

TAKING BACHELARD FROM THE INSTANT TO THE EDGE

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All that is simple and strong in us, even all that is enduring, is the gift of the instant.
Bachelard, *L'intuition de 'instant*, 34

Is the instant in time like an edge in space? What is an instant, what is an edge? Is the instant an edge in time—or perhaps part of time itself? These are the questions that will guide my intervention today. I shall take off from Bachelard's early ruminations on the instant and move from there to issues of edge.

I

Essential to Bachelard's revolution in philosophy—his “*déformation professionnelle*” in his own arch phrase—was his recourse to “the intuition of the instant” (in the title of the slim but suggestive book he published in 1932). Bachelard's explicit motive was to undo the dogma of duration, that molasses-like mass of time construed by Bergson as an ultimate reality. In relation to *durée réelle*, the instant in the form of the “now” is merely an artificial abstraction, a “spurious concept.”¹ As Bergson put it in *Time and Free Will*:

[When] we project time into space, we express duration in terms of extensity, and succession thus takes the form of a continuous line or a chain, the parts of which touch without penetrating one another. [Thus we create a distinction between] *before* and *after* [separated] by one and the same instant.²

The instant, in other words, is the infinitesimal pause poised between the segments of temporal succession, pictured as a line: and as such it is “nothing but the ghost of space haunting the reflective consciousness.”³ A familiar story in the history of thinking about time, but Bachelard was one of the first to take it to severe task. He did so by reconsidering the character of the instant. For him, instants are no mere abstractions or formal “cuts” in time's implacable flow; they are instead powder-like sparks that have their own

creative force. Rather than being punctuations in the slow-moving moraine of *durée réelle*—positions where nothing happens—they are where time's action is to be found and where change of any significant sort is located. Much as Kierkegaard had proposed the Moment as the existentially disruptive undoing of the World Spirit in Hegel—for whom the instant is just as abstract as it is for Bergson—so Bachelard affirms the instant as the deconstructive worm in the cordial heart of Bergsonian duration. In both cases, the rebellious actions of the obstreperous son against the prepossessing father were effective and timely. The Kierkegaardian *Augenblick* and Bachelardian *instant* both act to unravel the mantle of their most eminent philosophical forebears.

Oedipal issues aside, let us attend to the instant as conceived by Bachelard with an eye to its edge-like properties. What is this instant like? What is its real revolutionary potential? Here I shall be brief, as my two fellow panelists have already escorted you into its midst and begun to explore its fecund potential.

II

Bachelard's basic thesis in *L'intuition de l'instant* is that “the instant is the truly specific character of time.”⁴ By the Aristotelian locution “specific character,” Bachelard means that which distinguishes time itself—gives to it its *definitive* nature. At first glance, this would seem to put Bachelard into the same camp as those who, from Aristotle to Descartes, claim that time is composed of instants or “nows” posited as formal, enumerable atomic units of the flow of time, together constituting what Heidegger came to call the “succession ofnows” (*die Jetztfolge*) in *Being and Time*. In the eyes of critics of this earlier tradition, instants conceived in this manner are artificially generated by imaginary cuts or impositions—in any case, do not belong intrinsically to time itself but are artifices or constructions wrought

upon it. Heidegger argues that the now-series belongs to world-time, not to time as we experience it, and William James speaks of the “knife-edge” of the now, thereby indicating that one sense of edge, that belonging to a tool for cutting, is an appropriate image for the instant in its Aristotelian or Cartesian avatars.⁵ The rigor and precision of the knife-edge materializes the idea of the instant as sheer incision in time’s flow.

The difficulties with the classical and early modern idea of the edge as like a surgical cut are well known: It is utterly arbitrary (given that the flow of time has its own rhythm and pace), and it ignores the fact that time is not something that can be cut or strictly segmented in the first place. In fact, it is questionable whether Aristotle or Descartes ever held such a view—or anyone else for that matter: The *Jetztfolge* may itself be a myth devised by Heidegger as a foil against which to pose his own idea of temporal *ecstases*.⁶ Bachelard, ignoring these various difficulties, has his own contention to make. This is that the instant—far from being the product of arbitrary intervention, a mere artifact of the spirit of calculation—is, quite to the contrary, the source of novelty in human experience. Thus he speaks of “the *élan* furnished by the radical novelty of instants” (II 65). More strongly still, he maintains that the novel and the instantaneous co-implicate each other: Not only is it the case that “novelty is clearly always instantaneous” (II 31), but the instant itself is always novel—forever new, always different, irremissibly other than any other instant, including the instant that precedes the present instant. In sort, the instant offers “an absolute beginning” (II 66: “*un commencement absolu*”). By this Bachelard means not just that no instant can repeat another instant in its content or character but that each instant represents a radical new start—is “aboriginal,” *ab origo*. It launches a new event in the history of the world, setting it out to develop on its own. This event comes from nowhere, even if it is going somewhere from that moment on. Bachelard here provides a miniaturized model of cosmogenesis *ex nihilo*.

The result of such eruptive instantaneity is the radical *discontinuity of time*: “rather than the continuity of life [as in Bergson], it is the discontinuity of birth that calls for explication . . . discontinuous time” (II 67). Such time

carries a strong factor of the “accidental” (II 24); but it is not merely a matter of chance dispersion, for it betrays a “freedom of the possible” (II 67) that is the other side of novelty, which is always a foray into the far side of the possible. This freedom is such that it pervades even the realm of habitual behavior, which incorporates novelty into its re-enactments and is thus not a matter of sheer repetition: Habit (*habitude*) is “the synthesis of novelty and routine, and this synthesis is realized by fecund instants” (II 65), with the results that habit is “like the routinized assimilation of novelty” (II 64). Since habit is normally taken to be an expression of duration—we speak naturally of habits as “enduring”—it follows that duration itself is only a collocation of instants: “Duration, habit, and progress are only the grouping together of instants, [and as such] they are the simplest phenomena of time” (II 90). In the end, then, virtually everything human is a creature of the instant: even attention (see II 36), even morality (see II 110), even poetry: indeed, especially poetry. In a short essay of 1939 titled “Instant poétique, instant métaphysique,” Bachelard pursues the thesis that “la poésie est une métaphysique instantanée” (II 103), by which he means that poetry delivers itself in instantaneous moments of image and insight, and that it presents itself to us both as “ambivalent” (for two poetic images rarely agree with each other: see II 104–05) and as “vertical” (since the poetic instant “surges up . . . excited, active, dynamic,” [II 104]).

This last point is crucial: The instant, pre-eminently the poetic instant but by implication every instant, presents itself to us as rising over any horizontal spread of time, any time-line for instance, to attain an explosive presence *above* the flow of time itself: “Suddenly all flat horizontality is obliterated (*s’efface*). Time does not flow. It springs up (*jailloit*.” (II 106) This is the moment of epiphany—a word that connotes “appearing over or above.” Here we rejoin Richard Kearney’s remarks—just as Bachelard’s references to “fecundity” (II 86) and “re-birth” (II, 36) look forward to Eileen Rizo-Patron’s discussion of uterine existence.

III

Are edges anything like Bachelard's instants?—Certainly not if they are merely knife-like: Such edges reflect the false factitious moments of the now-series. But these latter are precisely not the kind of instants that inspire Bachelard in his pivotal book of 1932. Are there other sorts of edges that would be partners of Bachelardian instants in the new sense he promotes in *L'intuition de l'instant*? Let us explore this parallel in some detail.

To start with, we must distinguish two basic edge-types, namely, borders and boundaries:

(i) *Borders*: In their precision as well as in their arbitrary imposition, borders resemble rigidly delimited nows. For borders are normally considered in advance of and outside a given natural circumstance. I am thinking of phenomena like "border-lines," which are often the precipitates of a treaty or other political agreement—in short, a convention that is established in advance of its application. Such lines are as determinate as "now-points," Husserl's term for the reduction of an experienced now with its retentive and protentive horizons to a mere *punctum*. In classical Euclidean geometry, a line is a collection of points, thus the affiliation of border-line and now-point is built into an ancient vocabulary of spatial representation. Each also contributes to the constitution of surfaces, spatial and temporal respectively. These surfaces have edges—abrupt limits that signify where a given surface begins and ends: where it "drops off" into empty space.

Characteristic of all these phenomena are their indefinite divisibility (we can subdivide a point *ad infinitum* into lesser points, and the same is true for lines and surfaces) and, at the same time, their *de facto* invisibility. We shall never observe a now-point as such, nor a border-line on the ground: They possess the intransigent abstractness that Hegel attributed to the "This," the "Now," and "Here" in the chapter on sense-certainty in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. That is to say, they cannot be understood concretely in their own terms, but require the supplementation of perception and history if they are to become the genuine contents of actual experience. The "border" that is discussed in the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, though perfectly clear at the level of

language and numerical measurement, is not the border that immigrants feel in their bodies as they desperately attempt to cross into the United States. *This* border is not a line drawn upon the arid earth of the region, it is a separative force that is not measured in meters or miles but in human perspiration and exhaustion. Just as the "now" at stake in saying "now is the time to cross the border in the dark of night" is not captured on any clock but is no less decisively felt by those who take action in its name: "Now, right now let us get a move on . . ."

(ii) *Boundaries*. In contrast with borders, boundaries are permeable; they are porous, full of holes; they allow, indeed often invite, movement across them. When a friend opens his door to me as I arrive as her guest for the evening, I move effortlessly and guilelessly through the door as a boundary in the form of an open threshold. When I enter Mexico from the U.S. as an American citizen, I am waved through, and the very wall that has been constructed to stop human traffic from the other direction is opened to me. A boundary presents itself to me as something I *find* rather than *construct* even it has been built by human labor, I move through it as if it were part of the natural landscape. This is why its most frequent exemplar is found in the realm of physical nature or biological being—for instance, in the permeable membranes of tissues in the animal body. Fluids flow across these membranes as if in their own medium, perhaps slowed down for the moment but nonetheless facilitated in their overall motion through a given part of the body they are meant to traverse in the successful sustenance of life. They are not structures determined by previous agreements, much less imposed upon the organism by fiat—as are borders on the land they serve to delimit—but, rather, they change in shape and form to suit the rhythm and pace and volume of circulating fluids. Unlike borders, they are undetachable from their organic base. Where borders find their most acute existence in verbal descriptions and cartographic representations, boundaries are most fully instantiated in natural substances—and are, as a consequence, difficult to map in images or describe in words. Nevertheless, boundaries remain edges of a certain definite sort: They are found at the limits of things and more particularly on their surfaces.

They may lack the neatness and objective determinability of borders as edges, but they are edge phenomena of their own sort.

Let me propose forthwith that Bachelard's notion of the instant in time is akin to the boundary in space—just as the abstract now of punctiform time is the correlate of a spatial border. A double parallel is thus in operation. Here I will focus only on the first pair of terms, the instant and the boundary, in order to see where they converge—but also to discern where they depart from each other.

My strategy is to pick out three of the leading traits Bachelard attributes to the instant—namely, novelty, commencement, and verticality—and to see how these play out for the edges that are at play in boundaries:

Novelty: Just as every instant on Bachelard's assessment is not only new but radically new, so every successive boundary-like edge represents a unique emergence in the spatial realm. Thus, for instance, the exact form of the pores in a particular membrane is always altering; however regular it may be, it is not strictly static but varies in the shape of its opening continually—and the action of opening itself is changing all the time. It opens and re-opens at its own rate, even if it fits within large biorhythms that are themselves chartable if not always precisely predictable. In this sense, the edges of the openings arise by actions of “new birth” each and every moment, tightening and expanding in ever different ways, however subtle the differences may be. The same is true of the edges of the U.S.-Mexico boundary, *La Frontera*, as I approach it from the north as an American citizen: I am waved through differently each time, depending on such contingencies as which member of the border patrol is on duty when I pass through, how rigorously this person wishes to check cars, the appearance of my car itself, etc. The opening provided for me is continually changing.

Commencement: Boundaries, like instants, are situated at the beginning of an event to which they give rise, intentionally or not; the event emerges from the movement through the boundary and describes what happens on the other side, *al otro lado*: I pass through the check-point in tranquility only to discover a police car waiting to arrest me for not having up-to-date license plates. So, too, fluids that

cross through pores in membranes become part of a physiological event once past the pores: say, a toxic reaction or some other untoward event, or else an unanticipated revitalization. The transmission through a boundary is itself the start of something beginning to happen on the other side. A border, in contrast, closes down upon such a beginning by discouraging the new from occurring—by stopping bodies at the foot of the wall that is erected to arrest the flow of immigrants.

Verticality. Boundaries are typically vertical to the flow that courses through them. So, too, are borders, but their verticality is foreclosing. This is the very point of the border: to keep out undesirable such as undocumented workers and drug dealers at *La Frontera*. Boundaries admit and allow, not because there is a perfect fit in each case but because there is enough latitude to permit movement across them. The leeway is made possible by the verticality of the boundaries themselves. Their rising above the ground sufficiently to make openings possible in their very midst: e.g., doors, gates, windows, and (in the case of the natural world) anything ranging from canyons in Utah to membranous pores in my bodily organs. The verticality that Bachelard singles out as characterizing poetic imagery that surges before and above the reader's receptivity is here carried forward into built and physically or biologically given worlds that presents the over-arching in different scales. The horizontal flow of substances, water and blood alike, pours through these various verticals, creating a vast architecture, a virtual forest, of perpendicularities. Together, the flow and the boundary constitute a continually creative collusion of paired directionalities.

In these three ways (and doubtless others such as the surprising, the accidental, the discontinuous), the edges proffered by boundaries in space rejoin the instants surging forth in time. The parallel is not perfect—the exact way of being novel, commencing, and vertical differs in each case—but they are suggestive of a deep affinity between creative instants and boundaried edges, as well as (by sheer contrast) that between frozen now-points and fixed borders.

IV

Let us return to our point of departure, and re-pose the questions with which I began: Is the instant in time like an edge in space? What is an instant, what is an edge? Is the instant itself an edge in or of time? We are now better situated to answer such questions, and I shall attempt to do so schematically by a final set of reflections on edge and instant in time and space, mixing medium and term in a virtual chiasm of crossing-over.

My first reflection bears on the relation between edge and time: in particular, on *the edge of time*. Strictly speaking, there is no such edge, or else the temporal continuum might come screeching to an abrupt halt—which it manifestly does not do (and, I would argue separately, cannot do). When I fall asleep suddenly, I may seem to go over a sharp edge of time, to “fall off” or “drop off” to sleep, as we say revealingly; yet in fact I am only moving to another level of immanent time itself. To deny any such sheer edge of time belongs to the disclaimer that there is any *end of time*: no time when time itself will not be at all. Even to speak (or think) of a non-time after the end of time is still to think in temporal terms.

But to deny that there is an edge or end of time is not to have to deny that there are edges *in* time. These are the edges of events that are themselves situated in time, and such edges are instances of what I have been calling, quasi-technically, “boundaries.” Events have edges just as they have endings; but neither is of the character of a border, that is to say, a strict and final stoppage that is imposed from elsewhere and that, like a sheer wall, does not admit passage through it. An event has closure, but the closure is not itself closed; it possesses what Heidegger calls “the openness” of “the Open.”⁷⁷ Things happen in it and through it, but they do not go on happening indefinitely; they settle down, and when they do a boundary is formed, an edge established—an edge in a more capacious stretch of time, whether this be a day or a year or a millenium. (And these latter have their own edges in the form of the boundaries of what we call “eras” or “epochs” or “ages.”)

There are further wrinkles in the face of the temporal field. Just as we say that we *edge away* from certain events, so we also *edge to-*

ward them. As we begin to leave Chicago at the end of this meeting, we will feel ourselves to be on its far edge—much as today, the first day (and the first official session!) we sense ourselves getting into the event, edging into it gingerly. As we move toward the middle of our time here—not a precise point but a stretch situated somewhere tomorrow afternoon or evening—we will experience ourselves “in the midst” of SPEP, that is, in a valley of time whose edges are at once before and after us in roughly equal measure. This bivalent circumstance presents yet another edge-structure of being in time: being *between* events or times. (Notice that here we can use these terms interchangeably: Time has become event, and events are the most timeful or timelike units of our experiences here together.) Likewise, yesterday, we were somewhere *before* this meeting in Chicago, just as next Sunday or Monday we shall be *after* it. Thus, we can be on either side of an event, in the midst of it, or coming into (or leaving) its purview. All these structures depend for their existence on edges in time that act like boundaries.

Not only is there a proliferation of such edges—I am convinced that we could describe still others such as the edges at play in meeting people at this gathering (i.e., greeting them, departing from them, etc.)—but their presence is continual in our lives. We live in a virtual edge-world at all times. The same is not true of instants, despite Bachelard’s strong claim to the contrary. For one thing, there are no “instants in space.” That is to say, I cannot reverse the formula I have just been investigating, edges in time, to speak of their exact equivalent in space. Instants belong exclusively to temporality, and cannot be extended to the realm of space, not even metaphorically (or is so, the metaphor will jar rather than fit). For another, instants themselves arise within the immediate context of events, and in particular they occur *within the edges* of those events. As a spatio-temporal term—always having both modalities at once—“event” accommodates edge and instant alike. But it does so only by allowing edges to encompass instants: to enclose them as their encircling internal horizons.

Instants are indeed everything Bachelard claimed of them—radically novel, surprising, flashing up, starting up—but they are this only

within the edges of the events to which they belong. This is so despite the fact that these edges themselves, insofar as they are boundaries, display some of the same traits. But to share same or similar traits is not to belong to the other kind of thing, much less to *be* this kind.

There are no wholly unattached or isolated instants, as Bachelard is tempted to say in his flight from Bergsonian duration. Instants are not the summits of sequential time. Here Bachelard, Bergson, and Heidegger are in accord. But none of these thinkers sufficiently recognize that instants are ensconced within the aegis of temporal edges provided by such definite but anexact stretches as “day “or “night,” “tomorrow,” or “next week.” Understandable as is Bachelard’s impulse to valorize instants to the point of making them the sole constituents of time, as well as the privileged bearers of character and habit, memory and style, they cannot be the last word in the field and flow of human experience.

Bachelardian instants cluster, in the present moment like a corona of fine flashing lights. But they are not only part of the present: The past can return in sparks of sudden memory, and the future is forthcoming in scintillating signs of its imminent emergence. These other instants, not emphasized (though also not excluded) by Bachelard’s analysis, are just as much encompassed by the open edges of events as are those belonging to the present event and its uneven edge. The shower of instants, whatever their provenance, certainly does not configure as a *nacheinander* succession (as in the myth of the now-series, wedded as it is to the time-line); but it is also not an entirely unruly array, coming from nowhere and going nowhere. The panoply of spontaneous,

luminous appearances that instants present us with is situated within the edges of the events in which they inhere. The situatedness can be—often is—quite subtle and not marked as such (were it to be strictly marked, we would be dealing with edges that are borders); but the subtlety does not detract from the fact that edges, acting as boundaries, provide the arena of the instantaneous. The edges that matter offer holding operations that, instead of arising forthrightly (as do instants themselves in their leaping forth), are comparatively subdued but no less forceful for being implied rather than presented as such.

When will SPEP end, what is its outer edge? The program may well proclaim it to be late Saturday afternoon—after the final lecture by Agnes Heller listed in the program at 4:30 p.m.—but the proclamation is in vain, since the meeting will go on in various forms (talking among friends, satellite societies such as IAEP—which begins that same evening at 8:00 p.m.—or just walking around Chicago, etc.). The end of this meeting will edge out toward closure *on that day*, but no exact hour can be given for when that day will end. It *will* end, but we do not know just where its edge will be found.

Meanwhile, all the while, instants will have happened—instants as freely arisen as they are unforeseeable. Just as Bachelard insisted, they will sally forth to surprise us in their sheer singularity. But they will do so only as enclosed within the boundaries furnished by the events that are their carriers—by the edges of these events, edges that act to embrace them, even as edges and instants alike are subtended by the history that is in the making as their common matrix.

ENDNOTES

1. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, trans. F. L. Pogson (New York: Dover, 2001), 98.
2. *Ibid.*, 101; his italics.
3. *Ibid.*, 99.
4. Gaston Bachelard, *L'intuition de l'instant* (Paris: Gonthier, 1966), 2. Hereafter II.
5. The classical passage in James is this: “The practically cognized present is no knife-edge, but a saddle-back, with a certain breadth of its own on which we sit perched, and from which we look in two directions into time.” William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1950), I:609.
6. I owe this last contention to my colleague Peter Manchester. See his magisterial treatment of the issue in *The Syntax of Time* (Rotterdam: Brill, 2004).
7. “The openness of this Open, that is, truth, can be what it is, namely, *this* openness, only if and as long as it establishes itself within its Open.” Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry Language Truth*, trans. A. Hofstadter (New

York: Harper and Row, 1971), 59; his italics. See also *ibid.*, 47: “The world is the self-disclosing openness of the broad paths of the simple and es-

sential decisions in the destiny of an historical people.”

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