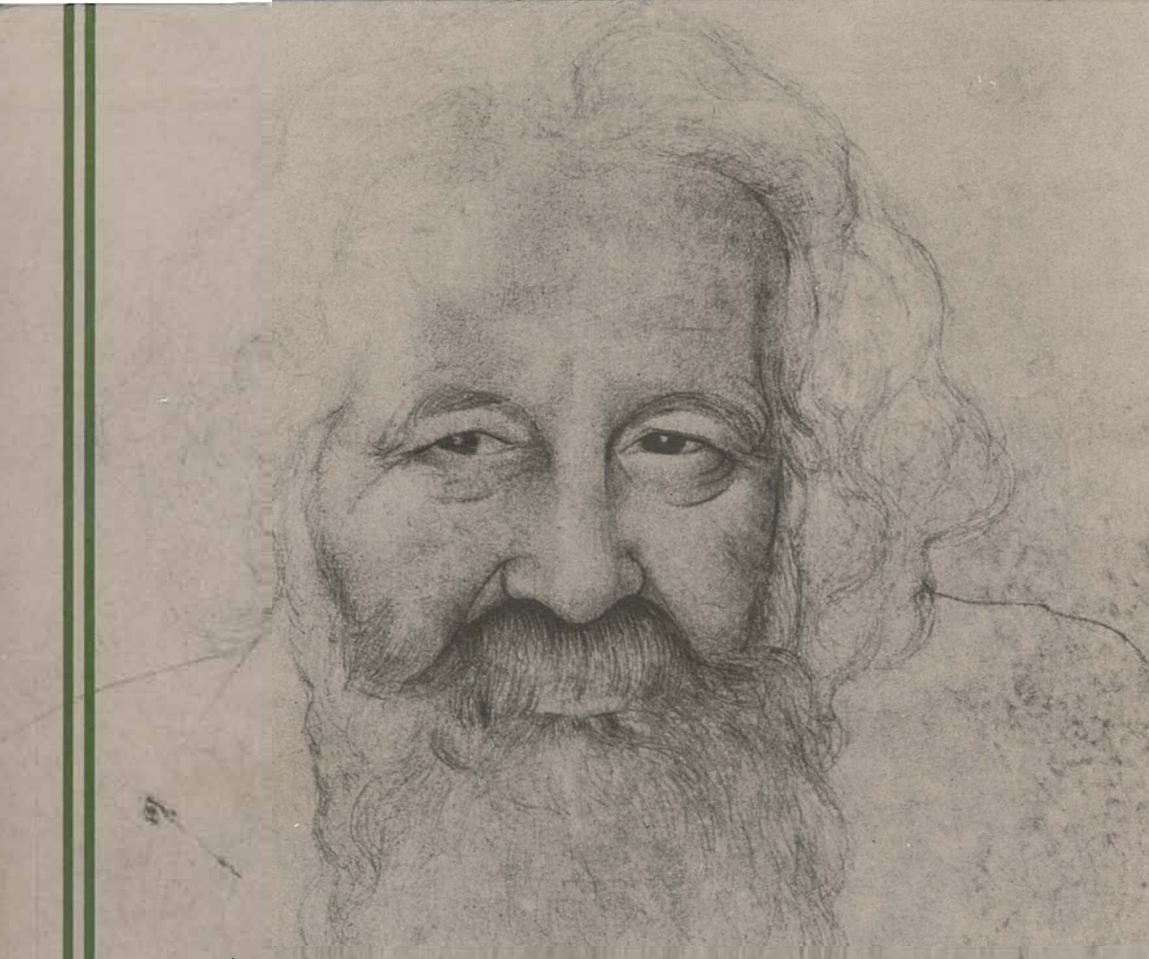

EARTH AND REVERIES OF WILL

An Essay On the Imagination of Matter

Gaston Bachelard

translated from the French by Kenneth Haltman

Foreword by Joanne H. Stroud

Earth and Reveries of Will

The Bachelard Translation Series

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Chapter III

Metaphors of Hardness and Solidity

The hoe is the terror of the earth.
ÉMILE VERHAEREN, "AVRIL,"
Les douze mois

I

TO DISTINGUISH CLEARLY between the problems of imagination and those of perception, to show that what we imagine determines what we perceive, thus to restore the imagination to its primary place in human affairs, few words are more appropriate than the word *hard*. All things considered, hardness is doubtless the object of but a small number of experiences, yet it is the source of an incalculable number of images. A kind of imaginary work is animated by the slightest impression of hardness:

Warte, ein Härtestes warnt aus der Ferne das Harte.
Wehe—: abwesender Hammer holt aus![1]

See how the hardest things proclaim their hardness from afar.
Alas—the absent hammer is about to strike!

The imaginary hammer of René Char, a hammer without a master, goes to work in idle hands as soon as the word *hard* is even muttered. With the word *hard* the world speaks its hostility and the reveries of human will respond.

The words *hard* and *hardness*, which appear as frequently in assessments of reality as in metaphors of morality, reveal simply the two functions of language: to transmit precise objective signs and to suggest more or less metaphoric values. From the first exchange

1. Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926), *Duisener Elegien, Die Sonette an Orpheus; Élégies de Duino, Les Sonnets à Orphée*, bilingual edition, trans. J. F. Angelloz (Paris: Paul Hartmann, 1936), Part 2, Sonnet XII, 216-217.

between swarming images and clear perceptions, it is images and metaphors which proliferate and invest new meanings most abundantly. Nearly always the word *hard* occasions the release of human energies, signs of wrath or pride or sometimes disdain. It is a word that cannot lie quietly in things.

But, true to my customary practice of basing broad philosophic arguments only on precise instances, let me offer at once an example in which a simple perception of pattern and form is immediately submerged in a flood of disparate images, almost imperceptibly engaging the moral life. I borrow the example from the writings of Dr. Willy Hellpach:

> When we describe an oak as *gnarled and knotty*, we refer not only to the actual nodules in its trunk and branches, but we wish to indicate the quality of stubbornness that the same image suggests about the human character. And so the image that originated with the tree returns to it after having been transposed by this allusion to the psychological particularities of humans.[2]

In other words, the word *knotty*, itself a mere form, obliges in us an immediate and human participation. One cannot understand the word *knotty* except by *tightening* the knot, *hardening* the substance, testifying to one's will to resist all weakness that might soften one's personal resolve. It is this transposition to the human of that which had a strictly objective origin that I would like to study in detail. A scrupulous examination of the points of connection between reality and metaphor will reveal that it is through metaphors and the imagination that reality takes on meaning. And this infusion of meaning is rapid. Even in the most naive intuition, the most idle contemplation, a *direct* impression of hardness unites us with the gnarled oak in a sort of sympathetic hardness. The world assumed by such reveries of will has *character*. It offers us fine dynamic images of human character. A kind of *objective characterology* begins to emerge when we imagine behind form the resistance of matter. For evidence, we need only look to the poets of energy. They attribute endless metaphoric meanings to oak trees—variously knotty, solid, strong, resistant, or cheerfully weighted with

2. Willy Hugo Hellpach (1877-1955), *Géopsyche: l'Âme humaine sous l'influence du temps, du climat, du sol et du paysage*, trans. F. Gidon (Paris: Payot, 1944), 128: "L'Anthropomorphisme dans le paysage," 267.

years. An example is the oak tree as it appears in the poetry of Émile Verhaeren.

II

In contrast to the *upward rising tree [l'arbre-élan]* I described in *Air and Dreams* when considering the aerial imagination, the compacted struggle of fibers in the wood knot is a form of *terrestrial* plant life, of *hardened* plant life. Regardless of the actual features of the lowlands of Flanders, the oak of Verhaeren is a mountain creature, surging from the rocky granitic soil, twisting its neck to escape the earth. It ties itself in knots to support its own weight, clinging no longer to the thin, fertile soil but to something in itself, the reserve of strength that *is* a knotty trunk. The oak indurates in order to endure. It can achieve such toughness only by turning in upon itself, by discouraging its own upward tendency, the idle compulsion of tender green plants. In his fine study of Verhaeren, Charles Baudouin draws attention to this struggle of a hardened being against itself, so characteristic in the psychological development of the poet. Baudouin describes a sort of *sublimation of immanent hardness* in action, precisely the sort at the heart of an aged oak. Of Verhaeren's early novel, *Les Flamandes*, Baudouin writes:

> The tree seems at first just what critics might expect—one of the symbols of brute instinct. But this instinct soon is seen to turn against itself, in a hand to hand combat, *twisting* so to speak in its own arms. Trees thereafter are described as knotty or twisted. They represent a sensuality that overcomes itself—a victory which has its own sensual pleasure. They are identified with the monks who have "twisted" their own nature between hands clenched in fervent, willful prayer.[3]

Baudouin cites these lines from Verhaeren's verse:

> Those in whom dark torments have twisted their hearts.[4]
>
> All enormities in those superhuman times
> Grew large beneath the sun of their fecund soul
> And twisted like a great oak in their hands.[5]

3. Charles Baudouin (1893-1963), *Le Symbolisme chez Verhaeren: essai de psychanalyse de l'art* (Geneva: Editions Montgenet, 1924), 83-84.
4. Émile Verhaeren, "Rentrées des Moines" from *Les Moines* [1886] in *Poèmes* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1895).
5. Verhaeren, "Les crucifères" from *Les Moines* in *Poèmes* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1895).

An unvanquished lane lined with giant oaks...
The trees proceed, like monks in a mortuary.[6]

It may seem as though we have insensibly strayed from images of hardness. But on closer inspection such images can be discerned at work. It is not the *form* of a twisted tree that makes the image but the *force* of torsion itself, and this very force implies the presence of hard matter, matter which *hardens* while twisting. It is the eminent privilege of the material imagination to work away invisibly beneath words not its own, beneath signs of the imagination of forms.

Nowhere is the play of repression and sublimation more intertwined than in this valorization of knotty, twisted hardness. Here we find ourselves at the center of the ambivalence of what is *knotty* and what is *knotted*; in other words, the *knot* is one of those "ambiguous realities" to which philosophers like Kierkegaard love to call attention. Depending on one's mood, the orientation of one's imagination, or the pitch of one's will, the knot can represent strength or weakness, fulcrum or blockage. It is precisely because the knot in hard wood has such ambivalence in the imagination that it yields a *revelatory term*.

Literary critics should meditate upon this revelation. The word measures the *participation* of the dreamer in the hardness of the world or perhaps the *repulsion* one feels for "hard" images. *Knot* should be inscribed in the register of sensitized words which can determine the orientation of imaginative powers. These words are less numerous than one might think. Language drags along in its wake many words too worn for dreaming, words that will never again work their poetry. As Ania Teillard has written, "the libido has withdrawn from external objects that once possessed powerful forces of attraction."[7] In other words, there are objects that are merely objects of perception; their names have lost the close connections which once made them part and parcel of the human imagination. The trunk of an oak, on the other hand, torments those forces within us that aspire to be unshakable. It is one of the great images of energy.

6. Verhaeren, "Soir religieux" from *Les Moines* in *Poèmes* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1895).
7. Ania Teillard, *Le Symbolisme du Rêve* (Paris: Delamain et Boutelleau, 1944), 221.

III

It is easier to sense this passionate adherence to the *certitudes* of a hard object if one sees a dreamer discovering the solidity of his own being in the company of an unshakable tree. It is in this way that I interpret an admirable passage in the writing of Virginia Woolf:

> He sighed profoundly, and flung himself—there was a passion in his movements which deserves the word—on the earth at the foot of the oak tree. He loved... to feel the earth's spine beneath him; for such he took the hard root of the oak tree to be; or, for image followed image, it was the back of a great horse that he was riding; or the deck of a tumbling ship—it was anything indeed, so long as it was hard, for he felt the need of something he could attach his floating heart to....[8]

How well the writer expresses this communion of hardnesses around a core of hardness! Oak, horse, and boat are united, despite the heterogeneity of their forms and the fact that they have neither visual traits nor any conscious signification in common. *Hardness*, by virtue of its imperialistic power over the material imagination, promulgates its image far and wide, from the solid hillock where the oak tree thrusts forth, to the plains on which the horse gallops, to the sea where all solidity takes refuge on the ship's deck. *Material understanding*, the absolute grasp of the image of hardness, upholds this mad extension that no logician could find legitimate. It is in fact the essential characteristic of primary material images—of which hardness is one—that they assume the most varied forms with ease. Matter is a center of dreaming.

Moreover, when studying this passage from Virginia Woolf in detail, we see a good example of the two ways in which images develop: flowing conceptually from one object to another, or inhabiting the total life of one particular being.

For in effect, Woolf returns to the initial image of the solid trunk and imagines the tree for us entirely. Leaning his weight against the solidity and stability of the oak's trunk, Orlando feels his heart grow still. He participates in the soothing powers of the quiet tree

8. Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), *Orlando: A Biography* [1928] (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 19.

as it pacifies the countryside. The oak seems to detain even the clouds passing overhead:

> ...the little leaves hung; the deer stopped; the pale summer clouds stayed; his limbs grew heavy on the ground; and he lay so still that by degrees the deer stepped nearer and the rocks wheeled round him and the swallows dipped and circled and the dragon-flies shot past, as if all the fertility and amorous activity of a summer's evening were woven web-like about his body.[9]

The dreamer thus benefits from the tree's *solidity* amid undulating fields of grain; the robust trunk and solid roots, these form a fixed center around which the landscape is organized, and the literary tableau, or *illustrated* world, is woven.[10] Orlando's tree is truly a *character* in Woolf's novel as the images on the book's cover suggest. To understand its role adequately, one must, at least once in one's life, have loved a majestic tree and been moved by its counsel of solidity.

In conclusion, I willingly offer this English novelist's text as a model of the psychoanalytic possibilities in imagery—as a material form of psychoanalysis. The tree here is grand and hard; it is grand because it is hard. It is the great achievement of solid courage. No matter how hard its roots, still the tree carries the being who dreams of its hardness up into its coarse, noisy leaves. To the dreamer motionless on the ground, the tree renders the mobility of birds and sky. In yet another example of anchored reverie, the dreamer moors his irresolute heart to the heart of the tree, yet is carried along in the slow, certain motion of its own existence. Suddenly the dreamer who experiences the intimate hardness of the tree understands that the tree is not hard *for nothing*, as human hearts too often are. The tree is hard so it can lift its airy crown, its high winged foliage. It gives to human beings a towering image of legitimate pride. Its image psychoanalyzes all sullen hardnesses, all unproductive hardnesses, and returns us to the peaceful condition of solidity.

9. Woolf, *Orlando*, 19.

10. Victor de Laprade has written: "The oak has its repose, humans their freedom."

IV

The analysis of an image as specialized as a knotty tree reveals the powerful appeal of coherent images with which the dreamer can *engage* more fully. Imagination is too often seen as gratuitous, as short-lived as the images it produces. This misconception fails to take into account the psychological *urgency* that sends one on a quest for images. Thus a true and authentic surrealism, which accepts the image in all of its aspects, profound as well as spontaneous, is necessarily accompanied by an *energy overload* [*surénergétisme*]. Surrealism—or imagination in action—is led to new imagery by virtue of its desire for renovation. But in a return to the original powers of primitive language, surrealism invests each new image with its own singular psychic energy. Freed of the obligation to signify, it discovers all the possibilities of imagining. One who experiences images in all their original force knows well that no image appears by chance, that every image that has been restored to its psychic reality has deep roots. It is perception, rather, that relies on chance—and at the invitation of this chance perception, imagination revisits its fundamental images, each supplied with its own dynamic.

When the dynamic aspects of images are studied, and correlatively, when their energizing impact on the psyche is experienced, the ancient phrase, unceasingly repeated—a landscape is a state of mind [*un état d'âme*]—takes on entirely new meanings. Typically this expression refers only to attitudes of contemplation, as if landscape's function were merely to be contemplated, as if it were a simple dictionary of elusive words and vain aspirations for escape. In contrast, reveries of will are accompanied by the development of themes precisely necessary for demiurgic construction: *landscape becomes a character*.[11] One can only understand this dynamically if the will participates in the construction of this character, experiencing the joy of assuring its foundations, gauging its forces and resistances. During the course of this work I will present more evidence of the characterology of images, of which hardness, as I've

11. In *Esquisses et Souvenirs* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1908), 229, Jean Moréas writes of suffering one day an inability to "give truly tragic cast to the inescapable landscape" surrounding him and so "lack[ing] the strength to transform Nature's cruelties into Art."

mentioned above, is a primary example. But before we pass on to another order of ideas, let me stress once again the dynamic influence exerted by our dreams of hard objects.

Certain images—the knotty oak is one—are essentially *images of awakening*. The oak is bent over, yet it uplifts us. The mimesis of energy is thus the antithesis of mimesis in form. The ancient oak elicits a resurgence of activity. Happy are they who begin each day looking upon images not only of beauty but of strength.

More precisely yet, we can verify, even in our own dreams, that images of hardness are often *images of awakening*; in other words, *hardness* will not remain unconscious but demands our activity. It appears that sleep, even nightmare sleep, cannot continue without a certain phantasmagoric softness and fluidity in even the darkest imaginings. According to an old adage, proof of the essential oneirism of the human temperament, "one only sleeps well in water, floating in warm water." Hard forms arrest our dreams, which rely on continuous deformations. Gérard de Nerval notes that the sun never shines in dreams. Its rays are too hard, too geometric, to illuminate the oneiric spectacle without risk of our awakening. Bodies too brightly lit or too solid have no place in sleeping life. These are the *objects of insomnia*. One must not think at night of iron or hard wood, or anything liable to arouse one. Waking life, by contrast, requires adversaries. When one is awake, bliss begins with images of solid objects. Hard matter brings *the resistant world* within reach. In the resistant world our nervous system is joined by our muscular system, and matter appears as the image of our muscles materialized. It would seem that when the imagination goes to work it strips the world of matter *bare*, cutting away extraneous tissue to reveal its lines of energy. All objects are resilient; they revitalize our imagination with energies drawn from the dynamic images we provide. Thus is reborn the dynamic life that dreams of intervention against the world's resistance. Virginia Woolf, describing this experience of being awakened by the freshness of an image, writes: "my shattered mind is pieced together by some sudden perception. I take the trees, the clouds, to be witnesses of my complete integration."[12] For this integration to be truly viable it must lead to some coordinated, productive activity—in short, to work.

12. Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* [1931] (London: The Hogarth Press, 1976), 28.

EARTH AND REVERIES OF WILL

Gaston Bachelard

translated from the French by Kenneth Haltman

Gaston Bachelard is acclaimed as one of the most significant modern thinkers of France. From 1929 to 1962 he wrote twenty-three books concerned with the philosophy of science and the analysis of the imagination of matter. His teaching career included posts at the College de Bar-sur-Aube, the University of Dijon, and from 1940 to 1962 the chair of history and philosophy of science at the Sorbonne. One of the amphitheaters of the Sorbonne is called "l'amphi Gaston Bachelard," an honor Bachelard shared with Descartes and Richelieu. He received the Grand Prix National des Lettres in 1961—one of only three philosophers ever to have achieved this honor. The influence of his thought can be felt in all disciplines of the humanities—art, architecture, literature, poetics, psychology, philosophy, and language.

The Bachelard Translations are the inspiration of Joanne H. Stroud, whose interests—literature and psychology—parallel those of Bachelard himself. In 1981, Dr. Stroud contracted with José Corti to publish in English the untranslated works of Bachelard on the imagination. In 1985 a new contract was signed with Presses Universitaire de France for future publications. Dr. Stroud is a Founding Fellow of the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, and a lecturer and Director of Publications.

Robert Scott Dupree, translation editor and translator of *Lautrémont*, is Professor of English and Director of Library and University Research at the University of Dallas and a Fellow of The Dallas Institute.

Gaston Bachelard is the great promoter of the forces of the imagination. The expansion of expressivity in our civilization is driven by the active imagination that renews life through a never-ending chain of poetic images. The fundamental nature of these images resides in their power to suggest rather than to describe. The imagination comes to flourish in its continuous interaction with the sensuous objects of this world. And the energy of the mind gives rise to a multiplicity of images as a revitalizing anchor. Bachelard's ideas and insights into the nature and function of the human imagination find a lively expression in the meticulously researched and refined translation of Terre et les rêveries de la volonté*—an exciting work to begin to comprehend the deep forces that shape the landscape of the humanities.*

— Rainer Schulte, Director
Center for Translation Studies
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