

HAYTHAM EL-WARDANY + IMAN ISSA =

On Sleep

IMAN: Lets begin with what made you interested in the subject of sleep in the first place?

HAYTHAM: My interest in sleep started a while ago. There were a few questions that concerned me: one was the question of identity and whether the individual remains within history or outside of it during sleep. I was also interested in the relationship of the individual to the community while sleeping. And little by little, I started to pay more attention to the timing of these concerns and how they might relate to the political circumstances in which we are living. I started to ask myself about the relationship between my interest in sleep at this moment and the general political context, especially with the consideration that the individual often tends to think about sleep as being something negative—the opposite of political action. I don't know how to describe the present moment—whether it would be as a moment of frustration and despair, or a moment marking the end of the revolutionary period in which we have been living for the past few years. Is it about limits? About a recognition of a kind of failure and a moment of defeat? I don't know, but I became interested in what it means to think about sleep within this context.

IMAN: It is interesting to me how you link sleep to the needs or conditions of the present moment, especially since in our previous conversations, you have been careful to qualify sleep as not necessarily a form of surrender or capitulation, but as an action in and of itself, one that might open up a space for a different kind of engagement. Can you speak more about the positive or active qualities with which you link sleep?

HAYTHAM: There are some assumptions about sleep, which classify it in the category of nonaction, or that it is something negative. Of course, in sleeping, there is something negative, and there is a kind of withdrawal, but there is also something positive, something active, and something political. For, maybe, at a certain moment one decides that the political context in which one would proceed is reaching an impasse, and that, at that moment, the most meaningful political action is for the individual to disengage from his or her context, to get separated from it. Of course, getting separated from it doesn't mean that the individual gets rid of it completely. There are things that remain, but to get separated from one's social and political context is to move to another zone, one

that allows for a rethinking of the situation, for a different kind of action. Therefore, sleep can signify a dissociation, and that could have a positive value, or a political significance.

IMAN: Would you say then that the domain of sleep is necessarily an individual one, or could it happen on a collective scale? You had spoken before of a “collective awakening.”

HAYTHAM: Yes, definitely, Walter Benjamin used to speak of a “collective awakening,” equivalent to revolution. It is the moment a group of people starts to redefine itself, and to change its reality. It is that moment that he labels as “awakening.” Thus, one can understand from this that “sleep” is the opposite of that. Sleep is the state in which a group of people fails to define itself and is incapable of changing the reality. It is possible to consider Benjamin's argument as linking revolution with awakening. In the sense that after a long sleep, people would wake up and take it upon themselves to change their conditions. Therefore, one can think that sleep is marked by an inability to change, by inactivity and indolence. But it is also possible to think of it differently; sleep as not necessarily the failure of changing reality, but it could be the moment in which we recognize failure, the moment preceding or following a collective awakening, which tried or is trying to change reality. The moment of sleep is one of a recognition of failure, which is distinct from failure itself. Therefore, sleep could carry a positive function because it signifies the moment one is able to see, and to see well. And here it is important to distinguish between sleep and coma, and between sleep and hypnosis, because those are things that could seem similar but are completely different. What is different about sleep is that it is always directed toward awakening. It is part of a process. Whereas coma is the state of disconnection without necessarily any hope of entering another domain. Hypnosis is when one gets hypnotized, and thus is subordinated to an authority. These are very different from sleep.

IMAN: It is interesting to me that you coin sleep as a state of awareness or one that allows for a form of awareness, and I am thinking of this in relationship to how you previously defined sleep as a state in which one is outside of history, where one is removed from his or her social self. Do you think it is this condition of being outside of history and removed from one's social self that allows for this state of seeing and awareness? ▶

HAYTHAM: I am not sure if one would be outside of history and the political context in sleep. I mean, it is possible that one is somewhat outside of history in sleep, but perhaps not totally outside. The fact that one belongs to a social body is not eliminated during sleep, but something is indeed different. What is different is that there is another way to understand or another way to structure the self; one that is more impersonal, and open. I will give you an example: the dreams, or if one would want to call them “hallucinations,” that one has during sleep, have flows of libido and political currents that fuse with one another. Sleep is not an exit from history as much as it is an experiment with history. It is as if one is playing jokes on history. I would argue that in sleep, one is still part of a social body, but at the same time, this body is in a different condition. Perhaps it is less hierarchal and more open to the fluctuating currents that come and go. I think sleep in a way lets the individual move to the space where he or she is both outside of and within history at the same time.

IMAN: I think this is very interesting to think of sleep as an individual activity, but at the same time, one that is not necessarily personal. That it is a space where one gets away from the notion of the self, as we understand it. Could we then qualify sleep as an individual space, but at the same time one connected to a collective space? Is that the space you are speaking of when you say that one is both inside and outside of history?

HAYTHAM: Usually, we imagine sleep as taking place in the private space, which is reserved to the self. If we contrast it with the public space, which is built on social hierarchies, the private space has a field where one doesn't need to prove oneself; one is in his or her private domain and is comfortable. However, there are still interactions taking place, like when one is cooking, one is using all kinds of tools and interacting with various objects. In sleep this can be seen clearly in dreams. For in dreams there are events that take place and individuals, places, and feelings that become manifest. One is not the sole character in one's dreams. So I feel that in sleep, one is getting closer to the impersonal in oneself. He or she is more open, which might allow the person to join or coalesce with objects, events, people, and groups in a way that is not possible when that person is aware of his or her social person.

IMAN: So sleep becomes a way to connect with a group in a manner, which might be more constructive and impossible in the conscious realm. With that in mind, do you think one can then actively and consciously undertake sleep as a political act or action? How would you define the relationship of will and the domain of sleep?

HAYTHAM: What is interesting about sleep in relationship with this subject of will is that sleep can't be reached unless the individual surrenders his or her will. It is a moment when the individual is not in control. And without this surrender, sleep is impossible. Sleep is a situation where one loses one's control without any catastrophic consequences that one normally associates with such a loss of control. That is the interesting thing in sleep or the lesson to be learned from sleep: that one can let go

of himself or herself without being at a loss. It is also interesting to think of will in relation to the moment of awakening. To what extent does one will that moment? To what extent does one's will play a role in choosing the place or time of awakening? I don't know, and I don't feel will is necessary here, whereas sleep is certainly the moment in which will is actively surrendered. It is not a failure of the will, not a defeat. It is a moment when one wills surrender, when one is not afraid of losing control.

IMAN: I want to go back to the relation of sleep to a collective space. Can the activity of sleep itself be thought of as collective? If you think of sleep as not just about closing one's eye, but that it is a space with a certain set of parameters and conditions, then maybe the state it allows could be achieved in conditions unrelated to and distinct from sleep. So with that in mind, do you think one could speak of a collective space in the activity of sleep, of a group dynamic or action?

HAYTHAM: When the individual sleeps, he or she is usually sleeping next to someone, and even if there is no one with him or her in the room, there is someone next door, someone close by. There is always the other individual besides the one sleeping, and one has trust in that individual. I think that sleeping entails a level of trust of the other. This could be the result of personal knowledge or from the belief that that individual by virtue of their personality, background, condition, etc., has no reason to hurt them. But it is a belief that entails letting go of ourselves together. Maybe what distinguishes an awake group from a sleeping one is indeed something unrelated to having one's eyes be open or shut. It is trust. Of course, these divisions are quite simplistic and not very accurate, however, but to generalize, one could say that the awake group is more likely to not easily let go of hierarchies or of the dominance of the self, whereas the sleeping group has abandoned the self out of a trust in the group dynamic or situation.

IMAN: I like very much the idea of an individual space, but at the same time, one that abandons the self. Would you be able to think of other examples beside sleep that allow this space of trust in the group to occur, other situations in which this abandonment of the self and its hierarchies could happen?

HAYTHAM: I think the answer is both yes and no. There are activities like listening, which share something with sleep. However, it is not a total similarity, because sleep has something very unique and exciting about it, which is this active loss of control. It is an experience in which the individual exists and doesn't at the same time. He exists because things continue happening to him or her, but he/she also doesn't exist because he/she is not aware of these things at the conscious level. When one listens, one is thinking with the ear, which constitutes an automatic reaction; it is not as calculated or controlled as other thought processes and that might be similar to the activity of sleep, where thought is not within one's control and yet is taking place nonetheless.

IMAN: This makes me wonder what role awareness plays in sleep, if one thinks of sleep as a place where one can

reorganize one's thoughts. Do you think awareness could be instrumentalized to make the most out of the activity of sleep?

HAYTHAM: I think that sleep entails a different level of awareness. In sleep, one is in a certain level of consciousness; however, one doesn't have access to that consciousness. It is different from being awake. I personally think that the moment after the person wakes up from sleep is a very interesting one because one might be enticed to put her hands on what happened during her sleep, to reenact the experience, to recount her dreams and understand what took place during that time, but that is an impossibility. One can never succeed in such an endeavor. It will always escape oneself and the only thing one can do is to accept this discontinuity, and to cherish the few things that may manifest from that experience.

IMAN: In that case, to what extent do you consider it important to understand the state of sleep, post-act? To what extent is it important that the person in the period after sleep attempts to absorb and recollect the fragments of what has taken place?

HAYTHAM: Are you asking how this can be positive? Or how can it be interesting or productive? Is that the question?

IMAN: Not exactly. I don't feel like it would be productive to ask the question in that way, because I don't know if whatever yields itself will be necessarily apparently constructive. I am more interested in the importance in your opinion of the post-sleeping attempt to recollect or absorb what has taken place, even if that doesn't yield a complete picture. You had mentioned Surrealism in our discussions, and in Surrealism it appears to me there is an emphasis on capturing all this material, which is attained at different levels of consciousness. There is a certain result that comes out of the experience of dreaming, sleeping, etc. So do you consider this important? Is there a final product we can look to, or is the emphasis on the activity itself without it necessarily yielding anything extra?

HAYTHAM: Maybe one can think of Surrealism as a movement that attempted to change reality, that tried to disturb the society and its ethics by presenting an other of which that society is scared. I do not necessarily share the opinion of the Surrealists that the individual, by coining a frame, can change reality; something else is needed here. I am not sure what it is.

IMAN: Do you think this interest in sleep relates to other themes you worked on, like your *How to Disappear* book, which consists of a set of instructions and aphorisms or your previous work on listening and the analysis of sound? Can you see a relationship between these themes and your current work on sleep?

HAYTHAM: I think the book on sleep on which I am currently working has a close relationship with my book *How to Disappear*. In *How to Disappear*, I experimented with different formats and methods of writing. I was actually thinking of something you told me about, how one cannot distinguish between form and content—that they are part and parcel of the same thing. It was interesting for me to test other methods

of writing that might come close to the actual experience of listening and sound; this idea of thinking with one's ear and how that could be translated in writing. In that book, I attempted to recall the experience of listening and how it might be different from seeing. If we think that most of our consciousness is based on "the eye," one can start to question why this is the case. What if the person does a shift in his or her position and abandons what is visual for what is audible? What came out from this question was the conclusion that the self that hears is different from the one that sees. In a way, I could even say that in order to sleep, one needs the ear more than the eye. Something in which I am interested in is how in most dreams the audible element is not in the foreground, yet the manner by which most dreams progress constitutes a form of rhythm, and it is this rhythm that is the most distinctive feature of dreams. There might be no melody, no sound, but there is always a rhythm. There is an echo and there are several things that I believe are not perceived by the eye, but by the ear.

IMAN: What format do you imagine the sleep book will take?

HAYTHAM: I think it will be in the form of fragments, and this is related to how I think of sleep. Sleep is constantly avoiding and protecting itself from being a research subject. The more I get close to it, the more it becomes something else. Therefore, poetry as a method, which is marked by precision, refinement, fineness, delicacy, and intuition, is the one I believe to be most apt at capturing the contradictions one faces in sleep. Poetry has a light hand; it doesn't keep a firm hold of things. It substitutes uniformity with precision, and logic with delicacy. The hallucinations, the impulses, and the discontinuities of poetry are closer to sleep than to wakefulness. I imagine the book to be a formal translation of these sensibilities.

IMAN: Would you like to speak about the writers and practitioners who have been instrumental in your research on sleep?

HAYTHAM: I was certainly intrigued by what Walter Benjamin wrote about collective awakening in his unfinished *Arcades Project*, which we had mentioned before. I was also interested in Hannah Arendt's writings in *The Human Condition*, about the public and the private realm, and the importance of the movement between the two realms. She argues in favor of the private realm over what she considered a trend to expand the public realm. This argument is consistent with that of Jonathan Crary in his book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, on capitalism's continuous targeting of sleep and its attempt to subordinate it to its logic. Here, sleep is presented as one of the last bastions standing up to the overarching reach of capitalism and neoliberalism. And, of course, Maurice Blanchot has written more than once about sleep and the question of identity. Blanchot sought to approach sleep without considering wakefulness to be the initial state. He presented sleep and dreaming as a sphere of projection and similarity; everything becomes similar to something else, and we in turn project those similarities onto the strangers that resemble us. ==