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The fascination of artifice. Valéry and Cioran

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Abstract

Borrowing a number of favorite themes from Valéry’s thought, Cioran sets for himself the goal of systematically contradicting Valéry’s solutions; he does that by relying on the force of the irrational, the unpredictable and the ephemeral, in an attempt to demonstrate the error made by the partisans of integral rationalism. Simulation, a central element in Valéry’s vision of art, indispensable to the development of personality and to the confinement of the anarchy of the accidental, appears to Cioran as a consequence of the corrupt nature of humanity and as a result of the proliferation of its carnivalesque instinct. Subsequently, he puts forward the suggestion that, in order to overcome it, oriental teachings about the unreality of the world and universal vacuity should be used.

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In his attempt to describe the mechanism of creation, Valéry starts from the statement that it involves an attitude placed at the precise antipodes of natural behavior, an anti-natural orientation. Yet, any such attitude “implique l’effort, la conscience de l’effort, l’intention, et donc l’artifice” [1]. In order to attain excellence of the general view, the creator must distance himself from the banality of naked existence, from its manifest insignificance, taking on a sustained effort which allows him to gradually eliminate the parasites of plainness and reach an essentialized image and the surfacing of form. The coagulation of the work into this end result may occur only after the author has managed to master the initial impulse which pushes him towards creation, placing it under the controlling forces of reason meant to correct, moderate and use it as a starting point, drawing it out of its rawness and inserting it into the machinery of language to fit the draconic constraints of expression [2].

From Valéry’s perspective, there is no doubt that “le vrai à l’état brut est plus faux que le faux” [2], that factual truth, obtained by the mere agglutination of fugitive impressions, by the haphazard mix of data arbitrarily filtered through the senses, imposes a partial, impoverished image, deprived of any necessity, whose acceptance

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would mean capitulation before meaningless chance. Truth cannot be obtained through a passive record of facts, through a lazy series of gestures and formulae, but only by the transformation of the brutal avalanche of events, through setting their significant nucleus free, through triumphantly imposing Form. Truth is not a given, it is a laborious construction. It is not easily perceptible, but the result of a long effort of the mind. Thus, it appears due to simulation, to that intervention of intention that lies behind all deliberate creation. In order to exist, truth needs not to impose itself by opposition, not to stand out by comparison with its contrary, but to integrate it and surpass the shapeless banality of factual truth:

"Le vrai que l’on favorise se change par là insensiblement sous la plume dans le vrai qui est fait pour paraître vrai. Vérité et volonté de vérité forment ensemble un instable mélange où ferment une contradiction et d’où ne manque jamais à sortir une production falsifiée" [1].

The example which Valéry finds most significant is that of confessions or diary writers willing to impress their readers by the promise of exposing themselves mercilessly in the fullest truth of their existence, by creating the expectation of revelation and of unveiling shocking or exceptional details. However, since a real person does not possess a too generous stock of remarkable deeds or gestures, since one’s feelings are mostly anodyne, one falls prey to the tension one has created and invents a character which would befit the public’s expectations, necessarily estranging oneself from the plainness of truth:

"on sait bien qu’une personne réelle n’a pas grand’chose à nous apprendre sur ce qu’elle est. On écrit donc les aveux de quelque autre plus remarquable, plus pur, plus noir, plus vif, plus sensible, et même plus soi qu’il n’est permis, car le soi a des degrés. Qui se confesse ment, et fuit le véritable vrai, lequel est nul, ou informe, et, en général, indistinct" [1].

Valéry believes that the most important danger the artist has to face is that of giving in to the pressure of feelings, of investing in the faithful transcription of whatever it is that he might feel, thus fatally succumbing to an easy solution and letting himself caught in the trap of banality. In order to be able to put forward an important work, he needs to distance himself from whatever is unmediated, he must employ his talents to the end of disguising everything that has to do with naturalness, keeping away from the inexplicable constraints of affection and believing in the intercession of reason. Art is simulation, artifice, triumph of the intelligence against daily insignificance, victory of eccentricity against the insipid reality of common feeling. That is precisely why art cannot be found in bare emotions which are “aussi faibles que les hommes tout nus” [3]. Since our soul is the worst thinker [3], since “l’âme n’a pas d’esprit” [4], the creator is forced to distance himself from his shapeless offspring, from its tedious progeny, either by eliminating it in order to shake off possible turbulences, or by contradicting it and changing it according to the habits of the mind.

In order to describe the process of creation, Valéry privileges the model of construction, of patient and lucid mental labor. He finds it important to invalidate the statement according to which, in order for an important work to be produced, a series of spectacular experiences would be required so as to subsequently generate strong impressions: “Je ne pense pas que les esprits puissants aient besoin de l’intensité des impressions. Elle leur est plutôt funeste, étant ceux qui de rien font quelque chose” [3]. Incapable of believing in the power of delirium, in the benefic virtues of the absurd or incoherence, he is also a firm opponent of the notion of inspiration, against which he launches devastating attacks, using the entire artistry of his caustic spirit. His argumentation follows two main directions. According to the first, accepting the common idea of inspiration, which holds it true that an entire work could be dictated to an author by the whims of some divinity, would lead to the conclusion that it is perfectly possible that the ‘inspired’ write in a language unknown to him and without taking into account the cultural context of the time, the literary taste of the epoch and his predecessors’ works. Yet, since such a thing never happens, Valéry ironically notes that inspiration proves to be a power “si délirée, si articulée, si sage, si informée et si claculatrice, qu’on ne saurait pourquoi ne pas l’appeler Intelligence et connaissance” [3].

The second line of argumentation focuses upon the realization that, from among the innumerable impulses of inspiration, only extremely few can be considered important, the majority being immediately ignorable mental
waste, remains which have accidentally reached the margins of consciousness, without having any significance or purpose. Even those that prove fertile only acquire their value as a result of transformation, after the laborious activity of intelligence has acted upon them:

“l’esprit nous souffle sans vergogne un million de sottises pour une belle idée qu’il nous abandonne ; et cette chance même ne vaudra finalement quelque chose que par le traitement qui l’accommode à notre fin. C’est ainsi que les minerais, inappréciables dans leur gites et dans leurs filons, prennent leur importance au soleil, et par les travaux de la surface” [2].

To Valéry, the most obvious difference between a common individual and a creator can be noticed at the level of their mental activity. If the former is not capable of, or even in the least preoccupied with controlling the natural disorder of his own mind, allowing it the freedom of the fullest intellectual vagabondage and the random consecration of the strangest digressions or obsessions, the latter programmatically violates the natural rhythm of the mind, imposing a series of rules and constraints that drastically limit its freedom, making it aim at order, developing its extremely rare capacity of “de coordonner, d’harmoniser, d’orchestrer un grand nombre de parties” [5].

By means of systematic effort and intense concentration, the outcome of this difficult discipline-imposing operation is a mental configuration favorable to an intelligible construction, to a gathering of ideas according to their internal affinities, so that they might organize and impose themselves onto consciousness, become understandable as psychic entities that have acquired their independence as to spiritual accidents “perdus dans les statistiques de la vie locale du cerveau” [2]. Even if he is perfectly aware of the absolutely unpredictable nature of the birth of ideas, even if he admits that thinking most often resembles an attempt at a dialogue of the minds and that intelligence may be compared to gambling, Valéry insists upon the pre-eminence of conscious, orderly, lucid labor in the configuration of a work. Without denying that there are days “with ideas,” in which “tout à coup naissent des moindres occasions, c’est-à-dire de RIEN” [6], he lies emphasis on the mind’s openness to them, on the complex operations which lead to the construction of an entire machinery to take over the received impulse, ensuring it the proper development circumstances, creating the suitable environment for the genuine opening of thought, for the establishment of connections that allow it to stand out. Nevertheless, as opposed to the partisans of inspiration, to those who celebrate the moment ideas are born, Valéry privileges the end of the process, the emergence of pure, precise thought, capable of generating other ideas and nourishing a systematic vision. To him, if taken to extremes, any perception can be useful, any external impulse can be put to use. The essential thing is to turn on the machinery of the mind, to capture the accidental excitement and turn it into something useful due to the intellect’s processing ability, to its engineering dimension [2].

For this reason, it is absolutely legitimate that he employ the work of other authors in order to support and develop his own vision, that he use the inspiration a foreign way of thinking may offer, since the raw matter which comes out of such meetings is commonly filtered by the spirit, leading to the surfacing and shaping of one’s own ideas. Just as it happens in the case of sensations, perceptions or fragments of ideas upon which the actions of the mind are exerted, other creators’ influences only serve as a mere starting point, as a factor which can set the mind’s work in motion, thus sparing a series of energies that will be thus available during the final stage of thought construction. According to Valéry, there is a series of books that

“me sont des aliments dont la substance se changera dans la mienne. Ma nature propre y puisera des formes de parler ou de penser ; ou bien des ressources définies et des réponses toutes faites: il faut bien emprunter les résultats des expériences des autres et nous accroître de ce qu’ils ont vu et que nous n’avons pas vu” [3].

The digestion metaphor offers Valéry the most appropriate means of describing the way in which an author encapsulates other spirits’ influence. Valéry was convinced that the existence of originality is a mere prejudice, a matter of fashion, the obsession of people who thus betray their mimetic nature as to the ones who have made them believe in such an idea [3], that “Ce qui ne ressemble à rien n’existe pas” [6]. He maintains that the difference between a plagiarist and a creator can be traced down not by following their sources, which can often
be identical, but by analyzing the conclusions they reach, by examining the way in which they leave their own
mark upon the borrowed materials, conveying them as such or, to the contrary, organically incorporating them
into their own vision and making them unrecognizable:

“Plagiaire est celui qui a mal digéré la substance des autres : il en rend les morceaux reconnaisssables. L’originalité, affaire d’estomac. Il n’y a pas d’écrivains originaux, car ceux qui méritereraient ce nom sont inconnus; et même inconnaisssables. Mais il en est qui font figure de l’être” [6].

Cioran is an admirer of the abysmal, of the often monstrous and brutal grandeur of nature but, in exchange, he
is a vital critic of man, whose Daedalic and malefic being repulses him, whose shortcomings call for his sarcasm.
Cioran stays faithful to the idea that the grandeur of humanity is nothing but a presumptuous hypothesis,
impossible to confirm according to the facts of experience. The belief that man can control the course of his life,
that he can obey the maxims of reason into minute detail seems risible to him, evidence demonstrating that the
individual is a mere girouette, entirely dependent upon the mood-swing of destiny, a humble marionette in the
hands of gods. All that man builds is determined by a string of accidents, coincidences, unpredictable series of
events and effort, diligence; will plays but a minor part in the economy of hazard. Things work in the same way
in what the efforts of the mind are concerned: it is impossible to direct according to rigorous schemes, impossible
to subject to the ghostly discipline imagined by a tyrannical ego that finds itself prey to inspiration, chaotic
impulses, illness-induced deformations or the peculiar calligraphy of unhappiness.

“Une indigestion n’est-elle point plus riche d’idées qu’une parade de concepts? Les troubles d’organes déterminent la fécondité de l’esprit: celui qui ne sent pas son corps ne sera jamais en mesure de concevoir une pensée vivante; il attendra en pure perte la surprise avantageuse de quelque inconvénient...” [7].

Cioran seems to be in accord with Valéry in the respect that, in order to create, the artist needs to distance
himself from the mediocrity of his natural state, he must rise above the waste which ordinary life presupposes.
Yet, their opinions differ in what concerns the means by which such distancing can be achieved. Valéry supports
the exacerbation of man’s intellectual faculties, the conscious effort of intelligence to take possession of all
exterior excitement, all accidental impulses and intuitions and process them with a maximum of lucidity, thus
obtaining a coherent string of ideas which leads towards a perfectly clear systematic vision. Cioran, on the other
hand, believes that what is needed is a radical change, a rummaging of the creative interiority, caused either by
the inexplicable thrill of inspiration, or by some major, disease-induced disequilibrium, or by some intense
ailment which changes the way in which the world is perceived. What matters to Valéry is the concentration of
will, the imperturbable focus of attention, the transformation of the spirit into a sophisticated calculus machinery,
into a docile instrument, capable of the most complicated intellectual operations. In Cioran’s case, the essential
part is played by the emotional charge, the depth of feeling which causes creative instability, further triggering
disorder, exaltation, delirium and favoring the escape from the self, the surpassing of a strictly personal point of
view, the capturing of the world’s monstrousness.

In his youth, Cioran was faithful to a perspective deeply influenced by Nietzsche’s attempts to dismiss the
classical theories of truth. Fascinated by the incorporation of falsehood, virile lie into the mere definition of the
new type of truth, Cioran gradually estranges himself from such approaches and, due to his connections to Indian
philosophy, opts for a traditional metaphysical model. In this Buddhist-indebted view, the main opposition is the
one between “the real truth” (paramārtha) and “the truth of error” (samavirtti), the truth of the salvaged and that
of the one who finds himself incapable of escaping the veil of appearances. The former captures the immateriality
of the world, the unreality of all gestures, objects and events, while the latter remains spasmodically attached to
the contours of reality, unable to discover its emptiness, its essentially apparent character, its lack of substance.
Thus, he stays a prisoner to the universe of forms and facts [8].

By adopting such an interpretive principle, Cioran turns into an illusion chaser who finds enjoyment in
demonstrating the superfluous nature of all fabrications, the insanity of all projects, the uselessness of the belief in
The portrait drawn by Cioran of the literary sophist in this 1956 volume shares quite a number of features that were later on to be attributed to Valéry in the never-to-become-a-preface 1968 essay. These features account for the nihilism of such a writer, for his discomfort before experience, feeling, anything that is full of life. It is, however, precisely these attributes that determine Cioran to think that such an author, dependent upon construction and artifice, obediently following reason, immune to any intellectually non-validated sensations or states, shaken by doubts, perpetually haunted by sterility, is unable to generate a truly important work, to put forward a disturbing view of the world. The hegemony of reason within creation seems impoverishing to Cioran, its excesses leading to a leveling of one’s view of existence, to the guilty ignorance of human being’s complexity.

The great creator is not a prisoner of language captive to the spoken, an eternal hostage of his own reason, but an individual that reaches words, expression, language to the very purpose of communicating an exceptional experience, to the end of showing its painful or beastly splendor with the whole intensity of the reality show he is living. To Cioran, such a writer is Dostoïevski, scarred by epilepsy [11] and obsessed with the divine experience, reaching

"jusqu’à la limite de la raison, jusqu’au vertige ultime. Il est allé jusqu’à l’effondrement, par ce saut dans le divin, dans l’extase. Pour moi, c’est le plus grand écrivain, le plus profond et qui a à peu près tout compris” [12].

In Valéry’s eyes, genius is an extremely complex machinery whose functions stand in perfect harmony, discipline and hierarchy and support the conscious production of the great work, the emergence of the attentively crystallized form that underlies each truly remarkable vision. In Cioran’s case, the surfacing of genius is the result of some misbalance, of troubled normality, of excess. For this reason, he does not believe in the virtues of lucidity, he deplores the hysteria of introspection, the obsessive self-scrutiny, reckoning that it all does nothing but block the spontaneity of the creative impulse, inserting the lethal inclination towards self-censorship and leading towards sterility:

“Ce n’est que dans la mesure où nous ne nous connaissons pas nous-mêmes qu’il nous est possible de nous réaliser et de produire. Est fécond celui qui se trompe sur les motifs de ses acts, qui répugne à peser ses défauts et ses mérites, qui pressent et redoute l’impasse où nous conduit la vue exacte de nos capacités. Le créateur qui devient transparent à lui-même ne crée plus : se connaître, c’est étouffer ses dons et son démon” [9].
His aseptic views on the creative process lead Valéry towards evicting the author’s empirical individuality from the judgment that is exerted upon the work, any biographism seeming irrelevant or even harmful to him by means of its threat against the purity of exclusively intellectual construction. By antithesis, Cioran explores with immense curiosity all the available details of the lives of the personalities that fascinate him. Swift’s or Gogol’s impotence, Dostoievski’s epilepsy, Hölderlin and Nietzsche’s madness are only a few of the episodes upon which he focuses, making his own comments according to his own attempt at characterizing his writing, either violently, explosively, hysterically, or coldly, sardonically, almost indifferently [13].

Cioran’s interest in biographic incidents, in digging the author’s flesh and bones up, is doubled by his perspective on creation. On one hand, he agrees with Valéry in what regards the absolutely unpredictable nature of the birth of ideas, the inscrutable hazard that governs its genesis. Yet, he does not share the latter’s conviction that the intellect can take over such an accidental impulse, controlling and molding it according to its intentions, consciously inscribing it into a constellation of themes and motifs that allows full emphasis upon its true importance. To Cioran it is obvious that great minds are not used to functioning rigorously, exactly following the steps of a certain method, changing their course into a voluntary enterprise, mastering the chaotic assault of impressions and instincts, rationally blurring the always demonic edges of the world, since acting as such would equal depriving themselves of the whole charge of living, of the entire spectacle of emotions and passions and opting for the mere plainness of abstraction, easy to call upon and forge at any given moment but perfectly indifferent, since “Celui qui pense quand il veut n’a rien à nous dire” [7]. Instead of controlling the metabolism of the idea, instead of subjecting it to intellectual constraints, the creators let themselves possessed by its capricious emergence, they become its slaves, totally dependent upon the decrees of their body and the requirements of the moment:

“Les <saisons> de l’esprit sont conditionnées par un rythme organique; il ne dépend pas de <moi> d’être naïf ou cynique: mes vérités sont les sophismes de mon enthousiasme ou de ma tristesse. J’existe, je sens et je pense au gré de l’instant – et malgré moi. Le Temps me constitue; je m’y oppose en vain – et je suis. Mon présent non souhaité se déroule, me déroule; ne pouvant le commander, je le commente; esclave de mes pensées, je joue avec elles, comme un bouffon de la fatalité...” [7].

Since every important work is the product of hazard, the fortunate outcome of circumstances which entirely escape the individual’s capacities of prediction, Cioran shows his belief that “Nous ne devrions parler que de sensations et de visions: jamais d’idées – car elles n’émanent pas de nos entrailles et ne sont jamais véritablement nôtres” [14]. Ideas, which people change as often as ties [7], originate in the exterior, they are not organically produced. They are merely used to partially decode the obscure impulses sent by one’s own body, to make the signals of the flesh abyss relatively legible. Neuter in themselves, emotionally colored only due to the magma of feelings and passions that determine their unpredictable emergence, they are often borrowed to express an experience that seems identical but remains, nevertheless, untranslatable.

A fervent enemy of the notion of originality, just like Valéry, Cioran ridicules the efforts paid by a series of artists in order to proclaim their singularity, convinced that “Presque tous les œuvres sont faites avec des éclairs d’imitation, avec des frissons appris et des extases pillées” [15], considering the pursuit of originality at any cost as an indication of a second hand mind [16]. In this respect, his position resembles the opinions of some of the most important moralists: he believes that the requirement of absolute novelty is a mere exaggeration of those who have not understood that the meaning of a writer’s experience is given by his own searches, which can lead him towards a series of conclusions which he shares with some of his predecessors. If the similarities are the result of borrowing, he admits, just as Valéry does, that received influences may be benefic or harmful according to the way in which they are integrated by the author’s spiritual metabolism:

“Toute <influence> est mauvaise, tant qu’elles est perceptible, sentie. Si elles est assimilée et surmontée, elle peut être utile. Oublier tous ceux qu’on a admirés, voilà un impératif salutaire” [16].
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