

The Barefoot Philosopher of the Imagination

—*Gaston Bachelard's Reverie of the Elements*

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You need to read Gaston Bachelard outside, slowly, with great patience. You need to be free to pick up a stone, feel the breeze on your face, enjoy the Sun's warmth on your skin, hear the water tinkling at your feet. Read him—this subversive humanist, one critic says—in the library and you won't get it; you'll toss the book and run away. Read him in the fresh air of outdoors and his unique way of thinking will insinuate itself into the way you see the world and reawaken, even energize, something you probably didn't know you had: an imagination with taproots in the unconscious reverie of substances. Read him at his pace and Bachelard will school you in the slow grace of true poetry.

With every page of his numerous books—he wrote 23 during his life, 1884-1962—Bachelard will frustrate you and, equally, he'll charm you. He'll take you off wandering into a seeming literary distraction, then reveal a vista of lucid relevance, an image of arresting clarity. Bachelard says, "Reading is a waste of time unless the reader likes to pause before the images." Bachelard knows how to pause: he's a man who gives familiar objects the attentive friendship they deserve, a dreamer of words, a man who imagines in solitude, a "lector who spends hours and days reading slowly, line by line, determined to penetrate the images which renew unconscious archetypes."

These archetypes are the imaginal substance of our being. Long before *Care of the Soul*, *Fire in the Belly*, and *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, Bachelard was out in the fields of Western literary images, excavating the human soul. While C. G. Jung was lamenting "Modern Man in Search of a Soul," there was barefoot Bachelard extricating the soul's gossamer lightning from centuries of soul-deadening accretions preparing us for our current reanimation.

Bachelard lives so intimately, so deeply in images that "a minute detail in the life of waters often becomes an essential psychological symbol for me." There, by the water's edge, awake in his reverie, he feels the calm

of the poet, the psychological health that comes to one willing to spend months faithful to a single image. “Although I am an old man now, my own muscles weak, how good it feels—an almost muscular sensation—to collect poetic images of smithing and the forge!” he wrote in 1959.

The barefoot philosopher of the elements, Bachelard is out there, in the rustic bosom of Nature, weaving reveries and spinning imaginations about things most of us never think about or experience other than as words or dry concepts. But for Bachelard, the elements of life—air, water, fire, and earth—speak to him in every moment of being alive, freshly, vividly, metaphorically. He traces the life of images back to their organic roots in the substances of nature; our mind and the world as we see it are made from these.

Bachelard’s domain is the material imaginations, dreams of the four elements, archetypal poetic temperaments that stimulate our being—hormones of the imagination, he calls them. They are the elemental stuff our imagination is made of, the food it feeds on, the fire that sparks the poetics of life, the air that animates our spirituality. “When the imagination works, everything works,” Bachelard writes. “The entire psyche regains courage; life regains its goals; passion rediscovers hope. A sick, weak, hesitating and blocked imagination can be returned to a state of healthy effectiveness by means of a well-directed image.” Revitalized images may even provide the foundation for a new conception of psychoanalysis and psychological rejuvenation, Bachelard says. “By means of images the subject must be helped to discover the secret knot blocking his soaring.”

Transforming the World Soul with Images

I call Bachelard barefoot because he grew up in rural France, close to Nature, in a section of Champagne noted for its streams, rivers, and valleys. “The most beautiful of retreats for me would be down in a valley, beside running water, in the scanty shade of the willows.” There he would slip into a reverie about the depth of running waters or the blue sound rising from the green brook; or he’d listen to the plums ripening under the Sun’s caress. I call Bachelard philosopher because in France that is his chief distinction.

He’s regarded as one of France’s foremost thinkers of this century; for 22 years he held the chair of history and philosophy of science at the Sorbonne in Paris; he received the Grand Prix National des Lettres in 1961, one of only three philosophers ever to have this honor; and he’s an acknowledged influence on such intellectual notables as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jean Paul Sartre.

A true iconoclast, he devoted his intellectual work equally to science and poetry, epistemology and the imagination. Not many know of Bachelard in America even though at least half of his books are now in English translation, including his most popular *The Poetics of Space*, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire, Air and Dreams, Water and Dreams*. But while the general public is unaware of Bachelard, his devotion to the science of poetic imagination has found fellow-travelers in the work of C. G. Jung, Henri Corbin, James Hillman, Thomas Moore, Robert Sardello, and other luminaries for whom active imagination, metaphorical visualization, and the archetypes of mythopoesis, have become the foundation for deeper psychological health, serious inner work, and care of the soul.

For Sardello, author of *Facing the World with Soul* and the new *Love and the Soul*, Bachelard gives us a way of turning back towards the world, seeing it anew, seeing it as still in the process of creation. “Bachelard absolutely steers clear of theory; he’s concerned with the transformation of the world soul, which includes both the human soul and the soul of the world. His whole work is oriented towards sensitizing us to the activity of an image. His is an alchemy of language, in which the word is the prime matter to work on to *free* the imagination. For him, the world is undergoing a gradual spiritualization of matter without the loss of the material.

Bachelard certainly changed my consciousness years ago from one fixated on logic to one open to the imaginal. You have to slow down to follow him in the flight of images—but it can be extraordinarily therapeutic. At first he seems almost incomprehensible, but if you can give up trying to understand him logically, you have an *awakening* of imagination, a kind of wakeful dreaming—a Bachelardian reverie.”

This was Bachelard’s prime goal of course, to develop a direct psychology of the imagination, to reanimate the false, lifeless images and inert words of the literary tradition which are nothing less than the stuff of our Western psyche. Throughout his books on the elements, Bachelard strives to “reinvest the imagination with its role as seducer,” to set images into motion again, to be the philosopher of the autonomy of the imagination, to reveal its primordial dynamic power, to show its fundamental role in spiritual development, and to elaborate a psychochemistry of dreams.

“The image must be returned to the primitive psyche,” to that rich humus of dream—the oneiric seed—from which images germinate, multiply, and cluster. “Basic images, especially those involving the way we imagine life, must be linked with elementary matters and fundamental movements. The dream is not a product of waking life; it is the fundamental subjective state. The dynamic image is a primary reality.” And it’s also a

prime way to study the human and divine the secrets of the heart because “the activity of the human psyche manifests itself primarily through images.”

Why Reality is Useless to the Poet

When Bachelard mused about renewing literary criticism and setting our understanding of poetic creation on a new basis, he often thought about establishing an oneiric museum of dream images. Or he saw himself as a “wandering botanist, gathering bouquets of ‘poetic flowers’” for “my herbarium of images;” he saw himself compiling an encyclopedia of cosmic imagery for “an elementary philosophy of cosmic imagination.” Guided by poets, Bachelard writes, “I shall try to seize on images in primal poetry, seeds of living poetry that we can make live within us,” as the sacred “image seeds of a new language that must envisage the world poetically.”

That’s not surprising for with Bachelard when imagination is activated it becomes omnipotent, rising from the terrestrial into the cosmic, so that “reality becomes useless.” When poetry is involved, realism is always wrong. All of this should be undertaken, Bachelard argues, to find the objective roots of poetic images and metaphors, to see how they emerge from the deepest, oldest strata of the human psyche as “autonomous poetic values and seeds of a poetic ontology.” A poetic mind is “purely and simply a syntax of metaphors and metaphorical coordinations.” The psyche is set into motion by a distinct hunger, an instinct for images and while psychoanalysis probes reality through images, Bachelard’s approach does the opposite: it’s the search for “the positivism of images by means of probing reality.”

Why do this? Because the more he studied literary images, the more Bachelard saw that this prolix animism actually gets in the way of objective scientific knowledge of the world. Reverie continually takes up the same “primitive” themes, which suggests we have a resistance to psychological evolution despite the successes of systematic thought and scientific experiments. Even the supposed scientific mentality is chronically obstructed by antique animistic prejudices—by poetic subjectivity. This primitive animism in the mind projects everything, “mingles on every occasion desire and vision, inner impulses and natural forces.”

That’s why Bachelard sought to perform a psychoanalysis of objective knowledge, to purge its ancient metaphorical conceits that obscure true seeing. Here is where his dual interests in poetry and epistemology merge to form a unique approach to the life of the imagination as a world-shaping activity. Bachelard writes as a psychologist studying which myths and

metaphors could still *move* a poet's soul and the dreamer's spirit "faithful to the infinite dreams of natural elements."

Typically we are so initially charmed by an experience of a fundamental element—a fire in the hearth, for example—that it actually warps the minds of even the clearest thinkers and keeps bringing us back "into the poetic fold in which dreams replace thought and poems conceal theorems." These sympathetic attractions and careless reveries hold dangers for true scientific knowledge; these unconscious fascinations affect the basis of empirical and scientific knowledge. We can't know until we master the activity of imagination.

Our aim, Bachelard explained, is to "cure the mind of its happy illusions, to free it from the narcissism caused by the first contact with the object." And the only way to do this is to plunge deeply into the manifold life of poetic images that surround the four basic elements of life—fire, water, earth, and air—and to live in and through their organizing, dynamic images. "By descending low enough inside the psyche through a sort of natural development, the illustrated dream discovers an archaic region and the archetypes of ancestral life under the sediments of real life."

The essence of imagination is dynamism, movement, kinetic activity, fluidity, perpetual metamorphic mobility, Bachelard said. Imagination projects the entire human being and poetic forms are "a deposit left by imaginary motion." Imagination ought to revitalize the inner image hidden in words, to unleash its hidden power because "within every word hides a verb" and the imagination lives to *act*. The imagination, dwelling in its elementary life, wields the original power that compels us to dream, to enter reveries, to experience a "dynamic intoxication" in which we have the poet's leisure to live our images oneirically. The imagination remakes reality: it doesn't form images, but *deforms* what we perceive. It is the faculty that "frees us from immediate images and *changes* them." Images are psychic realities, verbs through which the world imagines itself.

Our Dreaming is Faithful to the Substances of Life

What do we really dream of? Matter and its four fundamental forms. In fact, in Bachelard's view, matter precedes form—it is the basic substance out of which our imaginations are made. Matter is the unconscious of form, "the rough sketch for unrestricted dreams;" our dreams "mime the life of matter." Reverie, or active imagination, has four domains; any doctrine of poetic temperaments must recognize a tetravalent orientation. For all of us, there is one element, be it fire, air, earth, or water, with which we most intimately resonate and in which we find greatest exaltation. For each of us

there is a favored substance, a major element which runs our “poetic chemistry.”

Thus the imagination abides by a basic law of four elements which classifies various kinds of material imagination by their connections with these elements. This is how we make the world, through our styles of construing its elements. “Each element is profoundly and materially a *system of poetic fidelity*. We are being faithful to a primitive human feeling, to an element of organic reality, a fundamental oneiric temperament. Reverie is an ever-emanating universe, a fragrant breath that issues from things through the dreamer. To dream profoundly, one must dream with *substances*. The physiology of the imagination obeys the law of the four elements and each element is “imbued with its own particular dynamism” that acts as food for the psyche, as a “good conductor” of life energy.

Material imagination dramatizes the world in its depths. It finds in the depth of substances all the symbols of inner human life. And when you make this dynamic correspondence between imagination and its elemental substance, *images truly speak*; they sing reality, Bachelard assures us. Images can inflame language and produce in us a pitch of excitation. In the end, the “organic nature of materialized images” becomes the necessary foundation for a “truly deep” psychoanalysis, which is to say, for objective knowledge of oneself and the world. In all, Bachelard devoted seven books to the poetic archeology of the four elements; he read poets, novelists, and philosophers and used their observations and stanzas to extricate the psychic dynamism implicit in images to do with each element.

Take earth. Here we have the domain of rocks, crystals, metals, minerals, mud, paste, bone, wood, images of refuge such as the cave, womb, and house, the interior of substances. In earth we have the dialectic of hardness and softness, of volition and repose, the immediate and consistent hostility of resistance of this densest of matter. With earth, we encounter the power of the working hand, whether it’s the blacksmith’s or the potter’s, seeking to overcome, even defeat, the resisting substance. Imagination always dreams of dominating, so any reverie of earth strengthens our will power, our volition to change, modify, even exaggerate the earthy substance which is “the first dynamic form of existence of the resisting world.”

Through the word *hard*, the world “tells its hostility and in response the reveries of volition begin.” Rocks are hard, they are hardness embodied. Hardness is a wakener, an activity, an object of insomnia; do not muse on hard objects if you wish to fall asleep at night. All objects possess psychic energy, derived from our own mind, and through dynamic images this imaginal energy returns to us. Rocks impart reveries of solidity, resistance,

courage, steadfastness, permanence; they make us forget our weakness, show us how to fight, how to withstand the blows and injuries of life.

Yet the solidity of the tree is not an unjustified hardness: the tree is hard to support its crown of foliage, resilient in the high breezes above the land. The hardness of metal speaks of *fire paroxysm* and *excessive fire*, the price of brutal force, the very substance of coldness. Metallic coldness is a primary imaginary value, says Bachelard; it is psychologically offensive, a material protest and, again, if you want to tame it, you'll need to muster "the entire aggressive force of dream." Salt shows us the principle of concentration; precious gems invoke the stars; miners are underground astronomers; minerals germinate and mature deep within the Earth.

In the bowels of the planet, "gold ripens like a truffle." In fact, in crystals you dream of all four elements; were you to classify all the crystals, you would have charted a general psychology of the material imagination, Bachelard suggests. Deep in his cavern, the miner sees "the very substance of celestial influences" hidden within matter; with element of earth as his scrying glass, the miner is the most lucid seer.

The Candle-Dreamer Burns Fire into Spirit

When it comes to fire, Bachelard is a candle dreamer. "I myself need no more than the image of a person at his candlelight vigil to begin this undulant movement of thoughts and reveries." The flame is naturally, unchangeably solitary; it wants to remain alone in its rapture of increasing and rising in its own vertical energy. Meditate on a flame, says Bachelard, and you get "vertical nourishment, verticalizing food"—the flame's message is to *burn ever higher*. When Bachelard equates flame with verticality he means transcendence and the Empedocles Complex, in reference to that antique Greek philosopher threw himself into the volcanic pyre of Mt Etna to experience the annihilating transcendence of fire. Empedocles made "the discovery in fire of one's own nothingness, self-destruction by fire."

In this *auto da fe*, in which love, death, and fire are united in a single moment, we learn a lesson in eternity. Fire teaches you how to burn higher, finer, more vertically. The imagination is the flame of the psyche and this flame is a flower that becomes light. "The flame illustrates every form of transcendence," of how to stretch yourself towards an ethereal non-existence. "Consciousness and the flame have the same destiny in verticality. All idealists find, in meditating upon a flame, the same *ascensional stimulation*" because everything that rises bears the dynamics of fire. "For someone dreaming of a flame, the entire room takes on an atmosphere of verticality."

At the tip of its flame, fire becomes a nearly invisible vibration; dematerialized, it becomes light, illumination, pure spirit. No longer heat, or inner fire, it becomes celestial light—a perfect example of the Novalis Complex, which Bachelard named in honor of the 19th century German poet who more than anyone else drew copious mystical thought from this simple physical phenomenon.

Fire is both object and subject, surging and violent yet also warm and reassuring. Fire is inside us yet of the world, invisible yet dazzling, spirit and smoke. It is the essence of intensity and heightened existence; it is the funeral pyre and the volcano, the heat of our blood and the Sun's radiance; it is good and evil, shining in Paradise and burning in Hell, “a tutelary and a terrible divinity, both cookery and apocalypse.” Because it so thoroughly contradicts itself, fire is one of the universal principles of explanation. Every struggle against sexual impulses is a struggle against inner fire; that same fire is deeply purifying, destroying material impurities, cleansing the air and agricultural fields—the heat of purgation itself.

That's why fire was undoubtedly the material phenomenon on which primordial humanity first reflected. All fire-watchers are unknowingly hypnotized about fire, all our intuitions are “heavily charged with fallacies from the past.” We watch fire the same across thousands of years. Fire schools us in disobedience—“Don't touch the flame!” our parents instruct us early on—because fire incites a desire for knowledge; our first gesture is defiance which Bachelard calls the Prometheus Complex to refer to all that makes us desire to excel our parents' knowledge and mastery of the world.

A Dream of Air is the Flight of Imagination Itself

Probably the best way to surpass the knowledge of all our parents' and previous generations is to become one with the mobility and freedom that is the element of air. In dynamic imagination, the first flying creature is the dreamer oneself; the soaring spirit precedes even the birds and the nocturnal sky is a world of wings. Air is preëminently about ascension, the freedom of movement that releases us from the gravity of matter. Imaginary air evokes in us a sense of gaiety, lightness, buoyancy, the pure leap with wings on our heels, journeying for its own sake, the vectorial breaking into flight that is “more real than any other since it involves the substance of our psyche.” Motion, not substance, is what is immortal within us.

Consequently, the imagination of air “puts its imprint deeply on our substantial psychic development” imparting to us “the deep elemental inner life of oneiric flight.” Our entire being is pervaded with the youthful lightness and confident strength of mobility that enables us to leave the

Earth—to be air. “Our heart, heavy with the burdens of the day, is cured during the night by the pleasantness and ease of oneiric flight.”

For Bachelard the English poet Piercy Bysshe Shelley and the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche are the prime poets of air—“two geniuses who have adored opposite gods in the same aerial land.” For Shelley, spiritual life wants to grow and rise, so his poetic images are all “agents of elevation” and basically aerial. His poetry, Bachelard writes, is a “vertically dynamized space which expands and invigorates everyone. In poetic space, the lark is an invisible corpuscle that is accompanied by a wave of joy. The lark expresses the joy of the universe, the ideal of vibrant air.” As humans our rightful destiny is to be upright, to be animated substance filled with uprising hope, to continually grow lighter, to learn how to ascend. “Flight is a primordial beauty for the dynamic imagination.” Height after all is “materially, dynamically, and vitally moral;” elevation, paradoxically, is the foundation for the landlocked moral vista.

Nietzsche, on the other hand, is the poet of the cold air of the heights. The human will one day become a superbird, a superman, knowing air is the predator’s domain. A powerful flight is one undertaken with the intent to ravish, to wield the intoxicating power and happiness flight induces. “Nietzsche’s aerial life is an *offensive* against the heavens. Our terrestrial being must become *aerial*. Then it will make the whole Earth *light*.” Air is the core substance of our freedom, says Bachelard, and “pure air is awareness of the free moment that opens up a future. Basically, for Nietzsche this *freshness* is the true *tonic* quality of air that makes breathing a joy, the one that dynamizes motionless air—a true dynamization in depth, which is the very life of dynamic imagination.”

Water is the Liquid Language of Poetry

Speaking of depths, the element of water is the fundamental metaphor for depth and past time, says Bachelard. Just as much as he was a candle-dreamer, Bachelard was also a water-dreamer, the epitome of John Greenleaf Whittier’s barefoot boy who dabbles his imaginative feet in the flowing stream. Flow of course is what water excels in: “Everything that flows is water; everything that flows participates in water’s nature.”

Water is the transitory element, the embodiment of flux, compromise, fluidity, pliability, mixing; it demonstrates the endlessly changing substance of our own essential being, teaching us that our destiny is that of flowing water. Water instills a taste for infinity; we feel transported because we are carried by water’s current. Water, as its quintessential poet Edgar Allan Poe knew so well, draws us towards death. Bachelard calls this the Ophelia

Complex, in reference to Hamlet's distraught younger sister who throws herself, so young and necklaced with flowers, into the drowning pond.

Water, especially limpid or stagnant ponds, invites us to die. A pool contains a universe, says Bachelard, and water is a universal home. Water is the substance that drinks, swallowing your shadow like a black syrup; absorbing all shadows, water offers “a daily tomb to everything that dies within us every day.” Water is the color of universal suffering and infinite pain, and it absorbs it all.

Yet water is also the eye of Earth. It is the mother of narcissism, of self-reflecting absorption, of our fascination with our own reflected image cast back to us in mirrored purity. Still waters are sleeping waters and it is the dead who sleep in water’s still bosom. “Only water can sleep and all the while keep its beauty; only water can die, be still, and yet keep its reflections.” Water imparts melancholy; dissolving our unhappiness, it is a *substantial nothingness* that helps us die completely, says Bachelard.

Water is also a primal milk, the liquid of maternal love, the archetype of the fundamental beverage of life, the “first substantive in the order of liquid realities known to the mouth.” Water is “absolute motherhood.” Thus milk, as water, is a value for the imagination, a psychic seed for images. Water restores our mother to us; it relaxes our attention with a gesture of exceptional gentleness. Through lustration, the simple act of splashing water on our face, water makes sight active; it reawakens our energy for seeing, sparks the nerve centers, it freshens our cognitive eyes. “Hygiene is a poem,” says Bachelard, brilliantly compressing his whole approach in four words.

Even more, water is the matrix for poetry and living language. Human speech, in its finer moments, has a liquid quality; water flows in its consonants. Water is the “most faithful mirror of voices” and the bubbling spring is “truly the Word made water. The language of the waters is a direct poetic reality, and streams and rivers provide the sound for mute country landscapes. Murmuring waters teach birds and men to sing, speak, recount,” So we must fill our language with water, we must learn from this “mistress of liquid language” because liquidity is the “very desire of language—liquid language, bantering language, the jargon of the brook are vocal imagination.”

Imagination Makes Your Soul Young Again

But how many people in the mid-1990s want to bother with slowing down to read poems? Americans after all are a fanatically pragmatic culture; we want cookbooks, guidebooks, manuals, easy-to-use programs for fixing

everything, whether it's our car, air conditioning, ulcers, or psyche. Unlike France, we are not a country of intellectuals for whom ideas are the life blood of culture; we want 12 steps that get the problem resolved today. Bachelard frustrates all this; he offers us the heart of poetry when we want—or are so accustomed to—the flash of advertising.

Yet this same Taurean slowness is the uniquely healing gift Bachelard offers us in this ultra-fast paced time of faxes, modems, information superhighways, and virtual reality. He's concentrated, repetitive, digressive; you can't scan *Water and Dreams* in ten minutes and extract pithy soundbites. Yet we desperately need someone who thinks at the pace and depth of Bachelard, says Joanne Stroud, Ph.D., author of *The Bonding of Will and Desire* (which devotes a chapter to "Bachelard and Complexes Embedded in Culture") and co-founder of the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture which in 1981 undertook the English translation of many of Bachelard's most important works.

"You have to slow down to take it in, give yourself to it wholeheartedly, but there are healing qualities in Bachelard. I find reading him enormously healing." Stroud says that when she finds herself stuck in a mundane problem, reading Bachelard for even five minutes somehow frees up her imagination and reveals a surprising solution and gives her new ways of looking at the world. It's not even the words or the discursive ideas; it's the inimitable energy of a Bachelardian reverie that miraculously liberates the imagination.

"We're all so fractured and pulled in so many ways today, that I am constantly surprised at how unifying Bachelard is to read; he pulls together all the dichotomies of life," Stroud comments. "He's not at all a man of the 19th century Romantic Age; he offers us a great deal for the end of the 20th century because he keeps making such a strong case for spending some time with our interior thoughts, reveries, and daydreams. He shows us how to take an open-eyed, wondrous, even childlike view of the world, how to see it afresh. And he makes the imagination the vital part of the psyche I've always felt it to be. Like a verbal alchemist unveiling the nature of the material world, he teaches that spirit is the heart of matter, that matter is the ensoulment of spirit."

The soul suffers from a deficiency of material imagination, Bachelard wrote in 1942, almost a decade before the advent of television, imagination's nemesis. Just think of what television and print advertising have done to language and its ability to stimulate and fructify the psyche. Bachelard carefully shows us the mechanism by which images, analogies, and metaphors stir us, move us to action, whether it be a reverie or a walk. When

we become aware of the potency lying dormant in words, or the way modern commercial language distorts and adulterates this archaic poetic function, then we're not subject to the gross manipulations Western materialistic culture so much wishes us to be.

Real images are “inexhaustible food” for the psyche, “hormones of the imagination” that quicken us with life, youthfulness, vitality, excitement, and the will to see the world anew—to reimagine it along different lines. Poetry exists to give new form to the world, new perceptions reveal unsuspected realities. This can be ours when images spark into life again; they *dynamize* us and thus act as therapeutic agents. “Literary images, when correctly dynamized, also dynamize the reader; they govern in kindred souls a sort of physical hygiene of reading, an imaginary gymnastics of the nervous system that give us back the truth of our being, the energy of our own dynamism. A poetic image only really speaks to one once it has been accepted as a psychologically privileged moment of exaltation, as a transformation of one’s being through language.”

Bachelard, reading the verses of the French poet Paul Eluard, realizes: “These verses unburden me and my thoughts fly off on happier wings; poetry has delivered me, given me back my morning.” Bachelard shocks us into remembering how powerful “correctly dyanmized” words can be; they can electrify and transport us, ultimately far beyond the slow-coach psuedo-raptures of any physical or botanical substance. In the beginning was the Word and this Word generates an infinity of life-quickenings sentences through the logorrhea of Nature and its four poetic elements. Streams will teach us how to speak and “not a moment will pass without repeating somely lovely round word that rolls over the stones.”

A good image can renew language and enhance our literary tradition and at the same it’s implicit energy contributes its dynamism to the psyche. Images put us in contact with fundamental terrestrial and cosmic forces, energies that can heal the psyche. Words are real, images are world-making, and Bachelard is their demiurge in the reimagining of reality. “The imagination is the principle of eternal youth. It makes the mind young again by giving it back its original dynamic images” and sets the soul in motion on its archetypal oneiric flight of exploration and naming.

Metaphors of take-off, flight ascension, soaring, lightening, verticality, the host of air imaginations—all become positive psychological experiences when the images hidden in words and sleeping in metaphors are quickened into elemental life. We really need to understand this, Bachelard insists, because “if more attention were given to the imagination, many false

psychological problems would readily be cleared up. The imagination, more than reason, is a unifying force in the human soul.”

This reverie-facilitated freedom carries an obligation, Bachelard reminds us. We must realize that when we dream intimately with the four elemental substances of life and the psyche, we must hold ourselves morally responsible for the world we have imagined. When we reimagine the world, we are in effect willing a new world to be. That’s why Bachelard says that will imagination and volition are two aspects of a single profound force.

“Every contemplative person always trembles a little when he reflects on his elemental powers. The imagination, the first principle of an idealist philosophy, requires that the subject be a part of every one of the images.”

Reveries of material substances—imaginations of mud and fire, wings and still ponds—connect us to our universe for it is we who have *named* it, says Bachelard. Naming is the act, the verb, of imagination, the inflame the psyche and enliven the world. Here’s where we can discover the secret knot that blocks our soaring, the barefoot philosopher assures us. The imagination is a “sound-effects man” that amplifies or softens Nature’s voice.

So we must listen to our poets and painters because they have much to teach us; they exemplify our right to dream. “The fact is that in accepting the solicitation of the imagination of the elements, the painter receives the natural germ of an act of creation.” And the poet, that alchemical word-master, says Bachelard, is the natural guide for the metaphysician or for anyone who wishes to understand “all the powers of instantaneous connections, the fire of sacrifice, without allowing himself to be split by the clumsy philosophical duality of subject and object.”

Poetry, as the essence of creatively focussed language, “becomes a moment of formal cause, an instant of personal power that needs nothing but the moment. It *creates* the moment”—for where else can we truly live? “It is in the vertical time of an immobilized moment that poetry finds its specific, pure dynamism.” And it is in that precious vertical moment of perfect stillness and lucid poetic perception that we ascend with the master poet of the elements, Gaston Bachelard.

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