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# Poetry and the emergence of the voice

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Poetry seems to occupy an ever-diminishing place in contemporary culture and this situation has given rise to speculation about its coming to an end, as so many other realms of human spiritual creation have seemed to do. However, in its essence, poetry is the unending endeavour of poets all over the world to re-enact the origin of human speech. It continues to respond to humankind's need to bridge the chasm which modern science has created between itself and the world. But man himself is torn between body and soul. The quest for unity, then, is a quest for the identity of human beings, which finds its expression and confirmation in a voice. In poetry, prosody offers the possibility of making that voice heard again in its mysterious power of making sense with articulated sound.

## Digkuns en die hoorbaarwording van die stem

Digkuns bestryk 'n al hoe kleiner plek in die hedendaagse kultuur en hierdie situasie het aanleiding gegee tot spekulasie oor die einde daarvan soos in die geval van baie geesteskeppings van die mensheid. Maar die essensie van digkuns het sy grond in die voordurende poging van digters in die hele wêreld om die oorspronklike menslike spraak te herskep. Digkuns beantwoord aan die behoefte van die mens om die kloof wat die moderne wetenskap tussen mens en wêreld geopen het, te oorbrug. Maar die mens self is verdeel tussen liggaam en gees. Die soeke na eenheid is dus ook 'n soeke na die identiteit van die mens wat sy uitdrukking en bevestiging vind in sy stemgewing. In digkuns bied die prosodie die moontlikheid om die stem weer te laat hoor in sy misterieuse krag om met geartikuleerde klanke sin te maak.

In contemporary culture poetry has become particularly vulnerable. Its purported untranslatability has certainly played a role, as the fact that some great authors have defended the position that only prose in all its forms is equipped to deal with contemporary issues, so that we seem to have reached the end of poetry. Consequently, in our present so-called post-modernist situation, it is common practice to reflect upon poetry by playing on the double meaning of the term “end”. The problem of the usefulness of art goes back to Hegel. Ever since he declared the end of art in general, of which poetry is of course a particular form, the question has been with us. However, our doubt about the purpose of poetry has not prevented poets from pursuing their vocation ever since.

## 1. Hegel and the end of poetry

Let us first dwell a while on Hegel’s position on the matter. I would sum it up as follows. At the centre of his philosophy stands the concept: not a fixed idea but the meaning which governs all through all and pervades the totality of Being, both spatial and temporal, giving sense and direction to man’s presence in the world. But this sense is not ready and waiting to be uncovered; it effectuates itself through the history of the world. By realising itself in the world, this sense itself produces the light necessary for it to reveal itself. Until Hegel’s time, this light was situated in art, which he considered to have been the spirit knowing itself as “spirit”. (“Mind” is another possible translation of the German *Geist*, a word which is not translatable into English by a single term. I shall thus employ the German one.) Art was seen as the most living part of the life of *Geist*, its quintessence; however art only lives from the *Geist* as long as the latter also derives its life from the former. Thus they develop in a situation of mutual dependence.

In his own philosophy Hegel arrived at the conclusion that through the reflection of absolute Idealism in his own time and more specifically in his own philosophy, the universal *Geist* had come to itself, to its own understanding of what it really is, and gone beyond this artistic form of itself which it no longer needed. It thus had no reason to see itself in the sensory form of a work of art. Once the *Geist* can realise itself directly in all individual and socio-political aspects of human behaviour — the realm in which it will show its real efficiency — art becomes mere

decoration, no longer revealing the sense of existence, and esthetics has to give way to ethics. Poetry comes to its end by acknowledging its uselessness; it has neither a purpose nor an aim to serve, not even the *Geist*.

## 2. Progress?

Needless to say, Hegel's view that universal *Geist* would spiritualise the material world was turned around by Marx but all thinking about progress since the great revolutionary period in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century, whether materialistic or idealistic, has located the responsibility for progress in the hands of mankind. But can it be said that humankind is capable of ethical progress? Have we really shown progress in our moral behaviour over the two centuries that now separate us from the German Idealism which celebrated the absolute subject in Fichte and the possible victory of *Geist* in Hegel? Their contemporary Schelling arrived at very different conclusions. It is impossible to retrace the history of that extremely rich period in the life of the *Geist* in the context of this article. However, to answer the question about moral progress in the affirmative clearly requires total disregard of world events since this revolutionary time.

## 3. The uselessness of poetry

In the light of the foregoing, one could argue that the modern poet has to ply his trade in an atmosphere dominated by the religion of progress, in which he can only claim the role of decorator, illustrator of good morals or praiser of proletarian prowess. In doing so, however, he knows that he is lying. If he does not want to lie he must either abandon poetry or practise it for the sake of the art itself, proclaiming a catastrophic independence, which will situate him irrevocably on the outskirts of society. Nobody will take him seriously any more because he will be viewed merely as playing with the most innocuous instrument of all, mere sound signs. In other words: he is useless and therefore poetry has reached its terminus, or fallen into an endless abyss, as Agamben (2002: 131-8) would have it in his *La fin du poème*,<sup>1</sup> because it does not know about its own end, because it does not know how to end.

1 The end of the poem.

What is disturbing, however, is the fact that such post-modernists try to find proof for their convictions in the past, as if time and history did not exist, or as if, in the case of Agamben, Dante had read the deconstructionists. Heidegger (1981: 33-48) also posed a question, in his famous essay on "Hölderlin and the essence of poetry", about the usefulness of poets in a time of need. Hölderlin's conviction that poetry is the most innocent of all trades was tempered by the realisation that it asks one to work with Language, that most dangerous of all human possessions. However, this danger neither forced him into silence nor prevented later poets from running the same risk because the need for poetry remained. At least Heidegger's question about the sense of Hölderlin's poetry took into account what he called the history of Being. Which or whose history that is must remain undebated in the context of this essay. (Nor is it pertinent in the context of this reflection on the end of poetry to point out the insufficiencies and distortions in Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin.)

As far as the recent history and development of poetry is concerned, it must be noted that the precarious situation in which poets have found themselves since the beginning of the nineteenth century has made them more self-conscious and more resolved than ever to continue their apparently hopeless activity. As the contemporary poet Michel Deguy (1988) says in the title of one of his publications, *L'énergie du désespoir*, the poet writes with "the energy of despair". However, from the perspective of structural ontology,<sup>2</sup> in which man opens up ontological dimensions on the strength of his own existence in the world, I want to point out that Kierkegaard, while reflecting on despair and the sickness unto death, opened up the dimension of hope, an invitation which has been taken up by another of the major French contemporary poets, Yves Bonnefoy. In his student days he wrote a Master's thesis on the possible and fruitful encounter between the thinking of Kierkegaard and Baudelaire. In an essay on the act and the place of poetry he states his own intention as being to show the possible identification of hope and poetry (Bonnefoy 1959: 105). What is required now is not a proof or a statistical or socio-political confirmation of the uselessness of poetry: we must try to understand the fact that a powerful

2 I refer here to my previous essay in this journal on what comes after theory, Peeters 2003.

need continues to exist, a need to write, and to write poetry — and — this need is the same as that longing for sense and meaning which Hegel's *Geist* has not yet brought about. What is more, this “need” for sense or meaning cannot be met by material gain. The poet is the one who is conscious of that non-material aspect of need and who tries to fulfill it.

#### 4. Our need

In short, from my point of view, this need arose out of humankind's decision to take control of the destiny of the world. But with the passage of time we have become more and more despondent, not only because that world continues to resist but also, more tragically, because we are not as rational as we might wish to be, because ascertainable knowledge is not the only relationship we can have with what is. Neither on the spiritual nor on the material side of the modern subject-object divide has *Geist* up to now been totally successful. In spiritual or religious matters stubborn fundamentalism and obscurantism continue to dominate vast regions of our world. On the other hand, mere material existence has not yet been pervaded by *Geist* with its sense of order and transparency, with its illuminating rationality. Science resigns itself to the principle of indeterminacy; in nature life continues to be an example of an anti-logical reality, and *Geist* has not yet equipped us with immortality. But mere material existence would be death, of course, and signify the end of *Geist*. The concept, however, emerged at the moment of our consciousness of the inevitability of death in a living and apparently immortal and therefore inhuman universe.

The sense or aim of mortal beings in an immortal universe is what man needs to understand. That is the need to which poetry tries to respond. The sense of our situation has not changed since anthropoids started to bury their deceased because they were shattered by the discovery of their own mortality in a living and perpetual and therefore inhuman universe. They had to assume their own existence and they did it in speech, in liturgical and later magical “music” by means of which they wanted to restore their unity with that cosmos made of harmony and perpetuity, permanent in its revival and restoring thereby the unity of their own living together after the disappearance of one of their kin. Our modern situation is not fundamentally different from

theirs. We need sense; therefore poetry, as the creation of sense, will never die. Poetry has a purpose or aim, it works towards an end and therefore it will not end. All the ingenious arguments corroborating the proclamation of its end are preposterous. Succinctly put, man (humanity for the feminists) by the force of his existence is a poet. Not only those who write verse have the right to the title. All efforts to define poetry as a special language, an exception to the norm, have failed. Since the definition of the norm inside the cybernetic scheme of message processing, the only possibility of accounting for poetry has been to define it as an autotelic message because in fact a poem contains neither news nor mere information in the strict sense of the word. Poetry is not a press release; it is, in short, an adventure, a risk, an appeal. To substantiate this claim about the sense of poetry it may be useful to consider some of the strongest arguments in favour of the poems' "end" in the double sense of the word and to consider Agamben's thesis more closely.

## 5. Agamben's thesis

Agamben (2002) starts by stating a thesis or principle which he calls not trivial but evident: poetry would only live out of the tension and incongruity between sound and meaning, between what he calls a semiotic sequence and a semantic one. The incongruity between the two faces of the sign comes, of course, from Saussure and the separation of the semiotic from the semantic from Jakobson. The latter bases his linguistic and poetic theory on the cybernetic model of communication, which is now totally discredited in the field of linguistics and has ceased to be pertinent for the purpose of understanding human speech. Such understanding is only possible and understandable within the realm of the dialogical or interlocutory space where the party called the "receiver" in the cybernetic model plays an active and necessary part in the process of sense-making. I want to point out that as early as 1981, during a Franco-Saxon conference at the university of Lille, the French philosopher Francis Jaques (1982: *s p*) showed the inadequacy of Jakobson's model, calling it in Kuhnian terms "an epistemological obstacle".

There is another fundamental reason for the incompetence of structural linguistics and its more general cousin semiotics in terms of human speech in general and poetry in particular: they have nothing to say about the voice, for the good reason that it cannot be imprisoned in

a binary opposition with a non-voice. In actual speech no separation is possible between signifier and signified, nor is the tonality and rhythm of speech a matter of choice between binary differences, as Jakobson would have it.

## 6. Language and speech

For the purpose of understanding speech it is more pertinent to start with its Humboldtian definition as the spiritual capacity of man to make articulated sounds apt for the expression of his thought, of what is going on in his mind — “thought” being understood here in the most general sense of inner experience which in order to exist has to be and can be manifested in a comprehensible manner, both inside the person and in the direction or sense of the world and the Other. Humboldt conceived of language as an “energy” of which the languages commonly called natural or institutionalised were a result or *ergon* (Humboldt 1996: 418). He compared the thought processes with lightening, with a thrust, which summons up all the intentional and representational powers of the mind in one point, thereby eliminating all that could be simultaneously present in consciousness. Thought fills the whole mind at once. The intensification in one point is analogous to what articulated sound does in pervading the whole of the nervous system. To speak and to hear are both actions, hearing being an act of attention and co-operation in the making of sense (Humboldt 1996: 426-7). The voice produces in speech a living, animated sound transfigured by meaning at the moment of its utterance, a meaning that exists in the concrete situation of an ongoing dialogue. Therefore it is not possible to distinguish between the signifier and the signified in real speech, which is the only observable realisation of the capacity or energy of language.

In this sense Humboldt prefigured some aspects of recent developments in dialogical or interlocutory linguistics. For the non-specialist it is perhaps useful to situate Humboldt in the development of modern linguistics. He wrote his fundamental study on the diversity of languages from 1830 to 1835 and it became the basic text for research in comparative and typological linguistics during the nineteenth century. However, the positivist frame of mind of these comparatists concentrated on phonetical evolution and on the reconstruction of Indo-German, later Indo-European roots and grammatical features. This historical

approach to language was abandoned at the beginning of the twentieth century when Humboldt was relegated to the background in favour of more stringently “scientific” postulates and methods based on those apparently so successful in the natural sciences. Saussurian linguists were exclusively concerned with language as *ergon*, a finished and observable product, without bothering about its genesis, its continuous emergence and its transformation in real speech.

## 7. Linguistics and poetics

Language as a system of signs found its ideal partner in cybernetics while Jakobson, in trying to consider poetry as a legitimate object of linguistics, found a sort of confirmation that the binary construction of all sign systems would also be applicable to poetry in the note books of Valéry. In his essay on the end of poetry, Agamben (2002: 131) takes this reference at face value, as evident. It is therefore necessary to consider this evidence more closely. Jakobson (1963: 233) quotes a fragment included in Valéry’s *Rbumbs* which has become famous due to the success and prestige it gained from Jakobson’s theory: “Le poème, hésitation prolongée entre le son et le sens”.<sup>3</sup> As it stands, this quotation is not correct. Valéry wrote (and I copy the sentence as it figures in the *Pléiade* edition which Jakobson himself used: “Le poème — cette hésitation prolongée entre le son et le sens” (Valéry 1960: 637). In Jakobson’s quotation the noun “hésitation” figures without any article, which is very unusual in French, where the article is almost obligatory. Its zero degree or absence marks the noun with a special value. Jakobson does not attach any importance to this absence. But what is important is the fact that Valéry has used the demonstrative adjective *cette* (this) which refers the noun *hésitation* to the preceding note on the same page. Indeed, in normal usage the demonstrative adjective (or “article” as it is called in textual grammar) gives an instruction to the interlocutor or the reader to pay special attention to the referential context in which the noun is situated. In the case of a published text this context would be the preceding sentence or paragraph. In the preceding note on page 637 the poet defines the specific *puissance* (strength) of *le vers* (“line” in English) as an indefinable harmony between what the line/*vers* says

3 The poem, prolonged hesitation between sound and meaning.



(its content) and what it is (its music, the configuration of its vocal articulation).

Here, then, there is no idea of an impossible congruence between the semiotic and the semantic: the poet is in search of this harmony or “union”, as Michel Deguy (2001: 33), whom we have already mentioned, said in reference to the Valerian “hesitation”. This misquoted remark of Valéry’s was thus promoted to the status of an absolute definition, by virtue of Jakobson’s theory, and Agamben does not hesitate to identify this opposition with that, which, according to him, exists between metric and semantic segmentation.

## 8. Valéry’s poetics

When one reads Valéry’s *carnets*, the notebooks from which he published the bulk of the *Rhumbs* it is crystal clear that he considers poetry to be the constant search for union between sound and sense; that according to him, the poet is trying to make present in his writing what he calls “the voice in action”, adding “the voice stemming directly from or provoked by the things which one sees or which one feels as present” (Valéry 1960: 549). Neither Jakobson nor Agamben asks what these statements tell us about the specific poetics of Valéry. The main issue here is to understand what poetry is or was for Valéry, before proceeding to any generalisation. Neither Jakobson nor Agamben asks the question, and both behave as if Valéry was stating a universal truth. In a nutshell, for Valéry a poem has to be a place where a pure idea will become evident, where in an exquisite form the poet lends a voice to what is present and vivid in things. He holds poetry to be “de la nature de cette énergie qui se dépense à répondre à ce qui est...”<sup>4</sup> (Valéry 1960: 547), but this response has to be a verbal construct where no obscurity remains, has to attain a totally impersonal and disincarnated perfection, where the intellect of the poet leaves no hesitation, where no hazard can interfere. The hesitation about which Valéry speaks concerns this search for total control over the poetic message, and not its result.

In the same notebooks Valéry describes his own poetic practice as a search for poetic ideas which he seeks to separate from the non-poetic and for which he then proceeds to find adequate expression. The poem

4 of the nature of that energy which exerts itself to respond to what is ...

must be a feast for the intellect. However, as Bonnefoy (1959: 97-103) points out in his essay on Valéry, the poet who “exists” is a living being, not merely a fine-tuned intellect, and what he tries to incarnate in words is existence or emotion, which are very obscure, partly because the shadow of death looms over them. Existence is, as Valéry implicitly admits in the note just quoted, a response to what is; therefore, as I see it, marked by the pathic dimension, by aspects such as initiative and expectation, surprise and anger, menace and protection, discretion and liberty, decision and limitation. These pathic experiences are often painful and one can be tempted to transfigure them into poetic speech. To do so, Valéry wanted to place his words in the pure heaven of ideas, following in the footsteps of his master Mallarmé, as if the word were not also flesh. I shall return to Valéry’s poetics but first it must be noted that for him this adequate form had to make the “voice in action” heard.

Evidently this necessity postulates a close union between the semi-otic and the semantic. Our voice is situated before any choice at all: when we are moved to respond to the presence of what is, our voice does not choose between this or that emotion and its binary opposite. Emotions do not occur in binary taxonomies. Valéry held these emotions to be too common, too impure, and wanted to purify them in the form of poetry, place them in a kind of heaven, which he himself admits to be fictive. If redemption occurred, it would not do so in a poem but as a result of one. Only once did Valéry take death as the inspiration for a poem, and it is his most profound and best known, the famous “Le cimetière marin”.<sup>5</sup> In it one really hears a voice which trembles. Its genius stems partly from a decision of a formal nature — to try and convey in a decasyllable the plenitude of which an alexandrine is capable. The poem is really moving because the formal decision seems to be a kind of challenge or a gamble (to continue the idea of play or game) and the result corresponds miraculously to the anxious and therefore pathic meditation on personal death in front of the infinity and perpetuity of the Mediterranean. But nearly all Valéry’s poems are what he wanted them to be — a feast for the intellect. It is not very considerate, then, to take Valéry’s note as an absolute statement about poetry as such and in to construct a theory on it. Which brings us to Agamben.

5 The graveyard at the sea-side.

## 9. *Versura*

Agamben considers the hesitation in question to be concerned with the non-coincidence between metric and semantic units. He calls it the *versura*, by which he denotes the fact that each verse/line returns to the margin and that if there is no coincidence between the line (the sequence of metrically assembled signs) and the sentence (the syntactical unity of sense) there is *enjambement*. The French term has to be employed here (as Agamben does in his Italian text) and its meaning is not that of the “run-on line” in English poetry. Agamben makes the possibility of *enjambement* the only criterion differentiating poetry from prose. But for a discrepancy to be noticed at all, it is evident that the run-on sense or meaning, when it ends without undue interruption before the next line or even a few lines later, does not constitute an incongruity. Incongruity is only observed if the meaning stops in the middle of a line or verse. This Agamben neither hears nor sees. In any case, his probing examples are all taken from poetry in the Romance languages — Medieval Latin, Italian and Provençal. These languages have a prosody of their own which is markedly different from the Germanic (and Anglo-Saxon) languages, not to mention other traditions. The Germanic languages base their music on the distribution of stressed and unstressed syllables in feet and the number of accents, which is impossible in the Romance languages where the number of syllables determines the measure of the semiotic chain in the poem, as Agamben would call it. This also applies to the syntax of those languages.

It must be pointed out however that, even in normal everyday speech, separating the semiotic from the semantic by pausing in the middle of syntagms or phrases can create rhythmic effects. Since sense in speech depends on the voice, which articulates it in its own rhythm, there is very often hesitation and uncertainty in speech itself. The discrepancy in question does not constitute a prerogative of poetry and in the context of systemic linguistics it applies mainly to written discourse or texts. The complexity of the matter becomes clear when Agamben sets out to discuss the essential disjunction between sound and meaning in medieval poetry as if the latter were not lyric, not sung, not inseparably linked to melody. The unity of lyric meaning was not only a matter of sound and sense but of speech and melody. Only during the fourteenth century did the separation between music and words become

increasingly evident. Towards the end of the century we find theoretical treatises such as that by Eustache Deschamps, *L'art de dictier*<sup>6</sup> (1891), which dates from 1392 and can be found in the complete edition of his works by Ernest Raynaud in 1891.

Deschamps took cognisance of the separation between melody and meaning and tries to find a different way of assuring the unity of sound and sense. This is what he called “verbal” music, measured speech unaccompanied by instruments, formulated not for singing but for “dictating”; in other words, for reciting. The structure of this unit of sense and sound does not base itself on a melody but on the *versura*: the returning of the line within itself across a central void. The line does not point towards silence only at its end but does so continuously: the whole of the poem has its foundation (not its abyss) in silence, as music does. The silence does not fall at the end of the line or the poem — as its background or foundation it pervades the whole of the rhythmic emergence of its sense (both meaning and direction).

Most theorists do not have a sound notion of what rhythm really is: it is itself and should not be confused with metrics or, even worse, with some kind of cadence. Rhythm is the configuration of what becomes or emerges; it cannot be poured, as it were, into a pre-existing form or pattern. It is the form in which the voice surging forward out of the depth of the body articulates the encounter of this living and conscious body with the presence of things, thereby incarnating this emotional and meaningful encounter. The most spontaneous outburst of the pathic encounter with the world is of the order of non-articulated sound, such as a cry. At one stage Valéry (1960: 547) defines poetry as the effort to restore in articulated language what is meant by a cry, what it is as a response to what is present in the world.

With regard to Agamben's thesis we must insist that the sense or end (where it goes to, for what it is made) of a poem is not outside it but within. This situation is not one of closure, as so many theorists have said; rather, the rhythm and the sense of a poem open it up from the inside — in a poem we are situated in the “Open” where Being can reveal itself through an encounter between the mind and concrete things. It manifests the emergence of meaning out of the foundation

6 The art of reciting.

of the void of Being, to use a phrase now common in phenomenology. Prosody, of course, changed at the time of the great revolutions, the time when Hölderlin tried to transpose into the German idiom the insights he had gained from an intense confrontation with ancient Greek poetry. He went against the closed prosody of classicism. This new prosody was based on the rhythmic alternation of the three main poetic tonalities — lyric, epic and dramatic — which opened up poetry. Thereby Hölderlin opposed the so-called closed prosody of classicism. Prosody opens up a poem; it is the movement through which meaning, the lived sense of experience, seeks its apt expression, its articulation, and attempts to incarnate itself in all for its density and plentitude, not by submitting it to the external pressure of fixed patterns, but by letting it grow from within these potential prosodic configurations.

## 10. The end according to Agamben

To give substance or even proof to his argument about the end of the poem, Agamben then turns his attention to the endings of the poems of Baudelaire. He first quotes Proust and then Walter Benjamin, who remark that Baudelaire's poems often seem to have difficult endings, stop abruptly or become banal and prosaic. Needless to say, he still operates within the framework of the binary opposition between poetry and prose, seeing the former as autotelic and therefore informatively useless or cybernetically senseless and the latter as merely and unendingly informative. Agamben interpretes this feature as a proof that a poem does not want to conclude but feels it has to and that the oncoming necessity of an ending is felt only as an interruption of sound, which precipitates the poem into the abyss of meaning — whatever that means! However, it is an essential aspect of Baudelaire's poetics that the poem should return to the world in which we live together. The poem should not be formally perfect; its form, as a cycle of meaning, grows from within and when the sense is achieved, the poem has reached its end in the full and double sense of the word. Even when he finds it necessary to write in sonnet form he adapts it from within to the necessity of its inner form, that is, to the experience he wants to incarnate in words. In his notebooks Valéry singles Baudelaire out for stringent criticism in this regard, but he is intelligent enough to acknowledge that these inadequacies of Baudelaire's poetic diction — a diction which Valéry

wanted to be as pure and continuous as possible, devoid of loose elements or ends — bear testimony to the greatest gift or genius of Baudelaire: the capacity to install silences as a meaningful contribution to the sense of his poems (Valéry 1974: 1075).

In order to put the issue of the unity of a line or verse into perspective we may refer to a contemporary of Valéry's, Paul Claudel, who says that a verse/line reaches its end when its rhythm (the surging movement of articulated sense) has attained its completion, even after only one or two syllables. In his remarks on verse (Claudel 1963: 7-90) he states that a line/verse does not end because a material factor such as space on the page forces it to, but because its inner *chiffre* has reached its accomplishment. Claudel uses the term *chiffre* in an almost Hebraic sense, to the meaningful and destinal quality of a being. Why absolutise a remark of Valéry's, without situating it in its proper context? Why ignore so many other poets who continued to write in verse because its form is not a metrical straightjacket but an instrument of research, because verse leads somewhere whereas prose (*prosa ratio*: straight-on-going discourse) does not know how to end? Prosody is not a recipe for an exquisite mixture of knowledge and pleasure. A poem does not end to mark the impossibility of congruence between the semiotic and the semantic but because it has reached its plenitude of sense. Therefore poetry does not prove that language only communicates itself (the new version of Jakobson's autotelic poetic function) but that through language incarnation and communion are possible in its rhythm (not its metrics). The notion of verbal music as Deschamps defined it is, of course, linked to the necessity to make a voice heard, and a voice is always present, no matter what some or other guru might say: present to oneself and to the other, the presence of the world in me, and my presence through that world with the other.

## 11. The end of Agamben's thesis

Let us pause for a while to reconsider the gist of Agamben's thesis. First of all he considers the divergence between sound and meaning, or between the semiotic and the semantic as the essence of poetry. This divergence, of course, is of Saussurrean origin, and is taken for granted by Agamben on the authority of Jakobson. Sense then becomes a problem because it cannot be materially located and therefore does not

really exist. As a consequence the system of signs, which is language, can only speak about and for itself. Consequently if the poem has any right to existence its aim can only be to make language speak in and for itself, to communicate itself. This thesis is then projected into the past as if time has not passed, as if being had no history in terms such as Heidegger's. The diachronic is annihilated in the synchronic dimension of language. Therefore sense is nothing, in both senses of the word. We are left with the fascination of the abyss, which could only be mystical, and about which one should remain silent.

Wittgenstein rears his head again, this time in the guise of a remark about the relation between poetry and philosophy (Agamben 2002: 138). I do not want to attack the author of the renowned *Tractatus*, which ends with the now famous remark about silence. I want to distance myself from those who abuse the fragmented nature of his books to make him say whatever they like to see in them. Wittgenstein remarks (Agamben does not give the reference) that philosophy should be "poetized". It seems to me that the authority of Wittgenstein is randomly abused to defend some theory or other about the insufficiency of language, its incapacity to state the truth, and so on. Such abstract and abstruse elucubrations about the abyss of sense and end are fascinating to some, and that is understandable, but the fear of becoming trite when one says what one wants to say — which happens, according to Agamben, when philosophy pretends that sounds and sense coincide in its discourse — is ridiculous. He interprets Wittgenstein's remark about the purported necessity for philosophy to be "poetized" as a criticism of philosophy's overconfidence in its own discourse, which would ignore the difference between the semantic and the semiotic. I would say that overconfidence in the power of philosophical speech comes rather from the conviction that one's discourse has to be cryptic or obscurely encoded in order to avoid banality.

Ask Socrates about philosophical discourse. He never wrote, but was at the same time acutely aware of the gap that had opened up between the thing and its name as the latter was analysed in the newly developed Greek phonetic alphabet, but he remained convinced that words had *dunamis* — power by virtue of their meaning in a concrete situation. I would assume that a thinking subject is concerned with and about reality in and through his discourse, even if it is a philo-

sophical one. And what is so special about the latter in any case? — it remains forever vulnerable to the meaningful laughter of the Thracian woman. Moreover, what is more banal than suffering or the consciousness of our finitude? But it is because of the need we feel inside that finitude, out of the aspiration and hope which are aspects of the lived existence, that the poem emerges. Otherwise nobody would attempt to write one. I would insist that we are incarnated beings who exist in our flesh and are therefore capable of a meaningful encounter with the world. I would like to propose a way out of this so-called post-modern nihilism by meditating on one of the aspects of poetry which is commonly neglected: the voice. I shall start with what Valéry, that pure poet of aimlessness, had to say about it. In our voice, sound and sense always coincide but this fact neither makes idiots out of us nor condemns us to a state of inauthenticity.

## 12. Valéry and the voice

Valéry does not ignore the fact that poetry initially was oral and that by his own time the written form had taken over. But for a long, long time the voice was the basis and condition of literature, and the whole human body was present underneath the voice (Valéry 1960: 549). To make this voice audible again, to resuscitate it, is now the aim or end or sense of poetry, which is why poetry uses rhyme, lines, alliteration, and so on. We have already mentioned that the voice is a spontaneous response to the presence of the world. Valéry (1974: 1094) goes so far as to say that one makes the verses/lines of one's own voice, contending that if we knew more about this true relation between verse and voice we could know what the voice of Racine was, just by reading his poetical tragedies aloud. It remains a mystery how sound and sense combine. Neither sound nor sense precedes the other in poetry: does "poetic" mean that which restores the unitary state or union between body and mind (Valéry 1974: 1107)? The poem is a *génération* (an act of generation) and a creation of and in time (Valéry 1974: 1127). Sound and sense respond to each other. On paper poetry has no existence; it exists only in the mind which creates it, and during times when it is said or recited. Here the voice is necessary (Valéry 1974: 1141). I imagine that these remarks of Valéry's speak loudly enough for all theorists of the incongruence between the semiotic and the semantic.



### 13. The voice of Jaccottet

I shall now illustrate the pertinence of the voice by commenting on a poem by a living poet, Philippe Jaccottet (1985: 60), entitled *La voix*. I will translate its sense-sound while hearing and interpreting it.

#### La voix

Qui chante quand toute voix se tait? Qui chante  
avec cette voix sourde et pure un si beau chant?  
Serait-ce hors de la ville, à Robinson, dans un  
jardin couvert de neige? Ou est-ce là tout près,  
quelqu'un qui ne se doutait pas qu'on l'écoutât?  
Ne soyons pas impatients de le savoir  
puisque le jour n'est pas autrement précédé  
par l'invisible oiseau. Mais faisons seulement  
silence. Une voix monte, et comme un vent de mars  
aux bois vieillis porte leur force, elle nous vient  
sans larmes, souriant plutôt devant la mort.  
Qui chantait là quand notre lampe s'est éteinte?  
Nul ne le sait. Mais seul peut entendre le coeur  
Qui ne cherche la possession ni la victoire.

First of all, the title: in textual grammar, the definite article “la” is anaphoric, presenting the following noun as already known, as a notion supposed to be familiar to the reader. This notion is not necessarily abstract or of a conceptual nature. The poem itself is a sonnet and the lines are alexandrines. I will comment on the rhythm as I proceed. The first line is marked by the fact that the interrogative sentence ends before the prosodic unit of the alexandrine. Rhythmically, however, the second “qui chante” seems to be a repetition of the beginning of the line, marking an insistence or a concern about the fact that a song can be heard when all voices become silent. (Who sings when all voice becomes silent?) The noun “voice” thus refers to the potentiality of speaking, making oneself heard. The mystery deepens in the second line since this extremely beautiful chant is sung by a muted and pure voice. At this stage the reader cannot fail to hear the frequency of the vowel [a], the continental open vowel (both plain and nasal) in which one sings wordlessly. Again there is an *enjambement* across the caesura after the sixth syllable, which marks the alexandrine with a central void

or silence, a pause in which the rhythm “falls” (*cadit*, cf Dante: “cadere” here is a technical term which marks the placement of stressed and unstressed syllables in the rhythmical movement of speech) or descends in order to resurge and on which the *versura* turns: “et pure” belongs syntactically to the syntagm “cette voix sourde et pure” but comes as a kind of excess after the caesura. We already feel that the poem is not based on a regular measure or cadenza: the meaning surges up spontaneously as rhythm in the original sense of the word. This toing-and-froing will constitute the basic rhythm of this sonnet. Between what would have been the first stanza and the second and then between the second and the third, there is also an *enjambement*. The latter case is more remarkable since it isolates the word “silence” at the beginning of the first tercet, without an article. This zero degree of the article is possible between a verb (“faire”) and a direct object (“silence”) in fixed expressions but here the *enjambement* isolates and absolutises the silence at the beginning of the line. Out of this silence a voice then surges “Une voix monte”. The surging rhythm is effected by the so-called *coupe lyrique*: in traditional prosody the mute *e* of “silence” would have been absorbed by the following vowel *u* of “une”, but the full-stop prevents this neutralisation. The force of the hesitation creates a void. This time around the article is cataphoric; it refers the reader to what will follow. But first we must return to the opening lines.

#### 14. Music and silence

The questions in lines three to five concern the origin of the chant, the location from which it comes — a location not far away (would it be out of town in Robinson, in a garden covered with snow, or is it from nearby where somebody does not know that he is overheard?). Here again we have a counter-*enjambement* since “dans un” belongs syntactically to the next prosodic unit of line four. In fact we feel here that the poem is precariously situated on the foundation of silence just as the song mysteriously pervades the space in which it floats and wavers, not targeting anybody as the receiver of its message, not carrying an encoded message, but simply being there, much as the wind would be. The poet invites us not to be too impatient to know where the voice comes from because “daybreak is not otherwise followed by the invisible bird”. “Oiseau” here has an anaphoric article, which this time refers

us to the notion of what birds do at dawn, heralding it by their expectant and hopeful chant. Again the frequency of the vowel [a] maintains the presence of the song as potential meaning without words.

In the first tercet a comparison establishes the meaning of the chant, it is “as a wind of March (which) brings to the grown old forests their strength”. Here first of all the moment of the poem becomes clear: we are at the beginning of spring and the start of a new day; this moment is original and it is that of the surging upward of the voice in the depth of silence. The image suggests a mysterious unity, a genuine partnership between the forests and the wind since the latter returns “leur force”, their strength, which the wind of winter had taken away. This voice is the one which allows us to endure in our existence, in the face of death “it (the voice) comes to us”. The “nous” is an indirect object and thus does not denote a position in space as would “à nous” (to us). Thus a sort of correspondence is established between us (for us) and the voice brought to us by the wind of spring, as was the case with the winter forests: it comes to us without tears, rather smiling in the face of death.

At the beginning of the second tercet the initial question of the sonnet is repeated, but this time in the past tense: who sang there when our lamp went out? The present becomes the imperfect, which is the tense of the immediate past in its duration or decadence, and then in the perfect (“s’est éteinte”), marking the result or moments of completion. Of course when day breaks the luminosity of a lamp fades and dies. But nobody knows who sang. Again we hear here a counter-*enjambement* since “Nul ne le sait” ends before the first hemistiché does, acquiring rhythmically an almost absolute and assertive value. *Nul* is also stronger than *personne* (nobody). The verb “entendre” is also used in a non-limitative sense; the implicit action contained in the verb is not transitive since no direct object comes to limit it. We hear, or rather can only hear the heart, which seeks neither possession nor victory. Both nouns are provided with the definite article and thus refer to a notion supposed to be already familiar to the reader, indicating that we must know already where to look for the specific meaning and value of these terms. But our heart hears without seeking or obeying a specific purpose, which in some way would be the possession of our life and our victory over death. However, that song comes with a smile and repre-

sents another permanence, one not of the illusory nature which distinguishes the quest for possession and victory.

Hearing retrospectively now, we again emphasise the frequency of the [a] vowel (the most “open” vowel, the one that opens the mouth most widely, the one on which the voice can most easily vocalise and which makes us conscious of the mystery by which the sounds we produce with the mouth, in its movement and articulation, create meaning) as well as the almost continuous sprung rhythm. Both features correspond or are in unison with the moving and mysterious presence of the world which manifests itself in a singing and revivifying voice. The real subject of the poem (in Greek the *prōton upokeimenon*, that is the whole of the world in which beings manifest themselves out of the never-ending and unfathomable ground of Being) is that mysterious presence of Being which only the heart can hear and understand.

## 15. Conclusion

To conclude this brief analysis of a contemporary poem: there is indeed *enjambement* in this poem, but it exists in the way (or movement) in which the original rhythm of the poem’s subject makes itself felt in the music of the words. These do not denote concepts but are names; they name the presence of things by using all the grammatical and rhythmical potentialities of the spoken word. Secondly, time is inside the poem as silence is. When in the twelfth line the question about the chant is repeated in the imperfect tense, it refers not to external time but to time or duration within the poem itself. Therefore the poem is not speaking semiotically, encoding a pre-formed message or meaning on the so-called semantic level. The questions arrive at no answer, in any case, and it is not important to know, only to hearken and to understand, with understanding the heart. As far as the end of poetry is concerned: poetry does not end, since its end or aim is and always will be to re-enact the original emergence of speech as the sense-making articulation of the intertwining relationship between the world and a human consciousness indissolubly linked to a body which is part of that world. The human voice is at the same time before and beyond the subject-object divide opened up by humankind, which has now to be bridged. It is to this need that contemporary poetry responds.

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