Richard Wilbur

COMMENTARY

The "dream aesthetics" in my work would be most obvious in such a poem as "Walking to Sleep," which derives from a sort of exploratory dreaming which I experience (and some others, apparently, do not), or in the later poem "In Limbo," which has to do with the conversing of all one's selves and ages in the hypnopompic state. But even where dreaming is not the subject, I know that the drifting, linking and swerving of my poetry is often modelled—even while I strive for a conscious clarity and point—on the flow of consciousness in dream. I also know that it was my own experience as a dreamer which first led me—reading a paperback in a foxhole at Monte Cassino—to sense a submerged pattern of psychic action in the fiction of Poe, about whom I have since written a number of interpretive essays.

You ask for "a dream," and I am not sure whether to give you one which I understand or one which I do not. When I was sixteen, I dreamt of the appearance of an equestrian figure—a cowboy, I think—on the road which led past the gate of the walled vegetable-garden and rounded the manure-house behind the barn. The figure gestured to the pine-grove across the garden, and to a range of hazy blue mountains, Rockies-like, which had never appeared behind the pine-grove before. In a deep, oracular voice, which seemed to be speaking close to my ear, the rider said, "Those are the Old Catica Mountains." I woke up with a feeling of awe, but with no comprehension, and forty years later I feel the same about that comparatively uneventful dream, wherein large and craggy Western forms are glimpsed above a New Jersey farm's horizon. If anyone were to take the first and last syllables of that strange word "Catica," and connect them with the manure-house, I should not thank him for it; a sixteen-year-old boy who has grown up on a farm takes the manure-house for granted, and I did not know the word caca at that age.

Perhaps the old dream still resounds for me (the greatest force is in the words of it) because it was simple and soluble and yet escaped me; by which I mean that my waking mind never came to share it. A similar dream, a bit more than a decade later, was understood at once, enjoyed, and put away amongst fathomed experiences. At that time I was busy in left-wing politics, and not long before the dream had helped a young woman gather a great quantity of articles which were to be auctioned for the benefit of a radical organization. One item was a mantilla, which the young woman tried on, and which rather became her. The organization, by the way, was ostensibly concerned with relief for anti-Franco exiles and the like. A short time after the auction, during a house-party at Wellfleet, I behaved somewhat improperly toward, or with, the young woman, and afterward did not feel quite easy about it. The dream which summed all this up had no visual content which I can remember; what it amounted to was a resonant voice which intoned, just as I was waking up, "The Spanish Cape Mystery!" There was a mystery novel of that title knocking around our apartment at the time; the author, I believe, was Erle Stanley Gardner. It will be seen, however, that the title served, within my dream, to recall the Spanish civil war, the mantilla, the furtiveness of "front-group" politics, Cape Cod, and such guilt as I
felt about the girl. Its effect was to remind me of something in a veiled manner; at the same time, the reminder was so tricky and portentous as to amount to a recommendation that something be recognized and then laughed off.

One more dream, which seems to me both hilarious and embarrassing, because I cannot bear self-pity or feelings of nobility. This dream occurred at a time when I had been, as they say, “pressing myself very hard,” and apparently felt that I was neglecting my own work or pleasure for the sake of others. In the dream I was standing in a highway some distance from a little town. A steam-roller, driven by myself, came toward me as I stood there, and my spirit therefore prudently flew up and looked down on the goings-on. When the steam-roller had passed over my body, it lay in the road like a rolled-out ginger cookie; it was not, however, light-brown in color, as gingerbread-men are, but was full of red and blue traceries resembling the representations of innards in medical books. Whereupon, like a piece of wrapping-paper driven by a gale, my body was peeled from the road-surface and whipped across intervening fields to the village, where it at once became a stained-glass window in a church. I believe that this dream requires no explanation, but I report it because, though emotionally disgraceful, it is visually clever and delightful.

WALKING TO SLEEP

As a queen sits down, knowing that a chair will be there,
Or a general raises his hand and is given the field—glasses,
Step off assuredly into the blank of your mind.
Something will come to you. Although at first
You nod through nothing like a fogbound prow,
Gravel will breed in the margins of your gaze,
Perhaps with tussocks or a dusty flower,
And, humped like dolphins playing in the bow-wave,
Hills will suggest themselves. All such suggestions
Are yours to take or leave, but hear this warning:
Let them not be too velvet green, the fields
Which the deft needle of your eye appoints,
Nor the old farm past which you make your way
Too shady-linteled, too instinct with home.
It is precisely from Potemkin barns
With their fresh-painted hex signs on the gables,
Their sparkling gloom within, their stanchion-rattle
And sweet breath of silage, that there comes
The trotting cat whose head is but a skull.
Try to remember this: what you project
Is what you will perceive; what you perceive
With any passion, be it love or terror,

May take on whims and powers of its own.
Therefore a numb and grudging circumspection
Will serve you best, unless you overdo it,
Watching your step too narrowly, refusing
To specify a world, shrinking your purview
To a tight vision of your inching shoes—
Which may, as soon you come to think, be crossing
An unseen gorge upon a rotten trestle.
What you must manage is to bring to mind
A landscape not worth looking at, some bleak
Champaign at dead November's end, its grass
As dry as lichen, and its lichens grey,
Such glumly simple country that a glance
Of flat indifference from time to time
Will stabilize it. Lifeless thus, and leafless,
The view should set at rest all thoughts of ambush.
Nevertheless, permit no roadside thickets
Which, as you pass, might shake with worse than wind;
Revoke all trees and other cover; blast
The upstart boulder which a flicking shape
Has stepped behind; above all, put a stop
To the known stranger up ahead, whose face
Half turns to mark you with a creased expression.
Here let me interject that steady trudging
Can make you drowsy, so that without transition,
As when an old film jumps in the projector,
You will be wading a dun hallway, rounding
A newel post, and starting up the stairs.
Should that occur, adjust to circumstances
And carry on, taking these few precautions:
Detach some portion of your thought to guard
The outside of the building; as you wind
From room to room, leave nothing at your back,
But slough all memories at every threshold;
Nor must you dream of opening any door
Until you have foreseen what lies beyond it.
Regardless of its seeming size, or what
May first impress you as its style or function,
The abrupt structure which involves you now
Will improvise like vapor. Groping down
The gritty cellar steps and past the fuse-box,
Brushing through sheeted lawn-chairs, you emerge
In some cathedral's pillared crypt, and thence,
Your brow alight with carbide, pick your way
To the main shaft through drifts and rubbly tunnels.
Promptly the hoist, ascending toward the pit-head,
Rolls downward past your gaze a dented rock-face
Peppered with hacks and drill-holes, which acquire
Insensibly the look of hieroglyphics.
Whether to surface now within the vast
Stone tent where Cheops lay secure, or take
The proffered shed of corrugated iron
Which gives at once upon a vacant barracks,
Is up to you. Need I, at this point, tell you
What to avoid? Avoid the pleasant room
Where someone, smiling to herself, has placed
A bowl of yellow freesias. Do not let
The thought of her in yellow, lithe and sleek
As lemonwood, mislead you where the curtains,
Romping like spinnakers which taste the wind,
Belly out and lifting till the sill
Has shipped a drench of sunlight, then subsiding,
Both warm and cool the love-bed. Your concern
Is not to be detained by dread, or by
Such dear acceptances as would entail it,
But to pursue an ever-dimming course
Of pure transition, treading as in water
Past crumbling tufa, down cloacaal halls
Of boarded-up hotels, through attics full
Of glassy taxidermy, moping on
Like a drugged fire-inspector. What you hope for
Is that at some point of the pointless journey,
Indoors or out, and when you least expect it,
Right in the middle of your stride, like that,
So neatly that you never feel a thing,
The kind assassin Sleep will draw a bead
And blow your brains out.

What, are you still awake?

Then you must risk another tack and footing.
Forget what I have said. Open your eyes
To the good blackness not of your room alone
But of the sky you trust is over it,
Whose stars, though foundering in the time to come,
Bequeath us constantly a jetsam beauty.
Now with your knuckles rub your eyelids, seeing
The phosphenes caper like St. Elmo’s fire,
And let your head heel over on the pillow
Like a flung skiff on wild Gennesaret.
Let all things storm your thought with the moiled flocking
Of startled rookeries, or flak in air,
Or blossom-fall, and out of that come striding
In the strong dream by which you have been chosen.
Are you upon the roads again? If so,
Be led past honeyed meadows which might tempt
A wolf to graze, and groves which are not you
But answer to your supplier self, that nature
Able to bear the thrush’s quirky glee
In stands of chute light, yet praise as well,
All leaves aside, the barren bark of winter.
When, as you may, you find yourself approaching

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A crossroads and its laden gallows tree,
Do not with hooded eyes allow the shadow
Of a man moored in air to bruise your forehead,
But lift your gaze and stare your brother down,
Though the swart crows have pecked his sockets hollow.
As for what turn your travels then will take,
I cannot guess. Long errantry perhaps
Will arm you to be gentle, or the claws
Of nightmare flapp you pathless God knows where,
As the crow flies, to meet your dearest horror.
Still, if you are in luck, you may be granted,
As, inland, one can sometimes smell the sea,
A moment’s perfect carelessness, in which
To stumble a few steps and sink to sleep
In the same clearing where, in the old story,
A holy man discovered Vishnu sleeping.
Wrapped in his maya, dreaming by a pool
On whose calm face all images whatever
Lay clear, unfathomed, taken as they came.