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GASTON BACHELARD

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Gaston Bachelard was born on June 27, 1884, at Bar-sur-Aube, a small town in the Champagne Ardennes. In 1903, as a youth, Bachelard began working as a temporary clerk at a post office. Simultaneously, he began his studies as an autodidact and in 1924 earned a diploma in mathematical sciences, as well as a qualification as a second-degree professor of philosophy, becoming also professor of chemistry at the public college of Bar-sur-Aube. In 1927, Bachelard was designated as a doctor of letters at the Sorbonne in Paris. In 1930, Bachelard joined the Faculty of Letters' academic community in Dijon, where he taught as a professor of philosophy for ten years. In 1940, he became a professor at the Sorbonne in history and philosophy of science, succeeding Abel Rey as the director of the Institute of the History of Science and Technology. In 1947, Bachelard founded the scientific journal *Dialectica* alongside Ferdinand Gonseth and Paul Bernays. On October 16, 1962, a year after winning the Grand Prix Nationale des Lettres, Bachelard died in Paris. He was buried at Bar-sur-Aube's cemetery.

Bachelard's aesthetic thought is characterized, on the one hand, by the relationship between the world of natural elements – the reality around us – and the world of images. On the other hand, his thought is composed of poetics images. Historically, Bachelard's theories developed through various aesthetic and theoretical currents in French phenomenology and an early period of surrealism.

The logical-systemic organization of images (Wunenburger 2006) confirms their fundamental role in Bachelardian aesthetics: (1) they accord with natural elements, giving rise to the concept of *material imagination*, and (2) they underlie the world of poetics. Bachelard's introduction of the *material imagination* concept in *L'eau et les rêves: Essai sur l'imagination de la matière* (1942) emblemized these aspects of his aesthetics. Indeed, Bachelard held that the imagination's materiality corresponds to the production of images sparked by natural elements. The images of matter are always combined from a dialectical perspective: cold vs. hot, alive vs. dead, off vs. on, or wet vs. dry.

Through his poetics, Bachelard highlighted the power of the phenomenology of images. In *La poétique de l'espace* (1957) he introduced images of dwelling, and in *La poétique de la rêverie* (1960) he introduced the value of imagination as a phenomenological need.

MAIN WORKS

In his earlier works, Bachelard focused on the new scientific theories of the 20th century. His first research project was based on the relationship between matter and space and discoveries in microphysics. Highlighting the importance of progressive and constructive knowledge, in *Le nouvel esprit scientifique* (1934), Bachelard examined in an even more specific way the break between everyday experience and scientific knowledge. In this regard, he held that scientific knowledge is based on recurring concepts of rupture and rectification. Following the path of scientific progress in *La philosophie du non: Essai d'une philosophie du nouvel esprit scientifique* (1940), through *no* Bachelard theorized and systematized a way of knowing reality. *No*, he explained, produces knowledge insofar as it denies a given and not rationally elaborated-upon fact, thus making a "permanent rectification" possible.

Bachelard's approach in his epistemological works marked a fundamental step in purging the world of images. Indeed in *La formation de l'esprit scientifique: Contribution à une psychanalyse de la connaissance objective* (1938a), Bachelard expressed his fierce aversion to the world of images, which would later prove to be the focus of his later philosophical works. Images, he said, can be extraordinarily ambiguous and complicated obstacles. But suddenly Bachelard's philosophical interests changed; he expressed a keen interest in the world of images. Indeed, in the same year, he published the first of five books dedicated to the natural elements. In *La psychanalyse du feu* (1938b) Bachelard introduced Jungian complexes as psychoanalytic apparatus to describe images' sensitivity and material involvement. In *L'eau et les rêves: Essai sur l'imagination de la matière* (1942), he described the fundamental difference between material imagination and formal imagination: material imagination comprises images that relate to matter, while formal imagination relates to images' superfluous approach. In this regard, the realm of imagination functions through the law of the four natural elements. Through literary and poetic constructs, Bachelard showed the dialectical aspect of various water images, illustrating clear waters vs. dark waters, deadly waters vs. vital waters, and feminine waters vs. masculine waters.

With the air element, Bachelard introduced the concept of the mobility of images, which he developed in *L'air et les songes: Essai sur l'imagination du mouvement* (1943). This concept describes how the imagination can produce images of movement. Bachelard dedicated two texts to the earth element. In *La terre et les rêveries de la volonté: Essai sur l'imagination des forces* (1948) Bachelard underlined the role of resistance. The faculty of resistance enables the description of an essential theme: the sensitive relationship between the hand and matter in the condition of "petrissage," in which ductility and resistance occupy opposite poles. In *La terre et les rêveries du repos: Essai sur les images de l'intimité* (1949), through the images of intimacy, Bachelard identified the importance of domestic space, childhood homes, and roots. Using figures of the cave, the house, and the root, he extrapolated the Jonah complex to interpret the earth's material bond. The maternal womb's ancestral relationship, he explained, denoted the protective

envelopment of the whale's belly in the Jonah parable; in this welcoming cavity of the belly, all things will find refuge.

Bachelard's inclination toward the world of aesthetics remained fundamentally important in his later works. *La poétique de l'espace* (1957), his first text devoted to poetics, analyses the phenomenology of imagination and poetic images. Its central argument focuses on inhabited space – the space of experience – and the aesthetic assonance of our condition, inhabited through images of the house. Introducing the *topoanalysis* concept as the study of happy, welcoming, and native spaces, Bachelard described the various places of the house in detail, as well as their representations of our experience – the attic, the cellar, closets, and chests are all objects and places that accompany our imagination. Describing the dialectic of the inside-out and the dimension of intimate immensity, he suggested that opposite images can suggest different ways to feel a space-experience. Poetic images became crucial in *La poétique de la rêverie* (1960), where Bachelard illustrated the division between rationality and metaphysics. Thus, the phenomenology of images urges us toward creative participation.

The last text of Bachelard related to the fire spaces that create intimacy is *La flamme d'une chandelle* (1961) that defines the candlelight's contribution as a basic image of intimacy. Flame's great evocative power, said Bachelard, "forces us to imagine".

DIALOG WITH CONTEMPORARIES

In the first decades of the 20th century, Jean-Paul Sartre (1936; 1940) theorized about images and imagination, consecrating two works to the imagination and the imaginary. Simultaneously, and then especially in the second part of the 20th century, Bachelard hired the role of philosopher of images, inspiring many contemporary intellectuals, such as Roger Caillois, Paul Ricoeur, Gilbert Durand, Henry Corbin, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Serres.

Bachelard organized his philosophical system through dimensions of his thought such as: (1) the poetic activity, in which imagination presents itself as a primitive intention of consciousness; (2) material images, in which an image is a psychic and physical continuum; and (3) the reunion of being with the world through imagination (Wunenbuger 2006: 69-71). Using an experienced approach, Bachelard explored experience's material sphere. Like Caillois and Corbin, Bachelard analyzed reality's material structures (Chiore 2004), contextualizing his thinking through a "transcendental and fantastic" investigation. According to Foucault, Bachelard was a greatly valuable resource especially because, by bringing first-class authors and secondary or forgotten authors into dialog with each other, he showed how long-established cultural hierarchies can be circumvented and challenged.

CRITICAL DEBATE

An early phase of the critical debate surrounding Bachelard stems from his interest in two opposing domains: epistemology and aesthetics. In a lecture for the Société Française de Philosophie in 1950,

Bachelard played with words by describing the figure of the 24-hour man, "l'homme de 24 heures," defining the coexistence of the two aspects: the nocturnal and the diurnal, i.e. the imaginary and the rational.

His work represents two opposite sides:

- 1) a first epistemology, based on his epistemological approaches, from 1927 to 1940;
- 2) a first aesthetics, based on material imagination and the elements, from 1938 to 1949;
- 3) a second epistemology, based on contemporary physics and the rationalism, from 1949 to 1953;
- 4) a second aesthetics, based on poetics, from 1957 to 1961.

Beginning with Bachelard's earliest legacy in French philosophy, the dialectical aspect of his works immediately faced emphatic criticism. In 1974, Dominique Lecourt analyzed two phases of discordance, separating these two paths in *Bachelard ou le jour et la nuit* (1974). Conversely, François Dagognet sparked a new course of criticism, highlighting the dual aspect of Bachelardian philosophy (Dagognet 1984) and introducing the possibility of a constitutive dichotomy in which rationality and irrationality combine. A decisive phase in Bachelard criticism is related to the constitution of a Bachelardian ethics (Wunenburger 2013), where a dialectical vision of knowledge becomes necessary to openly and comprehensively read Bachelard's works.

A poly-philosophical reading of Bachelard's works developed a new sort of criticism. In Italy, interest in Bachelard began as early as the 1950s, investigating his aesthetics of images (Dorfles 1952; Boccali 2017) and dialectics (Sertoli 1972; Vinti 1997; Alison 2019). Even for the Geneva School (Georges Poulet, Jean Starobinski, Jean-Pierre Richard), the phenomenological aspect of Bachelard's thought has been a point of reference in the aesthetic-literary tradition. The Anglophone reception of Bachelard's works has been characterized by some fundamental topics, such as the dynamism based on a bivalent system (Smith 2016) and the relation between Bachelardian thought and the evolution of phenomenology in the Western tradition (Rizo-Patron 2017).

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