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## **‘The mind’s harmonic mappings’: Dream States and Dreamscapes in the Poetry of Anne Stevenson**

By Eleanor Spencer

Throughout her poetic career Anne Stevenson’s poetry has revealed a preoccupation with altered states of consciousness, and the complex, contestable relationship between what is ‘real’ and what is imagined, dreamt, or created. Andrew Motion notes that although Stevenson is ‘not much given to plundering her unconscious’, and neither does she ‘yeast up her language to evoke surreal states of mind’, her enduring interest in what he calls ‘dream-stories’ is abundantly apparent, and their significance within her work indubitable.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout Stevenson’s poetry we see an enduring curiosity about the very nature of human consciousness; about the complex ways in which we experience, perceive, and think about the world around us. In ‘A Luxury’ (2000), Stevenson writes, ‘I’m questioning / the weight / of the human cortex // and what it costs / per life / to ship its freight’.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in ‘Toy’ (2004), she describes human consciousness as ‘Monstrous equipment / [sprung] from that tiny head – / creator jammed, *enfin*, / in the created’,<sup>3</sup> and in ‘Journal Entry: Impromptu in C Minor’ (1988), she describes how she ‘unhook[s] the wires of [her] mind’, blissfully extricating herself from ‘the intellectual spider’s web.’<sup>4</sup> In these poems, human consciousness is associated with weight, bulk, and physical components. The conscious mind is figured here as ‘the mind’s machine’ described in ‘Saying the World’ (1996); it is a cumbersome piece of computer hardware or a crude mill, ‘grinding out the formulae you have to fit’.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, dreams in Stevenson’s poetry are repeatedly associated with weightlessness and diaphanous insubstantiality; they are ‘the mind’s harmonic mappings’, ‘floating’, and ‘frail as gossamer.’<sup>6</sup> Dreams, then, appear to offer a means of escape from, or transcendence of, the ‘weight’ of normative consciousness. They are, consequently, spaces in which she can more freely explore the questions of human identity and cognisance that persist in her work. In ‘A Luxury’, the speaker asks, ‘Why, among billions / of killer zooids, / do hominids alone // look in upon / themselves / and curse their fate?’ Dream-states represent, for Stevenson, the opportunity to escape or transcend this stultifying anthropocentric self-consciousness, our ‘weary I-am-ness’, even if only for a fleeting moment.<sup>7</sup> In ‘Washing My Hair’ (2003), the poet muses

It's my mind, with its hoard of horribles,  
that's me.  
Or is it really? I fantasise it bodiless,  
set free:  
No bones, no skin, no hair, no nerves,  
just memory,  
Untouchable, unwashable, and not, I guess,  
my own.<sup>8</sup>

It is only in dreams that our minds can become 'bodiless' and 'free', simultaneously not our own, yet strangely more our own than in any fully conscious moment. In 'Moonrise' (2000), the speaker experiences this yearned-for state of altered or discarnate consciousness, calling it her 'simpler self':

While my anxiety stood phoning you last evening,  
My simpler self lay marvelling through glass  
At that full moon marbling the clouds[.]<sup>9</sup>

It is this 'simpler self', disembodied, and 'Untouchable' that we become when we dream. In 'Sierra Nevada' (1965), too, we see this longing for a different, 'simpler' kind of consciousness. The speaker muses, 'if we were to stay here for a long time, lie here / like wood on these waterless beaches, / we would forget our names, would remember that / what we first wanted / had something to do with stones, the sun, / the thousand colours of water, brilliances, blue.'<sup>10</sup> The sharp, precise visual detailing of the previous stanzas has been replaced by a nebulous, dream-like apprehension of the surroundings. In 'Dreaming of Immortality in a Thatched Hut' (1965), a short poem inspired by a painting by the Chinese painter, Chin Ch'ang-Tsang, Stevenson figures dreaming as an 'out of body' experience:

as he slept, he could see it all –  
the graceful ascent from the shelving eaves of the hut,  
an ease of detachment, the flowing out of his sleeves,  
that slow half sorrowful movement of regret  
as he rose with the steady mists about his knees,  
away from the rocks and stunted, gripping pine,  
and the books stacked neatly out of the way of the rain.<sup>11</sup>

Here, dreaming is a quasi-spiritual experience figured as a weightless ascension or transcendence to some higher plane. It is also once again powerfully associated with enhanced or increased vision – 'as he slept, he could see it all'.

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Though these altered states of consciousness are spaces of freedom, they also often evoke foreboding, and the poems express both a desire for, and an intense fear of, those experiences that are above or beyond normal consciousness. These yearned-for moments of freedom from, or transcendence of, normative consciousness often suddenly become nightmarish visions from which the speaker longs to escape. In "Journal Entry; Impromptu in C Minor", the speaker quickly finds herself grasping for the cast-off 'wires' of her conscious mind:

But I correct myself.  
Soon I'm standing in my grid of guilts  
hastily reaching for my thoughts.

...

In the black, beyond the blue of my perception,  
in the huge vault where the wires won't reach,  
the dead are lively.  
The moment I take off my thought-clothes  
I expose every nerve to their waves.

The speaker has glimpsed her subconscious – vast, 'black', unmappable, teeming with the 'lively' dead – and has retreated back into the familiar 'grid' of her normative conscious state. In 'An Angel' (2000), too, the speaker seeks release from a dream that has become an inescapable, claustrophobic waking nightmare, a diabolical 'vision-furnace'.<sup>12</sup> Here, as elsewhere, the dream-state is closely associated with enhanced vision; the speaker is bidden by 'an angel, / tall as a caryatid' to gaze through 'a glazed porthole, a lens of alizarin'. Is this what dreams are – a lens or a 'glazed porthole' through which we can gaze into our subconscious, or perhaps an 'unhinging light'<sup>13</sup> by which we can see what is obscured or invisible during our waking hours? This association of dreams with extraordinary vision owes much to the theories of Carl Gustav Jung. Sigmund Freud posited that dreams afford us only a censored and distorted view into the subconscious; that the potentially damaging desires of the *id* can manifest themselves only within a symbolic language or psychic shorthand. For Freud then, dreams both reveal and obscure. Carl Jung contested Freud's model of dreams as obfuscations of our subconscious urges, and instead suggested that

The dream is a little hidden door in the innermost and most secret recesses of the soul, opening into that cosmic night which was psyche long before there was any ego-consciousness, and which will remain psyche no matter how far our ego-consciousness extends.<sup>14</sup>

Stevenson's speaker describes how the angel 'focused it (it must have been a microscope) / and silently motioned me to look':

the red glass  
cleared and a blizzard of swimming cells  
swept underneath it, lashing their whip-like tails,  
clashing, fusing, consuming each other greedily,  
fountaining into polyps and underwater flowers.

However, this enhanced vision, this 'blink into genesis' or into what Jung calls 'that cosmic night' offered by the dream, quickly becomes too intense for the speaker:

hatching from the scum, animaculae  
crawled, swarmed, multiplied, disbanded,  
swarmed again, raised cities out of dust,  
destroyed them, died. I turned to the angel,  
'Save these species,' I cried.  
And brought my face right down on her book,  
my cheek on the lens like a lid.

In the final verse paragraph of 'Travelling Behind Glass' (1974), too, we see another troubling vision of a post-apocalyptic wilderness glimpsed in a waking dream during a long train journey:

I dreamed I watched  
the rubble pitch and core  
of a dead, gutted valley  
shudder into space  
with the candour of any volcano,  
while I drove alive and alone  
on the oily circumference,  
peering at the twittering abyss,  
'l'abime des oiseaux',  
until the glass shattered  
into its stars, and stars  
scattered, flashing like kingfishers  
into the emptiness.<sup>15</sup>

It seems, in poems such as this, that it is in these often nightmarish dream-states in which the speaker is both most intensely 'alive' and most utterly 'alone'. Even within this dark vacancy, though, there is a curious kind of beauty. The speaker teeters precariously on the edge of a cavernous 'abyss', yet from within comes the delicate sound of birdsong. What was described as the 'core / of a dead, gutted valley' is now revealed as being

scattered with stars, 'flashing like kingfishers'. The glass window that has isolated, even imprisoned, the speaker throughout the poem is 'shattered' within this waking dream; the speaker is freed.

It is clear that Stevenson perceives a fundamental connection between poetry and dreams. In 'And even then,' (1990), she imagines a language in which the word 'poetry' would somehow encompass this powerful affinity:

Music in this language would mean  
'measuring the rhythms', and poetry,  
'translating the dreams'.<sup>16</sup>

Is poetry, then, a translation, a record, of our dreams, both individual and shared? The true poet and the dreamer share certain qualities, it seems. In a 1990 lecture, Stevenson stresses the importance for the poet of a 'capacity to receive, a willingness continually to be impressed, or "invented"'. She continues, 'As one who bears witness, the poet must, as Keats knew, keep alive the child within the adult – keep some impressionable core green and curious. This quality of receptiveness of being continually aware tends to fade as one grows older.'<sup>17</sup> In 'Innocence and Experience', Stevenson figures dreaming as a temporary return to a child-like state of continual impressionability and curiosity:

I laid myself down as a woman  
And woke as a child.  
Sleep buried me up to my chin,  
But my brain cut wild.

The dreamer, the poet, and the child exist in a state of feverish heightened awareness, constantly startled and struck by the wonderful strangeness of the world in which they find themselves, what Louis MacNeice described as 'the drunkenness of things being various.'<sup>18</sup>

There is a pervasive cultural belief in the close relationship between dreaming and creativity, buoyed by stories of famous writers, painters, or composers finding inspiration within their dreams. Famously, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was inspired by a nightmare, and in her introduction to the novel Shelley described it as 'only a transcript of the grim terrors of my waking dream.'<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Robert Louis Stevenson recounts not only how scenes from *The Strange case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* came to him in a dream, but how dreaming came to be a vital part of his creative process: 'When he lay down to prepare himself for sleep, he no longer sought

amusement, but printable and profitable tales... how often have these sleepless Brownies done him honest service, and given him, as he sat idly taking his pleasure in the boxes, better tales than he could fashion for himself... God bless them! who do one-half my work for me while I am fast asleep'.<sup>20</sup> In 'The Loom' (2008), Stevenson explores this notion of dreaming as subconscious creative process. In the dream the speaker is strangely distant or divorced from the creative process, looking on as if a mere bystander or observer:

I drowned in sleep.  
And once my lungs were gills,  
I watched my liquid shadow, fathoms deep,  
Weave through a trembling warp of light and hope a weft that kills.<sup>21</sup>

The poet-speaker is watching her own unconscious – her 'liquid shadow, fathoms deep' – take flight, wholly independent of her conscious, observing self. The speaker has no active part in this unfolding creative process; 'No working hand', she reveals, 'had anything to do with how ... / One tightening thread / Gathered those crooked strokes of light into a beam / Through which I rose'.

Elsewhere, however, Stevenson appears to play down the idea of dreaming as an integral part of the creative process. In a 2008 interview she says, 'Ideas come in dreams, but also while simply walking down the street, even in the dentist's chair... anywhere. I have written a poem at the hairdresser's. Any time will do.'<sup>22</sup> In 'The Holly and the Ivy' (1982), Stevenson writes:

It's a good thing for you,  
she said,  
dreams aren't true.

How do you know,  
he said,  
how do you know?<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps inevitably, given the intense vividness of Stevenson's 'dream stories', what is 'real' and what is 'dreamt' is often unclear in these poems. Such is Stevenson's productive preoccupation with dream states and dreamscapes that the 'real' landscapes within her poetry often take on a shimmering, hallucinogenic quality. In 2008 Geoffrey O'Brien noted Stevenson's preoccupation with both 'the landscapes of dream and the landscapes of geology'.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Emily Grosholz writes of the 'complex reality' created within Stevenson's work 'where

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an intently sensory world inhabited by wilfully resistant people is overlaid by ghosts, ideas, and spectral emissions'.<sup>25</sup> In 'Green Mountain, Black Mountain' (2003), the landscape is simultaneously 'real' and 'unreal':

the Black Mountains  
where the drenched sleep of Wales  
troubles King Arthur in his cave,  
where invisible hankerings of the dead  
trouble the farms spilled over them –  
the heaped fields, graves and tales.<sup>26</sup>

Both the poet and the inhabitants of this striking landscape are torn between the dream-like – 'the ghost-pull of Annwfn, / the other world, underworld' – and the stoutly material – 'the animal pull of... green dunged boots'. Similarly, in 'Walking Early by the Wye' (1982), the physical landscape is overlaid with an opulent shifting dreamscape:

As if the squint of the sun had released light's  
metals. As if the river pulsed white,  
and the holly's  
  
sharp green lacquered leaves leaped acetylene[.]<sup>27</sup>

Through the anaphoric repetition of 'As if' in this poem the dream is again revealed as a place of possibility, a place where it is wholly possible 'to enter alive the braided rings Saturn / is known by // and yet still be allied to the dyke's heaped mud.' This dreamscape is a place in which a metaphor is not merely a figure of speech. In the final stanza the speaker vows,

I will not forget ...  
  
how each soft stone on its near shadow knelt,  
how the sheep became stones where they built  
their pearled hill.

The 'sheep' do not merely resemble 'stones' in this place of expanded possibility, but rather they become 'stones', a strange transfiguration enacted in the interplay of soft assonance on the 's' and brittle 't' end sounds. 'A River' (1969), asks 'Where's an end to illusion?', a question that sounds again and again in various forms



within Stevenson's work.<sup>28</sup> This poem also reveals the poet's enduring fascination with liminal and ambiguous spaces:

The line between land and water  
Forms itself without thought.  
Land ends where on the river  
No one can walk,  
Though the deep, familiar  
Path looks hard as silver,  
Though land can be held there  
Firm in precise inversion  
As an eye holds rock.

The unconventional syntax creates the sense of an 'inversion' within this strange, unfamiliar region halfway between 'land and water'. In the third stanza, this liminal space begins to seem almost surreal, as 'Swans, clusters of pale stems, / Finger the air; / Their tuberous bodies / Flower[ing] momentarily.' However, this prettily surreal image quickly becomes nightmarish as the river is revealed to be 'full of fungi, / Its scabby trunk / Breath[ing] sour putrefaction / Out of the fen.' The poem ends with the suggestion that just as 'At night, the land slips softly / Into the river in vague / Columns of light', the reader, too, 'crosses the line / Between himself and object / Ceaselessly, without thought', that 'no mind / Hesitates, moving from one / Bank to the other, / To cross the line.' Stevenson's poetry leads us again and again 'from one / Bank to the other', across the line between land and water, into a liminal space that is at once 'familiar' and 'vague'. It is in liminal, dream-like spaces such as this that much of Stevenson's poetry locates itself, as it explores the protean relationship between 'reality' and fantasy, the conscious and the subconscious, the material and the metaphysical. In 'The Other House' (1990), Stevenson writes,

I drove my mind to a strange house,  
Infinitely huge and small:

...

Infinite steps of death and birth  
lead up and down.

Beneath me, infinitely deep,  
Solidity dissolves.  
Above me, infinitely wide,  
Galactic winter sprawls.  
That house of the utterly outside,  
became my home.<sup>29</sup>

The dream-state or dreamscape functions as what Stevenson calls, here, 'the other house'; a space 'infinitely deep', 'infinitely wide', in which 'solidity dissolves', as the 'real' meets the imagined, the consciousness meets the unconscious, and where ideas, images, and experiences can be explored and examined at a liberating remove from what Wallace Stevens called 'the pressures of reality'.<sup>30</sup> Dreams are repeatedly revealed as sites of potential and possibility. In the words of A.C. Spearing, 'In dreams we undergo experiences in which we are freed from the constraints of everyday possibility and which we feel to have some hidden significance.'<sup>31</sup> Dreams, then, are associated with both expanded possibility and enhanced vision; we transcend the 'constraints of everyday possibility', or rather, impossibility, and we are able to apprehend significances that were previously 'hidden' to us. In 'The Holly and the Ivy', we see the following exchange:

Where have you been? she said.  
Not sleeping,  
dead, he said.

What did you see?  
she said.  
Everything. Everything.

Dreams, then, in Stevenson's poetry, are 'places in which 'Everything. Everything' is possible and newly visible. In 'Innocence and Experience' (2000), the speaker recalls,

I laid myself down as a woman  
And woke as a child.  
Sleep buried me up to my chin,  
But my brain cut wild.<sup>32</sup>

In dreams, the brain cuts wild, and dares to explore and entertain things that are impossible or improbable in waking hours. In 'He and It' (1982), the speaker commands the reader to 'figure the resurrection' of an 'enchanted giant' – an imagined presence within the rugged north Welsh landscape – within their 'dreams, or art'.<sup>33</sup> This 'enchanted giant' can exist only within dreams or art because, as the speaker well knows, 'when daylight comes back / it will tear him apart.'

Dream states and dreamscapes are of particular significance in Stevenson's many elegies and elegiac poems. The genre of elegy has been for many centuries closely connected with the pastoral. Pastoral elegists created

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within their poems a discrete, self-contained space – an extemporal, bucolic idyll peopled by shepherds and swains – in which to locate, explore, and perform the difficult ‘work of mourning’.<sup>34</sup> Whilst Stevenson’s elegies significantly engage with and draw upon the conventions of the pastoral elegy, I suggest that it is the dream state or dreamscape that primarily provides that necessary discrete space in which to perform the ‘work of mourning’ in these poems. The dream-vision also serves another long-standing yet increasingly significant purpose in elegiac poetry. Spearing describes how even during the fourteenth century poetry began to face a problem of self-justification. Previous to this the vernacular poet’s mode of existence was justified simply by the satisfaction they gave to their audience; however, during the fourteenth century the poet became ‘more self aware, more conscious of the peculiar status of works of literature, and of the need to define, or pretend to define, that status for their audiences.’<sup>35</sup> The problem of self-justification persists particularly for the writer of the twentieth-century elegy. Jahan Ramazani notes that in a time when mourning rituals have been ‘simplified, streamlined, and compartmentalised’, many modern elegies seem to feel the need to justify their own existence, to defend themselves, implicitly or even explicitly, against accusations of self-indulgence and sentimentality.<sup>36</sup> Spearing suggests that in the fourteenth century, ‘the dream-framework ... explains the mere fact of the existence of the poem; it exists as an account of the narrator’s dream.’<sup>37</sup> It seems that in Stevenson’s *A Lament for the Makers* (2006), too, the ‘dream-framework’ does the work of explaining the fact of the poem’s existence, affording Stevenson the freedom and the premise to write an elegy more searching and more sustained than anything she has written before.

The poem is an experimental sequence based on medieval dream poetry, drawing particularly on William Dunbar’s sixteenth-century orison of the same name, and Dante’s *La Divina Commedia*. The poem is based, Stevenson has said, on a dream she had following the death of Philip Hobsbaum (with whom she lived for a period in the late 1970s). As in Chaucer’s *The Book of the Duchess*, and *The Parliament of Fowls*, it is a dream of the underworld – the ‘underworld of words’, Stevenson writes.<sup>38</sup> The poem follows a structure similar to that of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and the ninth-century Archbishop Hincmar’s poem in Latin, *Visio Bernoldi*; Stevenson is granted a vision of the afterlife within a dream, meets a shade with whom she is acquainted, and is guided by that familiar shade, not upon a doctrinal issue, as in *Visio Bernoldi* or the medieval poem, *Pearl*, but on the complex relationship that the poet has with fame, tradition, inheritance, and bequeathal. The opening of the second part of the poem describes how Stevenson is transported to the underworld:

A dream? No, more

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A writing sea of dreams  
that tossed me to the shore

only to claw me back  
and fill my eyes  
wide open as before

with that same haunted plain,  
empty now, and flat,  
though everywhere pitted, it seemed,

with little round pools,  
each with a sheen  
like linen laid across it.<sup>39</sup>

This underworld which Stevenson is shown is not merely the final resting (or restive?) place of deceased 'makers'. Rather it is a liminal space – a 'Limbo, / hovering on the left bank of Lethe' – in which 'the living' and 'the (long and the lately) dead' meet and mingle. It is only in this 'hinterland of dream', this 'shared fountain / of the living word', as Stevenson calls it, that genuine 'communion' between poets, dead and alive, may occur. 'The dead, like the living, we are told, sleep and dream; in Section VI, Stevenson describes how, upon meeting Peter Redgrove (her familiar shade) in this underworld, she felt herself

dissolve  
and filter through  
an all-surrounding screen

into his dream.<sup>40</sup>

In this hazy 'hinterland' of the human consciousness, stark dichotomies, such as that between 'the living' and 'the dead' become increasingly unstable, to the extent that 'the living and dead / inhabit one house under the sky'.<sup>41</sup> However, to the shade of Sylvia Plath, Stevenson (author of the controversial 1989 biography of Plath, *Bitter Fame*) does not exist:

another broke away  
and bowled towards me,  
meaning, I thought, to greet me.  
But no, like an X-ray,  
she passed through me.

'You are amazed,'

---

it was Redgrove's voice,  
'But for Sylvia you don't exist,'

...

To her  
you're invisible,  
a shade more insubstantial

than she to you.  
The dreams of the dead  
don't feature unknown faces.'<sup>42</sup>

In this dreamscape it is the living Stevenson rather than the dead Plath who is 'invisible', 'insubstantial', and 'unknown'.

As is clear from the rest of Stevenson's work, Stevenson is a poet productively preoccupied with questions of inheritance, influence, and tradition. In poems such as 'Letter to Sylvia Plath' (1988), 'Waving to Elizabeth Bishop' (1985), and 'Invocation and Interruption' (2000), an imagined conversation with Ted Hughes, Stevenson attempts to both explore and assert her complex and often ambivalent relationships, both poetic and personal, to her fellow 'makers' of poetry. In this shifting dreamscape Stevenson converses with those poets whose influences are subtly evident within her work; Bishop and Hughes, but also Edward Thomas, Dylan Thomas, Philip Larkin, John Berryman. In these imagined conversations, as in the poem 'The Fiction Makers' (1985), Stevenson is assuredly averring and asserting her place within a long and illustrious tradition of 'makers', and declaring her poetic allegiances and debts. Later in the poem, she asks herself, 'So, on which tangle of hopes, / in whose memory / shall I reverently place a wreath?'<sup>43</sup>

Interestingly, despite repeatedly refusing in both her poetry and her prose to assume the oft-proffered mantle of the marginalised woman poet, in this discrete dreamscape, Stevenson, hearing the sound of 'Lowell and Berryman together, / Frost and Sandburg, / Muir and MacDiarmid', allows herself to ask, 'How was it that I heard, / yet couldn't join / that all-male choir of voices?'<sup>44</sup> Freud suggests that it is in dreams that (knowingly or unknowingly) repressed ideas, emotions, or urges surface again. Here, the dreamscape affords the female poet the freedom to express an uneasiness with this raucous patrilineal party that she is unwilling or unable to articulate, or even to acknowledge, elsewhere. In this dreamscape, where Stevenson moves alongside her

'eternal contemporaries', the living poet can both ally herself with the dead 'makers' and assert her difference and distance from them, as she says to the shade of Hughes, 'As you see, I don't belong here.'<sup>45</sup>

It is in dreams that we come closest to our dead, much of Stevenson's poetry suggests. In the epistolary poem, *Correspondences* (1974), the speaker awakes in a hospital bed, and confusedly asks whether she is 'Dreaming or dying?'<sup>46</sup> In 'Completing the Circle' (2007), an elegy for Anita Jackson, Stevenson writes that 'dying is the water side of waking', suggesting that sleep and death are closely connected.<sup>47</sup> In 'Dreaming of the Dead' (1985), an elegy for Anne Pennington, the speaker writes, 'I receive the forbidden dead. / They appear in the mirrors of asleep / To accuse or be comforted.'<sup>48</sup> In 'Inheriting my Grandmother's Nightmare', Stevenson suffers from the same recurring nightmare that plagued her grandmother, who, during WWII, 'Every night, at the wheel of an ambulance, / ... drove and drove, not knowing how to drive', the repetition of 'drove' and 'drive', here, creating some sense of the intense claustrophobia experienced during nightmares.<sup>49</sup> The final stanza describes how 'her dream' has become the poet's 'heirloom'. It is clear that for Stevenson, dream states and dreamscapes offer a way of exploring memories and past experiences within her poetry, without falling prey to what she calls the 'ego hill' and mawkish 'misery well'.<sup>50</sup> Stevenson's poetry is fiercely 'anti-confessional', and she has, throughout her career, refused to offer up her personal experiences or recollections as *materia poetica*. However, as described in 'Dreaming of the Dead', the dream functions as a 'mirror' of sorts, in which personal experiences and memories may be reflected but also distorted and defamiliarised.

In 'Nightmares, Daymoths' (1990) the speaker vividly describes a disturbing nightmare. The seemingly innocent domestic image with which the poem begins quickly becomes threatening and frightening:

A glass jar rattles its split peas and pasta.  
Those cysts look innocuous, but they weave  
through the kernels, hatching into terrible insects.  
Something's on the floor there,  
buzzing like a swat wasp.<sup>51</sup>

This poem, one of three poems described by the poet as 'for' Sylvia Plath, was written during the period in which Stevenson was writing *Bitter Fame*, her controversial biography of Plath. Stevenson's immersion in

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Plath's work and private journals reveals itself in the Plath-like imagery and diction of this poem, and lines like, 'A belly like a moist rubber thimble / sucks and stings my finger. *Ach*, / my heels reduces it to sewage', with their visceral imagery and barely contained violence seem to be eerily ventriloquising the dead poet. In depicting this nightmare replete with Plathian imagery, Stevenson seems to be deliberately revealing the powerful hold that Plath's life and work had, during over her imagination and subconscious during this period. Indeed, in another poem 'for' Plath, 'Letter to Sylvia Plath' (1988), Stevenson likens the dead poet to 'a black rook' perched for 'three springs... between sweet weather and my mind.'<sup>52</sup>

Participants in a 2000 study reported that, after playing the computer game Tetris for extended periods, they experienced a high incidence of visual imagery of and repeated thoughts about the computer game during sleep and sleep onset. Stickgold et al. were thus able to conclude that 'people who engage with novel physical or mental activities for extended periods of time often experience a hallucinatory replay of the activities as they fall asleep, a phenomenon noted in both literary and scientific sources.'<sup>53</sup> What Stickgold et al. subsequently termed 'the Tetris effect' was explored nearly a century previously in Robert Frost's 'After Apple-Picking' (1914), in which the speaker muses

I was well  
Upon my way to sleep...  
And I could tell  
What form my dreaming was about to take.  
Magnified apples appear and disappear,  
Stem end and blossom end,  
And every fleck of russet showing clear.  
...  
I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.<sup>54</sup>

It would not be surprising, then, if Stevenson did experience dreams of a peculiarly Plathian bent whilst assiduously researching Plath's life and work. The poem also obliquely suggests the particular challenges faced by the biographer. The speaker describes how the insect-like creatures

glisten there like fish, softly  
lengthening into milliner's feathers.  
See, they are only moths, paper moths or horses,  
Not even paper but the Paisley curtain  
Sifting ashy patterns from the winter light.  
  
*Order, they order, order.*

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They are reduced first to 'feathers', then to 'paper', then finally to 'patterns'. It is the biographer's unenviable task to impose 'order' upon the unruly details of a human life, to compose the myriad facts and interpretations into some semblance of a coherent 'pattern', to tame 'the flying words [which] want paper to nest in.' At the end of the poem, it seems as though that order has been achieved, and that the speaker / dreamer is once again in control; 'These letters are marching straight into an alphabet: / X Y Z, not to infinity.' As in *Lament for the Makers*, the dream framework allows Stevenson to reveal or confess something she ordinarily would not, in this case, the emotional and intellectual difficulties of writing *Bitter Fame*, which she would only explicitly discuss years after its publication.

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Dream states and dreamscapes are an integral part of the physical and psychological landscapes of Stevenson's work, functioning as discrete places of possibility, potential, and freedom. They are states and spaces in which the poet and her speakers are simultaneously 'alive and alone', at home and at risk. It is these various dream-spaces and complex double realities in which, and through which, we see a late modern poet boldly modulating persistent questions about the nature of human consciousness and cognisance, identity and experience.

**Eleanor Spencer**

## NOTES

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5. 'Saying the World', p. 18.
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7. '17:14 Out of Newcastle' 2004, p. 104.



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9. 'Moonrise', p. 23.
10. 'Sierra Nevada', p. 30.
11. 'Dreaming of Immortality in a Thatched Hut', p. 296.
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