

## THE RELEVANCE OF BACHELARD'S DYNAMIC IMAGINATION FOR MOVEMENT ART PSYCHOTHERAPY\*

ILENE SERLIN, PhD, ADTR†

Maintaining that the world is intense before it is complex, and that philosophy should feel before it thinks.

*The Right to Dream*, G. Bachelard (1971)

Bachelard's concept of dynamic imagination has direct relevance for a psychotherapy based on the arts. In this essay, I will show how Bachelard's theory of dynamic imagination can be a praxis and rhetoric that is based on the image, and has application to movement art psychotherapy.

### Image, Archetype, and the Imagination

Gaston Bachelard was an early 20th century French philosopher, trained in the physical sciences, who devoted his life to promoting the human imagination. By working on such topics as psychoanalysis of the elements, he continuously bridges science and art. He contributed an understanding of the phenomenology of the imagining consciousness through such topics as the philosophical significance of space in daydreams, the origins of poetic imagery in childhood, human sexuality, and wonder. His concept of reverie as poetic consciousness contributed to psychology and psychotherapy an appreciation of the waking dream in everyday life. Reverie is a state of attention that is between waking consciousness and sleep, and is the kind of attention in which the imagination occurs. The dynamic imagination is an active

process that perceives and generates images (Kaplan, 1972, p. 14). Bachelard also used the term "poetic consciousness" somewhat interchangeably with "imaginative consciousness"; in this essay, dynamic imagination will be taken to mean the active process of creating images.

The structures of imagining consciousness are archetypes, images, and metaphor. Archetypes are the deepest structures of the human imagination, which roots imaginal structures into collective cultural and historical reservoirs:

The deepest psychic structures of imagination are the archetypes . . . while studying prime images, one can develop for each of them almost all the problems of a metaphysics of the imagination. In this respect, the image of the root is particularly apt. It corresponds in the Jungian sense to an archetype buried in the unconscious of all races, and it also has, in the clearest part of the mind to the level of abstract thought, a power of multiple metaphors, always simple, always understood. The most realistic image and the freest metaphors thus cross all regions of the psychic life.

(Kaplan, 1972, p. 7)

From this great reservoir of structures can emerge images that live in the intermediary zone between unconscious and conscious awareness. As they move

\*This paper was presented at the American Psychological Association meeting, August 1990.

†Ilene Serlin, a Professor of Psychology at Saybrook Institute, is also a registered dance/movement therapist, and Director of Imago: Center for Psychotherapy and the Counseling Arts in San Francisco.

toward consciousness, they acquire form and distill unconscious material. Images are not mere representations of reality, nor is the imagining consciousness passive; rather, imagination is an active process. Bachelard described this as: "Consciousness is itself an act, the human act. It is a lively, full act . . . consciousness-as-act is still completely positive or kinetic" (1960, p. 5). Although Bachelard wrote about imaginative consciousness as speech and verbal poetic language, he nevertheless indicated a way in which poetic drawing or movement can also create images.

For Bachelard, the desire to make images was a basic human drive. The creative imagination seeks to transcend what is, to transform reality into poetry. Through this amplification, the limitations of the merely personal expand to a larger mythic horizon:

Imagination speaks in us, our dreams speak, our thoughts speak. All human activity desires to speak. The poetic image is the first exteriorization of imagination's fundamental will to logos, man's essential need of creativity as manifestation of his spirituality . . . The pure poetic image, then, is the subject of the verb "to imagine."

(Kaplan, 1972)

#### Art, Imagination, and the Psychological

Imagination therefore liberates us from literal perception and having to adjust to a given reality. As the "function of the unreal," the imagination moves us beyond the known to a sense of transcendence. Although it sends us upward to transcendence, it also roots us deep in the psyche. This paradoxical movement of up-down is intensely psychological and, for Bachelard, a measure of mental health.

As subjective impressions are moved into expression, we become artists: "Poetry is soul inaugurating a form" (Pierre-Jean Jouve, in Bachelard, 1958/1969, p. xviii). This artistic making of images is an active, voluptuous experience. It requires a full participation in experience in which hesitation is transcended and joy results. Bachelard (1971) described Chagall painting: "Marc Chagall draws too well to be a pessimist. He trusts his pencil, he has confidence in his brush, and so the world is beautiful . . . The joy of painting is a joy in living" (p. 22).

Not only can the imagination describe and transform experience, it also unifies it (Maritain, 1953). Imagination discovers a relation among parts of an experience that form a pattern characterized by a sense of rightness, of aesthetic necessity. These patterns of sentience include all the senses: "All the senses awaken and fall into harmony in poetic reverie. Poetic reverie listens to this polyphony of the senses, and the poetic consciousness must record it" (Bachelard, 1960, p. 6).

These patterns of sentience are not apprehended by the rational intellect, but by feelings. Bachelard called this form of knowing, which moves through feelings and transforms its object, "valorization." It is not knowledge of the real which makes us passionately love it. It is rather feeling which is the primary and fundamental value" (Quoted from Eau, in Kaplan, 1972, p. 4).

Valorization is a sensuous way of knowing through feeling that unifies subject and object through the image: "At the level of the poetic image, the duality of subject and object is iridescent, shimmering, unceasingly active in its inversions" (Bachelard, 1958/1969, p. xv). Image moves us toward ontology, toward being: an image . . . "becomes a new being in our language, expressing us by making us what it expresses, and a becoming of our being. Here expression creates being . . . This last remark defines the level of the ontology toward which I am working" (p. xix). This unity of thought and action shows up in Bachelard's work as imagination-as-action. Bachelard described the imagination as a creative act, an active consciousness seeking form, which is a fundamental human need (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Sartre, 1968).

Valorization involves the full being of the artist: "Valorization thus asserts the creativity of the individual as over against objective evaluation. Here is one of the great (ontological) principles of the imaginative: valorization decides being" (Quoted from Air, in Kaplan, 1972, p. 5). An artist knows in image, therefore, by becoming the image; at the same time, the image inhabits and changes the artist. Poetic imagination therefore brings interpenetration of subject and object, artist and image: "Thanks to a fruit, the whole being of the dreamer becomes round. Thanks to a flower, the whole being of the dreamer relaxes . . . this flower born in poetic reverie, then, is the very being of the dreamer, his flowering being" (Bachelard, 1960, p. 154).

### Psychological Praxis and Rhetoric

What language describes psychological events? This question is drawing increased attention from psychologists and human scientists interested in the relationship between narrative and human experience.

Descriptions of human experience in modern scientific psychology are rooted in the rhetoric and style of the scientific revolution. This language was established by the Fellows of the Royal Society during the time of Newton. It was strengthened by a group of editors and business managers of anthropological and psychological periodicals in 1928, who created the first official format for articles written for the American Psychological Association (APA) journals. The model for their format was the physical sciences. The prototype of this article was ". . . the idealized, modern research paper, neatly categorizing and parceling Methods, Results, and Discussion . . . even in the ways that procedures are described, that data are chosen, selected, analyzed, and displayed . . . but the tacit knowledge about research specialties, their paradigms (in the Kuhnian and other senses), lab lore and so forth" (Marks, 1989, p. 11).

How we write not only affects how we describe phenomena, but it also affects how we think; the process of writing itself can become an active part of scientific inquiry. Freud noted this, as he remarked in a July 7, 1898 letter to Fliess that unconscious mental processes can guide the formulation of scientific discourse. Not only is it important for us to be aware of the particular cultural traditions that mark our psychology, but we need to search for a language, format, and rhetoric that accurately reflects and does not distort the true nature of psychological experience.

Finally, "in the beginning was the word." From the beginning, Western psychology was marked by a reliance on verbal discourse, by a historical Cartesian split between mind and body, thought and deed. Absent has been an understanding of the psychological language of silence, mystery, body, and movement. Also the psychological language that grows out of scientific rhetoric is prose. Absent is a language suitable for a poetics of the soul. Bachelard's dynamic imagination helped restore a wholeness of thought and deed, expressed poetically.

In sum, this sensuous way of knowing, which seeks creation through form, expresses itself in an image-based poetics of the soul. For Bachelard, the ontology expressed in valorization, the fundamental

human drive to create, and the poetic description of experienced reality were all expression of soul: "It is reasonable to speak of a phenomenology of the soul. In many circumstances we are obliged to acknowledge that poetry is a commitment of the soul. A consciousness associated with the soul is more relaxed, less intentionalized than a consciousness associated with the phenomena of the mind" (Bachelard, 1958/1969, p. xviii). Bachelard's insistence on a psychological rhetoric based on image rather than naturalistic scientific discourse predates and echoes efforts by contemporary psychologists to find a new psychological rhetoric (Lakoff, Polkinghorne, Sarbin, Shafer). Lawrence Marks, in his outgoing speech as President of the Division of Psychology and the Arts of APA, noted: "For what I want to talk about is the relation of form to content in scientific discourse" (1989). His observation that psychological rhetoric remains stuck in its scientific origins and that it needs change is well supported by Bachelard's views.

Although Bachelard was not a psychologist, he nevertheless showed keen understanding of the workings of the human soul through the imagination and poetic rhetoric. His observations are fruitful for psychologists today seeking rhetoric and praxis relevant for working with soul material. Bachelard's description of the dynamic imagination and poetic discourse therefore provides rich resources for such a search.

### Two Therapeutic Applications

The arts have a long history of psychological healing practices, from ritual dance to drawings of the mentally ill. The fields of art, music, poetry, drama, and dance/movement therapy have encouraged expression of the psyche through one of the art forms (Bartenieff, 1972-1973).

The following is one description of a movement therapy session that illustrates the use of dynamic imagination to move from inarticulate felt-sense into formed image (Gendlin, 1978). A movement image is like a dream or a poetic image; it has its own logic, own beginning, middle, and end. Its form of discourse is primarily nonverbal, image-based, and poetic.

Poetic consciousness or reverie begins by sinking into quiet receptivity, and attending to the progressive emergence of the image. As images emerge, the attending awareness and movement help form the image, and move it toward cognitive recognition. Meaning comes as the image is named.

Linda (not her real name) began with loose, unstructured movements. Simply moving around the room, she free-associated in movement, allowing the movements free play. Once her body was warmed up, she began to "listen in," allowing quiet and receptivity to inform the movement. After some time, the movements began to change. Against a "background" of random movement, some "foreground" gestures began to stand out (Perls, 1968). The random movements were like Bachelard's free-floating attention that allows images to emerge and focus; what emerged was Linda's hands, which had a particular intensity; something was happening there. Something was coming into focus.

As therapist, I encouraged her to "stay with" her hands and let them move her (Hillman, 1977). As she surrendered to the process of being moved, she sank into a deeper state of consciousness. Her descent was into Bachelard's "great calm lake reservoir" from which the image is born. She waited, suffered, and was patient during the gestation of the image.

Then Linda's hands began to move. Her face registered the change; she looked interested, and her whole body was poised for action. Her hands swung an arc through the air, compressing themselves tightly together. They swung down, up, down, urgently over and over. It looked to me as if she were chopping wood, but I did not interpret or have any a priori idea of what this meant. Meaning was in, and would emerge through, her own subjective experience. Although I could not know the meaning, I could see and feel the form. The crescendo of the chopping mounted; there was increased development of time, phrasing, intentionality, and spatial focus (Serlin, 1989). The repetition of these movements strengthened and clarified the emerging structure in the beginning of ritual.

As the chopping motion continued, we both waited, waited for something to happen. It was clear that this was the moment of birth. Suddenly Linda began to cry. Her face tightened; she did not like what she had been shown. When she was ready, she told me a story. Her movements brought back a memory of having been a schoolteacher abroad, where she was required to discipline children by hitting them. She would fake her actions, but would swallow horror. When I asked her to name this image, she said, "hitting small children."

Naming this image allowed her reflective distance. Giving it form and body allowed her to look at it and its terrible aspect, and not to be possessed by it (Ser-

lin, 1990). Creating emotions into art does not make life better, but it gives form and coherence to experience (Serlin, 1977). With this new form, the patterns of her life, figure-foreground constellations, shift.

The second description comes from Nancy Lee Stewart, a student who explored the element of water. As Bachelard wrote, water can have many qualities. It can calm, rage, and trickle. In the following description, she explored the image of water by moving it, beginning with the sensation itself:

The sense was of continuous onward movement without struggle. It was just a way of moving, a way of being. The water had little significance except as the medium through which I was moving. By moving through water, a sense of some resistance and weight was felt, but it never seemed to be an obstacle or to cause slowing or tiring . . . The strongest sense was that of wading; it was so familiar.

This simple description led to associations. After recording these associations, she was asked to go back over them and underline words that stood out to her. The result was:

This image feels familiar. It is an old companion. I do a lot of wading-type movements. The rhythm of the movement is the rhythm of my daily life. It is a rhythm I live. It is a steady, lively, expansive, 4/4 beat. It is smoother than a march and has more progression (more travelling). The wading itself felt as if it focused on movement. It had a sense of quiet persistence. The wading also felt like there was an awareness—a cautiousness that was not limiting the movement, but was there all the same. The effort qualities were bound flow, an active use of weight (a strong, light combination), sustained time, direct use of space, and directionality. These efforts are the ones that I am most comfortable with using. I find them to be the main ones that I use in everyday life, but I feel I do use other ones at times.

For her, the gesture corresponded to the syntax of her verbal speech. Gesture supported words, and words supported gesture.

The hand gesture that goes with the image and the words of smoothing it over is making a

small forward circle with both hands in front of the body, with the hands moving clockwise in opposition going around and around. This, too, is familiar. It is a gesture that I use when I am searching for words, and the words aren't coming. I am probably looking for words that will smooth things rather than words that might be blunt. This gesture, also, has a strong sense of motion. It requires a fair amount of energy (like wading). Like the words, it is both repetitious and yet has a sense of movement. I feel the wading image, the words, and the hand gesture are different expressions of the same core experience.

As her movements rolled onward, they became a text, like an action poem, filled with images and meanings. Like a poem, this text opens itself to meaning.

How is meaning revealed in an action text? It is revealed through a process of ongoing attentive movement that I call action hermeneutics, which concentrates, distills, and clarifies repetitive structures of meaning. These structures can appear in any nonverbal discourse, such as action or movement.

#### Conclusion

Bachelard's dynamic imagination and movement therapy share a common use of the image and the creative process. For both, the birth of the image is a creative process, which involves turning away from the ordinary world under conditions of solitude and receptivity. This creative process means sinking into unconscious depths, and waiting for the impregnation of matter by idea. There is a gestation, a period of forming within the womb container. With incubation comes increased excitement, the discipline of maintaining concentration and focus, until the "aha" of recognition and the aesthetic discrimination to know when the piece of work is finished. An image is born; the pattern is rearranged.

Healing comes not only with the recovery of memory and its integration, but with the creative process itself. To learn to listen within, to attend to emerging sense-data, to tolerate ambiguity, practice detached awareness and clarity of focus, to recognize patterns of intelligibility and phrasing are all aesthetic discriminations. The art is not about a thing called an image; it is not an object, but it is a process, a way of participating with life. As an active, creative imaginative consciousness, dynamic imagination can provide an image-based, nonverbal poetic praxis and language for the soul. It can provide a language to describe an

action poetics that is a text with multiple levels of meaning and interpretation possibilities. By staying in an image-based language and process, movement therapy remains in a language appropriate to its content and soul. Using a language from the arts, we can understand the therapeutic process as a creative, transformative process in which clients can create themselves and their lives, experiencing the joy and transcendence of living-as-artists.

#### References

- Bachelard, G. (1960). *The poetics of reverie*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Bachelard, G. (1964). *The psychoanalysis of fire*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Bachelard, G. (1969). *The poetics of space*. Boston: Beacon Press. (Original work published in French in 1958)
- Bachelard, G. (1971). *On poetic imagination and reverie*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Bachelard, G. (1971). *The right to dream*. (J. A. Underwood, Trans.). New York: Orion Press.
- Bartenieff, I. (1972-1973). Dance therapy: A new profession or a rediscovery of an ancient role of the dance. *Dance Scope*, 7 (1), 6-18.
- Freud, S. (1959). On the relation of the poet to daydreaming. In *On creativity and the unconscious*. New York: Colophon Books.
- Gendlin, E. (1978). *Focusing*. New York: Everest House.
- Hillman, J. (1977). An inquiry into image. *Spring*, pp. 62-88.
- Jung, C. (1966). On the relation of analytic psychology to poetry. In *The spirit in man, art and literature* (pp. 131-193). Princeton: Bollingen Series XX.
- Kaplan, E. (1972, September). Gaston Bachelard's philosophy of imagination: An introduction. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 1.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Langer, S. (1953). *Feeling and form*. New York: Scribner's.
- Maritain, J. (1953). *Creative intuition in art and poetry*. New York: The New American Library.
- Marks, L. (1989, Fall/Winter). The language of psychology. Newsletter, APA Division 10, *Psychology and the Arts*.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *The phenomenology of perception*. (Colin Smith, Trans.). New York: Humanities Press.
- Perls, L. (1968). Two instances of gestalt therapy. In *Recognitions in gestalt therapy*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Sarbin, T. R. (1986). *Narrative psychology: The storied nature of human conduct*. New York: Praeger.
- Sartre, J. (1968). *The psychology of imagination*. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Serlin, L. (1977). Portrait of Karen: A gestalt-phenomenological approach to movement therapy. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 8, 145-152.
- Serlin, I. (1989). Choreography of a verbal session. In A. Robbins (Ed.), *The psychoaesthetic experience: An approach to depth-oriented psychotherapy*. New York: Human Sciences Press.
- Serlin, I. (1990). Therapy with a borderline nun. *Psychotherapy*, 27, (1), 91-94.
- Shafer, R. (1976). *A new language for psychoanalysis*. New York: Yale University Press.