The call for this exploratory study on the hermeneutics of Gaston Bachelard arises from a brief but luminous essay “Divination and the Look in the Work of Marcoussis” published in *The Right to Dream (Le Droit de rêver, 1970)*, where Bachelard ponders, pen-in-hand, on an album of engraved copper-plates depicting the faces of sixteen prospectors immersed in deep contemplation as they search out the substance of the future within the realm of the sensory (be it a pile of bones, the flight of birds, the knot of a crystal at the heart of a limpid ball...). As do most of the essays collected in this volume, Bachelard’s meditation on the *Diviners* by Louis Marcoussis bears some of the seminal concerns that run throughout his hermeneutic writings – particularly the question of how we can approach works of art or literature whose signifying power is rooted not so much in scholarly tradition as in the realms of dream, substance, and possibility. But before we engage in a close analysis of this essay, let us briefly place Bachelard’s contribution within the broader field of hermeneutic inquiry.

Hermeneutics (Gk. *Hermenēuein*: to say, to interpret, to translate) has come to be understood over time as an art and discipline that aims at understanding the unsaid life of our discourses, the undercurrents of meaning latent not only in *human productions* – from simple poetic images to complex cultural constructs – but also in *existence* itself, as in the encounter with a person’s gestures or with the imminence of death. Over the past century, moreover, launched by the work of prominent hermeneutic thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, or Paul Ricoeur, hermeneutics has been evolving as a reflective, self-critical discipline that aims at understanding its own understanding – namely, how it is that our affective attitudes, expectations, and questions come to shape what we understand, and hence how we interpret phenomena. Most of these features can be found subtly interwoven, if not always systematically thematized, in Bachelard’s study of literary texts, artworks, and the phenomenon of reading itself, from his early *L’Intuition de l’instant* (1932) to his posthumous *Fragments d’une poétique du feu* (1988). Rather than limited to deciphering written texts and following the intri-
cate thread of facts, a “reader” is most importantly, for him, one who can read signs through reverie (“Divination” 46) – one who can sense the unspoken poems underlying natural phenomena (Right to Dream 145), or one who is able to tap into the reserves of dream and possibility contained in works of art (Right to Dream 27, 103). Insofar as it is founded on rationalistic thinking to the detriment of dream, Bachelard contests classical hermeneutics when he writes:

Interpretations of ancient texts are often overly clever readings... The modern reader forgets that knowledge of natural phenomena is closely connected with natural reveries... We must revive these natural reveries to interpret a text from a lost civilization. Not only must facts be weighed, but the weight of dreams must be determined. For everything of a literary nature is dreamed before being seen.

(Water and Dreams 135)