INTERWEAVINGS: REFLECTIONS ON THE ROLE OF DREAM IN THE MAKING OF POEMS

Can I distinguish between dreaming and writing—that is, between dream images and those which come into being while I am in the poem-making state? I'm not sure.

I began writing at a very early age, but the two childhood dreams I remember were beyond my powers to articulate. One of them was a kind of nightmare; and after it had recurring a couple of times I found I could summon it at will—which I did, in much the same spirit, I suppose, as that in which people watch horror movies. Retrospectively, I see it as a mythic vision of Eden and the Fall: the scene is a barn, wooden and pleasantly—not scarily—dark, in which the golden hay and straw are illumined by a glow as of candlelight. And all around the room of the barn are seated various animals—cows, sheep, horses, dogs, and cats. They all sit somewhat the way dogs do, with their front legs straight and their back ones curved to one side, and they look comfortable, relaxed. There's an atmosphere of great peace and well-being and camaraderie. But suddenly—without a minute's transition—all is changed: all blackens, crinkles, and corrugates like burnt paper. There's a sense of horror.

I was not more than six when I first dreamed this, and it frightens me still; can it (I think to myself) have been a prophetic dream about the nuclear holocaust we live our lives in fear of? Then I console myself a bit with the knowledge that it didn't have to be so; I'd already long since been terrified several times by the sight of the newspaper my mother, with astounding rashness, would wrap around the metal-mesh fireguard to make the new-lit coals draw, catching on fire, the charred tatters of it flying up the chimney like flimsy bats. Someone had accidentally dropped a sheet of newspaper over my face when I was in the cradle and apparently I went into convulsions from the fright of it. I seem to remember it, in fact, though I was only a few months old; and this connected itself to the way a page of the Times would burst into a sheet of flame and so quickly blacken. In my dream there were no flames, only the switch from the soft glow in which all the friendly beasts (and I among them) basked and were at peace, to the horror of irreversible destruction, of ruin.

The other dream came when I was eight. I used as a child to love reading the descriptions (often accompanied by small photographs) of country houses for sale which at that time occupied the back page of the London Times. They ranged from cottages to castles, and I was not only fascinated by their varied architecture but also by their names. I would furnish each with inhabitants and make up "pretend games" (long, mainly unwritten serial stories within which I moved not so much doing anything as being one of the people in them—another form of dreaming). Another source of these daydreams was the sample notepaper, embossed or printed with the names of persons or places I presume were made up by the stationer, which my
father, as a clergyman, used to receive from time to time. He would give me these
advertisements to play with; and from a letterhead such as

Colonel & Mrs. Ashley Fiennes
The Manor House
Rowanbeck,
Westmoreland

I could create not the plot of a story—I've never been good at that—but a situation
and its shadowy children. So—this dream was of a house. When I first dreamed it
there were some scenes, events, something of a story or situation in the dream; but
those soon faded, and what I remembered (and now still either remember, or
remember remembering, so that the picture still has clarity) was the vision of the
house itself. It is seen from a hillside perhaps a quarter of a mile away, and it's a
Jacobean house with two projecting wings. The stone it's made of is a most lovely
warm peach-pink; and the English county it's in is Somerset—lovely name! The
mood or atmosphere of this dream is as harmonious and delightful as that of the
barn, but this time there's no disaster; it just goes on glowing, beaming, filling the self
who gazes from the hillside with ineffable pleasure. Not long ago I realized that the
reason I always give my present address as West Somerville, which though correct is
not necessary for postal purposes, is not from some snobbish concern (East
Somerville, like East Cambridge, is a poorer, uglier neighborhood) but because
Somerville sounds like Somerset and Somerset is in the West Country. The
associations are pleasant; when I say "West Somerville" I evoke for myself the old
rose color of the house in my dream, though plain "Somerville" makes me think of
Union Square and its traffic jams. The house of the dream had a name too:
Mazinger Hall, and I dreamed it on a Midsummer's Eve. For many years just to think
of it could give me a sense of peace and satisfaction. What connection do these two
eyear dreams, which never became poems, have with the images of poetry or with
my later activity as a writer? The powerful first one perhaps embodies some basic
later themes, of joy and fear, joy and loss. But it's the second one, because of its
verbal element—the house having a name and an awareness of the sounds and
associations of Somerset, West Country, being implicit—that links itself to the
writing of poems.

Although my first book, The Double Image, is full of the words dream and
dreamer, it is daydreaming and the idea of dreaming that really prevail in it. It was
some years later that I began to write directly from real dreams; "The Girlhood of
Jane Harrison," for instance. I had been reading J. H.'s Prolegomena to the Study
of Greek Religion and some of her other work, but had not then read her charming
autobiographical memoir, later given me by Adrienne Rich because I'd written the
poem. My dream is described in the poem, but I don't know that the sense, in the
dream and in the wake of it, of the symbolic value of the window, indoor and garden
darknesses, the sweetness of marzipan, the naming of roses, the diagram ("like the
pan for star cake") of the dance in which Jane Harrison and her semblances moved
from the central point out towards and beyond the dissolving boundaries of youth's
garden, is adequately presented in the text. "Marzipan" is an especially unrealized
reference; I myself can only dimly recall what part it played in the dream, and I don't
see how anyone else could derive its significance from the poem unaided by any
trace of memory. I think it was a word that the figure in the dream murmurs to
herself as if its sound and the sweetness and dense texture of the substance so
named expressed the feeling of the summer night and its roses. Also it was linked
with the "star cake." The garden was a nineteenth century English one, with ample
lawns and rosebeds, the surrounding shrubbery backed by taller trees, and a great
cedar in the middle distance. Jane leans out of a groundfloor window at first; then

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she steps into the outdoor space. Though it's dark there's some moonlight, or possibly a glow from the house behind her—enough for trees and bushes to cast shadow. Starting from near the cedar, she begins to dance; and in forming the star figure of the dance, which is a ritual to welcome the autumn that is soon to begin, she multiplies, as if reflected in many mirrors or as if a cluster of identical dancers spread out to the points of a compass rose. She's moved out of the house of childhood, recognized the end of summer, saluted the fall (The Fall from innocence into the vast adventure of Knowledge?) to which her own grown-up life corresponds. Something like that. But as a poem it may be incompletely evolved, or partially unborn. And this is the great danger of dream poems: that they remain subjective, private, inaccessible without the author's gloss. Not only dream material presents this danger, of course; one of the most typical failures of student poetry is the writer's failure to recognize what has actually emerged into the poem and what remains available only to the poet or through explications that are not incorporated in the work. Such non-articulated material may originate in all kinds of experience; but dream experiences are particularly likely to be insufficiently transmuted into art unless the writer is sensitive to the problem and to its solution.

“Relative Figures Reappear” is another dream-poem I seldom read to audiences. I feel it describes a dream but does not evoke it vividly enough for it to stir in others feelings analogous to those it gave to me; and because of this descriptive, rather than evocative, quality its significances remain unshared in much the same way as those in the Jane Harrison poem, “The Park,” on the other hand, in which persons and places of my own life also appear, seems somewhat more evocative—its images have more feeling-tone—and ends with a rather clear statement of intent, specifying the park as the country of open secrets where the elm
shelters the construction of gods
and true magic exceeds all design.

The dream (and I hope, the poem) gave a sense of the way in which “real magic” may be arrived at by means of illusive modes; or rather that it transcends the trickery or sleight-of-hand it may condense to utilize. The elm (real, natural, an “open secret”) may indeed shelter the construction, by carpenters, of wooden “gods”—but they are real gods! Magic is happening, a multi-layered paradox.

Many of my poems of the fifties and early sixties—“Nice House,” “Scenes from the Life of the Pepper Trees,” “The Springtime,” “The Departure,” for example—may seem to have been dream-derived, but they were not. Rather they are typical examples of the poetic imagination’s way of throwing off analogues as it moves through, or plays over, the writer’s life. I see a difference between these poems and those of a still earlier period, however: being more concrete and more genuinely related as analogies, metaphors, images, to that life-experience—more rooted, in a word—they are truly poems in a degree that the stanzas of vague talk, unfounded either in actual dreams or in daily waking life, which filled The Double Image, were not. One poem from the early sixties which might easily be mistaken for dream account is “A Happening,” here a metaphor that expressed for me the trauma of returning to the city after two years in Mexico, proved to be meaningful to many readers. For me it was New York City that was the intractably alien and terrifying place, despite years of residence there and attempts to love it; for others it may have been any other great metropolis. However, the poem includes a conscious irony that I now think is a flaw because of its peculiar obscurity: one of the protagonists (a stranger bird who turns into a paper sack and then “resumes its human shape” when it touches down in the streets of the city) goes up town to seek
the source of "the Broadway river." Now, only someone familiar with New York would know, first, that Broadway does have a river-like meandering course, and second, that in fact it begins downtown, where Manhattan's earliest buildings were constructed near the harbor. So the stranger is looking in the wrong direction. That's part of the "plot" of the poem, but it's not fully accessible, and even to a New Yorker can too easily seem merely a mistake on the part of a writer who was, at the time, a fairly recent immigrant. (I had come to the U.S. at the end of 1949, but had spent almost four years out of the country during the fifties.)

In dreams, of course, just such "mistakes" do occur; but the dream atmosphere of a poem must be as strongly convincing as a Magritte painting to ensure the reader's not being distracted by its peculiarities from the dynamics of the poem itself. When the images of certain poems (dream derived or not) make one feel one is entering a real dream, it is a sign of their strength, their power. We are convinced, just as, ourselves dreaming, we accept without question situations and juxtapositions our waking reason finds illogical or "weird." Poems "about" dreams which are not well written are as boring or depressing as other shoddy work; and poems which (like my own early work) make constant reference to the dream state but provide no concrete evidence of its existence are at best vaguely pleasant in a melancholy, misty way. When a poem "feels like a dream" it does so by virtue of the clearness of its terms (however irrational they may be). When we wake from actual dreams, isn't it precisely the powerful clarity, not any so-called "dreaminess," that speaks to us? It is true that sometimes dream episodes, and figures in them, dissolve or melt into one another and that this witnessed metamorphic process forms part of the dream-drama; but we are not commonly brought to question it while dreaming, any more than we question the transitions of place, mood, and persons we experience while waking.

In the early sixties my husband began working with a Jungian therapist who encouraged him to talk over his dreams with me; and this stimulated me to remember and think about many more of my own dreams than hitherto, both because of our discussions and his account of the therapist's interpretations and because I began to make a practice of writing down what I remembered, and of participating to some extent in the emotional effect of Mitch's dreams as well as my own. Thus, in "A Ring of Changes," I wrote,

I look among your papers
for something that will give you to me
until you come back;
and find: "Where are my dreams?"

Your dreams! Have they not nourished my life?
Didn't I poach among them, as now on your desk?
My cheeks grown red and my hair curly
as I roasted your pheasants by my night fire!

My dreams are gone off to hunt yours,
I won't take them back unless they find yours,
they must return torn by your forests...

It was a time of great pain and a lot of growth for us; looking back I see that the sharing of our dream-life, and of what we were learning about how to think about dreams, was what kept us going and held us to one another in those years more than anything else. Whatever conflicts we endured, we nevertheless found ourselves linked in the unconscious; not that, as some have done, we dreamed the same dream or answered dream with dream; yet our common intense interest in our own and each other's nightly adventures in the inner world acted as a powerful bond. After a while I too began to see a therapist and to work more methodically in trying to comprehend the symbolic language. Specifically dream-originated poems of this
time are part IV of “A Ring of Changes,” “The Dog of Art,” the prose story about Antonio and Sabrinus (A Dream) and To the Snake, as well as some of those previously mentioned: but not The Goddess, though people have thought so. The daisy-eyes, worked in wool, of the Dog of Art are the “lazy-daisy” embroidered eyes my mother (and later I, myself, when my son was little) used to substitute for the dangerous button-eyes on wire pins with which stuffed toy animals used to be furnished. The dream-images, and consequently the poem, imply relationships between the embroiderer’s practical creative imagination and the child’s imagination that infuses still more life into the toy; the functioning of imagination in dream, and the way it incorporates memory; and the way in which artists (of any kind) draw upon all of these things. Daisies suggest the “innocent eye” of art.

Something the Antonio and Sabrinus dream made even clearer for me than it had been before was the urgent tendency of some material toward its medium—in this case prose, not verse. I began telling the story as a poem, but it had been a dream with a very distinct tone or style, a tale told; and the slightly archaic diction which was virtually “given,” or at least which the dream laid on the very brink of, sounded stilled in verse. (It was in conversation with Robert Bly that the possibility of capturing the tone better in prose rhythms emerged. I remember—unlikely as that seems, for Bly has never, in my opinion, really understood the sonic aspects of poetry, which is why, focusing almost exclusively on the image, he has felt free to translate such various poets. Had he been concerned with ear and voice he would have been haunted by auditory problems he has simply ignored.) The stanzas of verse which conclude “A Dream” began, I think, as the opening of the subsequently abandoned first version. I had a similar experience of material “wanting to be” prose in writing the non-dream experience of a tree-felling, the story “Say the Word.”

One must learn to listen to the form-needs of events; and dream material often seems to make this necessity specially clear.

This retrospective evaluation of my own relation to dreams as a poet reveals so far two main points. One is the difficulty of adequately conveying not only the mood of the dream, and of not only describing or presenting its facts, but also—along with mood and facts combined—of capturing within the poem itself a sense of its significance. For the poem to work, this significance may be narrowly personal only if a sufficient context is provided for that personal meaning to justify itself as a dramatic component. For example, in “A Sequence” it is possible that the tense situation presented in the first four parts of the sequence provides a sufficiently novelistic context for the dream references of part five, tenuous though their meaning may be, to have some impact. One can at least comprehend that the dream joke (which, as often happens, doesn’t really seem all that funny when one wakes and looks for the point of it) does in fact give a crucial moment of relief to the protagonists. And perhaps this puts it on a less narrow, more universal level: one accepts the laughter and relief (I speak now as reader, not writer, for the poem was written so long ago) not because one shares the joke but because one has witnessed the characters’ previous misery, and also because one is probably familiar with the way in which such tension can at last be broken by something simply silly.

The other point revealed is that the attempt to render dream into poem is potentially an excellent way to learn one’s craft, for if the difficulties inherent in that process can be surmounted, those attendant upon the articulation of other experience seem less great. Moreover—and this perhaps is a third and separate point—consideration of dream-images, in which the imagination has free play, or at least less censored and inhibited play, than it has in the waking mind, provides valuable models of possibility for the too-deliberate, cautious, and thus “uninspired” writer. (Or perhaps I should say, for the writer temporarily in an uninspired, over-intentional phase; for if a poet’s sole experience of being taken over by the imagination took place in dreaming, could one consider him a poet at all?)

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There is a certain kind of dream in which it is not the visual and its associations which are paramount in impact and significance, but rather an actual verbal message, though a visual context and the identity of the speaker may be important factors. The first dream I can recall having written into a poem ("The Flight," Collected Earlier Poems 1940–1960, p. 34) was dreamed in London in 1945 but not composed until several years later, probably in New York. The encounter with William Blake—who was sitting on the floor, his back against a wall and his knees drawn up, and who looked at me with his prominent, unmistakable eyes as he spoke—was so memorable that the lapse of time has scarcely blurred it. And it coincided with the “real life” fact of a bird’s getting caught in my room at night and at dawn, when I pushed down the top half of the sash window, shooting unhesitatingly out, calmed by the sleep into which it had sunk when I turned out the light. But it was the extraordinary Blakean words, “The will is given us that we may know the delights of surrender,” that made the dream an artistic whole which seemed to ask only for transcription. Yet if I’d tried to write the poem at the time of dreaming I would not have had the craftsmanship to accomplish it, and it would have been lost to me, because once crystallized in an inadequate form, it would almost inevitably have become inaccessible to another attempt.

Then there are verbal dreams whose visual context vanishes on waking, or never appeared at all, the dream having consisted purely of words. The context may arrive later, in the world of external events. “In Memory of Boris Pasternak” exemplifies this latter eventuality. In its second section I wrote about the way in which a great writer can impart to scenes of one’s own world a character they would not otherwise have had—in other words, can give one new or changed eyes to see through. While I was working on the poem, I looked at the barn and woods and clouds and buried the dead fledglings among wild strawberries, a dream I’d lost track of re-entered my consciousness, and though at the time two nights before, I’d not associated it with the recently-dead poet, the lines a disembodied voice had spoken, “The artist must create himself or be born again,” came clearly into the constellation of images and experiences clustered around my feeling for Pasternak, so that the dictum seemed not only directive but also a comment on how, for the poet, “self-creation” consists in attaining, in a lifetime’s practice of the art, the ability to reveal the world, or a world, to others. The dream words are syntactically ambiguous; do they mean, “If the artist fails to give birth to himself (to his creative potential) he must undergo reincarnation until he does so”’? Or is the syntax appositive, i.e., “The artist must create himself, or in other words, be born anew in each work of his art, as in Christian theology the New Adam takes the place of the Old”? As the dreamer, my sense is that both meanings are implicit. Indeed, this leads me to note one of the most important lessons a poet can learn from dreaming—namely, that just as in dreams we effortlessly receive, rather than force being by a process of will, images and their significances, including double images and complimentary double meanings, so in writing (from dream or non-dream sources) the process is rather one of recognizing and absorbing the given than of willing something into existence. But this “given” is not the taken-for-granted reality of superficial, inattentive moving through life, but the often disregarded reality that lies just beyond or within it.

A dream that exemplifies the verbal message without visual or other sensuous context is this one, in which the following proposition was presented to the intellect (presumably in much the same way as solutions to mathematical problems have occurred to people during sleep):

“Trauerzucker = Zauberzucker”

The dream consisted of these equated German words (which meant “mourning sugar” and “magic sugar”) and of the awareness (a) that (in the dream world) there exists a funeral rite in which lumps of sugar are distributed to guests at a wake, and
(b) that this was understood to signify “out of sorrow comes joy.” Thus, a ritual of sorrow and death, in which sugar is handed out to sweeten the bitterness, turns out to have an intimate connection with or even to be identical with (as shown by the equal sign) the rituals of (favorable, “white,” or “good”) magic—so that (it was implied) the sugar cubes don’t just alleviate, but transform the sorrow (into joy).

A curious point was that the word “trauer” was misspelled, so to speak, in this non-visual dream, as “trauber,” a word that doesn’t exist; however, the word “traube,” meaning a bunch of grapes, does, so that “traubenzucker” would be “grape-sugar” (as in Trauben-saft, grape-juice).

Often a dream presents a ring from which to hang the latent questions of that moment in one’s life. “The Broken Sandal” was such a one. As it states, I “dreamed the thong of my sandal broke.” The questions that follow—from the most literally practical ones about how I’m going to walk on without it over sharp dirty stones, to the more abstract ones:

Where was I going?
Where was I going I can’t go to now, unless hurting?
Where am I standing, if I’m to stand still now?

arise (gradually waking) from the initial event. The dream demanded of the dreamer that some basic life-questions be asked. That was its function. In becoming poem, the organic process begun in dream continued, statement and questions giving the poem its necessarily terse form; and the mode of the questions was provided by the dream’s sandal-thong metaphor, so that “Where am I (is my life) going?” is given concrete context, a matter of bare feet, of hobbling, of hurting. Finally the dreamer-writer is brought to enquire the nature of the place that is the poem’s present. This type of dream experience and poem experience is not hampered by the intrusion of the ego and its so often untransferable trappings, but translates seamlessly into the reader’s own “I”. I wish that happened oftener. Yet perhaps a poetry devoid of the peculiarities of a less universal experience might seem bland; an occasional such poem may have some degree of stark force precisely because it is unusually simple, whereas a whole book of such poems might make one suspect the author of deliberately aiming at universality in the manner of gurus and greeting-card rhymesters. The hope is always that, when autobiographical images occur in a poem, readers will respond with the same combination of empathy and of a recognition of their own equivalents with which they would receive a novel, a play, a film. For instance, in “Don’t You Hear That Whistle Blowin...,” the “Middle Door” and the personages named—Steve, Richard, Bo, Mitch—are unknown to the reader, but the theme of the poem is loss and change, and my hope is that the poem clearly expresses this and (because of the givens of the dream source) reinforce that theme with the folkloric, nostalgic associations of railroad trains.

There is a type of dream that, like the simple image of the broken sandal, virtually writes itself: the kind whose very terms are those of the myth or fairy tale. “The Well,” about which I’ve written elsewhere, is an instance. More recently the nature of a close relationship was dreamed in what felt like mythic terms, the resulting poem (“A Pilgrim Dreaming”) havings its rhythms and diction deriving partly from the feeling-tone of the dream itself and partly of my waking feelings—rather awestruck—about having dreamed something seemingly from my friend’s point of view rather than my own, almost as if I had dreamed his dream. Again, one of the friends of whom I’d written twenty-five years before in “The Earthwoman and the Waterwoman” (not a dream-derived poem) was visiting me one day in 1978, and after she left I dreamed about her as “The Dragonfly Mother,” the long-ago images of water and blueness reappearing in a metamorphosis that expressed the growth and change in her and also in my response to her personality. Thus the sequence was, impression, first poem, passage of time, new impressions, dream,
second poem. And in addition (as recounted in the second poem) her visit affected my actions on that day, making me forego doing something I’d thought it was my duty to do (but which as a matter of fact wasn’t important, since it was only a matter of speaking for two minutes at a big outdoor rally, at which I would not really be missed). Instead, I slept, dreamed, wrote a poem I like, and recognized how often the fear of displeasing masks itself as a sense of obligation.

Perhaps it is when dreaming and waking life thus interweave themselves actively that we experience both most intensely. When such interaction takes place for someone who is not an artist in any medium, the recognition of its power remains restricted to that individual. But the poet or other artist may sometimes experience the primary interweaving in the very doing of the poem, painting, dance, or whatever. It is then more than recapitulation, it is of one substance with the dream; and its power has a chance to extend beyond the limits of the artist’s own life.

Appendix

Some dreams contain a great quantity of narrative detail than seems manageable in a poem. An example would be the following (which I can hardly believe occurred as long ago as 1963, it is so vivid to me: that is, its orientation—the placement of doors or rooms to the right or left in relation to the beholder—is so clear in my mind). I am visiting a mental hospital, or rather a residential clinic in search of a woman who works there in some more or less mental capacity, and whom I have agreed to help move into a new apartment. She is in fact moving into my building but I’d promised to assist her before I knew that, and she still doesn’t know—I’m going to surprise her with the information later. I find that this place she works in is so interesting that I want to look at everything for its own sake. I more or less forget about looking for her; the people in her office know I’m doing so, anyway.

It’s an old building without “grounds,” right in the city, a mixture of City and Country School (a private elementary school in New York City) and the Judson Health Center (a neighborhood clinic in New York City). It works on the principle of keeping promises and of lots of creative occupational therapy. The O.T. rooms occupy almost all the space, unlike the situation in most hospitals. On a woman’s floor I learn that troubled housewives can come for short periods (e.g., a week) and immerse themselves in doing painting or sculpture or whatever. On a door is a sign about “perpetual counsel”—I open it. Not expecting to find anyone there during the lunch hour, but sure enough, there is; promise kept. Likewise on the children’s floor is a door saying “The Friendly Lady” will be there at all times: and I look in, and she is.

Also on the children’s floor is a special quiet library-room, quite small, rounded or vaulted in shape, in which there are four mural panels—silvery-white designs on milky-pale-blue background—of subjects “from the Zohar,” showing constellations and kingly figures on horseback rising from, and composed of, stars; all prophetically tending towards the Stable of Bethlehem which can be seen afar as if amid the nebulae. A theme here is of reassurance—promises are kept, the “Friendly Lady” is actually there, “counsel” really is perpetual. There is a sense of consolation and grace akin to that in the idea of the Madonna, the Holy Mother. And the final scene, with the magical starry mural has its own evident symbolism, with powers and principalities moving towards the humble stable. (That the Zohar enters into this can be variously interpreted.)

Another dream “told itself” in the immediate writing down of what, with a little crafting, might approximate to the style of the Grimms’ Household Tales. It’s only an amusing anecdote, however; I enjoyed dreaming it but it could not impel me into trying to make a work of art of it: A little girl had longed, as many do (I did, passionately) for the inanimate to speak. To find one of her dolls actually addressing her one day! But as she grew older she of course became more and more aware it probably wouldn’t happen. Then one day, when she was about ten years old, it did happen! Though it was not a doll that spoke. This is what occurred: Her parents took two newspapers, one conservative, one radical, and the latter was lying on a couch or bed when, as she looked at it, it raised itself up on its elbow, so to speak, and began to address her. In delight and excitement she exclaimed, “How I’ve always wanted this to
happen!—And before, it never did, no matter how much I longed for it!” “Ah,” said the newspaper (whose name was The Emancipator), “I’ll tell you the secret of how to get us Things to speak—” And just then I woke up.

Yet another type of dream, verbal but not poetic, is illustrated by the following:

I am at Yale for a reading. A professor points out how many Black college Fellows (as the term is used at Oxford, or in Harvard’s “Society of Fellows”) are in the hall. I say, ironically, “Oh yes—angels on the point of a needle, right?”

The dream that follows suggests to me two literary possibilities: one would be, to re-enter the dream imaginatively and draw forth from it some further elements of story—this would tend to become prose fiction. The other possibility is that since the dream-experience becomes as much a part of one’s memory-bank as any other, its images (rather than the fictional situation) may come into play unbidden in the course of some later poem. With another girl (Jean Rankir, my childhood friend) I come to the edge of the sea. (We are about eleven and twelve years old.) There seem to be shelves, or levels, of sea, and the whole expanse is cluttered with wrecked tankers, some floating, some half-beached, as far as the eye can see. It’s a dank, dark-green, eerie seascape but the water’s not cold and we have come to swim. We swim aboard the decks of the nearest wreck—stanchions and bits of companionway all awash and covered with eel seaweeds. We have fun swimming in and out of it all; we don’t scrape or hit against anything. There is absolutely no living creature in sight and the shore is a vague sedgy marsh. After a long time, though, we realize that the boat is free of the bottom (and of the ridges or reefs of dark tufa-like rock) and has drifted out with the tide. We become troubled and decide to make our way (wading along the half-submerged decks to the end nearest land) back as far as we can without swimming, and then swim to shore before we get carried out any further. But even then it looks like a long swim—can we make it? Jean thinks we must; I am hesitant, thinking it might be better to risk staying on board the many hours till the next high tide washes us inshore again. We are perplexed—especially since it’s so hard to judge the distance and the variable depth. Looking out to sea, the other levels stretch away and away, faintly gleaming, thick with wrecks. We might get wedged so that out particular wreck would not wash in with the next tide—or, half submerged as it was, it might sink, further out than we were already. On the other hand, the distance we were already out at sea looked greater than any we had ever tried to swim. No one to whom to signal. Woke in perplexity.

REFERENCES

3. Ibid. p. 127.
4. Ibid., p. 69, p. 72., p. 82, p. 87.
5. Ibid. p. 97.
6. Ibid. p. 106.
7. Ibid. p. 118.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid. p. 131.
10. Ibid. p. 110.
13. Ibid. p. 32.
20. A group of Jewish Cabalist texts.