

OSMOSPHERIC IMAGES. REVERIES, SMELLS, AND MEMORIES IN GASTON BACHELARD

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BACHELARD

SMELL

IMAGES

ATMOSPHERES

MEMORY

In this paper I explore the connections between reveries and atmospheres by considering three images related to smell and memories that are interspersed in Gaston Bachelard's works. I define them osmospheric images, indicating the causes and the effects of a peculiar disposition of daydreaming in tune with the irradiances that provide spaces and reminiscences with their flavor. My idea is that osmospheric images are the peculiar offsprings of rev-

eries when imagination and memory are intertwined. Firstly, the odor of water mint will help unravel reveries and atmospheres. Secondly, through the smell of raisins, the osmospheric perceptual disposition, as well as the workings of imagination and memory, will be scrutinized. Finally, the fragrance of warm bread will allow to address memory and happiness, the bonheur of images that Bachelard achieves by daydreaming about his childhood and native home.

...les images odorales, les plus subtiles,
les plus intraduisibles de
toutes les images.
Jean de Gourmont

INTRODUCTION

Western philosophy has explored images and imagination since its origins. From Aristotle to Kant, up to the contemporary theories of philosophy of mind and cognitive sciences, the variety of interpretations reflects their puzzling and pervasive nature (cf. Kind, 2016). But among the many possible approaches, these subjects can be woven through the idea of atmosphere, which is precisely one of the hallmarks of the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard.

Bachelard's thought is extremely multifaceted, which makes it quite difficult to encapsulate in a few lines (cf. Smith, 2016; Del Longo, 2021). Portrayed as a polarized and "dual" philosopher (Roy, 1977), Bachelard was primarily interested in science, epistemology, and rationality before devoting himself, via psychoanalysis and poetry, to what he deemed to be the diametrically opposite dimensions of human experience, namely daydreaming, images, and imagination. The trajectory traced by the shift in his theoretical focus corresponded to the adoption of different attitudes and styles of argumentation that appear increasingly unbound from academic rigor and therefore elusive to systematization, an intriguing and challenging aspect of this key figure in 20th-century European culture². His oeuvre can be roughly divided into four main periods that cover a first epistemological phase (1927-1938), an aesthetic phase (1938-1948), a second epistemological phase (1949-1953), and lastly his poetics (1957-1961). Given the purpose of this article, I will base my considerations on some of Bachelard's aesthetic

works, which address the dynamics of imagination in the face of the cosmogonic elements (fire, water, air, earth) understood as its hormones, and on some of his poetics, where the idea of reverie takes on depth and breadth through an autobiographical, undisciplined, and creative stance.

Deliberating Bachelard's point of view already equates to a considerable narrowing of the subject matter we are dealing with. Indeed, according to Bachelard, images and words coalesce. To put it less succinctly, poetic, literary images and words form an imaginative-verbal whole where the image is the nucleus and the word its membrane. The interval between words and images forms the spheric interstice where the imaginative act of the poet, and then of the reader, infiltrates and unfolds. This coincides with the movement proper to imagination and the reverie. The imagery is the atmosphere of images.

The term 'atmosphere' and the ideas this notion implies - first of all, 'spatialized feelings' - run pervasively through Bachelard's latest works, especially in *La poétique de l'espace*, which has been addressed by many scholars in this regard (cf. Alison 2019, 2020). In his vocabulary, however, 'atmosphere' clusters diverse semantic and figurative nuances. It seems to indicate, on the one hand, the affective qua poetic quality of words and images; on the other hand, the dimension where the very reverie uncurls. Quite consistently, atmosphere opposes rational meaning, which is "of little importance when it is a question of giving memories their dream (*rêve*) atmosphere" (Bachelard, 1969, p. 140). This implies a resistance to an analytical and reductionist attitude to comprehend words and images conceptually, while encouraging – or even *compelling* – a first-hand engagement with their realm. As Bachelard (2002) maintains, in the explosion of language "images multiply; words are no longer simple signifiers. They no longer merely complete thoughts; they are the future of imagery. Poetry opens up the meanings of words, suffusing them in an atmosphere of imagery" (p. 5).

Given its inherently vague and sentimental character, the idea of atmosphere appears particularly reluctant to overly sharp demarcations. At the same time, for some decades atmosphere has been seized upon by philosophers as a promising tool not only to rethink traditional ontology, but also to explore space and time as lived dimensions that are charged by ‘something-more’ which cannot be reduced to measurable elements grasped by reason alone. Similarly, the acknowledgment of a pole *other* than scientific objectivity led Bachelard, by means of literature, to be preoccupied with imagination and its unintelligible rules and, eventually, to lay the foundations of “a poetics of poetic reverie” (Bachelard, 1969, p. 16). Despite the struggle to conceptualize them, both atmospheres and reveries are felt unambiguously in their operativity and force on the experiential plane. Rather than a flaw, this aspect concurs in testifying to their aesthetic significance.

In this respect, most of the aesthetic accounts on atmospheres insist on the cross-modal nature of perception: atmospheres would cut across the distinction between the senses and, even more, they would precede sensory perception. Comparably, reveries anticipate the perception of reality. Whereas atmospheres can be conceived as “qualitative-sentimental *prius*” (Griffero, 2014, p. 5) constituting the ways one is affected by and attuned to extra-sensory spatial values that intersect the physical, moral, and emotional level, reveries reveal themselves as the auroral states of consciousness. In other terms, they would be “the *primal* dimension³” (Sertoli, 1972, p. 119) in which the being and the appearing of consciousness and the world lap each other. We will resume the idea of ‘primitiveness’ later.

Within the philosophical horizon concerned with atmospheres, we can further distinguish between a trend that stresses their eminently synaesthetic character, and one that privileges one sense above the others. In the latter case, smell undoubtedly holds a privileged position, especially when dealing with memory. The tight relationship,

or even *concurrency*, between atmospheres, smells, and recollections is indeed the key element used to substantiate the thesis that olfaction is *the* atmospheric sense⁴. Likewise, Bachelardian reveries do not hierarchize the senses. Nonetheless, explicit eminence is accorded to aromas when tackling the link between memory and imagination. This culminates in *La poétique de la rêverie*, where recollections are extensively addressed to, and form the season of childhood. Bachelard's observations engender and are innervated by a tangle of questions I will try to account for: Is the memory that stores scents, or is it rather the sense⁵ of smell that daydreams fragrances when entering the realm of remembrance? Are smells witnesses to the past, or do they po(i)etically create images that open up to the future?

In this paper, I will overlook the assumptions underlying the debate over whether smell is the most atmospheric sense. Arranging the senses into a further, albeit reversed, hierarchy is, I believe, neither desirable nor useful; besides, I think the most promising philosophical potential of atmospheres lies in laying emphasis on the cross-modal dimension of perceiving rather than on its percepts. Hence, I like to turn the tables on the issue: experiencing atmospheres results in a perceiving that is tinged with affective qualities that, afterwards, may prove more comparable to one sense than another. Senses are here affective facets of a unitary feeling, while becoming, in their turn, figurative images of the manifold ways to be tuned to sentimental qualities crisscrossing the environment. Consistently, I am not interested in establishing whether Bachelard is an 'olfactive type.'⁷ Instead, I will focus on some images related to odors that are daydreamed by Bachelard himself⁸. I will call them *osmospheric images*. From the ancient Greek words ὀσμῇ (*osmē*), 'smell, odor, exhalation,' and σφαῖρα (*sphaira*), 'sphere, globe,' by *osmospheres* I mean the atmospheric irradiances, *ecstasies*, which provide spaces and memories with their *flavor*.

Firstly, the odor of water mint will help us outline reverie and atmosphere. Secondly, through the smell of raisins,

the features of osmospheric perceptual disposition and the workings of imagination will be perused. Finally, the fragrance of warm bread will lead to discuss memory and happiness, the *bonheur* of images that Bachelard achieves by revering to his childhood and native home.

These are the results of a deliberate choice aimed, on the one hand, at sketching the significance of smells as it evolved in Bachelard's conception of reverie and imagination; on the other hand, at supporting and concretizing my thesis: osmospheric images are the peculiar offsprings of reveries when imagination and memory are intertwined. Although the present paper suffers from necessary exclusions which, if included, would allow for a more complete and nuanced analysis, an exhaustive Bachelardian meta-poetics of smells exceeds the scope of this contribution. This preliminary inquiry endeavors to open up new lines of research to which philosophy and aesthetics have paid little attention thus far.

THE ODOR OF WATER MINT

In the opening pages of *L'eau et les rêves*, Bachelard offers the reader a vivid osmospheric image which is concurrently an illustration of the reverie. A special kind of melancholy radiating from the dormant waters is distilled in the odor of water mint. This smell, Bachelard (1983) recounts, "calls forth in me a sort of ontological correspondence which makes me believe that life is simply an aroma, that it emanates from a being as an odor emanates from a substance, that a plant growing in a stream must express the soul of water" (p. 7). This evocation seems to answer the author's purpose to point out that only in proximity of water and its flowers he realizes to have "best understood that reverie is an ever-emanating universe, a fragrant breath that issues from things through the dreamer" (ibid.).

Even if *L'eau et les rêves* is, after all, one of his least osmospheric essays⁹, the aforementioned passage is crucial, since

it stands as an explicit breakpoint from the objective pose assumed in his previous psychoanalysis of fire (Bachelard, 1964). Indeed, Bachelard is obliged to shift gears because of his failure to approach the images of water by means of a rationalistic and detached attitude. As he admits: "I still live water images; I live them synthetically in their original complexity, often according them my unreasoning adherence" (Bachelard, 1983, p. 7). This unprecedented awareness marks a decisive turning point in his stance, disclosing to him a different direction. Since the reality of the image is the combination of subjective and objective elements, one cannot disregard the former to grasp the latter. Bachelard makes it unequivocally clear: "if I intend to study the life of water images, I must allow the river and springs of my home a dominant role" (ibid.). Namely, the streams running through the French region of Champagne-Ardenne, where he spent his childhood.

Here, the odor of water mint not only exemplifies the embrace of subjective instances¹⁰, but also epitomizes the idea that images are the result of the convergence of matter and affectivity¹¹. All this concurs in the Bachelardian use of odors to depict the unfolding of the very reverie. In *L'eau et les rêves*, Bachelard delineates the pivotal distinction between formal and material imagination. A formal image is a datum of reality, hence a dead image because its definite form causes the movement of imagination to die. In the images of matter, instead, imagination unravels by penetrating into the fibers of matter that provide it with an affective tone. This is translated into an oriented and orienting axis along which imagination develops. Images are then modes of *oneiric* experience of matter. The adjective, however, risks being misleading. *Rêverie* (daydream) differs from *rêve* (dream) because of its evanescence and peculiar dynamics¹². Whereas dream is ruled by silence and the unconscious, reverie is an incessant murmuring that flourishes at the juncture where consciousness and the world begin to diverge but are still entangled. Bachelard (1969) coins the evocative phrase "penumbral ontology" (p. 111) to

indicate this interstitial crevice, the blossoming of a difference from which the self and the world, consciousness and cosmos emerge in the *same mode of being*. The image is then an act of *consciousness* or, better, *self-consciousness*. Reverie, atmospheres, and smells find here a first point of convergence, if we agree that odors are properties of the surroundings that allow us “to sense through our disposition (*Befinden*) where we are” (Böhme, 2017a, p. 125). The odor of water mint cannot be separated from the soul of water and its relationship with the daydreamer’s being, who is affected by its sentimental quality. The ontological issue is therefore the first knot to be untied. The reverie reveals itself as the half-light zone where the emergence of being, still blurred, occurs and is announced. As Bachelard (1994) puts it, this ontological disclosure entails that, at “the level of the poetic image, the duality of subject and object is iridescent, shimmering, unceasingly active in its inversions” (p. xix). Specifically, the subjective and objective poles seem to be the results of a relationship that stands as a necessary precondition to their subsequent differentiation. Bachelard’s self exists with the odor of water mint that expresses the soul of water. In other terms, the odor of water mint conjures a self-manifestation which corresponds to specific lexical choices¹³ conveying the dynamics of expansion. The ‘ontological correspondence’ itself finds its linguistic counterpart in the olfactory field, where signs and meanings cannot be differentiated (Böhme, 2019, p. 263). Moreover, smell blurs the lines between the self and its surroundings in a radical way¹⁴. By appropriating and readjusting the myth of Condillac’s statue – “I am, first of all, the odor of mint, the odor of mint water” (Bachelard, 1983, p. 7) – Bachelard ‘osmospherizes’ his very world and primitive consciousness. If the reverie is the interpenetration of subject and object, where the human consciousness constitutes the world in its primal state of emergence from nature, the odor of water mint is the vestige of the ontological awakening of being, which “awakens in the awareness of an extraordinary impression” (Bachelard, 1983, p. 7).

Aligning with Gernot Böhme's relational theory of atmospheres as the 'in-between' subjects and the environment, the reverie is the point where the latter – that gives off its qualities – and the state of the perceiver – who has attuned accordingly – merge, concurrently e-merging. In other words, we are faced with an affective, material ecology dense with *ecstasies*, as Böhme would say: namely, the ways things step out of themselves becoming present in the surrounding space and, hence, generating an ambience, an atmosphere¹⁵. It is no surprise that Böhme insists on the atmospheric nature of odors¹⁶, since they would innately exemplify *ecstasies* as the material emanations through which things pervade a space and (the mood in which we) are present in it. Implicitly drawing from Eugène Minkowski (1999)¹⁷, who argues that *se répandre* (to expand, to spread) is the movement of the 'olfactive,' and that smell "is the atmosphere endowed with its fundamental quality" (p. 115), Bachelard depicts the reverie as the daydreaming of the material world through the imaginative activity of the daydreamer. In essence, the reverie is penetrated by the materiality of nature, while being an expansion of it¹⁸. On this plane – the liminal layer between sleep and wakefulness – the world is not littered with solidified objects, but teems with rarefied processes and metamorphic mingling; it is a volatile pre-dimensional space. Images arise from the confused relationship with a fluid world that possesses lines of force, suggestions, and provocations caused by the elemental substances it is composed of. Affective *affordances*, in the Gibsonian terminology¹⁹. The osmospheric image – the odor of water mint – serves as a prelude to a philosophy of poetry that, as Bachelard (1994) clarifies elsewhere, "must appear and re-appear through a significant verse, [...] in the very ecstasy of the newness of the image" (p. xv). Bachelard sinks into the primal age of his *osmobiography*²⁰ through the odor of water mint. The experience of smell as "the event of profane mystics" (Böhme, 2019, p. 264) finds in this Bachelardian osmospheric image its fullest fulfillment.

As already mentioned, the motif of the *primordial* relationship with the world through smells and atmospheres can be inflected in various ways, from their inaugural role in the human ontogenesis, to their link to prejudice and the so-called ‘first impressions.’ When Bachelard (1969) states that odors are the “first evidence of our fusion with the world” (p. 136), or that perfumes are “memories of the native atmosphere” (p. 156), he is forerunning the pioneering thoughts that, less than a decade later, the German psychiatrist Hubertus Tellenbach (1968) would develop in the first study entirely devoted to smells as atmospheres. Tellenbach stresses the significance of smell for the newborns because, in the first stages of life, odors coincide with the sentimental/atmospheric irradiations of their mothers, the nucleus of their original relation to the world. Somehow, remembrance is immanent to osmospheres.

Again, the odor of (water) mint offers itself as a spark and a bridge to tackle the relationships between imagination and memory, writer and reader. Like a cherished reminiscence that resurfaces the abyss of memory²¹, this osmospheric image recurs in a different guise in *La poétique de la rêverie*. While describing its synaesthetic and thermal complexity, Bachelard sheds light on the effort to imagine the odor of mint, a site-specific encounter belonging to another time. The ecology of memory is intricate, and one “must dream a great deal to find the exact climate of childhood which balances the fire of the mint and the odor of the stream” (Bachelard, 1969, pp. 138-139). In the face of this osmospheric synthesis, the reader cannot but feel that the writer is breathing their past. Memory and reverie are here “in total symbiosis” (p. 139).

THE SMELL OF RAISINS

In *La poétique de l'espace*, the smell of raisins hovers as an osmospheric image that condenses the peculiarity of the

'osmopheric' and the workings of imagination and memory. In Bachelard's oeuvre, the relationship between smell and memory already occurs in *Lautréamont*, where the passivity of odors hinders the activity of reality and animal force. But when in the service of poetry, smell and memory are inextricably intertwined: "When the aroma is a memory, the memory will be an aroma" (Bachelard, 1986, p. 62). In *L'air et les songes*, this correlation emerges antithetically. Whereas for most material imaginations odors are "the most strongly *substantivited* qualities of air" (Bachelard, 1988a, p. 136), a pure aerial imagination seeks an odorless air as an emancipated openness to the future, without any tie nor reminiscence. Nietzsche is the exemplary case of the aerial spirit, embodying such an ambition. A Nietzschean cannot enjoy odors²² since smells are in themselves aesthetic bonds, mnemonic filaments. Such an 'anosmic impulse' is counterbalanced by terrestrial poets like Baudelaire or Shelley, who, quite the opposite, daydream with scents as they "bind memories to desires, an enormous past to an immense and unformulated future" (p. 137)²³.

Actually, Bachelard's comprehension of memory shifted markedly. One pole is typified by the books on the elements, where a positivistic stance towards it prevails: memory is opposed to imagination since it would consist of an archive of associations from the past. The other pole is instantiated by *La poétique de la rêverie*, where memory is understood as the re-activation of past imaginative acts that infiltrate the present ones. As counterintuitive as it may seem, it follows that the very memory is based on and sustained by imagination. This twisted logic reflects the reverie's antilogic. To some extent, every imaginative act is the *original* act of imagination, in an intertwined relationship that Bachelard (1969) summarizes thus: "memory dreams, and reverie remembers" (p. 20)²⁴. If reason is historical, imagination is unhistorical; the latter is space rather than time or, better said, it is time in its lived, weathered spatiality – season, atmosphere²⁵. *La poétique de l'espace* is the watershed between

the two above-mentioned poles, where the first gives way to the second.

“All we communicate to others is an *orientation* towards what is secret” (Bachelard, 1994, p. 13). This statement introduces the idea that over-picturesqueness conceals the values of shelter: neither the most detailed spatial descriptions, nor the most precise planimetric representations, do justice to the home of the past. But the sense of smell seems to draw a daydreamy topography (or better, *topophilia*) of its own²⁶. The passage reads:

I alone, in my memories of another century, can open the deep cupboard that still retains for me alone that unique odor, the odor of raisins drying on a wicker tray. The odor of raisins! It is an odor that is beyond description, one that it takes a lot of imagination to smell. But I’ve already said too much. If I said more, the reader, back in his own room, would not open that unique wardrobe, with its unique smell, which is the signature of intimacy. Paradoxically, in order to suggest the values of intimacy, we have to induce in the reader a state of suspended reading. For it is not until his eyes have left the page that recollections of my room can become a threshold of oneirism for him (pp. 13-14).

If too structured and precise, images obstruct the reader’s imagination, which becomes entangled in a crystallization that cannot be reworked and reactivated. This reactivation consists in retracing backward the path of the poet’s imagination²⁷. Hence, the poetic image needs to maintain in the reader the poet’s reverie. The odor preserves the atmosphere of one’s own childhood room only if unburdened by specifications. It is an authoritative (but not authoritarian) atmosphere that does not prevent the reader from readjusting the poet’s fragrance. Like a perfumer or a cook, the daydreamer rebalances the aromatic notes suggested by the poet to savor the osmospheic image of an individual (but not private) past. The pathic feature of the reverie does not imply that the daydreamer is inactive. Bachelard (1969) makes this point clear arguing that the

“phenomenology of the image requires that we participate actively in the creating imagination” (p. 4). In this sense, day-dreamers are craftspeople manufacturing subtle scents, but they don’t start from scratch. Osmospheric images are recipes executed by the reverie²⁸, each time anew, with varying ingredients and proportions. The principle underlying imagination is one of metamorphosis, a dynamic force that, after shaping and crystallizing its forms, instantly destroys them by creating new ones all over again²⁹.

Through the odor of raisins, smell becomes the emblem of a perceptual and imaginative disposition I call osmospheric, that diametrically opposes the optical one. I borrow the idea of ‘optical paradigm’ from Nicola Perullo (2025), who allegorizes sight to indicate the dominant, distal, and dualistic model of perceiving underlying the separation of subjects and objects, in contrast with a relational perceptual disposition identified as haptic³⁰. To delineate the osmospheric, the optical constitutes an ideal perceptual benchmark. Bachelard himself suggests the divergence between these two postures through the case of memory and smell.

“Visual images are so clear,” Bachelard (1969) asserts, as “they form pictures which summarize life so naturally that they are privileged with easy evocation in our childhood memories” (p. 136). Visual images serve here as negative terms of comparison. Indeed, those whose aim is to “penetrate into the zone of indeterminate childhood, into the childhood without proper names and without a history either, would no doubt be helped by the return of the great vague memories like the memories of odors from the past” (ibid.). Clarity and vagueness characterize two opposite perceptual dispositions that are consonant with sight’s sharpness and smell’s nebulosity. The first gives rise to a vivid mental image on a flat and crystalline surface; the second, to an involute, opaque, indefinite, and voluminous medium to dive into – an *orientation* towards a secret.

Optical and osmospheric are convergent attitudes in a further way: only when the gaze is not focused can the

osmospheric image emerge. The smell of raisins asks explicitly for a *suspended reading*. Indeed, the “memories of odors from the past are recovered by closing our eyes” (ibid.). Eyes are the main instruments of the objectification of reality: the Bachelardian argument against realism is also one against sight and vision³¹. Realism is the rationalization of vision riding on the surface of things. Whereas science obeys the norms of reason following the reality function, imagination is guided by the unreality one³². In particular, the image makes matter oneiric while materializing the oneiric.

The relationship between smell and images is thorny due to the common tendency to model the latter on visual precepts. Tellenbach’s (1981, p. 223) denial of the existence of odor images seems to be based on this assumption, since smells do not stand out against an amorphous background and have neither limits nor sides. In turn, they would not produce images of memory or imagination. Here, the very shapelessness of smells elucidates their atmospheric primacy. But this definition of image does not match Bachelard’s at all. “We could almost say that smell ‘colors’ the atmosphere,” Minkowski (1999, p. 115) concedes, but on condition that we acknowledge that the way colors spread over the surfaces of things is totally different: the smell permeating the atmosphere does not demarcate anything. In other words, smells adhere to and condense the very atmosphere they evoke; this is why “even the slightest odor can create an entire environment in the world of the imagination” (Bachelard, 1994, p. 174).

For Bachelard, however, images refer to nothing per se; rather, in them something is fulfilled. The psyche’s hunger for images is a search for *sur-reality*, which is a creative need that fosters human flourishing. In the case of Bachelard *rêveur*, the imaginative hunger becomes quite literal. His pursuit of happiness in reactivating the natural reverie that has settled on the page gets materialized, verbatim and synecdochally, by the osmospheric image of food. More specifically, by the warm, fragrant, domestic bread.

THE FRAGRANCE OF WARM BREAD

Food-related images are interspersed throughout Bachelard's *corpus*. For instance, in *La psychanalyse du feu*, Bachelard (1964, p. 15) recollects a childhood memory linked to the waffle (*gaufre*) put in the iron mold and directly cooked in the fire. The experience of eating it, still warm, corresponded to the ingestion³³ of the igneous matter (its odor, its color, and its texture), thus domesticated³⁴. Fire becomes benevolent by enabling humans to enjoy purely voluptuary foods like desserts: it does not merely cook, but “gives a material form to [humans'] festivities” (ibid.)³⁵. In *La terre et les rêveries de la volonté*, his most ‘gastronomic’ book, Bachelard (2002) confesses to being a serial accumulator of poetic images of bread – “bread still warm from the oven, crisp and richly aromatic” (p. 65). The imaginative pleasure conveyed by the fragrant dough is fully developed in *La poétique de la rêverie*, where the final part of “Reveries toward Childhood” is almost entirely devoted to smell, and bread plays a pivotal role. “Suddenly,” Bachelard (1969) reveals, “I am taken by the urge to collect all the warm bread to be found in poetry. How they would help me give to memory the great odors of the celebration begun again, of a life which one would take up again, swearing gratitude for the original joys” (p. 141).

The resurfacing of involuntary memories prompted by scents is called Proust phenomenon³⁶, in a tribute to the French novelist who masterfully used smells as triggers of recollections. A case in point is the celebrated episode of the madeleine dipped in lime blossom tea, whose flavor causes Marcel's dormant and childhood memories to emerge, springing an entire *happy ambience* into being³⁷. The fact that taste and especially smell “bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection”³⁹ (Proust, 1998, p. 65) is a *literary topos* from which Bachelard (1969) draws fully-to-day-dream. For instance:

When I read this line by Edmond Vandercammen: “My childhood goes back to that wheaten bread,” an odor of warm bread invaded a house of my youth. The custard (*flan*) and round loaf returned to my table. Festive occasions are associated with this domestic bread. The world was in joy for the celebration of the warm bread. Two cocks on a single spit were cooking before the scarlet hearth (p. 141).

A range of Bachelardian images revolves around the hearth as the dimension of conviviality, intimacy, and coziness³⁹. Similarly, the osmospheric image of the fragrance of warm bread has three recurring elements: festivity, sense of home, and happiness. Whereas food makes human celebrations concrete and subjected to chronologically punctuated occasions, its aroma makes festivities atmospheric, as they pervade the whole season of the cosmic childhood. In all likelihood, Bachelard’s reverie would have easily tuned in with this osmospheric image by Elsa Morante (1979): “The tepid air, especially in the sun, smelled of bread” (p. 417), where the welcoming quality of the atmosphere is expressed by the flavor that incarnates a homely pleasure, together with the soul of the wheat, whose gold spreads in the summer wind. Here, the hearth expands so much that it coincides with the sun, and the whole world becomes a nest—an “aura of family atmosphere” (Tellenbach, 1981, p. 229) that loses all its personalistic connotations to become a shared, primary human condition. In this sense, osmospheric images can be interpreted as the manifestation of the *way one feels* in the relational, ecological pattern of the imagery one dwells in.

Whereas “Proust needed the dough of the madeleine to remember” (Bachelard, 1969, p. 137), Bachelard’s imagination calls for words in which the odor recollected by the poets is absorbed. *Pain*, ‘bread’ in French, although it is not the only one, certainly counts among his *beloved images* in which reverie and memory bloom in unison⁴⁰. As flowers exude their fragrance, so do words⁴¹. Bachelard stresses not only the need to savor images, but also the pneumatic reality of the poetic verse: poetry

is a dynamic and verbal pattern for breathing happily⁴². If Walter Benjamin (1968, p. 214) was true in drawing a parallel between Proust's attention to smell and asthma he suffered from (whence, his syntax would essentially mimic his terror of asphyxiating), odors would in themselves represent the causes and the effects of the happiness of deep, tranquil breaths. As Bachelard argues, the daydreamer's being obeys the dynamics of diffusion in a twofold direction: it diffuses its well-being into the world, and it is the result of a diffusion. Hence, it escapes "the punctualization of the *hic* and of the *nunc*" (Bachelard, 1969, p. 167), and creates the time as an output of the activity of the reverie as a pneumatic reality⁴³.

But as Proust suggests, it is not the memory that stores smells; rather, it is smell – "the sense of weight of someone who casts his nets into the sea of the *temps perdu*" (Benjamin, 1968, p. 214) – that tenaciously preserve memories. If the very feeling remembers its feeling and feels its remembering, osmospheric images are the reminiscences of the reverie itself. This seems to explain why, when "memory breathes, all odors are good" (Bachelard, 1969, p. 136). In light of this, Bachelard's idea that the house of one's birth cannot have a moldy, stale smell, takes on a deep osmospheric meaning, bringing together the atmospheric values of duration, happiness, and intimate spaces⁴⁴. That is, *food* for the daydreamer's soul. Indeed, in "days of happiness, the world is edible. And when the great odors which were preparing feasts return to me in memory, it seems to me, Baudelarian that I was, that 'I eat memories'" (p. 141). Smell and taste, air and food, are rooted in the primordial stages of life when moods and nourishment acquire an interchangeable atmospheric value.

FINAL REMARKS

Let's close the circle by returning to the epigraph to these pages. Within a spasmodic sequence of literary quotes on smell and childhood memories that actually justifies the

accusation of pointillisme levelled against him⁴⁵, as a self-explanatory aside Bachelard resumes few lines by Jean de Courmont, who observes that odorous images are “the subtlest, the most untranslatable of all images” (p. 139). Imaging osmospheres means daydreaming in a time that has been regained. Indeed, in the reverie Bachelard accomplished his search of lost time.

The odor of water mint paved the way for the reverie to come to light. The smell of raisins provided the imaginative tools necessary to daydreaming. The fragrance of warm bread, Bachelard’s osmospheric image of convoluted time, expresses its passage as a coiling over: the older Bachelard gets (at the time of the book’s publication, he is almost eighty years old), the more his memory and imagination rejuvenate and dig into time. The happiness in this image is the rest “found again by the consciousness that has returned to its ‘country’, to ‘its home’” (Sertoli, 1972, p. 370). This flavor takes to the surface the essence of the past, its atmosphere. It is a domestic, enveloping shelter, which represents the very essence of the reverie and of human happiness, like a mother’s belly⁴⁶ or the protective smell of the nest. An osmospheric topophilia would likely reveal that consciousness is primitively homed and happy when imagination and memory smell the fragrance of baking.

NOTES

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² Whereas some scholars (with whom I tend to agree) see his intellectual and personal journey as marked by a fundamental continuity, others think that it betrays fitful ruptures.

³ Henceforth, the translations from non-English sources are by the author.

⁴ The presumed atmospheric primacy of odors and orosensory perceptions is to be attributed to various reasons. For an overview: Griffero, 2022; Mancipopi, 2023, pp. 17-55.

⁵ See Wunenburger, 2016. One excerpt from Bachelard (2011, p. 60) helps bring clarity on this point: “We show we are imagining when

we refine on sensation, when we break through crude sensation (colors or scents) and extol nuances and bouquets. We seek the other within the same."

6 Losing ourselves in nostalgic reveries while lingering over some odors is in fact very common.

7 As Albert Camus (1963, p. 179) would phrase it. Had one to establish a sensory ranking, perhaps Bachelard would be more of an 'auditive type,' given the centrality of the verbal, linguistic, phonetic, acoustic aspect of imagination and reveries, their 'speech' and 'murmuring.' On speech as the pneumatic and aesthetic force of literature: Berleant, 2016, especially chapters XII and XIII.

8 This approach, I think, is in tune with Bachelard's spirit. He incrementally abandoned any thematic schematism, by elaborating a poetics of the images that are attuned to his own reveries. For a now-classic analysis: Mansuy, 1967.

9 This comes as no surprise, as his style often involves the same assumptions and purposes stated and set at the beginning of a book being revised or exceeded in the course of its writing

10 The personal and idiosyncratic character of olfaction traditionally relegated it among the inferior senses. The list of philosophers is long; Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel are just the most influential ones. For an overview: Korsmeyer, 1999, pp. 11-37; Shiner, 2020, pp. 19-34.

11 As already pinpointed by Plato in the *Timaeus* (66d), smells always occur in the intermediate stage of elemental processes. For land animals' olfaction, a medium (air), particles (earth), heat (fire), and moisture (water) are required. This may also explain why, for Bachelard, odors do not dominate a single matter but they are 'cross-elemental.' Certainly, the prominent link with the aerial dimension underlies many correlations with the atmosphere, as the latter "might be something which is primarily somehow inhaled and smelled" (Diaconu, 2006, p. 136). The material and affective nature of olfactory stimuli is the basis of their reappraisal – the so-called affective turn and (new) materialisms are the theoretical perspectives where this trend can be framed.

12 By considering the French language, Bachelard (1969, p. 29) provides the grammatical gender system with affective qualities. On smells, atmospheres, and gender: Mancioppi, 2022.

13 Bachelard selects diverse olfactory terms to 'distill' and make possible the reverie itself, because "the verbal activity of the image is essential to its ontological function" (Smith, 2016, p. 96).

14 This trait makes the social aesthetic implications of olfaction particularly relevant, as a growing cultural interest ascertains. In fact, odor "truly violates our privacy" (Bachelard, 1964, p. 103).

15 This is one of the major gaps where the divergence between Böhme's and Schmitz's views creeps into. According to Schmitz (2019), atmospheres are free floating 'quasi-things.' Whether atmospheres are anchored in something specific is a matter of dispute; instead, that reveries are always anchored in words (and in matters) is for Bachelard an established truth.

- 16 "In the generation of atmospheres, smells as factors have an extraordinary position" (Böhme, 2019, p. 262). See also Böhme, 2017b, p. 51.
- 17 Explicitly, Bachelard takes up Minkowski's concept of *retentissement* (reverberation), the dynamics of *l'auditif*.
- 18 See Barontini, 2020, p. 65.
- 19 On atmospheres and affordances: Griffero, 2020.
- 20 The term was coined by Mădălina Diaconu (2021, p. 62) to indicate the immigrants' memories associated to the smell of home creatively manufactured by the artist Brian Goeltzenleuchter in his project Scents of Exile. See also: Goeltzenleuchter, Mancioffi, 2024.
- 21 "The poetic image is a sudden salience on the surface of the psyche" (Bachelard, 1994, p. xv).
- 22 As Chantal Jaquet (2010) speculates, Bachelard is wrong in that Nietzsche's pneumatic model is based on aromatic nuances almost undetectable to normal nostrils.
- 23 Bachelard argues that the reveries of certain writers gravitate towards images of one (or more) of the four elements.
- 24 The distinction between imagination and memory is particularly difficult in "the realm of childhood memories, the realm of beloved images harbored in memory since childhood" (Bachelard, 1969, p. 20), because these memories dwell and are entrenched in the image, giving rise to complex reveries.
- 25 For Bachelard (1969), "pure memory has no date. It has a season" (p. 116), and a personal season is very often contained in a singular odor.
- 26 In childhood, odor itself is "an immense detail" (Bachelard, 1969, p. 141).
- 27 On atmospheres in literature: Gumbrecht, 2012.
- 28 As Dal Pozzolo (2020) puts it, the reverie "is a certain affective and passive dimension, like a withdrawal of subjectivity to make way for the emergence of images" (p. 76).
- 29 This sentence by Michel Serres (2008) elicits interesting correspondences and dissonances: "Smell seems to be the sense of singularity. Forms reappear, invariant or recurrent, harmonies are transformed, stable across variations, specificity is countersigned by aroma" (p. 169).
- 30 The haptic refers to a dynamic contact, not localized but diffused; it is a "perceiving-with processes (engaged participation from within) that differs from perceiving about object (disinterested observation from without)" (Perullo, 2025, p. 22).
- 31 For Bachelard (1988b), even visual arts ignite the reverie in the observer because they are verbally translated into poetic words.
- 32 According to Bachelard, science and imagination are two poles with a mutually exclusive relationship. Each constitutes a cosmos with its own antithetical and complementary rules and values.
- 33 The images of ingestion are pivotal in the "Jonah complex," the assimilation of other living beings (Bachelard, 2011, pp. 94-132).
- 34 The deodorizing value of fire verifies its purifying power. The question of odor and (sexual) suppression recalls Freud's (1962) thesis:

olfactory inhibition would be the “actual yardstick of civilization” (p. 40). In fact, Bachelard's essay on fire, where libido images play a central role, owes a debt to the father of psychoanalysis.

35 In the images of fire, gastronomy and smells converge. Representing the control over putrefaction, cooked food and fermented drinks are “the principle of the banquet, that is to say the principle of primitive society” (Bachelard, 1964, p. 103) – the primal osmosphere of home. It is also for this reason that a “psychology of primitiveness must devote a good deal of attention to the olfactory psychism” (ibid.).

36 The literature is very vast, from sociology to psychology (Chu, Downes, 2000). For a phenomenological analysis: Kluck, 2019.

37 On the contrary, Marcel Proust (1998, p. 63) points out that the visual image of the small sponge cake, with its peculiar shell-like shape, reminded him of nothing.

38 As a variation on the theme, Fernando Pessoa (2003) notes: “With what subtle plausibility – taste combined with smell – I recreate the dead stage settings and reinvest them with the colours of a past” (p. 332). In Bachelard's (1969) terms, a “whole vanished universe is preserved by an odor” (p. 139).

39 Alison, 2019, pp. 149-150; Dal Pozzolo, 2020, pp. 78-79.

40 As stated, a “damp hood and all our October childhoods, all our schoolboy courages are reborn in our memory. The odor has remained in the word” (Bachelard, 1969, p. 137).

41 In *La terre et les rêveries du repos*, that mostly emits mephitic and miasmatic osmospheric images, Bachelard (2011) considers the word *mofette*, employed by the 18th-century chemistry for the evil-smelling exhalations from mines, arguing that it manifests an imagination describing the process of decomposition, pestilence, and death. “Mofettes are learned grimaces. This psychological realism of spoken language somehow gives heaviness to the bad air we breathe” (p. 51).

42 Bachelard would question the alleged preverbal character of the atmosphere as advocated, among others, by Tellenbach (1981), while he would probably agree on his definition of the atmosphere as a medium of “prereflective elemental contact” (p. 229).

43 Although poetic words are articulated horizontally by following one after the other, the time of poetry folds in on itself: in imagination, time is a vertical spiral, layered superposition and simultaneity. Bachelardian images are vertical axes that provide the horizontality of reality with a new dimension.

44 Bachelardian irenicism has been criticized from many quarters (e.g. Griffero, 2014, p. 42). For hostile places in Bachelard: Vydra, 2014.

45 A fragmented way of proceeding which is exacerbated by the plentiful quotations of decontextualized verses by mostly marginal authors and minor poets.

46 House and belly “bear the same distinctive stamp of a return to the mother” (Bachelard, 2011, p. 4). At the same time, the house becomes fully maternal when one can “smell her odor penetrating maternally to [one's] very heart” (Bachelard, 1994, p. 45).

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