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The phenomenon of reciprocal mirroring of Bachelard's study "L'eau et les rêves: essai sur l'imagination de la matière", Debussy's "Des pas sur la neige" and Thaulow's "La Rivière Simoa en hiver"

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The phenomenon of reciprocal mirroring of Bachelard's study *L'eau et les rêves: essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, Debussy's *Des pas sur la neige* and Thaulow's *La Rivière Simoa en hiver*

Mysterious, unfathomable, and endless images of water have for centuries intrigued many artists, philosophers and scientists. Seduced by its metamorphoses and kaleidoscopic water scenes, they frequently have been attracted to this 'onirist' water phenomenon, where they seem to have found the most beautiful works of art. This paper will discuss the works which, although originating from different artistic media, display a corresponding interpretation of the water element. Specifically, bearing in mind the snow as one of the three aggregate states of water, and following the examples of Bachelard's study – *L'eau et les rêves: essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, Debussy's *Des pas sur la neige* and Thaulow's (one of many) landscape evoking winter in Norway – *La Rivière Simoa en hiver*, this paper aims to consider the mutual relationship of their intellection, comprehension, and interpretation of water, and onirist experiences encouraged by specific images of its element.

Gaston Bachelard: Deep – asleep – dead waters

In his study *L'eau et les rêves: essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, Gaston Bachelard deals extensively with the complexity of the water element, *water psyche*, or *type of intimacy* suggested by the depth of water; he also examines the *moral of water*. Bachelard devoted to the water phenomenon this thorough and detailed study. Firstly, this paper focuses on Bachelard's interpretation of the water element, so as to see in what way and to what extent the water phenomenon allows the process of relating diverse subjects. Secondly, this paper studies works of Debussy and Thaulow in order to show the phenomenon of networking of music, philosophical work and fine art (painting).

Bachelard begins his story about the water phenomenon by explaining two concepts: *formal imagination* and *material imagination*. Imagination which is prompted by the forms or shapes, that is, the external appearance of objects is *formal imagination*. Imagination which finds inspiration in the depths, exceeding the variable surfaces and penetrating the very substance is *material imagination*. Surface reflections of water inspire *formal imagination*; however, the author states that surface reflections of water are variable, ephemeral, or deceptive, and that they offer abundant, but simple metaphors.¹ Therefore, Bachelard believes that when *formal imagination* breathes life into these surface 'performances' of water, works of simple, 'low' art are created.² Yet, Bachelard points out that if we penetrate behind surface 'images', we will discover the world of deep, dark, heavy waters, which is a space where the *material imagination* acts because it penetrates the substance, the essence – it will breathe life into those deep 'images' of water that hide 'the entire world of meaning in themselves' and will achieve more stable art.

What is characteristic of deep 'images' of water is that sometimes we cannot distinguish the shadows from the substance, that is, we cannot indicate what is reflected in the water from what has its natural habitat there. One of the quotes Bachelard used to illustrate this phenomenon comes from Eugeni d'Ors (1881–1954) – “The valley was characterized

1 See: Г. Башлар, *Вода и снови. Оглед о имагинацији материје* (G. Bachelard, *Water and Dreams. An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*), Sremski Karlovci-Novı Sad 1998, p. 29.

2 *Ibid.*

by great depth, but the water was so diaphanous that the bottom, which seemed to be composed of innumerable rounded alabaster pebbles, in some brief moments clearly showed itself, that is, always when the eye could resist *not to see* deep down in the turned sky doubled flowers from the hills.”³ So, it is difficult to determine where the reality ends, and where its reflection begins, though, the author (quite justifiably) raises the question of where this reality is at all? Since these two realities are intertwined, they penetrate one another. In other words, water absorbs ‘the images/shadows of reality’, and thus leads to assimilation, the symbiosis of these ‘images’, to a complete fusion of the matter. However, Bachelard states that “water that has absorbed so many powerful reflections and shadows is heavy water (...) It is the heaviest of all the waters.”⁴ Still, it is not only heavy, it is dark, as it absorbs the shadows – dark ‘images’ that soak it with darkness. Bachelard emphasizes this phenomenon by choosing an example from Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) – “The shadow of the trees was falling hard on the water and as it immersed into it, soaking the depths of element with dark.”⁵ Then, further in the text, since it is about dark, heavy ‘images’ of water, the author explores a human emotion – sadness, and writes: “sadness, it is a shadow that falls into the water”;⁶ but to better explain and underline his thought, the author again reaches for the poetry of Edgar Poe, and says: “As long as she was under the influence of beautiful late rays (Fairy), her appearance as if reflected the joy; – but suffering changed her expression when she crossed into shadow area (...) I saw well that, as she walked into the darkness, her shadow broke away from her and disappeared into the dark water, which became even darker.”⁷ Therefore, after the absorption of shadows, i.e. dark suffering or sorrow, water becomes dark, sluggish, hard, or so heavy that it slows its course to complete stillness, hibernation alike. It begins its *mute life*, becomes dead – frozen, because “only water can sleep and preserve its beauty; only water can die, motionless, and preserve its reflections”⁸ just like a frozen ‘image’.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 79.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 74.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 90.

During the interpretation of deep ‘images’ of water, Bachelard also had in mind, which is somewhat noticeable from the previous passages, the thought of Heraclitus that “death is nothing but water”.⁹ The author believes that every living water is about to die, and to observe the water means to flow (away), to dissolve, or to die.¹⁰ However, for the author this is no ordinary death, it is a melancholic death because for Bachelard water is an object of melancholy. This is evidenced by his statement – “The sun itself also cries on the water: Some sort of fluid similar to dew, somniferous, gloomy, dripping from the golden ring (...) This fluid, in the style of alchemy, gives the water the color of universal suffering, the color of tears, which converts the colors of all these lakes, all these wetlands, in the water-mother of human pain, in the matter of melancholy.”¹¹

From the above description, it is not difficult to notice that the ‘images’ of deep, dark or sleepy waters are the images that represent the feelings of anxiety, pain, suffering, sadness, fatigue and other negative sensations.

Interpretation of deep, dark waters of Gaston Bachelard in works *Des pas sur la neige* by Claude Debussy and *La Rivière Simoa en hiver* by Frits Thaulow

The idea to view Debussy’s prelude *Des pas sur la neige* through the prism of the poetics of water arose as a result of my interest in the music of Claude Debussy. After an insight into his work I have noticed that a large number of compositions by their titles,¹² musical language, specific facture,¹³ and verbal indications,¹⁴ undoubtedly relate to characteristics of the water element. Also, I noticed that Debussy in his oeuvre displayed all possible transformations of the water phenom-

9 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

12 *La Mer, Brouillards, Des pas sur la neige, Nuages, Sirènes, Reflets dans l’eau, Jardins sous la pluie, Poissons d’or.*

13 Fast (often rhythmically indefinite) passages, chord decomposition, pedal tones etc.

14 For example: *scintillant* (sparkling), *doux* (soft) *Animé et tumultueux* (live and turbulent), *Profondément calme, dans une brume doucement sonore* (deep and calm in the quiet fog) and so on.

enon, from large orchestral work *La Mer (The Sea, 1903–1905)* to piano miniatures, such as preludes *Brouillards (Mists, Book II, 1912–1913)* and *Des pas sur la neige*, as they offer musical ‘images’ of all three states of the element of water. In this study the focus will be on the interpretation of the melancholic ‘image’ of water in the prelude *Des pas sur la neige*. Incidentally, it is worth mentioning that not every “water” piece of Debussy evokes melancholy. For example, *La mer* and *Reflets dans l'eau (Reflections in the water, 1905)* are very vibrant. However, it should also be mentioned that there are certain compositions that are melancholic despite their fast tempo, as in *La neige qui dance (The snow is dancing, 1908)*.

To match Debussy’s melancholic ‘image’ of the *Des pas sur la neige*, this paper refers to a work of art of similar nature – *La Rivière Simoa en hiver* – by a Norwegian painter Fritz Thaulow. It should be mentioned here that Thaulow’s paintings were present and much appreciated in Paris, especially after 1889, when Salon exhibited some of his snow scenes.¹⁵ What is more, Thaulow was part of the circles of eminent painters, like Monet (Oscar-Claude Monet, 1840–1926), Degas (Edgar Degas, 1834–1917), Gauguin (Eugène Henri Paul Gauguin, 1848–1903), Lerolle (Henry Lerolle, 1848–1929),¹⁶ which shows acceptance and recognition of his works in France. Similarly, the fact that he was often offered, either as gifts or exchanges, works by Rodin (François Auguste René Rodin, 1840–1917), Camille Claudel (1864–1943), Jacques-Émile Blanche (1861–1942)¹⁷ testifies of his esteemed position in the artistic circles of Paris. In France (as well as in Britain, Germany, United States) Thaulow was known as a “painter of the running stream, of the effects of light upon the snow, of the twilight that suggests more than it reveals”.¹⁸ Debussy harbored affection for all these features, and particularly for the northern melancholy displayed in the painter’s works on snow (which Debussy had the opportunity to see at Lerolle’s

15 E.H. Moore, *Fritz Thaulow, Norway's Master of Color*, "Brush and Pencil" 1903, Vol. 13, No. 1, p. 9, [online] <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25505945> [accessed: 26.07.2016], p. 9.

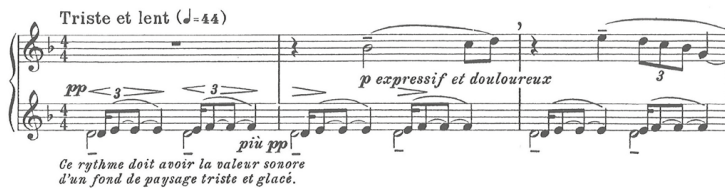
16 J.-M. Nectoux, *Portrait of the artist as Roderick Usher*, in: *Debussy studies*, R.L. Smith (ed.), New York 1997, p. 115.

17 *Ibid.*

18 E.E. Grant, *The Art of Fritz Thaulow*, "Brush and Pencil" 1906, Vol. 18, No. 5, p. 208. [online] <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25504072> [accessed: 26.07.2016].

home).¹⁹ Therefore, we assume that Thaulow's art inspired certain Debussy's compositions and, following this assumption, the analysis of Debussy's *Des pas sur la neige* will be done along Thaulow's *La Rivière Simoa en hiver*.

The beginning of Debussy's prelude is marked by verbal indications, like *Triste et lent* (*sad and slow*) and, for the rhythm of steps/footprints, *Ce rythme doit avoir la valeur sonore d'un fond de paysage triste et glacé* (*This rhythm should sound like a sad, frozen landscape*); pianissimo dynamics; low register; and tonality of D-minor (see Example 1).



Example 1. Claude Debussy, *Des pas sur la neige*, *Triste et lent* (mm. 1-3).²⁰

Noticeably, all the dimensions of the initial musical thought allow us, at the very beginning of the piece, to recognise the correspondence between the prelude and Bachelard's interpretation of deep, dark and sleepy waters. In other words, the slow tempo suggests hard or heavy water, the quiet dynamics stand for *mute waters*, second and D-minor third evokes feelings of sadness and melancholy, whereas the verbal descriptions clearly indicate the notion of frozen, motionless, or sleeping water. Therefore, the very musical language (along with written remarks) completely justifies the thought of the phenomenon of mutual 'mirroring' of the prelude and Bachelard's interpretation of sleeping waters. Moreover, the atmosphere of the prelude and the still, frozen waters corresponds with the aforementioned work of Frits Thaulow.

19 J.-M. Nectoux, *Portrait of the artist as Roderick Usher...*, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

20 All music examples are taken from the website: <http://imslp.org/> – which represents International Music Score Library Project. Category: Claude Debussy, *Préludes* (Book I and Book II) – Schirmer Edition, 1972.

The painting (*La Rivière Simoa en hiver*, see Example 2), despite a large area of white, shows dark and gloomy atmosphere, reinforced with the shadow of the trees reflected in the water.



Example 2. Frits Thaulow, *La Rivière Simoa en hiver*.²¹

Therefore, in this painting it is possible to perceive Bachelard's statement on Edgar Poe – *The shadow of the trees was falling hard on the water and as it immersed into it, soaking the depths of element with dark*. Having absorbed the shadows, or dark suffering, the image of water in Thaulow's work is dark, heavy and sleepy directly responding to Bachelard's dark and sleepy waters. Then, in Thaulow's painting, the darkness of the flowing water is so strong that it overpowers the surface of the snow and frozen water, making it dark. In this way we face a phenomenon also discussed by Bachelard – touching, overlapping, intertwining of two 'realities' and complete unity of matter. Interestingly, in addition to the shadows of the trees, plunging into the non-frozen water the painting also shows the footprints in the snow, in solid, frozen water. They testify of the previous movement

²¹ Painting is taken from the website: <http://www.allpaintings.org/>. Category: Impressionism, Frits Thaulow, *Winter at Simoa river* (pastel on canvas), posted: 11.12.2002.

of the protagonist, whose footprints have branded the sleepy solid, snowy water altering its surface. However, while analysing the painting in-depth, we see that the distance between the steps becomes smaller. More precisely, the footprints closer to the 'surface' of the painting are clearly reflected, and then the prints are becoming blurred and it seems that the distance between them is getting smaller – suggesting difficult, weaker movement and tiredness. A similar pattern of footprints can be observed in Debussy's prelude. However, before we move onto the musical interpretation, it is necessary to point out certain characteristics of the very motif that represents footprints. Debussy created the motif of steps or footprints by building a double-layer (but only in the part of the right hand): tone D, the lowest tone in the first four bars of the prelude, is the first or lower layer, whereas the upward movement D-E and E-F is the second or upper layer that continues to tone D and is sustained. The motif of steps/footprints permeates the entire prelude (out of 36 bars of the prelude, the main motif appears in 24) and its deeper layer, that is, tone D appears as an pedal tone. Consequently, we can conclude that tone D represents the basis, frozen water and that the upward movement D-E and E-F presents the steps/footprints. Debussy represented the progression of steps (D-E, E-F) with a specific pattern – reverse syncopated rhythm, so the emphasis on the weak part of the bar creates the impression of a slow, difficult pace. Once we found out what in prelude is the ground, frozen water, and what the steps are, we can focus on the presentation of the musical 'path' of the steps or footprints.

In the first section of the prelude (bars 1-15), the 'path' starts from the lowest layer of facture through the middle towards (after one-bar interruption, or more precisely, absence of the motif) the highest voice ends with a halt (i.e. four-measure absence of a motif). After the mentioned interruption, the line continues in the second section (bars 16-36) of the prelude while moving from the highest to the middle voice, and (after one-bar absence of the motif) again in the highest voice in which it ends. Therefore, as in Thaulow's painting, the trajectory of steps/footprints in the prelude has some interruptions, which the composer uses to imply that the protagonist falters. Also, when the composer in the second section of the prelude presents and six times repeats only the second part of the motif (E-F; b. 21-24, see Example 3), he thereby reduces the distance between the two appearances of the motifs, or, indicates a decrease in the distance between the steps.

Example 3. Claude Debussy, *Des pas sur la neige*, *Triste et lent* (mm. 19-28).

In other words, in the prelude, and in the painting *La Rivière Simoa en hiver*, steps/footprints are at the beginning of the work clearly established, but as the composition develops, after shorter and longer delays, steps are getting smaller and eventually disappear or dissolve. The last occurrence of the motif in the prelude is given in octaves in the high register. Compared to the previous stream and the previous occurrence of the motif in the composition, the octave presentation of the motifs creates a sound impression that the motive dissolves and this also relates to the picture of Frits Thaulow since on his painting footprints in the snow are lost at the point where the protagonist stands in front of the body of quiet (as if sleeping), dark water and observes its flow. This very image brings to life Bachelard's words: "to observe the water means to flow (away), dissolve, die". Debussy's prelude also evokes a similar image – the composition is "set at the very boundary of silence"²² and as the music progresses, the flow becomes quieter (*pp* – *p* – *più piano* – *pp* – *ppp*), the ebbing of the musical flow also follows the slowing of the tempo (the prelude starts *Triste et lent/slow and sad*, and ends with *Plus lent/slower*, and *Très lent/very slow*). At the end of

22 See: Т. Поповић Млађеновић, *Клод Дебиси (1862-1918) и његово доба. Од „Змаја из Алке“ до „Залубљеног фауна“* (Т. Popović Mladenović, *Claude Debussy /1862-1918/ and his time. From 'Les dragons d'Alca' to 'Le faune amoureux'*) Београд: Парал – Музичка омладина Србије, 2008, p. 75.

the composition (after the motif has dissolved), the composer marks *morendo* (*dying*) and in *ppp* dynamics sounds (held long) the tonic chord of D-minor (see Ex. 4).

The image shows a musical score for Claude Debussy's 'Des pas sur la neige'. It consists of two systems of piano and vocal staves. The first system is for the vocal line, starting with the instruction 'un tendre et triste regret' and a dynamic marking of *p*. The second system is for the piano accompaniment, starting with 'Plus lent' and a dynamic marking of *pp*. The piano part features a rhythmic motif of steps in the right hand and a melody in the left hand. The tempo markings 'Plus lent' and 'Très lent' are present. The score concludes with a *morendo* marking and a final *ppp* dynamic. Below the score, the text '(...Des pas sur la neige)' is written.

Example 4. Claude Debussy, *Des pas sur la neige*, *Triste et lent* (mm. 29-36).

Hence, the prelude also fully captures the image of dark, heavy water which (as the composition develops) becomes heavier, slows its course, bringing it to complete stillness and eventually begins its *mute life*. The course of the prelude can be described by Poe's verses quoted by Bachelard in his essay: "Caressing music gradually dies away in the murmur which was becoming weaker, until the entire stream eventually again returns to its original solemn silence."²³

Having discussed in detail the rhythmic motif of the preludes, it is necessary to briefly mention the characteristics of other components of the musical composition. Beginning in the second bar the rhythmic motif of steps is joined by the melody, realized in short strokes, almost fragmentary and based on the whole tone scale, and then modal diatonic. In addition to the melody, it is important to mention the diatonic and chromatic chords which together with the rhythmic motif and melody form the already mentioned three-layer texture of the work. Using these chords, or more specifically, chro-

23 G. Bachelard, *Water and Dreams...*, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

matic movements (created by the chords) the composer broke the purity and whiteness of a pattern of footprints and modal diatonic, thus bringing more vivid expression into the melancholic flow of the prelude. A corresponding strategy can be spotted in Thaulow's painting, where the uniformity of dark and gloomy atmosphere of the painting is transformed by the orange cottage and blue smoke – these are the only representations of life in the painting, just as the chromatic movements are moments of intensification of a melancholic prelude. Also, it is very interesting how this triple sound image of the prelude presented by whole tone scale, modal and chromatic movements is reflected in Thaulow's painting in which the three layers are expressed in colors: from the gentle and bright white color of snow, through the dark color of non-frozen water and trees, to the vivid colors of orange and blue on the cottage.

Therefore, following the analytical and comparative approach, we have shown that three different works of art, through their representation of the water phenomenon can be stored and interpreted in the same poetic space, where they, as it turns out, very closely resonate. This interpretation of the analysed works is, of course, only one of many possible meanings they convey. In other words, when we think we have reached an end point, their contents trigger new questions, such as – whether the end of the path of steps/footprints (both in the painting and the prelude) means the end of the road. In the painting of Frits Thaulow we notice that the steps/footprints are lost at the point when the protagonist is standing in front of the vastness of dark, heavy water as if looking at a remote cottage (the only sign of life), but cannot reach it, and remains motionless, drowning in this dark, somniferous, and melancholic scenery (along with a solitary tree that has almost the same shape as the figure of the protagonist). This immobility of the protagonist seems to suggest that, as in the prelude (slowing the tempo, quieting the dynamics with *morendo*), the heart rate (of the protagonist) is dying away and disappearing, everything dissolves. These issues could presumably raise some new questions, as if we were in a multiple (literary-musical-visual) maze offering a new solution at each level, and yet, it is never the final one. On the contrary, it is always a key to a new door, and a new interpretation.

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between Bachelard's (Gaston Bachelard, 1884–1962) philosophical comprehension of the water element, Debussy's (Claude Debussy, 1862–1918) musical interpretation of the water phenomenon and Thaulow's (Frits Thaulow, 1847–1906) intellection of the same element in painting. More precisely, having in mind the snow as one of aggregate states of water, I will explore via examples of Bachelard's study on water and dreams – *L'eau et les rêves: essai sur l'imagination de la matière* (*Water and Dreams. An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, 1942), Debussy's composition *Des pas sur la neige* (*Footprints in the snow*, Book I, 1909–1910) and Thaulow's piece *La Rivière Simoa en hiver* (*Winter at Simoa river* – from a series of images of the Simoa river, unknown date), the reciprocal relationship of their artistic perception, as well as their interpretation of the water phenomenon.

These three authors have devoted a significant “expanse” of their oeuvres to their interpretation of the phenomenon of water. In the mentioned “expanse”, their creative interpretations encounter, intertwine, and interrelate. In other words, in this “expanse” of interpretation of the *water psyche*, we can detect the correspondence between Bachelard's, Debussy's and Thaulow's *poetics of the water vastness*. Therefore, through the analytical and comparative approaches, my aim is to emphasize the correspondence among Bachelard's (philosophical), Debussy's (musical) and Thaulow's (painterly) representations of the water element and to demonstrate which compositional and expressive methods Debussy employs to embody his understanding of the phenomenon in question.

Keywords

music, philosophy, painting, water

Abstrakt

Zjawisko wzajemnych odbić lustrzanych studium Bachelarda *L'eau et les rêves: essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, Debussy'ego *Des pas sur la neige* i Thaulowa *Winter in Norway*

W niniejszym artykule zostanie omówiony związek między filozoficznym pojmowaniem żywiołu wody Bachelarda (Gaston Bachelard, 1884–1962), muzyczną interpretacją wodnego fenomenu autorstwa Debussy'ego (Claude Debussy, 1862–1918) oraz sposobem, w jaki postrzega go w malarstwie Thaulow (Frits Thaulow, 1847–1906). Doprecyzowując, zanalizuję relacje pomiędzy artystyczną percepcją a interpretacjami zjawiska wody na przykładzie studium Bachelarda dotyczącego wody i marzeń *L'eau et les rêves: essai sur l'imagination de la matière* (*Woda i marzenia. Studium wyobrażeń o materii*, 1942), kompozycji Debussy'ego *Des pas sur la neige* (*Ślady na śniegu*, Zeszyt I, 1909–1910) oraz dzieła Thaulowa *La Riviere Simoa en hiver* (*Zima na rzece Simoa* – obraz wchodzący w skład serii przedstawień rzeki Simoa, nieznanego czasu powstania), nie zapominając przy tym, że śnieg jest jednym ze stanów skupienia wody.

Wyżej wymienieni autorzy poświęcili znaczący obszar swojej twórczości zjawisku wody. Na wspomnianym polu ich twórcze interpretacje spotykają się, przeplatają i oddziałują na siebie wzajemnie. Innymi słowy, w przestrzeni interpretacji „ducha wody” możemy dostrzec powiązania między „poetyką bezmiaru wody” Bachelarda, Debussy'ego i Thaulowa. W związku z tym moim celem będzie zaakcentowanie pokrewieństwa w pojmowaniu żywiołu wody przez Bachelarda (ujęcie filozoficzne), Debussy'ego (muzyczne) i Thaulowa (malarzkie), a także pokazanie technik kompozytorskich i środków wyrazu, których użył Debussy, by ukazać swoje pojmowanie tego zjawiska.

Słowa kluczowe

muzyka, filozofia, malarstwo, woda

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