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Gaston Bachelard's Theory of Intimate Geometry

Cassandra Basile

> Outside and inside form a dialectic of division, the obvious geometry of which blinds us as soon as we bring it into play in metaphorical domains. It has the sharpness of the dialectics of yes and no, which decides everything. Unless one is careful, it is made into a basis of images that govern all thoughts of positive and negative (Bachelard, 1957, p. 211).

1. The Horrible Outside-Inside

Chapter Nine of *The Poetics of Space* contains a sentence that can be assumed to be a sibylline feature. Paraphrasing Henri Michaux's prose poem *L'espace aux ombres*, Bachelard writes that «space is nothing but a horrible outside-inside» (*ivi*, p. 218), thus reversing the order of the words of Michaux's original version, «inside-outside».

> L'espace, mais vous ne pouvez concevoir, cet horrible en dedans-en dehors qu'est le vrai espace. Certaines (ombres) surtout se bandant une dernière fois, font un effort désespéré pour "être dans leur seule unité". Mal leur en prend. J'en

> rencontrai une. Détruite par châtiment, elle n'était plus qu'un bruit, mais énorme. Un monde immense l'entendait encore, mais elle n'était plus, devenue seulement et uniquement un bruit, qui allait rouler encore des siècles mais destiné à s'éteindre complètement, comme si elle n'avait jamais été (Michaux, 1952, p. 91).[1]

One of the terms used in this quotation immediately draws the reader's attention: that is, the use of the word 'horrible', since one would not expect such an adjective to describe space. However, through an in-depth analysis one realises that the use of this adjective contributes only one part of the ensuing perplexity. The major puzzle is what this adjective implies, since space is defined in a *sui generis* way as it does not appeal to the concepts of *extension* or *relationship* but to a clear division that exposes an unresolved conflict. Indeed, space is said by Bachelard to be the outside and the inside simultaneously.

At first glance one might think that for Bachelard space is a 'whole' to which qualitative divisions are attributed. Indeed, each outside and each inside is to be considered, in itself, a piece of the 'whole' space, therefore the latter is characterised by both.

This definition, however, does not clarify a fundamental question that arises regarding the spatial division. It might be

[1] Space, but you cannot even conceive the horrible inside-outside that real space is. Certain (shades) specially, girding their loins one last time, make a desperate effort to "exist as a single unity". But they rue the day. I met one of them. Destroyed by punishment, it was reduced to a noise, a thunderous noise. An immense world still heard it, but it no longer existed, having become simply and solely a noise, which was to rumble on for centuries longer, but was fated to die out completely, as though it had never existed (Bachelard, 1957, pp. 216-217).

wondered, in fact, what is being referred to when this division of outside and inside is established. What is lacking here is the origin of these two concepts in their relation to space, with respect to *who* or *what* outside and inside are extrapolated. In view of this it is important to understand what kind of space Bachelard is talking about.

The Bachelardian analysis within *The Poetics of Space* focuses on a specific space, with which the human being enters into a relationship in his everyday life. The meaning to be attributed to the concept of space contained in Bachelard's theory is not that of a generic *everywhere*, or *every-place*. His description of space is linked with a part of the human being's existence because it is characterised by what people emotionally identify with as a place in which to live. Consequently, the qualitative distinction between an outside and an inside is provided by what the individual recognises as his place of inhabitation. In light of this, it can be affirmed that the origin of the distinction between an outside and an inside is given by the point of view of the singular human being. Moreover, what in a precise period of time is considered to be an outside compared to an inside is just a space that, from the individual's perspective, is not lived in, or has not yet been lived in. However, this description displays an oppositional relationship that need not be taken into consideration. Indeed, Bachelard's quotation as noted at the beginning of this paragraph does not invite the reader to consider the two concepts as opposites, but as part of a dialectic that awaits a resolution. For now, one could state that space is an outside and an inside, and that this subdivision is given by what an individual recognises as his own, namely as a space that belongs to him. Therefore, the latter assumes the quality of

being an inside by identifying as outside what he judges as something strange to him.

However, although this distinction reveals the existence of something that the individual considers as foreign, in other words as an unexplored territory that he would not live in, through his quote Bachelard intends that such a territory is constantly present before one's own eyes because it cannot be eliminated, since it originates from the determination of the limits of the place one inhabits. If, in fact, something is identified by the person as belonging to him because he finds in it a certain familiarity, it is clear that he excludes something else, by recognizing it as beyond what he considers his own. As a result, even though this 'outside' does not belong to him, he must still take it into account so that it is possible to identify his place of belonging as an 'inside'.

Furthermore, another element that should not be ignored is the arrangement of linguistic features used when Bachelard quotes Michaux's prose poem. Bachelard reverses the order of words, so that the space is no longer an «inside-outside», as Michaux writes, but an «outside-inside». This inversion is clearly not an example of forgetfulness or an error in transcription. What Bachelard proposes is a change of perspective: it is therefore not the outside that is determined by exclusion. Instead, it is the inside that carves out a space with respect to everything else, which thus assumes the character of extraneousness. It is the inside that has an origin and a constitution. It is the inside that dictates the rules of the division and externalises everything else, by identifying it as an outside. Therefore, the place to live in is characterised as an inside compared to an outside. This specific place has a range of meanings that go beyond the common sense of the term 'living': (I live in a certain house, in a certain

street, in a city and so forth). The meaning of 'living' bears with it a series of concepts, emotions, feelings, and positive or negative values (or both together), which human beings attribute to the concept of living in a place.

For Bachelard, space becomes the symbol of the human being's inner self brought to life in a metaphorical sense through what is considered to be the place of belonging. This place bears some characteristics such as longevity, and is therefore extendable over time. The Latin word for the verb *to live* is *habitare* which means «to continue to have»,[2] therefore «to live in» a place means to consider an inhabited space one's own, as something which is extendable over time or that remains constant despite the individual's changing life circumstances.

In view of what has emerged, it is possible to understand that when Bachelard speaks of *living in a place* this does not mean exclusively the place of physical existence. He refers to the place of the inner self, as this could also be characterised by the physical space, which however undergoes a transformation in that it becomes an image filled with *rêveries*, taking on a meaning in the sense of intimacy. In this regard, according to Bachelard, through the imaginative and emotional experience that the human being attributes to places of living, it is possible to constitute a *geometry of intimacy* (Bachelard, 1957, pp. 214-215), which in his thought seems to be woven only into the plots of poetic-literary creations where poets and writers express, through the images of places dear to them, an experience of intimacy and estrangement. In reality, at a later stage, it is possible for each individual to create, through his *rêveries*, a geometry of intimacy that reflects his own experience. The term

[2] See Devoto (1968), p. 2; see also https://www.etimo.it/?term=abitare.

used by Bachelard is rich in meaning because talking about a geometry of intimacy is equivalent to designing a space from a starting point pertaining to human intimacy. This means that the space imagined through the images of poets belongs to reality, but is transliterated in a form that belongs to the human, to the heart of man. Furthermore, this geometry draws a space that establishes a distinction between an "outside" and an "inside", designing the places of living from one's own intimacy, whilst distancing them and highlighting them with respect to levels of perception of such.

The imagined space, then, is outlined in a different way from the tangible one, since it is structured through a geometry that starts from human emotions. Important here is the individual's imagination since it plays a pivotal role in outlining this space.[3] In fact, the way in which poets operate, and the way in which one can perceive their poetic-literary images, is made possible by virtue of the basic capacity of one's own imagination which is *retentissement*,[4] that is, the process by which a person can create *rêveries*[5], namely forms of hybrids of dreams and

[3] On the imaginative experience in Bachelard see Formaggio (1986), pp. 38-39.

[4] Regarding the concept of *retentissement*, Bachelard is heavily influenced by both Minkowski and Kuhn. For further insight see Minkowski (1936) and Id. (1946); Kuhn (1944). Fregoso highlights the points of greatest closeness between the Bachelardian theory of *retentissement* and the theories of Minkowski and Kuhn (see Fregoso 2002, p. 19).

[5] The term *rêverie* must not be associated with a daydream, because in Bachelardian theory it is much more: by having in common the reference to imagination linked to dream (*rêve*) through the etymology of the term, *rêverie* is the ability to imagine during waking, entering the world of imagination. This world consisting of *rêveries* of poetic-literary images is not to be reduced to mere imaginings, because it is to be traced back to the world of our soul, to the essence of our creativity (see Bachelard, 1960; see also Basile, 2018, pp. 37-40 and Schattel, 1977).

memories full of emotional and imaginative aspects that allow the individual to relive in turn the places described by poets or writers. Therefore the poetic geometry of intimacy then becomes the geometry of each person (see Piromallo Gambardella, 1995, pp. 169-203; Piana, 1988).

2. The Dramatic Aspect of Intimate Geometry

After the idyllic image provided by talking about geometries of intimacy, one might wonder what is so «horrible» in the dialectic that the individual establishes when he recognises some space as belonging to him. Therefore, the reason why space is, as Bachelard states by citing Michaux, an awful outside-inside ought to be explored.

From the reading of the penultimate paragraph of *The Poetics of Space* it is possible to obtain some information towards understanding in what sense Bachelard speaks of space as a «horrible outside-inside». It would seem that the adjective *horrible* is unconsciously ascribed to the space by the individual when setting up his geometry of intimacy. By excluding from his place everything that he is afraid of, the *horrible outside* arises from what he cannot eliminate because, in the end, it belongs to him as much as what he considers his own. As a result, it is possible to affirm that the way in which human space is constituted starts from the convictions of the single individual (*ivi*, pp. 217-218).

Therefore space is constituted by the human being's desire to sectorise, to divide, to separate what he considers to belong to him, and is thus internal to himself, in order to guard, protect, and insure it from everything he considers external, foreign, and

something to be afraid of. By doing this, the duality of outside and inside is created. As a support to his thinking Bachelard uses the *rêveries* that can arise by reading the imaginings of poets and writers in order to make evident how the division between an outside and an inside is fictitious. Contrarily, what emerges is that, even what is considered foreign by the person constitutes another place of his inner life, though which he still does not fully inhabit. Clarification of what has been described thus far is provided by the poetic-literary images that Bachelard uses within *The Poetics of Space*.

One of the most impactful descriptions that the reader of Bachelard's work can find is that of an isolated house in the middle of the forest, in the dark of night in the pouring rain. According to Bachelard, each person can develop different forms of *rêveries* depending on the degree of empathy that each of them has with this type of image, or with some of the elements that constitute this description. This happens because each individual can associate his memories with it and can fantasise about the description provided, charging the image with his own emotional content.

Bachelard proposes two contrasting *rêveries* that could emerge from the image of the isolated house: 1) the house could be identified as a safe place, therefore as an inside, by relegating the forest and bad weather to what is foreign to the person (*ivi*, pp. 47-48); 2) if one's memory of what home is leads him to consider it a hostile place, he could identify the forest as inside, by relegating the house to an extraneous place (*ivi*, pp. 42-43). Therefore, if in the first *rêverie* the house is identified as a safe place, this means that the individual's intimacy is placed there: he lives in the house, and not on the outside: the latter is foreign to him, unknown, and is considered as an enemy. On the

contrary, in the second *rêverie* the person lives in the forest and it is the house that is judged as hostile and a source of danger.
The quotation provided by Bachelard thus begins to fully acquire its value: space is «the horrible outside-inside» because it is constituted by both components. It is not an outside differentiated from an inside, but is an *outside-inside*, because it can be both. Moreover, the adjective «horrible» coincides with people's obsession with wanting to implement a division, in other words a separation between them and something they consider 'other' to them.
The real problem arises when the individual discovers that this separation is also present in what he judges to be his place to inhabit. In fact, if according to the identification of outside and inside it is possible to save a secure core of one's own being, this is not possible when otherness peeks inside oneself, or in what the individual identifies as a place in which he feels at home. Important examples in this regard are images of the garret and cellar proposed by Bachelard (*ivi*, pp. 3-22). If the positive *reverie* about the house as a safe place is taken into consideration, it is possible to say that it recalls the place of living *par excellence*, since it becomes the identification of the individual's inner life. Bachelard introduces, through some poetic-literary images, the «drama» (*ivi*, p. 218) of the human experience of living, since even inside his interior home some places can be perceived by him to be foreign, because they are loaded with negative emotional content.
The house understood as the place where the individual's home is situated can manifest this differentiation between an "outside" and an "inside". As a result, the person discovers that in his home there also exists, as a projection of his inner self, one or more zones which appear to be unknown and

frightening. In the descriptions of some poets and writers the image of the garret and the cellar appears as extraneous to the house (in the meaning of home), as if not belonging to it. For Bachelard these two environments physically represent the two opposite poles of the house, highlighting how the human being's core living space locates in the centre of the house, and that it is very small compared to the space available.

Nonetheless, while both poles can inspire a certain fear, the position of the garret with respect to the cellar makes it privileged in the assimilation of a place for living. Indeed, since the garret is attached to the roof, it is plugged to the house. This closeness assumes, according to Bachelard, an important connotation because the garret becomes the symbolic place of rationalization and sanctuary. There are windows in the garret: it can be illuminated, the objects are thus less fearful, and the estrangement decreases, gradually affording familiarity. The cellar, however, is considered as literally detached from the house, since it belongs to the basement. Its nature leads the individual to cognise the cellar as the place of the unconscious of the individual, therefore as something foreign to him which can be judged as an "outside" with respect to his core of intimacy, although it belongs to himself more than he imagines. Through his phenomenology of imagination, Bachelard demonstrates how even what is usually relegated to man's imagination, such as the poetic-literary image, is actually another way to better understand oneself. These images, in fact, offer a content that if in one way can be objective (as in the description of a scene), in another are subjective (Piana, 1988, p. 60), because they speak of the human being to the human being by displaying our interiority. *Rêveries* and the way in which the person creates them communicate a lot about one's inner world

and about the places that the soul inhabits[6]. The «inside and outside are both intimate, they are always ready to exchange their hostility», being based on the individual's projection of the place in which he lives. This understanding should lead people to forsake the "drama" of geometry created *ad hoc* by them and for them, to enter into an intimacy that embraces even the most tenebrous places of their inner world. The poetic images representing these geometries of intimacy should initiate people to the discovery of places presented to them as environments with the possibility of open inhabitation.

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[6] On the relationship between soul and home in Bachelard, see Catucci (2006), pp. 219-234.

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Abstract

Gaston Bachelard's Theory of Intimate Geometry

What this paper attempts to show is the way in which Bachelard manages to clarify the dialectic between the concepts of "outside" and "inside" that characterise space; and, at the same time, to bring to light how this typical division conceals an

aspect of the way of thinking of the human being which is as yet unrevealed. This is so because the division originates from a person's intimate world and from the way in which he analyses lived reality through his emotions. According to Bachelard, the concept of "to live a place" linked with that of intimacy is defined by what the individual considers his home. However, the latter is something that resists a uniform definition and is open to subjective interpretation.

Keywords: Intimate Geometry; Space; Unfamiliarity; Inhabitation; Home.