

INTRODUCTION

De lui à moi, pas de discours.

—*Gaston Bachelard*

“1933: the thunderclap of the thousand-year Reich, that intolerable prospect. . . . So into exile, with wife and child, destination Paris!”¹ Writing three years before his death in 1994, Albert Flocon is describing how his younger self, Albert Mentzel, experienced his exodus. He would spend the rest of his life in France.

This essay is about the encounter between Albert Flocon (1909–1994) and Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962), which began in the art circles of postwar Paris and continued for somewhat more than a decade, from the late 1940s to the end of the 1950s. The episode and the works to which it gave rise have attracted no detailed attention either from the philosophy of science or from the history of art.² They form the object of the present essay. A number of years ago, starting from an interest in Bachelard’s epistemology, in particular his views on experimentation, I became aware of this connection between an engraver and a philosopher of science, a theorist of perspective and a theorist of poetics. A closer look at their works soon convinced me that this was a unique opportunity to investigate the interplay of hand and matter in poetic writing, in the art of engraving, and in scientific experimentation; it would allow me to explore the links and contiguities between those activities. My longstanding interest in the history and epistemology of the

experiment as a form of rationality that is essentially embodied—in the hand of the experimenter as well as in the objects of manipulation—would find, so I hoped, new food for thought in this peculiar encounter. And I realized it would enable me to bring the two sides of Bachelard's oeuvre, his studies of the contemporary sciences and his reflections on literary writing, to bear on each other. Usually, Bachelard's epistemology and his poetology are kept in different boxes. Here, they appeared to me to come together on the terrain of an engraver's art, in the reflections of its making and the stories to which it gave rise.

The short chapters of this essay follow the encounter between Bachelard and Flocon in an essentially chronological manner, and they are organized themselves as encounters, each with one of the works initiating or resulting from their collaboration. The chapters provide glimpses into each of these works—that is, they proceed in an exemplary rather than an exhaustive fashion. My study can also be read as a contribution to an archaeology of situated knowledge in general, and of tactile knowledge in particular. Hands figure prominently throughout Flocon's work and Bachelard's musings on the elements, and so do they here. Above all, however, the piece is an homage to the two protagonists.