

BOOK REVIEWS

A Critical Edition of the Works by Gaston Bachelard. A Report on the Project Planned for 2020–2024

Works by Gaston Bachelard, both in the field of the philosophy of science and in the field of the philosophy of poetic imagination, were reissued in France many times. These reissues were unchanged reprints of the original editions, which were always very interesting in terms of content, but sometimes underdeveloped in terms of form. Obviously, this is not the most important aspect of these works, as we can undoubtedly agree with Jean-Jacques Wunenburger.¹ Nevertheless, a disordered form, especially in terms of bibliographic references, is a certain difficulty for researchers of this philosophy and may be a prelude to its unauthorized readings. Let us add that Bachelard's works originally came out in various publishing houses, including Librairie José Corti, Les Presses universitaires de France, Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, Librairie Félix Alcan, Les Éditions Gallimard. It had an impact on the availability of individual titles, as they were reissued on different terms and with different frequency.

In light of the ever wider reception of Bachelard's philosophy, also outside France (Bachelard's works have been translated into more than twenty languages),² ordering and critical study of his achievements has become

1. Wunenburger comments on Bachelard's references to Carl Gustav Jung's works as follows, "you can be meticulous and say banal things, you can also say extremely brilliant things, while making a few minor mistakes" (Wunenburger 2013, 18).

2. It is worth mentioning here the research devoted to Bachelard's philosophy, conducted in recent years, for example, in Italy, Romania, Korea, China, Brazil, Mexico, Portugal, and

a pressing need. This challenge was taken up by the Bachelard community centred around the Association Internationale Gaston Bachelard, as well as the Parisian École normale supérieure and Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3. The project planned for 2020–2024 is headed by Jean-Jacques Wunenburger and Gilles Hieronimus.³

The edition comes out in the publishing house Les Presses universitaires de France, in the Quadrigue series. So far, three titles have been published: *Le nouvel esprit scientifique*—compiled by Vincent Bontemps (Bachelard 2020), *La poétique de l'espace*—compiled by Gilles Hieronimus (Bachelard 2020b) and *Le matérialisme rationnel*—compiled by Lucie Fabry (Bachelard 2021). The following will be published by the end of 2024: *La dialectique de la durée* (compiled by Elie During), *La philosophie du non* (compiled by Jean-Jacques Wunenburger), *Le droit de rêver* (compiled by Jean-Philippe Pierron), *Fragments d'une poétique du feu* (compiled by Arnaud Bouaniche), *Rationalisme appliqué*, (compiled by Michel Elie Martin), *La flamme d'une chandelle* (compiled by Rodolphe Calin), *L'activité rationaliste de la physique contemporaine* and *La poétique de la rêverie*. Experts on Bachelard's works will immediately recognize the absence of some of his significant works, such as the famous treatise on the psychoanalysis of scientific cognition, i.e. *La formation de l'esprit scientifique. Contribution à une psychanalyse de la connaissance objective*, or books on the psychoanalysis of the elements: water, air and earth. The project is therefore not a complete critical edition of Bachelard's achievements. It is a selection that offers hope for continuation.⁴

The project is based on the assumption of the equivalence of the two directions of Bachelard's thought. His philosophy of science is as strongly represented in the series as his philosophy of poetic imagination. Without adding extra value to any of these areas, project coordinators seem to point to their complementarity. This is also indicated by the decision to publish two works each year: one in the field of philosophy and science, and another in the field of the philosophy of imagination.

also in Poland (Wunenburger and Hieronimus 2019, 11).

3. The source idea of a critical edition of Bachelard's works arose during the works of Atelier Gaston Bachelard, led by Julien Lamy and Gilles Hieronimus (Wunenburger and Hieronimus 2019, 11).

4. The editors do not mention the difficulties in negotiating with the publishing houses, but it can be suspected that there is a certain difficulty here, too, which prevented the edition of Bachelard's collected works. Let us remind you that such projects were already planned and that they did not come to fruition due to the lack of agreement between the publishers (Bachelard 1988, 20–1).

It seems important for the team leading the edition not only to balance Bachelard's poetics with his epistemology, but also to show the diversity of his philosophy and its internal evolution. The first edition doublet is *La poétique de l'espace* and *Le nouvel esprit scientifique*, i.e. books from two opposite poles of Bachelard's activity, not only in the aforementioned thematic perspective, but also in the context of its chronology. The first one, devoted to images and ideas born out of spatial determinants, is the work of mature or late Bachelard (published in 1957). The second, on the other hand, developing the concept of a "new scientific mind," responsible, according to the philosopher, for the emergence and development of "new" (post-Einsteinian) science, is early Bachelard, before the formulation of the most famous theories and methods, such as the psychoanalysis of objective cognition or psychoanalysis of the elements.

Among the most important tasks of the edition, Gilles Hieronimus and Jean-Jacques Wunenburger mention, among others, the need for a new positioning of Bachelard's thoughts in the history of the philosophy of the twentieth century, emphasizing its originality, also in the context of his contribution to contemporary debates (Wunenburger and Hieronimus 2019, 16). The authors of the new edition also wish to popularize Bachelard's work and allow it to reach the widest possible audience. The task thus defined seems to be fully in line with the intention of Bachelard himself. His works are interdisciplinary, moreover, many of them—books on the poetics of dreams—can be read without academic preparation.

An example of such a book is *La poétique de l'espace*, devoted to ideas related to various spaces, for example a family home (with micro-spaces hidden in it and marked with meaning—stairs, attic, basement), a wardrobe, a nest or a crack. The figure of negation, characteristic of Bachelard, also appears here: in analyses marked by dialectics, images of the external collide with the dream of the internal, and the imagined house turns out to be a reflection of cosmic dreams.

In the introduction to the new edition, Gilles Hieronimus places Bachelard's analyses of the ideas of space in the broad context of his thoughts, stressing that "this book engages the entirety of Bachelard's philosophy, along with its scientific, anthropological and metaphysical background, as well as its ethical horizon" (Hieronimus 2020, 10).

Hieronimus reads Bachelard's poetics of space as a continuation and complement to his philosophy of science, in which space appears in the context of "new physics"—initiated by the research of Albert Einstein, Louis de Broglie and Werner Heisenberg—that changed the way we think about space. It is no longer defined as a geometric dimension existing within itself,

as a static localization frame distinguished from the body inside it and the movements performed within it. New thinking about space is radically different from this simple intuition (Hieronimus 2020, 12–3).

Following modern physics based on non-Euclidean geometries, Bachelard writes about space not as a direct given, but as a structure. Such an understanding of space fits in with Bachelard's thinking about scientific cognition, which in his view is a construct of the mind, an abstraction that mathematizes the specifics given in experience. On one hand, it provides the basis for understanding reality, thus enabling reflection on what is given, and on the other, it is the opposite of experience, because it must reject its specificity to make thinking of it possible.

A fact—that is given—is an epistemological obstacle (*obstacle épistémologique*) inhibiting the development of cognition. As such, it must be removed from it, as Bachelard shows in the psychoanalysis of objective cognition. This does not mean, however, that there is no other reason for it. The *raison d'être* of a fact is the imagination, which recovers and creatively uses what intellect rejects. This radical separation between specifics and the abstract is reflected in the duality of Bachelard's philosophy. *La poétique de l'espace* focuses on imagination as an active power of creating images, processing direct data that becomes its material.

Both Bachelard's philosophy of science and his philosophy of imagination evolved throughout his lifetime. *La poétique de l'espace* belongs to its late period, in which the first psychoanalytical analyses in the Freudian spirit were replaced by a turn to Jung's depth psychology and phenomenology. Gilles Hieronimus draws attention to the modifications that "late" Bachelard introduces to his method, stressing at the same time that the pillars of Bachelard's poetics, based on the recognition of: (1) primacy of imagination, enabling all experience (of which a scientist must be aware), linking what is unconscious with what is individual; (2) daydream as a privileged modality of the activity of imagination (as opposed to psychoanalytic analyses focused on dreams); (3) a poetic image as a power supporting a dream, a power that enables its recipient to make a new—renewed—transition from the dreamlike world into real space, remained unchanged (Hieronimus 2020, 16–7).

For a historian of philosophy, it is interesting to see how *La poétique de l'espace* fits into the discussions and philosophical currents that prevailed in France in the 1950s. One of the tasks set by the editors of the edition of Bachelard's works is to define the place of individual works in their contemporary intellectual landscape. Hieronimus also touches on this topic, in this context noting Bachelard's participation in the discussion on

the problems posed by existentialists in post-war France (the existentialism of J.P. Sartre and the phenomenology of M. Merleau-Ponty appear as important points of reference), also the Heideggerian theme of inhabiting the world appears. Hieronimus also draws attention to Bachelard's hermeneutic and even structuralist threads (Hieronimus 2020, 20–1). I admit that as a reader I feel a bit unsatisfied here, it is a pity that these issues were not developed further, but only mentioned.

In the project under discussion, *Le nouvel esprit scientifique*, a book on the other pole of Bachelard's philosophy, was published almost simultaneously with *La poétique de l'espace*—both in terms of its subject (philosophy of science) and the period of the philosopher's activity (the book was published in 1934, that is, it is more than two decades ahead of *La poétique de l'espace*). This is a book about relativity and quantum mechanics. As Vincent Bontemps, editor of the critical edition of the dissertation proves in the introduction, regardless of the topicality of Bachelard's analyses, *Le nouvel esprit scientifique* shows that philosophy remains in line with the scientific spirit of its time only when it revises its own metaphysical hypotheses (Bontemps 2020, 9).

The most famous distinction made in the dissertation is that between the “old” and “new” scientific mind. Bachelard—while inscribing and arguing with the historical, continuationist tradition of French epistemology—considers the scientific mind in the process of its improvement. In his opinion, it distinguishes his epistemology from continuationist theories of cognition; this process is not continuous, but on the contrary: any changes that occur in his area result from a rupture (*la rupture*). This is also the case of two ways of scientific thinking, split by Einstein's theory of relativity. The new scientific mind by no means evolved from the old paradigm of scientific thought that preceded it. On the contrary: it constituted itself by breaking with the old paradigm and creating a new way of understanding the world, scientific cognition and man.

A philosopher who wants to keep up with changes in science must abandon the ideas of linearity, continuity and evolution. For him/her, “dialectics” should become the primary category. Referring to modern rationalism, Bachelard postulates the abandonment of its framework and the establishment of non-Cartesianism, based on an open dialectic, a dialectic of negation. Let us emphasize that the intuition of negativity and opposition indicated here will be developed by Bachelard in his further works, recognizing the philosophy of negation (a philosophy that says “no”) as an appropriate research method both in the field of philosophy of science and poetic imagination.

The third published treatise is *Le matérialisme rationnel*. A book from 1953, so again from the “mature” period of the philosopher’s activity. Lucie Fabry, who prepared the critical edition of the book, assesses it as, in a sense, the culmination of Bachelard’s earlier theses concerning the category of matter (Fabry 2021, 14). Matter is the central subject of analyses here, and it is unquestionably not a new topic for Bachelard. Although the main discipline that interests Bachelard in *Le matérialisme* . . . is chemistry, both poetic and philosophical contexts appear here. Matter becomes a special point of intersection of poetic dreams, philosophical and scientific insights (Fabry 2021, 14).

Fabry reads *Le matérialisme* . . . from the perspective of the whole of Bachelard’s thoughts. He draws attention to his tendency to create neologisms, as well as to introduce detailed divisions and hierarchies, which results in a rich—quite innovative—semantic field. It is sufficient to say that “materialism” has about forty terms for it (imagined, enlightened, idealistic, nuclear, chemical), and each of them is accompanied by an attempt to precisely distinguish and discern the essence of the distinguished elements. This conceptual work with the accompanying linguistic invention marked all of Bachelard’s intellectual work, so we could again speak of a culmination here—this time in a methodological sense.

The philosophical and scientific layer of the book is interesting, a lot of space is devoted to the question of the essence of chemistry as a science. Bachelard takes a position between realism and conventionalism, rejecting both the thesis that chemical cognition should be a faithful reflection of the natural order and the assumption that chemistry only constructs a set of conventions devoid of any objective value. The statement typical for Bachelard’s epistemology about the constructivist nature of scientific cognition leads him to the thesis that, contrary to realism, the form of molecules is calculated and inferred rather than demonstrated. This does not mean, however, that we are dealing here only with a convention. Bachelard defines chemical cognition in the perspective of its dynamics, the process of maturation of concepts gradually gaining their real dimension (*maturation réalistique des notions scientifiques*).

So far, the three dissertations discussed above have been published in the series. The cited interpretations are the most important element—next to the critical apparatus—of the new edition. The editors of the new editions and at the same time the authors of the introductions analyse the dissertations in the context of their significance for Bachelard’s contemporary debates—both scientific and philosophical, as well as in the perspective of their topicality and contribution to the history of philosophy in general. In

my opinion, this intention was carried out very well. The new interpretations convincingly demonstrate the topicality of Bachelard's texts, sometimes almost ninety years old, as in the case of *Le nouvel esprit scientifique*.

This critical edition is an attempt at a new reading of Bachelard's texts, as well as defining their place in the history of the twentieth-century philosophy and indicating their significance for contemporary humanities. The critical apparatus that organizes and expands the content of Bachelard's dissertations is also worth noting. Each of the books has a personal and subject index. The footnotes were refined and supplemented, and the editors' footnotes were added, which, for the sake of clarity, were introduced at the end. Each dissertation also includes a list of the most important historical and philosophical theses and references, discussed in relation to each chapter, as well as a bibliography of the most important studies and commentaries. All these solutions significantly facilitate the reading of Bachelard's works, and readers can use the tools of critical reading offered to them in various ways, depending on their needs and preferences.

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