

The Wound of Consciousness: An Introduction to “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities”

Editor’s note: A version of this essay will appear in a forthcoming short story anthology (title to be announced) published by Pearson and edited by Andre Dubus III.

The title is the epigraph to a book of Yeats’s poems called *Responsibilities*, but Yeats claimed not to have written the line; it’s ascribed to an “old tale.” Perfect, for the tale is endless. Delmore Schwartz, author of a perfect story at age twenty-two, was a Freudian and a Marxist whose brilliant academic career began with skipping high-school graduation for early enrollment at Harvard. He then left Harvard for undergraduate study at the University of Wisconsin, which was so progressive in 1932 that the state legislature launched an investigation into its “avant-garde” ideas about education. Schwartz finally graduated from NYU in philosophy, mentored by Marxist scholar Sidney Hook, but moved out of his mother’s apartment in the summer of his junior year. He found a cheap room in a boarding house off Washington Square and worked twelve hours a day “to become a great poet.” An isolated month later, he wrote, in a burst of catalytic energy, “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities.” A friend reported visiting Schwartz one July weekend in 1935 to find him “ecstatic—he knew he’d written a masterpiece.”

Dreams themselves are not our possessions or conscious creations, but Schwartz believed that the movies in our minds demand we acknowledge every image, construct a narrative, and accept the anguish of understanding. “Dreams” is an exaltation, a lament, a mourning song, a comic/tragic coming-of-age; Schwartz tapped the primal knowledge we all possess, but seldom recognize or articulate. It was inspired by the “dream” of life, when Schwartz was at the fresh zenith of his intellect and powers as a writer. In 1937, “Dreams” was the lead feature in the first issue of *Partisan Review*, the left-wing magazine of American politics and culture edited by two of Schultz’s intellectual circle, William Phillips and Philip Rahv. The next year, the story was the title piece in his first collection, stories and poems published by New Directions on Delmore’s twenty-fifth birthday. By 1948, he was poetry editor of *Partisan*, where he published definitive essays on Pound, Hemingway,

and Auden. He was probably the most widely anthologized poet of his generation, yet his income was virtually nil. His early marriage to essayist Gertrude Buckman, and a later one to the much younger novelist Elizabeth Pollet, ended in divorce. Encumbered by the effects of lifelong addictions to alcohol, amphetamines, and barbiturates, he was given to jealous rages, and his attack on art critic Hilton Kramer resulted in Schwartz's brief confinement at Bellevue. He remained the poetry and film critic for *The New Republic*, and in 1959, at age forty-six, he became the youngest poet to win the Bollingen Prize and the Shelley Memorial Award, for *Summer Knowledge: New and Selected Poems*.

Schwartz published, over twenty years, five volumes of poetry, three books of stories (including *The World Is a Wedding* and *Successful Love and Other Stories*), and a book of plays. Despite his success, he became increasingly itinerant, taken up with desperate self-medication and a midlife academic slog from one visiting professorship to another (Harvard, Bennington, Kenyon, Princeton, Syracuse, interspersed with protective visits to Yaddo, the writers' colony). He held forth, quoting a heavily annotated copy of *Finnegans Wake* to indulgent coeds and nascent rock stars. Lou Reed, a student at Syracuse who led his professor to and from obligatory literary cocktail parties, called him "my mountain." In "Dreams," we find Delmore Schwartz at the glorious beginning.

Delmore was an unusual name for a Jewish boy born in 1913 Brooklyn to Romanian Jewish parents, but Harry Schwartz and Rose Nathanson came of industrious, upwardly mobile families. Rose's immigrant father established a business renting and selling pushcarts; within a few years, he owned a clothing store in the Garment District. Harry Schwartz, wealthy at thirty, an ambitious businessman determined to outdistance his own immigrant roots, prospered in real estate and insurance. When Delmore was nine, his embattled parents divorced bitterly and woke him at midnight to demand that he choose between them. His father moved to Chicago and remarried; Delmore and his younger brother Kenneth moved with their mother to a Brooklyn apartment that too often rang with her regrets and lamentations. His father, a millionaire by 1929, saw little of his family and lived well in Chicago, where he died suddenly when Delmore was seventeen. Schwartz was cheated of a generous inheritance by the shady executor of his father's estate; for years, he hoped to reclaim funds that might have sustained him as a writer, and he regretted, all his life, the loss of the only legacy his father was capable of providing.

Ever in search of the father who disappeared, Delmore bade everyone call him by his first name. His name was the first contradiction to engage his poetic sensibility; it was not the name of a “nice Jewish boy.” He was once clocked talking for eight hours straight, and he joked in mesmerizing conversational monologues that he was named after a Pullman car, a building on Riverside Drive, or a crooked Tammany politician. Lou Reed, his former student, may know the truth: the writer who wrote a timeless story framed as a movie was named after Frank Delmore, a dancer in silent films. Perfect, for Schwartz’s consciousness danced through towering, flickering images. His name was emblematic of concerns he explored in his work: generational divides between immigrants and their American-born children, tensions between old-world values and American social aspirations, the old manners and a brash new culture that celebrated the breakdown of class divides and made a liberating religion of artistic endeavor. Yet the specificity of origin, its weight and history and demand for redemption, is the fire at the center of the examined life. Schwartz peered into the unresolved emotional dilemmas we inherit, but he was often alone in his last, dark years. No longer the life of the White Horse Tavern, he lived in a series of dank hotel rooms and sat, disheveled, nearly unrecognizable, on a bench in Washington Square Park. He suffered a heart attack in a hotel hallway and died on July 11, 1962; his body lay at the morgue unidentified for two days. He was fifty-two.

Words read for decades or centuries are never erased. Schwartz once said that his subject was “the wound of consciousness.” He was a dazzling writer whose work captures the quicksilver mercury of time, the enormous weight of anguish, and the exaltation of finding meaning in what might have been lost sadness and desperate waste. Irving Howe said that Schwartz “found a language for his parents’ grief,” but the story transforms history, place, and character into primal truth. His “merciless passionate ocean” with its waves “tugging strength from far back” and cracking “at the moment of somersault . . . when they arch their backs so beautifully” drowns each of us in his genius. The shining “lip of snow” remains, cold and clean, perfect, new.