

Gaston Bachelard and the Hands of Albert Flocon[†]

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Abstract

The paper deals with the engraving hand of Albert Flocon and its poetic description by the pen of Gaston Bachelard. It proceeds by discussing examples of the group of collaborative works that emerged from the cooperation between Flocon, the copperplate engraver and theoretician of perspective and Bachelard, the philosopher of science and scholar of literary images in mid-twentieth century Paris.

Keywords: Gaston Bachelard, Albert Flocon, Images of the hand, Concretion, Abstraction, Perspective, Phenomenotechnique, Surrealism.

Gaston Bachelard y las manos de Albert Flocon

Resumen

Este artículo se ocupa del grabado de mano de Albert Flocon y la descripción poética que realiza la pluma de Gaston Bachelard. Se procede a discutir los ejemplos del conjunto de trabajos que surgieron de la cooperación entre Flocon y Bachelard; el grabador en cobre y teórico de la perspectiva, y el filósofo de la ciencia y estudioso de imágenes literarias de la segunda mitad del siglo XX de París.

Palabras clave: Gaston Bachelard, Albert Flocon, imágenes de la mano, concreción, abstracción, perspectiva, fenomenotécnica, surrealismo.

[†] Dedicated to Roberto Torretti. Recibido: mayo 2016.

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This paper concerns the engraving hand of Albert Flocon and its poetic description by the pen of Gaston Bachelard. The paper will proceed by discussing examples of the group of collaborative works that emerged from the cooperation between Flocon, the copperplate engraver and theoretician of perspective and Bachelard, the philosopher of science and scholar of literary images in the mid-twentieth century in Paris.¹

I shall begin with some biographical remarks on Albert Flocon and Gaston Bachelard. Flocon was born as Albert Mentzel in 1909 in Köpenick near Berlin. From 1927 to 1929 he was a student at the Bauhaus in Dessau, where he studied, among others, with Josef Albers and Oskar Schlemmer (Flocon, 1994). Schlemmer's theatrical gaze had a profound influence on Flocon's later artistic work. As a left-wing Bauhaus member, married since the early 1930s to Lo Rothschild, a woman of Jewish descent from Frankfurt, Mentzel decided in 1933 to seek refuge in France with his young family. He spent the first few years there eking out a living in Paris in the advertising business, including in the studio of Victor Vasarely. To avoid deportation to Germany, he served in the Foreign Legion from 1939 to 1941. He finally made contact with the Résistance and in 1944 the Gestapo arrested him with his family in Toulouse. His wife and their daughter Ruth were deported shortly before the end of the war and murdered in Auschwitz. Mentzel survived as a prisoner in the panopticon penitentiary in Toulouse. After the war he returned to Paris, adopted the name of a revolutionary French ancestor, Ferdinand Flocon,² and became a French citizen.

Gaston Bachelard was born in 1884 as the son of a tobacconist in Barsur-Aube in the Champagne region.³ He was a post office employee in Paris before the First World War. He described his trajectory briefly and succinctly in a letter to Gustave le Bon as follows: "In the course of a very irregular intellectual life I studied science at the Sorbonne and graduated with an examination in mathematics and physics. Then I was employed at the post office and wanted to become a telegraph engineer."⁴ This came to nothing, however, because he spent the whole war as a soldier at the front. After the war he completed another quick study course and from 1919 to 1930 he taught

¹ For a more detailed account, see Rheinberger (2016).

² Ferdinand Flocon (1800-1866) was a radical liberal journalist and writer, and a member of the provisional government of the Second French Republic of 1848. He went into exile in Lausanne, Switzerland, after the coup d'état in 1851.

³ See the comprehensive biography by André Parinaud, *Gaston Bachelard* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996).

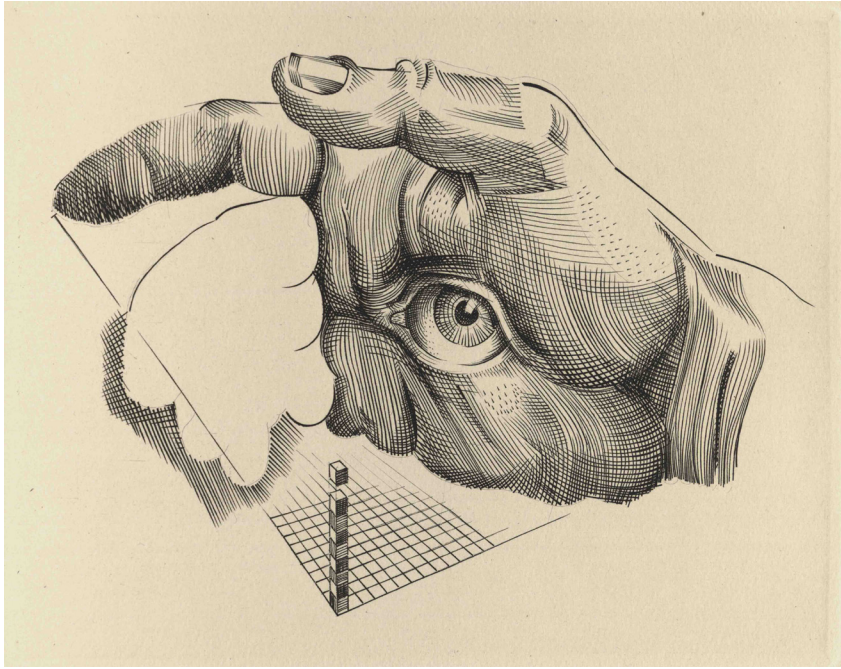
⁴ Letter from Gaston Bachelard to "Monsieur" (Gustave Le Bon), January 18, 1931, Dijon (private collection).

physics, chemistry and philosophy at the high school in his hometown. In 1927 he received his doctorate in philosophy of science and history of science at the Sorbonne under the guidance of Abel Rey and Léon Brunschvicg, and then worked from 1930 to 1940 as a professor of philosophy at the University of Dijon. In 1940 he was appointed to the chair of the history and philosophy of science at the Sorbonne and as director of the Institute for Philosophy and the History of Science and Technology. During his stay at the faculty of literature in Dijon and in the Quartier Latin in Paris thereafter, Bachelard developed close contact with the French surrealism scene. Even after he moved to Paris he spent the summer writing in Dijon.

The Meeting between Flocon and Bachelard or, The Hand of the Engraver

Flocon began his career as a copperplate engraver in Paris immediately after the Second World War. He had begun doing perspective sketches during his imprisonment in Toulouse; friends who were graphic artists convinced him that copperplate engraving would be an ideal medium for these drawings. Flocon learned the skills of engraving in Georges Leblanc's studios, where all the knowledge of this vanishing technique was still available. As he wrote in his memoirs, his first engraving was "an open hand pointing in one direction, in the palm of which an eye opens, in other words a hand that sees, the hand of the engraver" (**Fig. 1**) (Flocon, 1995: 134). He included this illustration later in his first book of graphic prints, in which the ten engravings were accompanied by ten short poems by Paul Eluard (Eluard & Flocon, 1948). This hand is emblematic of the art of reflexivity that became a hallmark of Flocon's work and was soon to attract the interest of Gaston Bachelard.

Figure 1



Éluard & Flocon, 1948: Fig. 1 in source.

To begin with, however, things were exactly the opposite. After founding the Graphies group in Paris – a group of artists who not only drew but were also printmakers themselves – Flocon, together with Albert Yersin, a colleague from the West of Switzerland who also lived in Paris, began organizing an exhibition for the group. Again, the hand was to be the central element. For the preface to the catalogue, Flocon conceived a “montage of quotations” from Bachelard’s recently published book, *La terre et les rêveries de la volonté* (Bachelard, 1948), which he had come upon while preparing the exhibition (Flocon, 1995: 143). According to Flocon’s memoirs, Bachelard’s publisher Corti suggested that he contact Bachelard, and Flocon took his advice. The two men met and Bachelard remarked that there was no point in “printing the same thing twice.” (Flocon, 1995: 144). He agreed nonetheless to write a short new text for the catalogue which he titled “Matière et main.” Flocon placed it at the front of the album *A la gloire de la main*, which was a compilation of the prints in the exhibition (Bachelard, 1949). Consisting of engravings, etchings and lithographs by Christine Boumeester, Albert Yersin and Flocon himself (Fig. 2), and a dozen other artists, it was accompanied

by a series of texts by contemporary French writers, among them Francis Ponge, Paul Valéry and Tristan Tzara. The book was printed in 1949 in the studio of Georges Leblanc in the rue Saint Jacques in Paris. Flocon's print on this occasion shows his own hand – “my hand.” It is holding a burin and engraving a hand in turn – a hand, that is, “at work” on a hand (Bachelard, 1949: Plate 7). At the same time, the copper shows a further stage in the chain of defiguration and transfiguration: the physical hand is at work engraving the contours of another hand on the copper plate in which, finally, yet another outline in the shape of a hand is appearing, this time in the abstract form of a geometrical sketch.

A la gloire de la main marks the first time Flocon and Bachelard met in person. The philosopher remarked in his introductory text, “The happily aesthetic results do not obscure the history of toil that lies behind them, the history of the battle with matter.” He went on, “This awareness of the hand at work comes alive within us as a sharing in the engraver's craft.” (Bachelard, 1949: 11-12). There were two things that particularly fascinated Bachelard about the profession of engraving, and continued to occupy his thoughts: first, the forms of resistance in the confrontation of the hand with matter, and second, the hand as the material and as the conscious agent of a process of construction at the same time. Flocon recalls that the philosopher Bachelard was “always curious about the tools, the manipulations, the material labor.” (Flocon, 1995: 144).

Figure 2



Bachelard et al, 1949: Fig. 7 in source.

Landscapes

A year later, in 1950, a substantial volume, *Paysages*, appeared, for which Bachelard wrote not only the introduction but also extensive texts to accompany the plates (Bachelard & Flocon, 1950). Flocon saw this series of engravings as a play on the theme of metamorphosis. He had been inspired to make them by the series of books that Bachelard had published with Corti between 1942 and 1948, which contained Bachelard's examination of the literary imagination of the four elements, earth, fire, air and water. He associated them with figures of

movement, matter, rest and will. He saw *Paysages* primarily as a manifestation of movement. He began the book with the following sentence: “In losing color — the most potent of all sensual attractions — the engraver retains one great opportunity: he can and must discover *movement*.” He continued, “The least line in an engraving is a trajectory, a movement.”⁵ Or, as he summarized it at the end of the introduction: Engraving is “taking possession of the world.” (Bachelard, 1971: 64). Bachelard saw his text as a form of notes — “Notes by a philosopher for an engraver.” Flocon recalls in his memoirs: “I brought Bachelard one or two plates a fortnight, so I saw him often and our friendship unfolded out of this shared work, in which the images are anterior to the text that illustrates them.” (Flocon, 1995: 182). Even if the term “illustration” may not seem quite the right one in this context – I would prefer “accompaniment” – the reversal of the conventional relationship between image and text highlights the special nature of this correlation here. What occurred in this interplay was the creation of two parallel universes, the one consisting of words and the other of lines. Bachelard formulated it as follows: “These notes on Albert Flocon’s engravings are the reactions of a solitary philosopher. If they have no other virtue, they have at least the spontaneity of the reclusive dreamer. In the case of the majority of the plates, Flocon and I did not look for any ‘common ground’.” (Bachelard & Flocon, 1950: 50). This, then, was not communication in the usual sense of the word. For Bachelard, “if the poet’s landscape is a state of mind, the engraver’s landscape is a disposition or outburst of will, an activity that is impatient to come to grips with the world. The engraver sets a world in motion, . . . provoking the forces that lie dormant in a flat universe. Provocation is his way of creating.” (Bachelard & Flocon, 1950: S. 10). The engraver’s labor is an object lesson in “work with hard materials,” as Jean Starobinski, the polymath from Geneva, put it in his review of the volume for *Journal de Genève*. (Starobinski, 1951: 3-4).⁶

I cannot discuss the 15 plates of this remarkable collection in detail here. The first four treat the themes of earth, water, air and fire (**Fig. 3**). Let us look more closely at fire. Here is a dancing couple rising from the ground in an eddy of motion. A flame turns into a whirl of smoke with embers still dancing in it and which finally mingles with the body of the female dancer. It echoes the dynamic movements of the dancers while binding them together to form a pirouetting loop surrounded by a heart-shaped outline.

⁵ Bachelard, 1971: “Introduction to the Dynamics of Landscape”, pp. 59-68, on p. 59. This text is the English translation of Bachelard’s introduction to Bachelard & Flocon 1950.

⁶ Here p. 4. This naturally recalls Starobinski’s works on gestures: Jean Starobinski, *Largesse*, trans. by Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997).

Figure 3



Bachelard & Flocon, 1950: Fig. 4 in source.

At first glance we seem to be looking at figures that have grown together to form a single, conjoined body. On closer inspection, however, the figures become distinct with the hands playing a central role once again. To some extent they embody the movement of the dancing couple. The two hands pointing upward come together to form a closed circle that simultaneously becomes a ring of fire. The hands reaching outward lead the way at the same time as holding the balance. For all the specific dynamic of fire, these hands, each stylized into characteristic gestures, lend the picture a playful and relaxed aspect in the midst of the magic of the sparks.

Another example I shall consider more closely is the plate that follows the introduction of the four elements (**Fig. 4**). Vegetable and human forms are intertwined with each other here. An arm is growing out of a branch from which

leaves are falling and flying toward the horizon; the curved space between the body and the branch stretches out and mutates into a hand; a leg twists into the interior of a snail shell lying on the ground; and the overall impression of jungle-like convolution is repeated in a more abstract form at the point where the gaze turns toward the horizon. All these elementary ingredients grow out of the center foreground of the picture, especially between the two legs of the torso as they merge into the deep forest surrounding this gigantic metamorphic struggle of a transformation whose movements dominate the whole picture.

Figure 4



Bachelard & Flocon 1950: Fig. 5 in source.

But it is not only vegetable and human forms that continually intertwine. Another characteristic feature of this engraving is that forms perpetually grow out of interstices and that figurations are transformed into interstices again.

The metamorphosis dominates not only the bodies but also the actual space of the engraver with his options. In fact, this confronts us with a continuation of the reflexivity that defined Flocon's earlier engravings of hands. And it is hands, in turn, that give the picture their character: hands that intertwine to form a treetop; an interstice that proliferates into a hand grasping the shoulder. Bachelard's comment on this engraving was, "We are here at the node of a metabolism of images." (Bachelard, 1971: 70). He even went as far as to elevate his associations anthropologically by stating that "The life of root and bud lies at the heart of our being. We are really very ancient plants." (Bachelard, 1971: 70).

Treatise on the Burin

Flocon wrote another work on the craft of the copperplate engraver and his hand, *Le traité du burin* (Flocon, 1952), in which he tried to analyze in detail "what happens at once in the head, the hands, and the eyes of an engraver." (Flocon, 1995: 184). The treatise was published in 1952. Bachelard contributed a lengthy preface to it which included plates on the engraver's craft with a companion text by Flocon. The seven chapters of *Le traité du burin* discuss "Engraving" as a primordial gesture, "Sharpening the Burin," "Mirroring," "The Proof," "Drawing the Stroke," "Meaning and Form," and finally "In-Formation." It is an appeal for the conviction that the freedom of the *artist* consists in overcoming impediments, comparable to the way Bachelard saw the quintessence of the work of the *scientist* – and thus of the "formation of the scientific mind" – as being the ability to overcome "epistemological obstacles," as he wrote in his book published in 1938. (Bachelard, 2002: Chapter 1). This treatise shows us the hand of the engraver in a further series of variations. One of the plates (**Fig. 5**) embodies – "negotiates" – the three dimensions of the space by means of a hand that is, in turn, part of a much bigger construction site. The three tiny figures under the mighty trihedron appear like marionettes controlled with invisible strings by the fingers of this hand. "The copperplate engraver," Bachelard remarked, "can never be passive; he copies nothing; everything must come from him, must be produced by him with a minimum of lines, surfaces he has to create by outlining them; to bring out his solids he has only the superposition of perspectives. Never was the power of construction better evoked, made more attractive and more purposefully approached than in the albums of the copperplate engraver and constructor Albert Flocon."⁷

⁷ Bachelard, 1971: "Albert Flocon's 'Engraver's Treatise'", pp. 79-82, on p. 79. This text is the English

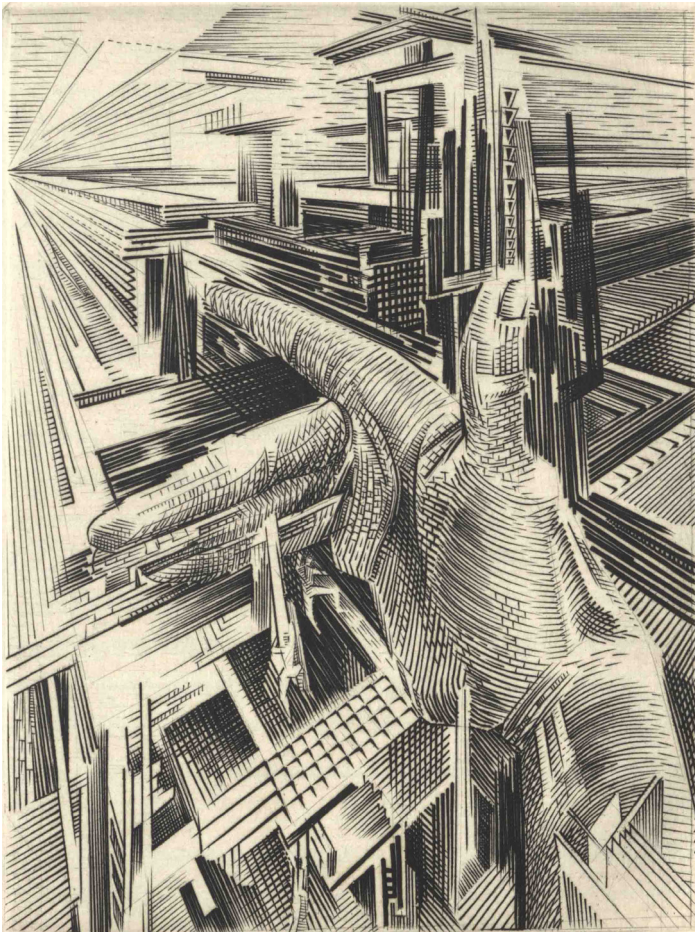
Figure 5

Plate “Le trièdre” (Flocon, 1952).

Castles in the Air: The Work and the Project

“I have made another book with Bachelard,” we read in Flocon’s autobiography, “*Châteaux en Espagne*, for which he has written the commentary. These are the greatest copperplates I have ever made.” (Flocon, 1995: 197). Describing the period when the book was taking shape, Bachelard wrote, “The stories I’ve been telling myself all winter as Albert Flocon brought me week by week the individual sheets of his album!” (Bachelard & Flocon, 1957: 9). Once again he stresses what could be called their unspoken

collaboration: “Flocon, of course, never told me what his intention had been. He made me no speeches.”⁸ But Bachelard captures the substance of Flocon’s enterprise very precisely when he confesses: “I like engraving for its own sake, autonomous engraving, engraving which is primarily not illustration, the kind I call in my philosophical ruminations autoeidetic engraving. For me this is the ideal form of the story without words, the distilled story. And it is because the engraving ‘tells’ nothing that it obliges you, the musing spectator, to do the talking.” (Bachelard, 1971: 83).

Bachelard goes on to summarize as follows: “Flocon calls his collection *Castles in Spain*. He is inviting us to measure the distance between that which is seen and that which is dreamt; he is inviting us to move through what might be called *project-space*, to live in the *space-time of the project*. This is how, impenitent philosopher that I am, I would sum up Flocon’s vision: Flocon is the engraver of the *space-time of the project*.” (Bachelard, 1971: 85). These words are strongly reminiscent of a passage from *The New Scientific Spirit*, the key text of Bachelard’s early period of epistemological endeavor, in which he characterizes the modern sciences as follows: “Above the *subject* and beyond the *object*, modern science is based on the *project*. In scientific thought the subject’s meditation upon the object always takes the form of a project.” (Bachelard, 1984: 11-12). Here we approach the essence of the sympathy between Bachelard the philosopher of science and Flocon the engraver. Bachelard regards Flocon’s oeuvre as embodying an empowerment whose gesture he sees at work in the modern experimental sciences — and that, *mutatis mutandis*, also typifies his own philosophy of science.

The common denominator between the work of Bachelard and Flocon is what we might term “philosophy at work.” As Bachelard remarks in relation to one of the great plates of this volume – a fantastical construction (**Fig. 6**), “This is truly a page dedicated to the heroism of labor ... “Yes, I like a plate like this to illustrate the philosophy of work. It is more concrete than an architect’s drawing and more abstract than a finished work. This engraving is a *moment’s work*, the moment in which the work advances, the project becomes object, the object takes shape. An abstract-concrete plate.” (Bachelard, 1971: 91).

⁸ Bachelard, 1971: “Castles in Spain”, pp. 83-102, on p. 83. This text is the English translation of Bachelard’s notes to Bachelard & Flocon 1957.

Figure 6

Plate “Le nid d’aigle” (Bachelard & Flocon, 1957: Fig. 5 in source).

In view of these comments, it will hardly be surprising to find that in *Le rationalisme appliqué* — one of his epistemological works of the second series, around 1950 — Bachelard not only attributes an “abstract-concrete mentality” to the physics of his era, but also describes his own philosophy concerned with that mentality as a “philosophy at work” or “philosophy of work” (*philosophie au travail*), as opposed to what he dismissively calls the “philosophies of synopsis” (*philosophies de résumé*) of his predecessors and contemporaries. (Bachelard, 1949: 1, 9). And Bachelard sees Flocon’s incisions with the burin as “a symbol of the rock drill penetrating the resistant depths. From the moment of its very first, sketchy movement against a hard

material, a primeval tension determines in the hand that the entire being shall continue to strain.” And he adds, “Faced with a hard material, one must continue to act.” (Bachelard, 1971: 90-91).

For Bachelard the work of the engraver is the epitome of a particular kind of phenomenotechnique. If, as he argues in one of his early essays, modern physics is “no longer a science of *facts*; it is a technology of *effects*” and, no longer content with describing phenomena, is “a production of phenomena,”⁹ then the work of the engraver inscribes itself into a comparable space — the space of a “dialectic of nature and anti-nature.” (Bachelard, 1971: 94-95). This constructive yet abstract element in Flocon’s work is what fascinates Bachelard and resonates so deeply with his own philosophical orientation.

The castle in the air shown on this plate perfectly epitomizes this dialectic of nature and anti-nature. It literally reaches up into the clouds. The rock out of which it grows stands on a flat ground on which people are working, strolling, conversing and resting. Another interesting aspect of this plate is the strangely inverted relationship of foreground and background. Miniaturized human figures can be seen in the foreground, with enormous blocks of half-hewn rock in the background. Flocon introduces a counter-perspective into the heart of a classical geometric perspective with its vanishing point on the horizon. Thanks to that multiple perspectivity, an engraving like this one can evoke “the greatest contingency of contemplation,” comments Bachelard. He adds that, when looking at an image today, “I tell myself a different story from the one I told myself yesterday. Sincere contemplation is a capricious thing — pure caprice, in fact.” (Bachelard, 1971: 83).

This engraving also shows yet another play with the gaze, one that goes back to Flocon’s training in stage design with Oskar Schlemmer during his Bauhaus years. In a strangely fluctuating triple ambivalence, engravings such as this one repeatedly combine the space of a landscape, a stage in this space and a stage décor. It is never quite clear where the landscape ends and the stage begins, or where the stage ends and the décor begins, or the other way around. Moreover, each picture contains little surprises and jokes in the form of contingent addenda, mostly tiny human figures that comment on the scene from inside the scene.

And taking up the theme of the hand once again, the arms and hands of the little foreground figures carry, point and measure. Flocon’s depiction of these hatched figures reveals him as a master of gestural suggestion. But it is

⁹ Bachelard, 2006: 79 (translation emended) and 84.

the mighty stone block they are gathered around that can be seen not only as a rock but just as well as a stylized image of a fist, which emphasizes once again the gripping and forceful quality that made this picture so fascinating for Bachelard.

Conclusion

It is a figure of exuberance characteristic of Flocon's work: to operate at the limit of a technique whose boundaries perpetually challenged him. As he once expressed it, "I loved pushing rationality to its very limits." (Albert Flocon, 1983: 64). It is this figure that Bachelard traced in the sciences, and he also saw it at work in literary writing. "In writing, the author has already performed a transposition. He would not *say* what he has written." (Bachelard, 1969: 24). And when he writes, he is driven by the pen, "It is the pen which dreams." (Bachelard, 1969: 16).

In 1936 Bachelard wrote a short, programmatic essay on "surrationalism" in which he chose the following chiasmic sentence to describe the relationship between the arts and sciences of his day. "An *experimental reason* will be established, capable of organizing reality surrationally as the *experimental dream* of Tristan Tzara organizes poetic liberty surrealistically." (Bachelard, 1936: 186, translation emended).

We could interpret Bachelard's collaboration with an engraver twenty years later as a philosopher entering into the oeuvre of a visual artist whose labors epitomize the chiasmus of reason and dream quoted above: a surrational organization of the real and a surreal organization of the rational, in one and the same movement. Albert Flocon's pictures range between these two figurations. It is here, in the realm of art, that Bachelard found both the embodiment of the motto of his short text on surrationalism and the way he could pursue it in his own life. "One should choose the side where one thinks the most, where one experiments the most artificially, where ideas are the least viscous, where reason loves to be in danger. *If, in any experiment, one does not risk one's reason, that experiment is not worthwhile attempting.*" (Bachelard, 1936: 188, translation emended).

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