

Between Matter and Hand: On Gaston Bachelard's Theory of Material Imagination

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Struck by the neglect of the material cause in aesthetic philosophy, Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962), the significant French thinker, wondrously contributed his penetrating search upon how matter engages our imagination and mind in the significant way, after his successful career as a scientific philosopher. His relative works on this subject bear such titles as *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (*La psychanalyse du feu*, 1938), *Water and Dream: An Essay on Imagination of Matter* (*L'eau et les rêves*, 1942), *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement* (*L'air et les songes*, 1943), *Earth and Reveries of Repose: An Essay on Images of Interiority* (*La terre et les rêveries du repos*, 1946), *Earth and Reveries of Will: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (*La terre et les rêveries de la volonté*, 1948), etc. In his later time, especially after his phenomenological turn, Bachelard explored the poetic images and its becoming in our subjective sense, in *The Poetics of Space* (*La Poétique de l'Espace*, 1958) and *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos* (*La poétique de la rêverie*, 1960), which can be regarded as a supplement of his theory of material imagination. This article will try to firstly explore how Bachelard deals with matter and materiality in his theory of material imagination, then through an analysis of the metaphor of “hand” to explain and present the characteristics of material imagination, towards the end this article will show how the special “cogito” in our dreams as well as in material imagination makes us more connect with the material world again.

Material Imagination and Materiality

When investigating the imaging power of our mind, Bachelard distinguishes two very different axes, or different types of imaginations, “One that gives life to the formal cause and one that gives life to the material cause—or, more succinctly, a formal imagination and a material imagination” (Bachelard 1999, 1). When a work just arises

from feeling and heart, and at the same time possesses “verbal variety and ever-changing life of light”, formal imagination comes into being. It is joyful, playful, but with “perishable forms and vain images” and “perpetual change of surfaces”, never hits the “substance” of the matter beneath the object. The superficial images “play on the surface of an element without giving the imagination time to work upon its matter” (Bachelard 1999, 10-11). For Bachelard, formal imagination floats on the surface of matter, because the images “get their impetus from novelty; they take pleasure in the picturesque, the varied, and the unexpected” (Bachelard 1999, 1). Even at the very initial period, formal imagination flees away from the matter which initially inspires it. This is because formal imagination appeals to fascination and joy, thus is more intrigued by form and color, variety and change, the result is inevitably that it “deserts depth, volume and the inner recesses of substance” (Bachelard 1999, 2).

However, material imagination takes root in the substance of matter. It “plumbs the depth of being. They seek to find there both the primitive and the eternal” (Bachelard 1999, 2). Material imagination seeks for consistency within the matter, and draws power from the substance itself. Material imagination doesn’t come from the surface, but goes for the hidden matter image beneath the object and meanwhile excludes the transient and changeable parts in the resultant image. As Bachelard puts it, “many attempted images cannot survive because they are merely formal play, not truly adapted to the matter they should adorn” (Bachelard 1999, 3). Therefore he argues the historically eternal created images and “system of poetic fidelity”, could not come from the formal imagination, but material imagination. The latter creates images stemming “directly from matter” and represents the individualizing power of matter. It plugs into the depth of the matter and marches towards the essence of the matter. Thus the images arising from material causality bear the mark of a deep impregnation by substantial properties of the matter.

In the case of our imagination of water. A playful poet, or rather, formal imagination “likes water in its yearly cycle, from spring to winter, easily, passively, lightly reflecting all the seasons”, while the more profound poet, or material imagination “discovers enduring water, unchanging and reborn, which stamps its image with an indelible mark and is an organ of the world, the nourishment of flowing phenomena, the vegetating and polishing element, the embodiment of tears” (Bachelard 1999, 11), such as, the poet Edgar Allan Poe expresses the heaviness of water, Shakespeare imagines the dead Ophelia floating on the waves of a river. Here instead of the fluency and dreaminess from the superficial play of waters, the heaviness and the association of death evokes the depth of water. Similarly, when meditating beside river, the Chinese philosopher Confucius compares water to time: “Time lapses like the river!” Water runs forward without any rest and never returns, just like time does.

Bachelard defends the poetics of symbolism and surrealism. Although the images conceived by the symbolists and surrealists usually have no apparent affinity to reality, they probably represent the interiority of matter. Like in Jacques Audiberti’s poem,

“Snow composed to water is black, despite our eyes.” What credit that snow could be black? As Bachelard puts it, “black will be the that color’s substantial solidity, black will be the substantial negation of all that attains the light” (Bachelard 2011, Earth, 20). He persuasively cites Hegel, black is “the inherent nature of white”, the “in-itself” of white. It worth mentioning that material imagination is actually in some sense close to what John Ruskin refers to by the term “imagination penetrative” (Ruskin 1900, 132-133).

Through material imagination, Bachelard tries to show that matter strongly determines the imagination, and attributes the substance, principle and character to the poetic image. As a (pre)scientific philosopher, Bachelard believes each kind of matter has its individualizing power and its individuality, “an individuality in depth that takes matter a totality, even in its smallest divisions” (Bachelard 1999, 2). As he writes in *Water and Dream*, “a material element must provide its own substance, its particular rules and poetics” (Bachelard 1999, 3), or he similarly expresses in *Air and Dreams*, “A material element is the principle of a good conductor that gives continuity to the imagining psyche” (Bachelard 2011, 8). In material imagination, matter so much engages our imagination that it shapes whatever from the imagination, and its ontologically individual existence inevitably dyes our imaginations and dreams. That is why some images come into archetypes in different cultures. Although Bachelard and J. C. Jung meet on this same plane, the difference is the latter explains it as “collective unconscious”, but Bachelard, who learned Jung quite late after he already established his own theory (Christofide 1962, 271), thinks it originates from the power of matter which acts on our imagination.

Bachelard’s way of exploring the matter from the depth, partly comes from his experience as a scientific philosopher. According to him, natural science takes effort to approach the depth of matter, and pierces through the surface of object. But his contemporary philosophers are so much engaged in “phenomena” and therefore prevent themselves from reflecting upon the “thing itself”. As for the arts, most painters deal with the appearance of objects and rarely hit on the essence of the matter. As for the so-called aesthetic contemplation, basically disinterested contemplation, the perceivers are supposed to look into the essence of the matter, but Bachelard points out insightfully that so-called contemplation is nothing but a consistent gaze upon appearance of matter and eventually can’t touch the substance of the matter, which is supposed to be unfixed, flowing and silent. Bachelard tells we only can find the depth of matter in some poems where, different from philosophers, poets are approaching “thing itself”, the bottom of matter.

The dualism of matter and form is quite obvious in Bachelard’s thought. While the idealism tradition regards form as a conscious and prior existence, and matter the passive and transient one, Bachelard defends that which is primary is the matter but not the form. Bachelard expresses that matter is more eternal than form, “form reach completion. Matter, never” (Bachelard 1999, 113), form would change, but matter

would survive, and moreover, matter is the basis and unconscious state of form, the possibilities of form are essentially imbedded within matter.

Bachelard argues all the imaginations or dreams come from the four elements, i.e., earth, air, fire and water, or their combinations. But it is worth stressing that not every element embodies materiality in the same degree. According to Bachelard's notion of matter and materiality, paste as the mixture of water and earth, is an ideal matter, a "prototype" of materiality, a "perfect earth, exemplary compound", "the fundamental schemes of materialism" (Bachelard 1999, 104), etc. In the preface of *Water and Dreams*, he writes, "paste is thus the basic component of materiality; the very notion of matter is, I think, closely bound up with it" (Bachelard 1999, 13). He even claims explicitly, "For the material imagination, the exemplary compound is a mixture of water and earth" (Bachelard 1999, 13). Elsewhere, in *Earth and Will*, he says, "It seems indispensable from the viewpoint of material imagination of the elements to study mesomorphic reverie, intermediate between water and earth" (Bachelard 2002, 56), or, "Perfect earth [pâté] is thus the basic material element of materialism, as the perfect solid is the basic formal element of geometry" (Bachelard 2002, 61). "Perfect earth" here refers the paste. That's why in the preface of *Air and Dreams*, he admits because air is very thin matter, with which, "movement takes precedence over matter", so "My research will be limited as material imagination is concerned" (Bachelard 2011, Air, 8).

Why could "paste" [pâté] be the exemplary matter or the pattern of materiality? Firstly, only the ambivalence can trigger active imagination and invite the whole soul engaged, "Matter that does not provide the opportunity for a psychological ambivalence cannot find a poetic double which allows endless transportation". As a mixture of water and earth, paste has the dual quality of fluidity and solidity, thus arouses "a dual participation of desire and fear, a participation of good and evil, a peaceful participation of black and white" (Bachelard 1999, 11). Or, as he says, the paste is "a perfect synthesis of yielding and resistance, a marvelous equilibrium of the forces of acceptance and refusal" (Bachelard 2002, 61). Secondly, paste is a combination and has unfinished and indeterminate shape. "Formal imagination needs the idea of composition. Material imagination needs the idea of combination" (Bachelard 1999, 93). Without solid or composed shape, the paste wouldn't invite formal imagination instantly as other matter with solid form and composition. The paste, "in which shape is supplanted, effaced, dissolved", "relieves of our intuition of any worry about shape. The problem of form is given a secondary role" (Bachelard 1999, 105), so that it wouldn't easily lead to formal imagination, while usually "this visualizing of the finished work leads naturally to the supremacy of formal imagination" (Bachelard 1999, 13). In brief, paste's formlessness makes it much engaged by material imagination, rather than formal imagination.

Hand: A Metaphor of Material Imagination

The ideal matter such as paste, not only arouses our whole dual activities and material imagination, for Bachelard, it is also "evident to the hand as the perfect solid to the geometer's eye" (Bachelard 2002, 59). It means, the fundamental matter should share

a kind of attribute that invites the sense of touching. He also uses “hand” to explain poetic creation, he writes, “if poetry is to reanimate the power of creation in the soul or help us relive our natural dreams in all their intensity and all their meaning, we must come to understand that the hand as well as the eye has its reveries and poetry. We must discover the poetry of touch, the poet of kneading hands” (Bachelard 2002, 60). Here we can see that there is dichotomy between eye and hand, the former is for the geometers, the latter for poets, the former prefers solid, clear and finished matter, the latter prefers the paste, the indeterminate being. For Bachelard, the visual images before our eyes are so clear and widespread, that they prevent us from any participation in the primitive, dynamic images; the visual images “assert their primacy” (Bachelard 2002, 60) and seclude us from material imagination. But, hand “helps us to understand matter in its inmost being” (Bachelard 1999, 107), “The dynamic hand symbolizes the imagination of force” (Bachelard 1999, 108). Bachelard borrows the image of manual workers’ labour, where through rubbing, smashing, pressing, grasping, twisting, beating and welding. hands penetrate the substance and interiority. They make slippery and floating matter substantial and solid, and thus establish a deep relationship with the matter through their positive engagement.

Hands here are not only figurative or rhetoric. Bachelard seriously treats hands or touching as his subject of philosophy. He suggests that, in contrast to manual workers, philosophers, especially those of French existentialist, seem to have different attitude of their hands. In *Earth and Will*, Bachelard criticizes Sartre’s existentialism as far as his attitude to the viscosity is concerned. In Jean-Paul Sartre’s novel *Nausea*, in a single paragraph, Sartre shows the hero in the process of gathering “chestnuts”, “old rags” and later, “heavy and sumptuous papers, probably soiled by excrement”, yet Roquentin recoils from contact with a pebble on the beach—a pebble washed clean by the sea. For Roquentin felt unpleasant and sick from the pebble, “it was a sort of sweetish sickness”, “a sort of nausea in the hands”. For him, “Objects should not touch because they are not alive. You use them, put them back in place, you live among them: they are useful, nothing more. But they touch me, it is unbearable. I am afraid of being in contact with them as though they were living beasts” (Sartre, 1993, 20). For this, Bachelard explains, “Such hands, which perhaps have not been given a clear task to accomplish at the proper moment, nor a pleasant substance to work with, rarely succeed in coming to terms with the material world” (Bachelard 2002, 87). And he further explains, “Roquentin is sick even in the realm of material images, that is to say even in his attempts to establish a viable relationship with the substance of things” (Bachelard 2002, 86).

That means, for Roquentin, matter is dead and lifeless, and his hands are passive, the work of hands “is a soft and yielding action, a moist and feminine sucking” (Bachelard 2002, 88). Bachelard argues this is because existentialist merely lingers on the phenomena, but the objects, such as the pebble in Roquentin’s hands, or paste, are not essentially comprehended only by their appearance, but through action. Roquentin stops himself from looking into the depth because of his failure to get a

viable connection to the substance. Before Bachelard published his *Earth and Will*, Sartre discussed the ontological significance of the slimy and the sticky, though a bit different from the slippery, such as the pebble in the last chapter of *Being and Nothingness* (1943), where he actually praises Bachelard's great theory of material imagination. From Sartre's point of view, the sticky is "inert"; "To touch the slimy is to risk being dissolved in sliminess. Now this dissolution by itself is frightening enough, because it is the absorption of the For-itself by the In-itself" (Sartre, 1993, 610). For Sartre, these kinds of matters are either inert or dangerous, for they delay or destroy the For-itself by the dominating In-itself.

However, for Bachelard, the matter under the manual workers' hands is totally different. Here the matter is potentially dynamic, and "Viscosity, then, is only a passing offense, a skirmish between reality and the labourer in which the dynamism of the latter ensures victory" (Bachelard 2002, 88). Moreover, facing the viscosity, the manual workers would not feel anxious and sick, but feel excited by the possible construction and creation. The manual workers never rest on phenomena, but use their hands to work on the matter and approach its depth. In the same way, poets harbour no fear for the flowing and unformed matter, because the indeterminate matter evokes their fantasy and dual activities, as I already mentioned above around the concept of paste. For instance, Seamus Heaney, an Irish poet, when reflecting upon the origins of his own poetic creation, traced it back to his addiction to paste, clay, marsh and other wet and soft things from his childhood. Bachelard himself writes, "In the loneliness, with a dough in our hands, dream begins" (Bachelard, 2000, 212). For the poets, "the material imagination of soft substances is essentially concern with labour" (Bachelard 2002, 88), material imagination is active and dynamic. Thus the poets and workers can venture to claim, "We are demiurges. We determine the destiny of matter" (Bachelard 2002, 88), "Material imagination has a demiurgic tone" (Bachelard 2011, Earth, 19). Obviously, the ideal matter is not the object to observe, probe or transcend, but that invites our mind to dream, imagine, absorb and melt with, then material imagination is not passive at all, but rather as active and dynamic as the manual working.

"Cogito of Kneading": Between Matter and Hand

Bachelard is a dream believer. In terms of its occurrence, dreams or reveries precede perception, thinking and contemplation. Especially, for Bachelard, matter is dreamed and not first perceived. In the preface of *Earth and Will*, he criticizes positivist philosopher for their argument that "it is the perception of images that determines the process of imagination" (Bachelard 2002, 2). Dream also precedes contemplation. He claims "Dream comes before contemplation" or "Material reveries precede contemplation" (Bachelard 1999, 4). Dreams or reveries have their big roles in Bachelard's philosophy. If what Bachelard formulates in *Water and Dreams* emphasizes the precedence and actuality of matter in poetic images, then in *The Poetics of Reverie* and *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard explores how deep our consciousness would be through the imagined connection with the matter, with the aim of "consideration of

the onset of the image in an individual sense” (Bachelard 1994, XIX), which can be regarded as an extension or supplement of theory of material imagination.

Bachelard uses “dream” in the sense of “reverie”. It is very different from night-dream. He points out that night-dreamer loses his subjectivity and his existence, “the night-dreamer is the shadow without self; but in the centre of reverie, if he has the philosophic disposition, arises a ‘cogito’ ” (Bachelard 2000, 189). The night dreamer has no “cogito”, the night-dream “kidnaps our existence”, (Bachelard 2000, 8). In contrast, the reverie somewhat keeps the twilight of consciousness, “cogito” has never been absent in a reverist.

But the subtlety of this “cogito” is different from “cogito” in Descartes’ sense. Thus Bachelard invents this new cogito based on reverie and names it as “cogito of kneading” (Cogito pétrisseur). If Cartesian Cogito is about mere self-knowing and the more active kind of self-recognizing, “cogito of kneading” is within reverie and imagination. Just as “paste” is set as the ideal of materiality, “kneading”, as an action typically towards paste, is posited as the image of existence of cogito, especially cogito in material imagination or dreams. Bachelard separates kneading from modeling, for modeling is shaping into a form, but kneading “tends to destroy form” (Bachelard 2002, 71). Kneading is in some sense the anti-thesis of modelling. Bachelard explains “the certitude of equilibrium between hand and matter” as “an excellent example of the cogito of the kneader” (Bachelard 2002, 61). It means, cogito of kneading contains a subtle equilibrium between subject and object, and it makes world and mind intimately entwined. If Cartesian Cogito separates itself from the world by the attentive, arrogant and sharp contemplation, “people who reverie upon the world do not look the world as their object” (Bachelard 2000, 182). In this sense, Bachelard extols that dream not only elevate the dreamer to the level of universal consciousness, but also “to the metaphysical level of an I-Thou relationship” (Bachelard 2002, 63), “I-Thou” presents the relation between dreamer and world, subject and object, hand and matter.

“Cogito of kneading” helps us understand the world through its intimacy with the material world. When studying on Bachelard, Joseph Chiari explains, we couldn’t understand the existence just through reason, but through the changeable senses cultivated by imagination, our senses usually operate on the edge between existence and non-existence, and out of unconsciousness and non-existence arises the understanding which is not improved by reason, but is trailed by the shadow of matter and rooted by the matter (Chiari 1987, 163). In contrast, consciousness of a Cartesian thinker operates like the sunlight at noon and violently dispels any shadow the objects could project, therefore only pure reason remains there. But only in the humble “cogito” permeated by the matter can let matter present itself. “Cogito” twined with matter is embedded by the image of material; whenever matter meets the consciousness, it shapes the consciousness. Thus just as paste, the prototype of matter in Bachelard’s sense is a something “between” water and earth, cogito of kneading shares the similar “in-between” character and plasticity.

While “a cogito of kneading” brings matter’s image into the consciousness of a poet, it is also the same process that the riverist explores and deepens himself through

the gentle struggle with matter, accompanying occasionally by the seeming self-loss. As Georges Poulet explains this point, “Our self flows into the matter and its images...while matter smoothly engages in the thought-deepening progress, thought fluidly flows into and involves the matter” (Poulet 1997, 175). It seems a poetically reciprocal process between the matter and ego. In some way, “The ‘Cogito’ of a dreamer is something like: I reverie, so the world exists just like what I reverie” (Bachelard 2000, 199). So the promise of depth of matter, as we have in our poetic imagination, could be only manifested in the infinity of mind.

In other words, depth of matter invites or resides the depth of man, and thus beneath Bachelard’s seeking for the universality of material element, exists the actuality that man pursues the infinity and the special universality in his soul. Bachelard examines the origin of the images in the phenomenological way, claiming that images have their subjectivity, which means the images would never be divorced from our intention towards the matter. The images expressing the depth of matter occur only in the soul of depth. It is the repercussions in the depth of soul that give the depth of existence to us (Bachelard, 1994, XXII). “Our existence is deep-going. We hide ourselves under the appearance, under the semblance, under the mask, etc. We hide ourselves from others, and even hide ourselves from ourselves...but we could descend into our body-soul ... into our own mystery” (Bachelard, 1994, XX). Bachelard says, our depth lies in the anima, i.e., unconsciousness, the feminine and deep part in our soul. Our depth implies our secret and eternal happiness. The dwelling of our soul for Bachelard definitely wouldn’t be situated at “clearing” or “off the beaten track” (Holzweg) in Martin Heidegger’s sense, but at the intimate and imagination-inviting space such as nests, shells and corners, where we are always surrounded by the material world even when we dream.

So far we can conclude, that for Bachelard, poeticity is characteristic of “between” and connection, paste is something between water and earth; material imagination sharing the attributes of the worker’s hands weaves the matter into our heart; “cogito of kneading” in our dream never leaves the material world behind and rather connect the world and our existence together. Moreover, matter and material imagination invite us to seek for the depth of the world and ourselves when we confront ambivalence and indeterminacy, and consequently they bring us activity and engagement. In this sense, Bachelard’s theory can also afford inspirations to the currently trendy concept of “performance”, which shows a mentality differing from the contemplative, idealistic aesthetics or pure reason.

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