

Bachelard

by Vincent Bontems. Paris: Belles Lettres, 2010, 244 pp. ISBN 978-2-251-76068-1.

Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962) is without any doubt one of the most original and influential philosophers that worked in 20th century France. In more than 20 works spanning over three decades Bachelard expounded an original view of scientific epistemology, wrote about the psychic value of the poetic image and presented an intriguing meditation on the nature of time. This diversity of themes has led to quite different commentaries, of which there was abundance in the first years after his death, almost 50 years ago. However, in the last two decades or so interest in this stimulating thinker seemed to have declined, it is, therefore, always welcome to see new commentaries appear, and when one comes from competent hands like those of Vincent Bontems this is more so indeed.

Bontems's book, which is published by *Les Belles Lettres* in a collection *Figures de savoir*, is ostensibly a general presentation, as are other titles from the same collection. However, although the basic contours of Bachelard's thought (epistemological rupture, opposition between concept and image, epistemological obstacle, etc.) are duly presented, Bontems offers an analysis which is of a finesse that surpasses a mere introductory presentation. The structure of the book already bears this out. The basic text consists of three chapters. The first two deal with Bachelard's epistemological views and the import they have on philosophical thought. The chapters are titled 'Une épistémologie *transhistorique*' and 'La relativité philosophique' and these titles already indicate the direction of Bontems's commentary. The earlier part of the first chapter deals with Bachelard's conception of history of science, however, already in the Introduction, Bontems signals one of the fundamental insights of Bachelardian thought: 'Le mathématiquement pensable *induit* le physiquement possible' (22). This is indeed a key concept in Bachelard's understanding of rationality, or more precisely 'surrationality', and Bontems fully explores the role mathematical thought plays in Bachelard's analyses of scientific thought. This is perhaps the most valuable part of the book. Bachelard is not an easy philosopher to engage with, he requires a good understanding of some of the problems emerging from contemporary physics as well as a wider philosophical context. Bachelard himself compounded the difficulty in that he did not situate

himself in the philosophical tradition; if anything, he often positioned himself against this tradition. Bontems seizes well this dimension of Bachelard's reflections on philosophy, which he points out is the consequence of the 'conflit entre les découvertes de la science et la stabilité des certitudes métaphysiques' (100). Because of this conflict Bachelard argued that philosophy should renew itself by adopting the openness of scientific rationality; there is a need for a philosophical relativity akin to relativity in the physical world. However, this does not mean the abandonment of realism, rather: 'la relativité philosophique aboutit alors à une réorganisation ontologique et non à l'abandon définitif du réalisme' (113). Bontems's presentation of Bachelard's position regarding the relation between scientific thought and philosophy is insightful and one reads it with great profit.

The third chapter 'Au rythme de nuit' deals with Bachelard's writings on the poetic imagination. Bontems follows the customary division of the distinction between the 'diurne' and 'nocturne', already signalled by Bachelard, ('on ne dort pas avec des équations dans la tête'), the first referring to scientific activity the second to poetic creativity. This strong separation between the scientific concept and poetic image has elicited different reactions from different commentators. Bruno Latour went as far as to declare Bachelard 'schizophrenic', others, on the other hand, have sought a certain unity between these two poles. The second approach is obviously potentially more fruitful and this is the one that Bontems adopts. He observes that certain concepts used in epistemological writings also appear in the works on the imaginary, such as the operator (*opérateur*) or induction, and he points out a certain consistency that runs through Bachelard's thinking about the imaginary ('l'induction, les groupes de transformation formelle, l'ambivalence dynamique, la covariance du rêveur et de sa rêverie', 164). But unlike the epistemological writings that require very rigorous analyses, the writings on poetic imagination also permit a more free associative reading. After presenting the basic contours of Bachelard's thought (the elementary images, dynamic imagination, material imagination) Bontems concentrates on two images and their value for the nocturnal activity. The first is the house, of which Bachelard wrote at most length in *La Poétique de l'espace* but of which there are scattered remarks in a number of other works. The other image is wine, and Bontems evidently takes great pleasure in enumerating the frequent references to it, often nostalgic ('J'ai bu le vin du Rhin et les vins de Moselle avec, je pense, le sens délicat des hommages qu'ils peuvent recevoir d'un Champenois'). The final pages of the chapter are devoted to one of Bachelard's most complex thoughts, his 'metaphysical writings' *L'Intuition de l'instant* and *La Dialectique de la durée*. In these works Bachelard presents a meditation on temporal discontinuity, which is pitched against Henri Bergson's notion of duration. Borrowing from an obscure

Portuguese philosopher Lucio Alberto Pinheiro dos Santos the notion of rhythmanalysis he argues that rather than viewing time as a continuous uninterrupted flow, it should be regarded as first and foremost bundles of instants that are held together through rhythms, vibrations. Bontems is not very convinced by Bachelard's arguments for temporal discontinuity but perhaps they need further exploration as they might hold the key to the understanding of the réorganisation ontologique that Bontems refers to. The chapter closes with the quote from a short 1939 text 'Instant poétique et l'instant métaphysique' in which Bachelard exhorts philosophers to meditate in order to break the attachment to duration. Bontems points out that such a call from a contemporary philosopher is most unusual and one could add that it has a very Buddhist feel about it (although Bachelard does not allude to Oriental thought).

Bontems completes the work with a chapter carrying the title *Le Bachelardisme*. It is difficult to see whether there really can be such a thing as 'Bachelardism' but the chapter is a useful survey of the influence that Bachelard exerted. It comes as no surprise to learn that in the Anglo-Saxon countries his influence is practically non-existent. One hopes this will change.

One of the virtues of the book is its succinctness. Bontems manages to convey in less than two pages (61-2) why the mechanics of Paul Dirac made an impression on Bachelard; in a matter of a few sentences (65) we learn about the essential differences (which are not clear to everyone) between Thomas Kuhn's concept of scientific revolutions and the Bachelardian 'ruptures' in scientific developments; although the differences between images of the house in Bachelard's poetics and Heidegger's mystico-réactionnare evocations of *Heimat* take a little longer to spelt out (148-54). Bontems's *Bachelard* is rich in detail, thoughtful and a very valuable contribution to our understanding of this eminent philosopher.

(Book review by Zbigniew Kotowicz)