

Sleeping, Waking and Dreaming in Protestant Piety

Alec Ryrie

Sleep is a universal human necessity. As such it is in one sense involuntary; but one can choose when to sleep and how much sleep to take - up to a point. One can choose when to go to bed, but it is harder to choose when to fall asleep (as insomniacs know) or when to wake up. Dreams are slightly different. They are not susceptible to conscious control in the same way that sleep is, but dreamers can feel a sense of moral responsibility for their dreamed acts. And dreams, unlike sleep, are not experienced as universal: some people apparently never recall dreams, and others do so only rarely.

All of which suggests that historians of early modern religion should pay more attention to sleeping and dreaming than we do.¹ These most everyday of phenomena are spiritual borderlands: borders between the voluntary and the involuntary, between consciousness and unconsciousness, between the universal and the particular, and between life and death. This made them sites of concern, and also of opportunity, for early modern Protestants. To a Reformed Protestant sleep is much like sin:² we cannot choose whether or not to be sinners, just as we cannot choose whether or not to be sleepers, but we can choose whether or not to sleep, or to sin, in a specific situation. And as such we remain culpable.

This may seem an odd perspective, given that sleep is evidently a natural need, and that orthodox Protestantism generally affirmed such needs as part of the created order and so intrinsically good. In fact, the Protestant

¹ Very little has been written directly on this subject, although the forthcoming work of Sasha Handley on the post-Restoration period promises good things. The field is so far held by two recent books: A. Roger Ekirch, *At Day's Close: Night in Times Past* (New York, 2005) and Carole Levin, *Dreaming the English Renaissance: Politics and Desire in Court and Culture* (New York, 2008). Cf. Craig Koslofsky, *Evening's Empire: A History of the Night in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2011), whose focus is the real and symbolic night rather than sleep as such. My own interest in the field was triggered by Carole Levin and Garrett Sullivan's introduction to the exhibition they co-curated at the FSL in 2009, titled 'To Sleep, Perchance to Dream'.

² A comparison made at length in *The drowsie disease: or, an alarme to awake church-sleepers* (London, 1638: RSTC 6913.5), pp. 11–19.

view of sleep is more ambiguous. Calvin argued that sleep (like other bodily needs) was not in fact good, but a sign of the body's corruption and enslavement to sin; it was, however, a permitted relief, a concession made to human weakness which Christians might use with a clear conscience.³ If this seems oddly grudging, consider the Biblical witness on the subject. There is one mention of Christ sleeping (sleeping during the day at that), on the boat during the storm. But that is almost the only positive reference to sleep in the Bible, and it is one which Protestants tended to interpret allegorically, as a sign of how our faithlessness makes God deaf to our prayers.⁴ For the Biblical writers, *rest* is clearly good; but *sleep* as such is either a symbol of death, or is associated with various moral failings, from common idleness and drunkenness to spiritual stupor and blindness or lack of perseverance. This is clearest in the Gospels, in Christ's repeated injunction to remain awake, and in the book of Proverbs, which inveighs against sluggards. On dreaming, the Biblical witness is more complex, because it is clear from both Old and New Testament examples that dreams can be messages from God; but it is also clear that there can be false dreams, and indeed the book of Deuteronomy equates the dreamer of false dreams with a false prophet who should be slain.⁵ There is of course no mention of Christ dreaming.

That Biblical witness might be enough to provide an undertow of concern for early modern Reformed Protestants. What magnified that concern was that both Biblical themes of disquiet about sleep tugged on other early modern preoccupations. First, the connection between sleep and death. Going to sleep in the early modern world was dangerous. The prayer 'If I should die before I wake' nowadays has a quaint feel to it. For our forebears, it was clear-eyed realism. Death often came in the night, whether from disease, household accident, fire, violence or simply from cold. Early modern households were vulnerable in ways that we find hard to imagine. For example, the London woodturner Nehemiah Wallington recorded a providential deliverance from night-time danger, after his two apprentices, sharing an upstairs room, fell asleep having forgotten to extinguish their candle. When it burned out, the wick fell through the wire holder and set fire to their bed. That incident ended happily, although the lack of ready access to water made it alarming for a few minutes;⁶ but such stories often did not. A case in Germany in 1558 in which a family of six

³ Paul Helm, *Calvin at the Centre* (Oxford, 2010), p. 282.

⁴ Matthew 8:24; John Norden, *A pensive mans practise ... The second part* (London, 1609: RSTC 18626a.5), pp. 41–2.

⁵ Deuteronomy 13:5.

⁶ *The Notebooks of Nehemiah Wallington, 1618–1654: A Selection*, edited by David Booy (Aldershot, 2007), p. 65.

all died in their sleep on Christmas Eve, with no obvious cause of death, was retold in shocked broadsides across Europe. We might suspect carbon monoxide: at the time divine judgement seemed the obvious explanation.⁷ Of course, death was ubiquitous in the early modern world, but dying in your sleep was (on the face of things) not a good death. There was no opportunity to prepare or to make a final confession of faith. The only solution was therefore to prepare for death every time you went to bed, in case tonight was the night. The prayers for domestic use which were included with Gervase Babington's best-selling *A briefe conference* would have reminded families of this every evening:

Let the bed O Lord strike into our hearts that the graue is almost readie for vs. Which of vs can tell, whether these eies of ours once closed vp shall euer open anie more againe, or no?⁸

To modern ears that may sound lugubrious. To many of our forebears it was merely prudent.

This is only reinforced by the other reason for viewing sleep with suspicion, which drew on that other Biblical strand, sleep as a moral failing. Reformed Protestantism in the British Isles developed a rigorous culture of self-discipline and self-observation. One of the features of the holiness which these men and women were trying to cultivate was constant awareness of the presence of God, and constant godliness of thought. This made sleeping and dreaming particularly problematic, as these are points at which disciplining your thoughts is extremely difficult. The ambition was to have your mind focused on godly matters as you fell asleep; more remarkably, to ensure that your first thought on waking was of God; and more remarkably still, to have a dream life which reflected your waking ideals. These are formidably difficult objectives, but Reformed Protestants were not averse to a little difficulty. This chapter will survey the different faces of their spiritual struggle with sleeping and dreaming, and argue that that struggle provided them with opportunities as well as problems.

1

In their commentary on the Ten Commandments, John Dod and Robert Cleaver issued a series of fearsome and impractical instructions to sleepers, so much so that they felt the need to state explicitly that 'a man is allowed

⁷ Ekirch, *At Day's Close*, p. 268.

⁸ Gervase Babington, *A briefe conference betwixt mans frailtie and faith* (London, 1584: RSTC 1082), p. 145.

to sleepe'.⁹ Which raises one very obvious way of avoiding sleep's spiritual dangers: to stay awake.

This practice – of radically restricting sleep, forgoing it entirely for a time, or rising very early – was very widespread amongst earnest Protestants, just as it was amongst Catholics who followed or drew inspiration from a monastic rule. Amongst Protestants, however, the practice has largely been overlooked by historians, apparently because of the jargon used for it. The word *watch*, whose principal connotations are now visual, shares its etymology with *wake*, and its primary late medieval and early modern meaning was to be or remain deliberately awake, in particular as a spiritual discipline. This is how it is used in English Bibles, and Protestant devotional writers were using it in that sense, to refer to a specific ascetic practice akin to fasting, from Tyndale's time onwards.¹⁰

Rising early in order to pray was a very widely recommended spiritual discipline. (The alternative, staying up late, was also practised but was clearly regarded as second-best: that end of the night belonged to debauchery and carousing.) In the age before alarm clocks, which only began to appear in the late seventeenth century, early rising was not always easy to manage, especially in rural areas where there were no chiming town clocks to be heard. This practical problem is rarely discussed. We may assume that often servants (who would be up before dawn for more mundane reasons) would be asked to assist, but regular habits can become self-reinforcing, and some early risers certainly managed to awaken unassisted. Rising and dressing was another matter. The seventeenth-century lawyer Justinian Paget, guilt-stricken after lying abed until nine o'clock one Saturday morning in November 1633, resolved to rise at five o'clock daily thereafter. He proposed to wake of his own accord, and then, lying in bed, to 'knock wth my bedstaff' to waken a servant, Elias. Poor Elias would then come immediately to make a fire, while Paget, still in bed, rubbed his body to warm up. Then, he promised himself, 'I will presently skip out of my bed'. His resolution lasted less than three weeks: perhaps it was the wrong time of year to embark on such an arduous regime.¹¹

Paget was at least not alone in aspiring to a regime of early rising. Lewis Bayly's *Practise of piety*, far and away the most popular devotional text in the early seventeenth century, urged readers to rise before the sun.¹²

⁹ John Dod and Robert Cleaver, *A plaine and familiar exposition of the Ten commandments* (London, 1604: RSTC 6598), p. 141.

¹⁰ OED; William Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises and Introductions to Different Portions of the Holy Scriptures*, edited by Henry Walter (Cambridge, 1848), p. 92; amongst numerous Biblical references, see especially II Cor. 11:27, I Thess. 5:6, I Tim. 3:2.

¹¹ BL, MS Harleian 1026 fo. 21^{r-v}.

¹² Lewis Bayly, *The Practise of pietie* (London, 1620: RSTC 1604), pp. 243–4.

Richard Rogers, the Essex Puritan minister, apparently made a regular practice of rising at five o'clock for his devotions – and that in December; he may have risen earlier in the summer.¹³ For William Gouge, we are told, it was a point of principle to rise before any of his neighbours: 'if he happened to hear any at their work before he began his studies, he would say ... that he was much troubled that any should be at the works of their Calling, before he was at his'.¹⁴ Nehemiah Wallington, who explicitly cited early rising as one of his weapons in his ongoing battle with lust, made it a point to rouse his whole household early on Sundays and fast days. Anyone under his roof who was still in bed at six o'clock on a Sunday had to contribute a farthing to the poor box, and on such days he himself seems regularly to have risen at four o'clock. On one occasion he tells us he rose 'a while after two a cloke in the morni[n]g' to go to a fast, and that on a weekday morning in February. On that occasion he went 'as a dogge to hanging: much drawing and hanging backe'; but more generally he found early rising spiritually uplifting. He claimed that he had never regretted rising early but had often regretted sleeping in, 'for my mind being then without distractions, and my spirit being fresh I have meat with many sweete meditations in closeing with the Lord in holy prayer and much sweetnesse I have had with his holy spirit'.¹⁵

If Wallington's practice seems extreme, consider that, in the previous century, Hugh Latimer was said to rise every morning at two o'clock, summer and winter, to be at his books.¹⁶ Perhaps Latimer was simply one of those individuals who need very little sleep; or it may have been that this was his practice only in his student days, because rising at midnight to study was apparently quite common amongst early modern students – sometimes returning to bed after a while, sometimes slogging through until morning.¹⁷ To what extent this is an echo of old monastic disciplines, and to what extent it is a matter of students' perennially irregular timekeeping, is hard to say. Aspiring to this pattern was, however, more common than achieving it. The young Samuel Ward only mentioned early rising in his student diary on the (fairly frequent) occasions when he was repenting for failing to do so.¹⁸ It was said that Thomas Cartwright adopted a regime

¹³ *Two Elizabethan Puritan Diaries by Richard Rogers and Samuel Ward*, edited by M.M. Knappen (Chicago, 1933), p. 69.

¹⁴ Samuel Clarke, *A Collection of the Lives of Ten Eminent Divines* (London, 1662: Wing C4506), p. 117.

¹⁵ *Notebooks of Nehemiah Wallington*, pp. 43, 153, 181, 183, 210, 272.

¹⁶ *Sermons by Hugh Latimer*, edited by George Elwes Corrie (Cambridge, 1844), p. 321.

¹⁷ Ekirch, *At Day's Close*, pp. 305–6.

¹⁸ *Two Puritan Diaries*, pp. 106, 116.

of sleeping no more than five hours a night during his student days, and that this ‘continued to his dying day’; but others found that later in life such regimes were harder to maintain. We are told of John Mein, a godly Edinburgh merchant of the 1620s, whose practice, summer and winter, was to rise at three o’clock and spend three hours in private devotions, before family prayers at six and then going to his shop. He managed this by taking a regular afternoon nap and also by falling asleep at the table at supper: habits which would normally be seen as reprehensible but which in his case, as we shall see, he managed to redeem.¹⁹

For the truly heroic, however, there is the option of omitting a night’s sleep altogether. John Bradford’s popular meditations pointed out that Christ ‘did watch often, euen al the whole night’, but stopped short of explicitly recommending that his followers do likewise. Likewise, Robert Saxby’s pious miscellany admired the devotion of ancient Christians ‘who spent many whole Nightes, in waching and praying for the forgiunes of their sins’, but without suggesting that they be imitated.²⁰ It is rare to find English Protestants who admit to doing this intentionally. (Sleeplessness caused by spiritual turmoil is another matter; a sleepless night before conversion was something of a trope, with grace coming with the dawn.²¹) But in 1616 Gouge denounced

a superstitious practise of many whom I haue knowne to vse to sit vp all night at certaine times of the yeere, keeping themselues awake with talking one with another, playing on instruments, singing and the like, vpon a conceit that Christ will come in iudgement on some of those nights of the yeere, and they would not then be found asleepe.²²

And in the revivalist culture which took root in southwest Scotland and in Ulster during the 1620s and 1630s, forgoing a night’s sleep seems to have been a regular part of godly practice. The minister John Welsh sometimes spent whole nights praying in Ayr parish church, where ‘he used to allow his affections full expression, and prayed not only with audible, but sometimes loud voice’. For this he was called a witch by some of his parishioners.²³

¹⁹ Samuel Clarke, *The Lives of Two and Twenty English Divines* (London, 1660: Wing C4540), p. 19; *Select Biographies Edited for the Wodrow Society*, edited by W.K. Tweedie (Edinburgh, 1845), pp. 344–5; see below, pp. 91–2.

²⁰ John Bradford, *Godlie meditations* (London, 1562: RSTC 3484); Cambridge University Library Additional MS 3117 fo. 69^v.

²¹ For example, Robert Bolton, *Mr. Boltons last and learned worke of the foure last things* (London, 1632: RSTC 3242), sig. b5^{r-v}.

²² William Gouge, . *The Whole-Armor of God* (London, 1616: RSTC 12122), p. 452.

²³ *Select Biographies*, pp. 8, 324, 345.

The most notorious examples, however, are not solitary vigils but collective feats of sleep-defying endurance connected with the huge, open-air summer communion festivals of the period. (Of course, in high summer in Scotland the hours of true darkness are very short.) After the evening sermon had concluded, the believers would split into smallish groups and spend the night in prayer together, before convening for the next morning's sermon.²⁴

At the most renowned revivalist meeting of this period, at Kirk o'Shotts in Lanarkshire in June 1630, several such groups gathered on the Sunday night, after the communion. Elizabeth Melville, Lady Culross, a published devotional author in her own right as well as a patron of reforming ministers, threw open her lodgings, and 'the night after the Sabbath was spent in prayer by a great many Christians, in a large room where her bed was'. In the morning, she retired to bed and drew the bed-curtains, and the others withdrew – but she went to bed to pray, not to sleep. When someone else came into the room shortly afterwards 'hearing her have great motion upon her, although she spake not out, he desired her to speak out'. The crowd packed back into the room to hear her, and – still behind her bed-curtains – 'she continued in prayer, with wonderfull assistance, for three hours' time'. John Livingston, one of the leaders of this revivalist movement, claimed that in the great festivals in Ulster in the early 1630s, it was common for the godly to assemble on a Saturday and continue in prayer and sermon-attendance without a break for either food or sleep until the Monday lunchtime, and to be 'not troubled with sleepiness' either.²⁵ Whether or not we fully believe that claim, the aspiration, and the sense that sleep was one of the earthly fetters from which the regenerate were liberated by grace, is important in itself.

2

However, in the end, everyone needs to sleep. Once you have pared down what you need to the minimum, what matters to the earnest Protestant is to sleep, and to waken, correctly.

Prayer before sleep was one ingredient. Devotional manuals of the time provide endless texts for use at this point, recycling a small number of recurrent themes.²⁶ The commonest theme was repentance, settling the

²⁴ On these revivals, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scottish Communion and American Revivals in the Early Modern Period* (Princeton, 1989).

²⁵ *Select Biographies*, pp. 138, 144, 346–7.

²⁶ See, amongst many examples, Thomas Becon, *The Flour of godly praiers* (London, c.1550: RSTC 1719.5), fos 2^r–3^r; Thomas Sternhold, John Hopkins et al., *The Whole Booke of Psalmes* (London, 1562: RSTC 2430), pp. 401–3; Richard Day, *A Booke of Christian Prayers* (London, 1578: RSTC 6429),

day's spiritual scores so that sleepers might face the night's perils knowing that they were at peace with God. Linked to this is prayer committing yourself to God's keeping, indeed throwing yourself on his mercy. The devotee commonly asked to sleep under the ease and peace of God's protection – a rest that was described using images of sweetness, or (in one case) as being sheltered 'with the soft wings of quietnesse'.²⁷ The other side of this was prayer for protection from the night's dangers, whether bodily or spiritual. One much-repeated trope held that prayer was 'a Lock to shut up the Evening', securing yourself and your family against all perils.²⁸

Another recurrent trope resolved the contradiction between the legitimacy of sweet sleep and the command to keep awake by praying that, while the body slept, the soul might watch with God. 'Whilest my bodily senses are surprized with sleepe', Daniel Featley prayed, 'keepe my soule still awake, that I may be alwaies ready to meete the Bridegroom with my lampe in my hand'.²⁹ What this might actually mean is not always clear, although it is intriguing that this is one of the few points in the regular round of Protestant piety at which angels are commonly invoked. It was routine to ask that angels would guard those who sleep, and very often (citing an image from Psalm 34) that they would pitch their tents around the sleeper's bed.³⁰ These prayers not only sought sweet rest; they were

fos 7^r–10^r; Edward Dering, *Godly priuate praier, for housholders to meditate vppon* (London, 1581: RSTC 6689.2), sigs F3^v–4^v; Johann Habermann, *The enimie of securitie or A daily exercise of godlie meditations*, translated by Thomas Rogers (London, 1583: RSTC 12582.6), p. 162; Norden, *Pensive mans practise*, pp. 27–9; William Prid, *The Glasse of Vaine-glorie* (London, 1600: RSTC 929), sigs G2^r–4^r; Richard Rogers et al., *A garden of spirituall flowers ... 1. Part* (London, 1616: RSTC 21207.5), sig. F6^r; the cycle of bedtime prayers in Michael Sparke, *Crumms of comfort* (London, 1627: RSTC 23015.7); Henry Scudder, *The Christians daily ualke in holy securitie and peace* (London, 1628: RSTC 22116), pp. 92–5; 'A. F.' [Anthony Fawkener?], *A Collection of certaine Promises out of the Word of GOD* (London, 1629: RSTC 10634.7), pp. 156–7; BodL MS Rawl C.473 fos. 2^r–17^r.

²⁷ John Gee, *Steps of Ascension vnto God, or, A Ladder to Heaven* (London, 1625: RSTC 11706.4), p. 32.

²⁸ Henry Valentine, *Private Devotions, Digested into Six Letanies* (London, 1635: RSTC 24576.3), p. 2 – amongst many, many others to cite this.

²⁹ Daniel Featley, *Ancilla Pietatis: Or, the Hand-Maid to Priuate Devotion* (London, 1626: RSTC 10726), p. 136.

³⁰ For example, Henry Bull, *Christian praier and holy meditations* (London, 1570: RSTC 4029), p. 116; Prid, *Glasse of Vaine-glorie*, sig. G4^r; Thomas Tuke, *The Practise of the faithfull* (London, 1613: RSTC 24314), p. 92; Richard Bernard, *A Weekes Worke. And a Worke for every weeke* (London, 1616: RSTC 1964.3), p. 120.

understood to be a means to it. As George Herbert put it, 'Who goes to bed and does not pray, / Maketh two nights to ev'ry day'.³¹

However, these very persistent patterns, and proverbial warnings against the foolishness of sleeping without prayer, alert us to a problem. If early modern British people prayed at all in their private lives, the moment when they were likeliest to do so (table-graces aside) was in bed, before falling asleep or as they were doing so. As Tara Hamling has pointed out, the pious imagery frequently carved onto bedsteads testifies to the bed as a site of prayer.³² What worried pious commentators was that such prayers were often cursory and formal. Arthur Dent's view of his ignorant neighbours' religion was that 'when they are laide in their beds a nights, and half asleepe, then wil they tumble ouer their praiers, or be pattering some Pater noster'.³³ Others detected the same pattern, including Richard Kilby, who recalled as a child sharing a bed with adults who 'would begin to say the Lords prayer, and by and by slumber, then awake, and beginne againe, and presently fall asleep againe'.³⁴ This was not the sort of pre-sleeping prayer the godly looked for. But if you should not fall asleep while praying, you should certainly pray while falling asleep. Henry Scudder recommended this explicitly: 'if possibly you can, fall asleepe out of some heauenly meditation'.³⁵ Scudder at least acknowledged that this might be tricky. John Norden's devotional best-seller, which urged that 'our last cogitation before wee ... shut vp the eye liddes of our hearts in slumber, should be of our time past and ill spent, and for the same to craue pardon', made no such allowance.³⁶ And Henry Bull's *Christian praiers and holy meditations* included an 84-word prayer to be recited 'when you fele slepe to be coming', which is either impossible or a recipe for insomnia.³⁷ Samuel Ward lamented 'my sleping without remembering my last thought, which should have bene of God', and 'my not gyving of my last thought to God'. Those whom Dent and Kilby criticised could at least claim to have done that.³⁸

³¹ *The English Poems of George Herbert*, edited by Helen Wilcox (Cambridge, 2007), p. 347.

³² Tara Hamling, *Decorating the 'Godly' Household: Religious Art in Post-Reformation Britain* (New Haven and London, 2010), p. 169.

³³ Arthur Dent, *The plaine mans path-way to heauen* (London, 1607: RSTC 6629), p. 196.

³⁴ Richard Kilby, *Hallelujah. Praise yee the Lord* (London, 1635: RSTC 14956.7), p. 168.

³⁵ Scudder, *The Christians daily vvalke*, p. 94.

³⁶ Norden, *Pensive mans practise*, p. 27.

³⁷ Bull, *Christian praiers*, p. 129.

³⁸ *Two Puritan Diaries*, pp. 104, 111.

If to pray while falling asleep was difficult, to pray while waking up was even more so. Scudder held up the ideal: ‘in the instant of awaking let your heart be lift vp to God with a thankfull acknowledgement of his mercie to you.’³⁹ Or as Richard Waste instructed his children in the 1640s:

The first Rule to be obserued in thy daily seruice of God; is to haue God alwayes first in thy thoughts in the Mornings after thou awakest ... In the Mornings thinke on nothing, till first thou thinke on him.⁴⁰

It is common for early modern devotional manuals baldly to instruct readers to ‘awake with God in the Morning’, with little sense of how such a thing is to be accomplished by mere effort.⁴¹ Brute force could sometimes be used: so, for example, we find the Scottish minister Robert Bruce turning friends away from his lodgings at eight o’clock one morning because ‘when I lay down, I had a good measure of the Lord’s presence, and now I have wrestled this hour or two and have not yet got accesse, and there fore I am not yet for any company’.⁴² And Richard Rogers’ recommendations to readers who found it hard to achieve this waking godliness amounted to exhorting them to try harder.⁴³ This was, in effect, no answer at all.

Rogers’ own experience, however, points us in a slightly different direction: for it suggests that it is the very impossibility of making yourself pray while awaking that made the aspiration spiritually valuable. For if you cannot do it by willpower, but you *do* nevertheless achieve it, that can only be a sign of God’s grace at work in you. Rogers found evidence of his election in the fact that ‘times have been when I was not sooner risen from bedde ... but I was immed[iately] with the lorde in med[itation] about my self, or seeking the good of some others’.⁴⁴ And when John Winthrop found assurance of his salvation, he spent several months on a spiritual high as a result, one symptom of which was that God ‘lay down with mee and usually I did awake with him’.⁴⁵ Archibald Johnston of Wariston claimed that on one blessed occasion ‘that night thy verrie sleap was ane prayer ...

³⁹ Scudder, *The Christians daily vvalke*, p. 19.

⁴⁰ BodL MS Rawl C.473 fo. 2^r.

⁴¹ Richard Rogers, William Perkins, Richard Greenham, Miles Mosse and George Webbe, *A Garden of Spirituall Flowers* (London, 1615: RSTC 21213.3), part II, sig. A2^r.

⁴² *Select Biographies*, p. 307.

⁴³ Richard Rogers, *Seven treatises* (London, 1603: RSTC 21215), pp. 346–8.

⁴⁴ *Two Puritan Diaries*, pp. 56–7.

⁴⁵ John Winthrop, *Winthrop Papers, vol. 1: 1498–1628* (Boston, 1929), pp. 159, 199.

Or ever thou could get on thy cloths, thy heart was longing for to be poured out befor God'.⁴⁶ Thomas Goodwin spelled out the reasoning behind such experiences. 'Looke what objects they are, have the most strong and deepe impressions in the minde, of those when a man awaketh he thinkes of first.'⁴⁷ To think of God on waking is proof that you truly love him.

So waking prayer was not so much a duty as a symptom of your spiritual state, a symptom which could be watched closely. Amongst the questions which Samuel Ward recommended using to assess your spiritual state (and which one reader, at least, carefully adopted), were 'What thought didst thou awake withal? what was the morning draught for thy soule next thy heart?'.⁴⁸ This perspective also made the important point that such thoughts were gifts of grace, rather than the product of the Christian's own corrupt heart. As George Herbert's prayer put it: 'I cannot ope mine eyes, / But thou art ready there to catch / My morning-soul and sacrifice.'⁴⁹ This recognition that the waking mind was spiritually open could, of course, cut both ways. It was not only God who was waiting to catch the newly-awakened Christian. The Scottish minister Robert Blair found the Devil opposing him ferociously in his attempt to keep the Sabbath as he believed he should, and wrote that 'at my first awaking I knew the Lord's day from another by the opposition I met with before my eyes were opened'.⁵⁰ Richard Greenham, one of the most level-headed pastors of the era, also meditated on the problem of why 'in the morning ... one should have such worldly thoughts dashed into the mind, which prevented divers better exercises'? His answer was that it was the act of a merciful Providence, who by this means reveals our own corruption to us. And he observed that some try to deal with this 'by falling into prayer so soone as they awaked: howsoever since it hath growen but into a popish mumbling, of words after sleep'. Effort, by this logic, was not merely futile: it was actually harmful, papering over corruption rather than extirpating it.⁵¹

So far we have been considering prayer at the moment of waking in the morning, but there is also the mysterious phenomenon of devotion during periods of wakefulness in the night. This is a more important subject than

⁴⁶ *Diary of Sir Archibald Johnston of Wariston, 1632–1639*, edited by George Morison Paul (Edinburgh: Scottish History Society, 1911), p. 79.

⁴⁷ Thomas Goodwin, *The Vanity of Thoughts Discovered* (London, 1643: Wing G1264), p. 46.

⁴⁸ R. Willis, *Mount Tabor. Or Private Exercises of a Penitent Sinner* (London, 1639: RSTC 25752), p. 5.

⁴⁹ *English Poems of George Herbert*, p. 226.

⁵⁰ *The Life of Mr Robert Blair, Minister of St. Andrews*, edited by Thomas M'Crie (Edinburgh, 1848), p. 21.

⁵¹ Kenneth L. Parker and Eric J. Carlson, '*Practical Divinity*': *The Works and Life of Revd Richard Greenham* (Aldershot, 1998), p. 223.

we might think. As Roger Ekirch has pointed out, our modern image of a good night's sleep, which begins with a light switched off and ends with an electronic bleep six to eight hours later, does not equip us very well to understand our early modern ancestors' nocturnal experience. Especially in the winter, absence of light and the need for warmth drove most people to spend rather longer in their beds than we do. Those beds were not orthopaedically designed. They were also habitually shared, with other human beings of various ages, and with quantities of vermin which we would find hard to credit. Adults, children and babies were often in the same room. Those suffering from assorted medical complaints – that is, most people – had very little in the way of pain relief. Even for those in good health, it was (and is) normal for those over a certain age regularly to spend periods awake during the night, or to have to rise once or more during the night to urinate. All of which adds up to saying that periods of wakefulness or sleeplessness were normal in pre-modern Europe. As Ekirch has pointed out, it was very common to distinguish between the 'first sleep' – three or four hours of heavy sleep at the beginning of the night – and the 'second sleep', a period of lighter, dream-visited sleep towards dawn. It was also common to spend time awake, possibly out of bed or even out of the house, between these two 'sleeps'.⁵²

Like all other facets of early modern life, these routine periods of midnight wakefulness had a spiritual dimension. Ekirch suggests that the hormones associated with midnight waking would be conducive to an almost meditative state of 'non-anxious wakefulness'.⁵³ Early modern observers would not have put it that way, of course: in their view, periods of midnight wakefulness were times when the soul could draw especially close to God. As such, it was important to make the best use of this drowsy, silent state: meaning, of course, spending it in prayer, meditation and self-examination, not in idle, vain or wandering thoughts. A Paul's Cross sermon of 1602 contrasted the covetous man, who lies awake counting his money in his head, with the psalmist who remembers the Lord in his bed.⁵⁴ Samuel Ward, characteristically, reproached himself for 'my inability to think a good thought when I waked on the night', but a week later gave thanks for 'how yt pleased God to give me grace to call upon him att night'.⁵⁵ Devotional manuals contained prayers for use when you woke in the night; some people composed such prayers for their own

⁵² Ekirch, *At Day's Close*, pp. 285–308.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

⁵⁴ *The Diary of John Manningham of the Middle Temple, 1602–1603*, edited by Robert Parker Sorlien (Hanover, 1976), p. 200; cf. Psalm 4:4.

⁵⁵ *Two Puritan Diaries*, pp. 105–6.

use.⁵⁶ Michael Sparke's best-seller *Crumms of comfort* included one for every night of the week. Sparke called these prayers 'trances' and they do indeed have a rapt, affective air to them quite distinct from his day-to-day prayers. He expected those using them to do so silently, in their beds, and 'to be rauished in spirit, or to bee rapt vp to heauen with good and godly desires'.⁵⁷ Those for whom midnight waking became routine could not always attain such raptures; in such cases, godly meditation became both a mental discipline and a welcome means of occupying the mind. John Dod made the best of his insomnia by saying that 'the meditation of the Word was sweeter to him than sleep'.⁵⁸ William Gouge used 'in his thoughts to run through diuers Chapters of the Scripture in order, as if he had heard them read to him', a godly variant on counting sheep.⁵⁹ Another minister, Richard Blackerby, was either more ambitious or more insomniac: he was said to lie awake composing verse, in English, Latin or Greek, in praise of God.⁶⁰ Not everyone took charge of their thoughts in so forthright a way. It was the habit of Rose Throckmorton, then aged 84, 'as I ly waking in my bed to meditate on his most mercifull deliverances', in particular nostalgically recalling her providential escape from persecution in Queen Mary's reign nearly half a century before.⁶¹

Not all midnight meditations were so sweet and peaceful, however. Midnight was a moment when the soul stood naked before God, a situation which could be alarming as well as comfortable. It was also a moment when the Devil might strike. John Forbes of Corse described how 'in the night in my bed ... I had fearefull wrestlings & comfortable victories through *Christ*'.⁶² But the victories were not always comfortable. Elizabeth Isham recalled how, as a child, she had shared a room with a cousin younger than herself who was troubled with nightmares, and how he used to wake up crying and try to calm himself with prayer. (She also recalled, with shame, how she and her brother used to try to frighten him

⁵⁶ See, for example, Kilby, *Hallelujah*, pp. 81–2; John Clarke, *Holy Incense for the Censers of the Saints* (London, 1635: RSTC 5358), pp. 132–3; Thomas Sorocold, *Supplications of Saints ... The sixteenth Edition* (London, 1630: RSTC 22934.2), pp. 80–2.

⁵⁷ Sparke, *Crumms of comfort*, sig. A6^r, and e.g. C7^v.

⁵⁸ Samuel Clarke, *The lives of thirty-two English divines, famous in their generations for learning and piety* (London, 1677: Wing C4539), p. 172.

⁵⁹ Clarke, *A Collection of the Lives of Ten Eminent Divines*, p. 98.

⁶⁰ Samuel Clarke, *The Lives of sundry Eminent Persons in this Later Age* (London, 1683: Wing C4538), p. 63.

⁶¹ BL, MS Additional 43827A fo. 5^v.

⁶² John Rylands Library, Manchester, English MS 958 p. 16.

in the night with roaring noises.)⁶³ Adults were liable to such troubles too. Richard Capel sternly warned those who were assaulted by midnight fears that they should lie still, pray and ‘fight it out by faith’, rather than fleeing from the room or calling for a light.⁶⁴ These episodes could, however, have their uses. Richard Greenham urged sinners who had shrugged off his reproaches ‘to examine ther harts after ther first sleep’ to see if they still felt the same way.⁶⁵ John Donne challenged atheists to wake at midnight, ‘darke, and alone ... Aske thee then ... Is there a God? and if thou darest, say No’.⁶⁶

In practice, however, midnight prayer was often no more solitary than sleep itself. Elizabeth Isham also recalled how her sister Judith had, before Christmas one year, been given a copy of Johann Gerhard’s *Meditations*, and had stayed up half the night reading it. When Elizabeth awoke in the night, Judith was still awake and bursting to tell her sister about what she had read, and about ‘what great joy she had being filled with devine love’.⁶⁷ Judith at least waited for her sister to wake of her own accord. Richard Rogers found himself lying awake one night thinking of all the blessings he had received, ‘till I perceived that it waxed too sweet to me’, and concluded that it was ‘daungerous, to solace my selfe with trashe’. He broke the cycle by waking his wife to pray with him, ‘and came in the morneinge with much cheerfulness to study and med[itation]’.⁶⁸ Whether she shared his cheerfulness is less clear. The wife of the Scots minister John Welsh was also disturbed by his nocturnal piety. Welsh gives us the impression that she repeatedly chased him back to bed from prayer. She was concerned that he would get dangerously cold, and with good reason, since he sometimes went to pray outside in the middle of the night.⁶⁹

Welsh, and some others, made deliberately waking for prayer in the night into a spiritual discipline. But very often the value of such episodes was again seen to lie in their involuntary nature. This applied in part to the sheer fact of midnight waking. Richard Greenham, aware that ‘great natural and worldly sorrow and joy wil cause a man to break his sleep at midnight ... would try himself whether sorrow for sin or joye for salvation

⁶³ Elizabeth Isham, ‘My Booke of Rememberance’, edited by Elizabeth Clarke and Erica Longfellow, www.warwick.ac.uk/english/perdita/Isham/, fo. 4^r, last accessed 1 May 2012.

⁶⁴ Richard Capel, *Tentations: their nature, danger, cure* (London, 1633: RSTC 4595), pp. 328–9.

⁶⁵ Parker and Carlson, ‘*Practical Divinity*’, p. 178.

⁶⁶ *The Sermons of John Donne: Vol. VIII*, edited by Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1956), p. 333.

⁶⁷ Isham, ‘My Booke of Rememberance’, fo. 28^r.

⁶⁸ *Two Puritan Diaries*, pp. 80–1.

⁶⁹ *Select Biographies*, pp. 11, 15.

had caused him to do the like'.⁷⁰ A pious early seventeenth-century English girl whom we know only as M. K. took this a step further, to the point of putting God to the test: 'I desired that God would be pleased to awake me in the night, that I might rise out of my bed to prayer, which (many times) I did.'⁷¹ In 1635 the newborn son of Thomas Shepard, a Puritan émigré to New England, was taken dangerously ill. During this crisis, Shepard wrote, 'the Lord awakened me in the night and stirred me up to pray for him, and that with very much fervency, as I thought, and many arguments to press the Lord for his life came in' – and the boy recovered.⁷² Once again it is among the Scots revivalists that this is taken to miraculous extremes. The minister John Livingston, who claimed that he never normally awoke in the night, credited God with rousing him one night just before a fire started and so saving his life, family and goods.⁷³

3

Dreams take us in another direction again. The subject was a ticklish one in Protestant theology. In keeping with their general view that miracles and special revelations had ceased with the age of the apostles, Protestants were broadly sceptical about any claim that dreams might be of divine origin. Martin Luther's commonsense view that dreams were meaningless by-products of hunger or indigestion set the tone.⁷⁴ But Protestants also accepted the numerous Biblical accounts of God speaking directly through dreams; and some dreams in their own time were simply too potent to write off as meaningless. The result was an uneasy ambiguity. Most dreams were assumed to be natural events (indeed, some contemporary dream theory is startlingly similar to modern ideas). Some were feared to be the work of the Devil, a fear which fed an undercurrent of suspicion of all dreams. Bishop Lake claimed that 'so long as he was in perfect health of his bodie, he did neuer dreame', and his biographer took this as a blessing and a sign of his inner serenity.⁷⁵ However, the possibility that a dream was of divine origin could not be ruled out entirely.

⁷⁰ Parker and Carlson, *Practical Divinity*, pp. 156–7.

⁷¹ Vavasor Powell, *Spirituell Experiences, Of sundry Beleevers* (London, 1653: Wing P3095), p. 163.

⁷² Michael McGiffert (ed.), *God's Plot: The Paradoxes of Puritan Piety, Being the Autobiography and Journal of Thomas Shepard* (Amherst, 1972), pp. 34–5.

⁷³ *Select Biographies*, pp. 144–5.

⁷⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works vol. 54: Table Talk*, edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia, 1967), p. 18.

⁷⁵ Arthur Lake, *Sermons vvith some religious and diuine meditations* (London, 1629: RSTC 15134), sig. ¶5.

The issue was rarely confronted head-on. Richard Haydocke, the 'sleeping preacher' unmasked as a fraud by James I in 1605, offers a typical testimony to this from his unusual vantage-point. In his treatise on dreams, dedicated to James in penance for his deception, Haydocke divided dreams into three categories: natural (caused by the dreamer's constitution), animal (caused by the events of the preceding day) and divine. However, his treatise only discussed the first two, because 'I dare not presume to vndergoe so highe a talke' as to discuss divine dreams.⁷⁶ With theorists reluctant to address the issue, dreamers were left to resolve it on a case-by-case basis; and this inevitably meant that certain powerful dreams were seen as God's handiwork. One common litmus test was to argue that divine dreams are those which we cannot forget, but which 'haue such imp'ssion in o'r minds y^t we are not able to blott it out'.⁷⁷ Another was to focus on dreams which arose at moments of crisis. As Carole Levin has pointed out, one of the richest Protestant collections of divine dreams was in John Foxe's martyrology. And as Foxe's examples show, such dreams could range from the merely exhortatory to the frankly prophetic.⁷⁸

During England's long religious peace from 1559–1640, fewer English Protestants were willing to avow such prophetic dreams, and more were willing to mock those who did.⁷⁹ It is only when the drumbeat of confessional conflict grows again in the 1630s that we find men like Henry Burton claiming prophetic dreams associated with his persecution.⁸⁰ Their Scottish brethren, again, were much less cautious. In 1574 James Melville claimed to have had dreams foretelling his father's death and his brother's marriage;⁸¹ 60 years later, Robert Blair dreamed of his wife's forthcoming death, and maintained his claim to have done so even though he was aware that some would find it offensive.⁸² Nor were Scottish prophetic dreams the exclusive property of Presbyterian radicals. Bishop Cowper claimed to have had his ministry foretold in a dream, and insisted that 'the liuing

⁷⁶ FSL MS J.a.1/6 fos 53^r, 63^r. Haydocke's story, from his first experiments with pretending to preach in his sleep, through his fame to his detection and its consequences, is told in Levin, *Dreaming the English Renaissance*, pp. 13–19.

⁷⁷ BL, MS Harleian 1026 fo. 13^v; cf. Parker and Carlson, 'Practical Divinity', p. 242.

⁷⁸ Levin, *Dreaming the English Renaissance*, pp. 64–6.

⁷⁹ Joseph Hall, *Meditations and Vowes ... Newly enlarged with Characters of Vertues and Vices* (London, 1621: RSTC 12684), p. 747.

⁸⁰ Henry Burton, *A narration of the life of Mr. Henry Burton* (London, 1643: Wing B6169A), pp. 9–10, 17–18.

⁸¹ *The Autobiography and Diary of Mr James Melvill*, edited by Robert Pitcairn (Edinburgh, 1842), pp. 50–1.

⁸² *Life of Mr Robert Blair*, pp. 96–100.

ord who sleepes not, can giue warnings to the soules of his seruants, when their bodies are sleeping'.⁸³

However, you do not need to believe that dreams are predictive to see God's hand in them. Writers could claim inspiration (in the fullest sense) from them. Aemilia Lanyer claimed that she chose the title of her 1611 published poem, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, having had it 'delivered unto me in sleepe many yeares before'. She had forgotten that dream until she came to write the Passion narrative in her poem, whereupon 'immediately came into my remembrance, what I had dreamed long before; and thinking it a significant token, that I was appointed to performe this worke, I gave the very same words I received in sleepe as the fittest Title could devise'.⁸⁴ Elizabeth Melville, Lady Culross, had a considerable success with her devotional poem *A Godlie Dreame*: while of course died up for publication, it seems fairly clear that the dream at the poem's heart was authentic. She would not have invented a dream in which an angel turns into Christ, leads her through Hell, promises that it is the path to Heaven, and then suddenly abandons her there so that she wakes, in distress, calling on him.⁸⁵

But it was more common for Protestants to receive messages which were simpler and less controversial in their dreams; or, at least, those were the messages which they chose to record. In November 1637 the Northamptonshire lawyer Robert Woodford had 'a very comfortable dreame ... where in I did reioyce in the Lord in spirit wth much fayth & dependence on a promise', and carried the dream's sense of comfort into his waking life.⁸⁶ In 1612 John Winthrop dreamed that he was with Christ on earth: 'I was so ravished with his love towards me, farre exceedinge the affection of the kindest husbande, that being awaked it had made so deep impression in my hearte, as I was forced to unmeasurable weepings for a great while, and had a more lively feeling of the love of Christ then ever before.'⁸⁷ In 1647 Isaac Ambrose dreamed that he had died and been called into God's kingdom. 'Heavenly ornaments were put upon me by the hand of God, and of Christ: My soul was exceedingly ravished.'⁸⁸ In 1633 Archibald Johnston of Wariston had a recurring dream in which he

⁸³ William Cowper, *The Life and Death of the Reverend Father and faithfull servant of God, Mr. William Cowper* (London, 1619: RSTC 5945), sigs B1'-2'.

⁸⁴ *The Poetry of Aemilia Lanyer: Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, edited by Susanne Woods (Oxford, 1993), p. 139.

⁸⁵ Elizabeth Melville, *A Godlie Dreame* (Edinburgh, 1620), esp. sigs A6'-7'. Melville's poem went through four editions 1603-20, three of them in Edinburgh.

⁸⁶ New College, Oxford, MS 9502, sub. 29 November 1637 (verso).

⁸⁷ *Winthrop Papers*, p. 166.

⁸⁸ Isaac Ambrose, *Media: The Middle Things* (London, 1650: Wing A2958), . 76.

was shown passages of Scripture in which ‘God comforted me wonderfully against my afflictions’. On waking he could never find these passages (although he once rose four or five times in the night in the effort to do so), but the sense of comfort endured.⁸⁹ Nehemiah Wallington, who professed to believe that dreams were ‘lying vanities’, was sometimes still overwhelmed by them. He once dreamed of standing before Christ on the day of judgement, aghast that now that he understood his peril it was too late for him to repent. When he woke he did his best to learn the dream’s lesson, and naturally ‘I tooke this dreame for a great warning of God’.⁹⁰ The moral intervention of a dream could sometimes be even starker. The woman known as M. K. recalled how, when she had been sorely tempted to commit murder, she dreamed that she was standing before her intended victim with a weapon, and then heard a voice in her ear saying, ‘Vengeance is mine’. When she awoke the hatred had left her: she had no doubt that this was divine intervention.⁹¹ In a similar vein, Richard Greenham had an anecdote of a scoffing sinner who denied that there was any such thing as the day of judgement, and who declared that if there were he hoped to dream of it that night – which of course he did.⁹²

Such dramatic dreams were unusual, and as the young Elizabeth Isham discovered, those who longed for them did not always receive them.⁹³ But more run-of-the-mill dreams still had considerable spiritual significance, because even the most clean-living young Protestants might sometimes find that their dreams failed to live up to the austere moral standards of waking life. Such dreams can again be vivid and memorable. It was common for evening and night-time prayers to include prayer to be protected from spiritual sin in the night, and for morning prayers to include repentance for such sins. The language can sometimes be coy, but there is no mistaking what John Gee’s suggested evening prayer means:

Suffer no vncleane thoughts this night to pollute my body, and soule: but keepe my cogitations chast, & let my dreames be like them of Innocents and sucking babes.⁹⁴

Likewise, the official primer of 1553 included a prayer repenting for ‘uncleanness of soul or body that I have fallen into by the illusion of

⁸⁹ *Diary of Sir Archibald Johnston of Wariston*, pp. 52–3, 108, 133.

⁹⁰ *Notebooks of Nehemiah Wallington*, p. 50.

⁹¹ Powell, *Spirituell Experiences*, pp. 168–70.

⁹² Parker and Carlson, ‘*Practical Divinity*’, p. 247.

⁹³ Isham, ‘*My Booke of Rememberance*’, fo. 8ʳ.

⁹⁴ Gee, *Steps of Ascension*, p. 257.

the devil or else by frailty of mine own flesh' during the night.⁹⁵ And periodically we find the godly repenting for their dreams, or even declaring that before the Sabbath it was the Christian's duty for 'his dreames to haue some taste of religion, more then at other times'.⁹⁶

Once again these resolutions may seem a little impractical. Dreams are by their nature beyond the dreamer's conscious control. Yet it was unsatisfactory simply to dismiss them as temptations. Dreamed immorality feels culpable. Some, like the ever-pragmatic Greenham, offered practical solutions. How, he asked, should we 'do away the sin of an unclean person in the night[?] ... Avoid al ... wandering thoughts, in the day'. Or else we must thinck god calleth us to some more earnest repentance, for this or some other sin before committed'.⁹⁷ John Brinsley likewise suggested that 'nocturnal pollutions' were the result of 'excesse' in 'our diet, sleepe, and pleasures'.⁹⁸ Beyond such advice, however, lay a deeper truth. Once again, moral behaviour in our dreams was of value precisely because it lay beyond conscious control. This made it a true barometer of spiritual status, beyond the reach of hypocrisy and self-deception. Joseph Hall's *Meditations* had this to say about dreams:

The imaginations of our sleepe, shewe vs what our disposition is awaking ... All ... disclose to themselues in their sleep those secret inclinations, which after much searching, they could not haue found out waking ... Y^e night shal teach me what I am.⁹⁹

For Hall, revelations of the future through dreams had ceased: but revelations of the dreamer's own heart continued.

So dreams, like sleep itself, were spiritually troublesome because they were beyond the sleeper's control; but they were also spiritually potent and revealing for exactly the same reason. In a religious tradition haunted by the fear of hypocrisy, the indisputable authenticity of thoughts at the edge of sleep, and of dreams, provided a spiritual gauge which was otherwise rarely available. We have already noticed the case of John Mein, the Edinburgh merchant whose early-rising habits led to his napping later

⁹⁵ *The Two Liturgies, AD 1549 and AD 1552, with Other Documents Set Forth by Authority in the Reign of King Edward VI*, edited by Joseph Ketley (Cambridge, 1844), p. 379.

⁹⁶ *Two Puritan Diaries*, p. 106; Dod and Cleaver, *A plaine and familiar exposition*, p. 141.

⁹⁷ Parker and Carlson, 'Practical Divinity', pp. 207–8.

⁹⁸ John Brinsley, *The True Watch, and Rule of Life* (London, 1608: RSTC 3775.5), pp. 91, 93.

⁹⁹ Joseph Hall, *Meditations and Vowes, Diuine and Morall: A third Century* (London, 1606: RSTC 12680.5), part III pp. 43, 45.

in the day. The story goes that on one occasion, a minister who was a guest at Mein's table was earning his dinner by expounding the chapter of Scripture that was read after the meal, while his host dozed beside him. The unfortunate minister 'miscited a place of Scripture', whereupon the half-asleep Mein, without waking, spoke up to correct him and give the true chapter and verse.¹⁰⁰ That was the kind of testimony to one's godliness that the waking self could hardly give; and that, perhaps, is what it meant to pray that, while your body slept in sin, your soul might watch with God.

¹⁰⁰ *Select Biographies*, p. 345.