

In the Belly of Oneiric Images

DENNIS PATRICK SLATTERY

Review of: Gaston Bachelard's *Earth and Reveries of Repose: An Essay on Images of Interiority*, translated from the French and annotated by Mary McAllester Jones, The Bachelard Translation Series, Joanne H. Stroud, Executive Director, Dallas: The Dallas Institute Publications, 2011.

A ravenous wolf is born of a ravenous atom.
Gaston Bachelard (1948/2011, 202)

When I was a graduate student working toward a master's degree in comparative literature at Kent State University in the late 60s–early 70s, I came across a title in the University bookstore that intrigued me: *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962). I bought it and soon became so enamored with his thinking that I have subsequently read over the years an additional ten of his voluminous, dense, and stirring works, many of them newly translated and brought into the United States through the sustained dedication of Dr. Joanne Stroud of the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture. She has performed, over many years, a public service to the academic and psychological worlds in making available a large corpus of the French writer's works. Any reader of his books will, I am certain, share in my gratitude.

But to return to the Kent State bookstore for a moment as a literary launch pad into the galaxy of Bachelard's unique form of imagining: what I discovered I loved about his manner of thought as well as his style of writing were examples like the following: "By its novelty, a poetic image sets in motion the entire linguistic mechanism. The poetic image places us at the origin of the speaking being" (Bachelard 1958/1969, xix). I sensed a twist in his thought, an angle out of the ordinary, all of which made me question my assumptions about poetry, objects of culture, images of the natural order, even the natural elements themselves that persuade us to explore what Bachelard was later to call "a material imagination."

I continued to read his books, including, for instance, *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement* (1943/1988), *Lautremont* (1939/1986), *Fragments of a Poetics of Fire* (1990), *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (1942/1983), *The Flame of a Candle* (1961/1988), *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos* (1960/1969), *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie* (1971/1998), and the recently translated text that is the subject of this review, *Earth and Reveries of Repose: An Essay on the Imagination*

of *Interiority* (1948/2011). As I read, I discovered a comprehensive poetic epistemology of the literary and dream image. Of all the themes that Bachelard entertains and deepens in his writing, two stand out for me: 1) our oneiric life, that is, the play and place of dreaming; and 2) the literary/poetic image. He accomplishes these two primarily by consistently revising and renewing his understanding of two fundamental forms of imagination under which a series of others find their home: 1) The material imagination and 2) The dynamic imagination. His writing reveries circulate or orbit around these two forms of creating realities by way of rich analogies and through citing and deepening the images from a library of writers to illustrate in concrete form his meditations.

What may, in addition, be of special interest to those interested in the writings of C. G. Jung is that this last volume is the most thoroughly depth psychological in both language and attitude. Not only does Bachelard cite Jung often, but he also builds his poetic argument around the archetypal, depth-oriented impulses of the imagination, its protean motion of image-creation. This human faculty, as Bachelard cultivates it, appears to be a synonym for the activity of the soul itself. The accompanying images in this review are of my own paintings, witnesses in effect to the soul's need and desire to create images of the natural order. As crafted images, they portray in poetic form what Bachelard wishes to expose through literary forms of nature's mystery.

That he spent much of his life reveling in and revering poetic images might seem strange to some when they learn that from 1940 to 1962 he was Chair of History and Philosophy of Science at the Sorbonne. Yet his favorite discipline, to my mind, was dreaming as a creative way to awaken the deepest recesses of the personal and collective unconscious, which he believed was the true reservoir of images that persuade us to dream and to discover analogies that shock and expose us to another level of poetic metaphysics, wherein disciplines enjamb to find common resonances. Consider for a

moment some of the chapter titles of the text under review: "The House of Our Birth and the Oneiric House," "The Jonah Complex," "The Cave," "The Labyrinth," "The Serpent," "The Root," and "Alchemists' Wines and Alchemists' Vines."

Not all writers have the capacity to invite and provoke their readers to dream as they read. This is the flagship power of Bachelard's writings. But not just in what he writes but who he quotes, for the dreaming soul is activated most powerfully through literary images; in fact, there is a way of thinking of both the oneiric image and the literary image as originating from the same source. In another essay, I propose that "what dream images and poetic images share, therefore, is a mimetic impulse to capture psychic energy in the imagery, to reproduce by means of the power of analogy a reality that appears perhaps to be other, but in fact is another frame of ourselves in metaphoric guise..." (Slattery 2011, 81). I do not think this observation is alien to Bachelard's own understanding of our oneiric and poetic life's images.

In a respectful nod to the working of the alchemists, Bachelard chooses an image that begins to reveal *his mimetic method*, my term for the way he invites images to imagine themselves into being. So, for instance, when he quotes the writer Francis Jammes, who follows the alchemists in "turning inside out" substances, he reveals this writer's way of dreaming an image's interiority:

Francis Jammes, for instance, gazing at rushing water torn apart by the stones of a mountain stream, thinks he sees "the inside of water": "Shall I not call this whitening the inside of water, of water that is blue-green in repose, the color of a lime tree before it is turned up by the air?" (quoted in Bachelard 1948/2011, 16)

Following shortly after Jammes' reverie, Bachelard offers these two lines from the nineteenth-century French poet, Mallarmé: "Beneath its stern silver, a candlestick/Lets the copper laugh" (17). He then discloses two ways of reading the poet's words: "First, I read them



Tree of Life

ironically, hearing the copper laugh at the silver-plating's lies. Second, I read them more gently, without poking fun at a candlestick that has lost its silver but rhythm-analyzing in a better way the pale sternness and robust jollity of these two associated metallic powers" (17). The reader can begin to sense a poetic-dialectical

method unfolding here, as well as Bachelard's delightful impulse to create neologisms and surprising phrases as he writes his way into an image. To "rhythm-analyzing" I want to add a few more novel words and phrases that inhabit his landscape: "a physics of oppression" (159), "oneiric archeology" (186), "digestive



Spring Thaw

psychoanalysis” (189), “imaginary syntax” (203), “vegetal diagnosis” (219), “the somnambulism of images” (221), and an “alchemy of the vegetal” (239).

Not only in such language but also in his twisting an image to reveal something interior that might only have been dreamt of, Bachelard both disarms and provokes us to see the image from the inside out and to entertain its and our own interiority. When we read him slowly, which is what he encourages all readers to do with poetry, we follow the imaginal coil of his descriptions and find ourselves nodding, yes, of course, I know this but only if I dream it forward and downward do I fully get it. For this stunning reader of poetic images alongside dream images, we sense that, for Bachelard, images are primary psychological realities; “everything begins with images, even in experience itself” (Bachelard 1948/2011, 213). My paintings of several seasons find a resonance with his insight. These paintings were created

from original creations by others, but they do not copy them exactly; my own imagination entered into the work to stylize them according to my own imaginative interpretation. I like to think of them accompanying this review as poetic assertions of Bachelard’s insights on the power of the image to create further iterations of itself.

I will center in on one of the most haunting chapters, “Root,” to further underscore Bachelard’s method. He offers this rich observation at the beginning of Chapter IX: “Primary images have a very particular philosophic quality in that as we study them, each of these images allows us to address almost all the problems posed by a metaphysics of the imagination” (1948/2011, 212). Philosophy and poetry might best be re-visioned to see their commonplace connections, their shared rootedness in the oneiric life of each of us. The root, he argues, is an image of the living dead, the serpent in the soil, the coiling intestines of the

earth herself, “that touches on the subterranean life deep in us” (212). Because of its diversity, he adds, root is a *dynamic image* ... for it has the power to uphold—to hold up—and a power to terebrate—to bore down [so that] the root comes paradoxically to life in two directions” (213). In addition, Bachelard goes to a word’s conjuring possibilities, not just to its meanings, as he does when he thinks of the word as used in psychoanalysis:

It stands out because of its abundance of *association*. It is an *inductive* word, a word that makes us dream a word that comes to dream in us. Say it softly, no matter what the context, and it will make dreamers *descend* into their deepest past, into their most distant unconscious, even beyond all that was their person. (214)

What higher compliment could we extend to a word, Bachelard intimates, than to dream it in as much of its analogical muscle as we can muster. Words, mirroring the imagination’s own propensities, are polyvalent, polymorphous, and polytropic; dreaming is invited in as a means of exploration. Dreaming itself is a dialectical process of fertilization.

In one of the most ambitious chapters in the book, “The Jonah Complex,” Bachelard both praises and chastises Herman Melville’s depiction in *Moby-Dick* of Jonah being swallowed by the whale. At first Bachelard approves of Melville placing Jonah in the whale’s mouth, for, as he notes, any “hollow is all it takes to start one dreaming of a habitation” (1948/2011, 95). But then Melville’s fancy gets the better of him and he locates Jonah not just in the mouth but in “*the hollow tooth of the whale*.” Melville’s treating the biblical event with humor violates, for Bachelard, the dreaming quality of the image by treating it with levity, thus compromising the image’s dreaming capacity. One can, indeed, overdo an image and drain the imagination of the reader completely from it.

That having been said, the Jonah Complex from the bible, which has been extended into

many works of literature, fires up a host of resonances, including the act of swallowing, living in one’s own belly, hollow spaces as places of habitation, and an image for the psychology of dyspepsia. Indeed, Bachelard admonishes psychoanalysis because, as he writes, it often “does not always pay enough attention to explicit images” (1948/2011, 103), so preoccupied can psychology’s adherents become with unconscious complexes. He claims that another opportunity is missed because, though the image may seem elementary, it offers a means “of analyzing the immense and ill-explored area of digestive psychology” (103). The Jonah Complex is an avenue for all forms of swallowing and vomiting, from world mythologies and fairy tales wherein gods or children swallow animals and regurgitate them, to themes in Rabelais’ *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel* where we witness someone who swallows everything (105).

Using the image of Jonah swallowed by Leviathan, Bachelard extends its roots to include cavities, bosoms, bellies, water, and mercury—all in the service of revealing to us a poetic methodology of dreaming in depth. The Jonah image is one of the most “enclosing” images available to us; Bachelard suggests it is one of the great motifs of world dreams. Entering the belly and returning from the belly activates an archetypal process of rebirthing into a new consciousness. As an image, and here is Bachelard’s thesis again, the Jonah image revives reveries that correspond to it; they are more interior and less objective. Thus, there is an intrinsic advantage to tracing “an image back to an originary reverie” (1948/2011, 113). Without an awareness of the originary image, those that are “more interior and less objective” have no source, no clear genesis.

After listing and describing more iterations of the Jonah Complex, Bachelard further defines his method: “When diagnosing images, it is in fact advisable to exclude those that are somewhat over displayed and that thus lose their mysterious appeal. . . . for the overt image

does not always indicate the vigor of the image that lies hidden" (1948/2011, 117). His response is to activate what he has termed all along "the material imagination, whose function is to imagine beneath images of form, [and] is called upon to discover deep aspects of the unconscious" (117).

Reflecting on this last insight, I am reminded of C. G. Jung's perceptive observation in his chapter, "Concerning Rebirth," where he observes:

Therefore, if some great idea takes hold of us from outside, we must understand that it takes hold of us only because something in us responds to it and goes out to meet it. Richness of mind consists in mental receptivity, not in the accumulation of possessions. . . . Real increase of personality means consciousness of an enlargement that flows from inner sources. Without psychic depth, we can never be adequately related to the magnitude of our object. (CW 9,i, 1950/1971, ¶215)

Can we not add to "some great idea" some great images as Bachelard explores them? We dream into depth through images and ideas that prompt an analogy in us, a mimesis of our psychic predisposition and capacity, both of which continually shift as we grow into our larger selves, as Jung further develops in this quote. After years, decades even, of wanting to learn to paint, some deep instinct in me pushed me into painting classes during this last year. Some inner disposition wanted to shift to creating images from paint rather than prose. In the example under discussion, as Bachelard deepens the Jonah Complex, he explores particular images in Guy de Maupassant's novel, *Mont-Oriol*.

At the story's beginning, Oriol, the father, "labors for a whole week digging a hole in the stone" (1948/2011, 120), into which he packs explosives. The hole becomes "the emptied belly of the vast rock" (120). When dynamite is eventually detonated, which de Maupassant describes for ten pages, what is produced by its violence in the belly of the earth is "a spring of water" (120). Bachelard's insight here connects us to Jung's previously quoted observation, as the former

writer's revelation makes clear: "Moreover, from the moment he *set himself* to this lengthy task of description, the writer *knew* that out of the exploded rock would come a beneficial stream. He was sustained by the interest he took in this archetype living in his unconscious" (120). I find this a powerful insight into both the creative making of poetic images and into how consciousness and unconsciousness conspire to create a dreaming image, one that has the power to enter the reader's own oneiric life, as he or she who reads the description may be transformed by it because of its streaming unconscious flow. Without a sensate and potent image of interiority, the reader is not invited to dream the stream into his or her own creative unconscious. This example stresses the myriad images Bachelard cites to further his mimetic methodology.

Given the complexity of his development of the imaginal realm in poetry and dream, it is liberating to read one of his central intentions in writing this book, explored through an image of another writer's fiction:

At all events, when we read passages like the one we have just cited from Huysmans, we become well aware of the need to enrich literary criticism by applying an oneiric scheme to it. If all we see in a vision like that of Huysmans is the search for rare and striking expressions, we are ignoring the deep psychological functions of literature. (1948/2011, 168)

Herein lies Bachelard's purpose and his method, not just for literary criticism but for psychoanalysis and depth psychology as well: a fresh hermeneutics of the dreaming soul. My hope is that folks furrowing in these fields will use this book to plow deeper into their professions' particular ways of imagining the images of psyche.

Finally, I cannot end this review without acknowledging the translator's immensely helpful and insightful endnotes. They are superb and amplify so many of the ideas in the text. Ranging from pages 245–320, they comprise almost a second text to accompany the original writing and add abundantly to an understanding of Bachelard.



Fall Exposure

NOTE

References to *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung* are cited in the text as *CW*, volume number, and paragraph number. *The Collected Works* are published in English by Routledge (UK) and Princeton University Press (USA).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bachelard, G. 1958/1969. *The poetics of space*. Trans. Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Bachelard, G. 1948/2011. *Earth and reveries of repose: An essay on images of interiority*. Trans. Mary McAllester Jones. Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications.
- De Maupassant, G. 1910. *Le Mont-Oriol, roman*. Paris: Louis Conard.
- Jung, C. G. 1959/1971. Concerning rebirth. *The archetypes and the collective unconscious*. Second edition. *CW* 9,1.
- Slattery, D. P. 2011. Mytho-Poesis: The shared ground of psyche's dreaming and poetic impulse. *Journal of the C. G. Jung*

Foundation for Analytical Psychology, xxxi.1 (Winter): 71–85.

DENNIS PATRICK SLATTERY, PH.D., is core faculty, Mythological Studies Program at Pacifica Graduate Institute in Carpinteria, California. He has been teaching for forty-two years. He is the author, co-author, editor, and co-editor of 17 books and over 300 articles published in magazines, newspapers, and journals both online and in print. His works include *The Idiot: Dostoevsky's Fantastic Prince*; *The Wounded Body: Remembering the Markings of Flesh*; *Grace in the Desert: Awakening to the Gifts of Monastic Life*; *Day-to-Day Dante: Exploring Personal Myth through the Divine Comedy*; *Harvesting Darkness: Essays on Literature, Myth, Film and Culture*. With Charles Asher, he co-authored a novel, *Simon's Crossing*. He co-edited, with Lionel Corbett, *Depth Psychology: Meditations in the Field* and *Psychology at the Threshold*. With Glen Slater, he co-edited *Varieties of Mythic Experience: Essays on Religion, Psyche, and*

Culture. With Jennifer Selig, he co-edited *Reimagining Education: Essays on Reviving the Soul of Learning* and *The Soul Does Not Specialize: Revaluing the Humanities and the Polyvalent Imagination*. He has written four volumes of poetry, the most recent being a co-authored volume, *The Beauty Between Words: Selected Poems of Dennis Patrick Slattery and Chris Paris*. His most recent book is *Riting Myth, Mythic Writing: Plotting One's Personal Story*. Correspondence: 4690 River Oaks Drive, New Braunfels, Texas 78132. E-mail: dslattery@pacifica.edu. Website: www.dennisplattery.com.

ABSTRACT

The power and value of both oneiric and poetic images are revealed in *Earth and Reveries of Repose: An Essay on Images of Interiority*. Gaston Bachelard's unique form of imagining is revealed through a study of literary and dream images. In this, the writer's most Jungian-oriented text, he reveals that the depths of images correspond to the depths of the soul and to meditate on these images is to invite an alchemical transformation of the reader's psyche. Reverie over analysis is the preferred method and is expressed best through slow reading. By gathering images from dozens of writers, primarily French novelists and poets, Bachelard furthers his understanding of both the material and dynamic imaginations, two persuasive inroads to the dreaming and poetic self. Guiding his work is a fundamental assumption that we are beings who are deep; depth is achieved and enjoyed through a particular set of images that he conveys with imaginal dexterity and fresh forms of knowing.

KEY WORDS

alchemy, depth, dialectic, dynamic imagination, interiority, impregnation, interiority, Jung, matter, material imagination, oneiric life, psyche, reverie