

# BACHELARD AND THE EPIPHANIC INSTANT

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In an essay entitled "Instant poétique et instant métaphysique" (first published in the French review *Messages: Métaphysique et poésie*, No. 2, 1939, and subsequently in *The Right to Dream*),<sup>1</sup> Bachelard declares that "poetry is a metaphysics of the moment" (RD 173). This concise and formative essay, composed just one year after he made his famous turn from science to poetics in 1938, sees Bachelard deliver one of his most succinct accounts of what he calls "vertical time." He defines the poetic moment as the "principle of an essential simultaneity in which the most scattered and disunited being achieves unity." We are concerned here with a "complex" instant which gathers and concentrates many simultaneities at once. So doing, it cuts across and dissolves "the continuity of sequential time" (RD 173). Time no longer flows, as he puts it, it shoots up (*il jaillit*)! (RD 175).

Here, as elsewhere, Bachelard throws down the gauntlet to Bergson. (He once confessed that his philosophy was "Bergson without continuity," which might seem a bit like saying "Christianity without Christ"). In this 1939 essay, Bachelard summarizes and rehearses some of the key insights of his more sustained analysis of time, *L'Intuition de l'instant*, published in 1932. In both these texts, Bachelard challenges head-on Bergson's philosophy of time as duration, or what he will characterize—in his posthumously published *Fragments d'une poétique du feu* (1988)—as the "untorn and untearable continuity of Bergsonian consciousness" (7).<sup>2</sup>

Bachelard claims that every "real" poem signals a stopping of ordinary clock-time, introducing instead a dimension of "verticality," in depth and in height (RD 173). Where prosaic time is horizontal and continuous (like Bergson's), poetic time is discontinuous and disruptive. Echoing Coleridge's definition of poetry as the "yoking together of opposite and discordant qualities," Bachelard maintains that the poetic instant is a "harmonic relationship between opposites" (RD 174). Confronted by successive antitheses of ordinary

time, the poet refuses to comply; s/he resists the tyranny of chronological sequencing by transmuting antithesis into "ambivalence." S/he substitutes simultaneity for succession. This is the moment which Bachelard calls "rapture" and "ecstasy" when the person—author or reader—is compelled "to raise or lower his values," (RD 174) that is, to explode the continuum of the world's time, electing instead to move upwards or downwards in a rupturing moment of verticality—a sort of Jacob's ladder without explicit recourse to the divine (we shall return to this point below).

It is at this point in his analysis that Bachelard introduces his curious and central notion of androgyny: "On a more intuitive level," he writes, "the well-knit ambivalence can be identified by its temporal character: we have here neither the spirited, masculine time that thrusts forward and overcomes, nor gentle, submissive time that weeps and regrets, but the androgynous moment. The mystery of poetry is androgynous" (RD 174). This was a theme that Bachelard would return to time and time again in his various psychoanalyses of the elements—exercises in poetic depth-psychology, belatedly influenced by Jung as well as by hermeneutic trends in phenomenology.

Bachelard goes on to enumerate a number of productive paradoxes surrounding the poetic instant: first, the holding of a plurality of contradictory events within a single moment (RD 174); secondly, the "no" to the horizontal time of "other people, of life and of the world" which coincides with a "yes" to the emancipation of the deeper person "imprisoned in horizontal time" (RD 175); thirdly, the répétition or reliving of the past in terms of a certain "smiling regret," a singularly ambivalent emotion, for Bachelard, which transcends both melancholic nostalgia and naïve optimism. This most sensitive of ambivalences takes place, he says, in vertical time "since of the two instances—the smile and the regret—neither precedes the other." Neither causes the other. "Emotion is here reversible, or to put it better, the reversibility of being is here emotional-

ized: the smile regrets and the regret smiles and consoles" (RD 176).

This fascination with the poetic conjunction of opposites inclined Bachelard to seek for images not only in poetic literature itself but also in related notions of the *coincidentia oppositorum* in depth psychology and alchemy. But it is perhaps in the nautical notion of "*le point vélique*" that we find his favorite analogy, as several of his Sorbonne students attested. This describes a very specific convergence point of energies when the pressure of wind on sail is met with a countervailing resistance from the waves against the vessel itself. In this moment of opposing forces—sail versus sea—we witness a singular equipoise of intensities, a fertile commingling of immobility and movement, a still point that generates dynamic propulsion. And this double pressure on canvas sail and sea-born hull actually produces a humming sound. The boat literally *sings*.<sup>3</sup>

Bachelard also gives several examples of poets who epitomize these paradoxes. On the poetic effects of Mallarmé's "syntactical inversions" (of language and of time), he writes: "Reading Mallarmé frequently has an impression of a kind of recurrent time completing moments gone by. One is living belatedly the moments one ought to have lived—and the feeling is all the stranger for containing no hint of regret or remorse or nostalgia. It consists simply of *wrought time*, which is able sometimes to put the echo before the voice, and contain refusal within avowal" (RD 175). This anticipates Bachelard's later development of his famous notion of "reverberation" (*retentissement*) in his *Poetics of Space* (1957) and *Poetics of Reverie* (1960).

For Baudelaire—another minstrel of the "poetic instant" according to Bachelard—a poem does not unfold or evolve; it is "knit": and the resulting tissue of knots comprises a series of ambivalences—being and non-being, light and dark, the horror and ecstasy of life (RD 176). These clustered ambivalences include, crucially, a chiasmus of verticality and time which cuts across the normal linear flow of narrative drama. It prefers caesura to maturation, eruption to evolution. Hence the privileging of the genre of poetry over fiction in almost all of Bachelard's works. When Baudelaire speaks of "correspondences," for example, he is not simply speaking of a

transpositional code of sensual analogies (as is so often thought). He is, rather, presenting "a summary of sentient being in a single moment" (RD 176)—sensible simultaneities invoking deeper metaphysical correlations that cannot be experienced in chronological time (which for Bachelard also seems to include dramatic or narrative time).

In the aggressive intensity of the poetic instant time goes down and rises vertically—and "for no good reason" (*ohne warum*). It is free, in other words, from causes, motivations, plots, and developments. One oscillates between rapture and collapse within a single present, as Prince Myshkin does, for example, in Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, in the epileptic moment preceding his famous "falling fits." In this epiphanic instant, Myshkin realizes that beauty is at once a horrifying power *and* the only thing that will save the world. He witnesses a liminal now-point when past and future crisscross and undergo a strange reversibility. A moment at once dark and illuminating, terrifying and jubilant. "It was from the fit that all the darkness came, from the fit that the 'idea' came too," Dostoyevsky tells us.<sup>4</sup> In such vertical epiphanies we hit upon that strange consolation without hope for something outside itself, and without nostalgia for a past that is past. Here, as Bachelard boldly puts it, we discover "everything that loosens the ties of causation and reward, everything that denies our private history and even desire itself, (for) everything that devalues both past and future is contained in the poetic moment" (RD 176).

While Bachelard certainly privileges the genre of poetry over fiction or drama when it comes to the metaphysics of the moment, I think it can be countered that there are also examples of vertical temporality at work in certain modernist novels like Joyce's *Ulysses* or Proust's *Remembrance of Times Past*. As with Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, these novels are narratives constructed around certain vertical moments of "epiphany" which cut through the linear plot line and liberate the story into a series of circular reprises—e.g. Marcel's involuntary memories as he enters the Guermites' soirée in the final section of the novel, or Molly's rupturing of the mock-heroic odyssey as she attests to the epiphany of the first kiss. In both cases, chronological time is upended and re-

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versed, as past and future are reinscribed in a timeless moment: Marcel's reliving of his entrance to San Marco in Venice as he stumbles on the cobblestone in Paris; and Molly's reliving of the kisses of Gibraltar and of Howth Head in the here and now—"Yes I will Yes." It is perhaps unfortunate that in his analyses of the poetic moment Bachelard did not more fully elaborate on how it might work in fictional and dramatic literature as well as in poetry per se.<sup>5</sup>

If poetry was Bachelard's favorite literary genre, phenomenology became his preferred philosophical one. This is especially obvious in later works like *Poetics of Space*; but it is already implicit in earlier writings. The emancipatory power of the poetic moment might, for example, be said to recall Husserl's phenomenological *epoche* where our natural expectations and presuppositions are suspended in order to fully attend to "the things themselves." (Bachelard advocates a phenomenology of imagination in *Poetics of Space*, and certainly read Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre—though he disliked Sartre's residual Cartesian dualism).<sup>6</sup> And while Bachelard does not often cite religious literatures, one might usually recall, borrowing from a non-Western tradition, that special suspended moment of decision before battle, when Arjuna is instructed by Krishna on the virtues of vertical time, namely action without desire or reward: a notion retrieved and developed in the Buddhist idea of the empty moment as a free detachment from the horizontal cycles of *samsara*, as in the famous Heart Sutra—"form is emptiness, emptiness form." This, of course, is an emptiness that is not empty but fuller than the greatest fullness itself: another deep ambivalence conjured in the eternal instant. Indeed one might suspect an oblique rapport here between what Buddhism calls the empty form of time and Bachelard's claim that while "formal causality unfolds within the moment in the sense of vertical time, efficient causality unfolds in life and in things, horizontally" (RD 177).

Bachelard does not limit his analysis of the Instant to poetics—though he clearly privileges this idiom. He resists the temptation of literary solipsism or closure when he admits that the poetic instant also involves: 1) a "metaphysics of the immediate," 2) a psychol-

ogy of "fundamental ambivalence," and 3) a "morality of the instantaneous" (RD 177–78). Though Bachelard would explore the first two areas in his later texts on depth psychology and ontology, from *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (1938) to *Poetics of Space* (1957), the claim for morality might come as something of a surprise to those wont to think of Bachelard as a neutral scientist turned literary aesthete. But Bachelard is no advocate of symbolist self-regard or art's for arts sake. He makes the bold claim in his 1939 essay on the poetic instant that imagination is the well-spring of ethical as well as poetic values. That the poetic instant is existential as much as it is linguistic. This is boldly stated in the conclusion to his essay, where he demarcates his own position, once again, from the Bergsonian theory of *la durée*. I quote the passage at some length as it merits keen consideration:

The categorical imperative of morality has nothing to do with time as duration. It knows no sensible cause; it expects no result. It steers a straight course, vertically, through the time that belongs to forms and persons. The poet is thus the natural guide for the metaphysician who wishes to understand all the powers of instantaneous connections, the fire of sacrifice, without allowing himself to be split by the clumsy philosophical duality of subject and object or balked by the dualism of selfishness and duty. The poet operates a subtler dialectic. He reveals in the same moment both the solidarity of form and person. He proves that form is person and person is form. Poetry thus becomes a moment of formal cause, an instant of personal power. It has no interest . . . in time as duration that dissipates echoes. It seeks the moment. (RD 178)

We shall return to the question of Bachelard's ethics in our concluding remarks below.

## II

It was actually in *L'Intuition de L'Instant* (1932), seven years before the pivotal *Mesages* essay, that Bachelard first developed his analysis of vertical time. Here he defines the instant as a sudden burst of consciousness calling for an acute act of *attention* (18–19).<sup>7</sup> One

experiences the instant, he claims, as an act of concentrated will; and will is to be understood as a radical moment of decision that is simultaneously a deep moment of listening (21). The act of will, as an act of auditory imagination, is a response to the incoming instant. "When it strikes," writes Bachelard, "the instant imposes itself all in one blow, completely; it is the factor of the synthesis of being" (27). In other words, the word "invention" here takes on all the rich double sense of its etymological origin as both creation and discovery (*invenio-invenire*). It is both active and passive, dynamic and receptive.

Bachelard returns to this paradox of vertical time in *La Formation de l'esprit scientifique* (published just one year before "The Poetic Moment and the Metaphysical Moment"). Here, speaking with his scientific hat on, he claims that one species changes from a previous species by "a decisive act or leap." This amounts, he says, to a form of radical mutation: an event of temporal rupture which is also a function of inventiveness. "Through the spiritual revolution required by scientific inventiveness, we become a *mutating* species, or a species that needs to mutate, that suffers if it doesn't change."<sup>8</sup> This is, of course, a million miles from the unbreachable continuity of Bergsonian consciousness. (And within yards of the philosophy of *coupure* that so influenced later structuralist thinkers like Althusser and Foucault. This structuralist aspect of Bachelard's philosophy is often neglected).

The paradigm of mutation as metamorphosis is the same phenomenon captured in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (first published the same year as *La Formation*), where Bachelard speaks of the decisive act of imagination as a power to make a newborn babe out of a monster.<sup>9</sup> Or again in *Lautréamont* (1939) where he analyses Ducasse's poem *Maldoror* as what he calls "instant language," namely the expression of a psychic force to suddenly become language without causal antecedence in previous thoughts. This instant of creative aggression and fracturing typifies, for Bachelard, the poetry of Lautréamont and the "good surrealists." It marks an inaugurating power, a gratuitous beginning where the sudden will to change is accompanied by a deep joy of decision. This instantaneous time is far removed from the clock time of everyday life. It is the

moment of the transformation of forms, of awakening to a sur-reality beneath and beyond ordinary notions of the real. It is the magic of metamorphosis in the abrupt emergence of a poetic image.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, poetics—no less than philosophy and morality—is an act of "willed origins" (RD 179). Or as Bachelard puts it in *Air and Dreams*, "valorization *decides* being: this is one of the great principles of the imaginary."<sup>11</sup>

True to a central paradox of phenomenology, Bachelard holds that we create and we disclose *at one and the same time*. This bilateral action is exemplified in his image of an artist-craftsman liberating the gem out of stone, the reverie of the crystalline substance representing at once an instant and eternity.<sup>12</sup> It is also invoked in Bachelard's 1938 Preface to the French translation of Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, when he speaks about the genuine encounter between two persons as a special "synthesis of event and eternity."<sup>13</sup> Such real encounters involve a curious criss-crossing of mutual questioning and surprise. Nothing is established in advance; both partners are exposed to radical novelty:

Someone exists in the world, unknown to you, then, suddenly, in a single encounter, before knowing him, you recognize him. A dialogue begins in the night, a dialogue which, through a certain tone, completely involves the persons, "Michel, is that you?" And the voice answers, "Jeanne, is that you?" Neither one needs to answer, "Yes, it is I." For if the questioned person were to transcend the questioning, and forego the infinite grace of the encounter, he would then descend into monologue or confession . . . into the dull narrative of wishes and woes. He would say what he is, before saying what, through the encounter, he has become. The Instant of the human Person would be quite enfeebled, quite weakened, muffled, entirely deprived of the vector of futurity that sympathy just launched. (89)

This tone of mutual curiosity and astonishment, captured in the stammering of the I faced with the Thou, epitomizes what Bachelard refers to as an auditory imagination—a double tonality of aspiration and inspiration, of giving and receiving. "The ear then becomes *active*," as he puts it, "since lending an ear is wanting to

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respond" (93). And here we see how Bachelard's phenomenology of the instant involves a radical ethics of empathy, based on the Buberian insight that relations are not about poles, points, and centers but about *vectors*. The self for Bachelard, as for Buber, is less a substance or cogito than a dynamic relation to the endlessly surprising other.

Bachelard's philosophy of the instant takes the form of a phenomenology of relations understood as sympathy, reciprocity, and surprise. But Bachelard's phenomenology is unique in many respects. It reverses Gadamer's prioritizing of *Erfahrung* (continuous temporal experience) over *Erlebnis* (the discrete discontinuous moment). It challenges Sartre's priority of futural negations and intentions over the pure present. And it radically transforms Heidegger's reading of the *Augenblick*; for rather than seeing the authentic moment of decision, like Heidegger, as a recapitulation of past time and projection of our most proper possibilities in death, Bachelard sees it as an occasion of intense jubilation in the present as such, less a question of being-toward-death than of being-toward-birth.<sup>14</sup>

In the poetic instant, in short, the temporalizing horizons of "before" and "after" dissolve to reveal a bare inaugural moment. This is the moment when a lightning bolt of cosmic time traverses personal time in a fire of intimate intensity (*Fragments of Poetics of Fire*, 34–35). It is what Bachelard, in a favorite trope, calls a "phoenix poetic flash," an explosion where the death of linear time is reborn as vertical time, a natal event often caught in those special poems of an instant (Eliot's kingfisher, Arnold's Empedocles), great poems which combine "an instant in a man's life with an instant in the life of a world" (104). It is this break, insists Bachelard, this very interruption of the natural attitude of language, habit and chronology that allows the "nascent logos" of being to emerge as language. For here the advent of the poem signals an upsurge of new being—mortality giving way to natality, again and again. This logos of the "phoenix flash" is best understood, suggests Bachelard, in the mode of reverie, that attitude of attention which combines will and decision with a deep receptivity toward an incoming gift. All of which occurs in a single instant of intensity. This is how Bachelard describes the crucial

event: "When these flashes of fire, lightning or flight surprise us in our contemplation, they appear to our eyes as *heightened, universal moments*—not so much ours as given to us, moments which mark the memory and return in dreams, retaining their imaginary dynamism. We might term them, in fact, phoenixes of reverie" (32)—that is, instants which give rise to reverie.<sup>15</sup> And of course the phoenix is, in myth and metaphor, a bird which rises up from ashes, resurrected from the caesura and cessation of mortality. For, as Bachelard reminds us in *L'Intuition de l'instant*, "Time can be reborn but it must first die" (13).

### III

Such passages conjure up several associated images in the biblical tradition. But while Bachelard's notion of the instant seems extremely close, at times, to Christian (and more specifically Pauline) notions of the kairological or eschatological moment that cuts through time, his analogies are more commonly drawn from Greek and classical sources. Just as his psychoanalytic preferences are for Jung over Freud, his spiritual preferences seem to be for pagan and alchemical sources over biblical ones (though this is never stated in any dogmatic or polemical way). Rather than speaking of the eschaton coming like lightning crossing the sky (Mt. 24:23–27; Lk. 17:22–24)—a key biblical passage for Kierkegaard's instant and Heidegger's *Augenblick*—Bachelard opts instead for poetic and classical allusions.<sup>16</sup> In short, a phoenix flash rather than the famous "flash of fire" (*shalhevetjah*) in the Song of Songs (8:6) or the burning bush of Exodus 3:15 or the Pentecostal fire of the Acts of the Apostles. Bachelard is more wont to cite Empedocles than Jesus, Mallarmé than Maimonides, Baudelaire's *fleurs du mal* rather than the beatific *fleurs du lys*. And though he does, for example, devote an essay to Chagall's Bible in the posthumously published *Right to Dream* (1970), referring to prophets and their moral message, it is telling that even here the biblical reference is couched in an artistic allusion to a contemporary painter of folk dream and reverie. Nor should we forget the telling fact that while his seminal *L'Intuition de l'instant* is actually a reflection upon Gaston Roupnel's

*Siloë*, a retelling of the episode in John 9:7, where the blind man is cured by Jesus after bathing in the pool of Siloam, Bachelard does not once refer to its biblical origin explicitly.<sup>17</sup>

Why this discretion?—we may well ask. The option for poetic over confessional terminology is, I think, significant. But, careful, I am not suggesting for a moment that Bachelard is in any way anti-religious, or an advocate of militant atheism like Sartre or de Beauvoir. No, I suspect rather that Bachelard's attitude expresses his deeply humanist commitments as: 1) a scientist, 2) a phenomenologist, and 3) a citizen of the French République. For each of these three commitments requires a suspension of explicitly confessional and partisan religious language in favor of more secular idioms. Which does not of course mean that sacred and spiritual experiences—clearly central to Bachelard's whole understanding of the poetic moment—cannot be probed and sounded. Indeed terms like "grace," "spirit," and "resurrection" recur frequently throughout his writings. And in *L'Intuition de l'instant* he does not hesitate to speak of an "absolute" (18) or of "acts of the Creator" (48). But when Bachelard does reference such notions it is almost invariably in the idioms of poetry, philosophy, and myth. Here cosmic mystery traverses and truncates chronological time without explicitly announcing a coming kingdom or eschatological advent. (Though it does not, of course, exclude it either.)<sup>18</sup>

Bachelard's poetics, in sum, bear witness to the pure moment which speaks from itself, which watches and listens to the "thing itself" as it springs forth into creative language. His poetics attest to vertical time as a landing site for the gift of the fabulous, the upsurge of the marvelous, without attributing this to any one religious tradition. When he does make religious allusions these are invariably oblique, indirect and pluralistic: as, for example, when he juxtaposes a reference to an Indian saint (Narayana) with one to a Greek seer or an alchemical sage without batting an eyelid. He never invokes the authority of any particular religious tradition over another, Western or Eastern. So that we might reasonably conclude that Bachelard prefers a poetics of the instant that is pre-confessional, and thus open to all religious and non-religious experiences alike.

And in this he may be described as a true phenomenologist of the spiritual imagination. A poetic pioneer, in his unique way, of interspiritual hospitality.

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Let me conclude with a few brief words about Bachelard's ethics of the Instant which, I believe, accompanies and supplements his poetics of the Instant. This can be broadly classified under three rubrics: 1) an ethics of *empathy*, 2) an ethics of *attention*, and 3) an ethics of *emancipation*. As I have already mentioned the first in Bachelard's close affinity with Buber's ethics of relation above, let me focus here on the last two. The ethical attitude of attention takes the form of a vigilance and receptivity toward the gift of the moment, a chance event which is at once fortuitous and gratuitous. This relates directly to Bachelard's notion of the "accident," as when he writes that there is only one general law within "a truly creative evolution" namely, "that an accident lies at the root of every evolutionary attempt" (*Intuition of the Instant*, 24). This accident is literally *ac-cidens*, that which befalls us in a single blow, understood not as an abstract nothing (as in Bergson's evolution) but as the well-spring of reality itself in its beginning, its nascence, what he calls "the absolute of a birth" (24). An ethics of attention is thus one which discovers a true "occasion" of natality in a mere chance accident (*Zufall*), a moment of epiphany in rupture, of fertile *devenir* in the radical discontinuity of time. And so doing it transmutes mere contingency into a "destinal center." But whether this accident is an *ex-nihilo* advent of transcendence or an eruption from a forgotten dimension of immanent being is never resolved by Bachelard. What is clear is that a special attention to the accident as *arche* of new beginnings is at the heart of Bachelard's ethics. This attention is an act of both vigilance toward what comes and of audacity to listen and receive it. For as he writes in the opening chapter of *Intuition of the Instant*: "Intellectual courage consists in the active and vital preservation of this instant of nascent knowledge, of making it the unceasing fountain of our intuition, and of designing, with the subjective history of our errors and faults, the model of a better and more illumined life" (6).

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This brings me finally to Bachelard's third ethical category—emancipation. The instant comes not as an imposition but as an event. It does not coerce but persuades. For in liberating us from the ineluctable flow of *durée*, we are released into the option of generosity. Bachelard speaks accordingly of being free to “receive the gift of a fertile instant, as an essential novelty” (55), that is, unconditionally, as if unbound by the ties of habit and routine. Here we experience chance as something which induces and solicits without condemning us to absolute necessity (55). The instant as lacuna, gap, aperture, caesura invites us to replace the

*élan vital* with an *élan vocal*<sup>19</sup>—it replaces mute determinism with the liberty of poetic speech, the power to say “yes” or “no.” Like the maiden in Denise Levertov's poem, *Annunciation*, the self for Bachelard is fundamentally free in its moment of decision.

She was free  
to accept or to refuse, choice  
integral to humanness.<sup>20</sup>

It would be hard, I think, to find a better motto for Bachelard's ethics of the vertical instant.

### ENDNOTES

1. Translated by J. A. Underwood as “The Poetic Moment and the Metaphysical Moment” in *The Right to Dream* (Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 1988), 173–78. Page references cited in this article correspond to this English edition, hereafter abbreviated as RD.
2. Passages here cited are drawn from the English edition, *Fragments of a Poetics of Fire*, trans. Kenneth Haltman (Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 1990).
3. During one of his final lectures at the Sorbonne (1953–1954) before his retirement from teaching, Bachelard left his students with a striking nautical image—“*le point vélique*”—to describe human being as the dynamic convergence-point of the wind on a boat's sails and the sea's resistance against the vessel, a point of tension that gives rise to a vibrant “hum”: “Ce point que les dictionnaires décrivent comme celui où est appliqué la résultante de toutes les actions du vent sur les voiles, il le construisait à l'intersection de cette force résultante et de la force de résistance que la mer oppose à l'avance du navire.” This image, initially recorded by Jean Lescure in *Paroles de Gaston Bachelard, Mercure de France* (May 1963), is cited by Pierre Quillet in *Bachelard* (Paris: Éditions Seghers, 1964), 9–10.
4. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage 2003), 229.
5. Bachelard's tendency to bracket narrative plot in his literary analyses could, admittedly, be described more as a methodological choice than as a blind spot. Two studies which focus on the key role of poetic insight in narrative are Bachelard's essay “The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym” (1944), which analyzes Edgar Allan Poe's novel of maritime adventure, highlighting its twofold demand of vertical vs. horizontal time, dream and narrative (*Right to Dream*, 01–11), and “Séraphita” (1955) an essay which celebrates Balzac's mystical novel (on “the doctrine in action of the Christian Buddha,” as Balzac himself described it) while comparing its vertical movement to that of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (*ibid.*, 93–99).
6. In a chapter on “the phenomenology of roundness” in the *Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), Bachelard reveals a close familiarity with the work of Karl Jaspers, as well. Citing from *Von der Wahrheit* (München: R. Piper, 1947), he proposes to trim down his “*Jedes Dasein scheint in sich rund*” (50) to “*das Dasein ist rund*” in order to make it “phenomenologically purer”: “Because to add that *it seems round* is to keep a doublet of being and appearance, when we mean the entire being in its roundness. In fact it is not a question of observing, but of experiencing being in its immediacy” (232, 234).
7. Passages here cited have been translated by Eileen Rizo-Patron, *The Intuition of the Instant* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, forthcoming). Page numbers correspond to the recent French edition of *L'Intuition de l'instant* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 1992).
8. *La Formation de l'esprit scientifique* (Paris: Vrin, 1938), 15–16.
9. *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, trans. Alan C. M. Ross (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 10. Translation of *La Psychanalyse du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938).

10. *Lautréamont*, trans. Robert S. Dupree (Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 1986), 87. Translation of *Lautréamont* (Paris: José Corti, 1939).
11. *Air and Dreams*, trans. Edith Farrell (Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 1988), 74. Translation of *L'Air et les songes* (Paris: José Corti, 1943).
12. *La Terre et les rêveries de la volonté* (Paris: José Corti, 1947), 302.
13. "Preface to Martin Buber's *I and Thou*," trans. Edward Kaplan, *International Studies in Philosophy*, 35(2003): 89–94.
14. "At bottom," writes Bachelard, "it is the discontinuity of birth that needs to be expounded, more than the continuity of life. It is at the instant of birth that one can measure the true power of being. This power . . . is the return to the liberty of the possible, to its multiple resonances born from the solitude of being" (*L'Intuition de l'instant*, 67).
15. Later in *Fragments of a Poetics of Fire*, Bachelard returns to the phoenix moment as an intense, pure, birth into poetry: "The great phoenixes whose prestige is admired in the history of myth lived one year or a hundred years. ours could last but an instant. But what an instant which symbolizes the very height of happiness!" (33). And again: "This image was described by T. S. Eliot as an instant of light. . . . The violence of the luminous dart brightens the flat light of the waters. The poet experiences this instant of active light as a veritable break in time or emergence of time (*relief du temps*). Cosmic time seems here to heighten ordinary time" (34).
17. It is suggestive, nonetheless, that Bachelard's phoenix is also described as a "bird moving with lightning speed" in *Fragments of a Poetics of Fire* (33). See Rizo-Patron's study of the implications of this image in "Bachelard's Subversive Hermeneutics: The Role of Lightning in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*," in *Religion and the Arts* 10 (2006): 355–73.
17. While Bachelard does allude to "a divine redeemer" in *L'Intuition de l'instant*, he abstains from identifying such a redeemer by name. In his words: "The entire force of time condenses itself within the novel instant where sight awakens, near the fountain of Siloam, under the touch of a divine redeemer who in one gesture grants us joy, reason, and the way to eternal being through truth and goodness" (95).
18. Bachelard's poetic instant might be fruitfully compared to Walter Benjamin's notion of the dialectical image "in which the Then (*das Gewesene*) and the Now (*das Jetzt*) come into a constellation like a flash of lightning." *Benjamin, Philosophy, History, Aesthetics*, ed. Gary Smith (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989). The Messianic instant, or *Jetztzeit*, is here described by Benjamin as "dialectics at a standstill," transcending all temporal chronology and sequence: "For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of the Then to the Now is dialectical—not development but image, a leaping forth (*sprunghaft*). Only dialectical images are genuine (i.e. not archaic) images; and the place one happens upon them is language" (49). (I am grateful to Mary Anderson for bringing this reference to my attention). A similar notion of the Messianic instant was developed by another Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969). I have found no evidence to suggest that Bachelard was influenced by these "messianic" notions of the instant (disseminated after Bachelard wrote *L'Intuition de l'instant*), nor that Benjamin or Levinas were influenced by Bachelard (who, as already mentioned, avoided religious or political allusions in his discourse, restricting his phenomenological studies to poetics).
19. On Bergson's *élan vital* vs. Bachelard's *élan vocal*, see Jean-François Perraudin, "Un Bachelard non-Bergsonien," *Gaston Bachelard: Du rêveur ironiste au pédagogue inspiré* (Dijon: Centre Régional de Documentation Pédagogique, 1984), 75. E. Rizo-Patron's translation of this essay is forthcoming in *Continental Philosophy Review* 41(2008).
20. Denise Levertov, *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 2003), 162.

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