THE AUSTERITY KITCHEN
BY CHRISTINE BACMGARTHUEBER

Where the alimentary is elementary.

Night Moves

By CHRISTINE BACMGARTHUEBER

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"Early bird" or "night owl"–most modern individuals consider themselves one or the other. People who lived before the Industrial Age were both.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Das Schlaraffenland* (1567)

Enviable is the sleeper who sleeps, who sinks into nothingness and remains there for a good seven to ten hours, rising again only with the sun.

Enviable and perhaps contemptible. "I hate a man who goes to sleep at once," complains Mark Twain. Provoking his hatred is nothing specific, rather only "a sort of indefinable something" that comes across as "not exactly an insult," but more of "an insolence" that he nonetheless finds "hard to bear." The object of odium–a traveling companion who goes to bed directly after dinner, leaving a wakeful Twain no one to talk with–stands guilty of that typical lack of consideration the sleepy show the sleepless by indulging their sleepiness.

Twain registers this complaint in *A Tramp Abroad* (1880).

Exhaustion visits sound sleeper and insomniac alike. Yet whereas the sleeper eventually finds rest, the insomniac finds none. She suffers her exhaustion through the night, whose deep stillness only throws in starker relief the restlessness of her mind.

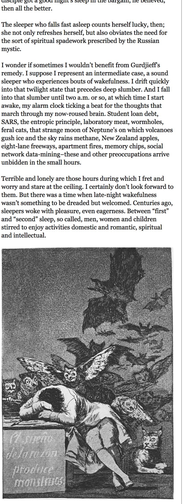
G.I. Gurdjieff understood the importance of placid thoughts. Whenever his disciples became nervous or agitated, he would hand them spades and command them to dig until their bodies were out and their minds softened like warmed wax. Gaining wisdom depended on a hard day's work. If the disciple got a good night's sleep in the bargain, he believed, then all the better.

The sleeper who falls fast asleep counts herself lucky, then; she not only refreshes herself, but also obviates the need for the sort of spiritual spadework prescribed by the Russian mystic.

I wonder if sometimes I wouldn't benefit from Gurdjieff's remedy. I suppose I represent an intermediate case, a sound sleeper who experiences bouts of wakefulness. I drift quickly into that twilight state that precedes deep slumber. And I fall into that slumber until two a.m. or so, at which time I start awake, my alarm clock ticking a beat for the thoughts that march through my now-roused brain. Student loan debt, SARS, the entropic principle, laboratory meat, wormholes, feral cats, that strange moon of Neptune's on which volcanoes gush ice and the sky rains methane, New Zealand apples, eight-lane freeways, apartment fires, memory chips, social network data-mining–these and other preoccupations arrive unbidden in the small hours.

"The capacity for sleeping, like the capacity for eating and drinking, is to be increased by indulgence," reports an 1844 issue of *The Rover*; some "will sleep for four-and-twenty hours. The celebrated Quin had this faculty. 'What sort of morning is it, John?' 'Very wet, sir.' 'Any mutler in the market?' 'No, sir.' 'Then, John, you may call me this time to-morrow.' So saying, he composed himself to sleep, and got rid of the ennui of a dull day in the arms of Morpheus."

Terrible and lonely are those hours during which I fret and worry and stare at the ceiling. I certainly don't look forward to them. But there was a time when late-night wakefulness wasn't something to be dreaded but welcomed. Centuries ago, sleepers woke with pleasure, even eagerness. Between "first" and "second" sleep, so called, men, women and children stirred to enjoy activities domestic and romantic, spiritual and intellectual.



Francisco Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (ca. 1797-98)

From Max Barthel's "Letters from Soviet Russia," translated from the German for the February 28, 1921 edition of *Soviet Russia*: "In the railroad station the peasants and workers are lying on the bare floor, looking like gray soil themselves. We depart and roll on through the night. In my car is still the twittering of the little children of Poltava, as well as the heaviness of sleep. Before I fall asleep I think of an inscription that I read in the Palace of the Children: 'Liberty and Education belong together like fire and heat. One cannot be without the other.'"

The idea of first and second sleep derives from a form of life that disappeared with the onset of industrialism. "Until the close of the early modern era," writes Roger Ekirch in *At Day's Close: Night in Times Past* (2005), "Western Europeans on most evenings experienced two major intervals of sleep bridged by up to an hour or more of quiet wakefulness." When an individual took her first sleep depended, like it does today, on disposition and life circumstances. Most, however, went to bed with the sun. Chaucer's "Squire's Tale" mentions that Canacee slept "soon after evening fell" and awoke again during the early hours of the morning. The thirteenth-century Catalan philosopher Ramón Lull characterizes first sleep as stretching from mid-evening to early morning, while the French writer Noel Taillepied maintains that it is "about midnight" when a person wakes from it.

The hours that followed first sleep individuals passed in diverse manners; no custom or obligation imposed itself on this time between times. Ekirch writes that this period bore no name other than the "watch" or "watching." Reluctant to leave a warm bed, many were content to do just that–watch. Others chatted with bedfellows, smoked pipes, comforted ill kinsmen or tended fires. Neighbors visited. Sometimes they broke bread. And frequently was the call of nature heeded. "When you do wake of your fyrst slepe," counsels the medieval physician Andrew Boorde, "make water if you feel your bladder charged."

Those souls charged with keeping house used the hours between first and second sleep to finish chores. These chores invariably fell to women, who tended children and livestock, and even brewed beer, as their husbands loafed in bed. Just how demanding the midnight hours could be for women of the laboring classes is amply illustrated in William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (ca. 1360–87):

> They themselves also suffer much hunger,
> And wee in winterime, and waking up nights
> To rise on the bedside, to rock the cradle,
> Also the card and comb wool, to patch and to wash,
> To rub flax and reel yarn and peel rushes.

The interval between sleep was for the agrarian housewife as unremittingly difficult as were daylight hours. Her days consisted of mind-numbing toil relieved only by bouts of black, dreamless slumber.

"The first five days of April put an end to the torpor of the larvae of both Geotrupes," writes Jean-Henri Fabre in *The Sacred Beetle* (1918). "Activity returns, bringing with it a last flicker of appetite. The remains of the autumn banquet are plentiful. The grub makes use of them no longer for greedy feasting, but just as a midnight snack between two slumbers, that of winter and the deeper sleep of the metamorphosis."

Men of sufficient leisure considered the period between first and second sleep prime time for the mind's exercise. *Dorveille*, as the French called this time, signaled the mingling of thoughts that wandered "at will" and that combined in new and exciting ways. "If you could choose an hour of wakefulness out of the whole night," observes Nathaniel Hawthorne, "it would be this." Elsewhere is reported that the Bishop of Salisbury would "rise, light, and after burning out his candle, return to bed before day." Some even prepared in advance for their period of watching. Before retiring, Thomas Jefferson would read works of moral philosophy so as to have something "whereon to ruminate in the intervals of sleep."

To dream of seeing apple trees and eating their sweet and ripe fruit portends joy, pleasure and recreation, especially if the dreamer should happen to be a virgin.

While the more intellectually inclined of the upper orders consecrated their wakeful wee hours to Athena, Hermes or Apollo, the lower orders dedicated theirs to Eros; albeit not for lack of something better to do, but from necessity. The physical demands of their job meant that artisans, plowmen and other laborers had to rest first. Sex came "after the first sleep," at which time the participants could "have more enjoyment" and could "do it better," as the French physician Laurent Jourbert insists. Only under such conditions can a child properly be conceived. After coition, partners should "get back to sleep again if possible, or if not, at least to remain in bed and relax while talking together joyfully."

THERE WAS THE PRIM

Illustration from a 1903 English-language edition of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*

Regardless of how the hours between first and second sleep were passed, they were undeniably full. Individuals strived into activity for good or ill. While the dutiful scrubbed and brewed, and while the lazy simply reposed, less scrupulous types burgled and pilfered under night's cover; and there were always those who in idle moments hatched evil plans. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, folks began to fall out of step with communal sleep rhythms, especially in the cities. "Not only did people stay up later," writes Ekirch, "but, more importantly, growing numbers after dark ventured outdoors in search of pleasure and profit." Among other social and economic developments, a burgeoning commodity market aided by innovations in lighting fueled this "nocturnal revolution." Shops, markets and arcades stayed open past nightfall, making the prospect of retiring with the setting sun decidedly less attractive. If the arcade enticed you to stay awake past midnight, then awake you remained, even if all of your neighbors should already be snoring away.

From Sleep: or, The Hygiene of the Night (1871): "Between the closing of the chamber door at night and its opening in the morning, a third of human life passes away, and upon the manner of its employment the physical, mental, and moral character of a man largely depends."

Yet as the streets filled, the hours emptied, losing their texture and significance once they had been surrendered to the wan pleasures of consumption. Those who could resist the cheap attractions of gaslit shops continued to make sure they got their rest. Those who did not? Well, they courted imbecility. "No brain can remain in permanent health that has been overtaken by nightly vigils," maintains Forbe Benignus Winslow in "On Obscure Diseases of the Brain" (1860s).

Franz Kafka, a noted insomniac, considers his affliction in a different light half a century later. In his short sketch, "At Night," he describes the loneliness of a vigil:

> Deeply lost in the night. Just as one sometimes lowers one's head to reflect, thus to be utterly lost in the night. All around people are asleep. Its just play acting, an innocent self-deception, that they sleep in houses, in safe beds, under a safe roof, stretched out or curled up on mattresses, in sheets, under blankets; in reality they have flocked together as they had once upon a time and again later in a deserted region, a camp in the open, a countless number of men, an army, a people, under a cold sky on cold earth, collapsed where once they had stood, forehead pressed on the arm, face to the ground, breathing quietly. And you are watching, are one of the watchmen, you find the next one by brandishing a burning stick from the broadwood pile beside you. Why are you watching? Someone must watch, it is said. Someone must be there.

"There are few social relationships that are pleasanter than midnight suppers," opines Mary Elizabeth Southworth in *Midnight Feasts: Two Hundred & Two Salads and Chafing-Dish Recipes* (1914), "and they have always had a certain secret fascination, as of forbidden temptations." She presents a recipe for Piedmont toast, which makes a perfectly satisfactory whisking-hour snack: "Take four anchovies, free them from skin and bone and chop fine; mix them with a half-pint of good stock and the yolks of six eggs and the beaten whites of two; add salt, pepper and parsley, and stir over the blaze until smooth, then pour into a bowl. Cover the bottom of the chafing-dish with toasted bread, pour the anchovy sauce over it, and sprinkle grated cheese on top. Cover and cook over hot water for ten minutes."

The British band The Cure took Kafka's sketch as inspiration for their 1980 song of the same title.

Wrapped in their bedclothes, the sleepers in Kafka's sketch bear only the outward vestments of solid, middle-class comfort. Members of a vast and wandering army, a people vulnerable to invasion; save for the watchmen, no one looks after them. Only he sees the historical continuum that undergirds their slumber. They are, as they have always been, unsettled and defenseless.

And unsettled and defenseless we continue to be, particularly as every aspect of contemporary existence conspires to rob us of our peace. "Disruptive," a fashionable term these days, flacks, shills and pundits apply to any new gizmo or "killer app" which promises to upend age-old ways of passing time. In a milieu of constant disruption, where can one find peace or rest? Enviable is the sleeper who sleeps, indeed; for she shows herself able to resist the constant barrage of enticements that the wired world hurls at her. She gets her rest while others keep watch over tweets and emails in imbecile expectation of goodness only knows what.

Previously by CHRISTINE BAUMGARTHUEBER

Coverge Burgers and Plastic Malts

Dinner with Caligula

A Contrary Image of Steaming Excrement