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Philosophy and Literature, Volume 41, Number 2, October 2017, pp. 392-399
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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“WHO HAS NOT WAK’D:” MARY ROBINSON AND
CARTESIAN POETRY

Abstract. A close reading of Mary Robinson’s late-eighteenth-century poem “London’s Summer Morning,” which captures all the noises and smells of a busy London street, is not enough to convince the reader that it isn’t all a dream. But whose dream? René Descartes and Wallace Stevens suggest that it may not matter.

THE OPENING LINES OF Mary Robinson’s poem “London’s Summer Morning” ask the reader, “Who has not wak’d to list the busy sounds / Of summer’s morning . . . ?”¹ On first reading, the question reads as rhetorical. Robinson invites the reader to consider memories of waking up on a summer morning, hearing the sounds of summer drifting through the window into the bedroom. What follows is a list, which is at once an inventory as well as evidence of the poet’s close attention paid to the sights and sounds of a lively, urban morning. The poem’s final two lines, “And the poor poet wakes from busy dreams, / To paint the summer morning,” are the second half of a compound sentence, offset by a semicolon. The proposition that sits behind the semicolon suggests that in the middle of all the commercial activity that has been the focus of the poem, the “poet wakes from busy dreams” to write the very poem which these lines conclude. This self-referential comment shifts the logic of the poem, revealing that the reader had not been viewing the urban scene accurately. From the vantage point of the poem’s last lines, the reader can see the dawning street coming to life in the poet’s imagination. It may all have been a dream.

Like many poets of her time, Robinson invokes Plato, Sappho, Pindar, and other Greek poets and philosophers in her poetry and memoirs. Because of the popularity of these references, the poetry of the eighteenth century is often considered neoclassical. Pindaric odes, heroic couplets, and georgics were some of the most common modes employed by poets seeking to elevate the stature of their writing by tracing a literary lineage back to the Greek and Roman origins of European culture.

Robinson's crown of sonnets, *Sappho and Phaon*, refers to the fragments of verse that are thought to be some of the oldest surviving poems written by a female poet. Sonnet 43 of the sequence pictures Sappho standing on a cliff, preparing to throw herself into the sea. Robinson imagines that Sappho's anguish is diminished when the Greek poet remembers that, once waves of the River Lethe—the river of forgetting—wash over her body, she will have to remember no more (*BW*, p. 31). The Arcadian themes in these and other poems suggest that Robinson had at least some familiarity with the mythology and philosophy of classical Greece.

Although "London's Summer Morning" mentions no philosophers by name nor makes any classical references, the epistemological turn in the final two lines gives the poem a deeper philosophical quality than any explicit reference to a particular thinker might have done. The poem's concluding lines suggest that the limit on what it is possible to know is often related to the position from which one observes the world. The poem's speaker-as-engaged-participant knows something other than what the speaker-as-outside-observer (or dreamer) knows. The unstable perspective of the poem's speaker, describing the sights and noises of an urban morning linked together only by a narrative of successive observations, dramatizes the tension between the empiricist tradition and the rationalist insistence that all knowledge is filtered through consciousness. The poem's philosophical quality comes from its emphasis on the life of the mind, especially as the mind merges with the scene it recounts.

To establish this emphasis, Robinson uses blank verse to create a sense of streaming experiences linked together "perhaps causally but mostly topographically."² As opposed to the heroic couplet, which works by reflecting on juxtaposed images, or the georgic, which works as an instructive device, blank verse puts the reader in the middle of the street's activity as it is happening. Day laborers populate the poem's middle thirty-eight lines. People are identified by their participation in the commercial exchange; everyone has a role. "Knife-grinders, coopers, squeaking cork-cutters," as well as fruit and vegetable vendors, arrange

their carts to display services and produce. Dishwashers and second-hand clothes dealers appear on “the fresh-sprinkled pavement” just as the sun and “humming insects” mix with the shopkeepers setting up for the day’s business, until “every shop displays its varied trade.” Even the allure of the “smart damsel” is commodified in “shops (where beauty smiles with industry).” Each of the various modes of employment is another way for Robinson to engage our senses.

On one reading, the poem is a celebration of the sights, sounds, and smells of a lively, urban morning. The streets are filled with hectic noise. The cacophonous shouts of the entrepreneurs, from chimney-sweeping boys to the man who carts away dust and refuse, proffer their services. The shouts mix with the sounds of wagon wheels on paving stones and tinkling doorbells. Milk-delivery and livery drivers crowd the streets, along with porters running errands. Jeffrey C. Robinson notes that the busy sounds of summer morning “only exist through a social consciousness of one who ‘lists’ (to list, to listen—both are applicable) them. The force of the opening question in Robinson’s poem indicates that the city inspires the consciousness of a citizen who, in turn, can give back an account of it” (*UP*, p. 132). By depicting the poet as a sensitive observer who “gives back” an account of the city, Jeffrey Robinson reads Mary Robinson as an early Romantic poet who anticipates “Wordsworth’s observation in ‘Composed upon Westminster Bridge,’ another London poem: ‘Dull would he be of soul who could pass by / A sight so touching in its majesty’” (p. 132).

The only writer identified in the poem is, presumably, the author herself, who appears in the final two lines. If one reads the final two lines to imply that the poet has dreamed the street scene, then the poet is not a part of the commercial exchanges for which London’s merchants spend their morning preparing. The list recounts activity that could be witnessed only from a perspective that permeates the walls and windows of the shops and homes along the street. The speaker mixes private and public details from the domestic and professional spheres, as well as describing the activity of the street itself. What she lists in the middle thirty-eight lines is possibly more than one observer—even an attentive, sensitive observer—would be able to report. The unstable perspective of the speaker lends evidence to thinking that the street scene has been a dream.

Robinson’s “London’s Summer Morning” is part of a long literary tradition associating dreams with doubt. After Penelope shares a dream with her disguised husband, a dream from which she interprets a prophesy

of Odysseus's return, she doubts its authenticity. "Dreams are hard to unravel, wayward, drifting things," she says. "Not all we glimpse in them come to pass. . . . / Two gates there are for our evanescent dreams, / one is made of ivory, the other made of horn." Penelope refers to a Greek tradition in which dreams were thought to come to the dreamer through one of two gates. A dream that passes through the gates of ivory was thought to be unreliable and deceptive. A dream that passes through the gates of horn was thought to be a dream that would correspond with reality. "But I can't believe my strange dream has come that way," she says referring to the gates of horn, "much as my son and I would love to have it so."³

Whereas for Homer, dreams are prophecies to be interpreted, Shakespeare uses dreams to rationalize the otherwise implausible events of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. At the end of act 4, scene 1, Demetrius and Bottom explain the foregoing events by deciding that they must have been dreaming. And in the play's final lines, Puck suggests to the audience that if anyone has been offended by the story, they should allow themselves to believe that the entire performance has been a dream. Homer's Penelope considers the possibility that her dream is a prophecy. Puck implies that otherwise unbelievable occurrences can be explained as imagination mistaken for reality. In both cases, the dream is a state of consciousness that allows access to a proposition that one would not ordinarily believe.

René Descartes, the seventeenth-century rationalist, admits that while some dreams are fantastical, the more problematic dreams are the ones that are nearly indistinguishable from reality. "How often does my evening slumber persuade me of such ordinary things as these: that I am here, clothed in my dressing gown, seated next to the fireplace—when in fact I am lying undressed in bed," the philosopher asks. Because Descartes has had the experience of dreaming that he is sitting in his chair, dressed in his robes, writing by firelight, he is unsure how to tell the difference between a realistic dream and being awake. "As I consider these matters more carefully," he concludes, "I see so plainly that there are no definitive signs by which to distinguish being awake from being asleep."⁴

Since one can know that one has been dreaming only after waking up, Descartes's worry is that what we call reality may itself be a dream from which we have yet to wake up. If this were the case, then upon waking up we would realize that our lives have been dreamed-about fictions. The logic of dreaming suggests that we can become conscious

of a dream only after we reach the state of being awake from which we can then reflect on the dream. In dreams, the subject can do nothing to test whether he or she is awake or asleep. Similarly, Descartes argues, nothing we do in life can test reliably whether we are awake or dreaming. Here, then, is a puzzle about our perception of reality.

In "London's Summer Morning," the poet's dream is neither the augury of Homer nor the *deus ex machina* of Shakespeare. The dream in Robinson's poem serves a function that differs from that of dreams in classical and Renaissance literature. Crafting "London's Summer Morning" with such a realistic dream serves a function for Robinson that is more characteristic of the time in which she lived. Like Descartes's puzzle, the surprising, self-reflexive turn at the poem's conclusion effects a shift in the reader's consciousness. It implies that the reader did not accurately perceive the events of the previous forty lines. If "the poet wakes from busy dreams, / To paint the summer morning," then the scenes of vendors, shopkeepers, and service workers preparing for a summer day might not actually have taken place.

Robinson's mother claimed aristocratic roots and family connections "to the learned and truly illustrious John Locke—a name that has acquired celebrity which admits of no augmented panegyric."⁵ Given the daughter's education and social status, it is plausible to think that she would have been familiar with Descartes's argument that we cannot always trust our senses as ultimate sources of knowledge, since our senses deceive us. And just as Descartes's skepticism infects the consciousness of one who reads his meditations, Robinson's poem inserts a thorn in the consciousness of the reader, irritating one's sense of confidence in one's perception of reality.

The poet's dream, which is neither oracular nor fantastical, reveals only truths that are accessible to a waking subject. It is a dream of realism. It is a dream of the very city in which the poet lives. It is a dream that is so tactile and sensual that the reader does not perceive the dream itself until the speaker reveals it, just as waking from a realistic dream is the only way to know that what came before was dreamt.

Lifelike dreams call into question the reliability of our senses. If we reflect on them, the dreams have the ability to call into question our perception of reality long after the dream is over. If we reflect on the final two lines of Mary Robinson's poem, they have the ability to call into question the reliability of our reading as well as our perception of reality.

Through radical skepticism, Descartes intended to doubt until he found indisputable knowledge on which he could rebuild an

understanding of the world (*MFP*, p. 13). He mistrusted his senses, and therefore he mistrusted knowledge that was derived from sensory data. By proving through thought experiments the indubitable truth that “the pronouncement ‘I am, I exist’ is necessarily true” each time that he uttered it, and later proving that duration exists, Descartes proved there is a kind of knowledge that does not depend on the senses (p. 18).

That, in some way, the thoughts in one’s consciousness manifest actions in the world through one’s body—I somehow will my fingers to type—captures what has since been called the mind-body problem. Descartes’s solution was to infer that the mind must be something other than the body. This metaphysical dualism inherits the questions how mental entities interact with the material world and whether mental phenomena are spiritual in nature. Materialists, beginning with the eighteenth-century French physician Julien Offray de La Mettrie, responded to Descartes by collapsing the strict distinction between the material and the mental. From this collapse, materialists further deduced that the physical world and the mental or spiritual world are not as distinct as classical and Renaissance thinkers had argued. This collapse is the materialism around which much thinking about the nature of knowledge has revolved since the Enlightenment.

The penultimate stanza of Wallace Stevens’s poem “Landscape with Boat” outlines this materialist approach. A painter searches for the right colors and brushstrokes to paint the air itself, not just the sand and sky of a landscape:

He never supposed
 That he might be truth, himself, or part of it,
 That the things that he rejected might be part
 And the irregular turquoise, part, the perceptible blue
 Grown denser, part, the eye so touched, so played
 Upon by clouds, the ear so magnified
 By thunder, parts, and all these things together,
 Parts, and more things, parts. He never supposed divine
 Things might not look divine, nor that if nothing
 Was divine then all things were, the world itself,
 And that if nothing was the truth, then all
 Things were the truth, the world itself was the truth.⁶

The materialist approach to reality, like “Landscape with Boat,” requires an epistemological turn. The poem’s speaker recognizes that the distinction on which the painter has insisted, between himself and the world

he tries to paint, is premised on a false perspective. The poem's speaker sees the world from a perspective that the painter cannot.

Similarly, the reader of Mary Robinson's poem sees the scenes in the street from one perspective in the first forty lines and another perspective after reading the final two lines. For the reader, the experience of this summer morning in eighteenth-century London is always in our imagination, but "the poor poet wakes from busy dreams / To paint the summer morning" suggests that within the poem the summer morning possibly exists only in the imagination of the waking "poor poet." But it is unclear whether the speaker in "London's Summer Morning" undergoes the same epistemological shift that the reader undergoes.

Perhaps, for the observant reader, the conceit is present in the poem's opening lines. If so, then the epistemological turn at the end of the poem is foreshadowed at the beginning. "Who has not wak'd to list the busy sounds / Of summer's morning," the speaker asks. On first reading of the poem, the reader perceives the question as a rhetorical device that sets up the "list" that follows. But the question could plausibly be read as one that has an answer: "the poor poet" has not yet awakened "from busy dreams, / To paint the summer morning" with words. If the speaker of the poem already knows that the sleeping poet will wake to write the poem of the summer morning, then the epistemological turn in the final lines is a playful revelation that the speaker has anticipated from the opening lines.

It is relevant to ask who the speaker is and what the speaker's relationship to "the poor poet" could be. For that matter, it is relevant to question the speaker's relationship to the poem. Either the poem that "the poor poet" wakes to write is some other poem altogether, or it is "London's Summer Morning." Either way, Robinson's poem acts as a funhouse mirror held up to the mind by calling into question the reliability of what the reader perceives.

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1. Paula R. Backscheider and Catherine Ingrassia, *British Women Poets of the Long Eighteenth Century: An Anthology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), p. 69; hereafter abbreviated *BW*.
2. Jeffrey Cane Robinson, *Unfettering Poetry: Fancy in British Romanticism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 133; hereafter abbreviated *UP*.

3. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 408.
4. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), p. 14; hereafter abbreviated *MFP*.
5. Joseph Fitzgerald Molloy and Mary Elizabeth Robinson, *Memoirs of Mary Robinson: "Perdita"* (London: Gibbings and Company, 1895), p. 4.
6. Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954), p. 242.