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LE RÉEL DU DISCOURS Eupalinos ou l'architecte^{*}

^{*}
A slightly different version of this text was previously published in the *festschrift* for Geert Bekaert, *Wonen tussen gemeenplaats en poëzie* (Rotterdam: 010, 1993).



Parthenon, 440 BC

If there is one text that takes the theme of the symposium, ‘Poesis and architecture’, as its element, then it is Paul Valéry’s dialogue *Eupalinos ou l’architecte*. I became familiar with this text in the elegant Gallimard edition published in 1944¹ – the year before Valéry’s death – which also contains the dialogues *L’âme et la danse* and *Dialogue de l’arbre*. I mention these titles in passing because dance and trees are two subjects of Valéry’s that are closely connected to our theme. While reading Valéry’s text, I was sent a review copy of the proceedings of the 1951 Darmstädter Gespräch, *Mensch und Raum*, including the Sunday lecture ‘Bauen, Wohnen, Denken’ by Prof. Martin Heidegger of Freiburg. By sheer coincidence, those texts, written 30 years apart, were brought together for me in an almost organic association. Recently, Massimo Cacciari made this association the theme of an article with the altered title ‘Eupalinos ou l’architecture’ (rather than *l’architecte*), which appeared in *Critique*, no. 476-477, January-February 1987. This alteration, whether conscious or not, is not unimportant in our context.

It is tempting to take Cacciari’s thesis, or the comparison between Heidegger and Valéry in general, as a point of departure, but I fear that Valéry’s text will then remain underexamined. Cacciari offers a Heideggerian reading of Valéry, in such a skilful and thought-provoking way that you are almost convinced it was meant to be. I too believe that it can be useful to juxtapose those two authors (Heidegger was 19 years younger than Valéry), just as it can be useful to juxtapose Valéry with authors such as Barthes, Deleuze, Derrida, Cioran and Bataille. I cannot escape the impression, however, that Cacciari’s all too direct interpretation of Valéry’s writings with the aid of certain Heideggerian concepts does violence to Valéry’s text. I will stay with Valéry’s text itself.

Valéry’s text is of a different order than Heidegger’s. It is above all text, form, construction, publication. Valéry plays with thoughts as if with bricks/building stones. He does not develop them. He provides no explanation. The spoken language, the writing in statements and counterstatements, the cessation, the continuation of spoken language and writing, carefully, cogently, but also playfully, parodically, speaking and writing is important. His thoughts about poesis are the text itself. Outside the text they do not exist. His approach to architecture is the architecture of his text.

Le réel d’un discours, Socrates says in *Eupalinos*: ‘c’est après tout cette chanson, et cette couleur d’une voix, que nous traitons a tort comme détails et accidents’: ‘The reality of a discourse is, after all, that song, and that colouring of the voice, which we unjustly view as details and accidents.’ Elsewhere Valéry says: ‘The highest goal of art is charm, enchantment.’

The most obvious thing to do would be to read the text itself aloud, to listen to it. It is rhetorical or poetic enough for that. But our symposium leaves no scope for this approach. Reading or ‘reciting’ the 127 pages in the above-mentioned elegant edition would take too much time. But what is the alternative?

Narrating a condensed version of Valéry is impossible, summarising him even more impossible. Explaining his system of thought is likewise impossible, because it does not exist, or if it does (as a kind of wish), it contains its own destruction. Just as Loos’ buildings cannot be photographed, Valéry’s texts cannot be translated. They are attached to their language. Their reality lies in their appearance, their form, their sound, their body.

1
A Dutch translation by Piet Meeuse was published in 1991 by De Bezige Bij in Amsterdam, under the title *Leonardo en Socrates*. Translator’s note: The English translations of quotes from *Eupalinos* are based on the Dutch translations in the original article, but with reference to both the original French version and a published English translation of the complete dialogue: ‘Eupalinos’, in Paul Valéry, *Dialogues*, trans. William McCausland Stewart (New York, 1956), 65-152. These translations thus reflect both the original dialogue and, in many cases, Geert Bekaert’s interpretation of it. Moreover, they reflect his decisions on issues such as whether to provide the French, a translation or both, what words and phrases to omit from the quotes, and whether to indicate those omissions. The English version of the excerpt from *La Pythie* is largely based on a translation by Elizabeth Sewell, as

All we can do here is take a few shots – following Valéry’s own method, *à la mode des artilleurs* – in the direction of the target, the target unknown to us, which remains eternally mysterious, and for all we know may not even exist. The text, as a text, remains out of reach. No construction or deconstruction whatsoever is capable of neutralising it.

Eupalinos ou l’architecte is an occasional piece – like the vast majority of Valéry’s works, one might add. This occasional character is in fact essential to its viewpoint on the functionality of a text. It was commissioned by the architects Louis Suë and André Mare as an introduction to the monumental edition of their work *Architectures . . . la présentation d’ouvrages d’architecture, décoration intérieure, peinture, sculpture et gravure, contribuant depuis mil neuf cent quatorze à former le style français*, an attempt to naturalize the Wiener Werkstätte in France. The book was published by Editions de la Nouvelle Revue Française in 1921. (That same year, Loos’s *Ins Leere gesprochen* was published. Le Corbusier’s *Vers une architecture* followed in 1923.)

Valéry was allotted precisely 115,800 characters, not one more or less. In a letter to Paul Souday, he remarks: ‘It’s true that they are sumptuous characters.’ And the fonts used were luxurious! The oversized proofs gave the author the impression that he was holding a sixteenth-century book and had been dead 400 years himself.

The same letter includes other remarks of potential relevance to our theme: ‘They are works made to order,’ Valéry says, ‘in which I could not place an authentic thought in the most favourable light. I have tried to show that pure thought and the search for truth itself cannot aspire to anything but the discovery and construction of a *form*.’ Here is all poesis in a nutshell: *découverte, construction, forme*.

Valéry explicitly draws in philosophy: ‘The contrast is not between a philosopher and an artist, but between an artist and a philosopher who does not arrive at a *perfect* form, who does not realise that *only this* can be the object of a rational and conscious investigation.’ Sculptors have never complained about also having to carve sculptures for the scalene triangle of a temple pediment. In a letter dating from 1934, 11 years after the previous one, Valéry returns to the subject of *Eupalinos*. He still recalls the precise number of characters. At first, he writes, this restriction put him off. But as a poet, used to fixed forms, he discovered that all the difficulties could be resolved through a flexible form of dialogue, in which a reply without meaning could be added or left out.

The name Eupalinos he finds in an encyclopaedia. It is no more than a name. But he needs a name, Poesis is not anonymous. It is the work of a ‘master’, ‘whose art gives beings and things a duration longer than many centuries and a contemplative and interpretative value comparable to that of a sacred text’.

The name is tied to the work, not to the person. ‘One can never infer from the work to the person, but from the work to the mask and from the mask to the machine.’ The author is a machine for writing; the writer is a typewriter. Valéry says, about himself, *Je ne suis pas celui que je suis* – ‘I am not who I am . . . I exist in order to find something’, to make something. ‘*That* which makes a work is not the person who lends his name to it. *That* which makes a work has no name.’ A name is no more than ‘a useful notation for a virtual collection of partial connective systems’.

cited by Denis Donoghue in *Partisan Review*, LXVII (1), 2000, but has been altered to more closely reflect the Dutch translation in the original article. One noteworthy difference is the second line (in this version; Sewell presents her translation as prose), in which Bekaert interprets *paré* as meaning ‘prepared’ or ‘forearmed’ (*paraat* in Dutch), while Sewell renders it as ‘adorned’. The English translations of quotes from other works in French are based entirely on the Dutch versions.

(In reality, Eupalinos was apparently more of a bridge-builder than a builder of temples. Valéry never went to Greece, and with his grammar-school Greek he could not read Plato’s dialogues in the original language – in translation they struck him as terribly long and tedious.)

These comments by Valéry are more than anecdotal. They reveal his relationship to the text. What matters to him is not the reality of the Greek landscape or of Plato’s text, but the form that his text assumes. In *Triomphe de Manet*, Valéry makes the following remark about the poetic art of Mallarmé, his great predecessor and friend: ‘Far from wishing to reconstruct beings and things through literary adaptation and painstaking description, he [Mallarmé] understood that poetry exhausted them; he dreamed that they had no other purpose, that they could be intended for no other use than to be consumed by it. He thought the world had been made to end up in a beautiful book.’ And Valéry would not have had any objection if we replaced the beautiful book with the beautiful building.

Reality provides only the occasion and the materials for *le réel du discours*. For Valéry, every text is an occasional text, or vice versa – every occasion is worth a text, can generate a text, just as a stone (in Valéry’s view) carries an image within it, or even awaits an image.

In one of Valéry’s earliest works, which not coincidentally is about architecture or, in fact, about the architect, *Paradoxe de l’architecte* (1891), this conviction comes to the fore. There Valéry says of Flaubert that *il tailait les mots longuement comme des pierres dures*: ‘he carved words for a long time, like hard stones.’ And he added, in italics, *le héros . . . conçoit en dehors du monde*: ‘the hero conceptualises independently of the world.’

For Valéry, the real world is language. *Honneur des hommes, Saint LANGAGE*, he says in his long 1919 poem *La Pythie*. I quote the final stanza, which sums up Valéry’s entire poetics:

Honour of humanity, Sainted LANGUAGE,
Discourse prophetic and adorned,
Fair chains in which the god
Lost in the flesh binds himself,
Illumination, generosity!
Here speaks a Wisdom,
Here sounds that august voice
Which when it sounds
Knows itself to be no longer anyone’s voice
So much as that of the waves and the woods!

Accordingly, there can be no poesis outside of language. Poesis is where language, through bodily participation, obtains its immediate and universal significance. In *Dialogue de l’arbre*, Valéry speaks of an *étrange vœu de trame universelle*, a strange wish for a universal framework, in which the individual is dissolved – in the words of his well-known poem *Le cimetière marin*: *ouvrages purs d’une éternelle cause*. In *Paradoxe de l’architecte*, quoted above, he describes the soul of the future architect as ‘a musical one, long sheltered in the pure loneliness of its dream’.

The deliberate, pure loneliness of the poet, the maker, the *constructeur* sets his work apart from the history around him. There is another reality besides the historical. Valéry did publish a collection of writings entitled *Regards sur le monde actuel*, which contains some surprisingly incisive analy-

ses of current events, but his *monde actuel*, his present-day world, is above all a world of the spirit, a universal world in which references to the anecdotal world around him – in which, it should be said, he made his way with great ease, though also with detachment – are signally lacking.

The surrealists Paul Eluard and André Breton once entertained themselves by altering Valéry's texts, replacing a given word by its opposite and thereby making a mockery of the utterly equivocal nature of Valéry's statements. In fact, they were very nearly applying Valéry's own method.

In *L'idée fixe ou deux hommes à la mer*, written in 1932 for the Medical Society – another *enfant de la hâte*, 'child of haste' – Valéry writes: 'Among people who know each other well enough not to misjudge the proportion of seriousness and unseriousness that makes up their dialogue, everything amounts to a match without consequences. Just like the kings painted on playing cards, the most serious subjects are thrown onto the carpet, taken up again, mixed with all the nothings of the world and the moment.' A dialogue does not offer the reader any ideas. The ideas are no more than incidental to the game, in which the essential thing is the rapidity of the exchange. Then comes the marvellous sentence: *Ces messieurs perdent vivement leur temps*. Those gentlemen are wasting their time in a lively (and rapid) manner, just as we are now. *Nos propos font des ronds à la surface de nos ennuis* – 'Our words make circles on the surface of our boredom.' Or put more prosaically (for Valéry can do that, too): *La façon de parler en dit plus que ce que l'on dit . . . Le fond n'a aucune importance . . . essentielle* – 'The manner of speaking says more than what one says. The content is of no essential importance whatsoever.' Like the ambiguous object that Socrates picks up on the beach in *Eupalinos*, any sentence forms an occasion for contemplation, for wordplay. When one has had enough, he throws it back into the sea. But his spirit remains in the grip of its riddle. Socrates hastily runs inland 'like someone whose thoughts, after having long been tossed in all directions, seem at last to find their bearings and gather into a single idea, engendering in his body at the same moment the decision for very definite movement, along with a resolute bearing'.

This clears the way for *Eupalinos*. *Eupalinos* is not an architectural treatise, much less a philosophy of architecture. The best way to describe our text is as a poetics, not the poetics of a particular discipline, but a poetics of spiritual activity, laying bare 'the inevitable ways in which the spirit functions'.

It is in Hades, the underworld, the realm of ghosts, the domain of philosophy, that this poetics of the spirit is formulated and thus put into perspective too, because there thought is utterly 'free', unfettered. It can no longer 'think in materials' and so, Valéry believes, it can no longer truly think. *Nous ne savons que ce que nous savons faire* – 'We know nothing but what we know how to make.' In the underworld, knowledge has become no more than allusion, memory. It is utterly dependent on itself. It no longer has a body, as the living do; it can no longer enter and exit, distance itself. After all, the living are made *d'une maison et d'une abeille*, 'of a house and a bee'.

The house which the living wish to make eternal, and which thus leads them to erect desperate monuments of stone or thoughts, is nothing but transience and madness. But the unquenchable, foolish longing to protect it from time is what makes a person a person, belongs to him and no one

else and sets poetry into motion. *Il n'y aurait pas d'hommes sans l'amour* – 'There would be no men without love,' Socrates says, and lets his thoughts drift onward: 'And from where do you think we have drawn the primal idea and the energy for those immense efforts which have raised so many illustrious cities and useless monuments that reason admires but would have never been capable of conceiving?' Elsewhere, Valéry speaks of *cet éclair qui illumine instantanément des années*.

Man's fate is his poesis, his love (the discovery and acknowledgement of the other), the creation of the other, the awareness of the nonexistent, the unknown, the hidden, the *possible*. This brings us close to the concept of *Technik* (technique, technology) in Heidegger. In a commentary accompanying his *Introduction à la méthode de Léonard de Vinci*, which was first published in 1894 and remained his credo for the rest of his life, Valéry says: 'It is not living, but making, that is of interest.' Living is *se transformer dans l'incomplet* – 'transforming oneself within the incomplete'. *La construction . . . implique les conditions a priori d'une existence qui pourrait être TOUT AUTRE* – 'Construction . . . presupposes the *a priori* conditions of an existence that could be ENTIRELY DIFFERENT.'

From this perspective, architecture – along with music – is the ultimate paradigm for the 'work of the spirit', the 'potential of the spirit' in matter. This point is emphasised in his *Paradoxe de l'architecte*, but also in many other texts in his daily *Cahiers* or his introduction to melodrama, *Amphion* (for which Honegger wrote the music). *Amphion* is an ode to the constructive arts, music and architecture. In Valéry's version, the tragic Amphion, the son of Zeus and Antiope, receives the lyre from Apollo, an act by which the god wishes to benefit the human race. When building the Temple of Apollo in Thebes, Amphion plays his lyre and the stones move into place of their own accord.

La marche des pierres

O miracle, o merveille!

Le roc marche! La terre est soumise a ce dieu,

Quelle vie effrayable envahit la nature?

Tout s'ébranle, tout cherche l'ordre

Tout se cherche un destin!

O miracle, O marvel!

The rock is walking! The earth is subjected to this god,

What fearsome life has overrun nature?

All things start moving, all seek order

All seek a destiny!

'Like prey, work and beauty are pursued.' But Amphion, too, is seized like prey. When the work has been completed, the Muses, one of whom is none other than Hope, seek a new master. And after a veiled form has taken Amphion's lyre away, he hides his face in the lap of someone who could be love or death.

In his introduction to *Amphion*, Valéry confesses: 'Architecture has assumed an important place among my spirit's first loves. My young self passionately imagined the act of construction . . . and even the idea of *construction*, which is the transition from chaos to order, the use of the change-

able to arrive at necessity, took hold of me as the most beautiful and complete type of activity that a person can imagine. A finished building gives us, at a single glance, the sum of intentions, inventions, insights and forces that imply its existence; it brings to light humanity's combined work of desire, knowledge and ability. Uniquely among the arts, and in an indivisible moment of vision, architecture charges our souls with the sense of human capacities as a whole.'

The building in *Eupalinos* is at first a Greek temple, but it is also a ship. Both Eupalinos of Megara and Tridon the Phoenician are artists of surprising spirit, who possess the power of Orpheus and work *à la manière de Dieu*. It is said that Eupalinos *s'élevait à la suprême connaissance de son art*.

We approach architecture through the architect. It is he who 'changes the seen into the visible'. Phaedrus reports on his conversations with the architect. He speaks, as Adorno says, about Valéry from the perspective of the design studio, not from that of the work of art.

The temple is not described as a result in a formal, archaeological or art-historical sense. The form itself is not dissected. Form is formation, poiesis. And this encompasses everything. Eupalinos controls not only the physical materials, but also the living workers. For him, they are pliable material in the creation of his work of art, because he can fill them with such inspiration that they become a kind of romantic brotherhood, carrying out his orders (which are no longer orders) with enthusiasm. In his speeches to the workers, no trace remains of his own nocturnal struggles for the idea. 'He gave them nothing but orders and figures.'

Phaedrus sums up his story: *Je ne sépare plus l'idée d'un temple de celle de son édification* – 'I no longer distinguish between the idea of a temple and that of its construction. When I see one, I see an admirable act, even more glorious than a victory and more in opposition to wretched nature.' *Le détruire et le construire sont égaux en importance* – 'Destruction and construction are of equal importance, souls are required for the one and for the other, but construction is dearer to my spirit.'

The remainder of the dialogue elaborates on this poiesis of architecture – a tautology – on this architecture. It takes a number of turns that at first seem surprising, but on further scrutiny, they all refer back to the fundamental themes of Valéry's poetics.

The first principle of this poetics is, *Il n'y a point de détails dans l'exécution* – 'In execution, there are no details.' Or, in Mies van der Rohe's terms, God is in the details. A professional's working principle must give a philosopher like Socrates valuable food for thought. It is a *lingot d'or brut*, an ingot of raw gold, at least 'if it is truly clear, and the direct product of work, in a brief act of the mind that sums up its experience, without allowing itself the time to fantasise'.

Socrates takes up this point in his remarks on *le réel d'un discours*. The reality of any speech lies in its form, the way it is phrased. This rule, it should be added, applies to every domain, except to the philosophers, 'whose great misfortune is that they never see the worlds they have imagined collapse, because they simply do not exist'.

Still, the very meticulous care devoted to the durability (*la durée*) of the building, which is manifest in this attention to detail, is nothing compared to Eupalinos' attentiveness *quand il élaborait les émotions et les vibra-*

tions de l'âme du futur contemplateur de son oeuvre – 'when he worked out the emotions and vibrations in the soul of the future viewer of his work.' And Phaedrus continues, in a marvellous passage: *Il préparait à la lumière* – 'He prepared a matchless instrument for light, which spread it, entirely saturated with intelligible forms and almost musical qualities, into the space where mortals move.'

Accordingly, the second rule of Eupalinos' poetics is, *Il faut que mon temple meuve les hommes comme les meut l'objet aimé* – 'My temple must move people as a cherished object moves them.' Valéry uses *mouvoir* here, rather than *émouvoir*.

Socrates responds by telling a surprising and enlightening story about a friend who, confronted with the well-made body (*le corps si bien fait*) of Alcibades, cried out, *En le voyant, on se sent devenir architecte!* – 'Seeing it, you feel yourself becoming an architect!'

This story prompts the further exploration of ideas about the corporality (materiality, sensory nature) of poiesis, of the poetic and the poet, and thus about their inherent transience. *Ce qu'il y a de plus beau ne figure pas dans l'éternel* – 'What is most beautiful has no place in the eternal. Nothing beautiful is separable from life, and life is that which dies.'

Beauty is not, however, a kind of intoxication or stupor. Socrates has known ecstasy. Experience has taught him 'that our souls, in the very bosom of time, can make sanctuaries for themselves impenetrable by duration, internally eternal, transient with regard to nature; where they at last are what they know, where they long for what they are, where they feel themselves to have been created by what they love, and give back to it light for light, silence for silence, giving and receiving themselves without borrowing anything from the material of the world or from the Hours.' These abysses 'presuppose the life that they suspend'.

'But these marvels, these meditations and these ecstasies do not clarify for me,' Socrates says, 'our strange problem of beauty. I cannot connect these supreme states of the soul to the presence of a body, or any object that brings them into being.'

These claims provoke the accusation from Phaedrus that Socrates, the philosopher, has always disapproved of beauty, of poiesis. By the end of the dialogue, this leads to a sort of conversion of Socrates, who becomes an anti-Socrates, a *constructeur* rather than a philosopher.

Again, the example of the architect is used to show that inner thoughts cannot be detached from external actions. *A force de construire*, Eupalinos confesses with a grin, *je crois bien que je me suis construit moi-même* – 'By building, I do believe I have built myself.'

And Eupalinos clarifies by making another confession: 'Listen, Phaedrus, that little temple I built for Hermes, just a few steps away – if you only knew how much it means to me! Where passers-by see nothing but an elegant chapel – it's nothing much, four columns, a very simple style – I placed the memory of a bright day in my life. O sweet metamorphosis! This delicate temple, nobody realises, is the mathematical image of a Corinthian girl whom I loved happily.'

Because Phaedrus shows that he understands Eupalinos, the architect is ready to tell him all his secrets. But they are inexpressible; they slip away from language. What can be said about them tends to be tedious, since it relates to the purely technical side of the profession.

But here again, the analogy between architecture and music sheds

some light on the issue. There are buildings that are mute, Phaedrussays, buildings that speak and, very rarely, buildings that sing.

Buildings that do not speak deserve only contempt. They are inferior even to a heap of stones ‘that amuse the sharp eye because of the accidental order they borrow from their fall’.

Buildings that speak clearly deserve our respect, like a prison that expresses the rigour and fairness of the law. Socrates replies, in a twist characteristic of Valéry’s work, that he does not even know how his prison looked.

But Phaedruss continues with the story of Eupalinos, who waxes lyrical about the beauty of the miraculous, half-natural theatres at the ports and on the coast. Maritime construction had fascinated Valéry since his youth in Sète. But as impressive as they are, Eupalinos says, they cannot compare to a work of art made entirely by a single man, as the temple was made by Eupalinos. ‘Even if, we have to make a fairly serious effort in defiance of ourselves, we must keep at a certain remove from the glamorous things in life and from immediate gratification.’ *Ce qu’il y a de plus beau est nécessairement tyrannique* – ‘That which is most beautiful is of necessity tyrannical . . . True beauty is as rare as is, among men, the man who is capable of defying himself, that is to say, choosing a certain self and imposing it on himself’ – *de choisir un certain soi-même et de se l’imposer*.

Eupalinos then gives a rapturous description of an architecture that could partake in the purity of musical sound, thanks to the architect whose meditations (with Minerva’s help) have penetrated to the outer limits of his being and thus the outer limits of reality. Eupalinos can imagine this only as a dream, and not as a science. *Je ne suis pas en possession d’enchaîner, comme il le faudrait, une analyse à une extase* – ‘I am not capable of joining analysis with ecstasy, as one should be.’

Ecstasy overtakes the artist. But it is not the ecstasy that is creative. ‘O most important of moments and supreme heartbreak! . . . Far from accepting these excessive and mysterious favours as they are, inferred solely from a great desire, formed naively from the extreme anticipation of my soul, I must hold them back, O Phaedruss, and they must await my signal. After I have obtained them through a kind of interruption of my life (an adorable suspension of ordinary duration), I still wish to divide the indivisible and to temper and interrupt the very birth of the Ideas . . . to be free. Above all, the important thing to me is *d’obtenir de ce qui va être* – ‘to obtain some part of *what is to be* which, with all the force of its newness, satisfies the reasonable demands of *what has been*.’

The spirit is a bodily, sensory spirit. It thinks in material terms. It lives by seeing, as Valéry says in his *Discours en l’honneur de Goethe. Il vit de voir*. And elsewhere: *Laisse l’œil vivre de sa vie*. He quotes Goethe: ‘I have never thought about a thought.’

‘When I design a dwelling,’ Eupalinos says, ‘(whether for the gods or for a man), and when I search for that form with love, setting myself the task of creating an object that delights the gaze, fuels the spirit, accords with reason and the many proprieties, I will tell you something strange: *it seems that my body is playing a part*.’ *Corps* is of course a term with architectural associations, perhaps more so than ‘body’.

Eupalinos goes on, in a moralistic tone, saying that people do not know how to put the miraculous instrument of the body to full use. ‘Beasts one moment and spirits the next, they do not realise what universal connec-

tions they contain. ‘Through their bodies, they are part of the world, they are stones, they are trees.’

Each morning, Eupalinos calls on the muse of the body in a long prayer: ‘Living instrument of life, for each of us you are the only object comparable to the universe.’ And he ends with the words, ‘But this body and this soul, this invincibly real presence and this creative absence which fight for being and must ultimately be brought together, this finite and infinite that we carry with us, each according to his nature, must now unite in a well-ordered construction . . . of which the profit is the imperishable wealth that I call Perfection.’

After his long silence, Socrates speaks, using the relationship between architecture and music to further explore the ‘perfection’ of the body and soul in the creative work. Music and architecture are unlike the other arts, because they carry us away with them. ‘We are, we move, we live in the work of man.’ We can leave it and return to it. (Here too, there are promising points of departure for a Heideggerian approach.) These two arts enclose man in man, or rather, they incorporate man into his work, and the soul into its acts and the products of those acts.

Through two arts, man surrounds himself in two different ways with laws and acts of inner will (*volontés intérieures*). ‘And each one fills our knowledge and our space with artificial truths and quintessentially human objects. By means of numbers and numerical relationships, they bring forth in us not a fable, but the hidden force that creates every fable.’

‘Music and Architecture make us think of things entirely different from themselves. They exist in this world as monuments from another world, or as examples, spread [disseminated] here and there, of a structure and a duration that are not those of beings, but of forms and laws.’ The architect imposes intelligible forms on stone. He gives shape to laws or deduces their forms from the laws themselves.

But he cannot do that without words. *Pas de géométrie sans la parole*. ‘No geometry without words. Without words, forms are mere accidents and neither manifest nor serve the power of the spirit.’ Language itself is a *constructeur*. The altar of language, like that of architecture, has three sides: that of the ordinary word, ‘which vanishes into the bread one asks for, the road one points out’, that of the exalted word, ‘from which a crystalline torrent of eternal water flows’, and finally, that of severe, subtle, inhuman clarity and simplicity, that of ‘numbers, which are the simplest of words’.

And then comes Socrates/Valéry’s confession: ‘There was an architect in me, which the circumstances did not form completely.’ A meditation on the beach, a personal memory of Valéry’s own, leads him to the distinction between a work of nature and a work of man.

The structure of every human creation is disorder. It is the result of a thought, and to think is to disrupt something (*déranger quelque chose*). Man creates by abstraction, by underappreciating or forgetting many of the properties he uses. Wine and milk and water are drunk from the same vessel, made of glass, onyx or clay and in a diverse array of shapes. ‘Even the maker of that cup could only ever roughly harmonise its material, form and function with one another. For the intimate subordination of these three things and the profound connection between them can only be the work of creative nature (*nature naturante*) itself. The artisan cannot do his work without violating or disrupting some form of order through the forces that he applies to matter to adapt it to the idea he wishes to imitate and

the use he anticipates. He is thus inevitably led to make things which, as a whole, are less complex than their parts', just as in an army in formation, each soldier is infinitely more complex than the formation as a whole.

Only philosophers try to grasp everything. Man, who wishes to live, is capable of action only because he can forget, and content himself with part of the knowledge that is his special quirk (*bizarrierie particulière*), knowledge which is a little bit more extensive than it need be. And this little bit shows that living beings are not precisely adapted to pure utility. Like dogs barking at the moon, people (*les humains*) try to fill or break the eternal silence of these infinite expanses that frighten them.

The things that people make stem from 'acts of a thought'. The principles are distinct from the construction (this does not contradict the higher statement that the idea of the temple cannot be separated from its construction); they are imposed on the material by a foreign tyrant who communicates them through his actions. 'The human condition (*le fait de l'homme*) is to create in two kinds of time, one of which passes in the domain of pure possibility, in the bosom of the subtle material that can imitate all things and combine them unto infinity.'

This brings Valéry to the Vitruvian categories: utility, beauty and durability. Utility is focused on the body, beauty on the soul and durability on the outside world, in which the object must resist its destiny, which is to perish. Only architecture requires these three properties of the complete 'work' and carries them to their highest point.

Those who succeed in that have no reason for modesty. They have discovered the means to mix necessity and artifice inextricably, and to bring forth ultimate freedom from ultimate severity. Their secret is well known. They replace nature, against which other artists struggle, with a nature more or less derived from the first, but in which all the forms and beings are nothing other than acts of the spirit, well-defined acts preserved by their names. In this essential manner, they construct worlds that are perfect in themselves, which sometimes grow so distant from our own as to become unimaginable, and sometimes approach ours so closely that they partly coincide with reality.

The example of the Phoenician, which Phaedrus presents at this point, introduces a new aspect of poiesis: the perfect work cannot imitate what already exists, but continually delves into the unknown regions of art, recapturing things at their source, in sensory experience. Most people reason with the aid of concepts that are not simply 'readymade' (*toutes faites*) but made by no one. No one is responsible for them, and so they are of no use to anyone. Only *les clartés personnelles* can be universal. Only they enable the artist to choose his form, 'for it is the task of the form to take from the resistance of nature what it needs in order to go on, but to take from it only what will impede its motive force as little as possible.'

'Man's deepest gazes are for empty space. They converge beyond the All.' Man never learns to overcome his hubris. 'What soul would hesitate to turn the universe upside down to be a little more itself?' We grant everything else only the right to be of use to us. We believe that all things, and all the richness of Time, are merely morsels for our mouths, and we cannot conceive of the contrary. We ghosts defend ourselves from non-existence with illusions, just as the living defend themselves from existence with illusions.

The God that Socrates sought is nothing other than a word born of words that returns to words. Only action can break the circle. It is in ac-

tion, and in the combination of actions, that we must find the most direct sensation of the presence of the divine, and that is the best possible use of the portion of our capacities that is unsuited to life and seems to have been reserved for the pursuit of an indefinable object that infinitely surpasses us. It is through action that one is most naturally able to take God's place. And of all actions, building is the most complete.

Towards the end of the dialogue, Socrates summarises what poiesis is to him, and he at once shows to what a great extent the digressions in the dialogue fit into a coherent structure, are a construction in their own right.

'A work demands love, contemplation, obedience to your most beautiful thought, the discovery of laws by your soul and so many other things in yourself that you never suspected you possessed. This work arises from the most intimate part of your life, and yet it cannot be confused with you.'

The creation story of the great *formateur*, who defeated chaos, is a story about the organisation of inequality, the introduction of diversity. The *constructeur*, as Socrates imagines him, departs from this established order, disrupting it or building on it. *Il ne faut pas que les dieux demeurent sans toit, et les âmes sans spectacles* – 'Gods should not remain without a roof, nor souls without spectacle. Marble should not remain interred in the earth's solid night. Cedars and cypresses should not be content to rot; they can become fragrant beams. Rich people's money should not sleep idly in their urns.'

In the face of all prior expectations, the *constructeur* says, *Je suis l'acte* – 'I am the act.' I am the one who designs what you desire, a little more precisely than you do yourself. The whole world benefits. Even if I am mistaken, my failed work will be a step towards greater beauty. (Phaedrus: 'It's fortunate that you're a dead architect, Socrates!') And after Socrates has recited an authentic bit of architectural treatise, he concludes, ironically or cynically, 'But here [in the netherworld] there is no "now", and everything we have said is both a natural game of these netherworlds, and the fantasy of a certain rhetorician in the other world who has taken us for marionettes!'

'That [that game, that eternal metamorphosis] is precisely the nature of immortality,' Phaedrus answers. And that is the final word: immortality, poiesis.

Translated by David McKay