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Water and dreams

Abstract:

This essay explores dreams and dreaming with reference to Gaston Bachelard's rather overlooked essay *Water and Dreams* (1941), where he defines two modes of imagination that are discrete but not disconnected. First is the formal mode that arises from emotions and sensations; next is the material mode, where images arise directly from matter: in this case, water. The phenomenological perspective he offers on water and its oneiric properties aligns very well with creative practice-led research – which, for us, comprises poetry (Jen Webb) and painting (Lorraine Webb). We explore Bachelard's notion of dream, which departs from the conventional views to suggest a different way of understanding what dreaming might be for creative practitioners. This, the concept of waking dreams, provides one conceptual frame for the affordances of dream for creative practice. The second frame attends to the fragmentary, aleatory, and haphazard nature of living in the world, and this we draw from Bertrand Russell's writing (1953), which incorporates both day and night dreams, and their poetic, allegorical qualities. We work through and around these two conceptual frames to reflect on the often confounding issue: how to be and to become, in a life that is both dream and concrete reality.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Dream thinking, waking dreams, Bachelard, phenomenology, creativity

A great work of art is like a dream;
for all its apparent obviousness it does not explain itself
and is never unequivocal.
– Carl Jung, 1974

Introduction

Everybody dreams. No one is entirely sure what dreams might mean, but still there is a mountain of commentary on the topic – as there always has been. Edward Slosson opens his introduction to Henri Bergson's *Dreams* (1914, p. 6) by announcing: "Before the dawn of history mankind [sic] was engaged in the study of dreaming". Medical science has its own footprint in this corpus, especially evident in the writing of the ancient Greeks who had a great deal to say about the functions of dreams in physical health and wellbeing. Religion too turns its attention to dreams, particularly in conceiving of dreams as texts for interpretation, as channels of divination. The Old Testament prophet Daniel, for example, made a living from his skill in dream analysis. The Neoplatonist Hypatia seems to have approved the idea, promulgated by her pupil Synesius, that dreams convey the will of god; and Homer seems confident that dreams are actually messages from the gods [1]. Even Plato, that philosopher of reason and self-control and scepticism, writes that Socrates seems to have taken dreams seriously. Along with other ancient scholars, Plato (2013, 31c, p. 44) identifies Socrates' trust in dreams, and aligns this with the master's *daimonion* (divine sign) – the *something* that is beyond conscious thought.

Aristotle is one of the few early voices critiquing the association of divine commentary and dreams. We humans, he notes, "are easily deceived responding the operations of sense-perception when we are excited by emotions": that is, rather than dreams being a

message from the divine, or a prophetic awareness, they are simply the product of our individual sense perceptions, framed and narrativised according to our own predilection – “the coward when excited by fear, the amorous person by amorous desire; so that with but little resemblance to go upon, the former thinks he sees his foes approaching, the latter, that he sees the object of his desire” (Aristotle, 1995, “On Dreams” 460b, pp.1–5). A physical or emotional stimulus turns into a dream we narrate according to our own personalities and tendencies, rather than the dream being a channel of divine communication. Moreover, he makes the point that many animals, like their human cousins, experience dreams: “not only do men dream, but horses also, and dogs, and oxen, and sheep, and goats, and all viviparous quadrupeds” (1995, “Generation of Animals” 4.10, pp. 1–3). In this he anticipated 21st century science, with new research validating the extent to which other animals also dream; that is, sleep-storying seems to be a property of (most) living beings, not only humans (Manger & Siegel, 2020). And he extends this awareness of dream experience into the actuality of dreams and what they achieve:

On the whole, forasmuch as certain of the other animals also dream, it may be concluded that dreams are not sent by God, nor are they designed for this purpose. They have a mysterious aspect, however, for nature is mysterious, though not divine. (Aristotle, 1995, “On Divination in Sleep” 663b, pp. 11–15)

We don’t need a prime mover; we can simply accept that, in our sleep, things seem to happen, events seem to intrude upon us, sensory experiences seem to occur.

In this essay we consider just a few of the lines of thought that thread through the (primarily Western) scholarship of dreaming, particularly those that address the relationship between dreaming, creativity and narrative. While we cast a fairly wide net, we adopt an expanded definition of “dream” in order to explore which lines of thought might open up the potential for creative practice. Our focus is, therefore, on specific theories and theorists, those that engage the potential that dream might have for bridging the chasm between conscious and unconscious cognition; for reconsidering what dream might be other than the operations of the brain during sleep. What this in turn affords, we suggest, is a way to galvanise creative thinking and practice, and to illuminate the value of attending to how we might live in the world. This phenomenological orientation allows a creative practice that dances across the apparent binaries of sleeping/waking consciousness and might lead to genuinely new ways of seeing and understanding, the nature of being, and the operations of ethics, for thinkers and makers.



Lorraine Webb (2021). *Tides* (acrylic and graphite on canvas). 650mm x 650mm.

Everybody – every sentient body – dreams. We may not be sure what dreams mean, or if they mean anything at all, but many philosophers and artists have given it considerable thought. The topic is teasingly evocative: we can't really know our dreams, let alone what means might mean, or be. Michel Foucault, that historian of ideas, has reviewed discourse on the relationship between dreaming and thinking, and finds it as fluky and erratic as water. In his *Madness and Civilization* (1965) he describes the long European tradition of associating dreams with what, in that volume, is termed “madness” – social or neurological divergences that set individuals outside what, in a particular episteme, is considered the norm. Dreams become aligned with this non-normative thinking not least because they can't easily be contained. Writing of Gothic symbolism in art, Foucault notes: “the image is burdened with supplementary meanings, and forced to express them. And dreams, madness, the unreasonable can also slip into this excess of meaning” (1965, p. 19). Dreams are, indeed, often unreasonable, uncertain and unsettling. Their narrative arc rarely follows the script-doctor's prescription; and their semiotic content frequently exceeds what is expected of the sort of thinking and representation presented by researchers, and by everyday people managing their everyday lives. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that it is affiliated both with “madness”, and that it attracts the attention of those who treat psychological disorders.

But Foucault looks well beyond disorder or its treatments. In *The Order of Things* he points out the affordances of dream-thinking for the generation of new knowledge and understanding. It was, as he notes “on the basis of error, illusion, dreams and madness, all the experiences of unaccounted-for thought, that Descartes discovered the

impossibility of there not being thoughts” (1973, pp. 323–24). Dream matter may be disordered, but dream thinking has the potential to be richly generative, capable of expanding intellectual thought. This has been reviewed by a number of scholars; that line of thought has been crafted and analysed by Niloofer Fanaiyan (2015) whose doctoral dissertation traces the ancient and more modern threads of dream study in literature, starting with *Epic of Gilgamesh* (c.2100 BCE) – arguably the first major work of literature, which itself is built on dreams.

Julia Fiore (2019) addresses similar issues, and demonstrates that, across the centuries, artists have explored and exploited dreams (and nightmares) in writing, visual art, performing art, film and photography. Federico Fellini’s *8½* (1963), for example, contains stunning dream sequences in his narrative of a film director hoping his dreams will provide inspiration for his next movie. Adrienne Rich’s 1978 collection, *The Dream of a Common Language* explicitly and lyrically draws on dream imagery and thinking. Picasso’s painting “Le Rêve” [The dream] (1932) is a canonical standard for painting the idea of dream. Warlpiri artist Abie Jangala observes – in what aligns with Socratic thinking – that dreams are the channel by which his father offers him advice on what and how to paint (Jangala, 2021). The Surrealists, famously, relied on the defamiliarising properties of dream in their art, an approach refreshed in the oneiric photography produced by Julie Lagier, who says, “To understand and be inspired by dreams, to recreate my dreams, to manipulate this vaporous material through photographic interpretation, that is what I try to do” (Lagier, 2021, n.p.).

Dream thinking

Art making, it seems, is aligned with dream thinking; and this is perhaps not surprising, given the strange nature of dream material, and its blending of apparent reality with unnerving uncertainty. But dream thinking is also recruited for other intellectual practices, particularly those committed to personal health and social ethics. Socrates, for example, makes the point that philosophers should avoid excitement before sleep – should eat and drink in moderation – because this will ensure the dreamer has “awakened his rational powers, and fed them on noble thoughts and enquiries”, and will in consequence experience the dreams of reason (in Plato, 1901, 571c-572c, p. 9).

That is one mode of dream thinking. Another comes from author and psychoanalyst Thomas Ogden, who describes dream thinking as “the thinking we do in the process of dreaming. It is our most profound form of thinking, which continues both while we are asleep and in waking life” and, he continues, “our most encompassing, penetrating, and creative form of thinking” (2010, pp. 319, 328). Psychologist Deirdre Barrett observes, perhaps more pragmatically:

Some dream workers glamorize dreaming as wiser than waking thought; that is not what this research suggests. If humans had to get along with only one mode of

thought, waking would obviously be the preferable. However, the power of dream thinking lies in how different it is from what the waking mind does – so when we are stuck on a problem, dreams can supply the breakthrough. (2017, p. 66)

Dream thinking: to energise art practice; to afford opportunities for good citizenship; to heal psychological wounds; to offer problem solving catalysts. Each approach has its use, but we take a different tack. Approaching it as creative practitioners rather than as philosophers or psychoanalysts, we identify dream thinking not as simply as the unconscious working of the mind and imagination, but rather as a channel for creative thought, one that operates across and beyond consciousness but does not reject reason; one that allows a deeply embodied connection with the lived world. Adrienne Rich again comes to mind here: her “Diving into the Wreck” (1973) has a strongly oneiric sensibility but incorporates a researcher’s framework. It starts: “First having read the book of myths, / and loaded the camera, / and checked the edge of the knife-blade...”. This is someone who is not simply responding to sense-perception, but is preparing for the encounter, through archival research and the preparation of data-collecting equipment. And the poetic persona’s clambering down into the depths of the ocean, learning to “breathe differently down here”, and becoming “the mermaid whose dark hair / streams black, the merman in his armored body” has the qualities of a dream narrative.

Her account of water in this oneiric voice calls attention to a mode of thought that emerges across the literature on dreams. For Aristotle, waking perceptions flow down, during sleep, from the consciousness to what we now call the subconscious, “like the little eddies which are formed in rivers, so the movements are each a continuous process” (1995, “On Dreams” 461a, pp. 5–10). For Foucault there is a material link between water and dreaming. In his account of the “ship of fools” – the medieval European “treatment” for mental illness – he observes that the idea of “madness” was then of something that is closely allied to dreaming. The casting off of what was then called “madmen” onto the waters casts them also into “the uncertainty of fate” because “on water, each of us is in the hands of his own destiny; every embarkation is, potentially, the last” (1965, p. 11). This remarkable state of being literally and metaphorically “at sea” is here an analogue for the domain of dreaming.



Lorraine Webb (2003). *Boat in Harbour* (watercolour on paper). 580mm x 490mm.

We too are captured by this notion of water as a dream state, water as a state for the performance of the self and its potential loss. We enter the conversation as painter and poet, collaborators, sisters who share a history of migration and resettlement, and a fascination with water. We grew up familiar with both drought and flood; with both dry riverbeds and the icy cascades that pour down the mountains in spring. Familiar too with salt water: the Atlantic and Indian oceans that clash at the bottom of Africa; the sea passage we took as teenagers from Cape Town to Auckland via the South Atlantic; the Pacific Ocean that borders our homes in Australia and New Zealand; and all the little seas and straits between. Water, for both of us, has long generated thought and imagination [2]; afforded the sorts of images and narratives that made their way into creative outputs; and informed both dreams and nightmares. It's an oneiric medium, after all: unstable yet always finding its own level; possessed of strong surface tension that is easily pierced; taking on viscous properties as easily as it vaporises; adhesive, and yet a universal solvent; constant and yet never the same (we can't step in the same river twice, to misquote Heraclitus, Fragment 21). And it comprises most of the make-up of anyone's body. It is as varied, erratic, necessary and unreliable as are we.

The possibilities of water (excerpt)

When the sea scolds the rocks, when the sea caresses the rocks, you stand on the great grey rocks and hold your nerve no matter the angle of the waves. The water reaches for you, reminds you that this is home. Take your chances. Expect no grace. It's you, and unending love, and the inquisitive sea.

(Jen Webb, 2020, p. 3)

Water and dreams

Our fascination with water, and particularly large bodies of water, is because we find that proximity to and reflections on water open up the affordances of dreaming, of material being, of imagination and uncertainty. Not surprisingly, then, we were drawn to Bachelard's rather overlooked essay on inspiration, materiality and phenomenology, *Water and Dreams* (originally published 1941) – one of several volumes he published on dreams, the imagination and the elements [3]. His starting point is, in fact, the imagination, and he opens the discussion with a clear distinction between what he identifies as the two main imaginative modes.

The first, or formal mode, is generated by “the feelings and the heart” – for example, being captured by the beauty of nature; the second, or material mode, comes from the “depths of being”, “images that stem directly from matter. The eye assigns them names, but only the hand truly knows them” (Bachelard, 1982, p. 1). From a 21st century perspective, these might be re-articulated as observation, and phenomenological encounter – and Bachelard acknowledges that while the two modes are discrete, they are not disconnected; we need to study them in concert. He makes this point in a discussion that leads to his claim that there has been less poetry written about water than about other sources; “poets and dreamers”, he avers, “have been more often entertained than captivated by the superficial play of waters”. The issue, for him, is a failure of poets and dreamers to give ourselves over fully to the work of making: rather than treating water as an “embellishment” of the worlds we make in our art, artists should accommodate it as “the ‘substance’ of their reveries” (1982, p. 5).

While we opted not to test his assertions empirically, and strongly suspect that, particularly now in the era of eco-art, there is plenty of work that attends to the substance of things, we find real value in the reminder that as artists we do need to immerse ourselves in the imaginative state (Csikszentmihalyi's flow offers an equally liquid metaphor for that immersive state); and by the implicit statement that we don't *find*, but rather *construct* knowledge and understandings. Equally, we are taken by his description of the way in which the materiality of water both performs and analogises ways of understanding the world, thereby pointing to the usefulness of ontological position in creative and knowledge making, the ethics of ecological thinking – and the dream of an environment on the mend.

Tracks (at the lookout)

Sky speaks to water and land traces its fingers along tracks
we've laid out, lines of desire and demand ghost the present
in dreams that insist: *remember; attend*. Water and sun
conspire nose to nose, conjuring streams that drift between

river and sky. Poised between them, land acts as high diver, stretching into uncomplaining air. We arrive, settle in places that we claim on hills that sprawl across the plains, hip settled against someone else's thigh, arms rough skinned from sun and stone drape down, fingers trailing in the flow. The view is too broad to see, so zoom in to the mutter of ants and grass and seed, small exchanges threading. Across the way a man is tuning violin, someone is playing scales, a child picks out sounds on pink guitar. Mezzo voice blends with the call of a cricket, distant birdsong, wind making music in the trees.

(Jen Webb, 2022)

Across the volume as a whole, Bachelard writes eloquently, passionately, and only sometimes rather unconvincingly about the properties of water; sometimes sailing close to Jungian perspectives (though Jung is only namechecked two or three times in the 200-plus pages of this volume), sometimes reflecting a Hegelian logic (though Hegel doesn't get a mention at all). But what he is doing in all this language is building a sense of water in all its peculiarities and particularities. In fact, he establishes a taxonomy of water: clear and reflective when amorous; capable of providing insights when deep; pure when fresh (river) water; impure – indeed, inhuman – when salt; death-oriented in the hands of an Ophelia; childish when it takes the form of a babbling noisy laughing brook; and et cetera. Much of this is the product of the person – a European man, writing from within the first half of the 20th century, drenched with archetypal thinking. His account is, moreover, heavily gendered; men/the male element in water is tough and strong; women/the female element is sensitive and prone to weeping. Indeed, as Brady Burroughs writes, “Bachelard writes on the matter of water in *Water and Dreams* based on what can only be described as an understanding of gender which is essential to the point of making any feminist reader exhausted” (2007, p. 8).

But let's not dwell on that aspect; because after all, Bachelard isn't alone in appropriating the idea of women, or the feminine, to prosecute an idea of creative qualities –

Simon Critchley: What I really learned from Paul De Man years and years ago was that writers are structurally self-deceived about what they do, what they write and the intentions that might or might not lie behind their writing. Namely to write is to be blind to one's insight.

3:AM: This dream of a total artwork in which one might poetically dwell often ends up being a womb with a view, right?

Simon Critchley: Absolutely right. It is a kind of male, maternal fantasy.

(in Gallix, 2014)

– but rather, let’s stay with his all-encompassing sense of what water is: “a complete being with body, soul and voice. Perhaps more than any other element, water is a complete poetic reality” (1982, p. 15).

He bases this on a phenomenological orientation, involving sustained attention to matter and the material that is both related to, and distinct from dream: “One cannot dream profoundly with *objects*. To dream profoundly, one must dream with *substances* ... Poetic experience, as I conceive it, must remain dependent of oneiric experience” (1982, p. 22). A dream that is not a dream; a process of dreaming that connects the artist/dreamer with the materiality of the world – of, in the case of Bachelard’s book, with the material properties of water. Because, as the subtitle of the book reads, and as he repeats in various ways throughout the volume, it is the “imagination of matter” that we imagine – that we dream – in finding motivations to make art, and in aligning ourselves to the thing itself and not to ideas about the thing or the first reflection we take from an encounter with that thing.

How do we enter the sort of dream-state Bachelard promulgates, the one that might generate inspiration? How do we peek beneath the lid of water that is never still, never the same, and find some sense of being and meaning? For artists and scholars in the 20th century, questions of dreaming, inspiration and creation lead quickly to Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, those towering figures of psychoanalysis, authors of suites of papers on dreams and their significance (Freud, 2015; Jung, 2002). Their perspectives are framed by techniques for the interpretation of dreams, on the grounds that this will shed light on the psychology of the dreamer. So, the analyst will read into the dreams such matters as the unspoken (unspeakable) desires of the dreamer, the machinations of their unconscious, or those archetypes that illuminate the deep patterns of their psyche. Such perspectives still colour the approach to dream interpretation, whether undertaken in the clinic or in popular media. The logic behind this is that ancient perspective that the dream is a product of the sleeping self. Writes Freud, “The dream represents a certain condition of affairs as I should wish it to be; *the content of the dream is thus the fulfilment of a wish; its motive is a wish*” (2015, p. 90, emphasis in original). And under the interpretive skills of the therapist, the content of the dream can illuminate something about the waking self.

On dreaming

When my phone trembles and its message is that there’s a new survey to complete, an old bill to pay, another headline about shocking facts. It’s that the tax office has melted down, that the

government really ought to, that whatever happens next will be against the spirit of the thing.

You take the phone from me and put it in a bag, and put the bag in a box and the box in a drawer.

When I tremble you hold me until I'm too hot and tell me stories out of ancient Egypt or an Egypt yet to come. The message is stop. The message is there is no end to the shock or to the bills, that there is no spirit of the thing.

When I slump you set me in a chair and feed me chocolate, and when I sleep I dream of breaking things, of falling, and of letting go.

(Jen Webb, 2017)

But while the lines of thought that identify dreams either with prophecy – daemonic interventions – or with Freudian understandings of the self remains very present and popular, Aristotle's cooler perspective has continued to inform and inflect thinkers across the millennia since he wrote his work on the nature and function of dreams. René Descartes' statement that "All the same thoughts that we have when we are awake can also come to us when we are asleep" (1968, p. 53) or John Locke's observation that we slip between waking and sleeping in ways that are often indiscernible (Locke, 1997, p. 4) echo the way many scholars have parsed Aristotle's writing on the topic, summarised as: dreaming is "thinking while asleep".

Again, this is not the position taken by Bachelard in any of his publications on dreams. His point, one that differs strongly from Aristotle, is that a sleeper is not a thinker: "The night dreamer", he writes (perhaps dismissively), "cannot articulate a cogito. The night dream is a dream without a dreamer. On the contrary, the dreamer of reverie remains conscious enough to say: it is I who dream the reverie" (1971, p. 22). For Bachelard, then, it is not the dream of *sleep* that is of interest, but rather *waking* dreams: the sorts of dreams one might have while fully awake, with cognitive processes at least partially engaged, and open to the possibility of making art. It is aligned to the mode of "dream" widely used as an analogue for creative aspirations, for longing and imagining, for *seeing otherwise*. This is a state Bachelard describes as "poetic reverie", in which "All the senses awaken and fall into harmony" (Bachelard, 1971, p. 6).



Lorraine Webb (2004). Water Net (ink, acrylic on paper). 5 metres x 4 metres.

For Bachelard, poetic reverie is the material effect of the four elements – earth, water, fire and air, or what he calls “my encyclopedia of cosmic imagery” – that prompt the movement into waking dream, and the affiliated “wonder of new imagery” (1990, pp. 4, 9). Here he seems to echo Jean Jacques Rousseau’s walking/writing/dreaming discussion: “Sometimes my reveries end in meditation, but more often my meditations end in reverie; and during these wanderings my soul roams and soars through the universe on the wings of imagination” (1974, p. 199). For Rousseau it is the material world and the encounter with nature and natural phenomena that propelled the dream-state in which his writing could flow; in which problems with his writing could be resolved. Sitting at a desk and relying on abstract imagining will not, for these thinkers, provide the solution; rather, it is putting oneself into a dream state, propelled there by phenomenological encounters, and in that state being able to focus very closely, very narrowly, on something about the feeling of being.

(Being there)

I wake from a dream of raspberries to find the bed turned to slurry, the walls a decadence of red. Someone in the next room is typing too fast, hitting keys, missing keys. The air is salt, a mangrove swamp at low tide with ibis highstepping through the mud. The senator is knocking on the front door but I am tied up measuring the mycelium, field notes growing at the rate of not.
(Jen Webb, 2021)

Waking dreams

When we say “waking dreams” or “wakeful dreaming” we are not referring to the sort of practice treated in Freud’s famous essay, ‘Creative writers and day-dreaming’ (1959). Yes certainly, we are addressing the use of the imagination; but it is not the Freudian notion of imagination generated by a surfeit of emotion and a rejection of reality. The imaginative work of “wakeful dreaming”, as we conceive of it, and as we read Bachelard’s conception, is one of attentiveness rather than phantasy; not the product of building castles in the air, but of encountering the material world in its materiality; engaging with it as beings who are part of the material world, and fully imbricated in it. “The dream”, writes Henri Bergson, “consists of the entire mental life minus the tension, the effort and the bodily movement” (2013, p. 40). A productive waking dream is therefore a different physical state from either full wakefulness or REM sleep; it is a state of full engagement, cognitive process, one where the dreamer is applying a different form of attention; *deep listening*, says artist Zadie Xa (2021) who, like Bachelard, locates her imaginative practice – her deep listening – in the domain of water, its experiences, its unknown or barely known narratives.

Perhaps it is a little specious to draw a firm line between sleeping dreams and waking dreams; between Freudian daydreams and Csikszentmihalyi’s flow (1966), since the difference between sleep and wakefulness, between being switched off and cognitively engaged, is very blurred. It should be a simple matter to know if one is awake or asleep, but as so many sleep-dreams remind us, the dream world is vivid and, often, convincing.

(First flight)

It is 2:25 am and you are racing to reach the departure lounge but your bag is lost at home and your papers are not kosher and you have forgotten your favourite coat which you will certainly need where you are going. Reach for your phone; your sleeping hand moves so slowly, your fingers so clumsy, the stress levels rise till, thank all that is, you irritably return to waking state. The cat is curled at the foot of your bed, watching you, watchfully. Your suitcase is packed and waiting at the bedroom door and your passport, expired of course, is propped on the bedside table. Wake and sleep are dancing, cheek to cheek, across the bedroom floor and out to the car and then across the city and out of your reach.

(Jen Webb, 2022)

Those two great essayists, Michel de Montaigne and Blaise Pascal, were sharply aware of this. Writes Montaigne:

We wake sleeping, and sleep waking. I do not see so clearly in my sleep; but as to my being awake, I never found it clear enough and free from clouds... Our reason and soul receiving those fancies and opinions that come in dreams, and authorizing the actions of our dreams with the like approbation that they do those of the day, wherefore do we not doubt whether our thought, our action, is not another sort of dreaming, and our waking a certain kind of sleep? (2020, p. 263)

Without deep listening, without embodied attention and engagement, we may as well be asleep, and in the sort of sleep that produces only those muddy rambling narratives our housemates dread hearing us relate in the mornings.

Pascal possessed the same uncertainties:

None of can be certain, apart from faith, whether we are awake or asleep, given that while asleep we believe as firmly as we do that we are awake. We think we see spaces, figures, movement. We feel the passage of time, we measure it; in short we behave just as when we are awake... The result is that, spending half our lives asleep ... we have not the slightest conception of the truth, as all our feelings during that period are illusions. (1995, p. 40)

In neither case can the conventional meaning of dream – the random, sometimes distressing sometimes enthralling buzzing of the brain during REM sleep – be considered a generative process. It's true of course that there are dream narratives and dream images produced; but for the majority of us, better work is done when we are actively involved in the making. This involves a mode of research as much as a mode of art: an attention to being that generates creativity thinking.

Neurologist Richard Cytowic lists what he terms “the true marks of creativity” as “(1) an ability to sense which problems are likely to yield results and so are worth tackling, (2) confidence that you can solve the problems you single out for solutions, and (3) a dogged persistence that keeps you going when others would give up” (Cytowic, 1993, p. 89). He continues, in a manner that reflects some elements of Bachelard's thesis, writing that:

Creativity does not result from mysterious visions that come in dreams, or from fortuitous circumstances. Creativity and persistence are synonyms. Constantly thinking about the problems, consciously and unconsciously maximizes the possibility that any chance occurrence is likely to be useful in solving it. (1993, pp. 89–90)



Lorraine Webb (2003). *Bluff Harbour* (watercolour on paper). 580mm x 490mm.

Chance is a key element in creativity, and waking dreams: the juxtaposition of light and shade, colour and line; the sudden recognition of something that demands one's attention. Bertrand Russell considers the impact and the complexities of the relationship between self and world, mind and matter, in any mode of making. For him, this is about philosophy rather than art, but its function, for Russell, is as much involved with feelings as it is with logic or abstraction. "The first thing that philosophy does, or should do", he insists, "is to enlarge intellectual imagination" (1956, p. 178). Philosophy as a mode of creativity; and where philosophy fails – or fails to deliver on that ambition – is in its tendency toward abstraction. Russell responds to this limit in philosophy, and turns to writing like an artist, a poet, rather than (*stricto sensu*) a philosopher:

I can see, at the moment, if I allow myself to talk the language of common sense, the furniture of my room, the trees waving in the wind, houses, clouds, blue sky, and sun. All these common sense imagines to be outside me. All these I believe to be causally connected with physical objects which are outside me, but as soon as I realize that the physical objects must differ in important ways from what I directly experience, and as soon as I take account of the causal trains that proceed from the physical object to my brain before my sensations occur, I see that from the point of view of physical causation the immediately experienced objects of sense are in my brain and not in the outer world. (1956, p. 159)

When he begins to pay attention, that is. When he reaches for the materiality of the world and of his own being. Yet he doubts the verity of this world much as he doubts the verifiability of sleep narratives, observing that we can rarely know anything in a once-for-all manner. Though the physical objects we encounter certainly appear to be materially present in a way that theoretical (metaphysical) objects do not, there is not

necessarily such a distinction between them, and this is because of the nature of sleep-dreaming:

Order, unity, and continuity are human inventions just as truly as are catalogues and encyclopaedias. But human inventions can, within limits, be made to prevail in our human world, and in the conduct of our daily life we may with advantage forget the realm of chaos and old night by which we are perhaps surrounded. (2009, p. 69)

This is perhaps where material practice, creative observation and attention, can trump philosophy and science; we don't need to know with certainty whether something *is* or *is not*; we only need to know that it mattered to us, when we connected with it; that it illuminated something we were trying to resolve. We need to know that consciousness exists within incarnated form, and anything with a body and consciousness has the capacity to observe and, in observing, to make a difference (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. viii).

Conclusion

Like Merleau-Ponty, Bachelard takes a phenomenological approach to his interpretation of how dreams and water interact with each other, and what this interaction might generate. We don't entirely align with his interpretation, but this is not surprising, given the differences between our contexts and his: we are women, he is not; we are southerners, he is a northerner; we are (now) people of the 21st century, and he is very much of the early 20th century. Our worldviews are necessarily based, therefore, on quite different foundations. But we do align with, and share, his fascination with water, with its oneiric properties, and with what waking dreams can afford us in our engagement with water in and of itself. What he is trying to achieve in his philosophy is something we too try to achieve in our creative work: not just to respond to surface content – whether in dreams or in images of water – but rather to wait for the structures at work in that content to speak to us; to be open to the materiality of water and to the capacity of our minds to respond creatively.

Such creative responses are the product of a convergence of a number of elements. Imagination and its impulses are key, of course; so too are the techniques and actions of creative practice that tips us into flow. These draw to our attention not only the great sweep of ocean or sky, but also the pebble that has dried to dullness, the most banal of objects, the fall of light, the trace of sound or scent – all those sense-perceptions that moved Aristotle to think and write about dreams. Neither of us are particularly motivated by the dreams of sleep; while for many others, such dreams may spark lines of thought that provide the impulse to write, or draw, or paint; but for us, they typically just dissolve in daylight and the busyness of the hours that follow. Nor do we find daydreaming a particularly generative state for creative work. While it may allow points of interest to float up to consciousness, and may generate creative work, we find a more

reliable activation in what we here call waking dreams. This is that state where one is not fully engaged with the everyday tasks of being alive in society, but rather give oneself over to a state of *seeing otherwise*: a mode of attentiveness to the lived, the built, and the natural environments.

For us, it is water that consistently provides a channel to the state of waking dreams. In its constant movement, in the way it bounces light back to the sky while holding darkness at its base, in the way it supports us while we swim but as easily will sink us: in all these ways it does double duty as a material entity and as metaphor for the complexities, exigencies, disappointments and occasional exultation of creative practice. This is, for us, a mode of dreaming that operates as a motive force; a mode of dreaming that propels us into observation both consciously and directly, and in glimpses and glances, in looking awry. In such a state, the world washes over us, oneirically and materially, and we respond to it, lingering with the problem and the delight of image-making, meaning-making, persisting in this attempt to be open to the feeling of being. And we respond by being present, however small we might feel, confronted by the wildness, the otherness and the sheer scale of bodies of water and all the dreams they evoke, and contain.



Lorraine Webb (2010). *David and the Sea* (felt tip pen on paper). 148mm x 210mm.

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Notes

[1] In both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, gods routinely visit or send messages to dreamers. See, e.g., Calhoun, G. M. (1933). Homeric Repetitions, *HSPH 12*, 1–26; Redfield, J. (2014). Dreams from Homer to Plato. *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte*, 15(1), DOI:10.1515/arege-2013-0002.

[2] In 2017, we explored this joint fascination in a project that resulted in the collaborative exhibition *The Possibilities of Water*, at Edith Gallery, Whanganui NZ, August (poems and paintings), and then published the findings in Webb, J. and Webb, L. (2018). The possibilities of water. *Axon: Creative Explorations; Material Poetics*, 8(1).

[3] The other elements are explored in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (1938), *Air and Dreams* (1943), and *Earth and Reveries of Will* (1948). The ideas of reverie and of how phenomenology can build understandings are pursued further in *The Poetics of Space* (1958), *The Poetics of Reverie* (1960), and the unfinished *Fragments of a Poetics of Fire* (1962).

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