames after the duel, and swimming towards the rainbow; as well as to Adelaide falling into and then rising up from the surge of water in the flooded house – both of these cases epitomizing “the story of Christian redemption through Christ’s death on the Cross and resurrection and its analogue in baptism’s modelling of that going down into the grave and rising from it again.” (Cunningham 2002:171-172)

Needless to say, this is far from being the only biblical theme in the novel, and the same author goes on to stress that Murdoch “is intertextual to a fault. She can’t do a pair of brothers without their being Cain and Abel. Errant sons are, of course, Prodigal Sons.” (Cunningham 2002: 177) Obviously, in *Bruno’s Dream* the twin brothers Nigel and Will are Cain and Abel, while Miles is the Prodigal Son – or, better still, the Lost Son – whom his father Bruno entreats to return home and whose love he wishes to rediscover. In the case of the old man himself, Murdoch introduces “the concept of *redemption*” (Cunningham 2002: 159), which Bruno seeks on the brink of death, because of all the bad things he has done to Janie, Maureen, Miles and Parvati. What is more, “Bruno’s plea for love from Miles will cause the collision of two households, and the dust will not settle until the final chapter, in much the same way that a Shakespearean plot is set into motion in the first act and resolved in the closing scene.” (Whitton 1999)

Along with these and some other symbols and intertextual associations, all the typical Murdochian elements are present in *Bruno’s Dream*, too. For instance: her favourite setting is London as the background; the novel starts and ends with certain elements of gothic melodrama – as with the

² The regularity of such scenes is affirmed by the opinion that, in Murdoch’s works, “what we tend to get is great repetition – across the oeuvre as in individual novels ... all those unhappy families mechanically multiplied into pairs, twins, doubles, reverse mirror-images, into threes and threesomes and place-changing quartets” (Cunningham 2002:175). Cunningham wittily names such a technique – which has almost become the trademark of Murdoch’s opus – ‘the game of *family musical chairs*’.

³ In another paper, the same critic also underlines that these symbols are *all-embracing* (see Todorović 1980:126).

image of the old man monstrously deformed by illness and similar to a ghost; there are several more scenes which are also grotesque, like that of Miles jumping over the wall of Diana's house, with his trousers ripped and leg hurt, and then unnecessarily leaving by the same route over the already wet and slippery fences; as well as the somewhat bizarre sight of Bruno, with naked legs like sticks and a huge head, standing at the top of the stairs during the flood and then falling down them. The flood near the end of the novel is a large catastrophic climax; among the many premature deaths, those of three characters: Gwen, Parvati, and Maureen, are accidents, while Janie's and Bruno's deaths are caused by cancer.⁴ More comical, but no less frequent, are those elements belonging to the realm of emotions, like the fact that too many characters are thunderstruck by love at first sight – some of them even several times; next, Lisa is the 'reverse mirror-image' of Gwen;⁵ there are several threesomes, and the most striking and unnatural quartet comprising Miles, Diana, Lisa, and Danby; whereas the image of dream, which recurs in all of Murdoch's work, becomes vital here, exposing 'the unknown' and making Derrida's 'inaccessible secret' ultimately knowable and 'full of sense' (Derrida 1998:4).

IV. Dream and Reality for Each of the Characters in *Bruno's Dream*

The life of each and every protagonist in this novel is a symbiosis of *dream* and *reality*, but the general impression of the reader is that they are certainly more oriented towards their dreams and/or past than the reality of their present lives. For each of them, there are two separate worlds: the *outer* one – which is real, and the *inner* world – consisting of their dreams and existing merely in their imaginations. However, sometimes it is not clear which one is which, and they are not quite sure of it themselves. It has rightfully been pointed out that Iris Murdoch's "artistry is to weave the improbable and the fantastic into the normal world, so that we cannot be sure, moment by moment, just what level of reality is being presented." (Ford 1974:519)⁶ One can argue that this is quite normal, for the reason that the images encountered while dreaming are nothing but "*mental transpositions* of the world", and that world – which we call reality - is just the reflection of *sensations* and *memories* surrounding us at any moment.⁷ However, in *Bruno's Dream* there are still an unusually large number of dream-images indicating each character's obsessive, fantasizing concern with the past, which has led some critics to the general conclusion that "Murdoch believes that the *inner* world is, in a sense, parasitic upon the *outer* world" (Oates 1978). Thus, in this novel, what Derrida calls 'veiled truth' (Derrida 1998:10) becomes *unveiled*, and the wishes underlying the daydreams of the characters are not only revealed, but turn out to be their reality.

On the other hand, Murdoch also uses linguistic means to reflect the importance of dreams in the lives of her characters, and the reader cannot fail to notice the extremely frequent repetition of words to this end (a total of 59). By simply counting words and phrases that contain the root *dream*,⁸ some strange coincidences and patterns regarding their number have been revealed. First of all, the more central the figure of the protagonist is in the plot, the more times such words occur in relation to that person – which is completely natural. However, not only are they the most numerous in the case of Bruno (19), who is already inseparably linked to the world of dreams in the very title of the novel – which is only to be expected as he is the main character in the book, but his daughter-in-law Diana and his son-in-law Danby are in joint second place (10 each). This shows that, surprisingly, these two are

⁴ "And Murdoch's novels not only end with large catastrophic climaxes, they tend to open with them, and to fill their middles with them as well. Accidents, bad luck, unexpected death, threaten us all, and are indeed the age-old stuff of tragedy, but they threaten Murdoch's people to an extraordinary degree." (Cunningham 2002:176)

⁵ For this remark and the following one, see Footnote 2.

⁶ Cited from: Capey, A.C. 'Post-War English Fiction' (I), *The Use of English*, Vol. 20, No. 4, Summer 1969.

⁷ "Les instants privilégiés sont ceux d'où nous viennent des images qui – qu'elles soient celles du réveil, du rêve, du souvenir, ou d'un jeu anticipateur – ont en commun d'être des reflets, des transpositions mentales du monde. Elles sont le monde, mais le monde hors du monde, le monde transporté dans l'espace de l'esprit. Elles sont les images du jour, mais frappées d'un autre soleil – un soleil de nuit." (Picon 1968: 127) and "Ce que nous appelons la réalité est un certain rapport entre ces sensations et ces souvenirs qui nous entourent simultanément - ..." (Picon 1968:136)

⁸ These words, of which some are repeated and some occur only once, are the following: (a) dream(s), daydreams, life-dream, to dream (of), dreamily, dreamy, dream-like, dreamlike, dreamless, dream world, dream stuff, dream figure, dream life, dream place, dream picture, dream woman, dream days, dreamer-upper. In addition to that, there are many examples of words related in sense to *dream*, such as: sleeping and waking, asleep, awakened, apparition, nightmare, nightmarish, sleeper, sleepless.

more important than Bruno's own son, Miles (6) (as has already been mentioned here), who is followed by Adelaide and Nigel (5 each), and also even more important than Lisa (2 for both her and Will), although on the surface of the plot she seems a major protagonist who affects the lives of all the people in that relatively closed circle of characters. Only in the final scene does Murdoch openly show that it is Diana – not her sister, as the reader might have expected – who is the crucial female character in the story, since she is the one who shares Bruno's last hours with him.

Another striking feature which proves how much effort Iris Murdoch invested in creating her works of art, and to what extent she carefully planned all the minute details, is the fact that the word *dream* does not occur even once when referring to those female protagonists that are already deceased (Janie, Maureen, Gwen, Parvati), as they exist only in the minds of the respective men (Bruno, Miles, Danby). Only on the plane of imagination of the male characters do they remain young, fresh and unchanged, so that even their love – though it used to be strong and sincere – now looks like a dream itself, and it is precisely because they live no longer that the dream remains. It would somehow be metaphorically pleonastic if the characters that exist only in someone's dream could themselves dream, and it was probably Murdoch's intention to avoid this trap – as Shakespeare already suggested “[a] dream itself is but a shadow” (Shakespeare 1978:882).⁹

The principal character of the novel, Bruno, was torn in his youth between his imagination – reflected in the boy's love for spiders, and reality – which was to follow in his father's footsteps and inherit his business: “Bruno had wanted to study zoology and not to go into the printing works. His father had made him study classics and go into the printing works.” (Murdoch 1969:6) His marriage also turned out to be a disappointment, as did his relationship with his son. Therefore, he has never fully accepted reality and fearfully concludes that: “[i]t's all a dream, [...] one goes through life in a dream, it's all too *hard*.” (Murdoch 1969:7) – especially now, when he lives “so much in his mind” (Murdoch 1969:30) and his reality has become “his little prison box” (Murdoch 1969:33). As the end of his life is approaching, Bruno sees that all he has been dreaming about is now pointless; however, as it is too late for him to awake from that dream, he can but imagine what would happen after death: “What would it be like, would someone be there? A girl perhaps?” (Murdoch 1969:14). Even in his position, helpless and aware that death is pending, the man still dreams about being loved *by somebody new*, which will, surprisingly, turn out to be possible – his dream will come true, and he will not die alone, but in the presence of Diana of all people!

According to Danby's thoughts, “/w/e all live in a private dream world most of the time” (Murdoch 1969:22). The secret of Danby's *absolute power* over the women in his life was that they were all “captivated by his easy charm, his good looks, and the atmosphere of cheerfulness which he carried about with him” (Murdoch 1969:44). Danby's love for Gwen was definitely “the once-in-a-lifetime form of insanity”, while his later affairs with two servants, Linda and Adelaide, “had nothing to do with what it had been like with Gwen” (Murdoch 1969:16). For Danby, “Gwen had been reality and his subsequent life had been a dream. But, and especially with Linda's help, he had decided that, like most other people, he was not made for reality” (Murdoch 1969:135). Therefore, he was not fully convinced that Lisa represented reality, either, as she seemed to him like *a dream figure*, but he kept fighting for her heart until she agreed to turn real for him, since she was, after all, “a girl who resembled Gwen” (Murdoch 1969:231), and thus subconsciously reminded him of his only true love.

Diana is described as a woman who “had a power of making small things seem large, just as she had uncannily made the garden seem large, made it seem to go on and on like an enchanted garden in a tale” (Murdoch 1969:61), and the fact that she has “somehow made the tiny garden into a dream place, made it seem longer, as if there must be more beyond, another garden, and another and another beyond that” (Murdoch 1969:52) certainly reminds us of Alice's *Adventures in Wonderland*. Her marriage to Miles “was, in some extraordinary way, the perfect working out of a dream”, as ever since leaving school “[s]he had dreamed of a separated man, a sad austere secluded man, a man with a great sorrow, an ascetic” (Murdoch 1969:59), and Diana considers herself to be very lucky for having married somebody who is so distinguished and aristocratic. She lives to such a great extent in the reality created by the fulfillment of her dream that she does not even feel guilty for dancing with Danby, because this event remains just a strangely romantic - *dreamlike* - episode in her memory, far away from real life.

⁹ Cited from: *Hamlet* 2.2.270.

Her husband Miles also had his dream come true, embodied in his first wife Parvati, for whom he felt “something supreme, a love not of this world only” (Murdoch 1969:60). Since Parvati’s death, which he experienced as “a permanent nightmare, not something real” (Murdoch 1969:163), he has never been able to start living in reality again, as this event prevents him from writing, and reality for him is personified in poetry, so he continues to live only in his imagination. Such a life is made possible for him by Diana, who “came later, as a surprise, almost as a miracle” (Murdoch 1969:58), and fully submitted “to being the second not only in time” (Murdoch 1969:60). Miles seems unaware of this until Lisa suggests that for him “/t/he real thing is Diana, all those years of sharing her bed [...] You must hang on to reality, Miles” (Murdoch 1969:162). And he does hang on, so his inspiring muse arrives at long last, but far from setting him free, this further confines him to his own small *dream place*.

Out of the supporting characters, we learn the most about the life of Adelaide, which is only natural because she is the maid in the household in which the novel takes place. Murdoch mentions that from an early age this girl has been “puzzled about her status and her identity” (Murdoch 1969:40), and also stresses that “[h]er childhood with the twins had been the happiest part of Adelaide’s life and she often felt its most real part” (Murdoch 1969:41). It is, however, not so in the present, which is obvious when Will tells her that she lives “in a dream world” (Murdoch 1969:49), and she herself concludes that “[t]he years with Danby seemed an insubstantial dream” (Murdoch 1969: 241), since she is one of those women who are completely captivated by his charm. The future is bound to bring her a new reality and happiness as Will’s wife, although even at the wedding she keeps crying because she still does not “dream of much later and sunnier days” (Murdoch 1969:263).

Murdoch’s attitude towards Nigel is clearly shown at the beginning of the novel by the following statement related to his life: “Out of the dreamless womb time creeps in the moment which is no beginning at the end which is no end” (Murdoch 1969: 24), as well as by the references of other characters. For instance, to Adelaide Nigel “seemed to be living in another world” (Murdoch 1969:43), Bruno recalls him as “/s/oft padding Nigel with the angel fingers” (Murdoch 1969:2), while Danby tells Bruno that Nigel is “in touch with the transcendent” (Murdoch 1969:29) and talks about his “dream days” (Murdoch 1969:152). Nigel represents one of the purest examples in Murdoch’s fiction of her concept of altruistic love, as he affectionately and tenderly takes care of all the despondent people in the novel, though some of them are even unaware of the fact.

In a conversation between Adelaide and Will, when he tells her: “Nigel’s a natural thief”, she responds: “You’re a natural bully” (Murdoch 1969:47). And indeed, of all the characters in the novel, Will seems the least removed from reality and Adelaide even considers him to be “her last connection with a real Adelaide who had once existed” (Murdoch 1969:125). Nevertheless, given the fact that, unlike the other protagonists, he cannot even decide which of his dreams to pursue, and thus keeps straying between the theatre, shooting and photography, Adelaide is quite right when she tells him: “You live in a dream world. You’re as bad as Nigel” (Murdoch 1969:38).

Although in the opinion of Miles “Lisa lived in a real world which seemed very unlike the reality which in his poetry he was attempting to join” (Murdoch 1969:148), he adds that “[s]ometimes indeed she seemed to him simply an apparition, a shadow beside the solid reality of her sister” (Murdoch 1969:63). The other two main male protagonists – Bruno and Danby – also describe her as *an apparition*, which is even more unsubstantial than a dream! But even if Danby “told himself sometimes that Lisa was, must be, a dream figure, an apparition, and that as time went on he would more and more realize this, until it would seem to him in the end that he had never really met her and that she had never really existed at all” (Murdoch 1969: 231), the novel ends by her becoming his reality.

V. Conclusion

“We are as real people, unfinished and full of blankness and jumble; only in our own illusioning fantasy are we complete,” said Iris Murdoch in her famous study *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (cited in Bran 2004:23). Among the many jumbled worlds of fantasy created by this writer in her numerous novels, *Bruno’s Dream* is the most memorable, and it holds the reader’s undivided attention from beginning to end, probably because it is at the same time both funny and philosophical – like real people’s lives. Although this novel consists entirely of the dreams, illusions and fantasies of

the protagonists, its atmosphere is fully realistic, while Murdoch's obsession with the conflict between good and evil, the sense of love and life, and the experience of death, only adds to the book's convincingness. As her contemporary Colin Wilson notes, "modern novelists are trying to catch an intensely personal form of reality" (Wilson 1962:14), and since clear-cut reality can only be found in dreams – never in actual life because it is precisely in dreams that one cannot experience the 'either-or alternative' (see Derrida 1990:51), it can be concluded that maybe Murdoch's task in creating this novel was even somewhat easier than if she had had to let reality speak for itself.

Writing about Proust, Murdoch observes that in his notorious roman fleuve *A la recherche du temps perdu*, the French author "seeks by reminiscence to bind up and catch in the present the stuff of his own past" (Murdoch 1967:46). To that effect and by parallel, we can rename the novel considered in this paper:

A la recherche du rêve perdu.

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