Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.
EVERY EXIT IS AN ENTRANCE

(A Praise of Sleep)
I want to make a praise of sleep. Not as a practitioner—I admit I have never been what is called “a good sleeper” and perhaps we can return later to that curious concept—but as a reader. There is so much sleep to read, there are so many ways to read it. In Aristotle’s view, sleep requires a “daimonic but not a divine” kind of reading.1 Kant refers to sleep’s content as “involuntary poetry in a healthy state.”2 Keats wrote a “Sonnet to Sleep,” invoking its powers against the analytic of the day:

O soft embalmer of the still midnight!

... Then save me, or the passed day will shine
Upon my pillow, breeding many woes;
Save me from curious conscience, that still lords
Its strength for darkness, burrowing like a mole;
Turn the key deftly in the oiled wards,
And seal the hushed casket of my soul.3

My intention in this essay is to burrow like a mole in different ways of reading sleep, different kinds of readers of sleep, both those who are saved, healthy, daimonic, good sleepers and those who are not. Keats ascribes to sleep an embalming action. This means two things: that sleep does soothe and perfume our nights; that sleep can belie the stench of death inborn in us. Both actions are salvific in Keats’ view. Both deserve (I think) to be praised.

My earliest memory is of a dream. It was in the house where we lived when I was three or four years of age. I dreamed I was asleep in the house in an upper room.
That I awoke and came downstairs and stood in the living room. The lights were on in the living room, although it was hushed and empty. The usual dark green sofa and chairs stood along the usual pale green walls. It was the same old living room as ever, I knew it well, nothing was out of place. And yet it was utterly, certainly, different. Inside its usual appearance the living room was as changed as if it had gone mad.

Later in life, when I was learning to reckon with my father, who was afflicted with and eventually died of dementia, this dream recovered itself to me, I think because it seemed to bespeak the situation of looking at a well-known face, whose appearance is exactly as it should be in every feature and detail, except that it is also, somehow, deeply and glowingly, strange.

The dream of the green living room was my first experience of such strangeness and I find it as uncanny today as I did when I was three. But there was no concept of madness or dementia available to me at that time. So, as far as I can recall, I explained the dream to myself by saying that I had caught the living room sleeping. I had entered it from the sleep side. And it took me years to recognize, or even to frame a question about, why I found this entrance into strangeness so supremely consoling. For despite the spookiness, inexplicability and later tragic reference of the green living room, it was and remains for me a consolation to think of it lying there, sunk in its greenness, breathing its own order, answerable to no one, apparently penetrable everywhere and yet so perfectly disguised in all the propaganda of its own waking life as to become in a true sense something incognito at the heart of our sleeping house.

It is in these terms that I wish to praise sleep, as a glimpse of something incognito. Both words are important. Incognito means “unrecognized, hidden, unknown.” Something means not nothing. What is incognito hides from us because it has something worth hiding, or so we judge. As an example of this judgment I shall
cite for you two stanzas of Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “The Man-Moth.” The Man-Moth, she says, is a creature who lives most of the time underground but pays occasional visits to the surface of the earth, where he attempts to scale the faces of the buildings and reach the moon, for he understands the moon to be a hole at the top of the sky through which he may escape. Failing to attain the moon each time he falls back and returns to the pale subways of his underground existence. Here is the poem’s third stanza:

Up the façades,
his shadow dragging like a photographer’s cloth behind him,
he climbs fearfully, thinking that this time he will manage
to push his small head through that round clean opening
and be forced through, as from a tube, in black scrolls on the light.
(Man, standing below him, has no such illusions).
But what the Man-Moth fears most he must do, although
he fails, of course, and falls back scared but quite unhurt.4

The Man-Moth is not sleeping, nor is he a dream, but he may represent sleep itself—an action of sleep, sliding up the facades of the world at night on his weird quest. He harbours a secret content, valuable content, which is difficult to extract even if you catch him. Here is the poem’s final stanza:

If you catch him,
hold up a flashlight to his eye. It’s all dark pupil,
an entire night itself, whose haired horizon tightens
as he stares back, and closes up the eye. Then from the lids
one tear, his only possession, like the bee’s sting, slips.
Slyly he palms it, and if you’re not paying attention
he’ll swallow it. However, if you watch, he’ll hand it over,
cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink.
To drink the tear of sleep, to detach the prefix “un-” from its canniness and from its underground purposes, has been the project of many technologies and therapies—from the ancient temple of Asklepios at Epidauros, where sick people slept the night in order to dream their own cure, to the psychoanalytic algebras of Jacques Lacan, who understands sleep as a space from which the sleeper can travel in two directions, both of them a kind of waking. If I were to praise either of these methods of healing I would do so on grounds of their hopefulness. Both Asklepiadic priests and Lacanian analysts posit a continuity between the realms of waking and sleeping, whereby a bit of something incognito may cross over from night to day and change the life of the sleeper. Here is an ancient account of one of the sleep cures at Epidauros:

There came as a suppliant to the god Asklepios a man who was so one-eyed that on the left he had only lids, there was nothing, just emptiness. People in the temple laughed at him for thinking he would see with an eye that was not there. But in a vision that appeared to him as he slept, the god seemed to boil some medicine and, drawing apart the lids, poured it in. When day came the man went out, seeing with both eyes.5

What could be more hopeful than this story of an empty eye filled with seeing as it sleeps? An analyst of the Lacanian sort might say that the one-eyed man has chosen to travel all the way in the direction of his dream and so awakes to a reality more real than the waking world. He dove into the nothingness of his eye and is awakened by too much light. Lacan would praise sleep as a blindness, which nonetheless looks back at us. What does sleep see when it looks back at us? This is a question entertained by Virginia Woolf in To the Lighthouse, a novel that falls asleep for twenty-five pages in the middle. The story has three parts. Parts I and III concern the planning and execution of a trip to the light-
house by the Ramsay family. Part II is told entirely from the sleep side. It is called “Time Passes.” It begins as a night that grows into many nights then turns into seasons and years. During this time, changes flow over the house of the story and penetrate the lives of the characters while they sleep. These changes are glimpsed as if from underneath; Virginia Woolf’s main narrative is a catalogue of silent bedrooms, motionless chests of drawers, apples left on the dining room table, the wind prying at a window blind, moonlight gliding on floorboards. Down across these phenomena come facts from the waking world, like swimmers stroking by on a night lake. The facts are brief, drastic and enclosed in square brackets. For example:

[Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty.]

or:

[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous.]

or:

[Mr. Carmichael brought out a volume of poems that spring, which had an unexpected success. The war, people said, had revived their interest in poetry.]

These square brackets convey surprising information about the Ramsays and their friends, yet they float past the narrative like the muffled shock of a sound heard while sleeping. No one wakes up. Night plunges on, absorbed in its own events. There is no exchange between night and its captives, no tampering with eyelids, no drinking the tear of sleep. Viewed from the sleep side, an empty eye
socket is just a fact about a person, not a wish to be fulfilled, not a therapeutic challenge. Virginia Woolf offers us, through sleep, a glimpse of a kind of emptiness that interests her. It is the emptiness of things before we make use of them, a glimpse of reality prior to its efficacy. Some of her characters also search for this glimpse while they are awake. Lily Briscoe, who is a painter in *To the Lighthouse*, stands before her canvas and ponders how “to get hold of that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything.” In a famous passage of her diaries, Virginia Woolf agrees with the aspiration:

> If I could catch the feeling I would: the feeling of the singing of the real world, as one is driven by loneliness and silence from the habitable world.  

What would the singing of the real world sound like? What would the thing itself look like? Such questions are entertained by her character Bernard, at the end of *The Waves*:

> “So now, taking upon me the mystery of things, I could go like a spy without leaving this place, without stirring from my chair... The birds sing in chorus; the house is whitened; the sleeper stretches; gradually all is astir. Light floods the room and drives shadow beyond shadow to where they hang in folds inscrutable. What does this central shadow hold? Something? Nothing? I do not know...”

Throughout her fiction Virginia Woolf likes to finger the border between nothing and something. Sleepers are ideal agents of this work. So in her first novel, *The Voyage Out* (a story in which Clarissa Dalloway and six other people travel to South America on a boat), she places her heroine in a remarkable paragraph afloat between waking and sleep:
“I often wonder,” Clarissa mused in bed, over the little white volume of Pascal which went with her everywhere, “whether it is really good for a woman to live with a man who is morally her superior, as Richard is mine. It makes one so dependent. I suppose I feel for him what my mother and women of her generation felt for Christ. It just shows that one can’t do without something.” She then fell into sleep, which was as usual extremely sound and refreshing, but visited by fantastic dreams of great Greek letters stalking round the room, when she woke up and laughed to herself, remembering where she was and that the Greek letters were real people, lying asleep not many yards away. . . . The dreams were not confined to her indeed, but went from one brain to another. They all dreamt of each other that night, as was natural, considering how thin the partitions were between them and how strangely they had been lifted off the earth to sit next each other in mid ocean. . . .

I think Virginia Woolf intends us to enjoy the gentle marital experiment in which Clarissa condenses her husband (Richard) with Christ and then Christ with something—put in italics to remind us of its proximity to nothing. But I am not sure how “natural” it is for dreams to go stalking from brain to brain on an ocean liner, or for ancient Greek letters of the alphabet to be identified with real people. Something supernatural is beginning to be conjured here. Slightly more spooky is a story Virginia Woolf published in 1921 called “A Haunted House,” which features a pair of ghosts sliding from room to room of a house where they had lived centuries ago. The ghosts seem happy but their transit through the house is disturbing, not least of all in its pronouns. The narrative voice shifts from “we” to “one” to “you” to “they” to “I,” as if no one in the story can keep a stable skin on, and the story ends with a sleeper startled awake by the ghosts leaning over her bed:
Waking, I cry “Oh, is this your buried treasure? The light in the heart.”  

I don’t exactly know what the last two sentences mean. A transaction of some importance seems about to take place. Between the realms of sleep and waking, life and death, Virginia Woolf throws open a possibility of dispossession, and then leaves it standing ajar, as if she isn’t sure which side she wants to be on. The story, although light and almost comical, leaves a dark aftertaste. Let us compare the supernatural effects of an earlier author. Homer locates the psychological climax of the *Iliad* in a scene at the start of the twenty-third book where Achilles falls asleep and is visited by the *psyche* of his dead friend Patroklos. Achilles converses with Patroklos and vainly tries to embrace him. As he reaches out his arms in sleep towards his dead friend, Achilles may remind us of poor Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, stretching out his arms in square brackets to his dead wife. Yet Homer’s metaphysic of sleep is much less dark than Virginia Woolf’s. Ghosts in epic are sad but they are also efficacious. While Patroklos goes gibbering off to his place in the underworld, Achilles jumps out of bed to perform the funeral rites enjoined on him by the dream, with this careful comment:  

“Soul and ghost are certainly something!”  

Sleepers in Virginia Woolf do not negotiate sublime transactions in this way. Her narrative advises us to place no hope in them:  

... and should any sleeper, fancying that he might find on the beach an answer to his doubts, a sharer of his solitude, throw off his bedclothes and go down by himself to walk on the sand, no image with semblance of serving and divine promptitude comes readily to hand bringing the night to order and making the world reflect the compass of his soul. ... Useless in such confusion to ask the night those questions as to what
and why and wherefore, which tempt the sleeper from his bed to seek an answer.¹³

In Homer on the other hand, we find answers, beds and sleepers often intertwined, especially in the *Odyssey*. You could say the *Odyssey* is a saga of who sleeps with whom, in its driving mythic impulse towards Penelope and away from Helen, in its fantastic elaboration of kinds of beds, culminating in the famous “trick of the bed” whereby Penelope and Odysseus prove who they are. Throughout the poem, Homer orchestrates a master sleep plan that pulls all the major characters into a nocturnal rhythm lying just under the surface of the awake narrative. Let’s look more closely at how people sleep and where their beds are in this epic.

Telemachos, to begin with, is an insomniac. On the seven occasions in the *Odyssey* when we observe him going to bed, only once does he “take the gift of sleep” in Homer’s phrase. Usually he lies awake worrying, as at the close of Book 1:

There all night long, wrapped in a sheep fleece,
he deliberated in his mind the road Athene had shown him.¹⁴

or at the beginning of Book 15:

Sweet sleep did not get hold of Telemachos but in his heart throughout the ambrosial night, cares for his father kept him awake.¹⁵

Cares for his father include, not least of all, cares for who his father is. When Athene asks him if he is Odysseus’ son he gives a tough teenage answer:

Well my mother says I’m his but I’m dubious myself: no one ever knows his own begetting.¹⁶
Yet he would certainly like to know. Sexual knowledge ripples everywhere in this story just out of Telemachos’ reach. He sits amid the suitors “biting his heart” as they cavort before his mother. He travels to the houses of other married couples, Nestor and his wife, Menelaos and Helen, where he passes the night on a couch aligned with the marital bed. Thus pursued by primal scenes and primary doubts he makes his way to the sixteenth book and to the hut of Eumaios, the swineherd, where he finally meets and knows his father. Here Telemachos “takes the gift of sleep,” lying down in the swineherd’s hut beside Odysseus. This idyllic, impossible night as substitute Penelope beside his own father is Telemachos’ happiest moment in the Odyssey. The very next evening sees him returned to his childhood and to insomnia: back at Penelope’s house, as Odysseus plans the rout of the suitors, he sends Telemachos upstairs to bed alone:

Then there Telemachos laid himself down
and waited for radiant dawn.17

Meanwhile Odysseus: no question the man of many turns is a master of waking reality, yet his relation to sleep is troubled. He frequently feels the need to force himself awake, as when predatory animals or rapacious humans surround him (5.473; 8.445), or because a roomful of eager listeners wants to hear one more chapter of his adventures (11.379). Whenever he does nod off, catastrophes occur. Sailing from the island of Aiolos, whose king has given him a bag containing all the winds, Odysseus dozes on deck and his companions get curious:

“So they loosened the bag and the winds all rushed out together. Storm winds seized them and carried them wailing their hearts out, over the sea away from their homes. But I awakened from sleep, considered in my excellent heart
whether to drop from the deck and die right there in the sea
or to endure, keep silent, go on being one of the living.”18

Odysseus has another suicidal moment occasioned by sleep, in Book 12 when
slumber overtakes him on the beach of Thrinakia and his companions slaughter
the cattle of the sun. Odysseus wakes up and cries out:

“O father Zeus and you other gods who live forever,
how to my ruin you have lulled me in pitiless slumber!”19

So let’s say in general Odysseus and sleep are not friends. Whatever this may
mean for the hero’s characterization overall, I’m struck by how Homer uses it in
subjugating Odysseus to Penelope at the end of the poem. For no one can deny
that Penelope is a master of sleep. She goes to bed dozens of times in the course of
the story, has lots of sleep shed on her by gods, experiences an array of telling and
efficacious dreams and evolves her own theory of how to read them. Moreover,
Homer shows us as early as Book 4 that sleep is the deepest contract she shares
with her husband. Miles apart, years apart, consciously and unconsciously, they
turn the key of each other. So Penelope in Book 4, lying awake in her chamber
while the suitors carouse below, is compared by Homer to a lion cornered in a
circle of huntsmen. Then she falls asleep, to dream of her husband, “noble
Odysseus who has the heart of a lion,”20 and wake up profoundly soothed. Sleep
works for Penelope. She knows how to use it, enjoy it, theorize it and even to par-
ody it, should need arise. As in her famous “recognition scene” with Odysseus
(which occupies Books 19–23 of the poem).

Penelope’s purpose in this scene is to seduce and overcome Odysseus, i.e.,
to seduce by overcoming Odysseus. She goes at it from the sleep side, be-
cause there she can win. As we have already seen, and as she probably knows,
sleep is not his country. Her seduction has two aspects, first a practical one, the bed question: Who sleeps where? This question culminates in Book 23 in the so-called “trick of the bed,” whereby Penelope manoeuvres Odysseus (still disguised as a stranger) into betraying his identity. For she alludes to the bed in her marriage chamber as one that can be moved out into the corridor to accommodate a guest. Odysseus is outraged: as he alone knows, the bed in her chamber was one he carved himself twenty years ago out of an oak tree in the middle of their house. His outrage is the final proof she needs of who he is. But before this recognition quite a bit of sleeping goes on, or is prevented from going on, in noteworthy ways.

Let’s look at Book 19, which takes the form of a long conversation between husband and wife before they retire to separate beds, on the night before the climax of the plot. After they have conversed, Penelope instructs her maidservants to give Odysseus a bath and prepare a luxurious bedstead for him. Odysseus rejects these arrangements, insists on being bathed by an old woman and being given a place on the bare ground to sleep. So Odysseus goes off, has his bath, then returns and sits down beside his wife. Whereupon, instead of saying goodnight, she launches into Penelope’s Interpretation of Dreams (to which we’ll return in a moment). Finally they do say goodnight and retire—she upstairs to her chamber, he to the ground in the forecourt. So there they are, in separate rooms of the same house, each lying awake. Athene sheds sleep on Penelope at the end of Book 19, then sheds sleep on Odysseus at the beginning of Book 20. No sooner does Odysseus fall asleep than Penelope awakes, weeping and crying out. Her voice carries through the house to where Odysseus is sleeping, enters his dream and convinces him that his wife is standing over him in the flesh, recognizing and welcoming him home. Odysseus wakes up, receives an omen from Zeus and rejoices in the forecourt. Homer has woven a strange symbiosis between these two people, together and apart in the same night, entering and exiting each other’s minds, almost sharing one
consciousness—especially at that moment when Penelope penetrates the membrane of her husband’s sleep and fills him with joy. I would call that a successful seduction.

For the theoretical aspect of this seduction, let’s return to the long conversation of Book 19. It has two parts. First, husband and wife exchange narratives of what they’ve been doing for the last twenty years; here Odysseus mainly lies, Penelope tells the truth. Then there is a pause while Odysseus has his bath. Now a bath in epic is often a mechanism of transition to new conditions. After the bath, Penelope takes the conversational initiative and offers a complex (and almost certainly fictitious) narrative about a dream she has had, demanding that Odysseus interpret the dream. Surely this demand is peculiar. The dream is of an eagle who flies down from the sky, slaughters Penelope’s twenty pet geese, then announces that he is not an eagle at all, nor a dream, but the real Odysseus returned to save his household. The dream is as blatant as an English movie with English subtitles and Odysseus politely says so. But why does Penelope require his complicity in reading it?

Because it is her game they are playing now: they are reasoning from the sleep side, where she is a master. Look what she does next. Broaches her theory of dreams. Dreams are double, she says, some true, some false. True ones emerge from the gates of horn, false from the gates of ivory. This theory is as bogus as the dream of geese. Penelope is talking through her hat. But all of a sudden, out of her hat, Penelope drops a bombshell. Tomorrow, she announces, I’m going to set up a contest, see which of the suitors can shoot through twelve axes with Odysseus’ bow. The winner will take me home as his wife. Here is a sudden practical solution to the whole domestic dilemma. Odysseus hastily agrees it is a great idea. Penelope has orchestrated the conversation so the great idea seems to drop out of a dream—or indeed to shoot out through the very gates of horn. She has involved Odysseus in the interpretive necessity of dreams as he earlier involved
her in the autobiographical necessity of lies. She has matched his ambiguities and used her sleep knowledge to wrap him in an act of seduction that he cannot outwit—that he will not wish to outwit. She invites him into the way her mind works. Rather like the moon in the mirror in Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “Insomnia”:

The moon in the bureau mirror
looks out a million miles
(and perhaps with pride, at herself,
but she never, never smiles)
far and away beyond sleep, or
perhaps she’s a daytime sleeper.

By the Universe deserted,
she’d tell it to go to hell,
and she’d find a body of water,
or a mirror, on which to dwell.
So wrap up care in a cobweb
and drop it down the well

into that world inverted
where left is always right,
where the shadows are really the body,
where we stay awake all night,
where the heavens are shallow as the sea
is now deep, and you love me.22

As far as love goes, Penelope’s only real rival among the female personnel of the Odyssey is Nausikaa, the very unmarried girl whom Odysseus meets in Book 6 on the island of the Phaiakians. She is asleep when we first meet her:
... the girl
lay sleeping in form and image like to immortals,
Nausikaa, daughter of great-hearted Alkinoos,
and alongside her two attendants having beauty from the Graces
on either side of the pillars. But the brilliant doors were shut.23

Homer shows us the sleeper in all her layers of defense. He shows us the doors,
pillars, attendants, behind which the she lies. Then he shows us how to pass
through doors, in the person of Athene, who traverses the house as a blast of
wind and stands over Nausikaa's bed, whispering:

"Nausikaa—how is it your mother bore so slack a girl as you?
Look, your shining clothes lie in a mess.
But for you marriage is near, when you will need beautiful things
to wear yourself and to give to those who attend you.
... let’s go do laundry as soon as dawn appears."24

Athene puts into Nausikaa a word that condenses laundry with marriage (clean-
liness with sex), a word whose dream logic names Nausikaa's perfect purity at the
very moment we see it most exposed to violation. For there is another motionless
presence on this page. Nausikaa lies sleeping side by side with Odysseus, not in
the space of her room but in narrative juxtaposition. Two verses describing
Odysseus (who is lying naked in a pile of leaves on the outskirts of Nausikaa's
city) immediately precede our view of Nausikaa in her bed:

So there he lay much-enduring goodly Odysseus
overwhelmed by sleep and exhaustion.25

Odysseus’ exhaustion subtends and embraces Nausikaa's dream (she rises at v. 50
but he does not wake until 117). Their sleep prefigures everything that will occur
between the man and the girl in the days to follow—a system of contradictions
curving in and out of impossibility without arriving at refutation, oxymoron of male and female—as the old, wild, dirty, naked, married, shelterless man of many
turns coils himself around a girl who lies straight in her nine frames of safety
dreaming of laundry.

She is the cleanest girl in epic. And his dirt emphasizes that, not to say the brutal
opacity of his sleep—whereas she lies transparent: we watch the dream in her
head, we know her action before she does, we see her desire prior to itself. Her
desire is to find a pretext and travel far from the city, to where the washing pools
lie. But this is precisely where Odysseus lies. The night before, at the end of Book
5, he laid himself down “on the edge of the land” to sleep the sleep of elemental
life. Life is all he has left. Wife, child, parents, home, ship, comrades, possessions,
clothing, youth, strength and personal fame are all lost. He had to cover himself
in a pile of leaves to survive the night:

And when he saw [the leaf pile]
much-enduring goodly Odysseus laughed
and lay in the middle and heaped a big bunch of leaves over himself.
As when someone hides a firebrand in black embers
on the edge of the land, who has no other neighbours near,
preserving the seed of fire, lest he have to kindle a light
from somewhere else,
so Odysseus wrapped himself in leaves.26

“On the edge of the land” is a symbolic description. “Land” means farmland,
cultivated space. “Odysseus is stranded at the margin of culture: he has come
back in from the wilderness and preserves within himself (just barely) the means
to begin civilization again. But no one can begin civilization alone. And the sleep
of fire needs careful waking. Homer seems to enjoy assigning this task to a girl
whose chief concerns are cold water and aristocratic hygiene.
Once he is awake, Odysseus finds the island of the Phaiakians a perplexing place. Almost everyone he meets presumes he has come there to marry Nausikaa, inherit her father’s kingdom and live happily ever after. It is as if he has waked up inside someone else’s dream, only to find himself the protagonist of it. For these dreamlike Phaiakians know who Odysseus is, although he withholds as long as possible from them the news that he is Odysseus. And as their local poet performs songs from the epic tradition that tell of Odysseus’ exploits at Troy, he sits and weeps to hear himself acclaimed in the third person. He has backed into his own heroic persona, like a shadow finding its body.

Or, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Tom Stoppard’s play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, where two Shakespearean courtiers find themselves in the midst of the tragedy of *Hamlet* without quite understanding who wrote them into the script. Yet they scramble to play their part, manage to produce the right lines and end up dead in England, as Shakespeare’s scenario requires. It is not clear whether they are awake or asleep—they talk about having been roused at dawn yet act like people stuck in a bad dream. It is a familiar dream. Stoppard uses the familiarity of Shakespeare’s play to lock us into the badness of the bad dream. He puts us, as audience, on the sleep side of the play, alongside Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, while the other characters of *Hamlet* wander in and out muttering passages of Shakespeare’s text. Stoppard uses Shakespeare’s text to capture Rosencrantz and Guildenstern within his own, in somewhat the same way Virginia Woolf used square brackets to capture the Ramsays and their friends in a long night of sleep. As readers we take a guilty pleasure in these arrangements. For we would almost like to see Rosencrantz and Guildenstern escape their predicament, except it would spoil the plot of *Hamlet*. Good sleepers that we are, we do not quite want to wake up. Stoppard’s play praises sleep, functionally, for its necessity. No other experience gives us so primary a sense of being governed by laws outside us. No other substance can so profoundly saturate a story in compulsion, inevita-
bility and dread as sleep can. Mr. Ramsay in square brackets has no option to snatch his wife back from death, nor Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to rewrite the tragedy of Hamlet. It is, as Virginia Woolf says, useless to ask the night these questions. Stoppard allows his character Guildenstern to ask them anyway. Guildenstern is a kind of amateur philosopher; he derives consolation in the middle of the play from a well-known Taoist parable about waking and sleeping:

Guildenstern: Wheels have been set in motion, and they have their own pace, to which we are . . . condemned. Each move is dictated by the previous one—that is the meaning of order. If we start being arbitrary it'll just be a shambles: at least let us hope so. Because if we happened, just happened to discover, or even suspect, that our spontaneity is part of their order, we'd know we were lost. (He sits.) A Chinaman of the T’ang dynasty—and by which definition a philosopher—dreamed he was a butterfly, and from that moment he was never quite sure that he was not a butterfly dreaming it was a Chinese philosopher. Envy him; in his two-fold security.27

There is something cheesy about Guildenstern’s envy, about his use of the parable of the butterfly and the sage (traditionally ascribed to Zhuang Zi, who was not of the T’ang dynasty), about his philosophizing in general, that makes me happy to turn to a different amateur philosopher for my final example of the praise of sleep. Sokrates, arguably the most amateur and the most different of the philosophers of the Western tradition, exhibits, in the Platonic dialogues describing the final days of his life, a certain regard for that sublime residue, the tear of sleep.

Let’s consider the Krito. Plato begins this dialogue in the dark, with Sokrates starting up sheer from sleep and his dream still wet on its back. Here are the opening lines of the dialogue:
Sokrates: Why are you here? Isn’t it early?
Krito: Yes pretty early.
Sokrates: What time?
Krito: Near dawn.
Sokrates: I’m surprised the guard let you in.
Krito: Oh he knows me by now. Anyway I tip him.
Sokrates: So did you just arrive or have you been here awhile?
Krito: Quite awhile.
Sokrates: Why didn’t you wake me?28

And so it emerges that Krito sat watching Sokrates sleep because he looked happy sleeping and Krito had nothing to wake him for but his death day. Perhaps I should call to mind the situation here. The Krito is the third of a tetralogy of dialogues concerned with Sokrates’ trial, imprisonment and death. Sokrates has by now been judged guilty and is in jail awaiting execution. His death is postponed because his trial coincided with the annual Athenian mission to Delos, during which no prisoners could be executed. Krito has come to announce to Sokrates that the ship from Delos has been sighted and so his death will take place the next day. To which news Sokrates responds:

Sokrates: You know I don’t think so. It won’t be tomorrow.
Krito: What are you talking about?
Sokrates: I had a dream last night—lucky you didn’t wake me!
Krito: What dream?
Sokrates: A beautiful woman came up to me, dressed in white, called to me and said: Sokrates, on the third day you shall reach rich Phthia.
Krito: Weird dream, Sokrates.
Sokrates: Well it seems obvious to me.29

Plato has constructed the opening of this dialogue in such a way as to align the realms of waking and sleeping, drawing our attention to an active boundary...
between them—active because it leaks. Sokrates brings a bit of difference back with him from the sleep side. The words of the woman in white contain a hint of the argument that will carry Sokrates all the way from these sleepy sentences to his death at the end of the *Phaedo*. She tells Sokrates he will reach Phthia on the third day. It is a line from Homer. In the ninth book of the *Iliad* Achilles receives an embassy of Greeks sent by Agamemnon to persuade him to return to war, promising tons of gifts if he does. He responds with a 114-line denunciation of gifts, war and Agamemnon, including a threat to leave for home at once:

“On the third day I could reach rich Phthia.”

Phthia is Achilles’ homeland. It is also a name cognate with a Greek verb for death (*phthiein*) but that may be incidental. Let us observe some analogies between these two heroes heading for Phthia on the third day: both Sokrates and Achilles are eccentric gentlemen who find themselves defying the rules of life of their society and disappointing the hopes of a circle of intense friends. For, as Achilles is surrounded by Achaians urging him to resume life as a warrior, Sokrates is surrounded by Athenians urging him to escape prison and take up life in exile. Both of them say no to their friends. Both argue this choice on the basis of an idiosyncratic understanding of the word *psyche*, “soul, spirit, principle of life.” So Achilles repudiates Agamemnon’s offer of gifts in these terms:

“All the gifts and treasure in Troy aren’t worth as much as my own soul!”

And Sokrates explains his choice for death at the end of the *Phaedo* by saying,

“Since the soul seems to be immortal . . . a man [who has lived a good life] might as well be cheerful as he makes his exit into Hades.”

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Who knows what either of them means by *psyche* or whether “soul” is a reasonable translation of it. Still we can say they both use this word to indicate some kind of immortal value, some sort of transcendent attractor, that exerts such a strong pressure on their mortal lives and thinking as to pull them into a choice that strikes everyone around them as insane. I reckon that Plato in his dialogues involving Sokrates had somewhat the same literary problem as Homer in his *Iliad*, viz., to convey a hero in his difference from other people, a hero whose power over other people arose in part from something *incognito* in his very being. In the dialogues that record his last days, the Platonic Sokrates seems increasingly a person ungraspable in ordinary sentences, a person who is (to use a current expression) *coming from somewhere else*.

Plato shows him coming from the sleep side in the *Krito*. As if he had slept in the temple of Asklepios, Sokrates emerges from his dream “seeing with both eyes.” And he does not hesitate to trust what the woman in white has let him see, although Krito dismisses it. The woman in white will turn out to be correct. Sokrates is inclined to trust, and to be correct about trusting, different sources of knowledge than other philosophers do—like his crazy *daimon*, or the oracle of Apollo, not to say the good sentences of sleep. Sokrates also puts a fair amount of faith in his own poetic imagination—his power to turn nothing into something. So in the latter half of the *Krito*, since Krito can think of nothing further to say, Sokrates conducts both sides of an imaginary conversation between himself as Sokrates and a ventriloquized projection of the *Nomoi*, the Laws of Athens. These ventriloquized Laws are as weird as the ghosts that Virginia Woolf sent rustling and whispering around the rooms of her “Haunted House,” looking for their buried treasure. If you recall, that story of the haunted house ends with a spooky moment of dispossession, as the ghosts lean over the sleeper’s bed and discover *their* treasure buried in *her* heart. Sokrates also
suffers a moment of dispossession at the end of the *Krito*. The voices of the Laws, he says, fill his prison cell and drown out all other sound. He has to stop talking:

“O beloved friend Krito, these voices are what I seem to hear—as Korybantic worshippers imagine they hear flutes—and the sound of their words is so loud in me, I am deaf to everything else.”

So Sokrates falls silent, overcome by what Virginia Woolf might call “the singing of the real world.”

To sum up.
I shall state my conclusions in the form of an “Ode to Sleep.”
ODE TO SLEEP

Think of your life without it.
Without that slab of outlaw time punctuating every pillow—without pillows.
Without the big black kitchen and the boiling stove where you
snatch morsels
of your own father’s legs and arms
only to see them form into a sentence
which—*you weep with sudden joy*—will save you
if you can remember it
later! Later,
not much left but a pale green *upsilon* embalmed between *butter* and *fly*—
but what’s that stuff he’s dabbing in your eye?
It is the moment when the shiver stops.
A shiver is a perfect servant.
Her amen sootheth.
“As a matter of fact,” she confides in a footnote, “it was
a misprint for *mammoth*."
It hurts me to know this.
Exit wound, as they say.
1. In his essay On Prophecy in Sleep, Aristotle reads sleep as part of nature and dreams as messages from the realm of the daimonic, which lies between divine and human being (463b12–15): Aristotle, Parva Naturalia, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955). Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.


7. Ibid., 193.


13. Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse, 128.


15. Ibid., 15.7–8.


17. Ibid., 39.50.


20. Ibid., 1.4.514.

21. This scene, where Odysseus is recognized by his old nurse Eurykleia because of the scar on his leg, is analyzed by Eric Auerbach in Mimesis, trans. W. Trask (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957); Penelope seems unaware.


23. Homer, Odyssey, 6.15–19.


25. Ibid., 6.1–2.

26. Ibid., 5.486–91.

27. Tom Stoppard, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (London: Faber and Faber, 1967) 51.


29. Ibid., 43d–44b.


31. Ibid., 9.401.


33. Plato, Krito, 54d.