



New Bachelards? Reveries, Elements and Twenty-First Century Materialism

by James L. Smith

Gaston Bachelard has been dead since 1962, and yet his ideas remain flexible, in transition. Can it be said that his position within discourse is solely that of an historical figure? This eccentric and engaging French philosopher remains a changing discursive entity in his own right, occupying a position within a long chain of influential and influenced philosophy. His ideas change and morph to fit new ideologies, new discursive landscapes and new applications. His work, to this day, is present within new and unfolding theories touching upon topics that were once of great interest to him. Although his many ideas regarding the interpretation of the elements, the poetics of reverie and the imagination remain of interest as a part of the history of continental and material philosophy, there are other possibilities for engagement that are more *ad hoc*, more plastic.

The overall spirit of Bachelard's poetic projects endures independently of his historiographical footprint. Although he was a scholar very much of his own *milieu*, albeit a highly innovative scholar preoccupied with the problems of his day, there are many valuable and topical lessons to be learned by placing Bachelard's work into remediating dialogue with philosophical goals beyond his experience or lifetime. The boon of working with a philosophy as ambitious, imaginative and polyvalent as Bachelard's is that it is always, continuously, ready for adaptation. He has proven to be extremely methodologically useful for a wide variety of topics.

A recent edited volume (Gayon–Wunenburger 2000), for example, (Gayon–Wunenburger 2000) has demonstrated his diverse and pan-national appeal. There is, it appears, a Bachelard for every intellectual tradition and every cultural *oeuvre*. The first decade of the new millennium has seen a veritable smorgasbord of new Bachelardian articles that experiment with the myriad and flexible mass of his ideas. These studies focus on a broad array of topics, including funerary rites (Pierron 2001), the construction of the planned city of Brasília (Oliveira 2001), patriarchal gendering of thought (O'Shea–Meddour 2003), and post-war modernisation (Lane 2006) to name a few. Perhaps the most fertile field in which the Bachelardian seed has sprouted is that of the ecologically inflected material philosophy borne from our current environmental crises and anxieties.



This article seeks to understand something of the cross-resonance between the philosophy of Gaston Bachelard and the materialism of the twenty-first century. Rather than seeking to engage with Bachelard within his original context or as a legacy of influence, I intend to draw his work into a conversation with recent anglophone materialist discourse. My points of engagement are *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* by Jane Bennett (2010), and *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire and Water as Elemental Ideas* by David Macauley (2010). Each of these monographs is focused upon a topic that was of great interest to Bachelard within his own lifetime – the imagination of matter and the philosophy of the elements respectively – and yet each places these topics within distinctly twenty-first century frameworks.

In the light of the increasing need for formative ecological philosophy in the face of manifold environment anxieties and conceptual problems, I will argue that Bachelard has acquired, by virtue of potentialities inherent within his ideas and through new interpretations, a new relevance much in need of further exposition. Bachelard and his corpus of works benefit, to my mind, from being given permission for *autopoeis*; by allowing his ideas to blend and percolate through those developed following his death, *new Bachelards* emerge. Bachelardian ideas infuse twenty-first century new materialisms with nuance and life, and so too can the twenty-first century revitalise Bachelard. Rather than the *ad hoc* quotation of Bachelard that has become *de rigueur* in certain areas of literary discourse, I seek to present a new, remediated Bachelardian framework that can take its place in discourse. Gaston Bachelard *and* and *as* Twenty-First century materialism, one might say. One can certainly apprehend the flexibility of matter within philosophy, but the goal of this article is to highlight the flexibility of Bachelard in equal measure. The argument begins with a comparison of Jane Bennett and Bachelard, followed by a discussion of David Macauley and Bachelard. Once the comparison is made, it will then be possible to speculate as to what kind of 'New Bachelards' emerge from the process of comparison.

JANE BENNETT AND GASTON BACHELARD: MATERIALE IMAGININGS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

Jane Bennett, as a political scientist, brings an ever-present and conscientious applicability to the imagination of matter. Reading *Vibrant Matter* is a politicising act, a call to awareness of a vibrant, interconnected world of vital 'stuff', the apprehension of which forces a reconceptualization of our relationship with that which we had previously assumed to be inert. Bennett's (2010: VII) vibrant materialism, in her words, aims to "think slowly" about an idea "that runs fast through modern heads", namely "the idea of matter as passive stuff, as raw, brute, or inert". Bennett's ideas have proved to be popular outside of the original purview of *Vibrant Matter*, and it is not an uncomfortable process to relate them to those of Bachelard. There are many reasons why the reader of Bennett might wish to make a comparison with Bachelard. Reading his writings on material imagination, to this day, is a call to consider both the subjective influence and the autonomous aesthetic valence of a world in which humanity shapes and is shaped by objects. Bennett takes this idea into the twenty-first century, riding the wave of Deleuzian vitalism and Latourian



distributed agency into the realm of what is now being referred to in discourse as 'object-oriented philosophy'.

The implications of Jane Bennett's *Vital Matter* for human agency within a materialist schema are political and ethical in nature. Bennett advocates the eschewal of the notion that all properties of thing-power are ultimately a result of human agency. Delaying the critique of objects as constructs of culture and history, she argues, presents an opportunity to "render manifest a subsistent world of nonhuman vitality". This manifestation, once apprehended, "arrives through humans but not entirely because of them" (Bennett 2010: 17). By insisting on the interaction between human and non-human and on the unhelpfulness of such binaries as human/non-human, Bennett presents a world of intimate liveliness and distributed agency. By dwelling within a world in which matter has affect, behaviour, vitality and agency, the *us* and the *it* become intertwined. Rather than exhibiting "passive intractability", Bennett's non-human actors have the ability to produce effects, to make things happen (Bennett 2010: 5).

Bennett, in this sense, adds an interesting spin to Bachelard. Following Husserl's phenomenological method, Bachelard claims that subject and object are "co-constituted" (Hans 1977: 316). To give a fixed, categorical definition to an object would be to deny it dynamic force, to flatten the phenomenon. Unlike a metaphor, which refers to something real, a poetic image is unreal, or rather *irreal* (Hans 1977: 317); it is a reaction to the phenomenal world. Taxonomic division does not stand within such a model, for the creation of imagination requires one to discard the notion that the *us* of subjectivity and the *it* of objects are a valid distinction. By eschewing the urge to break imagination into a system of prescriptive objective rules, Bachelard's approach instead privileges the power of the imagination prior to structural hermeneutics. Picart (1997: 59) describes Bachelard's methodology as "a perpetual play of consciousness that alternately teases out, wrestles with, and recedes from the emergence of an image". The vitality of the object for the subject drives Bachelard to understand "the poetic image and its place in human life". Poetics, then, allow a speculation on a source of human inspiration new and powerful to the imagination and anterior to interpretation (McAllester Jones 1991: 95). By reducing the agency of humans, as Bennett does, we reach a balance between matter as phenomenon and as autonomous agent that finds a fit within Bachelard's approach.

On the topic of phenomenology, Bennett makes some methodological observations that put *Vibrant Matter* into further dialogue with the phenomenological methodology of Bachelard. Bennett invokes the embodied approach of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as an important influence, a step confirming and yet moving on from the Husserlian phenomenology of Bachelard. Drawing on the formulation of Diana Coole (2007), Bennett (2010: 29–30) proposes a spectrum of agencies spanning human physiological and motor processes (the pre-personal and non-cognitive embodied phenomenological experience), and the human social structures of an "interworld" (the transpersonal, intersubjective processes of phenomenology). Consequently, Bennett's materialism makes a phenomenological claim much like that of Bachelard, albeit predicated on a different manifestation of the theory and with different considerations in mind. Bennett presents a world in which an ability to feel the vitality of the object, be it with the reason or the body, gives the option of a political engagement with the world that avoids deadening or flattening objects or reducing nature to utility. Bachelard has much the same goal, albeit in



a somewhat disembodied sense. Taken together, we can apprehend a more developed Bachelardian notion of the 'interworld' of trans-subjective reverie coupled with the recent insights gleaned from a turn towards embodiment in phenomenology.

Bennett and Bachelard, in very different contexts and by different methods, attempt to correct the notion that Bennett (2010: VII) describes as the parsing of the world into "dull matter" (the *it* and the category of things), and "vibrant life" (the *us*, and the category of beings). Bachelard presents the same false dichotomy. For to him "the duality of subject and object is iridescent, shimmering, unceasingly active in its inversions" (Bachelard 1997: XIX). Bennett proceeds by affirming the inhuman vitality of matter, and Bachelard stresses the complete dependence of human imagination on objects. By merging the two, the human subject 'emerges' from their solipsism and into engagement with the non-human but vital. Compare, for example, these two passages:

Humanity and nonhumanity have always performed an intricate dance with each other. There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity; today this mingling has become harder to ignore. (Bennett 2010: 31).

A dynamic joy touches, moulds and refines [images of matter]. When forms, mere perishable forms and vain images—perpetual change of surfaces—are put aside, these images of matter are dreamt substantially and intimately. They have weight; they constitute a heart. (Bachelard 2006: 1).

Making a step that is highly relevant in comparison with Bachelard, *Vibrant Matter* seeks to shift focus away from "the enhancement to human relational capacities resulting from affective catalysts" to the "catalyst itself as it exists in nonhuman bodies" (Bennett 2010: XII). Breaking away from and simultaneously supporting Bachelard's ideas, Bennett (Bennett 2010: XII) evokes a power that is "not transpersonal or intersubjective but impersonal, an affect intrinsic to forms that cannot be imagined (even ideally) as persons". In *The Poetics of Space* (1994: XVI), Bachelard summarises his position succinctly, claiming that "[b]ecause of its novelty and its action, the poetic image has an entity and dynamism of its own; it is referable to a direct *ontology*". He endeavours to develop a technique for capturing the force of an object that is inhuman, and is nevertheless the *sine qua non* of human life. The power of the object could, if reframed, be a kind of impersonal affect of the kind described by Bennett.

The principal catalytic effect of material imagination, for Bachelard, stems from the emergence of images, which through their dynamism, are the 'adjectives' rather than the 'nouns' of experience. They qualify, but are not in themselves a subject or an object (Hans: 317). He proposes a poetic imagery that uncovers the primal qualities of matter, and thus has the "feeling" of matter (Hans: 317). The goal of this imagination is "to reestablish imagination in its living role as the guide of human life" (Kaplan 1972: 2). One can well imagine what language would be without adjectives. It would be inalterably impoverished and unable to express even the slightest nuance of quality, gradation or valence. Through the qualificatory vocabulary of material imagination however, human experience is enriched with the language of things. Thus, to impoverish the autonomy of images is to devalue the very currency of the human imagination, words and images. By doing away



with the rigidity of material form, we approach a more viscous, more flexible and more interconnected mode of materialism.

Bennett sets equally high stakes on the preservation of material dynamics. The vitality of matter, for Bennett (2010: 23), is predicated upon the Deleuzian notion of the *assemblage*, the alliance of objects into “living, throbbing confederations”. These rhizomatic alliances of matter have no head and no edge, a foil for the limitations inherent within human-centric theories of action. (Bennett 2010: 24) The consequences of this, she claims, has powerful sociopolitical effects:

Why advocate the vitality of matter? Because my hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. (Bennett 2010: IX).

Bennett (2010: XV) advocates a refusal to demystify or break down the imagination of matter, for “demystification tends to screen from view the vitality of matter and to reduce *political* agency to *human* agency”. Like Bachelard, “[t]he capacity to detect the presence of impersonal affect requires that one is caught up in it”. Both philosophers seek to deal in effects generated by an engagement with matter that cannot be quantified, and is not subject to traditional objective knowledge based epistemologies. Like the phenomenology of Bachelard, the vitalism of Bennett has human implications and yet non-human origins. There must, in each case, be an unknown alterity of matter, an influence. For Bennett (2010: XVI), this requires us to cultivate a deliberate anthropomorphism, the notion that “human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature”. This, as we have seen, is a sentiment that has a great deal of currency within the notion of material imagination.

GASTON BACHELARD AND DAVID MACAULEY: THE ELEMENTS, THEIR PUZZLE AND THEIR FUTURE

The consequences of an uncritical attitude to the phenomenal world are matters of great interest for our other twenty-first century materialist, David Macauley. In many ways, Macauley is an intellectual descendent of Gaston Bachelard, a fellow advocate of elemental imagination as a conceptual phenomenon of enduring relevance. An increased awareness of the elements – a level of materiality above the inscrutable level of the atomic and below the unknowable vastness of the heavens – leads to a corresponding increase in our awareness of the force, motion, affect and ontological force of nature. Ecological restoration, for Macauley, is an attempt at *re-story-ation*, an attempt to historicise our ideas of nature; the origin, appearance, disappearance and rediscovery of the elements is part of this story (2010: 5):

With some patience, fortune, and persistence, we might be able to rediscover and recover a deeper and more lasting connection with the elemental world and in the process find our place–reside in our own element or elements, with the bewildered and bewildering beauty everywhere around us. (Macauley 2010: 355).



In *Elemental Philosophy*, Macauley refers to Bachelard regularly and dedicates a section of the book to discussing his ideas. In a section entitled *The Reclamation of the Elemental in Continental Philosophy*, Bachelard is positioned as part of a broader elemental awareness together with names such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Irigaray and many others. His attitude is, on the whole, complimentary, and clearly identifies Bachelard as a major figure in the discursive landscape. Macauley (2010: 295) describes Bachelard as the creator of “[t]he most creative articulation and sustained investigation of the elements in the twentieth century”. He discusses Bachelard’s dual scientific and poetic aspirations, claiming that they “emerge from the same deep source but develop along different axes”. Science tries to bypass and eliminate the force of metaphors, and thus science and poetry must be made complementary, two contraries in tandem (Macauley 2010: 295). Macauley (2010: 296) compares the Bachelardian elements to “the first Western Philosophers, who provide thought with pathways through powerful material images”. His elemental explorations are “germane [...] to a broad form of cultural ecology that unites the material and figurative realms” (Macauley 2010: 299). Bachelard influences the scope and priorities of Macauley’s elemental project, and yet there are also possible congruencies that we can apprehend by comparing their ideas more directly.

In the first of these books, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire (La psychanalyse du feu)*, Bachelard (1968: 1) begins with the claim that “scientific objectivity is possible only if one has broken first with the immediate object, if one has refused to yield to the seduction of the initial choice [...]”. Fire is a victim of this process, for it is no longer a reality for science; it has been sanitised of its power as a “striking immediate object”, broken down into a series of scientific problems and marginalised (Bachelard 1968: 2). At a point in the evolution of his ideas before enshrining the intrinsic value of the pre-hermeneutic image, Bachelard (1968: 3) wishes to expose the manner in which our reaction to fire is “charged with fallacies from the past” and “[leads] us to form immediate convictions about a problem which really should be solved by strict measurement and experimentation”. In order to overcome the irrationality of our familiarity with the elements, Bachelard's book seeks to destroy the *phillias* as well as the *phobias* surrounding our “complacent acceptance” of fire. This is an attitude that Macauley echoes for environmental reasons, for he asks: “[i]s fire in danger of becoming a cultural ember as we continue to ignore our awesome capacities to transfigure the planet [...]?” Fire without psychology and culture, it seems, is simply a poorly understood, deadly weapon.

The next book in the sequence, *Water and Dreams (L'eau et les rêves)*, moves away from attempts to exorcise the immediate object from human thought into the realm of the formal and material imagination. The material imagination occurs within “every poetic work that penetrates deeply enough into the heart of being to find the constancy and lovely monotony of matter,” and yet must “embrace all the exuberance of formal beauty in order to attract the reader in the first place” (Bachelard 2006: 2). Moving on from the proposition made in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* that different types of imagination could be linked to the four classical elements, Bachelard advances the more ambitious claim that “every poetics must accept components of material essence”, and that the elements are the best classification schema of such components (Bachelard 2006: 3). Water, within this system, engages in a material poetics of reflection and flow, purity and impurity, moving through and infusing all. Macauley (2010: 49) adds an ecological dimension to this image,



suggesting that “it is undoubtedly wise to adopt the environmental axiom that in a very real sense ‘we all live downstream’”. Material essence, then, is intrinsic to poetics and environmental interconnectivity in equal measure.

In *Air and Dreams* (*L'air et les songes*), Bachelard switches diverts his philosophy from the imagination of matter to that of movement. The reason for this turn, according to Bachelard (1988: 2) is to focus on an oft-ignored facet of imagination, the “mobility of images”. Movement, according to Bachelard, is the opposite of structure, and is neglected because “[i]t is easier to describe forms than motion”. In *Air and Dreams* Bachelard confronts an important facet of his work. He asks the reader, rhetorically, whether or not attempting to study a moveable and dynamic material element will be taken by the imagination as “justification for inflexibility and monotony” (Bachelard 1988: 7). Not so, for the element is “the principle of a *good conductor* that gives continuity to the imagining psyche” (Bachelard 1988: 8). This conductivity, for Macauley, is the conduit for degradation. “Inhaling the air of Mexico city [...] on a daily basis,” he claims, “is roughly like smoking two packs of cigarettes a day”. Our senses, he continues, signal to us that something is afoul (Macauley 2010: 34). Movement, it seems, has unfortunate consequences when pollution is involved.

In the final instalment of his elemental project – a pair of instalments, in fact – Bachelard’s *Earth and Reveries of Repose* (*La terre et les rêveries du repos*) and *Earth and Reveries of Will* (*La terre et les rêveries de la volonté*) completed the tetrad. Earth, Bachelard (2002: 2) claims, is so familiar to us that “it is not readily apparent how dreams of their deepest essence are to be extracted”. The ‘repose’ and ‘will’ of the two books refer to an ‘extrovert’ and ‘introvert’ form of reverie, the former dreams of action, the latter dreams of our inner depths (Bachelard 2002: 7). Earth, for Bachelard, is characterised primarily by the material property of *resistance*, the primary ingredient in what he calls ‘the world of resistance’. Macauley reverses Bachelard’s reverie of repose to consider the vastness of our terrestrial home. Actively remembering the earth, for Macauley (2010: 25), is the path to a better appreciation of just how spectacular a planet, our *Earth*, we live on.

What, then, have the elements become? After ‘reanimating’ the history of Western elemental theory, Macauley (2010: 333) seeks to “rediscover – even re-enchant and recover – an elemental connection with the natural world and earth, fire, air and water particularly”. As we have seen, Bachelard’s poetics of reverie sought to do just the same thing, albeit in order to quash an epistemic fallacy rather than rephilosophise the environment. These outcomes, I propose, are not at all incompatible. Attempting to instrumentalise the metaphoric vocabulary of poetry while simultaneously attempting to instrumentalise the environment has the same effect: impoverishment and eventual death; death of human dreams for Bachelard, death of everything for Macauley. Mindfulness of the elements as uniquely powerful and relevant can do nothing but good, and the dual outcome of preserving environment and cultural heritage is more powerful than either alone.

The goal of elemental philosophy is political and environmental for Macauley, and epistemological and poetic for Bachelard. Both result in what Macauley describes as the *be-wildering* of thought: an imbuing of ontology, epistemology and social order with the valence of the realm beyond our own material and mental walls (Macauley 2010: 334). This notion has strong resonances with Bachelard’s assertions that interaction with an



elemental image says more about us than it does about the image. Both philosophers seek to open up the world of the elements to consideration and rehabilitation with different goals, and yet merge to become more nuanced and profound.

A VIBRANT BACHELARD?

Although separated by years, disciplines, preoccupations and methodologies, the work of Gaston Bachelard and Jane Bennett touches upon the same subject: the power of matter to exert influence over the human subject, to be *dynamic*. Furthermore, both philosophers present a world in which arbitrary delineations such as subject and object of vitality and inertness are untenable. Both see matter as an inherently captivating entity with the power to hold and shape human affect and imagination. Both place natural vitality in a pivotal role in the human perception of and interaction with the world. When placed together, Bennett and Bachelard complement each other in a fashion that is mutually supportive and critically engaging. How, then, does Gaston Bachelard compare to the philosophy laid out in *Vibrant Matter*, and what can we learn from such a comparison?

The point of most fruitful comparisons between these two subjectivities is, to my mind, to *feel* the object as Bennett does, but to *interpret* the object as Bachelard does. By adding the embodied dimension of Merleau-Ponty to phenomenology, I propose that we gain a felt as well as imagined poetics of vital matter. The argument has already been put forward (Saint Aubert 2006) for a dialogue between the approaches of Merleau-Ponty and Bachelard in a dialectic relationship, and yet through Bennett, the two can merge and become a hybrid entity.

Bachelard presents a rigorous and practical approach to material imagination and reverie, and yet this approach can be expanded into the realms of embodiment and politics. By presenting a Bennett–Bachelard methodological admixture, we glimpse a world in which we can focus on and feel the vital agency of matter, are co-constituted with it both bodily and phenomenologically, divide its power from that of so-called ‘objective’ knowings of the world and can re-imagine ourselves and our poetics in a politically active, engaged fashion. Bachelard discusses the non-embodied ‘interworld’ at great depths, but with Bennett’s more corporeal phenomenology, we can propose a poetics and reverie of matter within as well as without us, entangled with our biology and daily life as well as our imagination.

Bachelard posited that scientific and poetic knowledge could not be compatible, and yet we find ourselves in an interesting situation; the advancement of ‘objective’ scientific knowledge has furnished us with atoms, DNA, cells, protons, all of the invisible objects of matter. With a rich new understanding of the life that surrounds us, is it not possible that the material imagination and science can merge to inspire reveries undreamt of even in Bachelard’s lifetime? His ideas are, inevitably, going to present a ‘philosophy of access’: they are empirical and not speculative. And yet within his grappling with the impossibility of objectivity, we see a kind of ur-speculative realism emerge. I propose that a more vibrant materialist Bachelard, in dialogue with the more networked and object-oriented philosophies of the last twenty years, need not deal in archetypes or singularities. Bachelard proposed that “only phenomenology – that is to say, consideration of the *onset*



of the image in an individual consciousness – can help us to restore the subjectivity of images and to measure their fullness, their strength, and their trans-subjectivity” (Bachelard 1997: XIX). It seems that this claim is only one step in a cycle, for a close reading of Bennett implies that the ‘onset’ of an image is equally effective even when that image is of something phenomenal on a different scale: a bacterium through a microscope, or an astronomer’s image of a distant nebula.

The ‘language’ of matter has grown, the ‘adjectives’ have multiplied: material imagery is now far greater in scope than it was in a traditionally Bachelardian sense, and the perception of this image is tied in with an endless Deleuzian web of correspondences. A new, vital materialist, Bachelard would adapt to such an environment, and yet his core precepts need little modification. By applying this new Bachelard to twenty-first century problems, perhaps we can approach new political and ecological imaginings undreamt of in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The twenty-first century has been gifted with a vision of the power and dynamism of objects in Bachelard’s philosophy of matter coupled with a methodology for reading the subjective states induced by this dynamism. He is by no means a politically motivated philosopher, and Bennett is not primarily preoccupied with the mechanics of subjectivity, yet each imply – either explicitly or *in potentia* – the possibility and even desirability a theory of material imagination that both illuminates the human trans-subjective imagination, politicises the implications of these imaginings, and enables a reverie that goes deeper and works on a greater spectrum than before.

AN ENVIRONMENTAL BACHELARD?

The elements, for Macauley, are the “shock of the real” that allow us to “see again for a spell the way children perceive the universe as brimming with marvels” (Macauley 2010: 354). Elements, as well as being our daily companions, are equally catalytic forces that shock us into engaging with “an ancient, sometimes strange but also strangely familiar and certainly more capacious sphere that we cannot easily assimilate” (Macauley 2010: 354). Bachelard’s whole elemental project (1968) stemmed from his puzzlement over magical thinking about and un-scientific engagement with fire. Could it be that a revisitation of Bachelard’s elemental theory, and a consideration of Macauley’s philosophy in the light of Bachelard, could enrich our understanding not only of each respective philosopher, but also of the elements themselves? This comparison is fascinating, for it adapts Bachelard into a role that did not formally exist during his lifetime, that of an *environmentalist*. Is it even possible for a philosopher who died before the environmental movement began to be an environmentalist? Not, it seems, if that philosopher is Gaston Bachelard.

Bachelard’s ‘proto-environmentalism’ emerges in synthesis with Macauley. The wonder of childhood, Bachelard proposes (1971: 99), is the fuel for reverie, for “the child knows the happiness of dreaming that will later be the happiness of the poets”. For Macauley, it is this imagination that will recuperate our environmental awareness. This sentiment, to my mind, is perhaps the most Bachelardian resonance in Macauley’s book. By becoming so preoccupied with the objective, inert and instrumental traits of matter, we have surrendered our childlike affinity for material imagination in favour for a colder, more



ecologically harmful putative maturity. By shocking the imagination into an engagement with the elements, Macauley proposes a move away from a world in which we are “increasingly sheltered from rather than brought into closer contact with the elements, which, in turn, have retreated from the forefront of daily thought and experience” (Macauley 2010: 1). A more ‘environmental’ Bachelard implies, worryingly, that sheltering ourselves from the outside world stifles our future potential for poetry in equal measure.

Bachelard, in my formulation, has become an environmentalist *post facto*. It is a strange coincidence that the publication of Rachael Carson's *Silent Spring* on September the 27th, 1962, preceded the passing away of Bachelard in Paris on October the 16th by so short a span. What would he have thought of Carson's book, generally considered to be a key catalyst for the environmental movement, had he lived to read it? What kind of material imagination would be possible in a landscape ravaged by pesticides? What kind of reverie would be possible in a body of water in which no fish swam, in which no life could thrive? Macauley, I think, offers some clues as to how best to inflect Bachelard with environmentalism. The environmental task that began so close to his departure from the world allows Bachelard to ‘live’ again, for his ideas now transcend his life. If Henry David Thoreau can be cast as a proto-ecologist and object of interest for ecocritics, then why not Bachelard?

The strength of the elements as a framework for environmental consciousness, Macauley argues, simultaneously satisfies anthropocentric, biocentric and eco-centric criteria. Anthropocentric, because the elements are tied to our material needs, and we must keep them pure and intact in order to sustain ourselves. Biocentric because the elements nurture and sustain the vast biosphere of the Earth, an order inextricably enmeshed with humanity. Eco-centric because the composition of what we call the ‘environment’ through the combined elements fosters a place-based ethic within which landscape is diverse and localised rather than abstract and generalised (Macauley 2010: 335–6). Bachelard, a good Husserlian, is anthropocentric and arguably androcentric (O’Shea-Meddour 2003), and yet has great potential within the realm of the biocentric and ecocentric. An eco-centric Bachelard, in particular, would allow more localisation and variation to colour the material imagination. Could an environmental Bachelard expand into a new diversity by escaping a predominantly European and essentialist view of matter?

THE FUTURE BACHELARD?

In conclusion, I would like to return to the notion of autopoiesis. Bachelard, through the course of this essay, has been exposed to comparisons that highlight three major points. First, Bachelard is truly distinct and unique, and continues to be a relevant object of study in his own right. Second, Gaston Bachelard, Jane Bennett and David Macauley have many ideas in common that provide the basis for new comparisons between materialisms old and new. Third, a ‘new Bachelard’ emerges from the synthesis of ideas, his ideas engaged with a more diffuse, more complex, network of material images, an ecological awareness and an ethic of conservation. What future self-generating manifestations might his ideas take? What can we learn by allowing this process to occur for other thinkers in



other contexts? If the ideas of other great historical philosophers are received and reinvented for their time, then why not Gaston Bachelard? His legacy of ideas is rich, their applicability ever validated, and their popularity undiminished. We have glimpsed a vibrant materialist Bachelard and an environmental Bachelard. What further potentialities remain untapped within the corpus of his work?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bachelard G., 1968, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Beacon Press, Boston (English trans. A. C. M. Ross).

Bachelard G. 1971, *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood Language and the Cosmos*, Beacon Press, Boston (English Trans. D. Russell).

Bachelard G. 1988, *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*, Dallas Institute, Dallas (English trans. E. R. and F. Farrell).

Bachelard G., 1994, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston (English trans. M. Jolas).

Bachelard G. 2002, *Earth and Reveries of Will: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, Dallas Institute, Dallas (English trans. K. Haltman).

Bachelard G., 2006, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, Dallas Institute, Dallas (English trans. E.R. Farrell).

Bennett J., 2010, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke U.P., Durham and London.

Bennett J. 2012, "Powers of the Hoard: Further Notes on Material Agency", in J.J. Cohen (ed.), *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*, Oliphaunt, Washington DC, pp. 237-269.

Bennett J., 2013, "Response Essay" (currently untitled), *Postmedieval, A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 4:1 (forthcoming).

Coole D., 2007, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics After Anti-Humanism*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham MD.

Deleuze G. and Guattari, F., 2004, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Continuum, New York.

Gayon J. and J. Wunenburger (eds), 2000, *Bachelard dans le monde*, PUF, Paris.

Gaudin C. (ed.), 1987, *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie: Selections from Gaston Bachelard*, Spring Publications, New York.

Hans J.S., 1977, "Gaston Bachelard and the phenomenology of the reading consciousness", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35, pp. 315-327.

Harman G., 2010, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures*, Zero Books, Ropley.

Kaplan E.K., 1972, "Gaston Bachelard's Philosophy of Imagination: An Introduction", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 33, pp. 1-24.

Lane J.F., 2006, "Towards a Poetics of Consumerism: Gaston Bachelard's 'Material Imagination' and Narratives of Post-War Modernisation", *French Cultural Studies* 17, pp. 19-34.

Latour B., 2005, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*,



Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Macauley D., 2010, *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire and Water as Environmental Ideas*, SUNY Press, New York.

McAllester Jones M., 1991, *Gaston Bachelard, Subversive Humanist: Texts and Readings*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison.

Oliveira M., 2001, "L'imaginaire de la construction de Brasília", *Cahiers Gaston Bachelard* 4, pp. 127-137.

O'Shea-Meddour W., 2003, *Gaston Bachelard's L'Eau et les Rêves: Conquering the Feminine Element*, *French Cultural Studies* 14, pp. 81-99.

Picart C.J.K.S., 1997, "Metaphysics in Gaston Bachelard's 'Reverie'", *Human Studies* 20, pp. 59-73.

Pierron J., 2001, "Rites funéraires et poétique des éléments: une métaphysique de la poussière?", *Cahiers Gaston Bachelard* 4, pp. 155-165.

Saint Aubert E., 2006, "Phénoménologie du'vers' ou dynamologie du'contre'? Éléments pour une confrontation entre Merleau-Ponty et Bachelard", *Cahiers Gaston Bachelard* 8, 56-67.

James L. Smith is a PhD candidate and tutor in History and Medieval and Early Modern Studies at The University of Western Australia. His thesis, with the working title of 'Hydrologies of Abstraction: Riverine Structures of Intellection and Imagination in High Medieval Western Christendom', is in its third year. His broader interests are medieval philosophy, intellectual history and literary criticism. Another article, co-authored with Ruth A. Morgan entitled 'Pre-Modern Streams of Thought in Twenty-First Century Water Management', is forthcoming in 2013.

james.smith@uwa.edu.au