

## HAND AND ENGRAVING: FROM FLOCON'S ENGRAVINGS TO BACHELARD'S PHILOSOPHIZING

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**ABSTRACT.** This text deals with the relationships between the phenomenizations of hand and engraving art, especially against the background of Gaston Bachelard's philosophical commentaries on the works of Albert Flocon. Special space is devoted to the interpretation of Flocon's engraving of two hands in connection with Escher's similar lithography. Another thematic field is the role of the tool and the hand equipped with the tool. However, the central axis of this thinking is the interconnection or intertwining of body and matter, the interactive relationship between human being and matter, between visual observation and dynamic haptics, which require a certain force and thus also experience the back pressure of matter. The conclusion of the text draws attention to a specific engraving, such as writing, especially the writing of a philosophical text, as we read about it in Bachelard's book *The Flame of a Candle*, the last word of which is—surprisingly—engraving.

**Keywords:** *poetics of touching, engraving, instrumentality, resistance of matter, work of art*

*See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands...*  
Isaiah 49:16

The relationship between hand and engraving is age-old. Ancient cultures (Phoenician, Jewish, Arabic and Ethiopian) interpreted the image of engraving or etching in stone or metal as an image of a just and unchanging decision of a ruler or even God. What is recorded in hard materials, resisting the changes of time, here acquires the force of a strict law with eternal validity for all to whom it may concern.

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Another type of long-lasting engraving record with a similar force of validity was tattooing, scratching the emblem—on the hand, palm, shoulder, or other part of the body. Such a sign could not be washed away by water; it remains visible and lasting. Moreover, if the emblem is engraved in the palm of your hand, a clasped hand—an ancient symbol of ownership and power—protects it. The palm is thus also an image of assurance and safety.

Thus, engraving in its original form indicates something permanently recorded or expressed on the surface of hard or relatively durable material. Later expressions for scratching and writing (Greek *graphein* or Latin *scribere*) also carried the meaning of carving characters, especially on some board or plate. Most similar expressions are derived from the same stem of a word meaning “to scratch”, “to notch”, “to etch”—for example, German *kerben*, “to cut”, but also *graben*, “to dig”, or *gravieren*, “to engrave”.

Engraving entered art as an artistic style first through the formation of ornaments in goldsmithing and jewelry, but it was not until the 15<sup>th</sup> century that the carving of characters into hard materials became an artistic technique of creating images. Alsace engraver Martin Schongauer was one of the first important artists working in this field with his one hundred and sixteen engravings. Schongauer took over this type of artistic representation from “masters of playing cards” (which were the first engraving attempts to transfer the same image onto multiple paper cards). His *Temptation of St. Anthony by Demons* (c. 1485) was an inspiration to Michelangelo<sup>1</sup> and Hieronymus Bosch due to the fantasy animals depicted on this plate. His work also significantly influenced Albrecht Dürer, who—together with Lucas van Leyden and Marcantonio Raimondi—is one of the greatest masters of engraving technique in the history of art. The final product of these artists is both the engraved image itself on some type of plate (on the stamp) and also the imprint (*impressum*), which can be repeatedly transferred (copied, reproduced) thanks to painting the stamp, say, on paper—the actual *engraving* being the final result. Other than that, the printing of patterns was not known before; where patterns occurred, they mainly concerned the imprints of selected shapes on textiles within dyeing and “fashion design,” especially between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Vasari mentions this in a chapter on Michelangelo Buonarroti, where he talks about how Michelangelo created a copy of an engraving by a certain ‘Martin the German’ who became famous and depicted Saint Anthony being beaten by devils. Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 418.

<sup>2</sup> See Arthur Mayger Hind, *A History of Engraving & Etching: From 15<sup>th</sup> Century to the Year 1914*, New York: Dover Publications, 1963, p. 19.

Over the following centuries, the art of engraving improved, embracing forms of chiaroscuro, portraiture, landscape painting, and finally also cubism (Louis Marcoussis is a good example). One new characteristic of engraving was the production of nonlinear perspectives, one adopted mainly by Albert Flocon (real name Mentzel), followed by Patrice Jeener and at the same time by M. C. Escher. Flocon also co-authored a book with André Barre on a curvilinear perspective (in a photograph known as the “fish-eye” view).<sup>3</sup> Non-linear geometries also interested French philosopher Gaston Bachelard at the time, and so a friendly relationship quickly developed between Flocon and Bachelard, and several years of cooperation between them began.

This paper will discuss Flocon and Bachelard, and in doing so we may formulate our basic question differently: the point may be not why several engravers (not only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) were interested in the subject of the hand, but how they were interested: how did they deal with the subject and what did the philosopher Bachelard say about this “how”? In the following sections, we will touch on four key topics: first, we will thematize Bachelard’s idea of the so-called “dreamy hand”. From there we will move on to Flocon and the interpretation of his two-hands engraving in connection with the theme of intertwining body and matter. Next, we will turn our attention to a hand equipped with a tool (“tooled hand”) in relation to various hard materials and finally we will conclude by pointing out why Bachelard could afford to speak of his life in a quite stylized way as an engraving. Thus, our crucial and central question will be: What kind of engraving is created by the tools of a philosopher?

But is not doing philosophy in the manner of engraving just a metaphor, just a pretty picture? Are we to understand it to mean that the philosopher seeks to immortalize his ideas in books or in human minds? Or that his arguments, constructed according to the principles of strict logic, are like chisels in the hand of an engraver? Or are we, on the contrary, to see philosophy as a mere engraver’s pastime, playing more with images than with concepts, or that it seeks out and depicts only certain paradoxes and illusions of language? Surely this would not be enough.

Bachelard saw engraving as the contact of the human body (the hand) and matter through the tool. The hand exerts pressure on the chisel and the chisel penetrates the hardness of the matter. The intertwining of subjectivity and objectivity that Maurice Merleau-Ponty spoke of is enriched in Bachelard’s work, in the spirit of his notion of *phenomenotechnique*, by the tool that makes the world give itself to subjectivity in a different way. The painter applies the paint (brush, pencil) to the canvas while the engraver permeates the matter.

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<sup>3</sup> Albert Flocon, André Barre, *La perspective curviligne*. Paris: Flammarion, 1968.

The result of the engraver's work is *reproduction*, and we must remember, when we hear this word, the importance Bachelard attached to the prefix *re-* in several of his texts. The result is not a single auratic image, but a stamp that can be used for further impressions. It is as if we create a method whose repeated application produces (begets) ever new images though not necessarily identical ones.

Bachelard, moreover, was sympathetic to Flocon's connections between realism and abstraction, the geometrized world merging here with the life-world, rigorous science with poetics. But before this connection between the engraver and the philosopher can be demonstrated, we must begin with the engraving itself. From there we gradually arrive at engraving as a philosophical method *sui generis*.

### First Impression: A Dreamy Hand

All of us know the dreamy look of dreamers, but how does a hand dream? Gaston Bachelard uses this term both in the text about Louis Marcoussis' engravings and in his commentaries on the works of Albert Flocon. In Marcoussis' case, however, he is primarily interested in the issue of perspective: the perspective of the engraver, but also the perspective of the characters he depicts. Writing about one of Marcoussis' engraving from his collection *Devins (Divinations, 1940)*, namely *Les osselets*, he describes a young woman who dreamily looks out of a window while supporting her chin with her right hand and playing with a little bone (*astragalus*) in her left. This is not a new topic at all: a similar girl can be found in a painting by Eugène Ernest Damas from 1887, while in many ancient or medieval paintings or sculptures depicting girls, we can see women or children playing with astragals. However, Marcoussis' engraving is different: the girl does not seem to be playing with her knucklebones; only one of them is lightly held, perhaps she is gently twisting it in her left hand. Bachelard writes: "This knucklebone is a natural bone and carries the cipher that nature has carved into the hard animal stone. Its S, its cavity and its delicate border speak to her dreamy hand, while her dilated pupil sees the future, she is thinking about..."<sup>4</sup>

It is a hand that is said to be dreamy here, dreaming of touching a specific matter, a material with a specific shape. The point is not that this hand was equipped with some special *cogito*,<sup>5</sup> it is rather one of the functions of the *cogito* of the

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<sup>4</sup> Gaston Bachelard, „L'œuvre de Marcoussis," in *Le droit de rêver*, Paris: Quadrige/PUF, 1970, p. 64.

<sup>5</sup> Words attributed to Immanuel Kant, that the hand is a visible part of the brain, have been quoted many times in various places, but there is no direct reference to the work in which such words occur.

depicted girl. She dreams with the help of her hand, which gently reads information from matter with her palm. This is not a question of divination, but rather the sensitivity of human contact with *materia*.

Marcoussis' hands are an important element in most of his engravings (as with Flocon and Escher). For example, an engraving called *La table tournante* (*Turning Table*), from the same collection, depicts five pairs of hands. Or in the engraving *Le pendule* (*Pendulum*), a hand reaches from heaven to earth, on which the whole future depends. Next, we can find the hand of an old man in the engraving *Le vol de oiseaux* (*Bird's Flight*) or another old man looking for a horseshoe in the painting *Le fétichiste* (*Fetishist*) from 1943. In all these cases, the hand is Marcoussis' crucial subject, the thing which expresses the intended emotion.

The image of a hand that reads information from the environment, reads data from matter as a sensitive device capable of "touching the still liquid matter of the future,"<sup>6</sup> is not at all atypical in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As an object of interest, it is present not only in the visual but also in the literary arts, as pointed out by Hans-Jörg Rheinberger in a book devoted to the connections between Gaston Bachelard and Albert Flocon.<sup>7</sup> However, there were also various other uses of the subject of the hand in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Escher's famous lithograph *Drawing Hands* was created in 1948 while another of his lithographs, *Hand with a Mirror Ball*, is from 1935. Of course, Flocon was creating his engravings at the same time, but the hand fascinated others during this period: Bachelard's great friend and novelist Henri Bosco wrote *Malicroix* in 1946, in which chiromancy, divination from the hand, is one of the main themes. Even on the literary periphery of former Czechoslovakia, in relation to the great centers of artistic life, Dominik Tatarka writes in 1944 *The Miraculous Virgin*, where the narrator says about one of the characters after seeing the painter Tristan painting an ethereal woman, Anabella, that "he placed the horror of a possible caress in his fingertips"<sup>8</sup>. With this he could stretch his imagination so as to touch the object of his desire and dreams.

The poetics of the dreamy hand are in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the poetics of a hand caressing, stroking; of a hand that gently touches or penetrates a mass; of a hand that leaves a foreign body, another body or a certain substance free to touch or act upon it; a hand that collects, sorts and evaluates information by—so to speak—touching; a hand holding a tool (such as a burin or *stylus*) or at least a pen or pencil.

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<sup>6</sup> Gaston Bachelard, „L'œuvre de Marcoussis," in *Le droit de rêver*, p. 65.

<sup>7</sup> Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *The Hand of the Engraver. Albert Flocon Meets Gaston Bachelard*, trans. Kate Sturge, Albany: SUNY, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Dominik Tatarka, *Panna zázračnica*, Bratislava: Tatran, 1992, p. 91.

But these poetics of the hand are also combined with the poetics of the rough, working, processing hand, creating new forms, struggling with matter. Gaston Bachelard points out this aspect of hand poetics both in his interpretation of Albert Flocon's work, for which he wrote several accompanying texts to his collections,<sup>9</sup> and in his analyses of dreams of a resistant matter. We will discuss these later, but for now, let us stay with the dreamy hand.

How does a hand dream? How does manual, haptic, or tactile dreaming work? There is a difference between dreaming and cognition, rather like with the Jung-Bachelard doublet of *anima* and *animus*. Cognition works with understanding, with grip, with concept. The Latin term *conceptus* comes from the verb *capere*, which means to grasp something (as in the German *Begriff*). The term *apprehension* has the same semiotic connotations, which refer to the simple grasping of an object by the cognitive mind. The metaphor of grasping, therefore, is linguistically strongly connected with a human's cognitive power. To know an object thus means to hold it firmly in one's hand, to have it in one's power, to grasp something that had previously escaped the mind, which was incomprehensible and unsustainable. Thus, by cognition, we seize the object of our intentions. Bachelard combined cognitive ability with the masculine *animus*, which forms one part of our consciousness.

However, what about dreaming dominated by the feminine *anima*? According to Bachelard, dreaming also touches something, but it does not hold. Rather, it resembles stroking, gently touching an object, or more accurately, placing a hand near a dream object to see what happens when you come into close contact. He does not want to grasp the dream yet; he does not need to understand his object rationally. The dream thing is not even an object that would lie in the palm of a dreamy *cogito*, but in a strict sense it is a touching thing or even matter, *materia*, pure affection—by touching it, we are touched.<sup>10</sup>

The ungrasping hand is thus an image of dreaming, an image of *cogito* that touches matter with respect. Note, by the way, how much this image differs from the hands depicted in works of socialist realism or fascist artistic propaganda, where the hand always firmly carries, for example, a scythe, a hammer, a flag, a banner, a

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<sup>9</sup> A compact overview of the basic topics of these texts can be found in the study Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, „Gaston Bachelard and the Hands of Albert Flocon,” in *Revista de Humanidades de Valparaíso*, 4(8), 2016, pp. 205-221.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Kearney writes in his newest book on touching: “But if touch is something we do to the world, it is also something the world does to us. It works both ways. As we reach out a hand, touch is what first *affects* us, in a concrete, personal manner. From the beginning, flesh is charged with attraction and retraction.” Richard Kearney, *Touch. Recovering Our Most Vital Sense*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2021, p. 40.

weapon, or holds another hand. And even when such a hand is empty (a saluting, summoning, agitating, mobilizing, cramping, greedy hand), it impresses the viewer with its robustness, strength, violence. It is a hand that refuses to show any weakness, decay, or passivity.

And let us to look at the dreamy hand: it may not necessarily be loose and helpless, it also engages in subtle struggles with matter and its resistance and may use a tool that aggressively digs into matter. This, though, is not necessarily a political manifestation of the violence of power, but rather the ability to shape, re-shape, or take something, peel it off or expose it. The violence of the dreamy hand is different from the violence of the grasping hand and follows the function of peculiar knowledge. As Delia Popa suggested: "But where understanding is disarmed, distracted or powerless, the hands can still seek new ways of doing things, exploring the dark nooks of things, taking the rough edges as landmarks and inventing nuances of touch and sight that theoretical intelligence itself cannot conceive."<sup>11</sup>

In order that the hand dreams lucidly, so that it may indulge in waking dreams and not dissolve in night dreams, it must retain at least a little waking consciousness, a weakened *cogito*.<sup>12</sup> But what does that mean? When Gaston Bachelard criticizes Sartre's phenomenology and its purely visual intentionality focused on objects, he tries to enrich it with haptic intentionality, which no longer focuses on the object, but rather penetrates matter. Bachelard puts his corrected version of "material phenomenology" or "directed phenomenology" (*la phénoménologie dirigée*) against Sartre:

Classical phenomenology likes to talk about visions. Consciousness is thus associated with direct intentionality. Therefore, it is attributed by excessive centrality. It is the center from which the lines of research diverge.<sup>13</sup> [...] We are right in front of a cultural situation where phenomenology cannot simply return 'to the things themselves,' because the working consciousness (*la conscience au travail*) must be freed from the initial instances of research. Scientific thinking does not ultimately begin as a preliminary designation (*désignation préalable*). It aims beyond things—to matter. It begins in a way

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<sup>11</sup> Delia Popa, „La portée pratique de l'imagination : dialectique et matérialité,” in Jean-Jacques Wunenburger (ed.), *Gaston Bachelard. Science et poétique, une nouvelle éthique?*, Paris: Hermann, 2013, pp. 328-329.

<sup>12</sup> See Róbert Karul, „Zasnenosť ako forma vizuality (Bachelard a šťastná melanchólia),” in *Filozofia*, 61(1), 2006, pp. 46-52.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'imaginaire. Psychologie phénoménologique de l'imagination*, Paris: Gallimard, 2010, p. 28: „Intention is at the center of consciousness: it focuses (*visé*) on the object, it constitutes it as it is.”

with negation: it denies the object in favor of discovering matter.”<sup>14</sup> Bachelard thus distinguishes between classical phenomenology (*the phenomenology of the object*) and the phenomenology that abandoned the object, *the phenomenology of matter*.<sup>15</sup>

However, the phenomenology of matter is, in principle, the phenomenology of the hand and the instrument, the phenomenology of touching, working, digging, etching. Let us take a closer look at his “reading” of Flocon’s engravings.

### Matter and Hand in Albert Flocon

The dreamy hand is again the topic of Bachelard’s text *Matter and Hand* (*Matière et main*) dedicated to Albert Flocon. The dreamy hand here is challenged thanks to the “rivalry of delicacy” by the paper itself, its graininess or fiber.<sup>16</sup> Rivalry presupposes struggle, coping, resistance, conquest. In Bachelard’s case, such performances of hand-to-matter use are always related to dreams of the will to overcome something provocative,<sup>17</sup> in contrast to dreams of rest, which passively submit to materials and their effects. This is the difference between the contemplative and the active hand,<sup>18</sup> as well as between the manual-visual (silently “observing hand,” descriptively following the shape of the object) and the manual-haptic appearance (normative-acting, working hand in interactive contact with matter).

Bachelard understands engraving as an art which cannot lie; it is primitive, prehistoric, and pre-humane, and he finds it in its original form in the conch shell, which pushes its shape into matter.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Le matérialisme rationnel*, Paris: PUF, 1963, p. 11 and 24.

<sup>15</sup> In this sense, it is good to compare the passages from *Le matérialisme rationnel* (p. 37) and from *La terre et les rêveries de la volonté* (Paris: José Corti, 2004, pp. 112-116), in which this distinction can be found.

<sup>16</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Matière et main*, in *Le droit de rêver*, p. 67.

<sup>17</sup> As Valeria Chiore realizes, „provocation and will hold each other and refer to each other, reciprocally.” Valeria Chiore, „Force, provocation, volonté: paysages. Notes d’un philosophe pour un graveur, entre ontologie des éléments et phénoménologie de la parole poétique,” in *Ideação*, 25(1), 2011, p. 126.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Gaston Bachelard, *La terre et les rêveries de la volonté*, p. 47, where he talks on the one hand of resting as being contemplative, and on the other hand of being resistant as being in action.

<sup>19</sup> Gaston Bachelard, „Matière et main,” in *Le droit de rêver*, p. 68.



For the French philosopher, engraving is associated with acts of awakening sleeping matter, with the challenge to a struggle, which he also calls *anthropocosmic*.<sup>20</sup> According to him, every engraving “bears witness to power,” “it is a dream of will, it is the nervousness of constructive will.”<sup>21</sup> A copper, wooden or other hard plate thus becomes a soil that needs to be cultivated, furrowed or at least dug into—with a spade. “Engraving,” writes Bachelard in a commentary on Flocon’s *Spanish Castles (Châteaux en Espagne)*, “is the moment of work, the moment when work begins, in which the project takes shape, in which form takes on a look.”<sup>22</sup>

We may not necessarily follow the chronology of Flocon’s work and especially those of his works in which the hand (the artist’s own hand) becomes not only the object of depiction but also the object of second order, but these examples offer us several ways to understand both Flocon and Bachelard. This is best seen in an engraving from 1949, on which we see two hands engraved: one is the realistically depicted artist’s hand holding a burin, the other is an abstract, a cubist<sup>23</sup> sketch that the artist’s hand is currently engraving (it could also be an image of the artist’s own hand). We may immediately remember Escher’s *Drawing Hands* from the same period. However, Flocon’s hand does not draw but it engraves, this hand remaining faithful to the profession of its creator and bearer. The hand is a frequent subject in Flocon, especially in the *Traité du Burin*. But let us stay for a moment with Flocon’s engraving of a hand engraving another hand.

What is presented to us here? There are two hands: one engraving, the other engraved; one working, the other processed. Unlike Escher’s hands, which are both shown in the same plan, although not strictly mirrored (on one we see a thumb and forefinger in the foreground, on the other we see a distant hand starting with the little finger), Flocon’s hands are shown in two completely different plans. The creator’s hand (the right hand) is shaded, almost realistically captured, facing the viewer with the inner part of the palm, in which we see the artist’s tool—a

<sup>20</sup> Gaston Bachelard, „Introduction à la dynamique du paysage,” in *Le droit de rêver*, p. 71.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>22</sup> Gaston Bachelard, „*Châteaux en Espagne*,” in *Le droit de rêver*, p. 108.

<sup>23</sup> It is worth noting that in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the topic of cubistic art was attractive to several areas of philosophical reasoning thanks to the attention it paid to abstraction. This was especially true of phenomenology, as Jaroslava Vydrová pointed out when arguing that „cubism is not an imitative art, is neither naively photographic nor a mirror of reality, but instead depicts deformations, deflections, hyperbolae, curvatures, disorders and de-colorations...” And as she adds in relation to our topic: „For the Cubist artist, body, tactile experience with the object in space is also important and forms part of the constitution of space.” Jaroslava Vydrová, „The Intertwining of Phenomenology and Cubism—in the Analyses and Works of Art of Czech Artists and Theoreticians,” in *Horizon*, 5(1), 2016, pp. 219 and 222.

spade. The other hand (the left)—since it is meant to evoke a painting—is a cubist sketch. We see its outer part and the artist shapes it from the base plate, which is indicated by a small crack at the tip of his spade.

Escher's hands not only draw, but actually *draw* each other *on paper*. In contrast, Flocon's hand *engraves* the other hand, apparently *on a wooden plate*, and intertwines the concrete, more figurative hand with the abstract, cubist hand.<sup>24</sup> What surprises us perhaps the most is a small detail: the index finger of the creator's hand intersects with the little finger of the hand being created. This overlap is ambivalent: as if, on the one hand, the created little finger had been detached from its base and, at the same time, as if, on the other hand, the creator's index finger had sunk into the matter of the wooden stamp and merged with it. As the burin digs into the plate and removes pieces of wood from it with gentle movements to create the contours of the ring finger, the creator's index finger seems to penetrate the mass "under the skin" with calm ease, while the burin remains clearly above the little finger. We do not find this element in Escher, but in Flocon it is eloquent. Is there a penetration through matter? Or is it a fusion and intertwining of the creator and the created work? Several simply sketched lines even pass through the index finger of the engraved hand, suggesting that it, too, has absorbed itself deeper and deeper into the matter from which it was born.

We also cannot forget that Escher's hands work with the resulting image (drawing on a piece of paper), with which nothing happens. But Flocon's engraved hand is still just preparing a stamp, which would need to be applied by color later, then printed on paper, and only this imprint will be called an engraving. So, the left hand on the stamp becomes the mirror-right hand on the engraving. But this is the story that the image itself shows us. However, if we looked at the real Flocon stamp, everything would be inverted. To see the creator's hand as right, Flocon had to engrave it on the stamp as left. That would still be a common motif. It is more complicated with the other hand, which, in order to appear to us as the left hand, had to be engraved as the right hand, and this would also appear when the Cubist hand was imaginarily struck on paper. Creation of an engraving showing the work on the engraving, expressing the artist's immersion into matter through the image of a hand that merges deeper into matter, is reminiscent of Bachelard's famous *cogito* to the second, third or fourth power: I think that I think that I think—and so on.<sup>25</sup> If Flocon's object is a hand, then the Cubist hand is in relation to the real hand,

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<sup>24</sup> M. C. Escher was influenced by cubism, too, but there was only a short period in his life when he devoted himself to that kind of depiction: in 1920-1921 he created four cubist engravings of seated nudes. He never tried to connect abstract forms with concrete ones to the extent that Albert Flocon did.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Gaston Bachelard, *La dialectique de la durée*, Paris: Quadrige/PUF, 2001, pp. 98-103.

a hand squared or even cubed. If its object is an engraving, then the Cubist hand is an engraving squared, or one to the third power. In short, from Flocon's real hand, we move on to a realistically depicted hand, which then loses its realism in pure geometric shapes, so that it finally dissolves completely in formless matter. And from real engraving we descend again to figurative engraving. There is certainly some Platonism in this, but also there is Albert Flocon's inconspicuous ingenuity.

While Escher offers us a touching and playful illusion of two hands, Flocon playfully expresses a different, much stronger idea. Escher's engraving is captured in the horizontal plane, but Flocon's has verticality: from the shape it descends deep into a mass. Is not such verticality a fundamental element of engraving art? Is it not a big topic in Bachelard's philosophy? Flocon did not just show us two hands, he showed us a fundamental feature of his art: penetration through matter.

If we need other proof, let us look closely at the mass engraved in Flocon's cycle *Traité du Burin*. Or we can observe the intertwining of the human body with the body of a tree or landscape as a female body in the *Paysage* collection. Earth, matter, body—three greats, converging, intertwined themes that connect Bachelard with Flocon, a philosopher with an engraver, text with an image.

### Hand Equipped with a Tool

Bachelard is also fascinated by something else, however: strength, resisting matter, work, digging into matter, and developing new forms. The engraver changes both the form of the material (copper, wood, stone...) into which he carves a shape and the material on which he then presses his work. Pushing, imprinting, *impressum*, is also a matter of exerting pressure, overcoming the resistance of a substance such as paper, the structure of which is thus disturbed.

The reinforcement, not just the extension of the hand, is a tool: for example, a spade, a burin, a stylus. Here we come to Bachelard's concept of a hand equipped with an instrument, a "tooled hand" (*la main outillée*), as we find in his *La terre et les rêveries de la volonté*. Bachelard describes an instrument first as the "coefficient of aggression against matter," against the "hard thing": "Things are too strong for an empty hand."<sup>26</sup> Here, Bachelard develops reflections on the dynamic imagination, which is passive when it remains purely in the field of visuality but is immediately activated when one takes up a tool, such as a burin. In this moment, the innocent difference between the No-Self (the world) and my own Self turns into a challenge,

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<sup>26</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *La terre et les rêveries de la volonté*, p. 40.

a provocation, and therefore Bachelard writes that: “true dreams of will are dreams equipped with tools (*rêveries outillées*)”.<sup>27</sup>

One thing is to calmly observe a piece of matter (wood or stone) that lies in front of me and around which my gaze can orbit like a satellite. Another thing is when we try to dig into this wood or stone—firstly, with a bare hand, then with a hand armed with a sharp and hard tool. This is time when the peaceful innocence of wood or stone ends. When I hit a concrete slab with a hammer and chisel, or when I cut it with a diamond wheel on my angle grinder, I suddenly feel the back pressure of a fabric that up to now has only been observed and whose hardness I expected but did not experience. Bachelard calls this experience a “dynamic existence”, an “existentialism of power.”<sup>28</sup>

But how does all this relate to engravings? We come to this when Bachelard borrows an analysis of the three types of instrument use from Andre Leroi-Gourhan, which is described in his book *L'homme et la Matière*. The first type is a precise but not too energetic application of a knife or razor to wood, for example: the cut will be precise, but does not require much force from us. The second type consists of chopping wood with a knife, which reduces accuracy but increases energy performance. The third type is the work of an engraver who puts his burin on a wooden plate with one hand, while holding a hammer in the other which he then pushes into the burin: “Two hands appear here in their respective privileges: one has strength, the other skill. Already in this differentiation of hands, the dialectic of the slave and the master is being prepared.”<sup>29</sup> Bachelard realizes that this third type of work using both hands but with differentiated performance does not apply just to work such as kneading soft dough, but also to work with hard materials. Let us critically note, however, that this differentiation may not be exclusive: if an engraver or carver holds a wooden board with one hand and pushes or digs into it with the other, pressure and back-pressure are exerted by two hands, both taking on the privilege of strength and ultimately skill, because even the hand holding the wooden board must exert an adequate, more or less gentle back-pressure against the burin.

To dig into matter means to understand in fullness its nature. Bachelard illuminates this by quoting one of John Ruskin’s childhood recollections in which he describes digging a pit in his family garden, something which his mother did not understand and rebuked him for. There is a moral rule forbidding children from digging pits in gardens; from drilling or digging in the ground. Bachelard aptly

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

remarks: "Here is the stem of the paradox of a child who had a garden but did not find nature!" The difference can be seen in a child who plays with a stick which his father carved for him and a child who holds a small knife in his hands and makes his first cuts into hardwood. Even if he does not find a skill for carving skill and art in himself, he will understand, at the very least, what resistance of matter is. Bachelard develops this difference in the dialectic of the expressions "vis-à-vis" (*vers*) and "against" (*contre*), the first of which is strongly visual, the second dynamic and incorporated into the movement of the hand against matter.

The tool in the hand is therefore not only an extension of the body, but also its weaponry in the struggle with matter. But what if such a tool becomes a pen for a philosopher to write his texts with?

### Conclusion: Philosophers' Engravings

In the final passage of *The Flame of a Candle*, Bachelard writes of his own "primordial engraving," the engraving of a worker, a scientist. "This picture, I am sure, needs no caption. [...] This primordial engraving bears the mark of solitude, the characteristic mark of a type of solitude."<sup>30</sup>

We can well imagine this somewhat stylized pose of an aging philosopher behind his desk (his whole world) lit by an electric lamp. At this special moment, he asks himself whether it is possible to work scientifically again in his solitude: "Yes, how does one experience adventures in consciousness by remaining alone? Could one discover adventures in consciousness by descending into one's own depths?"<sup>31</sup> The depths of one's own self are, according to him, deposits of dreams, not of existence, because existence dwells always above, in the working mind, in more abstract thinking. This is a nostalgia for the original life of an undreaming scientist: "It would be necessary in turn to re-engrave the engraver—to re-engrave in each vigil the very existence of the solitary man in the solitude of his lamp—in short, to see everything, think everything, say everything, write everything from the perspective of primordial existence."<sup>32</sup>

The notion of *re-engraving* is crucial here: Bachelard understands a scientific mind working under terms of re-organization, re-construction, re-reading, re-writing.

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<sup>30</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Flame of a Candle*, trans. Joni Caldwell, Dallas: The Dallas Institute Publications, 1988, p. 75-76.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

The prefix *re-* is typical of his theory of a new scientific mind and he returns to it with his notion of re-engraving. There is not an eternal and immutable engraving of human being; there are only his various re-engravings.

But why does he write in this situation that we need to add more shadow to the chiaroscuro of old images? What does it mean? What can we see in chiaroscuro painting with more shadow? Where do objects hide and what remains for our sight? The sole figure is the philosopher of sciences sitting before a blank page at his table, looking like a dying little flame. This is the primordial engraving of his life: a philosopher at his table lit by a lamp, surrounded by shadows and darkness.

But is it not strange that Bachelard does not talk about image or self-image, about painting or drawing, about photography of himself, but repeatedly about engraving and re-engraving of the engraver? Does he understand his own philosophical profession as a kind of engraving art? I think so. Primarily, he is a writer. Let us note that Bachelard still wrote by hand (at the end of his life, by ankylosed hand). This takes us back to the old terms for notching and scraping: *graphein* and *scribere*. At the beginning of Boëthius' *De consolatione philosophiae*, its author tells us that he recorded his cries *stili officio*, with the help of a stylus on some board.<sup>33</sup>

Writing as carving characters: this is an image very close to Bachelardian thinking. All the allusions of Albert Flocon suddenly come to mind here: verticality, the intersection of hand and matter; the skill of the engraver and the skill of the writer; the effort, the work, the elaboration; the struggle with matter; the struggle with the blank page. Writing texts is a form of engraving rather than painting by brush, and a philosopher works here with horizontal and vertical lines, with shapes, shadows, pressure, and the back-pressure of *material*. His work is an elaborating of matter rather than a representation of it.

And when Bachelard speaks intimately and autobiographically about his *table d'existence*,<sup>34</sup> we know that it is not only his table that becomes an existential

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<sup>33</sup> Boethius, *De Cons. Phil.* I, 1, 1. Notice, that *stylus* in the Roman period was not only a writing instrument, but also a weapon substitute due its form. Allegedly Quintus Antyllius, according to Plutarch, Saint Cassianus and John Scotus Eriugena were all killed by *styluses*. For Romans, carrying *styluses* circumvented Roman laws and norms about carrying weapons in public space. See Alexei V. Zadorojnyi, „'Stabbed with Large Pens': Trajectories of Literacy in Plutarch's *Lives*,” in Jeroen Bons, Ton Kessels, Dirk Schenkeveld, and Lukas de Blois (eds.), *The Statesman in Plutarch's Works, Volume II: The Statesman in Plutarch's Greek and Roman Lives*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2017, p. 114, n. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Jean Libis writes about this passage of the text: „The existential table is the center of maximum existence, and the working man is completely ready to return to his engraving, that is, to the life frame in which he fixes himself. Nevertheless, Bachelard is not naive and has never intertwined a dream space with a real socio-professional, with civic and political space. [...] Death is near, it seems

space for him, but also his personal, existential engraving plate into which he engraves the signs of his own life.

Yes, it is at my table of existence (*à ma table d'existence*; alternatively: at my existential engraving plate) that I have known maximum existence, existence in tension—tending toward an 'ahead,' toward a 'further ahead,' toward an 'above.' All around me is rest, tranquility; only my Being-seeking being strains in its improbable need to be another being, a more-than-being. And thus, it is that with Nothing, with Reveries, one believes one will be able to make books.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, there is a nostalgic sigh: "But is it time again for me to find the worker whom I know so well and return him to my engraving?"<sup>36</sup> The last question of *The Flame of a Candle* is written vis-à-vis his approaching death. There are no more words, no more signs, no more etches. What remains is a silence after the question.

In this final, almost triumphant climax, Bachelard acquires the artistic skill he admired so much during his lifetime and transforms it into his own philosophical activity which knows both soft, feminine substances (dreams) and hard, masculine substances (science, rationalism, exactness). The great dialectical moments of his philosophy are thus revived in his grand finale: *anima* and *animus*, soul and spirit, the concrete and the abstract, contemplation and action, passivity and activity, visuality and resistance, sight and pressure, innocence and power, eye and hand, dreaming and thinking, image and concept. And this is precisely the moment when we find ourselves directly in front of Bachelard's own existential engraving, in front of his own intimate anthropology.

Bachelard was fond of one of Flocon's engraving. It shows a bottle with a postage stamp inside which a cathedral is trapped. The bottle is standing on the seashore, with a glass and a conch shell beside it, and a burning out cigarette on top of the shell. It is the drama of the vertical and the horizontal that was so typical of Flocon's other engravings. For Bachelard, it was this drama of the whole scene that was essential. As if the cathedral in the bottle wanted to gush out through the narrow neck like geyser. It mixes calm and restlessness, relaxation on the beach

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to be whispering from the texts, and the dream house is no longer enough to protect the intimacy of the philosopher." Jean Libis, *Gaston Bachelard ou la solitude inspire*, Paris: Berg International Éditeurs, 2007, p. 127.

<sup>35</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Flame of a Candle*, p. 77-78.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

with tension in the bottle, the undulating sea to the left of the bottle, and its calm clean geometric lines to the right of it, or the clouds on one side, the brilliant sun on the other.

I am convinced that for Bachelard it was this play between horizontality and verticality that fascinated him in the engravings, which is always disturbed by the various folds. All his philosophy follows similar motifs as the hand of the engraver. The philosopher becomes the central figure of calm and restlessness, peace and conflict, silence and drama. If we read Bachelard's books on philosophy and the history of science, it is always some "event of reason" that from time to time disturbs the horizontal calm movement of history and shifts it to another plane. If we read his books on imagery and dreaming, it is "poetical sentences" that suddenly jolt him out of his peaceful writing. Folds and spirals enter it all, too, like the famous staircase in Rembrandt's painting *The Meditating Philosopher*, which Bachelard mentions at the beginning of *The Flame of a Candle*. And it is just beyond these horizontals, verticals and folds that the very engraving of Bachelard's philosophical writing is revealed.

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