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Gaston Bachelard's Sound Environments

Towards an Aesthetics of Energy

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A “dreamer of words” (PR 17), could Gaston Bachelard also be called a “sound-dreamer”? For this poet of the elements who lives in vibrant reciprocity with an environment that responds to his being and participates in his perceptions, does reverie have a sound origin? In “Reverie and Radio” (RD 167-172). Bachelard expresses his enthusiasm for the acousmatic dimension of voice—potential inducer of reverie much as music—as he calls for a musician, in his 1949 New Year radio chat (where he cites Chopin, Wagner, and Debussy alongside Béranger) to write on the theme of “reverie and music”. The upcoming issue of *Bachelard Studies* will attempt to respond to his appeal, guided by four cardinal points that will help us trace how Bachelard's sound environments influenced his creativity and thought, driven in particular by the principle of liquidity inherent in the sound of water (WD 192). Is this *fundamental sound* (WD 194) at the origin of Bachelard's interest in an “art of music” devoted to matter's ceaseless movements and transmutations? Addressing this question will require us to distinguish sound from music. How are the sonorous, the vocal, and the musical specifically articulated in his work?

1. Sound ecology and cosmo-listening

Like Debussy, Bachelard could well be one of the precursors of a sound ecology that aims to bring music closer to the sounds of the natural world, in order to unclog our body-mind and cure it of its deafness. Could the acousmatic and *trajectorial* listening practiced by Bachelard help us transform our environment today, to cosmicize urban space? Language itself is for Bachelard a *sound environment*: words are, for him, “clamor-filled shells” (PS 179). Living as a poet and musician means “rising and falling” with words and sounds, listening to their sonorities of being, as in the music of breath: *vie-âme* (AD 241). Given that he regards words and sounds as living “buds that dream” as they throb to ramify (PR, 16; PR-Eng 17) -- what might be the consequences of Bachelard's sound ecology and “harmonic philosophy” (PE, 96; PS 95)?

The sound-oriented listening practiced by Bachelard and many 20th-century musicians implies another mode of relation to the world than that of Western philosophers who largely conceived the relations between reality and the human spirit in terms of a visual relation (“at a distance”) between eye and object, in their attempt to dominate reality through reason: a process that tends to arrest life. Listening, unlike visual perception, implies a movement of immersion that consists in "transforming oneself into sound by existing in it" (Takemitsu, 1996, 63-64). This calls for another kind of language, one that evokes the *intensity* of music or poetry in order to communicate the *values* of life. Hence Bachelard's advocacy of a kind of *non-knowing* in poetry (Lassus, 2019), a "difficult surpassing of knowledge" (PS xxxiii) which consists in suspending visual perception and knowledge to give oneself entirely to an embodied listening of the world and others, by using what Nietzsche (and later Freud) called "the third ear" (1951, § 246). The musician is someone *who listens and hears* the world in a unique way, but it is actually quite rare for most people to hear the world before seeing it. So how could Bachelard help us found "a listening society" today (Rosa, 2019) on the basis of sound as a construction of the common? Could there be another realm of thought (reverie, speech, tonality) governed by listening and not screened through reason -- a dimension of existence made of felt vibrations and inner touch (Lassus, 2006)? Such is *the activity* of reverie which, according to Rousseau, enables us “to take pleasure in existence *without taking the trouble to think*" (Rousseau, 1762, 1974, 99). Could this activity be at the origin of the non-rationalized "concrete aesthetics" (FC-Eng, 3) advocated by Bachelard when he perceives within the *intensity* of a flame the unfolding of being, as it tends towards the “more than being” embodied by Prometheus, symbol of the dynamic disobedience that animates the arts (FPF-Eng 82-87)?

2. Aesthetics of energy

To compose in the 20th century is to work with living sound, treated as a "phenomenon of energy", comparable to the theory of discrete “bursts of energy”, modeled by quantum physics, and assembled as a whole sound dedicated to infinite transmutations (Xenakis, Varèse). To what extent could the new music of the 20th century — thought of as living sounds more than notes, and whose parameters are subordinated to tone bound to rhythm and time (Stockhausen, 1957) — have influenced Bachelard's own conception of “time” in the *Intuition of the Instant* (1932) and the *Dialectic of Duration* (1936)? Conversely, how might Bachelard's work have influenced composers such as J-C Risset, F-B Mâche or F. Bayle?

Moreover, could we relate this conception of sound as a form of energy with the "aesthetics of energy" initiated by Bachelard in his listening to the poetry of Lautréamont -- a "howling universe" where sounds are bound by a natural force that grants them acoustic boldness and "sound coherence" (L 65)? Such primitive poetry is fruit of the "sonority of nerve impulses" of a poet who valued *the cry*, wherein Herder detected the origin of languages (Herder, 1772, 2010, 75-76). But is the deep song resulting from this "sonorous, energetic *cogito*" (L 64) which gives rise to human speech and proto-music still art? "The beautiful is not a simple arrangement: it needs power, energy" (L 59), writes Bachelard, as he celebrates Blake's insight that “*Energy is only Life, and is from Body*” (AD 81). By thus turning energy into an aesthetic principle (L 66), isn't Bachelard suggesting that bodily activity is primary in relation to consciousness, which is born from it, and has no independent existence otherwise?

The new conceptions of time (relative and discontinuous) and of matter-energy revealed by the new physics at the threshold of the 20th-century impacted all domains of thought and art -- stimulating the synthesis between scientist and poet in Bachelard himself. Henceforth, there is *no space without music* (AD 50) any more than there is *music without space*. Indeed, space is *component of sound* for those 20th-century composers inclined to conceive it as space-time after Wagner (*Parsifal*, 1882, Act I " See my son/ Here time transforms itself into space ") and Debussy ("music and poetry are the only two arts which move in space" (1971, 45-46) .

Along these lines, Bachelard also cites Shelley's dynamic image of the flight of a lark: that creature of space and of a "greater-elsewhere" which increases life in us as it becomes an "invisible corpuscle accompanied by a wave of joy" (AD 84) under his scientific-poetic pen. Bachelard even proposes a "wave theory of the lark", invisible bird, emblematic of that music which addresses" the vibratory aspect of our being" (AD 84).

And was it this innately undulatory character of *matter* itself – which exists only on the plane of rhythm, according to the model set forth by contemporary physics (DD, 130; DD-Eng 137) – what would then give rise to another conception of rhythm, psychological and therapeutic, discernible through the method of *rhythmanalysis* developed by Pinheiro dos Santos, and celebrated by Bachelard (DD 136-154)?

3. Poetics of silence

Poets and musicians teach us to listen to *what lingers between sounds*, leading us even below the threshold of hearing, to listen to silence -- a mode of being which lives and breathes as sound, and lets itself be penetrated by an *augur's will* (ERR 63). Max Picard in his book *The world of silence* (1948), cited by Bachelard, showed how silence lies at the origin of poetry and music that works with time, the word, and human being itself. By thus projecting us into "a realm beyond perception" (PS 174), do not both poetry and music necessarily become *metaphysical practices*, for Bachelard?

In Bachelard's listening to silent sounds, one might also discover a connection with Japanese aesthetics, which rests on the enhancement of the *ma*— the space-time between two sounds or two movements -- a non-verbalizable, non-conceptualizable rhythm located at the heart of the art to which it gives meaning. Silence in music, non-action in dance or theater, white space in calligraphy or painting are conceived as resonances, *possibilities* or spaces of tension.

Also tending towards sounds to come, musicians as "silencers" (title of a work for strings and percussion by M. Ohana, 1969) write with "ten ears and one hand" (AD 247). They hear with the imagination more than with perception" (ERR 143), proof that Bachelard is aware of the mysterious gap between real and imagined sound, difficult to understand by non-musicians. His own work often gives testimony to this "sound imagination" with which he was evidently endowed: "Imaginary music ... accompanies movement that is lived totally through the imagination" (AD 48); "Imagination is a *sound-effects man*: it amplifies or deafens" (WD 195).

4. Sound imagination and imaginative dynamism

One might even say that, for Bachelard, *images are immediate music*. There is a "music of the image" (M. Ohana, 1974) at the foundation of his poetics where the elements (water, wind, flowers, trees, landscapes) are directly identified with sound.

If so, it would help to rethink his notion of the "image" in light of this dynamism of sound and the musical imagination. To evoke Bachelard's sound worlds nowadays -- when music is often reduced from the status of sound to a visual *image* -- might help restore us to the fundamentals of this art which require an adhesion to the invisible. For *we hear differently when we close our eyes* (PS 181) by taking measure of the immensity within us – an experience that recalls that Orphic music which contributes to "making our hearing spacious" (Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*) to the point of transforming resonance into reverberation as it touches the depths of the psyche before the surface (PS xvi, 7). Wouldn't the science of musicology, hence, be enriched by a poetic approach to musical works resistant to analysis, much as the approach to the microphysical world has been enriched, according to Bachelard, by embracing the postulate of non-analysis? (EEPC 26).

In poetry as in music, it is not a question of "describing" landscapes in order to *represent* them, but rather of *bringing their movements to life* by *involving* the listener; for sight has no part in the image: it is deduced from movement (AD 68-69, 83-85). Wouldn't the imagining and deforming action required by Bachelardian reverie indeed be a heuristic principle valid in all the arts -- a principle that does not aim at reproducing reality but at (re)creating it?

From dance to painting (cf. C. Carlson: "I am very influenced by Gaston Bachelard) all the way to sculpture, theater, or music -- all the arts are concerned with his poetics of elements and space, which have become compositional principles in J.C. Risset or F.B. Mâche (among others). What is the secret reason for this attraction to Bachelard's work as an engine of creation? Is his method of "reverie" -- that mode of deep meditation aimed at tapping matter's rhythmic energies (PR 126) -- so relevant to the arts that it continues to inspire artists today? What *is* the secret reason for this attraction to Bachelard's work as an engine of creation?

Exploring Bachelard's sound environments promises to reveal what his phenomenology of listening -- attentive as it is to the phenomenon of life lived in its intensity and immediacy -- can offer us today. Music, as an "immediate idea of life" (Nietzsche 1994, 129), inspires the thought of this philosopher who expressed a desire, toward the end of his life, to rewrite all his books to the measure of a "doctrine of spontaneity" (FPF 5) aimed at founding a concrete "human aesthetics". Wouldn't this aesthetics, combined with an "aesthetics of energy", be able to fertilize a profound ethics of poetry as "living presence to the world and to others"? Wouldn't such a "human aesthetics" (FPF 73) ultimately become an ethics?

Always wondering about how best our listening ears might tune into the root of silence where sound is born (PS 180), Bachelard cultivated a fine ear that would enable him to interpret "silences and sounds, *vivaces* and *lentos* -- "all the resonances and arpeggios of sympathy" (Preface to Buber's *I and Thou*, 273). Could his persistent example of empathic listening to life's energies encourage us today to take better care of life (within and around us) and to preserve our sound environment against the cacophonies so rampant in contemporary societies? These questions are meant to orient artistic and musical *practice* towards a certain "hygiene of life" as an appeal to vibrant energy (RD 42-43), in the hope of opening new perspectives which this issue of *Bachelard Studies* invites us to explore.

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[* N.B: (1) BACHELARD'S WORKS are here referenced in the body of the text in English translation, wherever applicable. French original editions can be found in the corresponding French "Appel à Publication" for this issue of *Études Bachelardiennes*. (2) Abbreviated SIGLAS for Bachelard's cited publications are indicated below before each title. Other texts and secondary references are cited by date of publication, and herein listed parenthetically before each title.]

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