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Falling though Space... Portrait of a Poet from a Bird's Eye View

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Poetry is not only a way of knowledge; it is even more a way of life – of life in its totality. – Saint-John Perse, “On Poetry”

Introduction

Since man has observed birds in flight, he has dreamed of the freedom of movement they possess. Yet, the literature that describes the experience of flight, whether physical or metaphorical, reveals two opposing spaces of attraction: earth and sky. From a Hegelian dialectic perspective, one would suggest that residing in one of these spaces, through negation, implies non-residence in the other. At the same time, one could also conclude that we are nonetheless tied to both in an overall *unity*. When we are on the ground, we long to be liberated by our earthly pull and spring into flight; all the pilot’s preparation is for the goal of operating in that new environment. Conversely, when in flight, we begin to reflect on our desire to return “home,” to our natural state. Furthermore, the poetic symbolism of a pilot in flight, like a bird, helps to take abstract emotions and understand them more concretely.

This paper aims to illustrate the dichotomy between the elevated perspective of flying and the gravitation of our own humanity through a survey of literary works, including John Gillespie Magee, Jr.’s “High Flight,” Richard Hillary’s *Falling through Space*, and the following French texts translated into English: “Birds” and “On Poetry” by Saint-John Perse; *Wind, Sand, and Stars* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry; and “Elevation” and “Albatross” from *The Flowers of Evil* by Charles Baudelaire. More importantly, it proposes that the effort of negotiating the inner space between these can be fruitful for our self-confidence and general sense of belonging.

Escape from earth

The pilot can use his aircraft to attain new heights, previously reserved for mythological figures; however, once in orbit his thoughts are often drawn to new observations of his own

planetary existence. The challenge of the poet, much like the pilot, is to negotiate between these two spaces, these two worlds, for a simultaneous sense of liberation and belonging. Both engage in exploration and struggle. Both offer a renewed perspective of the world in which we live. In the process of negotiating these two spaces, the aviator-author, much like the poet, attains a balanced perspective that allows him to approach his own mortality in a way that emboldens his spirit while not getting caught with his *head in the clouds*. What he learns is that when faced with death, or danger in general, the tendency to reach a state of catharsis is avoidable. Instead of a panic-stricken response that dwells in the peril of the moment, he remains able to act. Understanding our own aspirations and our own limitations, then, allows us to carry on despite the things that would derail a sense of normalcy or security.

Let us begin on a high note, with an example of a well-known poem in aviation circles. It was written in 1941 by John Gillespie Magee, Jr., an American pilot flying with the Royal Canadian Air Force in World War II. Appropriately, to the tone of its lyricism, it is entitled “High Flight.”

Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds, - and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of - wheeled and soared and swung
High into the sunlit silence. Hovering there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air...
Up, up the long delirious burning blue

I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace,
Where never lark nor even eagle flew -
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high, untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God. (Ravitch 280)

Certainly there is an aura of grandeur and intense spirituality in this poem. It emotes an exclusiveness and lofty separation from the mundane trials of life on earth. His words are inspired by his setting, where he pilots his Spitfire at 33,000 feet. Yet, this elation is accompanied by a strong sensibility and reverence. The sentiment captured in the poem expresses so well the peace of flight that Ronald Reagan was quick to reference it as consolation in his address to the nation following the tragic loss of the Challenger astronauts in 1986. While memorializing the seven men and women that died after launch, he encapsulated the entire poem at the end of his speech: “We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them, this morning, as they prepared for their journey and waved goodbye and ‘slipped the surly bonds of earth’ to ‘touch the face of God’” (Reagan 4:07). He recognized with matter-of-factness what their mortality reveals in the face of the dangers of space flight; at the same time, he recalled through Magee’s poem why we were drawn to it in the first place. This is how we bridge the gap between high and low, between elation and sullenness. While we continue to dream of the freedom of “footless halls of air,” we as humans know that is not our natural place. Nonetheless, we transcend our own fragility to achieve the “grace” of flight.

Falling from grace

Let us contrast this poem, then, with the prose of Richard Hillary, a British Spitfire pilot, also in World War II, as he writes about his experiences in the Royal Air Force in his sole book

Falling through Space (1942). This second example links more directly with the tragic imminence of death on each of the pilot's sorties. In fact, survival through more than a dozen wartime sorties was quite rare, and the pilots or the aircrew operated daily in this profound recognition. They accepted their fate in what many of them called a "damned profession." This may also be tied to the alternate title of the book *The Last Enemy*. This title is derived from I Corinthians, as it is cited in the epigraph: "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." The following excerpt describes Hillary's state after having been shot down by a Messerschmitt of the Luftwaffe.

I was falling. Falling slowly through a dark pit. I was dead. My body, headless, circled in front of me. I saw it with my mind, my mind that was the redness in front of the eye, the dull scream in the ear, the grinning of the mouth, the skin crawling on the skull. It was death and resurrection. Terror, moving with me, touched my cheek with hers and I felt the flesh wince. Faster, faster.... I was hot now, hot, again one with my body, on fire and screaming soundlessly. Dear God, no! No! Not that, not again. The sickly smell of death was in my nostrils and a confused roar of sound. Then all was quiet. I was back. (165)

More than a simple contrast of rising and falling, the writing of the experiences of certain pilots in World War II exposes the middle space between life and death, between what is real and what is imaginary. Arthur Koestler, in his article "The Birth of a Myth: in Memory of Richard Hillary" (1943), calls out the two spaces of existence from Hillary's text: *la vie tragique* and *la vie triviale* (238). It is likewise the alternation between these two spaces, or zones, that the writer's mind is able to acquiesce, allowing for an adroitness of spirit and intellect. The momentum of war often intensifies the human spirit to take stock of what matters most when

confronted with our own mortality. As Koestler states, it involves an existential effort to make sense of dueling spaces of our existence simultaneously:

The fraternity of the dead has its peculiar etiquette; one has not only to live up to one's form, one has to die up to it. But then again, there is the writer's curiosity which forces him to feel his own pulse, to jot down on long rambling pages of pencil-scrrawl the minutes of his agony; there are the nerve-tearing oscillations between cant and introspection, acceptance and revolt, arrogance and humility, twenty-three years and eternity. (Ibid)

Therefore, what Hillary begins to capture in this passage is physical human fragility and mortality. As opposed to Magee's playful imagery of "laughter-silvered wings" and the various maneuvers he controls, Hillary experiences the "terror" of losing control in the air. As opposed to the "sunlit silence" or even "shouting winds" that Magee embraces, Hillary's body is "on fire and screaming soundlessly." Rather than awe for the wonder of God's face, Hillary fears that his death is upon him; he asks God to take the pain away. At the same time as he borders on death, however, he says the experience is "resurrection." The silence of his coming "back" accompanies his escaping death with a renewed understanding of life itself. As he alludes in his exclamation, "No! Not that again," this revealing experience was a common, recurring experience of pilots in the war. Together, the two excerpts are reminiscent of the flight of Icarus, who flew too close to the sun, melted his wings, and plummeted to his death.

Gravity

In French literature, another author-aviator adds to the richness of this period's perspective: Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the celebrated author of *The Little Prince* (1943),

explains the effect of aviation on the pilot's frame of mind in his novel, *Terre des hommes* (1939), published in English *Wind, Sand, and Stars* (1939). His connection to his own humanity is paradoxically revealed to him the more he is separated from the planet in flight; already we get a sense of this from a literal translation of the French title – land of men. His experience switches between two worlds of existence. For example, in a chapter entitled “The Plane and the Planet,” Saint-Exupéry explains how the airplane is a tool of observation, that through the view of his cockpit he is able to ascertain the tracings of human activities on the planet: open spaces left untouched through time, trails of lights leading to the nearest village, meandering roads that twist or stop at the natural obstacles in place. Moreover, the reflection of his writing is not directed above, toward the stars, but once now in flight, his interest is in the *human* aspect of things: the sound of music, or the smell of an old armoire, for example. So his alternation is a switching between a longing to liberate himself from the planet and achieve the perspective of the air, and a yearning to return among his fellow man, in the daily sensations being on its surface. Here he describes his sensation of clinging to the surface after a crash in the desert. As he reflects, he stares into space through the darkness of the Sahara after nightfall.

But I did not fall. From nape to heel I discovered myself bound to earth. I felt a sort of appeasement in surrendering to it my weight. Gravitation had become as sovereign as love. The earth, I felt, was supporting my back, sustaining me, lifting me up, transporting me through the immense void of night. I was glued to our planet by a pressure like that with which one is glued to the side of a car on a curve. I leaned with joy against this admirable breast-work, this solidity, this security, feeling against my body this curving bridge of my ship. (70)

Ironically, although Saint-Exupéry states he does “not fall,” he is *falling* due to the physical force of gravity. His comparison to the centrifugal force in a car, the outward force acting on an object in motion perpendicular to the force of attraction upon it, reinforces the concept of omnipresent, balancing forces. If, in fact, he were flying, the same gravity would be pulling him down; only by overcoming this with the lift of his wings is he able to prevent *falling*. Now, instead of the “terror” that Hillary described, however, he is secure on the firmness of the ground. He does not describe the bond he feels as “surly” like Magee, but rather as an “admirable breast-work” that gives him comfort “as sovereign as love.” Despite all the adventures in the air and enlightened perspective of flight that Saint-Exupéry describes in his literary work, he is tied even more closely to his *terre des hommes*.

Balance

Another French writer and poet, Saint-John Perse, born as Alexis Saint-Leger Leger, captures this balance between two worlds that Saint-Exupéry explained. In his poem “Oiseaux,” (“Birds”), he describes the nature of flight by observation. A sense of balance is central to his poetry in the series of descriptions of birds’ mechanics, biology, and navigation of space and time. He references *Yin* and *Yang*, for example, and the austere poetry of their ecology. In section X of the poem, he describes the westward flight of a bird as though it were in perpetual equilibrium between the rosy light of the setting sun on the horizon before its beak, and the dimness of dusk behind its tail. You can see this balance captured in the Fauvist drawings of Georges Braque, which later accompanied the poems in a collaborated collection. Braque’s paintings make every effort to capture the impression of the balance amidst the vivid activity of flight; with his colors and brushstrokes, he shows the natural flow while seamlessly tying

together the sense of continuity and connectedness in Perse's poetry. Here is the translation of Robert Fitzgerald of the first section and second stanza of the poem:

On the cross-beam of his wing is the vast balancing of a double season, and under the curve of his flight the very curvature of the earth. Alternation is his law, ambiguity is his reign. In the space and time that he broods over in one flight, a single summering is heresy. It is likewise the scandal of painter and poet, who bring seasons together at the height where all intersect. (611)

For Saint-John Perse, poetry in itself was a "twofold vocation" where, in order to render the true testimony of his spirit, the poet holds a mirror that is, in his words, "more sensitive to his spiritual possibilities" and "to connect ever more closely the collective soul to the currents of spiritual energy in the world" (13). These thoughts are captured in his acceptance speech of the Nobel Prize for literature in Stockholm in 1960, published later under the title "On Poetry" (1961). In fact, his speech builds on the idea of *unity* in another Hegelian dialectic: art and science. As he argues, where the limits of one are met, the other takes over.

More importantly, a function of poetry is to leap beyond where rational science is unable to prove all the ways of the universe. Albert Einstein's genius that brought the Theory of Relativity, he argues, was derived from "invoking intuition to come to the rescue of reason" (5). In this way he refers to "artistic vision" as a means to attain understanding that surpasses science. "Poetry is not only a way of knowledge," he states, "it is even more a way of life – of life in its totality." (7,9). Because of this, its relevance is at the forefront of our human progress and the choices we make. In fact, he frames the need to build a conscience in the nuclear age through the spiritual connection of poetry. When he asks in his speech, "can the earthenware lamp of the poet still suffice?" he is reminding us of our simple human creations that have not been lost in the awe

of science (13). Perse connects the technologically advanced, yet dangerous, tools of our society with the simpler, more fundamental ones at our disposal. In doing so, he permeates the same ambivalent space of negotiation where the poet alternates between an elevated zone and a mundane one, by reminding us of our inherent humanity.

The poetry of Charles Baudelaire is indicative of this same alternation. His collection of poems in *The Flowers of Evil* resides in the space between *le gouffre et l'azur*, or the abyss and the heavens. As Willis Barnstone suggests, “the reasons that Baudelaire’s poems work are rudimentary. The poems give pleasure, they inform, they sing, and they profoundly move us. Once exposed to them, we are purged and altered forever” (Baudelaire vx-xvi). This is the bird’s eye view that offers a new outlook on things below. Although Baudelaire lived before the age of human flight, he expressed through his poetry the experience of the highs and lows that remind us of what it means to live. In “Elevation,” he describes what is to be gained from the journey.

Fly! Flee these putrid wastes! Let yourself be
Washed pure, cleansed, soaring higher, and even higher;
Drink of that heavenly liquor, that bright fire
That fills the realms of limpid purity.

Happy the man – despite the frets, despite
The woes that smother life’s dim murkiness –
Who, strong of purpose, flies high, nonetheless,
Off to the calm and peaceful fields of light;

Whose thoughts, in morning flight on lark-like wings,
Rise to the heavens, above the fray, swept free;

– Who understands, aloft, effortlessly,
The speech of flowers and of all silent things! (11)

Like Perse, Baudelaire uses the image of a bird in flight to illustrate the dilemma of a poet. Without the benefit of actual physical experience of John Gillespie Magee, Jr., he imagines the “purity” and “peaceful fields of light.” Yet, despite the notion of “soaring higher,” the poem acknowledges a certain grounding way that he suggests man negotiates his fears. Even the reference to the lark – predominantly a ground bird and a songbird – reminds us that not even birds are in perpetual flight; Magee pairs the lark with an eagle in his poem as well, but more to show the stratifications of elevation. Therefore, existence in these different spaces is not a binary condition; we can escape life’s “dim murkiness” by an elevation of spirit.

Baudelaire’s “Albatross” essentially describes an entrapment of the majestic seabird by a crew of sailors, who then proceed to taunt it on the deck of the ship. Its awkwardness on the ground is paralleled with that of a poet who is forced to exist in a world of seemingly inconsequential daily contingencies, in a world where he endures attacks of those who fail to see the usefulness of his craft. Here, he shows the challenge of returning to a reality that falls short of a poet’s *elevation*, reminding us of the uniqueness of his spiritual agility.

How clumsy this winged voyager! How weak;
Comic, and ugly! He, so fair of late!
Some, with their clay pipes, taut him, jab his beak;
Some, ape the erstwhile flier’s limping gait.

So too the Poet, like the prince of space,
Who haunts the storm and scorns the archer’s bow:

Mocked, jeered, his giant's wings hobble his pace
When exiled from his heights to earth below. (9)

Negotiating spaces

The metaphorical imagery of flight is, therefore, linked with liberation and freedom. It is loaded with imagined spaces, which can take on national appeal as much as a personal one. Gillian Beer points this out in the works of Virginia Woolf, for example. While she had never flown in an airplane, Woolf describes the escape of flight, taking her beyond her island nation, allowing the openness of her perspective: "The pilot's eye offers a new position for narrative distance which resolves [...] the scanned plurality of the community below into patterns and repeats" (267). As her words imply here, too, Woolf's fascination with flight was not a simple means of escape. She was also keenly aware of the dual nature of the bird's eye view: as much as flight allows for the sensation of freedom, it exposes a new dimension of the earth below. It is this realization that brings its fruitful function in the overall perspective of the community to which the pilots belongs. Like Saint-Exupéry, she was able to ascertain the value of *observation* from above for the understanding of our lived experience below.

The perspective that is rendered through aviation literature is not simply a slingshot away from the nation-space, but a boomerang. It involves an inevitable return home. It is already achieved in flight with the shift of focus from the dreamscape to the need to understand from above. Moreover, it is achieved on the ground in the coping with a newly gained viewpoint and the desire to share what is learned. So even if Antoine de Saint-Exupéry is considered the Joseph Conrad of the air, his distance is not eternal. In contrast, he is not the traveler of no return. Aviation literature is, therefore, also not the same as the fictitious near-realities of space

odysseys or Martian colonization. The aviator comes back. Much of his training, in fact, is to enable a good landing.

In a similar way, the aviator-writer brings his story to the public and contributes to the bank of national narratives. We come to know his characters through tales of his adventures or the conflicts of his plight. The wartime pilot faces another set of challenges, where the assumption of return is reduced. In World War II, the mortality of the crews was truly a numbers game, and the inevitability of death was very real in the psyche of the missions, from pre-flight briefings to landing. This feature alone is one of the uniquely unifying aspects of the aviators in wartime. Combined with the ever-present importance of the “mission,” they represent a sort of microcosm of nationhood that revolves around kinsmen-ship. Beer quotes W.H. Auden as she points out the three elements of this literature at once: distance, kinsmen-ship and myth. The following excerpt is from Auden’s “Musée de Beaux Arts,” written in December 1938.

In Brueghel’s *Icarus*, for instance; how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on. (268)

Auden’s reference to Icarus is clear, but the mythology of the figure is viewed from a distance. The overall tone of the passage is that of duty and matter-of-factness. Life moves on. One viewing of this landscape painting could be that the people are too involved in their daily

activities to notice the tragedy in the distance. A more useful interpretation, however, would be an early echo of what President Reagan explained about the Challenger tragedy: we continue on daringly despite the risks involved with high aspirations and hopes of a better future. Two years after Auden's poem, in fact, England nationalized the motto "keep calm and carry on" to harden Londoners' morale in face of bombings during the Battle of Britain. Auden had already moved to New York by that time, but his poem expresses a national sentiment that had already rooted itself in England. In the spirit of responding to the anxiety of German attacks on England or the occupation of France, then, a more appropriate interpretation of this painting is as a basis of courage in face with adversity. A sense of sailing "calmly on" was part of the culture of the people facing the war, in London or in Paris. It was also part of the deep kinship of the flyers who knew the realities of the risks when flying their missions.

Still today, the same motto persists, as a means of coping in a world consumed by what Auden would have categorized in terms of his "age of anxiety." Though often commercialized to the point of reducing the essence of its spirit, i.e., "keep calm and have a cupcake," I would argue that the effort of exploring the highs and lows of the emotions expressed by these pilots and poets lends a medium to grasp the "grace" they described. Among the threats of terrorism, the frets of climate change, or the woes of an unstable economy, we need some resilience to cope with our fears. The power of this literature is in recognizing that, despite our own human vulnerabilities, we can maintain a certain "balancing" that quells our anxieties with our hopes and checks our egos with humility and kinship.

Conclusion

In the end, if *Falling through Space* differs from the lyricism of "High Flight" it is largely due to the story of the return. As Koestler alluded, the story of the hero is what survives

from the men who braved the skies in World War II. It is not an Icarian tale of reckless pursuits of flight, the mythological antihero who lacks the awareness of his own limitations and vulnerabilities. Instead, what Richard Hillary learns, and what is reinforced across the literature examined here, is that an awareness of our humanity bridges the seemingly vast territory between the heavens and the earth. Time and time again, we see the flying character in his other space: grounded, walking as a biped. For Pilot Officer Magee, First Lieutenant Hillary, Commandant de Saint-Exupéry, and others, this is a matter of returning “among men.” It is the natural state of things, returning with an altered perspective and perhaps to a less vulnerable condition. For the birds of Perse or Baudelaire's albatross, it is the inverse. They achieve a more natural alternation between worlds, but they are exposed and weakened when not in flight. The poet or the writer lingers in between, in the middle space. This is a state of constant back-and-forth, or up-and-down. His use of language is a constant effort to balance between the dichotomies of his two worlds: liberation and gravitation.

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