

Editorial

Bachelard: An Ecological Thinker?

Bachelard did not write *about* ecology – his epistemology was indeed more about the sciences of matter than about the life sciences. His work did not give rise to an environmental aesthetics as we understand it today, nor did he ever adopt a normative stance towards an environmental ethics or politics. If he happened to refer to *Walden* by H.D. Thoreau, he did so by way of illustrating forest reveries rather than as a call for activism, a form of freedom and civic protest, or as a critique of the extractivism and productivity characteristic of late modernity. Would it then be a misunderstanding to call Gaston Bachelard an “ecological thinker”?

These three reservations make us aware of the ease with which Bachelard could be prematurely summoned into the field of ecology. In fact, his work is often read through the prism of technoscience elevated to the highest rank of modern rationality, whose transformative revolutions seem to confirm the true progress of reason, suggesting the hypothesis of scientific supremacy over nature. However, the other half of his work, his poetics, is dedicated to understanding and defending a poetic imagination of romantic provenance which supports free creativity, a joyful coexistence with the natural world, and even a cosmocentric ethic. But it does not do so while considering humanity’s current anesthetized relationship with nature, or even the sad passions that today’s ecology identifies and calls into question when it talks about collapse, ecological disaster, extinction. Bachelard blames the “Attila of sources” – ancestors of today’s polluters on an industrial scale – but can such a claim be followed up?

Nonetheless, architects, urban planners, visual artists, and video-makers are increasingly finding in Bachelard’s works the philosophical resources to nourish an alternative thought and practice aimed at promoting a harmonious relationship with the elements of nature, its landscapes and rhythms, while supporting an existential approach to habitat more in terms of care than of planning. His writings also exhibit a vocabulary rich in terms such as “place,” “earth,” “nature,” “cosmos,” “rhythm,” as well as verbs like “participate,” “interiorize,” “merge,” etc. The aim of this first issue of *Bachelard Studies* is to highlight how and why Bachelard could be considered a leading figure in ecological thinking, in France and beyond.

Bachelard's life was permeated with ecological sensitivity. Born in Bar-sur-Aube in Champagne in the late nineteenth century, he grew up in a pre-industrial landscape – appreciating, describing, and valuing his native habitat through its diverse craft practices. During the 1920s he used to walk daily through vineyards on his way to college. His biography is an eco-biography. It establishes the features of an idea that will ultimately give rise to the notion of an ecological self. Such self-telling cannot help but integrate his confrontation with the materials and textures of the world. His personal and cultural story reflects the health concerns that moved him to write in praise of walking, breathing at full lung capacity in the open air, on the importance of respecting natural rhythms (against the violation of cadences), and even in defense of homeopathy. His attachment to Bar-sur-Aube and Dijon (until 1940) led him in the 1930s to celebrate the ruralist vision of the balance between man and nature, the symbolic powers peculiar to material substances, and the laborious hand of the craftsman or the artist.

No wonder he became friends with witnesses of an endangered world (most notably, Gaston Roupnel, champion of the French countryside) during his years at the University of Dijon. Until the end of his life, he poured over books by poets immersed in the lyricism of nature, and he was greatly appreciated by regionalist writers such as Henri Vincenot. His attachment to the traditional house (with cellar and attic), in Bar-sur-Aube or Dijon, encouraged him to criticize the urban world (Paris) and the art of building high-rises removed from nature (he detested using the elevator!) – a critique which alternative planners would be inclined to support nowadays. Could one go so far as to imagine Bachelard adopting an ecological lifestyle?

Bachelard's poetic analyses seem evident, but their evidence should also be questioned and pondered conceptually, in order to avoid facile analogies and to get closer to ecological considerations. Earth, air, fire, and water mobilize his elemental poetics, which resonates with an ecological crisis that could be described as attacking the four elements through the production of rare-earth elements (known as potential contaminants), polluted air, global-warming fires, or tainted water. Does such a poetics provide a “natural” language for developing a sensitive and imaginative approach to nature? Or is it necessary for us to look for its fruitfulness elsewhere than in a mechanical application of the four elements to the four proposed challenges of contemporary ecology? If so, what is it that characterizes an “elemental poetics” vis-à-vis an “environmental aesthetics”? What are their points of convergence and their significant differences? What are we to think about this poetic tetralogy vis-à-vis other cultural cosmologies which articulate the affinities between the human and material worlds differently (e.g. the five elements including “wood” in Chinese cosmology)?

These considerations also open up questions regarding the *passage* from poetic cosmologies to ecological issues, or, more generally, from poetics to ethics and politics. How does the transition from image to concept, or from image to value, take

place? Through an ecological cosmology such as one rooted in ancient Greece or in alchemy – a cosmology that describes the aesthetic and ethical values of the four elements (themselves irreducible to the inert matter of physics and chemistry) – do we not indeed discover a philosophy of life that displays a cyclical and rhythmic transformative power capable of acting upon human beings via the unconscious (Jung), the will (Schopenhauer), and even via “open reason”? Answering such questions – as this, our first issue proposes to do – would help us cut through Bachelard’s apparent impasse between the “man of the theorem” vs. the “man of the poem.” This would allow us to examine the fecundity of his analyses and to ponder interdisciplinary themes such as: (1) the theme of habitation associated with a *poetics of space*, which the recent critical re-edition published by PUF in 2020 by Gilles Hiéronimus invites us to explore; (2) the *culture of rhythms* in a society of acceleration: “the calendar of fruits is the calendar of rhytmanalysis”; or (3) the theme of *creative production* which claims the critical importance of the “right to dream” in order to resist the generalized development of instrumental rationality that anesthetizes our sensitive relationship with nature.

From a scientific and technological perspective, what assistance can a Bachelardian epistemology and phenomenotechnique provide to illuminate contemporary issues of highly analytical physico-chemical and agronomic knowledge concerning systemic approaches to the ecological sciences? Given that, as a philosopher, he devoted much of his thought to chemistry, and considering today’s discussions about “green chemistry,” for example, can Bachelard’s epistemological analyses shed light on the links between science, technology, and the proper care of nature? If so, how?

Even though the various orientations of Bachelard’s thought, outlined herein, are rarely systematized, and hardly lend themselves to be reduced to one encompassing category, the *ecological* perspective calls forth a transverse and fecund reading of his work, as we shall discover when examining the contributions to this volume. Within this perspective, might his writings not be fruitfully related to that of other contemporary phenomenological and hermeneutic thinkers (M. Heidegger, M. Merleau-Ponty, etc.) who also converged on issues of ecological culture, as recognized and discussed by geographers (A. Berque, etc.) and poets (K. White, Michel Collot, etc.)? If so, might it help to bring to light possible resonances between Bachelard’s analyses and problems of environmental philosophy? In fact, couldn’t Bachelard’s later reflections on place or intimate cosmicity – within the framework of a “topophilia” – assist us in questioning the ethics of “place” of contemporary authors in ecology? And wouldn’t his analyses of the “dreamer’s *cogito*” themselves provide food for thought to suggest the nature of the “ecological self”?

Other more critical approaches to the philosopher’s work could finally be taken into consideration: To what extent is poetic imagination opposed to science in its approach to nature? In what ways could Bachelard’s elemental cosmopoetics be universalizable (cf. Chinese typology)? Does his “rhytmanalysis” (however frag-

mentary) prompt us to reflect on the various temporal dimensions of nature? In what way does his attachment to a naturalistic poetic paradigm incite opposition, resistance, or even mistrust from the reader who views it as anti-progressive, even if it is countered by Bachelard's own progressive scientific rationalism? We hope that the present volume will be a convincing contribution toward renewing and deepening our understanding of this philosopher's thought in light of the current environmental crisis, while exposing the fruitfulness of his work and the importance of his singular voice for our time.

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