

For a General Poetics

Paul Valéry's *Cours de Poétique*, recently published in two volumes by Gallimard, does not deal with poetry in the restricted sense that the word continues to have despite surrealism, or perhaps alas also because of surrealism, which perhaps did not succeed to push far enough the initially glimpsed surrealist revolution. This *Cours de Poétique* has little to do with the history of literature, and just as little to do with any discussions applicable to poetry or even art. It deals with the process of intellectual creation as such. Of all types of intellectual creations, including Artistic and literary as well as scientific and technical. Valéry deals with *Poïetics* in the sense of *intellectual creation*, in the sense of the processes that produce *the works of the mind*. And it could be a definition of Poetry if Poetry consented to lay down its linguistic blinders and extend the scope of its vision beyond what a respectable tradition has bequeathed to it, but which, after all, is not more than a tradition. .

“The works of the mind are indeed defined as "the works of man which aim to act on his sensitivity or his intellect, without utilitarian intent". The work of art has the property of creating a feeling of "aesthetic infinity" while it basically has no use whatsoever, it provokes its own need by activating what we would today a cognitive or sensory loop, or even an addiction effect”.

William Marx commenting Valéry's *Cours de Poétique*, Volume 1, Page 27.

What does Valéry mean by "without utilitarian intent"? Beyond a laudable criticism of utilitarianism, it seems that for Valéry, the process of creation *emerges* from *what exceeds simple biological survival*. That is, beyond of a kind of "biological utility" in short.

But to speak of biological utility is to reverse things. Biological evolution creates abilities that may or may not turn out to be useful depending on circumstances that no one can anticipate, and it is only a shortsighted technical view that qualifies them as useful after the fact. One cannot define a "biological utility", because *the living exceeds utilitarianism in every way*. A species must withstand everything that may happen in a some million years. It must therefore be equipped with *many more abilities* than those required for day-to-day survival. Abilities some of which may only be "useful" once in 500,000 years. It follows that living things are made up of *a sedimentation of many adaptation layers* that have no reason to be logically consistent. Possibly contradictory capacities but which must be, because History is not coherent.

Valéry's "biologism" is therefore in a way, unfounded. But what is fundamental is Valéry's insistence *on the creative process rather than its results*. Capitalism is what is interested in results and Valéry's approach therefore constitutes an overcoming of it. What matters to him is the dynamics, of the creation process in the "producer" (i.e. the artist) or of the reception process in the "consumer" (i.e. the public). It follows that the work of art, and more generally *the object*, is nothing but *an intermediary between human imaginations*. Apart from that, works of art, of science or technology are only natural things, that is to say deprived of any meaning, just like a grain of sand, a pebble, a gush of wind, or a stream.

And, on closer inspection, the "aesthetic infinity" of which Valéry speaks is none other than *passion*. Because passion, just like aesthetic emotion, feeds on itself, provoking in the same movement a desire, the satisfaction of this desire, and the almost immediate return of the same desire, or more often still, *a desire for more*, therefore potentially opening on infinity.

By taking things not at the level of the results, which can be as diverse as you like, but at the level of *the creative process* as such, that is to say of what Breton calls *the real functioning of thought*, which is common to all humanity, it becomes possible to rebuild some kind unity, because the brains that produce science and technology and the arts and poetry are always human brains. A unity that is therefore established beyond

specializations and the scattering of the various contexts of application of intellectual creation. From this irrefutable *and deeply surrealist point of view*, we can envisage a poetics that is no longer restricted to words, but extended to the actual functioning of thought, whether textual or visual, artistic, scientific or technical. Because the human creative process, *the actual functioning of thought is surrealist*.

Despite appearances (as regards results), implementation contexts, so-called "methods" and scientific, technical or artistic *disciplines*, the process of intellectual creation is always the same, for the simple reason that it is of a capacity common to all men.

And this is also what Breton has in mind at the end of the First Manifesto when he notes that *the process of intellectual creation is no less surrealist among scientists than among artists*.

This was amply demonstrated in mathematics by Henri Poincaré in 1908 and by Alexandre Grothendieck much later. (See *Another Exploration of the Unconscious*).

What is thus established by Valéry and by Breton is nothing less than the bases of a radical humanism which overflows and exceeds that of the Renaissance as well as that, more profoundly bourgeois, of the Enlightenment.

It is not a question of abolishing the canonical formulations required by the various disciplines, and whose function remains essential in that they allow the standardized presentation, verification, and dissemination of knowledge within each discipline. Simply these canonical formulations do not think. They consist of a rational shaping of creations of the mind of quite another origin. "Rational thinking" is not the thinking of creators, but the harping of teachers.

There is obviously no more question of thinking that the unconscious of a mathematician can produce any mathematical idea whatsoever without a thorough mathematical culture, not more, as Henri Poincaré notes, of hoping that the unconscious, even mathematically highly educated may ever perform the slightest calculation.

However, it should be noted that certain fundamental aspects of mathematics and theoretical computer science *draw the borders of what may be reached by language* in a much more radical way than Poetry does. Evolutionary biology, too, designates an area beyond what language can reach and even more, beyond the calculable, in that it reveals that ***doing goes far beyond saying***. From then on, either in a way of self-mutilation we agree to restrict poetry to language and saying, or we liberate poetry by opening wide the doors of *doing* to it. And this is hardly opposed except by traditional habits according to which people, whether they are poets, or scientists or anything else, tend to behave like petty shopkeepers of their conformism.

In the sense of the surrealism of the First Manifesto, Valéry's approach in the *Cours de Poétique* seems appropriate for clarifying the objectives of surrealism and allowing its extension by opening it up to the totality of human thought, beyond the narrow world of art. art and poetry, at least, as currently conceived.

This presupposes that surrealism ceases to agree to restrict itself to the production of poetic and plastic works, or even to *some kind of specific lifestyle*, and that it dedicates itself effectively to the collective practice and elucidation of *the expression of the real functioning of thought* taken in its totality. Valéry's objectives in the *Cours de Poétique* should normally appear in line with those set out in the First Manifesto. But are we serious about the initial objectives of surrealism when we prefer the eternal poetic and artistic exploitation of the gold mine unearthed by Breton rather than risk ourselves in going to see if there is not something even more exciting at the end of the mine tunnel – if only the end of this tunnel.