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Gaston Bachelard's Pedagogical Theory of Literature

Bachelard and his (pedagogical) theory of reading

Gaston Bachelard's role in the canon of literary theory is problematic today. Outside a French context, his name does not appear among the twentieth-century fathers of the discipline, especially among those who converted philosophical research into the elaboration of a literature's aesthetic (for instance, Roman Ingarden and Mikhail Bakhtin). If the French philosopher does not enjoy popularity among contemporary literary scholars, it is for having deliberately (but consistently with his philosophy) underestimated the stylistic, historiographical, and philological questions that are at the heart of most *literati's* works (who, on the other hand, could view with suspicion the intrusion of an epistemologist into their matters)¹. However, it could be said that Bachelard would not have cared about the judgments of a lot of academic literature scholars because his interests in the literary field were oriented not towards a formalistic theory but towards a theory of the aesthetical reception of the literary text².

A problem now is where the French philosopher could be placed within the rich and highly articulated *spectrum* of existing reading theories.³ Before proposing a comparison with other theoretical systems, it is possible to claim that the theory of reading in Bachelard would be impossible to highlight without considering pedagogical concerns, which sometimes are not among the primary interests of literary

¹ Cf. Therrien, V., *La révolution de Gaston Bachelard en critique littéraire*, Paris, Édition Klincksieck, 1970, pp. 2241. One could also be reminded of the negative views of Gaston Bachelard's critical ability, such as those expressed by Giacomo Debenedetti, who was one of the most important and influence Italian critics (Cf. Granese, A., *La maschera e l'uomo. Saggio su Giacomo Debenedetti e la cultura europea del Novecento*, Salerno, Palladio, 1976, pp. 318-319.).

² Among the contributions that have analyzed the theory of reading in Gaston Bachelard from the viewpoint of literary criticism, see Therrien, V., pp. 199-212, Sertoli G. *Le immagini e la realtà. Saggio su Gaston Bachelard*, Florence, La Nuova Italia, pp. 181-182, 303-313, and 345-350, Hans, J.S., *Gaston Bachelard and the Phenomenology of the Reading Consciousness*, "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", 35, (1977), pp. 315-327.

³ For a rather comprehensive review of theories of literature that put the reader's activity at the centre cf. Tompkins, J.P. (ed.), *Reader-response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-structuralism*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

theorists⁴. It is no coincidence that in *Formation de l'esprit scientifique*, *Lautréamont* and *La philosophie du non*, teaching occupies a crucial role. Bachelard often speaks of the school, both to criticize it and to valorize it as an ideal place for the development of rationality. For instance, Bachelard's *Formation de l'esprit scientifique* concludes with ardent praise for *lifelong learning*: ««Il n'y a de science que par une École permanente. C'est cette école que la science doit fonder. Alors les intérêts sociaux seront définitivement inversés : la Société sera faite pour l'École et non pas l'École pour la Société »»⁵.

This essay examines the aesthetic reception theory and the problem of teaching literature through Bachelard's pedagogical philosophy. To highlight the complexity of Gaston Bachelard's thought and to show that it could be an important point of reference for all contemporary theorists of literature, we will compare the educational project of the French philosopher with the research of an important contemporary literary theorist such as David Bleich.

The backwardness of literary culture and the authoritarianism of the rhetoric class

In *La philosophie du non*, commenting on Alfred Korzybski's pedagogical program based on mathematical *inventio*, Bachelard shows a certain bitterness at the fact that literary culture was not prepared at his time to adopt the dialectic of the *philosophie du non*:

Pour lui [Korzybski], la base de la santé intellectuelle et corrélativement de la santé générale, c'est l'éducation par les mathématiques et la physique, seules habilitées à poser fortement, clairement, normalement les conditions d'une éducation objective et inventive. Nous croyons, pour notre part, qu'une philosophie du non ne peut pour l'instant animer une culture littéraire. Une culture littéraire qui s'attacherait à utiliser sans préparation objective les thèmes de la philosophie du non n'aboutirait guère qu'à des arguties.⁶

Literary culture was still incapable of expressing a renewal in teaching practices because it imposed an objective way of experiencing literature and refused to accept any form of autonomous interpretation by the reader. As Bachelard ironically

⁴ However, taking into account Gaston Bachelard's specific background and interests in the field of aesthetic reception, his works could be placed alongside phenomenological theories of reading (for instance, those of Georges Poulet and Wolfgang Iser). Alternatively, considering Bachelard's polemic against academic literary critics, the thoughts of the French philosopher could be placed close to that of Anglo-American provocative reception theories (such as those of David Bleich and Stanley Fish). However, in the context of sociological theories of reception (for instance the theories of Hans Robert Jauss or Jacques Leenhardt), Bachelard's historical epistemology could bring decisive concepts and methodologies to teaching the history of literature.

⁵ Bachelard, G., *La formation de l'esprit scientifique. Contribution à une psychanalyse de la connaissance objective*, Paris, Vrin, 1967, p. 252.

⁶ Bachelard, G., *La philosophie du non. Essai d'une philosophie du nouvel esprit scientifique*, Paris, Puf, 2002, p. 132.

notes in *Lautréamont* : « De sorte que l'adolescence, dans son effort de culture, est perturbée profondément par les impulsions de la vanité, les plagiats, les démarquages, les choix indiscutés du goût, les critiques tranchantes sans preuves objectives, voilà les séquelles de la classe de rhétorique »⁷.

Along the same line, the philosopher takes a negative viewpoint of the absurd severity of the rhetoric teacher, especially when compared with the probing (and fair) severity of a mathematic teacher:

Seul, le professeur de mathématiques peut être à la fois sévère et juste. Si le professeur de rhétorique -perdant le bénéfice de la belle et douce relativité de sa culture – est sévère, il est, du même coup, partial. Aussitôt, il devient un professeur automate. On peut donc se garder facilement de sa sévérité ! Sa sévérité ne réussit pas. L'élève vigoureux a mille moyens pour amortir ou faire dévier la sévérité de son maître.⁸

However, automatism processes could affect both rhetoric and physics professors. As Bachelard claims :

S'imaginent que l'esprit commence comme une leçon, qu'on peut toujours refaire une culture nonchalante en redoublant une classe, qu'on peut faire comprendre une démonstration en la répétant point par point. Ils n'ont pas réfléchi que l'adolescent arrive dans une classe de physique avec des connaissances empiriques déjà constituées [...]. Il s'agit alors, non pas d'acquérir une culture expérimentale, mais bien de changer de culture, de renverser les obstacles déjà amoncelés par la vie quotidienne.⁹

Such the automatism is the fault of the 'official culture' represented by philosophy, which reduces the sciences to technical-practical subjects. From a traditional philosophical point of view, the usefulness of science for philosophers is to confirm what they have always deduced from their systems of thought. Bachelard claims : «Tout philosophe a sa science à lui. Nous dirions plus volontiers encore : la philosophie a une science qui n'est qu'à elle, la science de la généralité. Nous allons nous efforcer de montrer que cette science du général est toujours un arrêt de l'expérience, un échec de l'empirisme inventif »¹⁰.

As a consequence, the scholastic hegemony of the philosophical determines the concepts and problems of science by depriving the latter of the space to develop its autonomy, liberty, and spiritual development.

Faced with such a manifested authoritarianism and unjustified search for philosophical objectivity, the student must react to avoid falling into automatic and repetitive behavior imposed by the official philosophical culture. Against the risk of automatism, the student is encouraged by Bachelard to surrender to his irreducible animality and to overturn every dogma of humanism along the lines of Isidore Ducasse/Lautréamont.

⁷ Bachelard, G., *Lautréamont*, Paris, José Corti, 1939, pp. 83-84.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 126-127

⁹ Bachelard, *La Formation de l'esprit scientifique*, cit., p. 18.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 55.

¹¹ Bachelard, *Lautréamont*, cit., p. 58.

The boorish student needs to recognize the *drame de la culture* imposed by official culture and learn from some creative practices to resist all forms of ideological authoritarianism. In the case of literary teaching, the Lautréamontian student must counter the official language of literary culture through the de-formation of the latter, landing autonomously in primitive poetic activity.¹¹ Referring also to Jean Paulhan's *Les fleurs de tarbes*, Bachelard claims:

C'est un drame de la culture, un drame né dans une classe de rhétorique, un drame qui doit se résoudre dans une œuvre littéraire. Nous n'en méprisons sans doute pas les douleurs. Mais il n'en est pas moins vrai que le véritable révolté n'écrit pas. Du moins, il cesse d'écrire quand il se révolte. Jean Paulhan, sans mépriser la révolte, se méfie justement « de celle qui vient par voie langagière et comme mécanique ». Précisément, une révolte écrite est l'exacte réaction de ce que Jean Paulhan appelle la Terreur rhétoricienne, cette sorte de Cerbère, violent gardien d'une étymologie fermée, d'un enfer linguistique où les mots ne sont que le souffle d'une ombre, la poésie qu'un souvenir déformé et meurtri.¹¹

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However, the obligation to become a Lautréamontian student could transform into new forms of authoritarianism and automatism, completely mirroring those imposed by the culture of the philosopher. Rebellion could actually become the new norm and it could lead towards a new form of automatism¹². Bachelard believes that Lautréamontian aggression should be overcome to achieve a “non-Lautréamontism”¹³. Non-lautréamontism does not imply the elimination of Lautréamontism but its transformation: aggression and irrational activity must be replaced in poetry by the *rêverie* of action, which excludes all real action. Moreover, *rêverie*, even if it is *rêverie* of action, must not have the power to agitate feelings. Precisely because it is *rêverie* instead of delirious dream, its effects on the subject are consciously sublimated and placed within an aesthetic framework¹⁴.

A good student for Gaston Bachelard could be that human being who knows how to distribute consciously and responsibly his activity during both *le jour* and *la nuit*. In other words, a model pupil is one who has learned to defend the autonomous activity of the scientific laboratory and the equally autonomous activity of *rêverie*: «Tout travail patient et rythmique, qui réclame une longue suite d'opérations monotones, entraîne l'*homo faber* à la rêverie. Alors il incorpore sa rêverie et ses chants à la matière élaborée ; il coefficiente la substance longuement travaillée»¹⁵. As a consequence, the mathematics class should promote the teaching of patience and the “pleasurable ingratitude” of the sciences, while the rhetoric

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 99-100.

¹² Automatism may be the unwanted product of the *éthos* of the artistic avant-gardes (such as Surrealism and Dadaism) which promote the “axiology of the new” (cf. Brioschi, F., *Critica della ragion poetica*, Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 2002, pp. 21-39).

¹³ Bachelard, *Lautréamont*, cit., pp. 196-198.

¹⁴ Cf. Chimisso, C., *La ragione scientifica e la pedagogia nel Lautréamont di Bachelard*, in Bonicalzi, F., and Vinti, C., (eds.), *Ri-cominciare. Percorsi e attualità dell'opera di Gaston Bachelard*, Milano, Jaca Book, 2004, pp. 121-122, Sertoli, p. 161.

¹⁵ Bachelard, *La Formation de l'esprit scientifique*, cit., p. 123.

class teaches how to become a reader capable of enjoying the *rêverie*, the joy of slow reading, and the ethical responsibility for imagination's acts. Considering Bachelard's anthropological and pedagogical perspective mentioned above, teaching of literature needs to be profoundly reformed in his view.

Literature teachers should not claim to transmit an "objective knowledge" of literature, or the "right ways" to read poetry. Consequently, they should not require their students to become ideal or model readers: the Bachelardian reader is free from the interpretative constraints imposed by the immanent data of the text (as imposed, for example, by the members of the New Criticism) and the authorial intentionality (as postulated by Erich D. Hirsh's hermeneutic theory).

Literature teachers are therefore disempowered to transmit principles of formalist literary theory or they are called upon to teach them only to deny them from the point of view of a *philosophie du non*. This does not mean that the Bachelardian teacher has to promote naïve approaches to reading. Instead, it should call to mind Bachelard's critique of chemistry lessons as set out by Maria Montessori's pedagogical method:

Sans doute, pour toute connaissance, les premières leçons demandent des prouesses pédagogiques. Elles ont le droit d'être incomplètes, schématiques. Elles ne doivent cependant pas être fausses. Maria Montessori verse de l'acide sulfurique sur du sucre – est-ce vraiment une leçon de départ ? En tout cas, le commentaire est mauvais. Le professeur s'exprime ainsi : « Ce sucre qui est blanc est pourtant, en substance, un morceau de charbon. » Non, le sucre est sucre, le charbon est charbon. C'est seulement quand on aura fait comprendre que le sucre est un hydrate de carbone et que l'acide sulfurique est un déshydratant qu'on pourra expliquer la réaction inter-matérialiste par laquelle le sucre déshydraté devient du carbone. Il y a donc à proposer sans cesse un canevas théorique pour aborder le matérialisme instruit, pour décrocher le matérialisme instruit du matérialisme naïf, du matérialisme imaginaire. Nous donnerions volontiers ce minimum de théorie qui engage l'expérience, qui pense l'expérience, comme un exemple élémentaire du rationalisme appliqué. [...] On ne doit pas apporter d'aliment au matérialisme infantile. Que ce matérialisme infantile garde de nombreuses composantes dans la mentalité adulte, c'est sans doute un fait. Cela ne rend que plus nécessaire la discrimination des principes de culture objective et des éléments de convictions subjectives dont les racines descendent au fond de l'inconscient.¹⁶

Along the same line, the intrinsic naivety of *rêverie* and the joy of slow reading should not be considered as intuitive and instinctual attitudes but as approaches constructed and conquered only after the educational work of a good literature teacher. Hence, the rejection of formalist theories and the spontaneous practice of reading are linked in Bachelard with a rigorous construction of the subjectivity of the reader¹⁷.

¹⁶ Bachelard, G., *Le matérialisme rationnel*, Paris, Presses Universitaires De France, 1963, pp. 30-31.

¹⁷ The rejection of formalist theories and the practice of spontaneous reading could be viewed from the point of view of Bachelard's philosophy as naïve approaches. Both methods of reading could embody in different ways the dogma of transparency of realist philosophy. For instance,

The Bachelardian reader seems to have a great deal of freedom in experiencing the *rêverie* that the text suggests. Does this mean that Bachelard's reader is totally free during the aesthetic activity? Indeed, how can one deny the fact that formalist theories and spontaneous reading can concurrently promote the discipline of reverie and a meta-cognition of reading? One might respond to these questions by comparing Bachelard's theory with those of other literary theorists who argue in the name of the subject's centrality in aesthetic reception. Moreover, in general, the comparison between Bachelard's pedagogical theory of reading and those posterior to him could lead to the correct placement of Bachelard's thought in the constellation of theories of reading.

Transmitting to the student/reader the meta-cognitive awareness of the reading activity could represent, in Bachelard's years of philosophical activity, a feeble pedagogical hope. The literary culture of those years was not ready to question itself as philosophy did in the face of twentieth-century physics and chemistry. It was only with the arrival of the cultural upheavals of the 1970s that many critics and literary theorists began to reflect on reading and teaching practices debunking the academic taboos imposed by the structuralist *koiné* and returning to discussions of the central role of subjectivity in the reading experience.

If in Europe, where structuralist paradigms and a well-established tradition of literary teaching were in force, reader-response criticism hardly took root, in the Anglo-American world (the same world that Bachelard viewed with interest thanks to the work of Alfred Korzbinisky) a lot of theoretical disputes were meanwhile taking place against the backwardness of literary culture. One of the main protagonists of these theoretical struggles was the literature theorist David Bleich, who also had the great merit of not stopping at theoretical reflection but of proposing a profound revision on the ways of teaching literature. Bachelard and Bleich share the need for a rational conception of teaching that is able, at the same time, to guarantee certain interpretative freedom on the part of readers and students.

We will analyse how Bachelard's many positions may share some theoretical positions with those of David Bleich. In the following paragraphs, we attempt to synthetically outline the theoretical framework of David Bleich's "subjective criticism". Then, Bleich's theory will be compared with Bachelard's in the light of the teaching of literature and reader-reception theory. From the comparison, it becomes clear that in Bleich's thoughts there is a risk of falling back into a totalizing vision of aesthetic activity (total elimination of the text in favor of the total prominence of reader psychology and pragmatic and radical intersubjectivity), whereas Bachelard's pedagogical position seems to be more balanced because it establishes a balanced relationship between the text and the reader and enhances the roles of teacher and pupil in a dialectical perspective.

formalist theories have faith in the transparency of textual data, while spontaneity in reading ignores how our interpretative acts are culturally derived.

David Bleich's (Inter)Subjective Criticism

David Bleich's theory of literature is based on the study of the interaction between reader and text using a conceptual apparatus derived from developmental psychology, psychoanalysis, and Thomas Kuhn's epistemology. The main aim of subjective criticism is to provide an educational model that can reform the teaching of literature in order to give readers/students freedom to live and understand a given aesthetic experience by themselves without following the dogmas of literary critics¹⁸.

From a strictly theoretical point of view, the American academic promotes the epistemological shift from an objective paradigm (the cornerstone of an essentialist conception of reality and of a certain formalist literary criticism) to a subjective one, according to which it is only observers themselves who define the existence of a perceived object.

For Bleich literary works are thus objects with both material and symbolic existence: they are initially perceived as material artifacts that all readers experience similarly; but when they are read, they become symbolic objects that only make sense through the reader's subjective syntheses¹⁹. Bleich's numerous criticisms of literary critics should therefore come as no surprise:

A critic's normal job is to tell others what books say and mean. Critics are usually paid out of public funds under the agreement that most people want to know what books say and mean and that, for one reason or another, this majority cannot perform the critical function for itself. Thus, critics, like the clerics of the past, command a large measure of public and pedagogical faith in their words.²⁰

Bleich's polemic is against the exponents of *New Criticism* (I.A. Richards, William Empson, Cleanth Brooks, W.K. Wimsatt) who argued that what was highlighted in the text is how the fusion of consciousness with the literary world has become a formal condition that characterizes the structural density of internal textual relations. According to the subjective paradigm, on the other hand, interpretation should not claim to decode a message but only explain the intention and the psychology of the interpreter.

The symbolic nature of aesthetic objects opens up the field to the subjective initiative and justifies the infinite variations of experiences of the same object. Consequently, the meaning of a literary opera is not a sensory perception but a construction shaped by the reader's consciousness: «knowledge cannot be either a parent, a spouse, or a god, though we may think of it that way at times; rather,

¹⁸ It has been noted that there are similarities between David Bleich's theory and that of Georges Poulet, cf. Galenbeck, S., *Higher Innocence: David Bleich, the Geneva School, and Reader Criticism*, "College English", 40, (1979), pp. 788-801.

¹⁹ Bleich, D., *Subjective Criticism*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1978, p. 111. The centrality of subjective synthesis is present in other theories of literature, such as those of Roman Ingarden, Jan Mukařovský, and Wolfgang Iser.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

it is the subjective construction of our minds, which are, after all, more accessible than anything else»²¹.

The interpretation of the literary text becomes the reader's response to his reading experiences, producing a self-understanding and a meta-cognition of the reading process that brings out values, prejudices, and emotions of extra-textual nature. This process is referred to by Bleich as 'resymbolization':

The distinction between symbolization and resymbolization corresponds, respectively, to the use of language as simple denotation and as a complex explanation. Symbolization involves ordinary acts of naming and predication of the elementary sort first learned by infants. Resymbolization refers to the mentation performed in conscious response to rudimentary symbolization.²²

David Bleich, moreover, pursues the ambition of placing the activity of subjectivity at the centre of the construction of meaning not only in aesthetic activity but also in the more general processes of self-consciousness and self-awareness education: «Subjective criticism assumes that each person's most urgent motivations are to understand himself, and that the simplest path to this understanding is awareness of one's language system as the agency of consciousness and self-direction»²³.

From a methodological point of view, subjective criticism rejects a close reading of the text to examine only reports of readers' responses and interpretations. The intentions of Bleich's pedagogy are also clearly visible in the structure of his main works (*Readings and Feelings* and *Subjective Criticism*) in which there is an alternation between theoretical exposition, empirical *data* (students' reports of their reading experience), and Bleich's psychological analysis of his students' text-responses. However, it should be noted that Bleich does not give up the close-reading method but applies it in the analysis of the texts produced by his students.

Furthermore, from the point of view of subjective criticism, there are no criteria of judgement that are necessarily right or wrong because all student attempts to objectify subjective experiences more precisely (through the resymbolization process mentioned above) are primarily directed to make them communicable to the teacher and to other members of the class²⁴. As Bleich claims:

When we become aware that a symbolic objectification system is unsatisfactory, we try to symbolize or explain it. As Kuhn discusses, such explanation can actually change the object of attention from, say (to use his example), a swinging stone into a pendulum or Euclidian space into Riemannian space. The motive from such important changes grows from personal and communal subjectivity. Resymbolization rewords (or reworks) established symbols in a direction more adaptive to present needs.²⁵

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 65-66.

²³ *Ibidem*, pp. 297-298.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 125-126.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 66.

Bleich's criticism aims to transform knowledge into a negotiated judgment, intended as an objectified response that the individual elaborates among himself and then makes public, offering his reading to the community which decides dialogically what is significant in the text altogether.

As a consequence, for Bleich knowledge of literature and of the reading process should not be separated from a collective and dialogical dimension. There are no interpretative possibilities outside of a community because knowledge has an intersubjective basis by its very constitution. Then, perhaps, subjective criticism could be called "intersubjective criticism" too.

The primacy of subjectivity (which is, therefore, also the primacy of intersubjectivity) does not amount to the legitimization of unbridled freedom but aspires only to liberation from the chains of traditional authority (teachers, critics, and literary institutions)²⁶. If knowledge is no longer conceived as an objective entity, the purpose of pedagogical institutions will be to discuss knowledge rather than to transmit it²⁷.

Reading becomes a workshop, a joint enterprise involving all parties on an equal level. The teacher of literature is a reader like any other, and his interpretations formally have the same credibility as those of his students.

The 'ideal' teacher for David Bleich should have a background in reading and he should dialogically convey to his students the knowledge of what goes on in the human mind when someone is reading:

When a critic or teacher says, "This is important. let us study it," his listeners may take what he says with the confidence that it is important to the critic and may or may not be important to anyone else. The whole activity of reading and literary involvement becomes an interpersonal affair with genuine give and take, and authority flows openly where it belongs from the personal integrity and persuasive capacity of the critic-reader.²⁸

Ideally, before imposing rules for objectively reading texts, the literature teacher should teach students to understand meta-cognitively how their reading response works. Consequently, the ultimate task of the teacher/critic is to help turn the student into a teacher, both for himself and for other members of the community.

I think a student has to have developed a history of emotional response. [...] He has to be able to "become" his own teacher in order to make this more complex observation of his response. One has to have given oneself the luxury of responding freely, and also taken the additional responsibility of understanding that response. This small identity element (the awareness of one's own response) provides the necessary emotional preparation to undertake a more complex exploration of one's own response.²⁹

²⁶ It should be noted that subjective criticism does not lead to solipsism for the fact that only the absence of intersubjective negotiation creates solipsism, *Ibidem*, pp. 294-295.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 113.

²⁸ Bleich, D., *Readings and Feelings: An Introduction to Subjective Criticism*, Champaign, Natl Council of Teachers, 1975, p. 63.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 78.

We can see how some of David Bleich's positions have similarities with Gaston Bachelard's theory. Bachelard, as Bleich, places the analysis of the relationship between reader and text above any formalist close reading by rejecting any attempt to rationalize poetic images through formalist theories. Moreover, Bachelard advocates the centrality of the reader's subjective syntheses and promotes a meta-cognitive ethic of reading. Regarding the latter, Bachelard might consider the meta-cognition of reading conscious repression produced by the psychoanalysis of the processes of knowledge:

Le refoulement est à l'origine de la pensée attentive, réfléchie, abstraite. Toute pensée cohérente est construite sur un système d'inhibitions solides et claires. Il y a une joie de la raideur au fond de la joie de la culture. C'est en tant qu'il est joyeux que le refoulement bien fait est dynamique et utile. [...] A notre avis, la cure vraiment anagogique ne revient pas à libérer les tendances refoulées, mais à substituer au refoulement inconscient un refoulement conscient, une volonté constante de redressement.³⁰

As a consequence, the Bachelard who wrote *La formation de l'esprit scientifique* and, especially, *La psychanalyse du feu* would have appreciated Bleich's attempt to make a psychoanalytical *close-reading* of the knowledge acquired while reading. In fact, we should be reminded that the main task of Bachelard's epistemology is «psychanalyser l'intérêt, ruiner tout utilitarisme si déguisé qu'il soit, si élevé qu'il se prétende, tourner l'esprit du réel vers l'artificiel, du naturel vers l'humain, de la représentation vers l'abstraction»³¹.

Finally, we think that Bachelard would appreciate the idea of the teacher as a simple reader. In fact, putting both the student and the teacher at the same level could be the first step towards the realization of a pedagogy of dialogue and the life-long learning approach so much promoted in *Le rationalisme appliqué*:

L'homme adonné à la culture scientifique est un éternel écolier. *L'école* est le modèle le plus élevé de la vie sociale. Rester un écolier doit être le vœu secret d'un maître. [...] La dialectique du maître et du disciple s'inverse souvent. Dans un laboratoire, un jeune chercheur peut prendre une connaissance si poussée d'une technique ou d'une thèse qu'il est sur ce point le maître de son maître. Il y a là les éléments d'une pédagogie dialoguée dont on ne soupçonne ni la puissance ni la nouveauté si l'on ne prend pas une part active à une cité scientifique.³²

We have seen how there are points of affinity between the thought of David Bleich and that of Gaston Bachelard regarding pedagogy. However, despite some points of similarity, there are significant points of divergence between their theories.

³⁰ Bachelard, G., *La psychanalyse du feu*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992, p. 170.

³¹ Bachelard, G., *La Formation de l'esprit scientifique*, cit., pp. 9-10.

³² Bachelard, G., *Le rationalisme appliqué*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1966, p. 23.

Crucial Divergence Points

The main difference between Gaston Bachelard's philosophy and David Bleich's theory is the fact that they started from different viewpoints about the autonomy of scientific and humanistic discipline. It seems that Bleich's (inter) subjective criticism suffers from a certain inferiority complex concerning to the teaching methods offered by "hard" sciences. His theory seems to use literature and reading as a pretext to teach only the modality of the construction of knowledge and not to train readers on how to enjoy aesthetic experiences. In doing so, Bleich eliminates all specifically "literary" concerns and adopts only criteria of scientificity (calibrated on psychological descriptivism) to analyse students' reports of reading. Gaston Bachelard, on the other hand, considers scientific and humanistic culture as autonomous and complementary because they both cooperate toward an anthropology of *homme intégral*: «Les axes de la poésie et de la science sont d'abord inverses. Tout ce que peut espérer la philosophie, c'est de rendre la poésie et la science complémentaires, de les unir comme deux contraires bien faits»³³. Moreover, scientific activity and *rêverie* have well defined spheres of action and different methodologies of analysis which cannot contaminate each other.

From a closely theoretical perspective, a fundamental divergence between Gaston Bachelard's philosophy of literature and David Bleich's theory is that for the latter the construction of meaning in aesthetic and then communitarian experience is central, whereas in the former the main aim is the valorization of the participatory moment of *rêverie* disinterested in the anxiety of the search for meaning. As Bachelard himself comments in his work on Lautréamont: «regarder vivre ne suffisait pas. Nous nous sommes donc loyalement efforcé d'éprouver l'intensité des actes ducassiens»³⁴. Along the same line, it should be noted that in Bleich's theory there are no right or wrong criteria for judgments because they are all primarily negotiable when they are resymbolised through language³⁵. Instead, an aesthetic experience for Bachelard is not subject to verification and negotiation because Bachelard's reader must not objectify (or resymbolise) *rêverie* to make it communicable as members of the *cité scientifique* (or Bleich' students) are required to do with scientific concepts. In fact, the language of poetic images and *rêverie* cannot be for Bachelard matter for any language of rationalisation: «L'image ne peut être étudiée que par l'image, en rêvant les images telles qu'elles s'assemblent dans la rêverie. C'est un non-sens que de prétendre étudier objectivement l'imagination, puisqu'on ne reçoit vraiment l'image que si on l'admire.

³³ Bachelard, G., *La psychanalyse du feu*, cit., p. 12.

³⁴ Bachelard, G., *Lautréamont*, cit., p. 30.

³⁵ Moreover, Bachelard might say that literary teaching that claims to remove the true and the false would eliminate error from the educational horizon. In his view, error is necessary for any vision of progress, not only scientific but also humanistic: «L'erreur est un temps de la dialectique qu'il faut nécessairement traverser» cf. Bachelard, G., *Essai sur la connaissance approchée*, Paris, Vrin, 1967, p. 12.

Déjà en comparant une image à une autre, on risque de perdre la participation à son individualité »³⁶.

As a consequence, a crucial point of divergence in Bleich's theory and Bachelard's philosophy is about the role of intersubjectivity. David Bleich's notion of intersubjectivity is realized in a pragmatic context of negotiation while Bachelardian intersubjectivity seems to be experienced through the work of abstraction of a literary text. For the French philosopher, aesthetic experience could be defined as a dialogue between poetic images (born in the pre-textual dimension from a poet's *rêverie*) and the realization of it in the reader's *rêverie*³⁷. The aesthetic realization of the Bachelardian reader's *rêverie* is always superficially different from the poet's original *rêverie* but they both could follow the same archetype. The archetypes, which are primordial and psychological images common to all mankind, suggest to poet and reader an 'orientation' which guarantees a "spiritual" communication between them poet and reader: «les centres de *rêverie* bien déterminés sont des moyens de communication entre les hommes du songe avec la même sûreté que les concepts bien définis sont des moyens de communication entre les hommes de pensées»³⁸. Instead of finding the real model that inspired the poet's *rêverie*, the reader must enter into the imaginative dynamism suggested by the archetype. The images that refer to the archetype will, however, be deformed by the reader in a different way from how the poet deformed them, but they will be the product of the same inductive force: the world that the reader will actualise within himself is 'externally' different but 'internally' the same as that of the poet.

Compared to Bachelard's theory of reading, Bleich's theory risks rendering the text completely useless in favor of reading's psychological analysis, whereas for the French philosopher the encounter between reader and text remains central as a "catalyst" for *rêverie*'s activity³⁹. In this regard, a specific case where their position diverges completely is the approach to the problem of the relationship between the author's biography and the text. For David Bleich, the author and his biography offer only a conception of the reader: « "Knowing an author" means knowing one's [of the reader, nda] own conception of the author»⁴⁰. Bachelard, on the other hand, perceives the author's experiences through those elements that project a conscience into the text.

³⁶ Bachelard, G., *La poétique de la rêverie*, Paris, Les Presses universitaires de France, 1968, pp. 46-47.

³⁷ The Bachelardian dualism between text/poet-reader has been discussed in Georges Poulet's theory of reading and described as the artistic pole (that of the text/poet) and the aesthetic pole (that of the reader) in Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological analysis of reading. Cf. Poulet, G., *Phenomenology of Reading*, "New Literary History", 1, (1969), pp. 53-68, Iser, W., *The Implied Reader*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974, pp. 274-275.

³⁸ Bachelard, G., *La poétique de l'espace*, Paris, Les Presses universitaires de France, 1961, p. 52

³⁹ It must be remembered, however, that Bachelard also seems to eliminate the text from the interpretive horizon, as the members of the 'Tel Quel' group and Jean Ricardou have pointed out (cf. Sertoli, *op. cit.*, p. 300).

⁴⁰ Bleich, D., *Subjective Criticism*, cit., p. 259.

This authorial personality is rooted in a historical and psychological being, but it is revealed for Bachelard in the text and not only in the mind of the reader. In the case of Lautréamont, Bachelard notes :

Rien, dans sa vie, n'est étrange. Il est Montévidéen. Il vient en France pour être lycéen. Il vient à Paris pour faire des mathématiques. Il écrit un poème. Il a des difficultés pour l'éditer. Il prépare une œuvre différente plus sagement adaptée aux timidités des éditeurs. Il meurt. Aucun incident et surtout aucun acte qui décèlent des étrangetés. Il faut donc revenir à œuvre, s'installer dans l'œuvre, qui, elle, est génialement étrange, et c'est le procès de l'originalité qui s'engage.⁴¹

From all these points of divergence on a strictly theoretical level mentioned above, there are consequences from the point of view of pedagogical practice that further distance Gaston Bachelard's thought from David Bleich's.

In his lessons, David Bleich leaves the student completely free to say whatever comes to mind in his reading account. On the other hand, the Bachelardian teacher, who coincides with the Bachelard author of works on literary criticism, instructs his student to consistently read imagination's trajectories of poetic images through *rêverie*. Although Bachelard states that one should never compare one poetic image with another, he does so again and again in his texts on literary criticism to show us that there are poetic images with greater or lesser coherence in their imaginative path. As a consequence, Bachelard's apparent rejection of textuality is much less clear-cut than it appears: he certainly rejects formalistic and philological *minutiae* but, on the other, he glimpses in images rules that can exhibit an internal (semantic or syntactic) coherence that the reader can grasp during reading.

In this regard, teaching the theoretical distinction between formal and material imagination has a remarkable pedagogical effect. Bachelard, through the *rêverie* induced by poetic imagery, suggests that the an aesthetic object is nonetheless a multilayered entity that can be evaluated by experiencing its superficial aspects (imagining through forms and literary-rhetoric concepts) or its profound ones (imagining through matter and following its internal dynamism). Bachelard argues that a text could be read following formal imagination, material imagination, or both. Moreover, at the same time, the distinction between formal and material imagination could illuminate how the poet has composed his poetic images, whether by dreaming forms and concepts or through his pre-textual *rêverie* of matter's dynamism. For instance, at the beginning of an analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, Bachelard shows the outcomes of his methodology of reading:

Parmi les écrivains trop rares qui ont travaillé à la limite de la rêverie et de la pensée objective, dans la région confuse où le rêve se nourrit de formes et de couleurs réelles, où réciproquement la réalité esthétique reçoit son atmosphère onirique, Edgar Poe est l'un des plus profonds et des plus habiles. Par la profondeur du rêve et par l'habileté du récit, il a su concilier dans ses œuvres deux qualités contraires : l'art de l'étrange et l'art de la

⁴¹ Bachelard, G., *Lautréamont*, cit., p. 116.

déduction. Il a su enchaîner les pensées fantastiques. Si on lit Edgar Poe avec la lenteur requise, en prenant soin de respecter la double exigence du rêve et du récit, on apprend à faire rêver l'intelligence la plus claire, on apprend aussi à éveiller, pour une aventure suivie, la rêverie la plus inattentive, la plus épisodique.⁴²

Additionally, Bachelardian teachers should educate how to fix the poetic images that appear in them in a system, which means trying to identify the relationships that link the images and the law that produced them. For this reason, Bachelard promoted a new literary criticism in *La psychanalyse du feu* which anticipates some of structuralism's features:

Si présent travail pouvait être retenu comme base d'une physique ou d'une chimie de la rêverie, comme esquisse d'une détermination des conditions objectives de la rêverie, il devrait préparer des instruments pour une critique littéraire objective dans le sens le plus précis du terme.⁴³

However, Bachelard does not apply his 'structural' method indiscriminately to all the poeties and novels that he analyses in his aesthetical works. Indeed, Bachelard teaches us to constantly adapt our critical methodology by calibrating it, each time, to the singularity of a poet's work and the questions it sets in motion. As Vincent Therrien notes with regard Bachelard's methodology:

D'une part sa constant évolution, et d'autre part sa volonté d'appliquer à chaque auteur la méthode correspondant le mieux à son génie spécifique. Et l'un des principes bachelardiens qui fondent justement cette dernière attitude, c'est qu'il faut triompher des « habitudes rationnelles pour retrouver le mouvement spirituel de la découverte ». Dès lors, se corrigeant, s'adaptant et se modifiant sans cesse, « la méthode Bachelard » n'apparaît jamais, comme celles de Richard, Poulet, etc., définitivement cristallisée et glorieuse au sommet d'un seul faisceau de réflexion profondes.⁴⁴

On the other hand, it can be seen that the psychological descriptivism applied by David Bleich in the analysis of his students' reading reports is all-encompassing and does not allow for contamination or methodological evolution.

Finally, it could also be noted that each literary text that David Bleich proposes in his class is equivalent to another because his theory is focused on the reader and, therefore, he is not interested in proposing to the student different literary works or comparative methodologies to make him experience different types of aesthetic pleasure⁴⁵. Instead, Bachelard is convinced that the encounter with the language of literary works imposed by the teacher of literature could be fundamental from the point of view of a *pedagogie du non*:

⁴² Bachelard, G., *Le droit de rêver*, Paris, Les Presses universitaires de France, 1970, p. 134.

⁴³ Bachelard, G., *La psychanalyse du feu*, cit., 185.

⁴⁴ Therrien, V., *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁴⁵ Bachelard, instead, has the great merit of proposing in his critical texts on literary culture a personal (and open-minded) vision of the literary canon, which includes well-known and unknown authors and works.

Le problème psychologique de la culture littéraire n'a d'ailleurs pas encore été examiné sous son aspect strictement linguistique. En fait, la classe de rhétorique est, dans le sens mathématique du terme, un point de rebroussement pour l'évolution de la vie expressive. C'est là que le langage doit se réformer, se redresser, se corriger sous la moquerie olympienne du maître. C'est là qu'il se double vraiment de son étymologie consciente. Pour la première fois, la langue maternelle est l'objet d'une étrange suspicion. Pour la première fois, la langue est surveillée.⁴⁶

Reading that is imposed by an external authority is an epistemological obstacle that could be fundamental for our aesthetic education and for a hypothetical creative activity: « On doit se débarrasser des livres et des maîtres pour retrouver la primitivité poétique »⁴⁷. David Bleich's readers will never potentially be new Lautréamonts because they have never been schooled through the epistemological obstacle of the language of literary classics. In other words, they remain within the dimension of maternal language, and they never give in to the temptation to evolve their poetic competence. Proofs of this primary naivety are the stylistic ugliness of Bleich's readers' accounts of their experiences that marks a total disregard for the careful use of language⁴⁸.

Conclusion

In comparison with one of the theories of reading and literary education such as that of David Bleich, Bachelardian reading seems to propose a pedagogical method that is much less totalizing. David Bleich, while taking advantage of the historical moment to experiment with a revolutionary educational model, remains steadfast in an all-encompassing conception of aesthetic experience that eliminates the text to refuse formalist criticism in favor of the reader's psychology. However, there is no difference between totalizing the role of the text and totalizing the role of the reader. Bachelard, on the other hand, manages to keep the text *vs.* reader polarity in balance, avoiding any kind of static dichotomy and promoting dialectic between them through a methodology of reading through the activity of imagination that respects the freedom of the dreamer (*rêveur*).

From a pedagogical perspective, Bleich's professor projects a static dimension upon the reader who is conceived as an ordinary and self-aware member of a community in search of the meaning of aesthetic experience. Bachelard's teacher, on the other hand, stimulates the student/reader to become a reading dreamer (*rêveur*) and, hence, promotes an ongoing radical transformation of the subject

⁴⁶ Bachelard, G., *Lautréamont*, cit., pp. 84-85.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 69.

⁴⁸ Bleich, D., *Subjective Criticism*, cit., pp. 140-141, 156, 170-171, 175-177, 181-184, 191-197, 202-204, 205-208, 215-217, 219-222, 227-231, 240-243, 245-254, 266-270, 275-278 and 287-289. Moreover, from a bachelardian perspective, it should be noted that students' accounts are certainly intimate and sincere but they use words and concepts that carry with them a high rate of ontology which, unconsciously, direct the future negotiation of interpretation in the class.

through the encounter with art objects. Moreover, these two different educational goals conceal two different philosophies of literary epistemology: Bleich's theories consider literature as reasonable by commenting on it in its social dimension, whereas Bachelard's thought conceives of literary understanding as a matter of participation in the text, through *rêverie*.

However, we could say that reassessing the role of Bachelard's philosophy from the point of view of teaching literature does not mean applying his thought entirely to contemporary classrooms. It would be appropriate to get to know Bachelard's philosophy even if only to make it part of a dialectical movement that incorporates some of his positions but, at the same time, adapts them to new social demands. We believe that the comparison proposed between the French philosopher's thought and a pedagogical theory of literature such as that of David Bleich could stimulate a dialectical movement. For example, it should be focused on elaborating a model of teaching literature in which the pragmatic dimension of intersubjectivity promoted by the American theorist could be reconciled with Bachelard's concept of intersubjectivity that arises from the encounter between textual *rêverie* and the reader.

In conclusion, contemporary literary theorists, especially those interested in questions of literary and reading education, should return to the philosophy of Gaston Bachelard because the latter could be a remarkable source of reflection even today. In fact, in the contemporary scholastic context, where the official culture (no longer conditioned by traditional philosophy but still ideologically hetero-directed) promotes both old and new forms of automatism in teaching, Bachelardism can still stimulate us to radically rethink literary and imaginative education.

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