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Can Poems do Philosophy?: the Philosopher as a Sportsman of the Mind

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ABSTRACT. My paper is a humble tribute to the life and work of the recently deceased († 9/15/21) French philosopher Jacques Bouveresse. He leans on the work of Paul Valéry (in short, on the philosophical poetry by an anti-philosopher) in order to claim the idea of the philosopher as a kind of sportsman of the intellect. The goals of this paper are: 1) to present Valéry's answer (from Bouveresse's interpretation) to the question "Can poems do philosophy?", 2) to compare Carroll's solution to the (parallel) problem of the existence or not of a philosophy through motion pictures, 3) to assess Bouveresse's -Valéry's solution from a complex twofold conception of philosophy (as a corpus of knowledge and as a *momentum* of thinking). Valéry's poetic style of writing is, thus, a kind of resistance to do philosophy and, at the same time, an attempt to care for and save philosophy. And maybe Bouveresse, in turn, with his essayistic style, has contributed valuably to dismantling the analytical vice of insisting on answering in a narrow way questions such as "Is it possible to do philosophy in cinema?" or "Is it possible to do philosophy in poetry?"

My paper is a humble tribute to the life and work of the recently deceased († 9/15/21) French philosopher Jacques Bouveresse, one of the most "analytic" French philosophers. In his book *De la philosophie considérée comme un sport* (2015), Bouveresse leans on the work of Paul Valéry (in short, on the work of an anti-philosopher) in order to claim the idea that the philosopher is a kind of sportsman or athlete of the intellect, and includes the examples of both the swimmer and the dancer.

⁹⁶ Email: salrubio@um.es. The research work for this paper was funded by grants from PID2019-106351GB-I00 (MCIN/ AEI /10.13039/501100011033/ and FEDER), and 20934/PI/18 (Fundación SENECA, Plan Regional de Ciencia y Tecnología de la Región de Murcia, Spain).

The goals of this paper are to: 1) present Valéry's answer (based on Bouveresse's interpretation) to the question "Can poems do philosophy?"; 2) compare Noël Carroll's solution to the (parallel) problem of the existence or not of a philosophy through motion pictures; 3) assess Bouveresse's / Valéry's solution from a complex twofold conception of philosophy (as a corpus of knowledge and as a *momentum* of thinking); and 4) illustrate Bouveresse's - Valéry's thesis with some examples of Valéry's work.

Thierry Discepolo, in his previous note to Bouveresse's book, points out that a very French tradition wants philosophy to be literary. In contrast,

Turning his back on that program of fusion-confusion between philosophy and literature, Jacques Bouveresse, who takes the side of exact, argumentative philosophy, inscribed in the space of reason, never goes so far in his fight against the pitfalls of philosophical language and some of the redhibitory vices that philosophy suffers, as in his dialogue with the writers who have always made a clear distinction between philosophy and literature; writers (Musil, Kraus, etc. - here Valéry) who, aware of the powers of language, masters of the art of words and obsessed with accuracy, have often written against mystifications, verbiage, and 'phrases' which are used by intellectuals of all kinds and also frequently by philosophers themselves. (Bouveresse, 2015, pp. vii-viii)⁹⁷

All the same, Bouveresse, relying on Valéry, tries to resolve the difficult balance between the philosopher, the artist and the sage (or scientist) through the image of the philosopher as a "sportsman of the intellect" which Valéry applies to himself, and to his philosophical (or anti-philosophical) work. In the end, this is the subterfuge through which Valéry claims himself as, in a certain way, a philosopher, while at the same time moving the armchair of traditional philosophy.

The main aim of my paper is to give a new approach to the question "Can poems do philosophy?" or, in other words, "Is it possible to do philosophy through poetry?" I start from Bouveresse's thesis according to which poetry was for Valéry an instrument (and never a goal) in his pursuit of "purity and precision" and in this sense he never did anything other than philosophy, even in his poetic work. Bouveresse thinks that "it is on this side and this one only that we must look to in order to qualify his [Valéry's] poetry as philosophical" (Bouveresse, 2015, pp. 8-9). But at the same time, Bouveresse highlights the tension (a contradictory tension,

⁹⁷ My translation.

even) in Valéry's position in order to try to take care of philosophy. Valéry wants to "save philosophy" by making it independent of the sciences and mysticism, but also of the arts.

For him the serious real thing surely does not reside on the side of the philosophers, but rather on the side of wise men [scientists] and artists. Nevertheless, turning himself into a wise man [a scientist] is something that the philosopher cannot do, and turning himself into an artist is something he could do in principle, but he does not want to do and probably cannot want to do. (Bouveresse 2015, p. 75)

Valéry would precisely like philosophy, in order to be able to be taken seriously again, to agree to impose on itself constraints and resistances at least as rigorous as those of poetry. Philosophy does not seek the truth, but cultivates the forces and organizations which serve to seek or make the truth. Here is the reason why Valéry claims there is a "sporting" philosopher without any illusions - the swimmer, the dancer, who goes nowhere-, and philosophy is just a man's work about himself.

The question "Can poems do philosophy?" looks a lot like the question "Can motion pictures do philosophy?" which has been considered by Noël Carroll (2006). By "doing philosophy through film" and not just illustrating a philosophical question or philosophical authors, a movie must have been made really "*by means of the art of the moving image*" (Carroll, 2006, p. 174). The conclusion for Carroll in this paper is that there is at least one film —*Serene Velocity* (1970) by Ernie Gehr— that may be said, unequivocally, to be an example of doing philosophy through film, even if he does not think that this is the only example. In my opinion⁹⁸, Carroll's solution can be relativized by distinguishing between philosophy as a body of knowledge and philosophy as a *momentum* of thinking in a very large and varied range of activities.

Of course, on the one hand, the *momentum* of philosophy (philosophy as *momentum*) is not exclusive to professional philosophers. It arrives when we momentarily need to stop the current working of our language in order to see it (so to speak) from the outside, namely, in order to make a leap from one comprehensive level (or dimension) to another. Briefly, the

⁹⁸ See my RUBIO MARCO, Salvador: "Philosophizing through moving-image artworks: an alternative way out", Dorsch, F. & Ratiu, D-E. (eds.) *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics*, vol. 7, 2015, pp. 428-438, (Open Access Journal, Swiss ISSN Centre of the [Swiss National Library](http://www.eurosa.org/volumes/7/ESA-Proc-7-2015-Rubio-Marco.pdf), ISSN number: 1664 – 5278). <http://www.eurosa.org/volumes/7/ESA-Proc-7-2015-Rubio-Marco.pdf>

answer to the question ‘can we do philosophy through poems?’ would be similar to the answer to the question ‘can we do philosophy through moving-images?’ Obviously ‘yes’, for we can do activities of conceptual clearing up, of viewing (or making a view of) a thing in a new comprehensive dimension, an *übersichtliche Darstellung* (in Wittgensteinian terms) where the previous perplexity loses its itching effect, through films, pieces of film or kinetic experiments, words (in prose or poetry), still images (such as photos, paintings or drawings) or sounds (music or a particular voice inflection). And actually, “philosophy” refers to an activity rather than to an object.

On the other hand, in his attempt to answer the question ‘can motion pictures do philosophy, and not only illustrate philosophical ideas?’, Carroll appeals to a very restricted notion of philosophy when he stipulates that, in order to be a piece of “*original philosophizing*” (Carroll, 2006, p. 179), something has to be *philosophical* “in the strong sense of being an original addition to the fund of philosophical knowledge” (Carroll, 2006, 174). If we accept that restricted notion, we have enough academic criteria (reviews, books, conferences, syllabuses, etc.) to look into it. But in the case of poems, we have some additional difficulties in being able to know when they “would be worthy of the sobriquet of ‘philosophy’” (Carroll, 2006, p. 182). For historically, the corpus of philosophical contributions includes several texts which may be classified, if not strictly as poems, at least as something that is not strictly prose. Think, for example, of Heraclitus, Lucretius, Friedrich Nietzsche or María Zambrano.

But, coming back to Valéry, unlike Carroll with *Serene Velocity* (philosophy through cinema), Valéry does not pretend (in general) that his poetry is philosophy through poetry. Additionally, there is a sense in which Valéry can accept that the poet has “his philosophy”, but this does not mean, for him, that poetry is assessed as philosophy through poetry, and consequently Valéry does not try to make philosophy through his poetry. I quote Valéry:

Every true poet is much more capable than is generally known of right reasoning and abstract thought.

But one must not look for his real philosophy in his more or less philosophical utterances. In my opinion, the most authentic philosophy lies not so much in the objects of our reflection as in the very act of thought and in its handling. Take from metaphysics all its pet or special terms, all its traditional vocabulary, and you may realize that you have not impoverished the thought. Indeed, you may perhaps have eased and freshened it, and you will have got rid of other people’s problems, so as to

deal only with your own difficulties, your surprises that owe nothing to anyone, and whose intellectual spur you feel actually and directly. (Valéry 2007, p. 65)

In explaining and interpreting Valéry, Bouveresse seems to describe his ideal of philosophy, stripped of its metaphysical excrescences and its scientific pretensions, which would finally know what it is itself and he would be content to excel at it: a sport of the mind. Precisely, the idea of philosophy as a sport is a way of expressing that tension, but not without raising new questions: Is philosophical poetry that is not philosophy possible? Is the work of Valéry an example of philosophical poetry which avoids being properly philosophy?

In order to answer these questions, we have to look closer at Valéry's work. Certainly, it includes a big range of very different formal styles of writing, from the pure philosophical essay (for example: from his very well-known lecture at the University of Oxford in 1939 on poetry and abstract thought), to pure poetry (as for example his celebrated poem *Le cimetière marin*, *The Graveyard by the Sea*), having room, in the middle, for more hybrid and complex examples, namely the *Dialogue de l'arbre* (*Dialogue of the Tree*). Valéry has translated Virgil's *Book of Bucolics* into French, originally written in Latin in dactylic hexameter. In the *Dialogue of the Tree*, Valéry borrows the ambience and the character of Tityrus from Virgil's *Bucolics*, and he retakes the Greek formula of the dialogue (between Tityrus and Lucretius), but in this case the dialogue is written in French by means of blank verses, it is, words without rhyme, but with a very elaborated rhythm and sound, made to be heard, rather than read. Tityrus is the shepherd poet, sensitive and spontaneous. Lucretius is the thinker, the wise-man, the philosopher-scientist looking for knowledge. The dialogue becomes an insoluble (and unresolved) struggle addressing the Tree (a huge beech that is above them). Tityrus declares his immediate devotion to the spectacle and the delights of nature. By contrast, Lucretius gives priority to the intellectual approach by means of biology and abstract thought.

Let us see a brief excerpt, first in original French (read by the actor Louis Latourre⁹⁹), in order to hear and appreciate the style in blank verses, and secondly translated into English:

Says Tityre (Tityrus):

⁹⁹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ObeKe3MSaO8> (accessed 2/11/2022).

Mais pour toi, grand Lucrèce et ta secrète soif, qu'est-ce que la parole, une fois qu'elle chante? Elle y perd le pouvoir de poursuivre le vrai... Oui, je sais ce que vaut ce que m'enseigne l'Arbre. Il me dit ce qu'il veut que je veuille sentir. Je change ce que j'aime en délices secondes, et j'abandonne à l'air ce qui me vient des Cieux. Rien de plus, rien de moins... (Valéry, 2019, p. 136)

But great Lucretius, you –you with your secret thirst—what is the *word*, O what, when it begins to sing? It loses in that act the power to follow truth... Yes, I know well the worth of what the Tree imparts. It tells me what it would that I should wish to feel. I change that which I love into yet further joys, abandoning to air what comes to me from Heaven. Nothing more, nothing less... (Valéry, 1977, p. 330)

and (Lucretius) Lucretius replies that way to Tityre (Tytirus), a few lines further:

Tu n'aimes que ton hymne et tu me plais ainsi. Au Hêtre solennel, tu prends de quoi chanter les remous de sa forme et ses oiseaux sonores [...]. (Valéry, 2019, p. 136)

You love only your hymn –and so please me the more. From the majestic Beech you take wherewith to sing the eddies of its form and its sonorous birds [...]. (Valéry, 1977, p. 330)

The very end of the *Dialogue of the Tree* is a poetic testimony of that end in a tie:

Tityre: Mais tu deviens toi-même un arbre de paroles...

Lucretius: Oui... La méditation rayonnante m'enivre... et je sens tous les mots dans mon âme frémir.

Tityre: Je te laisse dans cet état admirable. Il me faut à present ressembler mon troupeau. Prends garde à la fraîcheur du soir qui vient si vite. (Valéry, 2019, p. 155)

Tytirus: But you become yourself a very tree of words...

Lucretius: Yes... Radiant meditation fills me with rapture... And in my soul I feel all words atremble.

Tytirus: I leave you in that admirable state. But I must now gather my flock again. Mind the cool of the evening –it comes so quickly. (Valéry 1977, p. 348)

At this point, perhaps we are tempted to say that all of our problems would disappear once it is admitted that there are some texts in Valéry's work which can be classified as "philosophical

poetry”, or even, complementarily, that some of them could be classified as “poetic philosophy”. But, as we have seen when we pay attention not just to the form but also the content (the topic) of those texts, that classificatory solution will not exhaust the power of the tension between poetry and philosophy in Valéry’s thought. In fact, the poetic characteristics of the *Dialogue of the Tree* would satisfy in some way Carroll’s exigence of being made *by means of* the art of poetry in order to doing philosophy through poetry. Nevertheless, at the same time, the poetic form serves as an escape from philosophy for Valéry.

Bouveresse admires the exercise of being a tightrope walker in Valéry’s work. Of course, the mind does not work in an idle condition: the resistance to things is indispensable to it, as is water for the swimmer, gravity for the dancer or for the tightrope walker. Philosophy should never be free from this resistance: it takes knowledge to exercise intelligence, and reality to soften the mind. The *Dialogue of the Tree* is pervaded by that tension. The physical presence of the Tree (a big beech) plays a central role in the text, as a kind of heart or engine which moves the dialogue, but is ultimately nothing more than a role (a character) in this “tree of words” that turns out to be the *Dialogue of the Tree*. The sensual sonority which constitutes one of the main characteristics of the poetic side of the *Dialogue of the Tree* becomes a symbol of the sensitive (and fictional, at the same time) relationship with the Tree. And the pairing of *sensibility / intellectual understanding* may unfold for the reader inside the symbolic world of the dialogue. The philosopher, but also the scientist and the poet, must accept the challenge of confronting their peculiar way of managing their relationship with real world and language. Valéry is especially pessimistic in the case of the philosopher, whose misbalance between pretensions and instruments becomes, for him, disappointing.

Bouveresse (2004, p. 278) remarks on a patent parallelism between Valéry and Wittgenstein: both share the idea that the philosophical problems are essentially of linguistic origin, but they disagree concerning the conviction of their interest and their importance. Wittgenstein seems to reserve a high task for the philosopher. Valéry cannot avoid the image of the philosopher as a kind of caged thinker. He is attached to the use of the ordinary language (unlike the poet) and at the same time he aspires to an appearance of accuracy and precision (unlike the scientist), even if most philosophical problems are in fact false problems resulting from a metaphysical forcing of ordinary language. Nevertheless, the philosopher is also like the athlete, “who makes unnecessary movements, but his muscles can be used on occasion”

(Valéry quoted in Bouveresse, 2015, p. 31).

Valéry compares words with “light planks which one throws across a ditch or a mountain crevasse”. When we use such words as “time” or “life” in everyday speech, they are “utterly limpid, precise, honest, and faithful”, but when they become “isolated, caught on the wing”, being “the object of a terrible philosophical desire”, “it turns into an enigma, an abyss, a torment of thought”. (Valéry 2007, p. 61)

Each and every word that enables us to leap so rapidly across the chasm of thought, and to follow the prompting of an idea that constructs its own expression, appears to me like one of those light planks which one throws across a ditch or a mountain crevasse and which will bear a man crossing it rapidly. But he must pass without weighing on it, without stopping –above all, he must not take it into his head to dance on the slender plank to test its resistance!... Otherwise the fragile bridge tips or breaks immediately, and all is hurled into the depths. (Valéry, 2007, p. 61)

A famous Cartier-Bresson’s photo, (*Derrière la gare Saint-Lazare*, 1932¹⁰⁰) comes to mind illustrating Valéry’s metaphor.

But provisionality also implies a danger. And the thinking must fight against that provisionality by means of looking for some precision. Not just the philosopher, but the poet also looks for precision, even if he does it in another way and for a different purpose in order to be able to make the words *his own words* and to liberate them for the readers once they have been reenergised. Now Valéry says that words are like banknotes or checks:

But how are we to think [...] if we hold language to be something essentially provisional, as a banknote or a check is provisional, what we call its “value” requiring us to forget its true nature, which is that of a piece of paper, generally dirty? The paper has passed through so many hands... But words have passed through so many mouths, so many phrases, so many uses and abuses, that the most delicate precautions must be taken to avoid too much confusion in our minds between what we think and are trying to think, and what dictionaries, authors, and, for that matter, the whole human race since the beginning of language, want us to think... (Valéry, 2007, p. 61)

As a response to Valéry, I want to propose that we play at thinking of the philosopher as someone who practices the exercise of walking, up and down, on the light planks of words

¹⁰⁰ See <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/es/ressources/oeuvre/cByr4z> (accessed 2/11/2022).

without crossing them quickly, but avoiding stopping and, therefore, sinking them with his weight, being aware at the same time that his effort has no other goal than himself. In order to do this, he has to measure his movements very precisely, he has to be in good shape, to take care of his weight and his effort, knowing well the areas and surfaces of the plank that he steps on. Perhaps that is the image of the only possible philosopher, for Valéry. There, the philosopher would be much more like a dancer, a tightrope walker, an athlete or a gymnast doing their exercises, than a traditional philosopher (Rodin's *Thinker*, for example). A guy who, it must be said, seen from the outside, would have seemed curious, apparently useless, maybe even comical, and a bit ridiculous, in his behavior.

To conclude, the relationship between Valéry himself and philosophy seems to have been marked both by his desire to preserve it while ridding it of its illusions. One of the suggestions he makes (and sometimes applies to literature as well) about the way in which it can hope to survive is to conceive and practice it now essentially as a sport. Valéry's poetic style of writing is, thus, a kind of resistance to do philosophy and, at the same time, an attempt to care for and save philosophy. And maybe Bouveresse, in turn, with his essayistic style, has contributed valuably to dismantling the analytical vice of insisting on answering in a narrow way questions such as "Is it possible to do philosophy in cinema?" or "Is it possible to do philosophy in poetry?"

In other words: Bouveresse's legacy has a therapeutic value which consists of solving conceptual misunderstandings (just as his admired Wittgenstein has claimed), but at the same time Bouveresse has the courage to provide an alternative counter balance to the tendency (a typically analytic tendency) in trying to answer philosophical questions by means of taking a stance on one side or the other of the debate, and very often by means of looking for too simplistic and "definitive" answers. And all that from the perspective of a very "unFrench" philosopher, who is really close to the analytic stream, and paradoxically (or maybe not so paradoxically) one of the most valuable French philosophers of recent decades.

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