THAT SWEET SECESSION[1]:
SLEEP AND SLEEPLESSNESS IN WESTERN LITERATURE

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Introduction

What is this secession from conscious life that we call sleep, this oblivious third of our lives? We usually think little of it, but it is always hovering around as a pending transaction or impending obligation. It visits us, or we it, with fuzzy regularity largely beyond our control. Yet we must submit to it somehow or perish. For if, as Prospero imagines, 'our little life / Is rounded with a sleep' (*The Tempest*, IV. i. 157–158), life also must be relentlessly intersected by little deaths, by the incessant, cyclic return of slumber.

We might first imagine sleeping to be one of those universal human experiences such as breathing, which varies little from person to person, from culture to culture, or from one historical period to another. A quick glance at the historical, medical, and literary record of the past few millennia seems to bear this out. People, it appears, have usually needed an average of six to eight hours of sleep per night, and have often found getting to sleep difficult when under the influence of strong emotions or irritating stimulations. Yet despite the apparent universality of many aspects of slumber, a close analysis of sleep in Western literature reveals numerous practical and attitudinal transformations regarding this most elementary human condition.

A study of sleep's significance in literature would be incomplete, however, without also acknowledging that people have long been intrigued by literature's effect on sleep. Traditionally, good literature keeps one in wakeful anticipation, whereas 'uninteresting'

or ‘bad’ literature or story-telling acts as a powerful soporific. In *One Thousand and One Nights*, (Zipes 1997) for example, Scheherazade wards off her own execution by telling the Persian king tales so gripping they keep him wakefully eager to hear more. On the other hand, in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, when Mercury must rescue the nymph Io from the ever-vigilant, hundred-eyed giant Argus Panoptes, it is only by reciting stories of inspired tediousness that the god is able to render the giant drowsy and thus slay him (Ovid 2004, p.43).[2]

The intersection of sleep and literature is made all the more complex by a consideration of the effects of literary representations of slumber. For most of its history, and especially before the invention of the electroencephalogram*, sleep has been thought of as a kind of nothingness, a lack. The sleeper has thus long been seen as devoid of appreciation, agency, sensation, or any sense of moral dilemma. So when characters in books sleep they are divested of many of the means by which an author typically simulates personality, lends emotional weight, establishes motive or otherwise renders their characters compelling. Accordingly, Shakespeare and a thousand other authors often only depict sleep as the longed-for yet unattainable goal of characters overburdened with cares:

> *O sleep, O gentle sleep,*
> *Nature's soft nurse, how have I frighted thee,*
> *That thou no more wilt weigh my eyelids down*
> *And steep my senses in forgetfulness?*
> (*Henry IV Part II*, III, i, 5–8)

This tradition of representing sleep as a kind of nothingness is also underscored in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1849). Here, the titular character expresses his desire to 'write a chapter upon sleep' in a chapter that largely confounds the consummation of this desire. Tristram's attempt offers little more than a catalogue of quotable clichés on the subject, where sleep is 'the refuge of the unfortunate' or 'the enfranchisement of the prisoner' – quotes that do not even seem to convince Tristram himself. Thus he is quick to refute the 'lie' that 'of all the soft and delicious functions of our nature, [sleep] is the chiefest' by claiming, 'I know pleasures worth ten of it' (pp.221–222). Finally, after largely sabotaging his so-called 'chapter upon sleep', he reveals that the condition might be best represented or appreciated by means of a kind of *via negativa*[3], by rather considering sleep's absence. Paraphrasing the essay 'Of Experience' by the French Renaissance writer Montaigne, he ironically proposes that causing his sleep to be disturbed might allow him to 'better and more sensibly relish it' or better 'study and ruminate' upon it (p.222).

Such a methodology in investigating sleep further underscores the sense that many of its most salient features are to be found in those it lacks, its featurelessness. It is because sleep is so often depicted as a desired disengagement, a state devoid of sense perception, memory, and emotion that a literature of sleep, or a chapter on the literature of sleep, would be short indeed unless we, like Tristram or Montaigne, include in our study not merely sleep, but also its borderlands and shadowlands: historical and attitudinal mutations, circadian-rhythmic transformations, somnambulism and other pseudo-sleep states – even chronic insomnia. It is only through studying the effects of these near

neighbours and antitheses of sleep that we can, like an astronomer studying the effects of a black hole, render palpable that thing which is otherwise phenomenologically void.

Proceeding roughly chronologically from the ancient to the modern period, this study considers a range of texts – medical and psychological treatises, ancient myths, Renaissance plays, and modern novels – to show how authors have employed both sleep and sleeplessness to present us with questions about our paradoxical or troubled relation to nature's rhythms, our intentions, expectations, and volition. It then chronicles the human sleep cycle's shift from an alignment with the periodic cycles in nature – waking in the day and sleeping at night – to its recalibration by the clocks and cogs of modernity during the Second Industrial Revolution, the advent of 24-hour communications, night trains, and shift work. Finally, it shows how, with the institution of the sleep laboratory, sleep was no longer seen as only an absence of identity, a disengagement or oblivion; it became a positive topography, an object with its own properties to be explored, causing both sleep and sleeplessness to be newly scrutinized, pathologized and commodified in our contemporary world.

16.2. Sleep and periodicity

Sleep's longstanding literary representation as a kind of negativity, lack, or absence, informs the tradition of the King in the Mountain in Western folklore. This motif usually involves a national hero who never dies but only sleeps, often ensconced in a hill or mountain, in order that he might one day arise to deliver the given nation into a new epoch of peace and prosperity. Ireland's Fionn mac Cumhaill, for instance, sleeps in a cave under Dublin with his retainers and will one day return to defend the land. It is even

supposed that the title of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* is an underhanded reference to this legend: *Finn again is awake* (MacKillop 1986, p.xi). Strikingly similar is the tale of the Swabian Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa, who sleeps in a cave under the Kyffhäuser range in Thuringia and who will one day awake to restore Germany (Detwiler 1976). According to another legend, the last emperor of Byzantium, Constantine XI, will likewise eventually rise from a deep slumber under his marble tomb to liberate Constantinople for the Greeks (Clucas 1988). The prevalence of these kinds of tales not only demonstrates the universality of nationalist sentiment, but also reminds us of an important aspect of sleep itself. While death results in a permanent absence, a hero's death-like sleep retains a shred of hope, and is in sense symbolic of nature's peek-a-boo periodicity – a reference to the fact that sleeping things are only absent temporarily and will eventually cyclically return again to wakefulness, to presence, like harvest moons or high tides.

Representations of sleep in some of the earliest literature in the West often thus underscore its periodic vacillation with wakefulness and the correspondence of this vacillation with other cycles in nature. The ancient Greeks made sleep the jurisdiction of anthropomorphic deities and weird demons whose actions determined both our shifting states of consciousness as well as the endless shift of day into night and back again. The Greek god of sleep, Hypnos, and Nyx, the goddess of the night, are chased away each morning by the 'bright consort of Tithonus', Eos, the dawn (Statius 1928, p.63). Hesiod's *Theogony* describes a similar synchronization, where day and night 'draw near and greet one another as they pass the great threshold of bronze: […] the one holds all-seeing light

for them on earth, but the other holds in her arms Sleep the brother of Death' (1920, pp.133–134).

Amid these mythic wellsprings of Western literature, the Greeks gradually developed a system of rational physics and medicine, assigning material rather than divine causes to cosmic, meteorological, and bodily processes. The Greek system evolved into an enduring tradition of humoral and Hermetic lore that proposed that the sleep cycle in healthy humans corresponded, or should correspond, to the rhythmic fluctuations between opposed dualities in nature,[4] and physicians have continued to note such correspondences nearer to our own times:

> *the succession of the seasons, and of day and night, the ebb and flow of the sea, the daily variations in the electricity of the air, in the rise and fall of the barometer, and the regular declination of the magnetic needle […] illustrate the same law of periodical action, which is displayed in the unvarying alternation of sleep and waking* (Goodrich 1845, p.225).

Conversely, sleep patterns that happened to stray from or disregard these periodic, natural rhythms have long been considered an indicator of humoral imbalance and disease. Melancholia was commonly marked by intense 'watching', the pre-modern near-equivalent of insomnia, and Chaucer (2008, writing around 1400) thus depicts the melancholic's disregard for such 'natural' slumber in 'The Book of the Duchess':

> *Nature wolde nat suffyse*
> *To noon erthly creature*
> *Nat longe tyme to endure*
> *Withoute slep and be in sorwe.*

And I ne may, ne night ne morwe,

Slepe; and thus melancolye

And drede I have for to dye (p.330).

Though a correspondence between one's sleep and the night was seen as desirable, straying from such a strict synchronization was not in every case viewed as problematic. Roger Ekirch and other scholars have recently brought attention to evidence that, prior to the Second Industrial Revolution in the mid-nineteenth century, people did not always pass the night in unbroken monophasic* slumber. Rather, their nocturnal sleep was commonly bifurcated into a 'first sleep' and 'second sleep', and between these two periods of rest, people were typically wakeful for about an hour.[5] This so-called segmented sleep pattern allowed people to attend to basic bodily needs in the middle of the night, such as urination and hydration, and satisfy a range of desires from the contemplative to the criminal. Ekirch (2005) citing the opinion of the sixteenth century French physician Laurent Joubert, claims that the wakeful period between the first and second sleep may have given the labouring classes an opportunity to more effectively copulate (being too exhausted on first going to bed). Similarly, the Swiss physician and alchemist Paracelsus recommended that one might use the segmented sleep pattern as an aid to digestion and that one should sleep on the right side when first retiring to bed so that the liver is better positioned to heat the contents of the stomach 'as a fire doth a kettle'; Paracelsus further proposes that 'after the first sleep 'tis not amiss to lie on the left side, that the meat may better descend' (Burton 1880, p.206).

However, some modern theorists and sleep researchers have posited a more spiritual role for this segmented sleep pattern. Thomas Wehr (1996) suggests that with segmented

sleep people were more in touch with the 'wellspring of myths and fantasies' (p.341).[6] This is because the periods of wakefulness tend to follow rapid eye movement (REM) sleep when dreaming occurs; people had a quiet time to reflect on dreams and there was therefore a clearer channel of communication between dreams and wakeful life. Yet the imaginative literature from prior to the mid-nineteenth century that refers to this phenomenon of segmented sleep appears to both support and contradict Wehr's claim. Hawthorne's brief sketch 'A Bell's Biography' speaks of labourers, 'the sons of toil', who in the middle of the night, in a 'brief interval of wakefulness', hearken to the town bell that causes them to wonder: 'Is so much of our quiet slumber spent? – is the morning so near at hand?' (1837, p.223) A similar scene is more expansively rendered in another of Hawthorne's short sketches, 'A Haunted Mind', where 'you', the second-person subject of the sketch, emerge from a first sleep into an 'hour of wakefulness' at the pealing of a distant church clock's bell: 'You count the strokes – one – two, and there they cease'. Whereas in 'A Bell's Biography' the wakeful interval is depicted as fraught with anxiety over the lateness of the hour, in 'A Haunted Mind' it becomes a meditative respite from all anxiety, even from time itself. It provides

> *one hour to be spent in thought, with the mind's eye half shut […] Yesterday has already vanished among the shadows of the past; to-morrow has not yet emerged from the future. You have found an intermediate space, where the business of life does not intrude; where the passing moment lingers, and becomes truly the present; a spot where Father Time, when he thinks nobody is watching him, sits down by the wayside to take breath* (Hawthorne 1851, pp.80–81).

Later in ‘A Haunted Mind’ Hawthorne depicts this nocturnal waking as a representation of the fleeting nature of life itself, which quickly passes into the permanent oblivion of death. Thus it provides both the occasion as well as the metaphoric vehicle through which one might better ponder one’s mortality. In both this wakeful interval as well as in a human life span, ‘you emerge from mystery, pass through a vicissitude that you can but imperfectly control, and are borne onward to another mystery’ (Hawthorne 1851, p.86).

Yet sleep’s metaphoric parity with death need not hinge on this segmented sleep pattern. Normal, diurnal wakefulness or even lucid dreams can be seen as a metaphor or a microcosm of an entire human life span, one that is, as in *The Tempest*, ‘rounded with a sleep’. Emily Brontë, writing a decade after Hawthorne, employs the metaphor of sleep to emphasize the carefree oblivion of a longed-for death:

Oh, for the time when I shall sleep
Without identity,
And never care how rain may steep,
Or snow may cover me!
No promised heaven these wild desires
Could all or half fulfil;
No threatened hell, with quenchless fires,
Subdue this quenchless will! (Brontë 1905, pp.69–70)

16.3. Sleep as a paradox of will

As is evinced in both Brontë's poem and Hawthorne's 'A Haunted Mind', issues related to volition, the will, and self-control, or the lack of all three, are central to the idea of what it is to be asleep, and often arise in its literature. Sleep has long been generally regarded as a state in which the powers of the will are held in abeyance. However, occasionally there were exceptions to this view of the utter helpless passivity of the sleeper. The nineteenth-century English psychologist James Sully, for instance, notes how during sleep, in a dream, one might remain 'conscious of voluntarily going through a series of actions' and maintain 'something resembling an exercise of voluntary attention' (1882, p.173). Furthermore, commentators in the popular press in the nineteenth century claimed that a kind of surrogate will is suggested in sleep by, among other things, the fact that some people are able to rouse themselves into consciousness at a predetermined hour (Chambers and Chambers 1879).

But for the most part, going to sleep involved forsaking the powers of volition and self-control. The German humorist Jean Paul Richter tells of the dangers of somnambulism, in which the unfortunate sleeper is taken over by an alien agency: People go to bed

> *without reflecting that perhaps, in the first sleep, they may get up again as Somnambulists, and crawl over the tops of roofs and the like; awakening in some spot where they may fall in a moment and break their necks* (Richter 1874, p.80).[7]

Somnambulism thus displays a convoluted, vague relation to the will. One seems in control enough to amble about, yet unable to purposefully direct that movement. Such volitional ambivalence is similarly highlighted when a sleepwalking Lady Macbeth incriminates herself. A gentlewoman sees her unconsciously 'rise from her bed, throw her

night-gown upon her, unlock her closet, take forth paper, fold it, write upon't, read it, afterwards seal it, and again return to bed; yet all this while in a most fast sleep' (*Macbeth*, V, i, 5–8), and it is the strange conflation in slumber of semi-purposeful acts with an auto-pilot obliviousness that makes her 'slumb'ry agitation' seem to the physician 'a great perturbation in nature' (*Macbeth*, V, i, 12–14).

Yet even outside of the context of somnambulism, sleep presents volitional ambiguities and paradoxes. Scottish philosopher Dugald Stewart recognizes that when we want to get to sleep we first must try to mimic a lack of will.[8] This seems to him fraught with much difficulty. For, Stewart wonders, how might one wilfully activate a lack of volition?

> *If it were necessary that volition should be suspended before we fall asleep, it would be impossible for us, by our own efforts to hasten the moment of rest. The very supposition of such efforts is absurd; for it implies a continued will to suspend the acts of the will* (Stewart 1857, p.192).

Another seeming paradox emerges in the realization that, though sleep was often considered to be a state devoid of will, it was also one in which one's psychosomatic energy – the so-called 'nervous agency' that in the nineteenth century was thought to fuel the will – was replenished. Furthermore, certain reserves of this nervous energy were required in order to voluntarily transit into sleep. It was once widely thought, for instance, that people of great nervous constitution and willpower could instantaneously fall asleep whenever they desired. Historical figures such as Napoleon and Wellington, it

was said, could ‘command sleep when it suited [them] to take rest’ and go for great lengths without it ‘when circumstances required such a privation’ (Jones 1864, p.280).

The power of the will to induce sleep often enhanced the mystique of those who wielded it in the awed estimation of those who did not, especially since such a power had long been associated with magical or divine influence. The potions of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and *Cymbaline* and the apple and spindle of *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty* demonstrate the prevalence and importance of magical soporifics in Western literature, a tradition stretching back at least to ancient Greece. In Nonnus’s *Dionysiaca*, for instance, Hypnos keeps Harmonia’s wedding guests awake through the night by intentionally leaving behind his magic wand, ‘because that was the rationer of sleep’ (Nonnus 1940, p.177). In the popular fiction of more recent times, the ‘magic’ driving the soporific wand’s efficacy is replaced by technological knowhow. In Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Coming Race* (1886), which is discussed further below, members of a technologically advanced, subterranean race use staffs to harness an atmospheric magnetism called Vril, which they use to wilfully force sleep upon the novel’s narrator.

Often in Western esoterica such magical wands and staffs – as appear in the myth of Hypnos, the tale of Sleeping Beauty, and Bulwer-Lytton’s novel – are stereotypically associated with an active, masculine principle. It thus may seem counterintuitive that in these cases the effects of such instruments facilitate the seeming passivity of sleep. Yet this apparent contradiction further underscores the aforementioned inherent contradictions in sleep itself – as a realization and rejuvenation of the will through seeming willlessness, as a death-like maintenance of life, and even in some cases as an enhanced procreativity despite – or by means of – passivity. Each of these apparent

contradictions is represented in the Greek myth of Endymion. Through Zeus' intercession, the mortal Endymion exchanges death for an eternal youth through divine sleep, yet in his slumber he is strangely active and vigilant.[9] In one of the most common versions of the myth, Endymion is loved by the goddess of the moon Selene, who somehow mates with him while he sleeps and thus conceives fifty daughters, representing the lunar phases (Grimal 1996). The sexualized fertility of Endymion's suspended state makes his myth a masculinized and less violent precursor to the earliest known version of the tale of Sleeping Beauty, the fourteenth-century French romance of *Perceforest*. Here, the beautiful maiden Zellandine is not kissed awake by a handsome prince, but is rather raped by her lover Troylus and bears his child while sleeping (Haase 2008). Thus, though Sleeping Beauty and Snow White have come to represent ways in which a prolonged slumber sustains an innocent and inviolate femininity, such literature also underscores the fact that in sleep humans are at their most vulnerable, which makes ever urgent the question of how much one can trust one's bed mate.[10]

A modern novel, Jonathan Coe's *The House of Sleep*, explores these issues of vulnerability and trust, agency and lack thereof, when the main character and sufferer of narcolepsy, Sarah, discovers the voyeuristic tendencies of the novel's chief antagonist, Gregory:

> *'Well, when did you become so intimately acquainted with my eyelids?' and he answered, 'While you were asleep. I like watching you when you're asleep.' And this was the first intimation she had, the first hint, of his liking for standing over people in their beds, looking down on them as they slept, something she had regarded as interesting at first, the sign of an enquiring intelligence, until she began to wonder, in*

the end, whether there wasn't something sinister about it, fetishistic almost, this desire to look down on people as they lay helpless, unconscious, while he, the watching subject, retained full control over his waking mind (Coe 1998, p.18).

Gregory's watchfulness ultimately takes the form of a strangely eroticized practice – called 'the game' – in which he rests his fingers over Sarah's eyelids to feel the movement of her eyes. He even parlays his fetish into a career: he goes on to run a centre for the study of sleep disorders, allowing him to feed his insatiable desire to observe his patients' inner lives in the involuntarily twitching of their REM* 'paradoxical sleep', and – further manifesting his controlling nature – even subjects some of them to dangerous sleep-deprivation experiments.

Coe's novel and the tale of Zellandine reveal ways in which sleepers and would-be sleepers are vulnerable to potential victimization by a malicious, wakeful presence. Yet the lack of wilful self-control in slumber has been conversely proposed as a means to protect the wakeful from would-be criminals. Shakespeare imagines sleep would keep maliciously minded youth from acting on their inclinations: 'I would there were no age between ten and three-and- twenty, or that youth would sleep out the rest; for there is nothing in the between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancientry, stealing, fighting' (*The Winter's Tale*, III, iii, 59–60).

Finally, the loss of control in sleep is represented in literature by characters who fall asleep only to discover that, while they were sleeping serenely, a kind of temporal transformation has occurred. This seems to highlight one of sleep's central phenomena, that of the seeming disappearance of the normal sense of the passage of time. Thus Shakespeare's hypothetical sleeping juvenile delinquent in *The Winter's Tale* in effect

uses sleep as a kind of time machine to propel himself or herself into a future in which he or she will be more civil. The literary implementation of sleep as just such a device for time travel had a particularly prominent heyday in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Novels such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000 – 1887* (1888), William Morris's *News From Nowhere* (1890), and H. G. Wells's *The Sleeper Wakes* (1910) present main characters who sleep for generations and, upon awaking, discover a world that has been transformed into either a utopia or a dystopia. In the tradition of Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle*, then, the time-travelling slumber of these novels' protagonists allows the author of each to comment on the social and cultural conditions of their own day.

Indeed, literature has often proposed that so complete is one's surrender of self-control upon going to sleep that there is never any guarantee that one will find the world quite the same upon their return to consciousness. Not only might time be transformed, but so too can one's surroundings or one's self. One might wake to discover, such as in the case of Gregor Samsa in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, that one has transformed into a bug or even, as is playfully hypothesized by Sylvia Plath in *The Bed Book*, that one – or one's bed – has shrunken to the size of a pea:

You can take out your Bed
Shrunk small as a pea
And water it till
It grows suitably.
Yes, a Pocket-size Bed
Works very well

Only how can you tell,

O how can you tell

It won't shrink back

To the size of a pea

While you're asleep in it?

Then where would you be! (Plath and McCully 1976, p.17).

16.4. Sleep, industrial modernity, and the rise of insomnia

The two main lenses through which we have thus far viewed sleep in this chapter – that of its periodicity and that of its relation to the will – must be in a sense superimposed when we consider sleep after the middle of the nineteenth century. In the Victorian period, people significantly enhanced their volitional powers through the railway and the telegraph, which made the world ever-more instantaneously accessible and thus transformed people's experience of time and space. For instance, after the institution of the transatlantic telegraph of 1866, many newspapers made arrangements for sending and receiving telecommunications after normal business hours, between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. (Society for Telegraphic Engineers 1880, p.216). By 1877, the main telegraphic offices in New York and London had become like self-contained cities, devoted to round-the-clock communication. Tom Standage describes them as having 'a press room, a doctor's surgery, a maintenance workshop, separate male and female dining rooms', as well as operators who 'work[ed] in shifts' and 'ensured that the whole system worked around the clock' (Standage 1998, p.99).

Considering the increasing precision with which people's time was thus managed in an age of trains and telegraphs, with ever more acute realization of, and attention paid to, the inconvenience or monetary cost of misspent time, there was an ever-increasing motivation for people's sleep schedules to be managed accordingly, with ever-greater precision. Meanwhile, Victorians' expectations also changed with regard to their own sleep habits. It seemed only natural that they, who were increasingly accustomed to thus expediting their will across continent-spanning wires or rails, should soon desire or expect to exact equivalent volitional control over something as near to them as their own bodies, over something as seemingly simple as falling asleep.

Bulwer-Lytton's novel *The Coming Race*, first published in 1870, provides an example of a willed, technologically enhanced management of sleep in a setting where most other aspects of life are similarly managed. The aforementioned 'Vril staff' that is used to force sleep upon the narrator does not seem out of place among that society's other technological marvels – such as their urban lighting, lifts, telegraphs, automata, and mechanical contrivances for flight – which similarly enhance what would seem to be an otherwise gloomy subterranean existence. After the narrator wonders how his 'cerebral organisation could possibly be duller than that of people who had lived all their lives by lamplight' he remarks: 'while I was thus thinking, [the Vril-ya] Zee quietly pointed her forefinger at my forehead and sent me to sleep' (Bulwer-Lytton 1886, p.47). This conflation of the narrator's wondering with Zee's actions seems to draw attention to the idea that any civilization that has become intellectually advanced enough to master its environment to the degree that the Vril-ya have, must also simultaneously exert an equivalent mastery over the body.

But such a mastery of the body was, sadly, only realized in fiction. Indeed, it was in the context of the new technologized cityscape of the 1860s that chronic insomnia emerged as a pathologic entity subject to increasing professional scrutiny and public concern. Ekirch (2005), Eluned Summers-Bremner (2008) and other commentators have recently focussed on the effects on sleep of public lighting and increased time-consciousness in the nineteenth century. And indeed, many medical and cultural commentators of the Victorian period similarly attributed the increase of chronic sleeplessness to the nervous degeneration that occurred in the face of the overbearing stimulations of modern, urban life – its brighter lights, its faster paces, its more strident sounds, its shocking vibrations and electrifications.

Yet recent scholars have largely overlooked the fact that physicians and psychologists of the Victorian period also bemoaned the rise of insomnia from so-called 'brain-work' – the intellectual labour of accountants, bankers, journalists, and lawyers – and the difficulty that this new breed of urban, professional 'thinkers' faced when attempting to cease to think. They remarked how an intense attention to a particular course of study or a difficult problem, or a heightened level of anxiety about technical minutiae, might cause the cerebral hyperaemia or neurasthenic enervation of insomniacs. The rise of insomnia, then, might be attributed not only to properties of technologic objects themselves – the brightness of electrical lighting, the loudness of a night train's whistle – but also, as is suggested in *The Coming Race*, to the intellectual involvement of the participants in and inventors of the ever-more technically complex, 24-hour economy.

The literature of this period reveals a growing tension between this so-called brain-work and sleep. In James Thomson's long poem *The City of Dreadful Night*, excessive

human activity has transgressed the natural, periodic limits of daylight and prior business hours, while workers in the poem, such as the drudges driving an ‘overburthened wain’, struggle to accommodate this excess, heedless of normal, nocturnal sleep. Yet Thomson is especially explicit in his portrayal of the strain the over-active dystopian environment puts upon the mental powers:

The City is of Night, but not of Sleep;

There sweet sleep is not for the weary brain;

The pitiless hours like years and ages creep,

A night seems termless hell. This dreadful strain

Of thought and consciousness which never ceases... (Thomson 1880, p.7).

Similarly, Charles Dickens’s short story ‘The Signal-Man’ shows how the onset of the railway and the telegraph taxed the brain and abolished sleep of one unfortunate railway employee. The unnamed signalman watches and listens for telegraphic warning signals – an alarm bell and a red ‘Danger-light’ – that tell of trouble on the railway line. He ‘passe[s] long winter nights there, alone and watching’ (Dickens 1866, p.23). The narrator underscores the post’s potential for exacerbating a worried insomnia, commenting on the poor man’s deteriorating nervous condition in the face of the danger-light, and its persistent evocation of worry over and always-imminent disaster:

That I more than once looked back at the red light as I ascended the pathway, that I did not like the red light, and that I should have slept but poorly if my bed had been under it, I see no reason to conceal (Dickens 1866, p.24).

Ironically, it is precisely the signalman’s monomaniacal exactitude – his uncompromising vigilance – that ultimately drives him mad and thus compromises his

ability to perform his job. The theme of worried watchfulness is then taken yet further when the narrator becomes a kind of signalman himself, faced with a similarly overwhelming responsibility for public safety. He debates with himself about whether he should warn others of the danger they face in the nervous signal man's employment, a warning that would, paradoxically, spread new rail-related worries in an effort to counteract already-existing ones. Significantly in Dickens's account, an insomniac vigilance is required of everyone in an industrialized, railway-riding society, in order to keep the whole system functioning properly.

Yet it is not just the perpetual vigilance necessitated by public safety in an age of mass transit that makes technological modernity so seemingly incompatible with sleep, nor even the oft-cited wakefulness of inventors of these selfsame modern technologies, such as the famously restless Edison and his co-workers – dubbed the 'insomnia squad' by his contemporaries. For a fuller understanding of the sudden emergence of 'brain-worker's' insomnia in the late nineteenth century, one must consider the psychological doctrines of the association of ideas that were popular in this period, and the potential difficulties that such doctrines were thought to pose for people who sought slumber in technologized environments.

The association of ideas, even since its origins in the work of Aristotle, explains how thoughts quantitatively replicate in the mind based on some ideas' association – or topical contiguity – with other ideas. In the early part of the nineteenth century, the philosopher James Mill observed how thoughts quantitatively beget thoughts by virtue of a qualitative determination:

I see a horse; that is a sensation. Immediately I think of his master; that is an idea [conception]. The idea of his master makes me think of his office; he is a minister of state; that is another idea' (Mill 1829, p.52).

Thus, it is these ideas' topical interrelation that forms their zealous mutual attraction and causes each to pull its next-of-kin into the mind without much or any effort on the part of the thinking subject. The ease – or, indeed, inevitability – with which the mind makes associations in this way was thought to explain why urban brain-workers became increasingly restless as the nineteenth century wore on. Simply put, during and after the Second Industrial Revolution people were surrounded by more and more things that were associated with or 'contiguous' with the idea of ceaseless activity. Prior to the middle of the nineteenth century, most objects of our attention suggested a periodic vacillation between activity and inactivity. After dusk in previous centuries, streets went generally dark, travel and communication all but ceased, towns fell relatively quiet. There were of course the occasional exception to this tendency, yet certainly after the Second Industrial Revolution this quiet nocturnal life became increasingly intruded upon. As the late nineteenth century wore on in northern transatlantic urban centres, and the more live telegraphs and night trains actively snaked through cities under 24-hour lamplight, the more people's impressions and associations became suggestive of round-the-clock activity, or insomnia.

If this idea seems far-fetched, consider the story 'Sounds in the Night' (Anonymous 1868), from a popular London magazine. It illustrates how a technologically active environment might facilitate a hyperactive association of ideas and intrudes upon one's peaceful slumber. The story's narrator first attributes sleeplessness to too much 'brain-

work', then describes how, when he tries to sleep in his country-house impressions of the distant city's technologies invade his bedroom's silence and initiate and perpetuate his obsessive mental associations. First comes the sound of a speeding night train. 'Listening attentively, I hear, clear and shrill, the scream of the railway engine as it plunges beneath our tunnel. [...] "That is the 2:35 A.M. up express" I mentally say to myself' (pp.33–34).[11]

Yet it is not this engine's 'scream' itself that keeps the narrator awake thereafter, but the train of thoughts that it inspires. Immediately he begins to reflect on his own former railway journeys. He imagines the busy, round-the-clock coming and going of other railway travellers. 'How odd to think of the light, activity and bustle *there*, at this unearthly hour, and all still and motionless here at home'. His mind, however, is anything but 'still and motionless', for he continues to make associations. The narrator seems quite self-conscious of his reverie, explicitly remarking how his intellectually hyperactive condition exemplifies associationist psychology.

> *I do not wonder that metaphysicians have dwelt so carefully on the subtle laws of association. How a casual sound awakens a mental association, and at the touch of this association the burial places of memory give up their dead. The sleepless hour is indeed the time for memory'* (Anonymous 1868, p.37).

Similarly, Dickens's introduces the idea of the wakefulness of those whose minds make associations involuntarily in his short sketch 'Lying Awake'. He reveals the musings of one who wants to sleep, but finds himself constantly drawn to and engrossed in memories and musings by the 'association of ideas' (Dickens 1853, p.145).

16.5. Sleep lab

For most of its history, sleep was considered as a unified whole. It was likened to a body of water or a curtain under or behind which one could submerge or hide one's self. [12] There has long seemed something comforting in this ability to so hide, to make identity disappear. In *Tristram Shandy*, the characterisation of sleep as that which 'covers a man all over like a cloak' is more valued 'than all the dissertations squeezed out of the heads or the learned together upon the subject' (Sterne 1849, p.222).

Yet this view of sleep as singular, as a sensory negation or a mere oblivion, began to change in the late nineteenth century. The change was subtle at first, merely implied. Dickens, in 'Lying Awake' (1853), suggests a kind of fracturing of Cartesian unified subjectivity by means of an idiosyncratic description of his insomnia: 'Perhaps, with no scientific intention or invention, I was illustrating the theory of the Duality of the Brain; perhaps one part of my brain, being wakeful, sat up to watch the other part which was sleepy' (p.145). Yet such a brain, fractured thus between wakeful and sleepy binaries, soon became subdivided even further. In the 1880s, British physician Joseph Mortimer Granville characterized sleep rather as an aggregation of the self's various mental, sensory, muscular, and visceral systems, each of which might maintain or involuntarily fall into its own independent sleep patterns: 'Sense organs must sleep, the viscera must sleep, and, above all, the nervous system composed as it is of a vast multitude of nerve-centres, each capable of a limited independence of action, must sleep' (Granville 1884, p.78). Granville then constructed out of this theoretical systemic heterogeneity a complex of potential 'false sleeps', wakeful states that mock true slumber. If just one of the body's

constituent systems remained restless, despite all others being dormant, a false sleep would result. Only when these sovereign systems' various sleeps occurred unanimously and simultaneously could one win 'perfect' slumber. Singular, negative sleep was further eroded by around 1900. Kenton Kroker's (2007) fascinating history of sleep research *The Sleep of Others* explores how, shortly after the development of the electroencephalograph, it became a complex positive entity with functional characteristics; it was no longer 'little more than nothingness'; it adopted 'a kind of morphology that it had never had before' (pp.6–7).

Sleep as a complicated, multivalent terrain, worthy of careful, clinical study becomes the focus of two recent novels that are partly set in sleep laboratories, Coe's *The House of Sleep* (1998), and William Boyd's *Armadillo* (1998). In *The House of Sleep,* the journalist Terry suffers from an impossibly severe case of insomnia and eventually becomes one of Gregory's patients. Gregory's account of the complex topologies of sleep, mapped by the electroencephalogram and a century of clinical research, reveal the fascinating world from which Terry in his sleeplessness has been effectively banished:

> *'Stage Two begins with the appearance of theta waves of three-and-a-half to seven-and-a-half cycles per second, along with spindles and K-complexes [...] and then we see slow delta wave activity beginning, which marks the start of unconsciousness proper. Stage Three is an interim stage, when the delta waves still account for less than half the recording on the EEG. Stage four is when the delta waves predominate ...'* (Coe 1998, p.145).

Similarly, *Armadillo* portrays the strangely conflicted relationship between a sleep researcher, Alan, and his patient, the insurance adjuster Lorimer. For both novels' sleep

researchers, the world of sleep – manifested in its brainwave morphologies as well as in the vivid dreams that occasionally unfold there – becomes in some ways more attractive than the waking world. Thus both novels convey multivalent contradictions between the demands and fascinations of clinical research, the idea of productivity, the demands of one's career, and the demands of sleep. Terry's prolificacy as a journalist, for example, is enhanced by his insomnia in that he is able to remain productive while his competitors, other would-be writers, are handicapped by their normal sleep patterns. Terry's career would thus suffer by any cure that Gregory might give.

Conversely, in Boyd's novel, Lorimer imagines that Alan's main priority is not to cure him of his disorder, but rather to simply exploit it for ever-more intriguing research data, in order to satisfy his own curiosity and further his own careerist agenda: 'after six weeks of participation in the Institute's program, it was ever more clear to Lorimer that the dream segment of the research, rather than the curative outcome, most intrigued [Alan]' (p.90). Alan encourages Lorimer to mentally manipulate his lucid dreams whenever a particular love interest appears, explaining that it would help cure Lorimer's sleep disorder. Yet given that the conscious and wilful participation of the dreamer in a lucid dream makes sleep less deep, this therapeutic regimen would seem entirely counterproductive. Still, Alan's therapeutic approach underscores the longstanding desire to maintain the volitional powers despite sleep, to transform it into something more like wakeful life and to recoup, as Terry had done, the hours lost to involuntary and unproductive oblivion. Both novels thus show evidence of the modern desire to render sleep either productive and utilitarian, or else to abolish it completely in the face of an unflagging will. It was evidence of this same desire that prompted F.T. Marinetti to urge

his fellow Futurists to ‘exalt aggressive action, a feverish insomnia’ in his manifesto of 1909 (Marinetti 2007, p.187).

This same desire to abolish sleep altogether is also evident (and also associated with modern technological advancement) in *The Coming Race*, where oblivious or unproductive slumber becomes a kind of unfortunate vestige of a primitive age, a resource to be tapped. A round-the-clock telegraphic transference of intelligence is represented in the novel when the narrator gets his language ‘extracted’ while he sleeps. He is then invited to compare such practices with those of his own civilization, asked if, in his world

> *it was not known that all the faculties of the mind could be quickened to a degree unknown in the waking state, by trance or vision, in which the thoughts of one brain could be transmitted to another, and knowledge be thus rapidly interchanged* (Bulwer-Lytton 1886, p.26).

Such a colonization of sleep by utilitarian wilful consciousness also appears in James Cameron’s recent film *Avatar*, where human characters manipulate their avatars while laying dormant in hi-tech pods. Thus oblivious or non-volitional sleep is entirely abolished. In both waking life as humans and while sleeping as Na’vi, Jake and Grace continue to enact their will, make decisions, remain involved in their surroundings, whether directly or vicariously. This scheme reveals one of the main misanthropic contradictions in the film: to live in seeming harmony with nature through the life of the Na’vi, Jake and Grace must disobey their own natural, circadian rhythms. Instead of finding harmoniously restful recuperation in themselves, they spend their sleep hours unnaturally enacting their wills through others’ bodies. Christopher Nolan’s film

Inception (2010) also fantasizes about the colonization of sleep by the technologized will. In both films, sleep loses much of its intractable otherwordliness and becomes yet another environment in which one's waking volition might be enacted. Thus in a sense in both films, one of sleep's defining characteristics is obliterated and sleep essentially disappears.

16.6. Turning off

The contradiction in Cameron's film, the radically artificial co-opting of sleep in order to be more 'in touch with nature', highlights the ever-increasing tension between the will and sleep in modernity. For since the invention of telecommunications a century-and-a-half ago, and especially since the rise of the internet in the last two decades, our wills have been given a kind of transcontinental dominion. Our conscious lives thus more and more resemble that of Bulwer-Lytton's Vril-ya, in whose world 'the thoughts of one brain [are] transmitted to another' around the clock. Yet this new widening of the dominion of our wills has not occurred without some sacrifice, for gains in one terrain are usually not won without losses in another. While using the internet to explore strange and faraway things we often languor in ignorance of our own visceral life or the goings-on inside our heads or right outside our door; we lie supine while, like the humans of *Avatar* or *Inception*, we virtually control a supplementary distant 'space' and play within its prescribed logic.

If the internet represents this perpetual access of information and a virtual connectivity or control, and if literature represents an archiving of our fantasies, memories, and histories, then sleep, as we have seen in this chapter, runs antithetical to them as the

oblivion of this archive and a resistance to this round-the-clock inundation and facilitation. It will thus be interesting to see what forms the literature of sleep takes in the coming decades, in which our days and nights become ever-more crowded with ideas and information and input, with spectacles and sounds vying for our limited capacities of attention. For as much as it is in our nature to periodically relinquish our will, to allow ourselves to be taken over by our circadian rhythms and the phenomenology of nothingness, it will also always be in our nature to desire to account somehow for this longed-for blind spot in our lives.

Notes

1. From Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*

2. See also: Ovid (2001) Simpson translation, p.282.

3. Latin: 'way of negation' – a way of describing something by identifying what it's not. This method was famously used to describe God by philosophers and theologians such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Thomas Aquinas.

4. The humoral tradition was a Greek system of medicine in which health was largely determined by the balance of four bodily fluids or humors. Similarly, the Hermitic tradition underscored the importance of a harmonious balance of the four classical elements and a correspondence between rhythms in nature and the cosmos and those in the body. Sleep is acknowledged as part of this correspondence in such lore, which claims 'without the repose of the night our bodies would not resist the day's toil' (Kingsford and Maitland, 1885, p.131).

5. Another kind of bifurcated sleep or polyphasic sleep, that of siesta cultures, is described in Brigitte Steger's essay in this book.

6. See also: Ackerman 2007, p.178.

7. To remedy this danger, the narrator fastens his right toe to his wife's left hand each night with tape – which he jokingly refers to as his 'marriage tie'.

8. Stewart also recognized, like Sully, that one might make decisions in one's dreams: 'That the power of volition is not suspended during sleep, appears from the efforts which we are conscious of making while in that situation. We dream, for example, that we are in danger; and we attempt to call out for assistance' (Stewart 1854, p.191).

9. Endymion is often depicted in literature and on sarcophagi as "sleeping" with eyes wide open. (See Athenaeus 1854, p.903–904).

10. This topic is discussed elsewhere in this book, in the essay of Brigitte Steger. (check)

11. Though the story is anonymously published in this journal, the author is likely the Reverend Frederick Arnold.

12. Examples of such a 'singular' sleep state are of course numerous, though the state might consist in varying degrees. See Frothingham (1866, p.202): 'Then comes sleep […] pouring balm into hurt minds; immersing Nature in her bath of oblivion'. See also Stebbins (1859, p.380): 'Silence, darkness all around me, / Not a fire-beam on the wall – / Now, oh Night, thou voiceless soother, / Let sleep's curtain gently fall!'

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* The 19th century poet James Thomson is widely known as B.V. which stands for his pseudonym *Bysshe Vanolis*. It also helps distinguish him from the 18th cent poet James Thomson.