

Rising, Falling

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(Terra Critica, 'Critical Transformations,' May 2022)

The imagination provides critical reflection with a medium and critical action with a framework on account of its *mobility*, suggests Bachelard in *Air and Dreams*, its capacity for mobilisation. This, over and above all else, is what the imaginary is – impetus, transport, placing in motion – and the capacity to mobilise is how the imaginary draws out of itself an alternative configuration for the reality it subsists alongside. In other words, the movement of the imagination takes its leave of reality at a *critical point*: “we must take account of every urge to abandon what we see or what we say in favor of what we imagine... Imagination allows us to leave the ordinary course of things... to launch out toward a new life.”¹ Certainly, this process gives rise to recognizable images that settle into a fixed and stable form, but for Bachelard this is not where the critical efficacy of the imaginary lies. Instead this efficacy is dependent upon the nature of the movement by which such an image has come about. What is the driving force that constitutes this or that particular vision? What has it been mobilised by? Along what vector? And with what consequences for the reality of the imagining subject through which this momentum passes? This for Bachelard is the standpoint from which the imaginary should be practiced and studied.

The “movement of the imagination”: isn’t this a fundamental feature of the fictional worlds that take shape in Nalo Hopkinson’s *Skin Folk*, spans of narrative often configured around an elemental force that is presented from the perspective of a momentum that will ultimately determine the course of events recounted? The always-in-motion water of ‘Money Tree,’ for example, passing back and forth from dream to reality, in all its forms invested with an enigmatic transformative power, “Watery light glistened off his teeth, turning them to gleaming coins... The current rearranged his features,”² both a threat and an attraction it will eventually drag down the story’s protagonists, brother and sister, one after the other, the pull it exerts telling us something about the forms of life to which such a fate has been meted out; or else the terrifying wind of ‘Under Glass,’ a chaotic presence that appears to exceed

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*, trans. Edith R. Farrell and C. Frederick Farrell, Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 1988. p. 3.

² Nalo Hopkinson, ‘Money Tree,’ in *Skin Folk*, New York: Warner Books, 2001. p. 21.

the frame of representation reserved for it, its force violently shaping the spaces and bodies with which it makes contact, inside and out, through the fine glass dust it scatters wherever it passes. The visual register of these imaginary worlds is in each case predicated upon an unstable element the nature of which is to remain in a state of unending movement, with the narrative itself caught up in the same momentum.

Once the imagination is conceived in these terms it requires a means by which the movement it consists in can be registered and evaluated, and it is on this basis that a specific schema is repeatedly called upon over the course of *Air and Dreams*: that of verticality. The imagination has verticality as its organising principle. The trajectory of its movement is always locatable along this axis. And this in turn sees its operation configured around a fundamental categorical distinction, its mobility always determined by a “*vertical differential*.” Insofar as there is movement in this sphere, it is directed upward or downward; it must ascend or descend, rise or fall. Of course this is not to say that in all of its manifestations the imagination will have this schema as its explicit subject, or that its productivity is guided by these two “vital values” alone; but it does mean, so Bachelard argues, that whatever its contours give particular shape to, the imaginary’s formations can always be expressed in the terms of this differential. “This, then, will be my formulation of the first principle of ascensional imagination: of all metaphors, metaphors of height, elevation, depth, sinking, and the fall are the axiomatic metaphors par excellence. Nothing explains them, and they explain everything.”³

Rising, falling: the terms of this differential are hierarchically distributed by Bachelard, the former valorised over the latter in principle, not least because here the motion of rising up is quite simply synonymous with valorisation itself: “every valorization is a verticalization.”⁴ Ascension is in this sense the value that underwrites the value of all other values, the value which all other values are relative to or derived from, falling included. This arrangement has more than one field of application in Bachelard’s study. To take just one example, upward directed movement, movement that is self-sufficient, advancing without the need for external reference or support, is also understood here to be constitutive of and proper to human existence. “It is in its traveling upward that the *élan vital*, the impulse of life, is the humanizing impulse... In man [sic], says Ramon Gomez de la Serna, everything is a path. We should add: every path encourages us to ascend. The positive dynamism of verticality is so clear that we can formulate this aphorism: what does not rise, falls. Man qua man cannot live

³ Bachelard, *Air and Dreams*, p. 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

horizontally.”⁵ In short, whilst downward movement is intractable, a “constant psychic reality,” to fall is nevertheless to fall away from this “humanizing impulse.” Hence “the will to fall,” the fall assented to and made an object of the will, is something like a “disorder of the will.”⁶ Descent is to ascent as sickness is to health.⁷

This, in any case, is the conclusion that Bachelard’s study tends towards in its evaluation of these two dispositions and their respective weighting. No doubt the fall is always acknowledged as a fundamental feature of the imagination – “Going up and going down - air and earth - will always be associated with vital values, with the expression of life, with life itself”⁸ – and no doubt the “alchemical” formation of the imaginary most prized by *Air and Dreams* is the one that manages to encompass both of these values in a single stroke, represented by the author with the ideogram \updownarrow and the following explanation: “These two arrows, joined in order to diverge... active participation in two opposite characteristics.”⁹ But at the same time this differential is always organised in view of the “primacy” of ascension, with the final measure of any image being its “potential for *rising*.”¹⁰

Here, then, is our question: must the conclusion arrived at by Bachelard be considered definitive? Is it possible, or perhaps necessary, to re-cast this problem of verticalization, to stage its terms differently, re-configure its typology, re-orientate its trajectory? If so, how would this axis then appear in the contemporary imaginary and its critical contexts?

A lead can be taken here from the Derrida of ‘My Chances,’ for the perspective that emerges in this text concerning what it means *to fall*, the latter’s downward movement considered to be there a constitutive characteristic of the chance event, of the event as chance: “what falls,” Derrida writes, “is not seen in advance. Is not what befalls us or descends upon us – coming from above, like destiny or lightning, taking our faces and hands by surprise – exactly what thwarts or undoes our anticipation?”¹¹ As with Bachelard, this movement is understood to have implications for our conception of what is human, disrupting the association between the latter and ascension: “In that case, when it is man or the subject who falls, the fall comes to affect the upright stance. It imprints on the vertical position the deviation of a clinamen, whose effects are sometimes irresistible.”¹² But in any case, the experience

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ p. 103.

⁷ pp. 15; 94.

⁸ p. 261.

⁹ p. 263.

¹⁰ p. 11. Emphasis in original.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, ‘My Chances / Mes chances: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereophonies,’ in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume 1*. Eds. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. p. 348.

¹² *Ibid.* pp. 348-49.

of downward motion understood in this way sees Derrida drawn towards a different evaluation of verticalization: “unforeseeability conditions the very structure of the event... One must not see it coming. If one anticipates what is coming, which is then outlined horizontally on a horizon, there is no pure event. So, one might say: no horizon for the event or the encounter, only the unforeseeable and on a vertical axis. The alterity of the other—which does not reduce itself to the economy of our horizon—always comes to us from on high; it is indeed the very high [*le très haut*].”¹³ The event, then – another form of movement, another “vital value” – will only ever be met on a downward trajectory, beyond the scope of what can be seen, at a juncture where it was not expected, waylaying all intention, exceeding the capacity to be received yet demanding precisely that. Wherever it falls therefore marks a critical point. Think of Silky, at the conclusion of ‘Money Tree,’ swimming laps in the pool one day when she is suddenly inundated – “The water was rushing and swirling around her. The river had found her”¹⁴ – her missing brother then appearing from the depths below, dead-alive, beyond rescue yet in reach; this impossible encounter, the outcome of which will never be confirmed since the story ends there, is precisely *an event* in this sense. Hence it traces the passage of a fall. “Breathing in the strength of the river, she swam down with strong strokes to get her brother.”¹⁵

¹³ Ibid., p.349.

¹⁴ ‘Money Tree,’ p.32.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 33.