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# Critique of Reason in Gaston Bachelard's Philosophy of the Imagination

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**Abstract:** A tension runs through the whole of Gaston Bachelard's philosophy: between science and poetry, and between reason and imagination. One facet of the tension is the critique of reason Bachelard's works on imagination engage in. This paper examines the critique in comparison with the ideas and arguments presented by Theodor Adorno, one of the foremost critics of reason in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bachelard's study of the imagination is not a romantic, unreflective flight from the rigor and objectivity of sciences into the realm of the subjective. Imagination to Bachelard is a distinctly human activity with which reason's limitations and excesses can be counterbalanced. All eight books by Bachelard on imagination, from *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* through *The Poetics of Reverie*, are considered together with Adorno's works such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Negative Dialectics*. The affinity between Frankfurt School and French history and philosophy of science has been underscored by Michel Foucault but remains a topic that hasn't attracted much attention from students of modern European intellectual history. Hoping to make a contribution on this topic, this paper explores the intersections between Adorno and Bachelard surrounding the question of reason.

**Keywords:** Gaston Bachelard, Theodor Adorno, Imagination, Rationality, 20<sup>th</sup> Century European Philosophy.

## Introduction

At the opening of *Fragments of the Poetics of Fire*, the very last book he was still working on by the time of his death, Gaston Bachelard says something quite revealing about his study of the imagination. When he first started working on literary imagery, he believed that he would be able to study images as he did "scientific ideas," that, through a rational approach to the examples of literary imagery he could collect and classify, he would discover "the lines of a new science of poetic language" (Bachelard 1997, 3). He later realizes the "paradox in studying the imagination "objectively"," that there are fundamental differences between scientific ideas and literary images and he cannot study them in one and the same way. Scientific ideas cannot be separated from their past, for they are "invented only as correctives to the past" (Bachelard 1997, 7). They, in other words, have a long history, whereas poetic imagination "has no history at all. It admits of no past preparation." Subsequently, as

he tells us, he resolved to "lead two lives" (Bachelard 1997, 9).

Bachelard is foremost known as a philosopher – rare among modern philosophers – who was at home in both of "the two cultures," to use the polemical phrase that came into prominence since C. P. Snow's celebrated Rede Lecture of that title in 1959. Bachelard himself wasn't particularly vocal either about the matter – the split of Western intellectual life into two cultures, one of the sciences and the other of the humanities – or how it might be resolved. As far as his own work life is concerned, he seems to have been a convinced separatist; his acknowledging, most notably in *Fragments of Poetics of Fire* as cited above, about the need to "lead two lives" – that he could work in peace only when matters of concepts and those of imagery remain divided into "independent halves" (Bachelard 1997, 8) – has been duly noted and sometimes been taken to confirm a "radical duality" (Kotowicz 2016, 11) of his thought. But the question of the relationship between the two domains in Bachelard's philosophy is far from being settled. Some commentators, in spite of what Bachelard himself says in *Fragments of Poetics of Fire* and elsewhere, argue that there is fundamental unity in Bachelard's thought; others believe that the clean-cut division between the two is really just that – a necessary and well-justified bi-partition between science and poetry. Still others present more nuanced views; Roch Smith, for instance, points to "a subtle "cross-fertilization"" (Smith 2016, 133) between Bachelard's philosophy of science and that of imagination. Mary McAllester Jones gives a brief survey of the differing views on the question and criticizes them as a whole by noting that they all "destroy peculiarly Bachelardian tension between science and poetry, reason and imagination." (Jones 1991, 91) Her own, more considered understanding of the Bachelardian polarity propounds that, while "Science and poetry are undeniably distinct" in Bachelard, a uniquely Bachelardian theme in philosophy – which she names "subversive humanism" – runs through both, often bringing them together (Jones 1991, 91). Under the aegis of subversive humanism, in Jones's account, both science and poetry in Bachelard create tensions between subject and object, letting us experience "the shifting and breaching of their familiar frontiers" (Jones 1991, 92). Bachelard's reinterpretation of subject-object relation leads to an abolition of "the frontiers of the internal and external worlds, making them reciprocal and interdependent" (Jones 1991, 13). Affirming the work of human creativity and the role of language in this regard in

both science and poetry, Jones concludes, Bachelard's subversive humanism redefines the human.

The present essay examines one element of the tension Jones underscores between science and poetry, reason and imagination, in Bachelard; namely, the ways in which his philosophy of the imagination performs a critique of reason, a critique that makes his works on the imagination go beyond the confines of poetics and come into contact with epistemology. The imagination in Bachelard's works stands in opposition, largely implicitly but at times quite explicitly, to what he calls "the stolid brand of rationalism [*rationalisme immobile*]" (Bachelard 1997, 8; Bachelard 1988b, 33). For starters, against the stolid, "immobile" rationalism, a rationalism that "acquires a taste of school" and becomes "cheerful as a prison gate, welcoming like a tradition . . . a spiritual prison,"<sup>1</sup> Bachelard champions an *activism* of imagination. In Bachelard's universe, the ideal of purity, for instance, can be either defined by reason (rationalist) or experienced in imagination (activist). When it is rationalist, we depend on our practical experience and take care "not to mix the pure with the impure," for we know "In such a mixture the pure is invariably ruined" (Bachelard 2002a, 254). In contrast, when purity is *imagined*, when the ideal of purity becomes an "activity" and "embodies a triumphant *act of purification*," the antithesis between purity and impurity becomes a veritable *duel*, in which purity "*attacks* impurities." Rituals of aspersion reflect this power of imagined purity; David in Psalm 51 repents his sin and pleads for renewal in these words: "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow." As Bachelard comments on this verse, hyssop "was the smallest of the flowers [the Hebrews] knew" and was "used for sprinkling" (Bachelard 1983, 142). When water is imagined to have purifying power, only a few drops of water are enough to give purity to the soul of a sinner. Or, to put it a little more dramatically: "A single dewdrop purifies a cesspool" (Bachelard 2002a, 254). Imagined purity sets in motion "the *will to purify*," compared to which the ideal of rational purity becomes utterly "inert" and "defenseless against insult and injury."

Imagination is activist because imagination is not perception; whereas perception is "a familiar memory, an habitual way of viewing form and color," imagination "*deforms* what we perceive" (Bachelard 1988a, 1). Imagination being the human psyche's faculty of "*openness and novelty*," (Bachelard 1988a, 1) images "*precede* perception, initiating an adventure in perception" (Bachelard 2002a, 3). Given this dynamic *cogito* of the images, imagination diverges even more widely from conceptual thinking than from perception. As one of the often cited statements Bachelard makes in this respect has it, "concepts and images develop on two divergent planes of the spiritual life" (Bachelard 1971, 52). Concepts can have precisely outlined meanings but images "do not withdraw into their meaning" and "tend to go beyond their meaning" (Bachelard 2011, 2). Bachelard even goes so far as saying that a task of a poetics is to establish the reign of poetic language, where ordinary language is freed from "the obligations of ideational coherence" and from "servitude to meaning" (Bachelard 1997, 17). The divergence between concepts and images lets Bachelard ascribe an

ontology to images and become increasingly convinced of the autonomy of the imagination. It was his last "wild ambition" to work out "the principles of spontaneity itself" from the language of imagery (Bachelard 1997, 5).

Michel Foucault is the first commentator on Bachelard who recognized and underlined an affinity between French history of science and the Frankfurt school. Given that French historians of science all in their own way wrestled with the aspects of the question of *Aufklärung*, "If one had to look outside France for something corresponding to the work of Koyré, Bachelard, Cavaillès, and Canguilhem, it would be in the vicinity of the Frankfurt School, no doubt, that one would find it" (Foucault 1998, 469). At the heart of the endeavor of both groups are the questions surrounding reason. The history and fate of reason are crucial concerns to both; Bachelard wrote a book called *The Formation of the Scientific Mind*; Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer co-wrote *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Indeed what strikes the reader of Bachelard's works on poetics is the unmistakable, intriguing resonances between his thinking and that of Adorno's; it is almost as if Adorno gives a philosophical programme and Bachelard its implementation. In what follows, intersections between their thoughts will be pursued, such that they demonstrate how Bachelard's thinking on the imagination becomes also a critique of rationality, in much the same vein as that of Adorno's. Deeply idiosyncratic in their approach and style, and thoroughly against system-building in philosophy, both Bachelard and Adorno present their commentators with unusual difficulties. Any attempt at explicating their thoughts in a neatly organized, systematic manner is easily defied. An alternative is to rely on chronology. Starting from *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* and ending with *The Poetics of Reverie*, all eight works on the imagination published in Bachelard's lifetime are discussed. They have been divided into four pairs; the two works in each pair are more connected to each other than to other works not only by close publication dates but thematically as well. Reading these works chronologically has in fact one advantage for the topic at hand. One gets to have a clearer sense that reflecting on the nature, past and future of the human mind, of which reason and imagination are two key facets, was indeed an abiding concern for Bachelard, that it is present in his works on the imagination from the start till the end.

### 1. Discovering the Furthest Limits of Our Mind: *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (1938) and *Lautréamont* (1939)

*The Psychoanalysis of Fire* is now widely considered a turning point in Bachelard's career, that which marks the beginning of his active interest in the question of imagination, but this slim book was originally meant as a work in epistemology, a companion volume to *The Formation of the Scientific Mind*, which was also published in 1938. This latter work is subtitled "A Contribution to a Psychoanalysis of Objective Knowledge," and deals mainly with a series of "epistemological obstacles" – this famed, Bachelardian notion designates a cluster of instincts, passions, or values that hinder the mind from achieving objective, scientific knowledge – the scientific mind has had

to overcome in its formation. Fire – an object of fascination from time immemorial – was to be psychoanalyzed as one of such obstacles in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*. So at the very outset, in the first paragraph of the “Introduction” to the book, Bachelard says: “scientific objectivity is possible only if one has broken first with the immediate object, if one has refused to yield to the seduction of the initial choice, if one has checked and contradicted the thoughts which arise from one’s first observation” (Bachelard 1964b, 1). And a few pages later, Bachelard states clearly what he intends with the book, that it will be “an illustration of the general theses put forward in [*The Formation of the Scientific Mind*],” that “as an example of that special psychoanalysis,” the personal experiences of fire discussed in the book will be demonstrated to be “human errors,” and that it will show clearly “how the fascination exerted by the object *distorts inductions*” and thereby improve the “pedagogy of scientific instruction” (Bachelard 1964b, 5).

And yet, only two out of seven chapters – chapters 4 and 5, “Sexualized Fire” and “The Chemistry of Fire: History of a False Problem,” respectively – explicitly discuss fire as an epistemological obstacle and all the rest are an almost guileless encomium to the allure of fire that has held such power in the minds of poets and novelists, philosophers and scholars, and, of course, Bachelard himself. Even in chapters 4 and 5, where one reads Bachelard writing as an avowed epistemologist – that with the error of the animistic intuition of fire exposed, “we wish to denounce this false assurance which claims to connect fire and life” (Bachelard 1964b, 46) or that “through the naïve ideas that have been developed about it, fire affords examples of the *substantialistic obstacle* and of the *animistic obstacle* which both impede scientific thought” (Bachelard 1964b, 61-2), he writes, for instance – Bachelard never becomes fully denunciatory of the enthused confusions fire creates but sooner or later turns contemplative and appreciative of fire’s power. So when Bachelard writes of alchemy and its grand error, of how it is “penetrated by an immense sexual reverie, by a reverie of wealth and rejuvenation,” of how “this *sexual reverie*” of alchemists is “a *fireside reverie*,” and then remarks, “Far from being a *description* of the objective phenomena, it is an attempt to *inscribe* human love at the heart of things” (Bachelard 1964b, 51), the reader rightly senses that Bachelard’s sympathy is aligned more with the inscription of love than with the description of phenomena, that alchemists’ passionate reveries cannot simply be dismissed as “human errors.”

*The Psychoanalysis of Fire* redeems, and *not* condemns, “the primitive scale of values” (Bachelard 1964b, 4) even scientists return to when they are not practicing their specialty. And this ambivalence, this going against his original plan for the book is in evidence very early on and lasts throughout, which can be disconcerting and leave the reader with the impression that the book is “disorderly and incomplete.”<sup>22</sup> It is in chapter 1, “Fire and Respect: The Prometheus Complex,” that, far from hindering intellectual progress, our love and “respect” for fire is shown to be its great instigator. For children brave enough to transgress the social interdiction not to touch fire, fire teaches “*clever disobedience*” (Bachelard 1964b,

11). The social interdiction will quickly turn into an intellectual one as the children grow and the disobedience fire taught them will now become “a veritable *will to intellectuality*” (Bachelard 1964b, 12). Prometheus complex is the name Bachelard gives this, i.e. the “tendencies which impel us *to know* as much as our fathers, more than our fathers, as much as our teachers, more than our teachers.”

This strange book may be best characterized as an attempt at a theory of intellectual experience. “Theory of Intellectual Experience” was a title Adorno originally had in mind for what later became the “Introduction” of *Negative Dialectics* (Adorno 2008, xi). Adorno here propounds a task for philosophy, one that embraces “things which ever since Plato used to be dismissed as transitory and insignificant,” namely “nonconceptuality, individuality, and particularity” (Adorno 1973, 8). Philosophy has now to concern itself with “the qualities it downgrades as contingent, as a *quantité négligeable*.” Bachelard himself doesn’t call them by these names but these are the running themes in Bachelard’s poetic works, starting from *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*. When Bachelard says, “I would rather fail to teach a good philosophy lesson than fail to light my morning fire” (Bachelard 1964b, 9), recalling the matinal ritual of kindling a fire in the hearth, of which his father was in charge when he was a child, he seems to make good-hearted fun at traditional philosophy, to which anything in the order of the pleasures of morning fire would belong to the category of contingent quality or “negligible quantity.” But it is before fire that a child, by leaning “his elbows on his knees and [holding] his head in his hands,” learns to assume “the attitude of the Thinker” (Bachelard 1964b, 17). Reveries before fire are reinstated with the philosophical dignity they deserve. Fire, with all the power it has to suggest change, becoming, forces of life and death, and renewal, leads to what Bachelard names the “Empedocles complex”; a “magnifying reverie” can turn any burning log into a Mount Etna, before which we are urged “forward to meet our destiny,” giving us a proof that “the contemplation of fire brings us back to the very origins of philosophical thinking” (Bachelard 1964b, 18). Bachelard ends *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* fully convinced of the indispensability of the imagination for our intellectual life. We are the creation of our reverie because “it is reverie which delineates the furthest limits of our mind” and because “Imagination works at the summit of the mind like a flame” (Bachelard 1964b, 110).

The ambivalence that runs through it makes *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* less of a study proper of the imagination than a primal history of subjectivity, in which the genesis of intellectual experience is located in reverie/imagination. Given this, *Lautréamont* may be said to herald the true beginning of Bachelard’s over two-decades-long exploration of the imagination. Bachelard’s subject in the book is the unusual excess of speed and aggression in the poetry of Lautréamont, the pen name of Isidor Ducasse, whose *Les chants de Maldoror* was written and published in the late 1860s and was rediscovered and idolized by surrealists decades later. Bachelard puts the uniqueness of Lautréamont and *Les chants de Maldoror* succinctly when he compares them with Nietzsche and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “Compared with Lautréamont, how slow Nietzsche seems, how calm and com-

fortable with his eagle and serpent. One moves like a dancer, the other springs like a tiger” (Bachelard 1986, 3).

Bachelard sees the main thrust of Lautréamont’s “poetry of provocation, of muscular impulse” (Bachelard 1986, 5) as “the will-to-live” turned “a will-to-attack” (Bachelard 1986, 3); this will-to-attack in turn is seen as “a need for action, a will to take advantage of all living forms in order to give their action a poetic character, their formal causality” (Bachelard 1986, 86). This subsumption of aggression – which can be truly brutal in *Les chants de Maldoror* – into poetic dynamism is not to take teeth out of Ducasse’s poetry. In the last pages of *Lautréamont*, Bachelard proposes what he calls “non-Lautréamontism,” not in the sense of “opposing Lautréamontism in any way” but in the sense of *opening* it in the most fruitful way, just as Euclidean geometry can mutate into non-Euclideanism (Bachelard 1986, 90). The actual physical movement of humans is but a poor imitation of that of animals, whose vehemence and rapidity Ducasse’s poetry dazzlingly captures. The task for the proposed non-Lautréamontism is to reintegrate “the human into the passionate life,” the life “that will spill out of *Maldoror* in all directions,” so that we learn “the truly human joy of action” in “the *dream of action*.” Bachelard concludes that non-Lautréamontism thus understood belongs to “the preliminary tasks for a pedagogy of the imagination.”

Reflecting on the primitive cave paintings in connection with the question of the origin of art, Adorno questions whether their apparent naturalism is a naturalism of simple imitation. As art, what remains vague about them is due to “something of the indeterminate, of what is inadequate to the concept” in them (Adorno 1997, 326). Cave paintings, in Adorno’s view, aspire to what Paul Valéry demanded of art, namely “the painstaking imitation of the indeterminate, of what has not been nailed down.” In this view, the “greatest fidelity to the portrayal of movement” that characterizes cave paintings suggests that the creative impulse behind these painting is not “naturalistic imitation but, rather, from the beginning a protest against reification” (Adorno 1997, 326-27). The same can be said of Ducasse’s poetry of animal aggression and violence. *Les chants de Maldoror* and *Lautréamont* are both impassioned protests against reification. What Adorno sees in Edgar Allan Poe, Bachelard sees in Isidor Ducasse. Adorno and Bachelard find in Poe and Ducasse “*Ratio* itself [becoming] mimetic in the shudder of the new” (Adorno 1997, 20).

## 2. Recovering Moralities of Water and Air: *Water and Dreams* (1942) and *Air and Dreams* (1943)

In *Water and Dreams*, a deeply unconventional book, under the simple rubric of “water’s morality,” Bachelard undertakes a naturalist reconception of morality, in which the imagination plays a decisive role and the limitations of a rationalist approach to morality are critiqued.

Bachelard first reproaches scholars who readily consign the purity of water to the realm of rational hygiene. To them, washing is simply a matter of cleansing off the dirt and being restored to cleanliness. Erwin Rohde among them for instance, as cited by Bachelard, calmly

recommends using running water for washing off severe pollution, the more of running water the more severe the pollution (Bachelard 1983, 141). Bachelard notes this way of seeking the purifying value in water will hardly attract any attention: “The rational value – the fact that the current carries refuse away – is too easy to refute for anyone to hold it in the slightest esteem.” As moral ideals, purity and purification are not experienced on the basis of reasoning. Rather, “All purity is, in fact, substantial. All purification must be thought of as the action of substance.”

Imagination’s activism regarding a special purifying power in water has already been noted. Now attention must be paid to what Bachelard makes of the difference between conceptual understanding and imagining. When it comes to purity, “washing” as a concept refers to a rationally determined practice and describes poorly what we experience internally. By contrast, an act of sprinkling – “aspersion” – retains and conveys purity *imagined*, “a purity both active and substantial.” It is not washing but aspersion that “is dreamed of as the primary operation” and “produces the maximum psychological reality” (Bachelard 1983, 142). To Bachelard, the *value* imagination gives to a material experience of water is always sensed as a “drama of the purity and impurity of water” (Bachelard 1983, 137). Purity of water is a valorized reality and valorization is an act of imagination. Since water is “a pure matter *par excellence*” and our understanding of purity is always imbued with the “poetic solidity” of water’s purity, it is not possible to *know* purity, even when it is not directly of water, without reenacting the “drama” of the purity and impurity of water (Bachelard 1983, 134).

What Bachelard here points to converges in effect with what Adorno calls the “mimetic element of knowledge” (Adorno 1973, 45). Conceptuality supplants the mimetic element; mimetic element is “what [the concept’s] abstractionist mechanism eliminates” (Adorno 1973, 8). In reclaiming the mimetic element conceptuality has so far abandoned, Bachelard goes further than Adorno and links it directly with morality. Since purity of water is both active and substantial, “one drop of pure water suffices to purify an ocean; one drop of impure water suffices to defile a universe” (Bachelard 1983, 142). Either of these two is a “moral direction of the action chosen by material imagination.” The action of the drop of water is “dreamed like a substantial becoming” and, because it is dreamed, this substantial becoming intimately concerns the dreamer as well; the becoming, “desired in the inner recesses of the substance,” starts from “the condensed will” of the dreamer (Bachelard 1983, 143). In this respect, Bachelard asserts, water’s substantial becoming reveals “the destiny of a person” (Bachelard 1983, 142).

In addition to purity, Bachelard’s example of water’s morality is clarity. Every morning before starting the day, cold water on our face “reawakens an energy for seeing”; “It makes sight active, makes a glance an action, a clear, distinct, easy action” (Bachelard 1983, 145). In this way, the freshness of cold water on our face translates into a freshness of the impression the visible world gives. Bachelard quotes from Théophile Gautier a passage about a painter, who paints “in a pavilion situated in the middle of a small body of water” and learns “to preserve the inte-

grality of his hues." Bachelard comments: "Near water, light takes on a new tonality; it seems that light has more clarity when it meets clear water." For moral lessons learned from water to be efficacious, water's substance must become our own substance; as Bachelard puts it, "We are moved to see a scene with limpid eyes when we have reserves of limpidity" (Bachelard 1983, 146). Water's morality builds up its reserves within us: those of purity and clarity; even of youth, for it is water's "fresh and youthful substance" that teaches us how to regain vitality, the power of youth. To anyone who knows water's morality, linking water with one's destiny is no vain exaggeration. Water really is "an essential destiny that endlessly changes the substance of the being" (Bachelard 1983, 6).

Early in *Water and Dreams*, Bachelard gives a definition of the imagination and, in a striking manner, links it with the Nietzschean *übermensch*: "The imagination is not, as its etymology suggests, the faculty for forming images of reality; it is the faculty for forming images which go beyond reality, which *sing* reality. It is a superhuman faculty. A man is a man to the extent that he is a superman" (Bachelard 1983, 16). His next book, *Air and Dreams*, which contains a chapter on Nietzsche, is devoted to what this brief outline of the imagination as a superhuman faculty means, as it can be experienced with aerial poets such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, Rainer Maria Rilke, Friedrich Nietzsche and in aerial phenomena such as "The Imaginary Fall," "The Blue Sky," "Clouds," or "The Aerial Tree," as they are named in the titles of the book's chapters. In Bachelard's reading, all these poets and phenomena give us their aerial lessons; they teach us that "without aerial discipline, without apprenticeship in lightness, the human psyche cannot evolve" (Bachelard 1988a, 261).

The chapter on Nietzsche ("Nietzsche and the Ascensional Psyche"), the only self-contained piece of work devoted to one thinker Bachelard wrote, shows what contribution sensitivity to the imagination of a thinker can make to a deepened understanding of his/her thoughts. Nietzsche's key doctrines – *übermensch*, will to power, eternal return – are presented as essentially a call for an "aerial discipline" – one may translate the call as: "Become light. Become the imaginary matter of air" – in ways that add unexpected precision and concretion to them. In *Air and Dreams*, Bachelard becomes more explicit about his Nietzsche-inspired "translat[ing] humanity back into nature" (Nietzsche 2002, 123) project. In the concluding paragraph of the book, he first exhorts us to live up to the double power of language, its "virtues of clarity and the powers of dream" (Bachelard 1988a, 266). Then he adds: "Really knowing the images of words, the images that exist beneath our thoughts and upon which our thoughts live, would advance our thinking in a natural manner." Especially in *Air and Dreams*, but not limited to it, the word "natural" is often meant more in the sense of "naturalist," i.e. to become closer to nature in a programmatic, self-conscious way. Bachelard in these words really is proposing that a naturalist reconfiguration of philosophy, in which the imagination is allowed its indispensable role, is one way for philosophy to renew itself.

Adorno concludes the course of lectures titled "The Problems of Moral Philosophy" he gave in 1963 by sounding a note of doubt about the possibility of moral philosophy proper in our time. In this, almost exclusively Kant-dominated course, Adorno gives significant class time to a discussion of Nietzsche and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in the very last session; in his view, as moral philosophy, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a failure and provides a case in point for its near bankruptcy (Adorno 2001, 171-76). Adorno's dry, unsympathetic and unimaginative reading of this important work presents an interesting contrast with Bachelard's inspired reading of Nietzsche in *Air and Dreams*; this contrast itself suggests what may crucially be at issue in reconfiguring moral philosophy and philosophy more broadly, namely whether rationality – "the rational, the concept, the argued, the logical, the abstract," as Michèle Le Doeuff enumerates in her polemic against philosophy's self-understanding as solely and entirely a rational enterprise (Le Doeuff 2002, 1) – as currently practiced is really adequate to the tasks philosophy sets itself. This is not a topic to be addressed here but Adorno's dialectical rigor, which is exemplary in its unflinching sensitivity to the matter at hand, lapses – one may even say, fails – with regard to Nietzsche. This is indicative of both Nietzsche's innovation in philosophy and the limitation of dialectics faced with such innovation. At any rate, on this one point, Adorno's critique of reason will have to be directed to him as well.

### 3. A Copernican Revolution of the Imagination: *Earth and the Reveries of Will* (1943) and *Earth and the Reveries of Repose* (1948)

According to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, "Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 4). The principle of equivalence governs enlightenment thinking; "Everything has value only in so far as it can be exchanged, not in so far as it is something in itself" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 128). Every event is explained as repetition; enlightenment's "arid wisdom" sees "nothing new under the sun" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 8). To any possible experience, boundaries are drawn; boundaries that dictate "Whatever might be different is made the same." When thinking is finding and establishing equivalence, truth in general is equated with classifying thoughts and "the knowledge which really apprehends the object" is tabooed along with mimetic magic (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 10). Under such "universal mediation," qualities are liquidated and human beings are forced into conformity (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 9).

*Dialectic of Enlightenment* does give the impression that the reigning social machinery modeled on the enlightenment reason and its corrosive power is omnipresent and omnipotent; nobody escapes, no exit from the machinery. Many passages in *Earth and Reveries of Will* seem to have been written as if in response to precisely this aspect of Adorno and Horkheimer's work. Bachelard defines human character itself in terms of its refusal to conform: "human character could be defined as the indi-

vidual's system of defense against society, as a process of opposition to society" (Bachelard 2002a, 21). Human beings are capable of resisting because they have reserves of psychic energy immune to social control. At "the borders of social reality," he says, "it behooves us to consider truly primordial material realities, the way they are found in nature, as so many invitations to exercise our strengths" (Bachelard 2002a, 23). These realities lead us to the "unconscious recesses of human energy, as yet untouched by the repressions dictated by prudent reason."

To Bachelard, when imagining, an individual is "a dreamer who flees from society, who claims the world as his sole companion" (Bachelard 1983, 133). The critique of reason contained in his theory of imagination also becomes an implicit critique of the social. He makes a distinction between the social and the natural in the unconscious: "the *social* unconscious, motivated by greed, does not contaminate the natural unconscious" (Bachelard 2002a, 228). The natural unconscious, greed-free, does not "desire diamond arithmetically, by the carat" (Bachelard 2002a, 229). Not only do we not desire diamond by the carat, "in our deepest dreams valuables are never sold"; rarely, in our dreams, precious stones may be "given away, but never sold." In other words: imagination has no place for the principle of equivalence. As Bachelard puts it, "It would appear that profound dreaming – dreaming that has left the social for the cosmic realm – has no understanding of exchange." Numerous passages in the chapters of *Earth and Reveries of Will*, especially in the one on "Crystals and Crystalline Reverie," attest to "the knowledge which really apprehends the object" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 10).

As *Dialectic of Enlightenment* presents it, the self-destruction of Western reason is inseparable from that reason's domination over nature, nature external and internal. The authors give this central thesis a series of eloquent variations. For one: "world domination over nature turns against the thinking subject itself: nothing is left of it except that ever-unchanging "I think," which must accompany all my conceptions" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 20). For another: "It is the identity of mind and its correlative, the unity of nature, which subdues the abundance of qualities. Nature, stripped of qualities, becomes the chaotic stuff of mere classification, and the all-powerful self becomes a mere having, an abstract identity" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 6). The calamitous dialectic of the destruction of qualities and the incapacitation of the subject stands condemned throughout *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Sharing in, albeit tacitly for the most part, the authors' judgment in the book, Bachelard's works on the imagination show how things still could be otherwise.

The last in line before *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard's most well-known work on the topic of the imagination, *Earth and Reveries of Repose* presents his most philosophically deepened understanding of the imagination so far. A subversion of the stable subject-object relation has always been a crucial part in his thoughts about the imagination but it was often more hinted at than clearly stated; in *Earth and Reveries of Repose*, this element is accentuated and given a radicalized turn. At the very outset of the book, Bachelard gives a definition of

the imagination, which clearly codifies the subversion of the subject and object in the act of imagining: "the imagination is nothing other than the subject transported into things" (Bachelard 2011, 2). The book has for its subtitle "An Essay on Images of Interiority"; Bachelard's definition is given in light of the human tendencies of "interiority," or introversion, in the imagination. Given this "all-consuming *desire* to go deep into matter," "it is by means of images that the most accurate diagnosis of the temperaments can be made." In other words, the nature of our subjectivity is best measured *not* in itself but in the images we create and love.

Accounts this brief will hardly do justice to Bachelard's often difficult but deeply original and subtle ideas. Elucidating and expanding the definition of the imagination given here deserves a long commentary of its own but will have to be left for another occasion. Suffice it to say that salvaging of qualities and recuperation of the subject are the philosophical tasks Bachelard explicitly set himself in *Earth and Reveries of Repose*. Here again it is as if Bachelard is writing in reply to Adorno. Quality is most of all captured in an intensification of the subject's relating with the object. Bachelard's term for this intensification is "the *tonalized subject*." (Bachelard 2011, 63). When the subject is tonalized, it can "break through crude sensation (colors or scents) and extol nuances" (Bachelard 2011, 60). Qualities may be defined as these nuances apprehended and adhered to with passion. Since every nuance is a "change" in the imagination (Bachelard 1988a, 4), "qualities are not so much states for us but processes of becoming" (Bachelard 2011, 65). A world of qualities is a world in motion and change. As Bachelard puts it, "Qualifying adjectives . . . are closer to *verbs* than to *nouns*. *Red* is closer to *redde*n than to *redness*." In the imagined motion and change, "the intensity of a quality is taken to be the tonalization of the whole subject"; thus the imagination of quality "merges together the subject and the object" (Bachelard 2011, 66).

In connection with these reflections on qualities, Bachelard in *Earth and Reveries of Repose* declares nothing less than a "Copernican revolution of the imagination" (Bachelard 2011, 59), with which he refers to the inversion in the subject-object relation the imagination achieves. The merging together of the subject and the object is also an inversion since, in the merging, quality is not to "be sought in the object's *totality*" but to "be sought in the *total adherence* of a subject who is deeply committed to what he or she is imagining." To put this in Adornian terms, the revolution is one that achieves a "reversal of subjectivity from the domination to the liberation of nature" (Hullot-Kentor 2006, 40). Recovering the memory of nature is in the order of reason's *telos*, a possibility not yet fully realized, in Adorno's thoughts; Bachelard's works, full of "enchanted materialism that can leave imperishable memories in a soul" (Bachelard 2011, 37), show us that such recovery, such memory, has always been with us – if only we heeded the lessons from the imagination.

#### 4. For Our Consciousness Is Destined for Greater Exploits: *The Poetics of Space* (1958) and *The Poetics of Reverie* (1960)

It is not at first obvious but Bachelard is polemic through and through. *The Poetics of Space*, the best-known, most widely read and appreciated book among all of Bachelard's works, is often taken as light-hearted (breezy and pleasant) and, somehow in correlation with this light-heartedness, as a work of an intellectual lightweight (intriguing but inconsequential); yet staged on almost every page of the book is a quarrel with establishment ideas, a quarrel considered, pointed, and consequential. Psychoanalysis, phenomenology (of the mainstream version), and positivism are among the most recurrent of his targets. Opening the book, one may in fact sense right away his rebellion against received ways of doing philosophy from the titles of chapters, "Nests," "Shells," "Corners," "Miniature," "Drawers, Chests, Wardrobes" and so on, in the last of which Bachelard engages in an impressive critique of Bergsonian conceptual philosophy.

In a nutshell, his quarrel in the book is with reification: methodologies, styles of thinking, or ideas that have become dogmatic and routine, ossified and stifling. In the chapter "Corners," Bachelard takes issue with an ideal commonly held, especially among philosophers of certain bent: clarity of language. He poses a question – may one not attribute "grace to curves and . . . inflexibility to straight lines?" – then tells us that Bergson once did and that such usage of language does "not exceed meaning" (Bachelard 1964a, 146). He presents a little more unusual combinations of a qualifier and a noun – a warm curve, a cold angle – and says, "it is a poetic fact that a dreamer can write of a curve that it is *warm*." This poetic fact may be defended on the ground that similar examples – simple cases of defamiliarization – abound in literature. But Bachelard does not think it is simply a question of poetic license; a warm curve has a direct psychological reality. As an "inhabited geometry," and a "minimum of refuge," it often is at the center of our reveries of repose, reveries of a beloved "corner." Bachelard admits such reveries aren't really all that common, so he adds: "But only the dreamer who curls up in contemplation of loops, understands these simple joys of delineated repose" (Bachelard 1964a, 147).

It's not an admission of him going too far, though. He gives another example of "a single word" having "the germ of a dream" from Joseph Joubert, that eminently sensible French moralist, who, curiously, felt certain words/ideas as "huts." Joubert knew "the intimate repose" some words somehow let us experience, as if we are inside a cozy, comforting hut. In fact, the hut itself is such a word; as Bachelard writes in another chapter in the book, the hut belongs to "the legendary images of primitive houses" (Bachelard 1964a, 31); its essence being "the essence of the verb 'to inhabit,'" the hut "becomes centralized solitude" (Bachelard 1964a, 32). As an image, the hut blends "memory and legend" and is "both a history and a prehistory" (Bachelard 1964a, 33). With this example from Joubert, Bachelard likens words to houses – "little houses, each with its cellar and garret" (Bachelard 1964a, 147) – and imagines what element in the meaning

of a word lives in what part of the house. So "Common sense lives on the ground floor, always ready to engage in 'foreign commerce,' on the same level as the others, as the passers-by, who are never dreamers." To paraphrase: on the ground floor lives the most social, i.e. the most widely agreed upon element of the meaning, at the ready to conduct trade with others. Leaving the ground floor, upstairs is the direction for the more aerial, or immaterial, sense of the word and downstairs for the more terrestrial: "To go upstairs in the word house, is to withdraw, step by step; while to go down to the cellar is to dream, it is losing oneself in the distant corridors of an obscure etymology, looking for treasures that cannot be found in words." It is the poet that lives freely in all the floors of the word house: "To mount and descend in the words themselves – this is a poet's life. To mount too high or descend too low, is allowed in the case of poets, who bring earth and sky together." The philosopher by contrast has little leeway in the house. As Bachelard sardonically puts it in a question: "Must the philosopher alone be condemned by his peers to live on the ground floor?"

Bachelard's attempt at undoing the ideal of clarity in language is a polemic against what Adorno called "our positivistic *zeitgeist*" (Adorno 1973, 40). Clarity and communicability of language as desiderata for thinkers: Bachelard takes this to be, again in Adorno's words, "an agent of social control, and so of stupefaction" (Adorno 1973, 51). Whereas Bachelard's polemic in the chapter "Corner" of *The Poetics of Space* is almost too poetic to be manifest, Adorno's is forthright, resolute, and carried out repeatedly in his major works. In *Negative Dialectics*, he says: it is an "all but universal compulsion to confuse the communication of knowledge with knowledge itself," but under present conditions "each communicative step is falsifying truth and selling it out" (Adorno 1973, 41). In the "Notes and Sketches" of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the authors have a section titled "Isolation by Communication," in which they point out, among other things, that "the mendacious idiom of the radio announcer fix[es] itself in the brain as an image of language itself, preventing people from speaking to one another" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 183). The ending of the section is resounding: "Communication makes people conform by isolating them" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 184). In "Enlightenment as Mass Deception," the chapter on the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the authors note that the demand for communicability of language is a corollary of culture becoming advertising. They write: "the more completely language coincides with communication, the more words change from substantial carriers of meaning to signs devoid of qualities" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 133). Adorno puts his objection to communicability as an ideal perhaps most strongly in *Minima Moralia*. In section 64, titled "Morality and Style," he presents what communication in actuality consists of: "Only what they do not need first to understand, they consider understandable; only the word coined by commerce, and really alienated, touches them as familiar" (Adorno 1974, 101). Then he gives his verdict: since "Few things contribute so much to the demoralization of intellectuals," those wanting to avert the demoralization "must recognize

the advocates of communicability as traitors to what they communicate.”

The noted antithesis between society and world in Bachelard is paired with another antithesis, between reason and imagination; reason corresponds to society and imagination to world. Pitting world/imagination against society/reason is an important motif in *The Poetics of Reverie*. In the chapter, “Reveries toward Childhood,” he puts this pair of antitheses as follows: “From the time a child reaches the “age of reason,” from the time he loses his absolute right to imagine the world, his mother, like all educators, makes it her duty to teach him to be *objective* – objective in the simple way adults believe themselves to be “objective.” He is stuffed with sociability” (Bachelard 1971, 107). Education is to socialize the child into conformity. To be rational is to “follow closely in the path of the lives of others.” *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in connection with civilization’s proscription of mimesis, makes the same point. The means with which those in power keep the “masses from relapsing into mimetic behavior” include “the education which “cures” children of childishness” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 148).

The meditations/reveries on words and their magic-like, evocative power that fill the pages of *The Poetics of Reverie* are, to borrow the terms from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, an attempt to *de-rationalize* and *re-mythologize* language.<sup>3</sup> In the last work on the imagination published in his lifetime, Bachelard in effect performs a restitution of the poetic knowledge of the world over and against the rational knowledge of the object. In *Air and Dreams*, he writes: “As is only right, the poetic knowledge of the world precedes rational knowledge of objects. The world is beautiful before being true. The world is admired before being verified” (Bachelard 1988a, 166). This is a rare statement in which Bachelard explicitly speaks of a possible filiation between poetics and science. That he gives priority to the poetic over the rational is noteworthy. Bachelard did not believe in drawing and maintaining strict boundaries, either in poetics or in epistemology, either self-imposed or from without. He compares chemistry with poetry in this regard: “Some man-made chemical bodies are no more real than the *Aeneid* or the *Divine Comedy*. In some ways, it does not seem to us more useful to speak of the boundary of Chemistry than of the boundary of Poetry” (Bachelard 1970, 83). Echoing what he said in the last pages of *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* – that “it is the reverie which delineates the furthest limits of our mind” – Bachelard writes, toward the end of *The Poetics of Reverie*, that dreams before fire “reveals to us the furthest countries of our secret soul” (Bachelard 1988a, 192). In *The Poetics of Reverie*, he takes it as his duty to follow to the utmost limits all “the singular reveries,” “those lines of aberration which are familiar to us” (Bachelard 1988a, 17) because “consciousness is destined for greater exploits” (Bachelard 1988a, 2).

## Conclusion

What Bernard Williams says of Nietzsche applies to Bachelard – and to a lesser extent, Adorno as well. With

these thinkers, “the resistance to the continuation of philosophy by ordinary means is built into the text” (Williams 2006, 300). Gilles Deleuze, in an interview, speaking of the need for a new language for philosophy, notes: “the problem of formal renewal can be posed only when the content is new” (Deleuze 2004, 140). He goes on to say: “We get the feeling that we can’t go on writing philosophy books in the old style much longer . . . So, I think everyone is on the look-out for something new” (Deleuze 2004, 141). His example of an innovator in content and style in philosophy is Nietzsche. Alongside Nietzsche, Adorno and Bachelard will also have to be considered as important innovators, in what they had to say and how they said it. In *Earth and Reveries of Repose*, Bachelard speaks of philosophy lagging behind science; since philosophy has discredited the notion of the noumenon, philosophers “close their eyes to the amazing constitution of a *noumenal* chemistry which, in the twentieth century, represents a major systematics of the organization of matter” (Bachelard 2011, 8). What these philosophers believe to be their lucidity of the mind is often only the effect of “denying all the light,” the light that, ironically, “comes from darker areas of our psyche.” Their lucidity, in other words, is an outcome of keeping off “the interests that encourage the attainment of knowledge,” and rendering themselves inert with regard to the experiences that will provoke such interests to them.

In a note for his lecture on negative dialectics, Adorno reverses the 11<sup>th</sup> thesis in Karl Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* and writes: “Another reason why the world has not changed is that too little is interpreted” (Adorno 2008, 55; original emphasis). The example he gives of philosophy’s not having done its part in interpretation is “the uncritical acceptance of the domination of nature in Marx.” Among so many other things, Bachelard is also a *hermeneut*: not just of texts, but of myriad of our experiences, most of which hitherto have been kept in the dark; experiences where mind and matter, human and nature, permeate into each other and closely intermingle. Reflecting on alchemists’ active “*participation*” in the substantial forces of matter, which invariably led them to *revere* the substantial becoming they desired and could induce in their laboratories, Bachelard writes: “Admiration – or wonderment – is the first and ardent form of knowledge, it is knowledge that extols its object, that valorizes it” (Bachelard 2011, 35-6). One senses here an ironic nod at Platonism. Adorno, for his part, striving to salvage “art’s rationality,” seeks recourse to “Plato’s doctrine of enthusiasm as the precondition of philosophy and emphatic knowledge” (Adorno 1997, 330). Their recasting of Platonism has to be noted, though no space is left for discussing it. In their critiques of reason the “relation of the subject to objectivity” is reconstituted in such a way that it “joins eros and knowledge” (Adorno 1997, 331).

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<sup>3</sup> In their discussion on culture industry as "Enlightenment as Mass Deception," Adorno and Horkheimer point to the contribution customers themselves make, through their language, to "culture as advertising" (133). Their language is rationalized; language "before its rationalization . . . had set free not only longing but lies," and now "in its rationalized form it has become a straightjacket more for longing than for lies." Rationalizing language converges with "demythologizing" it, whereby it "change[s] from substantial carriers of meaning to signs devoid of qualities."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gaston Bachelard, "Surrationalism," in *Gaston Bachelard: A Philosophy of the Surreal*, p. 77. Bachelard's essay "Le Surrationalisme" was first published in *Inquisitions* in 1936, then reprinted in *L'Engagement rationaliste* (1972). Kotowicz translated and included it in the Appendix of his book.

<sup>2</sup> These are Bachelard's own evaluation of the book, as cited by C. G. Christofides in his "Bachelard's Aesthetics," p. 267. Bachelard gives it in an interview in 1957, where he notes that, in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, he took some scientific results from *The Formation of the Scientific Mind* and joined them with literary documents. He did this because the four elements, the fascination with which had to be psychoanalyzed and eliminated in *The Formation of the Scientific Mind*, for it forms a powerful epistemological obstacle in the scientist's mind, nonetheless "corresponded to some sort of human necessity"; if science no longer had any place for them, then it had to be found somewhere in literature by way of the imagination, and this is why the book "is both disorderly and incomplete" (Christofides 1962, 267). In Bachelard's retrospective view, it is not his ambivalence – between science and imagination – but the way it was written that gave the book those qualities. A measure of ambivalence, if only retrospectively, is to be sensed, though, when he further comments: "[*The Psychoanalysis of Fire*] is a book I would like to rewrite. I have always thought that I would give this work the same extensive treatment that the other three elements received in my researches" (267-68).