The Funambulist Papers 2

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Is it possible to provide a meaningful relation between dreams of flight, a common variation amongst the form of dreams, and the body? And even if we are capable of doing so, even if we assume that we agree as to how we conceive the body, what kind of pathways such a relation opens up for us? Would we be able to sense ourselves being moved towards different political, ethical, or aesthetic directions than the ones that we have been given and taught to obey? Even if we are able through the dream of flying, to see how we can break the mould of formality, would we want to shape the break into a new mould, or would we prefer to remain suspended in air, defying gravity? And then again, to desire or want to remould the break provides us with an encounter with an agentic self — a self that can direct its future in this or that way, that perhaps, most probably it can’t exert such agency. Indeed, perhaps the most we can learn from this encounter with the dream of flying is precisely to let go of the chimera of remolding — turning into some form or blue print for the future the sense that such a dream may open up to us.

The dream of flying is a particular type of dream. It is one that puts our bodies into a position that we can’t really achieve when we are not asleep without the assistance of technical support, auxiliary wings — remember Daedalus and Icarus’s flight — or without being on a plane or some other air vehicle. The dream of flight, we may say, puts our bodies in an impossible position, up in the air, defying gravity, breaking the law: a formality of movement. The dream of flying positions our bodies beyond this law. In this brief piece I will consider where Freud’s and Bachelard’s accounts of this type of dream can take our bodies.

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Freud did not have much to say about dreams of flight. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud dedicates less than three pages under the subheading, “Other Typical Dreams” on dreams of flying.² Freud tells us that he had never had such a dream: “I have no experience of my own of other kind of typical dreams, in which the dreamer finds himself flying through the air,” especially, he continues, “since I turned my attention to the subject of dream interpretation.”³ Despite his inexperience in this area he proceeds to provide us with a brief analysis of his understanding of how such dreams come about:

… these dreams, too reproduce impressions of childhood; they relate, that is, to games involving movement, which are extraordinarily attractive to children. There cannot be a single uncle who has not shown a child how to fly by rushing across the room with him in his outstretched arms, or who has not played at letting him fall by riding him on his knee and then suddenly stretching out his leg, or by holding him up high and then suddenly pretending to drop him. Children are delighted by such experiences and never tire of asking to have the repeated, especially if there is something about them that causes a little fright or giddiness. In after years they repeat these experiences in dreams; but in the dreams they leave out the hands which held them up, so that they float, or fall unsupported.⁴

Freud positions the dreams of flying to a childhood scene, and specifically one that takes place in a familial environment. Dreams of flying, a common adult occurrence, are mere reproductions of scenes that they have experienced as children, being lifted into flying by an adult. The pleasure (when lifted) or fear and anxiety (of falling) of this experience is being repeated or re-lived later on in life in the flying dream. Reference to any sexual arousal that may be connected to either the dream of flying or the actual experience of being lifted by an adult in the air, is mentioned in the actual text and elaborated and supported by two footnotes. In these two footnotes, Freud directs us to analytic and medical research on the matter. The analytic literature connects the enthusiasm that children demonstrate either when they are lifted in the air or watching acrobatics to the stimulation of the sexual organs or the witnessing of a sexual act in humans or animals. The medical discourse appears to suggest that the first pleasurable sexual arousal in children, particularly in boys, is witnessed “while they were climbing about.”⁵ Freud categorically dismisses Strümpel’s account of the flying dream as the “image which is found appropriate by the mind as an interpretation of the stimulus produced

³ Ibid., 290.
⁴ Ibid., 289.
⁵ Ibid., 288
by the rising and sinking of the lobes of the lungs at times when cutaneous sensations in the thorax have ceased to be conscious. Such an interpretation focuses he notes on the source that may trigger a dream (inflation and deflation of the lungs) which he finds unsatisfactory, or rather hypothetical. Nevertheless, despite the fact that he had not experienced himself any dreams of flying, and despite the fact that he has no material to enable him to provide us with a fully-fleshed interpretation of such dreams, he insists that these dreams have their roots in early memories of sensations of pleasure (being lifted) and anxiety (the fear of fall) that one may have experienced in his or her childhood, drawing on his wider experience of the dream analysis of psychoneurotics which showed that dreams have their roots in “infantile experience.” In line with his method of dream analysis — dreams provide us with access to our unconscious, and consequently to our hidden desires, anxieties, drives — Freud points out that each analysis of a dream remains particular to each dreamer, as the content of each dream is unique to each one of us.

Nevertheless, even if Freud recognises that the content of each dream will provide us with access to the particular unconscious, he simultaneously direct us to read the content in his usual way. The cause of anxiety of falling or the pleasure in the dream of flying has its origin in sex. His medical professional colleague assures him also of the relation between being elevated and sexual sensation that Freud sees as being repeated in the flying dream: “Patients have often told me that the first pleasurable erections that they can remember occurred in their boyhood while they were climbing about.” The individual meanings that each flying dream is meant to body forth, are therefore narrowed down, by returning us to the probable cause in the dream — sexual desire. Of course Freud has made very important contributions to our understanding of the operation of the psychic world through sexual desire and this should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, by reducing the meaning of a dream, and here in particular the dream of flying, to sexual desire, Freud inadvertently limits the possible interpretations that we may deduce from the flying dream itself, the multiple ways in which pleasure is shaped by our relation to our bodies and the pleasures that flow through them. For example, Luce Irigaray (sexual difference), Hélène Cixous (female sexuality and writing), Judith Butler (queering gender), and Chrysanthi Nigiani (female sexuality, queering gender, writing and pleasure) have all shown us in distinct ways how polymorphous is female sexuality and pleasure, drawing to our attention to the limits of psychoanalytical accounts of pleasure and sensations such as Freud’s.

6 Ibid., 69.
7 Ibid., 289.
8 Ibid., 280.
Moreover, if the dream of flight is reduced to its content — irrespective of the particularities of the content — which in turn is directed by a particular prism (context) of interpretation (sexual desire), we may want to consider to what extent Freud’s interpretations of the flying dream really addresses the materiality of the body. We may want to ask to what extent the context through which the dream is interpreted is an abstraction of the material body, an abstraction of the material body in flight, and as what happens to a particular material body while in the dream of flight.

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Gaston Bachelard recounts his understanding of the dream of flight in his book *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*. As Colette Gaudin points out, Bachelard’s account of dreams in general is critical of psychoanalytic interpretations. As she writes:

“In *L’eau et le réves*, Bachelard explains his refusal to account for images as in terms of organic impulses by his lack of medical knowledge, alleging that this prevents him from going to the same depths as psychoanalysis. The real reason is that he wants to seize the specific originality of the symbol without reducing it to its causes.”

Indeed we can observe that, like in *L’eau et les rêves* (translated in English as *Water and Dreams*), in *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*, when Bachelard accounts for the dream of flight he diverts us from the causes of such dreaming, its content and symbolisation. When he explains, for example, that somebody seeing themselves flying does not necessarily relate to a desire to ascend in society, it is not a metaphor for the achievement of some aspiration, but rather it is related to some movement in the dreamers’ instinctual world and their dynamic imagination. Put otherwise, Bachelard urges us to avoid exploring the contents of such a dream or reading such a dream in a symbolic way, as a revelation of some deeper or, unconscious meaning, something that Freud in his *Interpretation of Dreams* follows. Instead he urges us to view it on its surface, understand and follow the dynamic movement that it produces in the soul, and understand it as an internal movement that

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12 Bachelard, *Air and Dreams*, 57.
shakes the soul, and deforms reality — the reality of our inability to fly. Bachelard tells us that flight dreams require us to look away from the form of the flight (e.g., flying with wings) and from the symbolisation/signification of the content of the dream. Instead, he asks us to concentrate on the movement that such dreams introduce upon the dreamer: a “journey for its own sake,” an ‘imaginary journey’ that is more real than any other since it involves the substance of our psyche.” And once we focus on what the flight dream does, we notice an ascending, a deforming reality, exposing us to an imagination that is not bound to a form (that “frees us from the tyranny of forms, and restores us to substances and to the life of our own element”) and to the desire of the soul to ascend, to unburden itself from the formal restrictions — or as Bachelard puts it, transforms the motion of the soul into the “whole soul in motion,” to the joy that we gain from the fear of falling. Indeed, the didactic lesson of the flight dream according to Bachelard lays in teaching us not to be afraid of falling. This is indeed a diametrically opposite lesson from the one we may infer from Freud. Freud suggests that the falling or descending we may experience in the flying dream produces anxiety, for we are fearful of the fall. It is only then, according to Bachelard, that we may be able to see what the flight dream is: “a future with a vector breaking into flight.”

Without causes to guide us, no origin to the sensations that follow the flight, no symbolic interpretations, Bachelard’s reading of the dream of flight opens our horizon to listen, to feel the subtle movements of our soul, to feel the body breaking with its form, weight, organs, bound-ness, and breaking, and not be in fear of what the future of this break may bring. It is a journey, a pleasurable journey, throwing us in unknown, undiscovered directions.

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I have told, and re-told two possible stories about the body in the dream of flight. Freud’s story, brings back the body to earth, chains it to a sex that is presented here at least as being one (we are aware that Freud understood sexuality to be multiple) and returns it to a familial scene. The other, Bachelard’s story, unchains the body from its form, shows us its movement, its ability to fly beyond itself fearlessly. Freud’s story is a story of needs, desires, fears, an origin, and a cause that can’t really be proved, the other, Bachelard’s is a story of pleasure beyond needs, a joy without cause or origin, with a direction that is not directive, a break from a past, a release of the imagination.

13 Bachelard, *Air and Dreams*, 22
14 Ibid., 24.
15 Ibid., 26-48.
16 Ibid., 21.
If we are to think of these stories politically, Freud’s story of the flying dream restricts our vision within the horizon of the familial, and while psychoanalysis may undo the fear of the fall, we will not escape from having our body reduced to the one sex or the one of sex. This is not to say that the body is not sexed, as of course it is. Bachelard moves the body away from the familiar and familial, to directions unknown. Bachelard’s story opens up a space to sense an organisation of life beyond the one that the family scene offers. It entices us to glimpse such a future without fear, while simultaneously it offers no guarantees of an idyllic resolution. We can choose to break from Freud, and indeed many women philosophers (Irigaray, Cixous, Butler, Nigianni) have done so, and we may choose to break from form, and it may indeed be not even be a choice but rather a political necessity. We may break from form and it may just happen only in a flying dream, “a future with a vector breaking into flight,” and it may be just enough for us to sketch a new political horizon.17

17 Ibid., 21.