

«Le Matériel verbal comme mémoire seconde»

Memory in Paul Valéry's *Cours de Poétique*

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The aim of this article is to show the interrelationship between, memory, language and artistic production in the reflections of Paul Valéry. If some of Valéry's essays in this sense were already accessible to readers, the recent publication of the almost entirely unpublished materials of the *Cours de Poétique* – held at the Collège de France from 1937 to 1941 – reveals a fruitful theoretical laboratory that can provide numerous insights into Valéry's reflections on poetic production and the aesthetic importance of observing memory and its role in the creation of artistic forms.

Keywords: Paul Valéry, Cours de Poétique, Poiesis, Memory.

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The *Cours de Poétique*

The recent publication of materials related to the *Cours de Poétique*¹, held by Paul Valéry at the Collège de France in Paris from 1937 to 1945 – now accessible from the beginning of 2023 thanks to the critical work of William Marx – allows for a deeper exploration of Valéry's theories encompassing various aspects of the creation and reception of artistic and literary works.

The texts of the *Cours*, which constitute a sort of *summa* of Valéry's thought, illustrate how his reflections consistently intertwine, forming cohesive threads. Within the *Cours de Poétique* Valéry's intellectual pursuits reveal that contemplating poetic composition also entails pondering societal evolution, the entrenched status of scientific beliefs, and the imperative to acknowledge the perpetual evolution of intellect and awareness. In modern society, this evolution faced the looming threat of technological nullification.

The aim of this contribution is to give an insight of the interrelationship that exists in Paul Valéry's thought between memory and poetics.

In the initial lectures of the *Cours* – which were already accessible to the Italian public thanks to the editorial work of Maria Teresa Giaveri² – Valéry stated his intention to dedicate the course at the Collège de France to «la forme d'activité intellectuelle, qui engendre les œuvres mêmes» («the form of intellectual activity that generates the works themselves») (Valéry 1957 [1940], 1438), as he considered it to be relatively understudied compared to literary history understood as the analysis of authors and their works, often approached with a biographical or purely historical-cultural attitude. Valéry then explains

¹ P. Valéry, *Cours de Poétique*, éd. par William Marx, Gallimard, Parigi 2023.

² Id., *Opere scelte*, a cura di Maria Teresa Giavieri, Mondadori, Milano 2014, pp. 377-430.

that his choice to use the term “Poétique” stems from the desire to emphasize its etymological meaning of *poiesis*:

On voit par ces quelques indications la quantité des problèmes et l'immensité de la matière que propose à la pensée le dessein d'une théorie de Littérature telle que nous la concevons. Le nom de Poétique nous paraît lui convenir, en entendant ce mot selon son étymologie, c'est-à-dire comme nom de tout ce qui a trait à la création ou à la composition d'ouvrage dont le langage est à la fois la substance et le moyen³.

He decides to use the term “Poétique” for his course, intending it in its etymological sense of *poiesis*, thus emphasizing the idea of doing, of building. He considers literature, and in general every artistic production, as a constantly *evolving* process. In art forms, just as in natural forms, his gaze is directed towards form as *Bildung* rather than *Gestalt*; towards form in its compositional process, rather than towards the defined and closed form, considering that «sie [die Komposition] ist nicht nur ein literarischer Wert; sie ist vielmehr eine Kraft des Geistes oder genauer gesagt: sie ist der Geist selbst»⁴.

Valéry's objective is therefore immediately expressed as an attempt to discuss the *poietic* act, taking into account the wide range of issues and the vastness of the field of study. The term “Poetics” was chosen by him as appropriate, interpreting it based on its etymology, namely as the term suitable to describe everything concerning the creation or composition of works in which language constitutes both substance and means. It is important to clearly state that in Valéry's thought, the poetic act is associated with both an idea of form in becoming (*Bildung*) and a fruitive and cognitive act.

The way in which Valéry approaches the poetic problem is intricately connected to the functioning of memory as it contemplates it, the mechanisms of knowing and creating subject in the creative and fruitive act; issues on which he had long pondered mainly in his *Cahiers*, which he began writing from 1892 onwards. In these studies, memory and its functioning and usefulness in the creative process are constant subjects of Valéry's interrogation.

From the beginning of the drafting of the *Cahiers*, Valéry demonstrates interest in observing the functioning of the mind and thought at the moment of its creation, in

³ P. Valéry, *Œuvres*, vol. I, éd. par J. Hytier, Gallimard, Paris 1957, p. 1441.

⁴ M. Bense, *Mathematik, Poesie und Literatur*, in *Ausgewählte Schriften*, band 2, Metzler Verlag, Stuttgart, 1998 p. 254.

understanding the process of knowledge as it unfolds «limites réelles de la connaissance»⁵, the real limits of knowledge, and the *Cahiers* show that they can «be understood as a laboratory where a Valéryan idea of writing takes shape: one that makes it both a cognitive and creative activity together»⁶.

Although it is not possible to retrace all of Valéry's reflections on the problem of memory in this context, the *Cours de Poétique* provides us with interesting starting points.

In a series of lectures delivered during January 1941, which serve as the primary subject of analysis in this article, Paul Valéry delves into what he terms «les mystiques et la parole intérieure»⁷ (or in English, «the mystics and the internal word»). Within these lectures, Valéry directs his focus towards the concept of a «parole intérieure» («inner word»), asserting the profound significance of every spoken or written word as an act imbued with inherent functions and implications. He suggests that behind each utterance lies a complex interplay of intentions, ideas, and images, which he metaphorically describes as «idées d'actes». Crucially, Valéry emphasizes that this inner verbalization is not a conscious, deliberate effort, but rather an instinctive and involuntary process, guided by underlying motives and desires.

Valéry elaborates on how this inner word originates within the depths of one's memory, where it takes shape before emerging into external expression. He illustrates this dynamic by drawing parallels to the formation of the self, suggesting that the inner word plays a fundamental role in shaping one's identity and influencing their outward actions and creations. However, he acknowledges the inherent limitations and complexities of this process, particularly regarding the translation of inner thoughts and emotions into tangible linguistic forms. As Philippe Roussin affirms:

En faisant référence à un langage simultanément singulier (propre) et universel, Valéry énonce une des ambitions de la littérature moderne ; il pose la question des conditions de cette littérature et de sa communicabilité ; il indique le lieu qui est le sien, lieu distinct et cependant complet⁸.

⁵ P. Valéry, *Cahiers*, 29 voll., Éditions du C.N.R.S, Paris, 1957-1961, vol I, p. 34.

⁶ B. Zaccarello, *Paul Valéry: per un'estetica della composizione*, in "Aisthesis", 2012, 5/1, p. 83. My translation.

⁷ P. Valéry, *Cours de Poétique*, vol 2, cit, p. 49 e sg.

⁸ P. Roussin, *Valéry : littérature, idolâtrie, fictions et démocratie*, in D. Rabaté (éd. par). *En quel nom parler ?*, Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, Pessac 2010, pp. 63-82.

Valéry's reference to a language that is both singular and universal encapsulates one of the ambitions of modern literature. This duality reflects the balance modern literature strives to achieve being deeply personal and specific in its expression while also resonating on a universal level.

Valéry's lectures traverse a diverse array of examples showcasing linguistic limitations alongside the innate representational capacities of language. He engages deeply with the intricate interplay between language and perception, acknowledging the profound influence of inner language on our comprehension of the world and our existential positioning within it. Inspired by figures like Saint Teresa of Ávila⁹ and drawing insights from mysticism, Valéry accentuates the intrinsic value and profound significance of inner language as a conduit for introspection, self-expression, and intellectual inquiry. He underscores the imperative of stimulating thought through thought itself, a concept encapsulated in the sentence «faire agir la pensée sur la pensée».

Valéry's reflections on language extend beyond mere linguistic analysis, encompassing broader philosophical inquiries into the nature of perception, memory itself and creative process. Valéry dedicated many years to reflections on language, both as a communicative form and as a productive tool for artistic creation. In his youthful years, he attempted the endeavor of constructing a language according to rigorous schemes, akin to algebra. He pondered extensively on the inadequacy of linguistic tools and the necessity to “empty” words of their canonically attributed meaning¹⁰.

He contends that language – towards which he always acts «à la mode des chirurgiens»¹¹ – serves as a medium through which we not only communicate but also interrogate and refine our own cognitive processes. By engaging in a dialogue with our inner thoughts and feelings, we gain deeper insights into ourselves and the world around us, transcending the limitations of language to access realms of meaning and understanding previously inaccessible.

In essence, Valéry's exploration of the aesthetic function of memory and language underscores the intricate interplay between consciousness, memory, language, and

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

¹⁰ This issue has been thoroughly explored by many scholars. Particularly notable is the work of J. Schmidt-Radefeldt, *Paul Valéry Linguiste dans Les Cahiers*, in "Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire", Klincksieck, Paris 1970.

¹¹ P. Valéry, *Oeuvres*, vol 1, éd par Michel Jarrey, Le livre de Poche, Paris 2016, p. 1316.

poetics. His lectures offer a profound meditation on the transformative power of words and the profound influence they wield in shaping our perceptions, experiences, and understanding of reality¹². Through his meticulous analysis and philosophical reflections, Valéry invites us to contemplate the profound implications of our inner linguistic landscape and the profound mysteries it holds.

In emphasizing the essence of art, Valéry extends beyond mere inspiration, delineating it as the deliberate, skillful application of the artist's faculties. Noteworthy is the resonance his views find with eminent philosophers and theorists such as Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, and Peter Szondi, who regarded Valéry's writings as pivotal in shaping a hermeneutic and aesthetic theory. Central to this discourse is the notion of «Die Fähigkeit, Kunstwerke von innen, in der Logik ihres Produziertseins zu sehen»¹³, that Adorno attributes to Valéry, acknowledging his great lucidity in analyzing hermeneutic activity, an expression that will later be adopted by Peter Szondi as crucial in the development of his philological hermeneutics¹⁴.

Das Spannungsfeld Valérys nimmt um dreißig Jahre das der gegenwärtigen Kunst: das von Emanzipation und Integration. [...] Die Fähigkeit, Kunstwerke von innen, in der Logik ihres Produzierstseins zu sehen – eine Einheit von Vollzug un Reflexion, die sich weder hinter Naivität verschantz, noch ihre konkreten Bestimmungen eilfertig in den allgemeinen Begriff verflüchtigt, ist wohl die allein mögliche Gestalt von Ästhetik heute¹⁵.

Here Adorno draws a parallel between Valéry's field of tension and that of contemporary art, highlighting the importance of understanding artworks from within by grasping their creative process and inherent logic. He stresses the need for a balanced integration of practical execution and theoretical reflection to properly engage with modern aesthetics. This approach necessitates a profound interaction with art that combines both its creation and contemplation, making it the only feasible form of aesthetics today.

¹² P. Valéry, *Cours de Poétique*, vol 2, cit, p. 68.

¹³ «Die Fähigkeit, Kunstwerke von innen, in der Logik ihres Produziertseins zu sehen – eine Einheit von Vollzug und Reflexion, die sich weder hinter Naivität verschantz noch ihre konkreten Bestimmungen eilfertig in den allgemeinen Begriff verflüchtigt, ist wohl die allein mögliche Gestalt von Ästhetik». T.W. Adorno, *Valérys Abweichungen*, in *Noten zur Literatur II*, hrsg. Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1961, p. 43.

¹⁴ Cfr. P. Szondi, *Über philologische Erkenntnis*, in *Schriften 1* Suhrkamp, pp. 263-286.

¹⁵ T.W. Adorno, *Valérys Abweichungen*, in *Noten zur Literatur II*, hrsg. Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1961, p. 84.

The focus of Valéry is on the attempt of elucidating the capacity to perceive artworks from within, discerning the logic inherent in their production, where the observation of how memory works and how images and forms creates in one's mind is directly related to the poietic process.

What proves particularly intriguing is the reflection that Valéry briefly expounds upon in a lecture from the same month titled *L'art comme mise en échec du consommateur (Art as a thwarting of the consumer)*¹⁶. Valéry underscores the crucial significance of the artist's faculties in artistic production, emphasizing the essential nature of tracing the formative and creative process in interpreting the work. In this regard, he accentuates both the artisanal dimension of the work and the paramount importance of the rhetorical strategies employed in its elaboration, as well as the cognitive and creative trajectory inherent to both the producer and the consumer of the work.

Valéry's scrutiny has long been directed towards the effects of literature and art, in general, on those who partake in them. The artistic experience, in this context, emerges as a form of calculation; while art indeed seeks an effect, it must utilize rhetorical tools not to manipulate the effects it elicits in the consumer, but rather to grant freedom in the experiential journey¹⁷.

La Littérature se propose d'abord comme une voie de développement de nos puissances d'invention et d'excitation, dans la plus grande liberté, puisqu'elle a pour substance et pour agent la parole, déliée de tout son poids d'utilité immédiate et subordonnée à toutes les fictions et à tous les agréments imaginables. Mais la condition d'agir sur un public indistinct vient aussitôt gâter cette belle promesse. L'objet d'un art ne peut être que de produire quelque effet le plus heureux sur des personnes inconnues, qui soient, ou bien le plus nombreuses, ou bien, le plus délicates qu'il se puisse...¹⁸

As noted by Benedetta Zaccarello¹⁹, Valéry's conceptualization of the diachronic functioning of consciousness is richly intricate, grounded in a framework of selective processes, recombination, emphasis, and assembly. In this context, the array of stimuli competing for attention undergoes a metamorphosis, shaped by cognitive processes to

¹⁶ P. Valéry, *Cours de Poétique*, cit, pp. 71-72.

¹⁷ Cfr. A. Ettlin, *Le poème est une fiction... d'auteur. Paul Valéry et la notion d'auteur fictif*, in "Poétique", 184, 2018, pp. 149-165.

¹⁸ P. Valéry, *Fragments des mémoires d'un poème*, in *Oeuvres I*, cit., p. 1465. Citato in A. Ettlin, *Le poème est une fiction*, cit.

¹⁹ Cfr. B. Zaccarello, *Paul Valéry: per un'estetica della composizione*, in "Aisthesis" 5/1, 2012, pp. 81-94.

bestow meaning and orientation upon the individual's experiential landscape. Valéry's meticulous examination extends to the mechanism of attention itself, which he perceives as not only a functional dynamic but also as an act of meaning creation. Through this lens, attention becomes not merely a passive reception of stimuli but an active engagement, shaping and imbuing significance to the ongoing narrative of consciousness.

Ce travail, qui articule en quelque sorte le phénomène, lui substitue un groupement momentané de termes dont le caractère principal est qu'ils peuvent rentrer dans une quantité de combinaisons différentes. [...] Mes impressions éveillent ensemble divers éléments discrets qui se trouvent coordonnés et me procurent un objet de pensée tel que j'aurais pu former de moi seul. Je ne l'ai pas fait; j'aurais pu le faire; et il s'est fait de mes éléments connus. Cet objet est donc, à la fois, formé sans que j'intervienne et identique à ceux que je sais construire²⁰.

In this contribution we will not deeply delve into Valéry's reflections on the analysis of consciousness, self-awareness, and the array of definitions he employs («consciousness», «self-consciousness», etc.²¹). Instead, our focus lies in briefly observing how Valéry, in his *Cours de Poétique*, places significant emphasis on the intricate interplay and interconnectedness between language, memory, and artistic productivity. Throughout his exploration, Valéry consistently underscores the importance of the morphological process and the careful observation of forms.

As Danilo Manca perspicaciously states²², an intriguing aspect of Valéry's approach is his endeavour to elucidate the fundamental distinction between poetry and prose. He does so by employing the metaphor of a pendulum, symbolizing the oscillation between two symmetrical points. At one end of this pendulum lies a form, encompassing the sensory elements of language such as sound, rhythm, accents, timbre, and movement – the very essence of the voice during its action. At the opposite end resides all significant values: images, ideas, and every element that contributes to the substance and meaning of discourse.

²⁰ P. Valéry, *Cahiers 1894-1914*, vol. VI, Gallimard, Paris 1997, pp. 233-234. Il testo proviene da *Mémoire sur l'attention*, redatto nel 1905 e rimasto postumo, come indicato anche in B. Zaccarello, *Paul Valéry*, cit., p. 87.

²¹ Cfr. *Cours de Poétique*, vol 2, cit., pp. 61-67.

²² D. Manca, *Valéry e la filosofia della letteratura*, in "Rivista di estetica" 70, 2019, pp. 125-140.

This metaphorical representation highlights Valéry's nuanced understanding of the duality inherent in artistic expression. It illustrates how poetry and prose are not merely disparate entities but rather complementary forces, each contributing distinct aspects to the overall fabric of literary creation. Valéry's exploration of this dynamic interplay underscores the depth of his engagement with the complexities of language and creativity, offering valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of artistic undertaking.

Memory and Artistic Productivity

In the draft of the lecture dated January 31, 1941, titled *Le Matériel verbal comme mémoire seconde* (“Verbal Material as Second Memory”), Valéry deeply intertwines the discourse on memory with that of language, and consequently, with poetic creation. It is noteworthy to emphasize Valéry's substantial dedication of time and extensive discussion within his course to these intertwined topics, relating them intricately to his reflections on Poetics – a subject that Valéry had long pondered within his *Cahiers*. Valéry categorizes language as «mémoire organisée»²³ (organized memory) underscoring the profound connection between linguistic expression and the storage and retrieval of memory.

This lecture serves as a vital component within a broader program which as said involves the ongoing exploration of language as a foundational state for the intellectual decisions and external productions of the mind, «Suite de l'étude du langage considéré comme état préparatoire aux décisions et productions extérieures de l'esprit» and at the «Développement de la «conscience de soi» applique à la production de l'esprit et aux actes producteurs»²⁴. Furthermore, it delves into the development of "self-awareness" as applied to the production of the mind and productive acts. Thus, Valéry's course is dedicated to elucidating the role of inner language in its application to the creation of "works of the mind" across various genres, including artistic and literary compositions. Valéry adamantly asserts that artistic production cannot be conceived in isolation but must continuously reference the role of memory, and the ongoing dialogue of linguistic

²³ P. Valéry, *Cours de Poétique*, vol 2, cit., p. 62.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 17.

introspection, also using the «language intérieur pour la connaissance de soi et pour le développement de la "self-consciousness"».²⁵

Indeed, Valéry posits that literature, in its essence, serves as an extension and application of certain inherent properties of language. This assertion highlights his belief in the symbiotic relationship between language and creative expression, wherein language becomes not only a tool for communication but also a conduit for the exploration and articulation of the complexities of human thought and emotion.

C'est là le domaine des « figures », dont s'inquiétait l'antique «Rhétorique», et qui est aujourd'hui à peu près délaissé par l'enseignement. Cet abandon est regrettable. La formation de figures est indivisible de celle du langage lui-même, dont tous les mots « abstraits » sont obtenus par quelque abus ou quelque transport de signification, suivi d'un oubli du sens primitif. Le poète qui multiplie les figures ne fait donc que retrouver le langage à l'état naissant. D'ailleurs, en considérant les choses d'assez haut, ne peut-on considérer le Langage lui-même comme le chef-d'œuvre des chefs-d'œuvre littéraires, puisque toute création dans cet ordre se réduit à une combinaison des puissances d'un vocabulaire donné, selon des formes instituées une fois pour toutes?²⁶

In Valéry's view rhetorical figures deserve greater attention. He argues that the formation of rhetorical figures is intertwined with the very evolution of language; abstract words frequently emerge from semantic shifts or changes in meaning, leading to a loss of their original sense over time. Therefore, he suggests that poets who utilize rhetorical figures are essentially uncovering language in its earliest form.

The process of creating figurative language is intricately entwined with the very fabric of language itself, a phenomenon wherein seemingly abstract words emerge through subtle manipulations or shifts in meaning, often followed by a subsequent forgetting of their original sense. In this nuanced exploration, the poet, through their act of crafting figures of speech, embarks on a journey to rediscover the profound and intimate origins of language itself, delving into its intricate layers and subtle nuances.

In his pursuit, Valéry delves into the concept of «mémoire seconde», a notion that lies at the intersection of language and memory, particularly focusing on the phenomenon of inner language. This internal dialogue, as Valéry observes, manifests in the intricacies of

²⁵ *Ivi*, p.18.

²⁶ P. Valéry, *Cours de Poétique*, vol 1, cit., p. 75.

more complex behaviors, where reasoning becomes a process of selective engagement and elimination among common signs. Such cognitive processes necessitate a sophisticated organization of memory, one that transcends mere recollection and instead orchestrates a symphony of associations and connections. It is within this intricate web of linguistic cognition that the role of verbal language emerges as a fundamental element, akin to a secondary repository of memory, essential for navigating the complexities of linguistic expression and comprehension.

Valéry's exploration further unveils the transformative power of a single word, which he contends can serve as a portal to an expansive realm of interconnected relationships and meanings. This dynamic interplay of language, traversing the boundaries of individual consciousness, illustrates the remarkable fluidity and adaptability of inner language. Through this lens, inner language emerges not merely as a tool for communication but as a dynamic medium for self-expression and introspection, offering unparalleled flexibility and immediacy in the dialogue with oneself. This can be connected with the conviction, also stated by, that «il y a chez Valéry la conception d'un langage indirect, permettant d'exprimer ce qui est trahi par le langage».²⁷

Central to Valéry's discourse is then the genesis of inner language, rooted in the iterative process of linguistic repetition and reinterpretation. Initially tentative and uncertain, inner language gradually evolves into a liberated form of expression, ultimately blossoming into a font of originality and creativity. This progressive journey empowers inner language with the profound ability to articulate one's perceptions, needs, and emotional responses, thereby catalyzing a dynamic interplay between the individual and their inner world.

In Valéry's work, one can find the attempt to establish a kind of «method of examining the entire range of creative and cognitive productions of the human psyche in the perspective of their genesis, in a way that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries»²⁸ but is always linked to the way artistic forms are created. This constant inquiry into how memories and thoughts can "become" forms and artistic creations is a fil rouge throughout Valéry's reflections on artistic creation.

²⁷ M. Tsukamoto, *Littérature et langage indirect chez Valéry*, in "Fabula / Les colloques" : *Paul Valéry et l'idée de littérature*, ed. by W. Marx, 2011, p. 3.

²⁸ P. Gifford, B. Stimpson (a cura di), *Reading Paul Valéry. Universe in mind*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, p. 8.

From that theater of transformations that memory represents for Valéry, the creative subject must *extract* elements that then need to be worked on; the creative eye acts upon reality by transforming it, working on its aspects, and observing itself in the very act of creation. The importance of constructing the work, for Valéry, also involves the central role he attributes to the reader, who, according to Valéry, has a responsibility in the making of the work. He believes, in fact, that the work holds value when it manages to be entirely different from what its author originally created.

The work acquires its own independent life, separating from its creator to become part of history, undergoing continuous modifications, and generating ever-changing effects. These effects are not merely a consequence of its initial conditions, although they are clearly influenced by them. The work is always evolving, never confined to the finality of completion.

Valéry's reflections are permeated by an aesthetic of memory; he considers memory not just as a mnemonic function, but as a creative and cognitive process capable of influencing and shaping artistic production. Memory, therefore, is not merely a repository of recollections, but a means through which creativity and reflection can emerge and develop.

In essence, Valéry's reflections underscore the profound symbiosis between language, memory, and creativity, wherein the intricate dance of inner language serves as a catalyst for self-discovery and intellectual exploration. The relentless pursuit of knowledge, coupled with the realization that internal inquiry can often yield profound insights, epitomizes a paradigm shift in the quest for understanding, transcending mere cognitive processes to embrace the holistic evolution of the human intellect. Thus, Valéry's insights serve as a beacon illuminating the path towards deeper self-awareness and enlightenment, heralding a new dawn in the annals of human thought and introspection – this represents a further research step demonstrating Valéry's interest in constant self-observation of the creative process.