Sleeping Time

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In the famous fairytale, the good fairy—whose blessing for the birth of Sleeping Beauty is never bestowed—converts the death spell cast on the girl into a less bitter fate: a hundred years of deep sleep. An entire kingdom falls asleep along with the accursed princess, and only the briar thicket surrounding the castle suddenly grows, covering the sleepers like a large shielding blanket. No one entered or left, until one hundred years later, a young prince chanced upon the place... and all the rest has been told ever after.

Sleep is akin to a warm cradle within the self; an important biological necessity, and at the same time—a plunge into the heart of darkness, the abode of horror and nightmare, the time of nocturnal sins and desires, the kingdom of the moonstruck and dreamers. Sleep is a breached time for the homeless who every night seek a temporary refuge in the bed of the public sphere. For many insomniacs, sleep amounts to a few moments of grace; troubled sleep in a new simultaneous web where the physical sphere loses its concreteness, collapsing into the temporal dimension, inverting day and night, creating an unbounded continuum which spans a false 24-hour unit in front of flickering screens. For the “new coal miners”—the various hi-tech workers who use every spare moment to “nod off” in the subway, during flight, in the car on their way to work or back home in the wee hours of the night—tranquil sleep has become an object of yearning. Welcome to the threshold of insomnia, the queen of the present time; greetings to the sheep-counters on white nights, whose biological clock makes only squeaking rings.

From time immemorial sleep has been ascribed intricate meanings; it has been dubbed “nocturnal birth” which renews one’s powers and strengths, and at the same time—a “small death” (*petit morte*). Many cultures construe falling asleep as a temporary relinquishment of the body and soul, and sleep—
as a spectral world, a limbo where the soul wanders outside
the body and into other realms, an unknown universe distinguished by strange spatial, temporal, and sensorial spheres. In his sleep, every individual becomes a

“nocturnal Columbus,” embarking on quests of search and wonder on the outskirts of darkness.1

In the past century our scientific knowledge about the world of sleep has been expanded. The familiar pace of the human day, called the “circadian rhythm” (from the Latin *circa dies*, “about a day”), reflects the motion of the Earth within the solar system. As a daytime creature affected by and dependent on the sunlight for his activities, man can adapt to sleeping in daytime and remaining awake at night, but this is not his natural inclination. In the day we operate in a visual world where objects have borders, depth, color, and structure, whereas at night, during sleep, the space envisioned in our dreams is populated by countless figures, objects, sights, and sounds accumulating without direct affinity with any logical sequence. Both worlds are equally real, even if they are experienced ever so differently.2

In the twilight zone following one’s falling asleep, the sleep centers gradually take over our brain, altering the physiological and psychological processes occurring in the body. Scientific research today provides statistical data and considerable information on the physiological aspects of being asleep, and has proven, for example, that only a small part of our sleep time is dedicated to dreaming: REM sleep, namely periods of rapid
eye movement indicative of dreaming.3 The ancient Greeks already understood the deep psychological link between sleep
and the unconscious, and the affinity of dreams and visions to feelings of anxiety and experiences of horror. Greek mythology attests to such insights, being rife with representations of nightmares on earth—daemonic creatures, devils, and gods, the ghosts of dead heroes, bewitched humans, and sirens. The god Pan, for instance, was associated with nightmares, insanity, as well as epilepsy.4

Heraclitus maintained that upon awakening, one always returns to the same world shared with others, whereas during sleep or dreaming he does not experience such a return.5 Aristotle regarded sleep as a state experienced only by living organisms with cognition and perception. Sleep and wakefulness, he held, cannot be permanent conditions: a person can be neither awake nor asleep constantly, since every physical act is eventually exhausted. Thus he perceived sleep’s objective as an interval, a rest from the state of wakefulness for the purpose of the living

organism's preservation. Sleep is *akinesia*—an absence of motion, where a person is ostensibly tied or bound. Aristotle likened the soul to motion, and sleep to its opposite—inactivity, a potential yet-unrealized.6

In the 20th century, and especially since Freud's breakthrough in the study of dreams, interest in the psychological and philosophical dimensions of sleep has grown. Nathan Johnstone dubbed sleep a "temporal discontinuity." Only if one takes into account the discontinuity of cognition, he held, can one begin to understand the identity of consciousness.7 Carl Gustav Jung differentiated sleep from hypnosis, stating that sleep involves many gradations ranging from the instinctual level to that of active decision. In the dream world Jung identified what he regarded as universal archetypes. Unlike Freud, who interpreted dreams as an expression of repressions or inhibitions, Jung regarded sleep as permitting the oblivion of the ego. In the delusional state between daydreams and night dreams an opportunity is created for unconstrained thought (for many artists, this period is an indelible spring of creativity).8 The binary configuration he introduced, sharply distinguishing wakefulness and consciousness from sleep and the unconscious, interfered with the understanding of the interrelations between the unconscious and the wakeful states of consciousness, and is now considered obsolete. Medard Boss, Jung's follower, maintained that dreaming, unlike the awakened state, does not provide a continuous personal history, yet pointed out the link between occurrences in waking life and those in dreams.9

Phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard, who studied the archetypes arising in dreams, regarded sleep as "nothingness." The unusual identity between sleep and the 'Nothing' provoked a profound fear in him. "The metaphysics of the night"10 elicit many questions, yet provide no answers:

But do they only think about teaching us to sleep well? [...] Sleeping well means discovering the primary element of the unconscious. To put it more directly, we must all sleep in our own element. A good sleep is one in which we are rocked or carried, and the imagination is well aware that we are rocked and carried by something and not by someone. [...] While asleep we inhabit a cosmos; we are rocked by water; we

are carried in the air and by the air which we breathe according to the rhythm of our own breath. This is the sleep of childhood, or at least the peaceful sleep of youth.11

For Bachelard, it is the dead who are identified with a more protected, hidden sleep; they enjoy the deepest sleep. “They awaken only when our own sleep gives us a dream deeper than memory; we find ourselves, along with those who have disappeared, in the land of the Night.”12

The need for safety is the foremost consideration in choosing a place to sleep. The bed is associated with territorialism, and when this type of security is violated—a man has difficulties sleeping, and frequently wakes up alarmed. The common reaction of escaping to the bedroom and to sleep in instances of psychological difficulty attests to the pathological potential of an individual’s connection to his bed. Marcel Proust, for example, rarely left his bed during the years in which he wrote *In Search of Lost Time*. Immanuel Kant abhorred sleep; he perceived it as a necessary evil and a waste of time, and therefore he tried to spend as little time as possible in the nocturnal world. Emmanuel Levinas, on the other hand, reversed the meaning of sleep a-la Kant, and regarded sleep, rather than wakefulness, as the preferred state where human subjectivity is realized. Levinas even offers an ode to sleep:

In lying down, in curling up in a corner to sleep, we abandon ourselves to a place; qua base it becomes our refuge. Then all our work of being consists in resting. Sleep is like entering into contact with the protective forces of a place; [...] When one wakes up one finds oneself shut up in one’s immobility like an egg in its shell.”13

Perhaps it is for these reasons that French philosopher René Descartes spent much of his life in bed, where he conceived of many of the rudiments of his philosophy. Similarly, it was said of Thomas Hobbes that he scribbled his ideas and mathematical formulae on his bed sheets or on his thighs.14

Contemporary scientific research rarely inquires into the phenomenon of sleep in general, focusing on the pathology of sleep, on various sleep disorders which spread like a plague, endangering our health. Sleep laboratories today function as a major tool in the study of the quality of sleep, sleep disorders, and the

treatment of those suffering from them. Approximately 30% of the population now suffers from some degree of insomnia, 10-15% of them suffer from chronic insomnia, and many use medication. An average, healthy six to seven hours of sleep has become a rarity. In his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel García Márquez describes an insomnia plague that strikes an entire village, violating its order:

'If we don't ever sleep again, so much the better,' Jose Arcadio Buendia said in good humour. 'That way we can get more out of life.' But the Indian woman explained that the most fearsome part of the sickness of insomnia was not the impossibility of sleeping, for the body did not feel any fatigue at all, but its inexorable evolution toward a more critical manifestation: a loss of memory. [...] when the sick person became used to his state of vigil, the recollection of his childhood began to be erased from his memory, then the name and notion of things, and finally the identity of people and even the awareness of his own being, until he sank into a kind of idiocy that had no past. [...] In that state of hallucinated lucidity, not only did they see the images of their own dreams, but some saw the images dreamed by others. [...] Those who wanted to sleep, not from fatigue but because of the nostalgia for dreams, tried all kinds of methods of exhausting themselves."15

Images of dream, as a key to the unconscious, have provided fertile ground for Surrealistic art. Nowadays many artists unveil the bed of privacy in the name of the voyeuristic desire to penetrate the heart of intimacy. Sophie Calle, for one, invited friends, and even complete strangers, to sleep in her bed. She documented the sleepers, followed their every movement while asleep, and wrote a text to accompany each photographic image. In her work *The Sleepers* (1979) and in other projects, Calle set out to examine the line between the public and the private; she wanted to find out where the separation line is drawn between art and life. At the time, this was considered a daring, provocative act, but ever since reality TV and private blogs have entered our lives, the boundaries between the private and the public have been blurred without recognition, nights have become interrupted, and

dreams—breached. In view of the intrusive cameras which broadcast the ongoings in foreign spaces at every given moment, Calle's idea seems almost naïve.

Similarly, artists Emilia and Ilya Kabakov explored a man's most defenseless private moments by expropriating the world of dream into the public domain. Their monumental installation *The House of Dreams* (2005), staged at the Serpentine Gallery, London, altered the gallery's structure in order to create a tranquil setting in which visitors could rest and meditate quietly. In so doing they wanted to comment via art on the chronic lack of sleep suffered by the individual in the busy modern urban environment, to address themes such as healing and rehabilitation, and help the spectator enter a world of fantasy, dreams, and daydreams. "Many of us suffer from insomnia, from shallow sleep, from oppressive, agonising dreams that are hard to shake during the course of the day. How can we fall asleep like we did in childhood, in a way that brings us rest and tranquility?" said Ilya Kabakov in a conversation about the project.16 The work reflected the Gallery's location at the heart of London's Kensington Gardens via its subdivision into spaces: one offered a view of a spectacular park next to the bed; a brilliant sky hung right above the bed in another, while in the third, the bed was surrounded by magical fairytale heroes. The "beds" themselves were made of white wooden crates reminiscent of sarcophagi, and the entire space was enclosed by pacifying white curtains.

The Kabakovs' work was influenced by the utopias of the Russian avant-garde, and especially by Konstantin Melnikov's *Laboratory of Sleep*, a Competition Project for the 'Garden City' held in Moscow in 1929. Melnikov's ideas were based
on psychological experiments in the field of sleep therapy.
The laboratory, which was never built, was designed to
allow 4,000 exhausted workers to rest simultaneously. The controlled frame was intended to encourage the curing and rehabilitation of the tired workers in order to increase their productivity. The beds were designed as laboratory tables with a sedating, rocking mechanism, and everything was monitored from a control booth responsible for regulating the temperature, humidity, and air pressure, combined with scents and sounds, such as the rustle of leaves, chirping of birds, or murmur of waves. In addition, the artists planned poetry readings and playing musical works.17

The longing for the sweetness of sleep, for the embracing wings of dimness in the darkness of contemporary life, attests to a deficiency in deep sleep concealed under such catchwords as “white night” or “hell on earth.” Perhaps the spell from the aforementioned fairytale has been reversed, and we are now concerned with a miserable beauty condemned to a hundred years without sleep.

1 See: Samuel Dunkell, *Sleep Positions: The Night Language of the Body* (New York: Signet, 1978).

2 See ibid.

3 See Peretz Lavie’s study, *The Enhanced World of Sleep*, trans. Anthony Berris (New Haven: Yale UP, 1996), as well as his essay in this catalogue.

4 See: James Hillman, *Pan and the Nightmare* (Woodstock, CT: Spring Publications, 2000), pp. 132-141.

5 *Heraclitus Seminar, 1966-67* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1979).

6 See: Aristotle, *On Sleep and Dreams*, trans. David Gallop (Warminster, UK: Aris and Phillips, 1996).

7 Nathan Johnstone, “Toward a Philosophy of Sleep,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 34 (1973-74), p. 73.

8 Carl G. Jung, “On the Psychology and Pathology of So-Called Occult Phenomena,” *Collected Works* (London & Princeton, NJ: Routledge and Kegan Paul & Bollingen, 1953), vol. 1, pp. 66-68.

9 Medard Boss, *Psychoanalysis and Daseinanalysis*, trans. L.B. Lefebre (New York: Basic Books, 1957), p. 207.

10 Bachelard noted the great philosophical deficiency in the study of the sleep phenomenon, and wondered “Where is the philosopher who will give us the metaphysics of the [...] human night?”; Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 147.

11 Gaston Bachelard, *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*, trans. Edith R. Farrell and C. Frederick Farrell (Dallas: Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1988), pp. 35-36.

12 Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (Dallas, Texas: Pegasus Foundation, 1983), p. 64.

13 Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990), p. 119.

14 See Dunkell (n. 1), op. cit., p. 26.

15 Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 43-45.

16 http://www.serpentinegallery.org/images/Kabakov_teachers.pdf

17 See: Frederick Starr, *Melnikov: Solo Architect in a Mass Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 179.