

The Poetics of Space, by Gaston Bachelard

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“The Poetics of Space” (*La Poétique de l'Espace*) is a book published in 1958 by the French philosopher and poet Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962), which discusses the importance and impact that the dwelling has on humans¹. Bachelard suggests that spaces such as the room, the garret, the attic, or spaces where things inhabit, such as drawers, caskets, and wardrobes, are intimate spaces and occasional shelters, and can produce feelings and memories and an important tool to discover human spirit and soul². According to the author, these feelings and memories create *poetic images* which, though not completely real or rational, have their own dynamics; they are lived “with all the partiality of the imagination” (p. xxxvi). An imagination that “is ceaselessly imagining and enriching itself with new images. It is this wealth of imagined being that I should like to explore.” (p. xxxvi). With this statement, included in the introduction, Bachelard declares that his book will be a journey to the wealth of *poetic images* that may arise in the house’s spaces of intimacy, as this is the prime space for dreams and daydreams. However, his objective is to cause impact in the readers’ (or receivers’) image rather than understand the origin of the image. In order to unveil the impact of *poetic images*, Bachelard cautions readers that they must forget all culture and all knowledge acquired in the past so that their body, soul and spirit are able to understand the meaning of the images that are unconsciously formed in their mind: “A philosopher who has evolved his entire thinking from the fundamental themes of the philosophy of science, and followed the main line of the active, growing rationalism of contemporary science as closely as he could, must forget his learning and break with all his habits of philosophical research, if he wants to study the problems posed by the poetic imagination” (p. xv). Therefore, Bachelard suggest a means to analyse something (the

poetic image) that should be understood, and which is not known and for which there is no method of analysis. He advocates that “The image, in its simplicity, has no need of scholarship. It is the property of a naive consciousness” (p. xix) In the introduction, the author also briefly explains each chapter (ten in total) and reveals his objective: “In the present volume, my field of examination has the advantage of being well circumscribed. Indeed, the images I want to examine are the quite simple images of felicitous space.” (p. xxxv)

In the first chapter, entitled “The house. From cellar to garret. The significance of the hut.” Bachelard states “For our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos” (p. 4). This means that all dreams, memories, desires, fears and loneliness that we feel are with us, inside the house: “the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind. The binding principle in this integration is the daydream.” (p. 6). Bachelard leads us to infer that the house is a “compact center of daydreams” (p. 6); a place that welcomes us, a place that fear and loneliness are a part of: And how happy the child who really possesses his moments of solitude (p. 6). Bachelard suggests that the house is a place that allows for daydreaming. And this daydreaming of different lives in the intimacy of the house allows us to understand our true selves.

“House and Universe” is the title of the second chapter. In this chapter, the author analyses some of the spaces of the house described by major writers, such as Baudelaire, Rilke, Henri Bosco, Edgar Allan Poe. Bachelard is led by images that were created by others rather than by him. For example, in Thomas de Quincey’s hut, created by Baudelaire, we find the house as a space that shelters and protects “our true selves” from storms and external hazards: Baudelaire sensed the increased intimacy of a house when it is besieged by winter” (p. 38), which recalls the image of the hut. Instinctively, we are overwhelmed by images of tranquility, dream, and loneliness that Bachelard calls the “imagination of repose” (39) Rilke, on the other hand, states that “storms are particularly aggressive in cities” (p. 42) Rilke does not fear the loneliness of the countryside, but the pride of the city: “I am frightened by hurricanes at night. It is as though (...) they did not see us. But they do see a lonely house in the country; they take it in their powerful arms (...) Bachelard uses examples from other authors to show that the hut, just like the house but in a different manner, is a tool to face our cosmos: In this dynamic rivalry between house and universe, we are far removed from any reference to simple geometrical forms. A house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space” (p. 47). In this chapter, Bachelard continues to focus on the house as a protective place that shelters daydreaming and peaceful dreaming. He refers to the hut as a shelter against storms “like a she-wolf” (p. 45) it defends its inhabitant who, despite outside aggression, feels protected and sheltered by this thing that, in the face of aggression, becomes a fortress. Hence, the heroic character of the house shelters the frailty of humans.

In chapter three: “Drawers, chests and wardrobes”, Bachelard speaks through metaphors about *the spaces where things inhabit*. There are several references to artists like André Breton, who are able to hear the “marvels of unreality” (p. 80). “The wardrobe is filled with linen There are even moonbeams which I can unfold” (p. 80). Through Breton, Bachelard is evoking the world of surrealism. The world of dreams. He again mentions the power that dreams have of delighting the imagination and daydreaming. “We open [casket] and discover that it is a dwelling-place, that a house is hidden in it” (p.86). This implies that human intimacy is not in the house but in the

spaces that are part of the house. These spaces also allow us to find our memories, with our actual or imaginary memories and, therefore, promote that we find ourselves.

The next chapters, like chapter three, refer to dream-like experiences lived or described by other authors, such as Robert Ganzo, Yvan Goll and Victor Hugo, who speak about the *well-being* lived in the shell or in the corners “refuges of vertebrates and invertebrates” (p. xxxviii). Bachelard’s objective is to show how, in these primal spaces, we can find physical happiness by feeling pleasure as we curl up in their corners. The author evokes images of protection and love, which also exist in the house, but here they are in the nests and in the shells, - the places where, according to poets, we have already experienced thousands of aerial or aquatic dreams (p. xxxviii)

In the last three chapters, and after wondering through inhabiting uninhabitable places, Bachelard returns to the image world and proposes that we curl up to live them: “To curl up belongs to the phenomenology of the verb to inhabit, and only those who have learned to do so can inhabit with intensity” (p. xxxviii). After all the chapters on the spaces of intimacy, the author wanted to test how you present the understanding of the dialogue between big and small spaces in a poetics of space: The questions that the author indirectly asks us are: How can you form an impression of immensity from the outside? Is immensity inside us? Or is it in space?

We can say that, in the ten chapters of the book “The Poetics of Space”, Gaston Bachelard tries to gather a collection of possible “images of being, all the multiple, changing images that, in spite of everything, illustrate permanence of being (...)” (p.241). Herein lies the relevance of this book, in particular, for architecture students: to understand the way in which Bachelard, through images that evoke philosophical and psychological thinking, introduces us to the complex relations between humans and space and makes us understand the influence that space has on its inhabitants.

¹ Edition used: BACHELARD, Gaston - Os Pensadores. São Paulo: Abril Cultura, 1979. Translated by António da Costa Leal and Lídia do Valle Santos Leal.

² Gaston Bachelard separates soul and spirit, stating that: “A consciousness associated with the soul is more relaxed, less intentionalized than a consciousness associated with the phenomena of the mind.” (p. xxi).