John Hollander

COMMENTARY

THE DREAM OF THE TRUMPETER

At the mountainous border of our two countries there is a village; it stands just below a pass, but some of the older houses lie higher up along the road, overlooking more of the valley than one might think. The border has never been heavily guarded, and our countries are peaceful. Theirs lies beyond the pass; in the other valley a large village looks up toward the mountains and toward us. The border itself is marked only by an occasional sign; but then there is the Trumpeter. His clear, triadic melodies break out through the frosty air, or through the swirling mists. From below, from above, the sound iscommandingly clear, and it seems to divide the air as the border divides the land. It can be heard at no fixed intervals, and yet with a regularity which we accept, but cannot calculate: No one knows whether the Trumpeter is theirs or ours.

[Epigraph to The Head of the Bed]

This is a text. The dream which it embodies (or: surrounds? misremembers? embroiders upon with the kind of fierce fancy-work that becomes the fabric itself? interprets? reports?—even to fix on a verb here would be to enmesh a whole poetic theory), the dream related to it, is now barely accessible to me, the text having replaced it. I now cannot help but feel that it was originally dreamed for its textual role; although that feeling is itself a fiction which replaces buried, but probably useless, psychic history, it was a feeling that dawned on the occasion of incorporating the text in an earlier poem called “The Head of the Bed.”

The dream as I remember it was a broad prospect—out at which I looked—all in the grays of etching and aquatint, of the mountain scene; I heard the trumpet, and knew in the dream that there was a Trumpeter, just as I had the sense (not from that kind of inner fiat, of axiom or identification revealed to the dreamer but from the landscape itself) that this was border territory. This was the kind of dream that arises in the fringes of sleep, and I awoke at the sounds of the trumpeting—at rather than to them, as to an alarm clock or some other noise in the eternally awakened world which the trumpet call absorbed and transformed. It was as I awoke—just after it—that the question came to me in the light of my bedroom, and with a sense not of immediate urgency but of profound importance: Was that trumpeter theirs or ours?

It was some days later that I transcribed the dream in the present form, and I think that without knowing it I had even then my own recently completed (and, even
to myself, still puzzling) "The Head of the Bed" in mind. That poem in 15 parts is itself a figurative dream-journey, moving in and out of a protagonist's sleeping and waking states. Its first three parts, written early in 1971, all concern the shores of sleep as a place for the generation of images. The whole poem starts out:

Heard through lids slammed down over darkened glass,
Trees shift in their tattered sheets, tossing in
Shallow sleep underneath the snoring wind.

A dream of forests far inside such sleep
As wakeful birds perched high in a dread wood,
Brooding over torn leaves, might mutter of
Rises over the pain of a snapped twig...

But although some of the episodes are explicitly dreamt in the poem's fictional narrative and some are actually encountered by the protagonist, there is only one scrap of material from any actual dream of my own (the flood scene, in section 12) anywhere in the poem. As I transcribed the Trumpeter dream—and perhaps even by transcribing it—I may have been completing, as well as glossing, the whole poem, which had been otherwise finished for the best part of a year.

When I added the text as an epigraph to "The Head of the Bed," I had already decided that the two countries in it were the realms of sleep and waking, and that the Trumpeter was a sort of liminal figure, a shore-warden who patrolled and celebrated whatever was at the line of division. Attaching it to the poem entailed interpreting the last line, and thereby the whole text (the last line itself being an avowal of the unanswerability of the question into which I awoke from the dream). This was some years before I had read the ingenious theory of a young friend, to the effect that, in Chaucer's Reeve's Tale, the place where the two Cambridge students avail themselves of the bodies of the miller's wife and daughter is made to be the village of Trumpington not merely because that village is in fact "nat fer fro Cantebrige" but to pun on the French tromper, or deceiving. Perhaps my Trumpeter anticipated that conceit: a rubbing of the memorial brass of Sir Roger de Trumpington with a trumpet as his armorial bearing hung near my desk, and I had always brooded on the epithet of the fabled apocalyptic bugle, the Last Trump, both as a final card, kept in reserve, that won all for one and lost it for all the rest, as well as a tromperie dernière, a cruel eschatological joke. But if there was any tromperie in the trumpeting, it was, I realize now that I then concluded, elided into the higher cozenings of trope.

I should say something here about my earlier comment about not understanding my own poem, "The Head of the Bed," at the time I added the prose epigraph. It seems superficially perverse or inaccurate to say that one has not understood something that he has written, revised, considered and so forth. In this case, I mean that although I was sure of every word in the text, sure of phrases and cadences, and certain of the order of the 15 sections (which was, with some exceptions, not the mere order of composition, but rather a complex reconsidered response to that order), I could not at that point have written a plausible or coherent "argument" for the poem, or an essay on it. Indeed, I had the astonishing and invigorating experience of discovering, after it was published in full form in 1974 with an interpretive essay by Harold Bloom, that I had misconstrued the poem myself. Bloom had suggested that a female figure I had felt to be warm, reassuring and beneficent, who appears in the final section, was "not wholly distinguishable" from the final appearance of the other female figure, the witch Lilith, the patroness of bad nights, who shows up throughout the poem. I was, indeed, somewhat miffed at being incorporated into an interpretive figure, a figure designed to give symmetry and structure to a reading, rather than to cope, at just that point, with the text itself.
turned out to be quite wrong, and subsequent events in my life convinced me that the poem was indeed associating the two presences; that, like a dream, it knew more than I did about the harmful character of a force I had only felt to be protective heretofore.

Ironically, this later interpretive revision does not concern any actual "dream material" in the poem. Adding the epigraph was itself, I have said, an act of interpretation, both of the dream-text and the poem; and the one phrase which manifestly connects the poem and the epigraph, itself appears in the second tercet of the final section, and, I now realize, significantly introduces the ambiguous beneficent figure who had entered the poem as I wrote it only in guise. The section opens with allusively apocalyptic images, and leads up to the introduction of the warm companion who I believed I was contrasting to the witch, "ilting Miss Noctae," later on in the episode:

The bright moon offends him; he plucks it out;
He opens all the seals of touch; he hears
The whirlwinds of his breathing; then it comes:

A last waking to a trumpet of light
From warm lamps turns him over gravely toward
Her long, bare figure, Lady Evening...

But it has only been the consideration, at the suggestion of the editor of this issue, of the Trumpeter dream that has led me to notice some of these patterns and juxtapositions, and some of the ways in which poem and dream seem to interpret each other. I have also been led to remember the first occasion on which I ever consciously referred to a dream of my own in any poem. For years I had never done so; the first poem to include anything from a dream was, I now remember, the first poem I ever wrote which left me with the feeling I have had much more frequently in recent years, of not knowing what my poem was really "about." The dream in question was a nightmare of early childhood, involving my maternal grandmother, to whom I was quite close, confronting me in a normal manner, but with her face totally crimson in color. The poem, written in 1965, involved actual recollections, too, of childhood fascination and terror at the sight of myself in a bedroom mirror in my darkened bedroom at night. In its final form "The Night Mirror" has its child protagonist, its frightened awakener, choose the terrors of dream over those of potential vision:

The Night Mirror
What it showed was always the same—
A vertical panel with him in it,
Being a horrible bit of movement
At the edge of knowledge, overhanging
The canyons of nightmare. And when the last
Glimpse was enough—his grandmother,
Say, with a blood-red face, rising
From her Windsor chair in the warm lamplight
To tell him something—he would scramble up,
Waiting to hear himself shrieking, and gain
The ledge of the world, his bed, lit by
The pale rectangle of window, eclipsed
By a dark shape, but a shape that moved
And saw and knew and mistook its reflection
In the tall panel on the closet door
For itself. The silver corona of moonlight

JOHN HOLLANDER
That gloried his glimpsed head was enough
To send him back into silences (choosing
Fear in those chasms below), to reject
Freedom of wakeful seeing, believing
And feeling, for peace and the bondage of horrors
Welling up only from deep within
That dark planet head, spinning beyond
The rim of the night mirror’s range, huge
And cold, on the pillow’s dark side.

Syntactically, this poem is far from easy, and the narrative structure bore too
much weight for me to do any more than accept it. While aware of all the
grammatical ambiguities of the title phrase, “the night mirror”—that which mirrored
at night, mirrored night itself, and so forth—and intentionally engaging them in the
poem, I knew no more of the whole than that it had to be the way it was, and, more
mysteriously, that it was a very important poem for me even though, I must confess,
I did not particularly like it. It was problematic in length, in genre, in form—free-
verse lines centering on four stresses, but casually so—and its three long periods felt
like a physical deformity of my own that I had to live with. But in its association for
me now with the dream of the Trumpeter, and with the poem which claimed,
elicted, misinterpreted it (or whatever), it has settled into a new kind of place for me.
The “night mirror” is both mirror and lamp, reflecting, cold satellite moon of night
vision and sun of informing light, that appears at the end of the poem in a mediating
position between planet and pillow, both within and beyond the sleeper-waker’s
head. It is the mimetic-expressive mirror of my own imagination, and a frightening
one; the image of the “head of the bed” was born in that poem, although I would
not know it until long after its rebirth as the title (added after composition of all
fifteen sections) of the later poem. “The Night Mirror” was a parable about the
relation of poem and dream which I wrote for my own instruction at the time, and if it
fell among thorns at first, it eventually worked its way down to good ground.

Writing this now, I have come to see that the parable could not have been
explicit at the time. I was just beginning in those years to read Spenser with poetic
seriousness, and beginning to understand how The Interpretation of Dreams—
surely one of the greatest works of criticism of our age—was making the quality of
dream available for serious poetic consideration. I mean by this that any earnest,
modernist literary aspirant of the 1950’s, told in impressionistic, belle-letttristic
essays that Spenser’s world of faerie had the glory and the freshness of the land of
dreams, would fling such essays aside with an oath, convinced that the quality of
dream for such a writer meant imprecision, flight from signification, botched
mimesis, steam filling the lower half of a Dalí-like set in a bad movie, and so forth.
Freud’s masterpiece in fact treated dreams as if they were as serious as poems, and
thereby made the notion of dream serious enough to be likened, by a conceptual
adult, to poetry, without invoking all of the qualities that one knew poetry, as
opposed to sentimental bad writing, always had to shun.

In any event, the text-dream relation in my earlier poem was a trope for the
imagination: that much I have understood for some time. In a poem of the spring of
1974 (written some months after the publication in chapbook form of “The Head of
the Bed”) called “The Train” I worked some of the landscape from recurring dreams
of my own and of my wife of twenty years from whom I was just then separated; it
was as if perhaps to augment imagination’s power over events it could only
represent. “The Train” concerns two fictional dreamers, lying beside each other in
bed, dreaming overlapping—or, in the mythology of the poem, interpenetrating-
dreams. Actual dreams of transportation systems, missed connections and of a
particular, unique dream which had in fact recently been “shared” by two sleepers
in bed together, composed the scenery of various episodes in the poem, which were connected by continuing glimpses of a train—the train of the poem’s thought—making its way through a larger landscape. Sometimes, in a tunnel, it became the actual sexual penetration of one of the sleepers by the other, and similarly one dream “inside” another one. That railroad cross-ties are called “sleepers” provides another mode of connection between the metaphoric train and the dreamers in and around the poem.

I don’t think that I could have managed “The Train” (a poem which I prize highly) without having come to terms with the meta-relation, as it were, of three relations between dream and text: (1) allusion to actual dreams of one’s own, (2) narrative fictions of dreaming in the text, and (3) the condition of poetry—or genre of poem, if one must, or intensity of poetic force—which allows a poetic text, no matter how carefully contrived and constructed, to escape from the hand of the poet’s wit, and partake of the unwitting poesis of dream-work. Poems are neither night-dreams nor day-dreams, which is something the ambiguous nationality of the Trumpeter may be asserting.

It was only having to comment on the trumpeting-dream that occasioned my reassessment of it, the whole poem to which it was added, and “The Night Mirror.” I realize now that in these remarks I have been treating that early poem as a kind of inner vocation. It is only having gone along so far in reconstructing that leads me back again to the meaning of the later parable I told myself, the parable of the Trumpeter. Theirs or ours? Sleeping or waking? I now read it as a fable of what trope is, of where its home is, travel widely though it may; a fable not of the sea of figure as opposed to the literal shore, but of a division made at right angles to the coast-line, as it were, by which what lay on either side the boundary would look identical.

But I now see something else as well. Sleep has a brother kingdom, and the trumpeter of trope, the music of representation, play at the boundary of Death and Life in this wise: fictions, the lies we tell ourselves to avert the continuing and otherwise paralyzing gaze of death, the way in which those fictions lie not against truth so much as against time, must ultimately serve the cause of Life. But perhaps, in another kind of tromperie derrière, they may actually be in the employ of Death, whose ultimate victory may be augmented by the loss of any intervening apparent battles. Is our imagination, then, brave or pitiable? No one can ever know whether the Trumpeter is theirs or ours.