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'GASTON BACHELARD, HALF-WAY BETWEEN SCIENCE AND THE OBJECT'

(A matter of Bergsonian and Bachelardian judgement)

In a recent book published in Montreal, *Bachelard ou le Concept Contre l'image*, Jean-Pierre Roy suggests that idealists have in recent years attempted a recouping of Bachelard's works in a way that would proceed from "a humanist ideology of literature" (1977, p.203) and he mentions Georges Poulet, Jean-Pierre Richard and Paul Ricoeur. Indeed he sees a rupture between Bachelard's approach to works of art and his epistemology, which would place him in the camp of rigorous knowledge, and Jean-Pierre Roy refers to Barthes, Genette and Derrida (1977, p.219). The author of the book concludes that the poetics of Bachelard belong to a time which is anterior to that of his epistemology. This is of course a verdict which allows for the rejection of a mode of thinking which belongs to the past and which cannot be seen flourishing in the future channels of what Marxists hold as the sense of history.

Our own views on the Bachelardian approach are somewhat different, since the appraisal we have made of our contemporary world does not lean towards an existentialist comprehension of it. Researchers usually group themselves according to a dividing line, hermeneutics and semiology. The first is reputed to be subjective, the second objective, whereas we feel, after having had a careful look at aspects of the work of Sartre and René Thom, that the objectivity which retains their attention is not that of the object which is under scrutiny, but that of science itself. The old terminology of *en soi* and *pour soi* is relevant here, as in a new form we have coined according to French grammar, which we call the *lui* and the *soi*, what belongs to the object and what is seen or interpreted by us. The objectivity the Moderns are interested in is that of the *soi*, that is of the *pour soi*, but not that of the *lui* or *en soi* as it is for people like Pierre Emmanuel, Jean Brun or Jacques Ellul. And the great paradox of this age and time is that the great majority of clerks, that is thinkers of our time according to the terminology of Denis de Rougemont, give the *soi* or the *pour soi* the value of a *lui* or of an *en soi*. What the French call *Modernité* is nothing other than an appropriation of meaning by forms, that is of essence in situation-form, but to the exclusion of essence as one is expected to generate in a rational way, an essence for the situation-form which is one's point of departure, as is the case with Marcuse, Lucien Goldmann or indeed Lukàcs and what François Mitterrand, the French President calls "Le Changement". Barthes, Lacan, Michel Foucault and Althusser are on the band-waggon.

Gaston Bachelard is a bird of a different feather. His dualism is somehow morally sound, closer to that of Descartes, or indeed those of Bergson, Lavelle and Jean Grenier. God (maybe, maybe not) is not dead as is the case with Nietzsche or Sartre. Modern philosophy of a kind will probably have it that God never existed and that it is nothing but a dream. With regard to what the French call "Méthode Bachelard" Jean-Pierre Roy suggests that Bachelard's poetics is narrower than is his epistemology, because the *pour-soi* of this work is more rigorous. However, as is the case with Teilhard de Chardin and his Omega Point, we think that Bachelard's use of rationalism in the part of his works which deals with the human sciences, (and he uses a concept of surrationalism which is parallel to surrealism), is an attempt at enlarging the mind towards something the mind cannot grasp. Indeed, Bachelard always refused that one should mix up for him methods which he thought were on the one hand relevant for the sciences and on the other suited to literary criticism. It is unfortunately what Jean-Pierre Roy does when he suggests that Bachelard's epistemology "gives us the means to question his poetics" (1977, p.220). In contradiction to the French Philosopher, he himself would like to reject, for the analysis of Bachelard's work, the dualism which Bachelard intended to keep.

In that, however, Roy's approach and ours are not greatly different but where the Canadian critic intends to assume the standpoint of epistemology, we wish to consider a third dimension, which is somehow not hermeneutics nor the idealist trend but which proceeds from a Bergsonian view-point which might lead a Christian to think in terms of revelation with regard to using the absolute as a point of reference, but an absolute whose gravity centre is not in the *soi* or *pour soi*, but indeed in the *lui*, or *en soi*; close to the Bergsonian *durée* and to what Bachelard himself calls 'imagination ouverte' (open imagination) in an attempt to gain access to 'imagination matérielle', a type of imagination which is that of matter itself in its attempt at giving us the clue as to how best to participate in it. This is the process used by God in what is known as Revelation, and the word 'matter' must not be considered in its materialistic sense, it is the object which is in the process of being revealed. The moderns often use the word 'exegesis', as opposed to 'interpretation' but to offer this terminology may force us to enter within a system which was imposed upon us by marxist thinkers who believe in the struggle of the classes; in this context, matter against man, and for some, 'matter' covers the concept of 'God'. It is perhaps also dangerous to use the terms 'vertical' as opposed to 'horizontal', they belong to the jargon of Marxist Structuralism. Is it more reasonable to speak as Claudel did of 'anima' and 'animus', also applied to their purpose by Bachelard and Jung of whom Bachelard was a follower if not a disciple? Is it more reasonable to oppose *Agape* to *Eros*, as Jacques Ellul does it? We like reading Sartre, using

his *en soi* and *pour soi* distinctions as we also have suggested *lui* and *soi*, where our *lui* is in fact Jung's *soi*, that is *l'Être* (Being), perhaps the Great Mother of the primitives. Perhaps it is good to be able to move in various systems of reference, it allows one to become free of them, as one must eventually from epistemology. After all, it is not the navel of man, but man himself who matters, away from his subjectivity at large, or from his restricted subjectivity, his rational mind, in particular.

Already, Bergson had pointed out the opposing views of two types of philosophy: realism which is based on science of a kind and idealism which relied on consciousness; according to the one "each image only related to itself remains an absolute for itself", according to the other "all the images we have are focussed on a central image, our body, on which their variations are adjusted" (Bergson, 1963). Consciousness and perception have remained and also with the help of memory the bases for the creation and indeed the appraisal of the works of art. A third dimension which was rejected by the realists, and which usually remains unknown of the idealists, is that of 'pure perception' with the sister concepts of 'pure consciousness' and 'pure memory'. Three themes which, put together, contributed to the success of Marcel Proust, although he did not do it from a philosophical view-point but as a creator. Lukàcs and Lucien Goldmann coined related concepts which suited their Marxist philosophy: 'real consciousness' and 'possible consciousness'; we suggested they added pure consciousness (Marie, 1975) so that they attempted to achieve the merging of the *soi* and the *lui*, something that their 'religion' cannot take anyway, as it would destroy their confidence in materialism. The advantage seen by Bergson in his concept of 'pure perception' was that instead of relating the image to the body that was perceiving it, it related it to the object that was the source of the image. It meant that he overstepped the bounds of usual perception as well as those of the rational laws. Bergson was offering an intangible light which at the same time showed the limitations of idealism and realism. This light he reflected in a mirror. As long as the light, the object, was there, a virtual image was reflected, which could indeed, were it given a mind for it, decide that it was the centre of the world, in a way which would not be entirely dissimilar to what man thinks of himself... Remove the light, the object, and you would soon discover the absence of a virtual image. The gravity centre was therefore not in the image or in the man whose retina would support it, but in the object itself. Here ends the dichotomy between realism and idealism. Both philosophies show only one branch of the problem which is linked to the *soi* as opposed to the *lui*. There are, in actual matter of fact, two forms of subjectivity, one's own and realism. To divide the world of perception between positivism and gentle humanism appears in the Bergsonian light nonsensical.

This is where Gaston Bachelard, thanks to his individualistic approach, continues the philosophy of 'pure perception'; not that he sticks to it, but he keeps constantly in his mind the old dualism at the same time as he sees something of an *Omega point* where idealism and positivism can converge; however, the methods of both approaches must not be interrelated. The sciences and the arts must remain different even if one can envisage the eventual merging of transcendency and immanency which is by all accounts an essentialist viewpoint and our own objective, the object under scrutiny coming chronologically first in the interaction. It is this link which forms most of the analysis which Bachelard attempted. We shall first look at this as he did in the second part of his life with a view to educating, quoting from three of his books, *La Dialectique de la Durée*, *L'Engagement rationaliste* and *La Philosophie du Non*.

Relate *lui* and *soi* through action, from 'abstraction empirique' (empirical abstraction) to 'abstraction réfléchissante' (reflecting abstraction) (1977, p.41) suggests Piaget, "To know is to transform reality to apprehend how a certain state is reached" (p.39). Unlike empirical abstractions, reflecting abstractions must lead to the representation of the object by a sign, a symbol or another object, to the effect that "a signifiant represents that which is signified" (p.46). For his own part Bachelard insists that "psychological continuity is not given, but built up" (1963, p.viii). Both men situate the process of acquisition in Bergsonian *durée* (eternity?) as opposed to space-time, but whereas Piaget aims at helping the child to establish a real equivalence at the level of logical structures between the external world and the reality he perceives, Bachelard concentrates his attention upon rhythms. He calls *rythmanalyse* (rhythm analysis) the process by which 'durée par les choses' (eternity through things, or objects) and 'durée par la raison' (eternity through reason) could be linked by man at the level of perception. The fate of man would therefore become poetical, the vital impulse given a richer significance : "Poetry could become the principle behind creative evolution" (1963, p.xi). Intensity would create *durée*. This was also seen by Louis Lavelle who based his approach on the understanding of 'L'instant' (instant) (1934). Placed in *durée* as opposed to space-time, life is then seen as harmony. Joy is therefore attained and 'instant' is work, rhythm analysis is "less an exchange of substance than an exchange of energy" (1963, p.134). This is where Bachelard goes deeper into the process of acquisition than does Piaget. Remember, matter must be absorbed by man and this will be done during what Bachelard calls 'temps vibré' (vibrated time)(p. 131). In other words, the educational time is not seen as a transmission of knowledge from one spatial dimension into another spatial dimension; instant is seen as *durée* and becomes a drama. It lasts according to an essentialist dialectics which ensures the osmosis of outside and inside, in this chronology. Bachelard emphatically states that "matter and radiation only exist in the

rhythm and by the rhythm” (p.132). Be it an ‘integration’ with Piaget or an ‘assimilation’ with Bachelard there is a privileged time when substance spends itself, so to speak; it is then, when it is being destroyed that one must seize upon it. The vibrations are action at that very moment. Absolute perception and continuous perception proceed from this diachrony. One understands, however, that the recipient must be attentive. His attention is such that he participates totally. From a pedagogical viewpoint Bachelard insists that it is from a thought-out rhythm that one will be able to organize any rhythm and that it cannot work the other way round. In other words, it is at the level of the virtual image and not at that of the object that learning can start. This notwithstanding, “substance is nothing but the occasion of an advancement; essence in its purest form is nothing but a well vibrated time” (p.136).

This vibrated time gives birth to what Bachelard calls *surrationalisme* (surrationalism). One must “learn to consider logical principles in relationship to their function and no longer to their structure” (1972, p.30), the idea being to situate what is amidst any dynamic action. Generalities are therefore seen as a necessity and to Piaget’s closed rationalism Bachelard opposes an “open rationalism” (p.12) which also depends on polemic with the inner necessity for a multiplicity of viewpoints. Rationalism and imagination would then play a similar role in the apprehension of world and of man, creating what Bachelard names ‘Essentielle tension’ (essential tension) with the ultimate outcome of an axiomatic rooting of itself in the absolute.

The most instructive and probably the more accessible of the books concerned with this question is *La Philosophie du Non* (The philosophy of negation). He suggests that rationalism must become prospective (1973, p.6) and he proposes a law : “Organized phenomena are richer than natural phenomena” (p.6) and knowledge is considered as the evolution of the mind (p.9). Scientific thought becomes a great adventure from realist form to rationalist form through a series of tensions. What Bachelard calls ‘Philosophie dispersée’ (scattered philosophy) casts the basis for his philosophy of negation where he has it that a mind at work is a mind in progress. He seems to accept my own essentialist’s algorithm in such a way that the integrality of philosophy through vibrated action leads in a rapport of unity and through an open deal to what he calls ‘philosophie scientifique différentielle’ (differentiated scientific philosophy). The object can then be envisaged in terms of laws as he maintains is the case with Physics, and he offers this important statement : “Il faut passer du réalisme des choses au réalisme des lois” (One must proceed from the realism of things to the realism of laws) (p.27). Things are then as a result of the operation to be

considered as simple illustrations of the principles which represent them. It is according to the Bergsonian diagram as if the thing were the perception of its original principle. The organisation is of course relational and in a rational way to a corpus of notions (p.32). "La réalisation prime la réalité" (production excels reality) (p.36). The final stage, finite in time but not in *durée*, wants a quasi coincidence of the *signifié* and the *signifiant* which gives evidence of the unity of the world in its relationship with its origin (see all entries in bibliography under Marie). The object of the surrealist's quest is, of course, "a mathematical truth which has so far not resulted in its full completion" (Bachelard, 1973, 36).

Unlike Marxism the centre of gravity of knowledge is seen in the object rather than in society, and there is no coupling of the type leading to an expounding of the sense of history. Bachelard gives more importance to truth than does Marxist dialectics in its attachment to underlining errors and hesitations which only witness uncertainties of an empiristic nature and the tentative efforts of man to go straight. Indeed, there is nothing systematic within the social impulse and certainly nothing of an absolute to be considered, this is why Bachelard's rhythm analysis cannot be scrounged by Marxist dialecticians however hard they may try. There is no inter-subjectivity in the Sartrean mood either in the Bachelardian 'abstract-concrete' coupling. Far away from the only too famous 'L'enfer c'est les autres' (Hell, the others are Hell!), Bachelard attempts to establish a link of continuation and not a break between the abstract and the concrete. "One is more likely, he says, to know sugar by making sugars than through the analysis of a given sugar" (p.36). We are again moving away from space into *durée*, away from structure into function, away from the unique into multiplicity with a better chance to figure out in the light of the essentialist axiomatic, *signifié* first, above *signifiant*, within a transformation which is the core, and through its own rhythms, of the object into my fuller perception of it, a *lui* which, thanks to surrealistism, can merge into a *soi*. The transcendent and the immanent are actually meeting. This is what the French playwright Jean Giraudoux called 'Transparence' : "Ce dont les hommes ont le plus peur" (What men are most afraid of) (1939, *Ondine*).*

In this principle is to be found Bachelard's early approach to literary criticism away from both the idealist and the realist, what we could phrase 'perception of the absolute', that is, of an object, a work of art, which itself in turn has or does not have a link with the absolute. And Bachelard will choose for his analyses writers who do have links with the absolute. Hence, perhaps, the feeling that Jean-Pierre Roy had, that he could make abstraction of dualism within Bachelard's work to analyse that very work. It

* Also, C.P. Marie, 'Jean Giraudoux et le duo d'unité poétique,' In: *Le Cerf Volant*, No. 115, 2(Two) trimestre, 1982.

is a literary criticism which is based on the use of the four elements and which approach necessitates some form of initiation, perhaps of a non-rational nature, which implies the projection of the object into one's consciousness as it would be with truth, or freedom, or God, or any recognized absolute, keeping in mind, however, the trips Bachelard would make at a later stage in the direction of dialectics, rationalism and multiplicity.

We shall use here *L'Eau et les Rêves, Essai sur l'imagination de la matière* (1939) and mention *La Psychanalyse du feu, La Terre et les rêveries de la volonté, L'air et les songes*. Not unlike Antonin Artaud in his *Théâtre et son double* (1964), Gaston Bachelard starts from forms and attempts to discover their meanings, true meanings, not just interpretations, as Michel Foucault would later have it in his *Les Mots et les Choses* (1966). "Images spring out of matter, are born like germs out of a sensual and primitive reality, an intoxication" (Bachelard, 1939, p. 117). Matter is indeed the objective and must be evaluated, first in the sense of its own depth (*imagination matérielle*), secondly in its soaring (*imagination formelle*). The first implies a mystery, the second and inexhaustible multiplicity. In both cases "the mediation of a matter brings up an open imagination" (p. 3—4). Starting from the *signifiants*, the formal imagination will be first explored, then it will be possible to find "in depth" the substance according to "a law of the four elements which classifies the various material imaginations in accordance with fire, air, water or earth, as the case may be" (p. 4). The complex of the swan will illustrate the proposition. Novalis dreams that he is going to swim and here with the wave is a group of charming girls who are part of the wave, creating body contact with the young man which will lead him to believe that unity has been achieved. "The female forms" writes Bachelard, "will spring from the watery substance in contact with the man's chest as his desire will grow more precise. But the voluptuous substance exists before the forms of sensual delight" (p. 173). The dream will suffice without giving birth to any form of liaison. Bachelard concludes that Novalis is not a seer, but a toucher who touches the unreal in an 'in depth' way. The substance is "this marvellous water which places of the young lady everywhere" (p. 173). Novalis enjoys the possession of substance of which he dreams and this is pure material imagination. With Bachelard, if the quest begins with formal imagination, it necessarily opens onto a material image and the critic must strive to isolate the force of imagination at work.

If Bachelard is right, imagination is now opened to a psychoanalysis of dreams which could only influence life, art and the major myths, since the objective is to re-establish essentialist relations in a rapport of forms to meanings, *signifiant* to *signifié* (See Appendix). In a similar way Artaud would think that what moves about is a piece of manifestation, that "It is a

sort of prime Physics from which spirit was never detached” (1964, p.90) and a theatre is true action on the stage with a prime link with matter, away from speech that can only be a component of but not all the theatre, as French tradition would wish to make one believe this. The alchemist and the metaphysician are close at hand. As with Bachelard it is the ways of the dreams which lead to a metaphysical absolute and it is by following such paths that the critic will be able to go up to the absolute image which is the true person of the poet, and perhaps his material or divine origin. One is indeed not very far from C.G. Jung’s archetypes, but it is also Edgar Poe’s conception of the star-isle. Amongst the very many images the critic will have to trace back to the authentic, from a reflection to an absolute and the theory of the absolute reflection suggested by Bachelard usefully continues the line of landmarks established by Bergson with his ‘pure perception’, ‘pure memory’ and ‘pure imagination’.

“If only the reader could make real all the images of a poet, if only he could abstract himself from his own realism, he would at long last hear the call” (*l’invitation au voyage*) (Bachelard, 1939, p.69), away from simplistic realist or idealist visions, and much could be gained from pondering over many of Bachelard’s statements : “Matter is the subconscious of form” (p.70), he says. The call is of a metaphysical nature but science is not excluded from this, especially as each form possesses in itself an axiomatic that links it with the absolute. Here of course, the object, thing or matter, replaces objectivity or science or indeed subjectivity. Bachelard only accepts surrationalism which is a dynamic form of rationalism, away from all spatial dimensions and prejudices. He accepts matter as the only source for the various forms of imagination : “What one imagines orders what one perceives” (1949, p.43), and poetry is indeed an opening onto the divine. He does not mention semiotics or the ways of the new gods who believe that one must empty a form of all its meaning and “pass from the ideographic writing of the symbolic quest to the abstract language of structural analysis” (Serre, p.220). The words used by Bachelard are still signs which relate to values. Amongst all possibilities the values, that is matter, remain the quest for the grail. The now too famous “glissement du signifiant” (sliding of the *signifiant*), expounded later by Barthes, is not yet born and does not stand a chance with him to become he means for the uprooting of man in an attempt to make him subservient to the sense of history, and indeed when Bachelard suggests a form of literary criticism “it is less a question of describing forms than of weighing a matter” (1939, p.26). In truth “the psyche is incorporated with a cosmic reality” (p.123), which through dreams allows a participation “to the slow and monotonous life of an element” (p.15). This is perhaps what life and the arts are about.

A distinction is to be added, however: the difference which Paul Ginestier sees between Bergson's and Bachelard's philosophies: "Bergson saw a type of imagination by which one places oneself into things in order to understand them, whereas with Bachelard, what matters is to animate them" (1968, p.158). All the difference implies a move from static to dynamic and this in itself is a revolution, as was in linguistics the passage of the study of *langue* to that of *parole*, both being incorporated into *langage*. Diachrony must be added to synchrony and perhaps this is what was missed out for a long time by social scientists and perhaps philosophers, a need to relate the object to one within a relation which is not dissimilar to the acceleration of time. If man is so, active, perhaps matter is too, and God also. At any rate reference to an absolute is of paramount importance and this is what the philosophies of Bergson and Bachelard alike will teach us away from the usual dichotomy between realism and idealism. But what is the absolute and can we allow it to be skipped for not being able to define it? De Saussure used to say that it is bad pedagogy to start from words to define things. And here we strongly believe that thing is matter, that very one which was the subject of the essay. It is a matter for metaphysicians to judge and for other people to keep talking about so that their own rhythms can be joined to the rhythms of the matter.

APPENDIX

The essentialist algorithm is based on Saussurean Linguistics but the standpoint is different from that of Jacques Lacan:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \downarrow & S & \text{(Signifié)} \\ & = & | \\ & s & \text{(signifiant)} \end{array}$$

I have also applied this method in the following analyses :

A. With a Christian bias : 1. 'Les possédés de transcendance - Maurice Clavel - Pierre-Henri Simon - Paul Claudel' (an analysis of *L'Annonce faite à Marie*), in *Claudel Studies*, Dallas University, U.S.A.; April 1976.

2. 'A re-examination of "form and meaning" in Camus' *Le Malentendu*, in *Nottingham French Studies*, Vol 17 N2, Nottingham University, G.B., October 1978.

3. 'Marie-Paule de *L'Enchantement de la nuit ou la très grande faute des cloches*' (a reading of a book by Jean Guirec), in *Rencontres Artistiques et Littéraires* N27/28, Mantes-La-Jolie, France, 1983.

B. With a political bias : 1. 'Le sceptre et le balancier' (an analysis of

- Gaullism), in *Revue Espoir* N. 14 (Institut Charles de Gaulle), Plon, March 1976.
2. 'Giraudoux et l'idée de mesure nationale', in *Jean Giraudoux et les Pouvoirs, Cahiers Jean Giraudoux 7*, Grasset, Paris, 1978.
- C. With a literary bias : 1. 'La Tour du Pin et le Rayon limpide', in *Fer de Lance* N. 100 (Special issue on La Tour du Pin), Cannes, France, December 1977.
2. 'L'Etre et le paraître dans Electre', in *Cahiers Jean Giraudoux 10*, Grasset, Paris, 1981.
3. *Luc Vuagnat dans le voile d'Isis*, Editions Poésie Vivante (2 rue Jean-Jaquet) Genève, 1984, 184 pages.
4. 'Trois poètes genevois : Luc Vuagnat, Jean-Georges Lossier, Vahé Godel', in *Swiss-French Studies*, Vol V. N.1, Acadia University, Canada, 1984.
5. *Le Sens sous les mots*, Potchefstroom University Press, RSA, 1984, 269 pages.

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