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BOSTON

# THE POETICS OF SPACE

THE CLASSIC LOOK AT HOW WE  
EXPERIENCE INTIMATE PLACES

GASTON  
BACHELARD

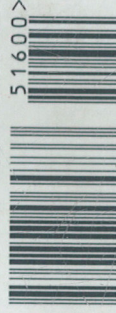
WITH A NEW FOREWORD

BY JOHN R. STILLGOE

THE POETICS OF SPACE GASTON BACHELARD



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4  
nests

*Je cueillis un nid dans le squelette du lierre  
Un nid doux de mousse champêtre et herbe de songe.*

YVAN COLL, *Tombeau du père*, in *Poètes d'aujourd'hui*, 50.  
Ed. Seghers, p. 156.

(I found a nest in the skeleton of the ivy  
A soft nest of country moss and dream herb.)

*Nids blancs vos oiseaux vont fleurir  
.....  
Vous volerez, sentiers de plume.*

ROBERT GANZO, *L'oeuvre poétique*  
Ed. Grasset, p. 63.

(White nests your birds will flower  
.....  
You will fly, feather paths.)

In one short sentence, Victor Hugo associates the images and beings of the function of inhabiting. For Quasimodo, he says,<sup>1</sup> the cathedral had been successively "egg, nest, house, country and universe." "One might almost say that he had espoused its form the way a snail does the form of its shell. It was his home, his hole, his envelope . . . He adhered to it, as it were, like a turtle to its carapace. This rugged cathedral was his armor." All of these images were needed to tell how an unfortunate creature assumed the

<sup>1</sup> Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, book IV, § 3.

contorted forms of his numerous hiding-places in the corners of this complex structure. In this way, by multiplying his images, the poet makes us aware of the powers of the various refuges. But he immediately adds a sign of modulation to the abundance of images. "It is useless," he continues, "to warn the reader not to take literally the figures of speech that I am obliged to use here to express the strange, symmetrical, immediate, almost consubstantial flexibility of a man and an edifice."

It is striking that even in our homes, where there is light, our consciousness of well-being should call for comparison with animals in their shelters. An example may be found in the following lines by the painter, Vlaminck, who, when he wrote them, was living quietly in the country:<sup>1</sup> "The well-being I feel, seated in front of my fire, while bad weather rages out-of-doors, is entirely animal. A rat in its hole, a rabbit in its burrow, cows in the stable, must all feel the same contentment that I feel." Thus, well-being takes us back to the primitiveness of the refuge. Physically, the creature endowed with a sense of refuge, huddles up to itself, takes to cover, hides away, lies snug, concealed. If we were to look among the wealth of our vocabulary for verbs that express the dynamics of retreat, we should find images based on animal movements of withdrawal, movements that are engraved in our muscles. How psychology would deepen if we could know the psychology of each muscle! And what a quantity of animal beings there are in the being of a man! But our research does not go that far. It would already be a good deal if we were able to enhance the value of these images of refuge by showing that by understanding them, in a way, we live them.

With nests and, above all, shells, we shall find a whole series of images that I am going to try to characterize as primal images; images that bring out the primitiveness in us. I shall then show that a human being likes to "withdraw into his corner," and that it gives him physical pleasure to do so.

<sup>1</sup> Vlaminck, *Poliment*, 1931, p. 52.

## II

Already, in the world of inanimate objects, extraordinary significance is attached to nests. We want them to be perfect, to bear the mark of a very sure instinct. We ourselves marvel at this instinct, and a nest is generally considered to be one of the marvels of animal life. An example of this much vaunted perfection may be found in one of Ambroise Paré's works:<sup>1</sup> "The enterprise and skill with which animals make their nests is so efficient that it is not possible to do better, so entirely do they surpass all masons, carpenters and builders; for there is not a man who would be able to make a house better suited to himself and to his children than these little animals build for themselves. This is so true, in fact, that we have a proverb according to which men can do everything except build a bird's nest."

A book that is limited to facts soon dampens this enthusiasm, as, for instance, Arthur Landborough Thomson's book, in which we are told that nests are often barely started, and at times, botched. "When the golden eagle nests in a tree, it sometimes makes an enormous pile of branches to which every year it adds others, until one day the entire thing falls to pieces under its own weight."<sup>2</sup> Between enthusiasm and scientific criticism one could find countless shades of opinion if one followed the history of ornithology. But this is not our subject. Let us note in passing, however, that we have here a controversy over values that often deforms the facts on both sides. And who knows if this fall, not of the eagle, but of the eagle's nest, does not furnish the author with the minor delight of being disrespectful!

## III

Positively speaking, there is nothing more absurd than images that attribute *human* qualities to a nest. For a bird,

<sup>1</sup> Ambroise Paré, *Le livre des animaux et de l'intelligence de l'homme. Oeuvres complètes*, édition J. F. Malgaigne, vol. III, p. 740.

<sup>2</sup> A. Landborough Thomson, *Birds*. Reference is to French translation (ed. Cluny, 1934), p. 104.

a nest is no doubt a good warm home, it is even a life-giving home, since it continues to shelter the bird that has come out of the egg. It also serves as a sort of downy coverlet for the baby bird until its quite naked skin grows its own down. But why hasten to make a human image, an image for man's use, out of such a paltry thing? The ridiculous nature of this image would become evident if the cosy "little nest," the warm "little nest" that lovers promise each other, were actually compared with the real nest, lost in the foliage. Among birds, need I recall, love is a strictly extracurricular affair, and the nest is not built until later, when the mad love-chase across the fields is over. If we were obliged to reflect upon all this and deduce from it a lesson for human beings, we should have to evolve a dialectics of forest love and love in a city room. But this is not our subject, either. Only someone like André Theuriot would compare a garret to a nest, and accompany the comparison with the following single remark: "Haven't dreams always liked to perch on high?"<sup>1</sup> In short, in literature, the nest image is generally childish.

The "nest" that is "lived" was therefore a poor image to start with. And yet it has certain initial virtues which a phenomenologist who likes simple problems, can discover. It offers a fresh opportunity to do away with misunderstandings as to the principal function of philosophical phenomenology. For it is not the task of this phenomenology to describe the nests met with in nature, which is a quite positive task reserved for ornithologists. A beginning of a philosophical phenomenology of nests would consist in our being able to elucidate the interest with which we look through an album containing reproductions of nests, or, even more positively, in our capacity to recapture the naïve wonder we used to feel when we found a nest. This wonder is lasting, and today when we discover a nest it takes us back to our childhood or, rather, to a childhood; to the childhoods we should have had. For not many of us have been endowed by life with the full measure of its cosmic implications.

<sup>1</sup> André Theuriot, *Colette*, p. 209.

How many times, in my garden, I have experienced the disappointment of discovering a nest too late. Autumn was there, the leaves had already begun to fall and in the fork of two branches there was an abandoned nest. To think that they had all been there: the father bird, the mother bird and the nestlings. And I had not seen them!

An empty nest found belatedly in the woods in winter, mocks the finder. A nest is a hiding-place for winged creatures. How could it have remained invisible? Invisible from above, and yet far from the more dependable hiding-places on the ground? But since, in order to determine the shades of being in an image, we must add a super-impression to it, here is a legend that carries the imagination of an invisible nest to its utmost point. It is taken from Charbonneau-Lassay's very fine book: *Le bestiaire du Christ*.<sup>1</sup> "People used to think that the hoopoe bird could hide entirely from the sight of all living creatures, which explains the fact that, at the end of the Middle Ages, it was still believed that there was a multicolored herb in the hoopoe's nest which made a man invisible when he wore it."

This may be Yvan Goll's "dream herb."

But the dreams of today do not go this far, and an abandoned nest no longer contains the herb of invisibility. Indeed, the nest we pluck from the hedge like a dead flower, is nothing but a "thing." I have the right to take it in my hands and pull it apart. In melancholy mood, I become once more a man of the fields and thickets, and a bit vain at being able to hand on my knowledge to a child, I say: "This is the nest of a timouse."

And so the old nest enters into the category of objects. The more varied the objects, the simpler the concept. But as our collection of nests grows, our imagination remains idle, and we lose contact with living nests.

And yet it is living nests that could introduce a phenomenology of the actual nest, of the nest found in natural surroundings, and which becomes for a moment the center—the term is no exaggeration—of an entire universe, the evidence of a cosmic situation. Gently I lift a branch. In

<sup>1</sup> L. Charbonneau-Lassay, *Le bestiaire du Christ*, Paris, 1940, p. 489.

the nest is a setting bird. But it doesn't fly away, it only quivers a little. I tremble at having caused it to tremble. I am afraid that this setting bird will realize that I am a man, a being that has lost the confidence of birds. I remain motionless. Slowly the bird's fear and my own fear of causing fear are allayed—or so I imagine. I breathe easily again, and let go of the branch. I'll come back tomorrow. Today, I am happy, because some birds have built a nest in my garden.

And the next day when I come back, walking more softly than the day before, I see eight pink-white eggs in the bottom of the nest. But how small they are! How small these thicker eggs are!

This is a living, inhabited nest. A nest is a bird's house. I've known this for a long time, people have told it to me for a long time. In fact, it is such an old story that I hesitate to repeat it, even to myself. And yet, I have just re-experienced it. And I recall very clearly days in my life when I found a live nest. Such genuine recollections as these are rare in life. And how well I understand these lines from Toussenet's *Le monde des oiseaux*:<sup>1</sup> "My recollection of the first bird's nest that I found all by myself has remained more deeply engraved in my memory than that of the a first prize I won in grammar school for a Latin version. It was a lovely inner's nest with four pinkish-gray eggs striated with red lines, like an emblematical map. I was seized with an emotion of such indescribable delight that I stood there for over an hour, glued to one spot, looking. That day, by chance, I found my vocation." What a fine passage for those who are always looking for primal interests! And the fact that from the start, Toussenet reacted with such "emotion," helps us to understand that he should have succeeded in integrating the entire harmonic philosophy of a Fourier in both his life and work, and even added an emblematical life of universal dimensions to the life of a bird.

<sup>1</sup> A. Toussenet, *Le monde des oiseaux*, Ornithologie passionnelle, Paris 1893, p. 32.

But in everyday life too, for a man who lives in the woods and fields, the discovery of a nest is always a source of fresh emotion. Fernand Leguenne, the botanist, writes that one day while walking with his wife, Marilda, he saw a warbler's nest in a black hawthorne bush: "Marilda knelt down and, holding out one finger, barely touched the soft moss, then withdrew her finger, only leaving it outstretched . . ."

"Suddenly I began to tremble.

"I had just discovered the feminine significance of a nest set in the fork of two branches. The thicket took on such a human quality that I called out: 'Don't touch it, above all, don't touch it!'"<sup>1</sup>

## IV

Trousseau's "emotion" and Leguenne's "trembling" both bear the mark of sincerity. I have recalled them in my reading, since it is in books that we enjoy the surprise of "discovering a nest." Let us pursue our search for nests in literature. The following is an example in which the author sets the domiciliary value of the nest one tone higher. It is taken from the *Journals* of Henry David Thoreau, March 17, 1858. Here the entire tree, for the bird, is the vestibule of the nest. Already, a tree that has the honor of sheltering a nest participates in its mystery. For a bird, a tree is already a refuge. Thoreau tells of a green woodpecker that took an entire tree for its home. He compares this taking possession with the joy of a family that returns to live in a house it had long since abandoned.

"It is as when a family, your neighbors, return to an empty house after a long absence, and you hear the cheerful hum of voices and the laughter of children, and see the smoke from the kitchen fire. The doors are thrown open, and children go screaming through the hall. So the flicker dashes through the aisles of the grove, throws up a window here and cackles out it, and then there, airing the house. It makes its voice ring up-stairs and down-stairs, and

<sup>1</sup> Fernand Leguenne, *Plantes sauvages*, p. 269.

so, as it were, fits it for its habitation and ours, and takes possession."

In this passage Thoreau gives an expanded version of both nest and house. We are struck too by the fact that the text comes alive in both directions of the metaphor: the happy household is a flourishing nest. The woodpecker's confidence in the shelter of the tree in which it has hidden its nest, represents taking possession of a home. Here we leave well behind us the implications of comparisons and allegories. A reasonable critic will no doubt consider that this woodpecker "proprietor," who appears at the window of the tree and sings on its balcony, is an "exaggeration." But a poetic spirit will be grateful to Thoreau for giving it, with this nest that has the dimensions of a tree, a fullness of image. A tree becomes a nest the moment a great dreamer hides in it. In his *Mémoires d'Outre-tombe*, Chateaubriand made the following confidential note: "I had set up my headquarters, like a nest, in one of these willows, and there, isolated between heaven and earth, I spent hours among the warblers."

And the fact is that, in a garden, we grow more attached to a tree inhabited by birds. However mysterious and invisible among the leaves the green-garbed woodpecker may be at times, he nevertheless becomes familiar to us. For a woodpecker is not a silent dweller. It is not when he sings, however, that we think of him, but when he works. Up and down the tree-trunk, his beak pecks the wood with resounding taps, and although he frequently disappears, we still hear him. He is a garden worker.

And so the woodpecker enters into my sound world and I make a salutary image of him for my own use. In my Paris apartment, when a neighbor drives nails into the wall at an undue hour, I "naturalize" the noise by imagining that I am in my house in Dijon, where I have a garden. And finding everything I hear quite natural, I say to myself: "That's my woodpecker at work in the acacia tree." This is my method for obtaining calm when things disturb me.

v

A nest, like any other image of rest and quiet, is immediately associated with the image of a simple house. When we pass from the image of a nest to the image of a house, and *vice versa*, it can only be in an atmosphere of *simplicity*. Van Gogh, who painted numerous nests, as well as numerous peasant cottages, wrote to his brother: "The cottage, with its thatched roof, made me think of a wren's nest."<sup>1</sup> For a painter, it is probably *twice* as interesting if, while painting a nest, he dreams of a cottage and, while painting a cottage, he dreams of a nest. It is as though one dreamed twice, in two registers, when one dreams of an image cluster such as this. For the simplest image is doubled; it is itself and something else than itself. Van Gogh's thatched cottages are overlaid with thatch. Thick, coarsely plaited straw emphasizes the will to provide shelter by extending well beyond the walls. Indeed, in this instance, among all the shelter virtues, the roof is the dominant evidence. Under the roof's covering the walls are of earth and stone. The openings are low. A thatched cottage is set on the ground like a nest in a field.

And a wren's nest is a thatched cottage, because it is covered, round nest. The Abbé Vincelot has described it as follows: "The wren builds its nest in the form of a very round ball, in the bottom of which it makes a small hole to let the water out. Usually this hole is hidden beneath a branch, and I have often examined a nest from every angle before noticing this opening, which also serves as entrance for the female bird."<sup>2</sup> By living Van Gogh's nest-cottage in its obvious liaison, the words suddenly seem to jest. I like to tell myself that a little king lives in that cottage. Here is certainly a fairy-tale image, an image that suggests any number of tales.

<sup>1</sup> Van Gogh, *Lettres à Théo*, p. 12 (French translation).

<sup>2</sup> Vincelot, *Les noms des oiseaux expliqués par leurs moeurs, ou essais étymologiques sur l'ornithologie*, Angers, 1867, p. 233.

vi

A nest-house is never young. Indeed, speaking as a pedant, we might say that it is the natural habitat of the function of inhabiting. For not only do we *come back* to it, but we dream of coming back to it, the way a bird comes back to its nest, or a lamb to the fold. This sign of *return* marks an infinite number of daydreams, for the reason that human returning takes place in the great rhythm of human life, a rhythm that reaches back across the years and, through the dream, combats all absence. An intimate component of faithful loyalty reacts upon the related images of nest and house.

In this domain, everything takes place simply and delicately. The soul is so sensitive to these simple images that it hears all the resonances in a harmonic reading. Reading on the conceptual level, on the other hand, would be insipid and cold; it would be purely linear. For here we are asked to understand the images one after the other. And in this domain of the nest image the lines are so simple that one is surprised at the poet's delight in them. But simplicity brings forgetfulness, and suddenly we feel grateful toward the poet who has the talent to renew it with such rare felicity. No phenomenologist could help reacting to this renewal of such a simple image. We are deeply moved when we read Jean Caubère's simple poem entitled: *Le nid tiède* (The warm nest). This poem becomes all the more meaningful when one considers that it appeared in a rather austere volume on the theme of the desert:<sup>1</sup>

*Le nid tiède et calme*

*Où chante l'oiseau*

.....

*Rappelle les chansons, les charmes*

*Le seuil pur*

*De la vieille maison.*

<sup>1</sup> Jean Caubère, *Déserts*, p. 25. Debrasse, Paris.

(The warm, calm nest  
In which a bird sings

.....  
Recalls the songs, the charms,  
The pure threshold  
Of my old home.)

And here the threshold is a hospitable threshold, one that does not intimidate us by its majesty. The two images: the calm nest and the old home, weave the sturdy web of intimacy on the dream loom. And the images are all simple ones, with no attempt at picturesqueness. The poet rightly thought that, at the mention of a nest, a bird's song, and the charms that take us back to the old home, to the first home, a sort of musical chord would sound in the soul of the reader. But in order to make so gentle a comparison between house and nest, one must have lost the house that stood for happiness. So there is also an *alas* in this song of tenderness. If we return to the old home as to a nest, it is because memories are dreams, because the home of other days has become a great image of lost intimacy.

## VII

Thus values alter facts. The moment we love an image, it cannot remain the copy of a fact. One of the greatest of dreamers of winged life, Jules Michelet, has given us fresh evidence of this. And yet he only devotes a few pages to "bird architecture." But these are pages that think and dream at the same time.

According to Michelet, a bird is a worker without tools. It has "neither the hand of the squirrel, nor the teeth of the beaver." "In reality," he writes, "a bird's tool is its own body, that is, its breast, with which it presses and tightens its materials until they have become absolutely pliant, well-blended and adapted to the general plan."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jules Michelet, *Leoiseau*, 4th edition, 1858, p. 208 etc. Joseph Joubert (*Pensées*, Vol. 11, p. 167) has also written: "It would be interesting to find out if the forms that birds give their nests, without ever having seen a nest, have not some analogy with their own inner constitutions."

And Michelet suggests a house built by and for the body, taking form from the inside, like a shell, in an intimacy that works physically. The form of the nest is commanded by the inside. "On the inside," he continues, "the instrument that prescribes a circular form for the nest is nothing else but the body of the bird. It is by constantly turning round and round and pressing back the walls on every side, that it succeeds in forming this circle." The female, like a living tower, hollows out the house, while the male brings back from the outside all kinds of materials, sturdy twigs and other bits. By exercising an active pressure, the female makes this into a felt-like padding.

Michelet goes on: "The house is a bird's very person; it is its form and its most immediate effort, I shall even say, its suffering. The result is only obtained by constantly repeated pressure of the breast. There is not one of these blades of grass that, in order to make it curve and hold the curve, has not been pressed on countless times by the bird's breast, its heart, surely with difficulty in breathing, perhaps even, with palpitations."

What an incredible inversion of images! Here we have the breast created by the embryo. Everything is a matter of inner pressure, physically dominant intimacy. The nest is a swelling fruit, pressing against its limits.

From the depths of what daydreams do such images arise? They might come, of course, from the dream of the protection that is closest to us, a protection adapted to our bodies. Dreams of a garment-house are not unfamiliar to those who indulge in the imaginary exercise of the function of inhabiting. And if we were to work at our dwelling-places the way Michelet dreams of his nest, we should not be wearing the ready-made clothes, so often viewed with disfavor by Bergson. On the contrary, each one of us would have a personal house of his own, a nest for his body, padded to his measure. In Romain Rolland's novel, *Colas Breugnot*, when, after a life of trials, the leading character is offered a larger, more convenient house, he refuses it as being a garment that would not fit him. "Either it would

hang on me too loosely," he says, "or I should make it burst at the seams."<sup>1</sup>

By following the nest images collected by Michelet to the human level, we realize that, from the start, these were human images. It is even doubtful if an ornithologist would describe the building of a nest the way Michelet does, and a nest built in this way would have to be called a Michelet nest. Phenomenologists will use it to test the dynamics of a strange sort of withdrawal, which is active and in a state of constant renewal. This is not a dynamics of insomnia, during which we turn and toss in our beds. Michelet points out how the home is modeled by fine touches, which make a surface originally bristling and composite into one that is smooth and soft.

Incidentally, this passage by Michelet constitutes a rare and, for this reason, all the more valuable, document on the subject of the material imagination. Indeed, no one who likes images of matter can forget it, because it describes *dry modeling*. This is the modeling, or shall we say, the marriage, in the dry air and summer sunlight, of moss and down. Michelet's nest is a paean of praise to its felt-like fabric.

It should be noted in closing that few dreamers of nests like a swallow's nest which, they say, is made of saliva and mud. People have even wondered where all the swallows lived before the existence of houses and cities. Swallows, in other words, are not "regular" birds, and Charbonneau-Lassay wrote of them: "I have heard peasants in the Vendée say that a swallow's nest could frighten the night devils away, even in winter."<sup>2</sup>

## VIII

If we go deeper into daydreams of nests, we soon encounter a sort of paradox of sensibility. A nest—and this we understand right away—is a precarious thing, and yet it sets us to *daydreaming of security*. Why does this obvious pre-

<sup>1</sup> Romain Rolland, *Colas Breugnot*, p. 107.

<sup>2</sup> *Loc. cit.* p. 572.

cariousness not arrest daydreams of this kind? The answer to this paradox is simple: when we dream, we are phenomenologists without realizing it. In a sort of naïve way, we relive the instinct of the bird, taking pleasure in accentuating the mimetic features of the green nest in green leaves. We definitely saw it, but we say that it was well hidden. This center of animal life is concealed by the immense volume of vegetable life. The nest is a lyrical bouquet of leaves. It participates in the peace of the vegetable world. It is a point in the atmosphere of happiness that always surrounds large trees.

A poet once wrote:<sup>1</sup>

*J'ai rêvé d'un nid où les arbres repoussaient la mort.*

(I dreamed of a nest in which the trees repulsed death.)

And so when we examine a nest, we place ourselves at the origin of confidence in the world, we receive a beginning of confidence, an urge toward cosmic confidence. Would a bird build its nest if it did not have its instinct for confidence in the world? If we heed this call and make an absolute refuge of such a precarious shelter as a nest—paradoxically no doubt, but in the very impetus of the imagination—we return to the sources of the oneric house. Our house, apprehended in its dream potentiality, becomes a nest in the world, and we shall live there in complete confidence if, in our dreams, we really participate in the sense of security of our first home. In order to experience this confidence, which is deeply graven in our sleep, there is no need to enumerate material reasons for confidence. The nest, quite as much as the oneric house, and the oneric house quite as much as the nest—if we ourselves are at the origin of our dreams—knows nothing of the hostility of the world. Human life starts with refreshing sleep, and all the eggs in a nest are kept nicely warm. The experience of the hostility of the world—and consequently, our dreams of defense and aggressiveness—come much later. In its germi-

<sup>1</sup> Adolphe Shredrow, *Berceau sans promesses*, p. 33. Seghers, Paris.

Shedrow also wrote: *I dreamed of a nest in which the ages no longer slept.*



nal form, therefore, all of life is well-being. Being starts with well-being. When a philosopher considers a nest, he calms himself by meditating on the subject of his own being in the calm world being. And if we were to translate the absolute naïveté of his daydream into the metaphysical language of today, a dreamer might say that the world is the nest of mankind.

For the world is a nest, and an immense power holds the inhabitants of the world in this nest. In Herder's history of Hebrew poetry there is an image of the immense sky resting on the immense earth: "The air," he wrote, "is a dove which, as it rests on its nest, keeps its young warm."<sup>1</sup>

I was thinking these thoughts and dreaming these dreams when I read a passage in the autumn 1954 issue of *Cahiers G.L.M.* that encouraged me to maintain the axiom that identifies the nest with the world and makes it the center of the world. Here Boris Pasternak speaks of "the instinct with the help of which, like the swallow, we construct the world—an enormous nest, an agglomerate of earth and sky, of death and life, and of two sorts of time, one we can dispose of and one that is lacking."<sup>2</sup> Yes, two sorts of time, for what a long time we should need before waves of tranquility spreading out from the center of our intimacy, reached the ends of the world.

What a concentration of images in Pasternak's swallow's nest! And, in reality, why should we stop building and molding the world's clay about our own shelters? Mankind's nest, like his world, is never finished. And imagination helps us to continue it. A poet cannot leave such a great image as this, nor, to be more exact, can such an image leave its poet. Boris Pasternak also wrote (*loc. cit.*, p. 5): "Man himself is mute, and it is the image that speaks. For it is obvious that the image *alone* can keep pace with nature."

<sup>1</sup> French translation: *L'histoire de la poésie des Hébreux*, p. 269.

<sup>2</sup> *Cahiers G.L.M.*, p. 7, Autumn 1954, translated by André du Bouchet.