

Poetry as physiology: Paul Valéry's concept of "purity"

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In the 1930s Paul Valéry (1871-1945) had many opportunities to express his idea about poetry in public. Curiously, in order to explain the ideal effect poetry should have on its readers he referred again and again to a particular phenomenon that seems to bear no relevance to either poetry or art. This phenomenon is physiological and comes from the nature of our retina. Look at a red-colored plate in the light for a while. You will find that your retina emits the complementary color <green> as an "antidote" (CE1, 1407) against the strong <red>. "The organ of the retina responds to the color which impressed it by the «subjective» emission of the other color, namely, the complementary color of the first." (*ibid.*) This correlation between <red> and <green> continues. The emitted <green> does not obliterate the first <red> and instead allows it to be sensed again more vividly. Thus the recovering <red> responds to the declining <green> and conversely the recovering <green> responds to the declining <red> - and so on. Once an automatic chain of alternate two colors is established, it will last forever unless the retina becomes tired. Valéry called this everlasting chain "aesthetic infinity." (CE2, 1342)

Urging audiences or readers to experiment on their own bodies in a similar fashion, Valéry is appealing to such a "subjective" but universally valid experience because it comes from our physical structure. This argument assumes that there is a close relationship between poetic experience and physical sensation. The idea that poetry begets certain physical sensations may be uncommon, but Valéry inquired into it insisting that he was "the first poet to try it." For example, when referring to *La Jeune Parque*, he explained that he "tried to hold on the design of charting the physiological feeling of consciousness." (C1, 289) For him, poetry as a fruit was nothing but "the physiological life (...) expressed as poetry." (285) How does poetry relate to physical sensations? Why can this sensation be said to be "physiological"? The aim of this paper is to answer these questions.

To clarify the idea of "physiological sensation" is also to shed some light on Valéry's well-known concept of "purity" from a different angle, as the latter had hitherto been thought mainly from the standpoint of literature. The essence of "poésie pure" lies in nothing other than the distinction between poetry and prose. For Valéry, "poésie pure" is poetry "purified from non-poetic elements." (CE1, 1457) This conception hasn't changed since Valéry used this word in public for the first time in 1920[1]. Then what is the difference between poetry and prose? Poetry has a rhymed structure and musical beauty, whereas prose doesn't. But these are only superficial differences between poetry and prose. There is a fundamental difference concerning the physical sensation that poetry or prose gives to readers. According to Valéry, between readers of poetry and prose there are different "physical features that can be easily observed" (1374). Readers of prose "exist, move, suffer and are worried only in spirit." (*ibid.*) For

them, “bodies don’t exist.” (*ibid.*) On the other hand “poetry doesn’t impose on its reader a false reality that demands (...) abstention of the body.” (*ibid.*) “Poetry demands us participation which is more similar to a complete act.” (1375) Of course reading poetry doesn’t involve any visible movement of body as running or jumping. Nevertheless Valéry says that poetry “is developed in our richer domain of functions of movements.” (*ibid.*) In short, what poetry has and prose doesn’t have is invisible physical movements, which Valéry calls “physiological” sensations. “Between the action of poetry and that of prose, the difference is the physiological order.” (*ibid.*) Then, what does Valéry mean by “physiological”?

1. The subjective perception and the productivity of organs

The science that Valéry calls physiology is certainly a physiology, but it is not what we call physiology. It doesn’t use any laboratory nor is it based on experiment. Passages written in his private *Notebooks* tell us that his interest does not lie in the objective analysis of phenomena itself, but at a unique interpretation from his point of view. In this section, we will focus on Valéry’s interpretation of the perception of complementary colors and we will try to clarify this unique understanding of physiology [2].

1. 1 The subjective perception as a perception of function

First of all and interestingly, Valéry keeps insisting on the fact that perceptions of complementary colors are “useless sensations.” (1406) This “uselessness” must be understood in the context of Valéry’s favorite contrasting comparison. For him, words of prose are *useful* because they have a clear end of communicating meaning to someone. On the other hand, words of poetry as a genre of art lack any clear end and are therefore *useless*. They “don’t play any role” (1405) and must “be definitely distinguished from actions of practical order.” (1406) [3]

Why is the perception of complementary colors “useless”? We will be able to obtain an answer by comparing such a perception with “useful sensations.” “In the case of ‘useful vision,’ we holds from an impression only what induce us to think another thing, stimulate us to have an ‘idea’ or provoke us to do an act.” (1407) In short, the “useful sensation” is a sensation that begets ideas or acts that are necessary. The sensation is then replaced by these ideas or acts and vanishes, just as words of prose vanish to pave the way to ideas or acts to which they have given shape. As their function is provocation, all useful sensations are “transitive.” (1409) On the other hand, the perception of complementary colors lacks this transitivity and on the contrary prolongs the chain of <green> and <red>. The perception of complementary colors “tries to repeat and prolong what the intellect tries to eliminate and overtake.” (1408-1409) For the practical purpose of recognition of objects, it is not useful at all. This is why the perception of complementary colors is “useless.”

However, the non-transitivity of useless perceptions of complementary colors relates itself to art, which “induces us to remain within the realm of sensations.” (1406) How can we then stay within the realm of sensations? How can we keep experiencing sensation? A clue to this question may be provided if we look at the different phenomena listed in the *Notebooks*, which have as Valéry insists the same nature as the perceptions of complementary colors.

Interestingly enough, he characterizes these phenomena as “subjective” perceptions[4].

The list of “subjective” perceptions contains, for example, low tones like a ringing that we would hear in a silent room, or lines that we would see between dots at even intervals. These are phenomena we experience daily. Even more, amongst “subjective” perceptions Valéry includes certain pathological phenomena that seem to be categorized as “symptoms”: a “subjective product”(C1, 992) like a frying fry caused by a brain tumor, a “subjective noise”(1009) stemming from auditory hallucinations, or other phenomena caused by visual hallucinations. This listing shows that “subjective perceptions”, once their subjective element is forgotten, can easily become pathological signs. The reason why these phenomena are thought to be “subjective” should now be clear. All of these phenomena are perceptions without identifiable objects. Instead, the objects of perceptions exist only for the subject.

The complementary colors that we see are also “subjective” perceptions because our eyes are also responsible for producing colors, for example <green>. Of course these are not at all pathological phenomena but this subjective <green> is not merely useless to recognize the object. It interferes with received impressions of <green>. In other words it *disturbs* what is normally thought to be objective perception. The perception of complementary colors runs such risks, of which Valéry was fully aware. “This local sensibility does not play any role in the ‘useful vision’ - on the contrary, it can do nothing but troubling it.”(CE1, 1407)

Then, on which ground was Valéry able to conceive subjective perceptions as ideal effects of poetry, in spite of them interfering or disturbing vision? Let us see Valéry’s analysis of phenomena of low tone in a silent room that we have already mentioned. “Silence - term that represents the continuity of the auditory function. Hearing = 0, but the audibility exists and is perceived - in the form of expectations. Perception of pure ability to hear - lack of response.”(C1, 1155) Of course, ears receive no stimulus in silence. However, as this lack strongly stimulates expectations for perception it prompts the ears to hear unreal sounds. What is important here is that Valéry thinks that the excessive perception in hearing silence is nothing but “the continuity of the auditory function” and furthermore “the perception of one’s ability.” According to Valéry, when subjective perception gets mixed with objective perception, a sense organ that is normally transparent for clear recognition of objects perceives its own function or ability.

How about the perception of complementary colors? Valéry’s analysis is similar to that of phenomena of low tones in a silent room. For him, to understand the perception of complementary colors, we have to know the fact that “the eye does not make itself felt in normal vision, the things seen do not talk about eyes.”(1094) Here comes Valéry’s basic idea about the living body. For him, there is a lot of “ignorance (...) about *one’s own* body.”(1142) “The *sensibility* required for sensory knowledge is normally *insensible*,”(1093) but under certain conditions such as strong light or darkness the eye shows all its active nature against all absence of sensibility. The eye “asserts” itself, unlike in the clear recognition of objects. In short, the notion of subjective perception indicates that sensory organs such as the eyes have “productive properties” in spite of being supposedly passive and transitive.(CE1, 1409) One can keep on feeling the same sensation not by keeping on receiving but by producing “green” after receiving “red.” “Reciprocal excitation”(1407) is needed.

When the eye demonstrates productive properties, the necessary condition for normal

recognition whereby “the eye is absent from what we see”(C1, 1100) is broken off. “The eye’ becomes then a sensation that interferes with vision.”(*ibid.*) “It is another order of thing which intervenes” and as the ear makes it possible to hear in silence the organ of the eye “making itself felt.”(*ibid.*) This is why Valéry takes account of the perception of complementary colors. Thus, the perception of complementary color is a unique and precious occasion for us to feel the functions or capabilities of organs that are normally hidden to us. The subjective impression that our organs produce as evidence of their active nature is nothing but the perception of organs themselves, owing to the fact that the same perception lacks external references. It is thus only through excessive and disturbing productions that are useless for the recognition of objects that we can know our own organs[5].

1.2 Non-representativeness and simulation

In fact, this idea about the perception of complementary colors follows the same logic that Valéry uses to explain what characterizes pure poetry, namely, “non-representativeness”. According to Valéry, poetry as “‘pure’ modes”, contrary to prose, “represents nothing” as the subjective impression of complementary colors points to no external reference. This makes the sensibility of readers of pure poetry “free from any reference making and *sign*-function reading.”(E1, 1472) Then “they [i.e. ‘pure’ modes] exploit (...), they organize and compose the values of every power of our sensibility”(*ibid.*) just as the perception of complementary color enables us to know the ability of our organs.

Of course “pure” modes are not resistant to meaning, but they are to the representativeness of words. This becomes clear by reading Valéry’s poems. They are far from meaningless ranges of words or strange collisions of images. “Literary operation engenders the object and the object is not engendered by literary operation.”(C2, 1104) Here Valéry assumes that in such experiences the reader of poetry “sees” the object, which he/she him/herself produces instead of receiving the object represented in the poem, just as the eye “sees” the color that it produces by responding to an external color.

While denying representativeness, “pure” modes still convey the meaning of words. Referring to the concept of “simulation” will help us clarifying this somehow complex matter. In this light, let us examine what is for Valéry the ideal form of receptive experience of poetry.

In many of his poems, Valéry uses a style of narrative where a lonely character talks to him/herself throughout. The simulation is, in short, a mode of reception of poetry during which the reader unifies with the character, as in the case of Parque’s monologue in *Le Jeune Parque*. It is to “*place myself in the figure*”(E2, 702), in other words to become imaginarily another person and have the reader live a kind of “artificial life.”(703)

In addition to the style of narrative monologue, Valéry often chooses motifs that induce readers to simulate characters, such as a changing mood when falling asleep or awaking, a stiff body with pain or that is relieved from it. These motives are all physical - but obviously not in the sense of visible movements. Thus, readers cannot conceive the story by having visual images of the character, for example of Parque. They cannot conceive the story by *representing* Parque’s actions. Then, readers are induced to reconstruct internally bodily changes with Parque. While in mental representations “images are clear (... and ...) the acts are hardly

sketched,” simulations “draws powerfully the action in me” without at the same time leaving a vague impression of images.(705) Readers who simulate draw actively the experience of the character through the tension and relaxation of his/her body.

Valéry parallels simulation with the experience of hearing music in that both make contrast with the understanding of represented content that mainly rests on visual images. Valéry sees the ideal of poetry in music because of how we experience musical works. In hearing music “I am made to generate movements, I am made to develop the space of the third or fourth dimension, I was communicated quasi abstract impressions of balance, of moving of balance.”(704) It is worth noticing that the idea of describing the internal movements of the body in such a geometrical space can also be found in the “geometry of my suffering”(24) in *La soirée avec Monsieur Teste*. In this text, Monsieur Teste, after having been overwhelmed by the abstract sensations of music at the opera, falls asleep on his bed in his room, finds various fogged points in his body and feels sensations of rings, poles and fireworks, of which he strives to perceive the way they spread and change. The simulation urges readers to become conscious of the various changes happening in Monsieur Teste’s spatially imaged body. A body fixed by “a distribution of isolated efforts” forms “figures which consist of perceived *points* and are separated by vague expanses.”(702) Thus, when we reconstruct the experience of the character through our own body, “we feel (...) that the work which acts on us suits us so well that we cannot conceive it differently.”(CE1, 1350) This is the very situation to which Valéry refers when he declares that “the work of the mind only exists in acts.”(1349)[6]

2. The concept of “function”

In the previous section we saw how Valéry tried to focus on the active nature of our organs, namely their productive properties, through the analysis of poetic experience and the perception of complementary colors as typical examples. We must however keep in mind that this “active nature,” or these “productive properties” of organs contain contradictory elements. The organs are not simply “productive” but “receptive and at the same time productive.” Let us first of all reflect on this point in the following section.

In the perception of complementary colors, the “receptive” aspect is obvious. The eye can produce <green> only as a complementary color of <red> while it cannot freely produce <yellow> or <black>. It produces <green> to recover the normal visual balance that is disrupted by scorching <red>. In such a case, the eye certainly shows its activity but it is controlled by the “redness” of the object, making the eye therefore restrained. If the <red> were not strong enough to restrain the eye, this activity would not show.

The same applies to the relationship between the poem and its reader. Needless to say, the simulation is a receptive but at the same time active acceptance by the reader of the experience of the character. Valéry finds the same contradictory element in the formal aspect of poetry, too. Valéry does not conceive poetry without fixed form because he attaches great importance to the restrictive power of rhythm. Rhythm “*seizes*” me, “makes use of my *machine to live*,” and develops “*by means of me*.”(1322) To “ride” on a rhythm is for him to “produce” it by tensing up one’s body periodically on the exact timing perceived. Besides rhythm, a poem uses various

means together to restrict a reader. For example, inversion gives the sensation of “destabilizing” (C2, 1083); a rhyme is used as “a violence that a rule inflicts on thought.” (1084) As a matter of fact, Valéry says that the power of restriction becomes so strong that it turns into a form of “captivity.” Readers who actively engage in reading certainly take pleasure in doing so, but they also feel a sense of “captivity.” To be precise, this activity and sense of pleasure could not be without presupposing this “captivity.” In Valéry’s words, “[t]he work rewards for what we yield of our liberty, it gives us the love of the captivity that it imposes on us and the feeling of a kind of sweetness of immediate recognition.” (CE1, 1355) Even though we, as readers, find pleasure in the active nature of reading and feels pleasant to develop our own activeness, it is a kind of replacement. “[W]e feel that we own ourselves because we are splendidly owned.” (*ibid.*)

Taking this point into account, it is worth noticing the particular meaning of the word “function” or “functioning.” Valéry uses these words in the context of “subjective perception,” which we have already examined, and “active-productive power” accompanying “restriction.” For example, he explains the feeling that we have when captivated by a rhythm like this: “[T]he rhythm soon gave me the impression of a strange functioning.” (1322) In short, a productive power begotten by an external cause such as the color <red> or a rhythm in a poem is something strange to a reader as a willing subject. To evoke this strange “functioning,” which is that of the reader but doesn’t feel like it, Valéry uses the specific word of “function.” All “functions” accompany the “production” because they can only be felt through the latter’s activity. And no matter how strange the production seems to be, it is a “function” as long as it is an activity.

This strangeness is sometimes felt as an automatic movement. The automatic movement happens when every function acts separately without collaborating or regulating each other. “Each function - namely every system of demand-response taken separately and left alone - tends to ‘exceed the goal.’ It is the *blindness of nature*.” (C1, 907) This is, as it were, when function bares itself. The way how a function responds to an incitation is always the same, irrespective of the content of incitation. (863) A function is “repeatable” (825) but has only one way to respond to the incitation. In short, it is a separable minimal unit of working that generates variety but that is itself “invariant.” (826)

Consequently, regardless of how complex the working may be, it can be reduced to a combination of functions and Valéry’s attempt consists in reducing or dividing various workings into functions as minutely as possible. “How do I see the living being? (...) I see it as a system of functions - these functions are more or less independent.” (926) Even a living body can be reduced to a system of various functions and the diversity that a living body displays represents all functions. “The individual is then made up of certain functions that are simple and composed, and all things in their diversity excluding each other are functions.” (908)

Now that the concept of “function” explains all workings of living being, it can also indicate actions that are involuntary and strange to us. For example, Valéry uses the word “function” to analyze the artificiality of simulation we have already seen. In this example the workings of which we cannot specify the position on a physical system of living beings is also called “function.” “Any kind of artificiality is possible when the mind proceeds by *functions*, in spite of by *objects*.” (CE2, 703) It is true that simulation accompanies certain physical efforts such as the

“minimum general tension of muscles.”(703) But we cannot specify any anatomical position ascribed to the function of which Valéry speaks here, nor reduce it to the physiological properties of muscles. The reason why Valéry persists in calling it “procession by function” against plausible counterarguments like these is that the usage of the “I” remains unchanged, even though the reader becomes the other person, namely the character. “Being other than the I (...) is also a functioning of I.”(703)

This is the very point on which Valéry focuses. The concept of function can indicate *my* possibilities, which certainly belong to *me* but are also felt alien to *me*. “There are more possibilities in our nervous being than the average circumstances draw out and utilize from me.”(*ibid.*) In other words, there are the workings that escape from my intellect, namely that are normally unknown to me. In the lecture Valéry gave to the surgical society in 1938, he suddenly used the phrase “our functionary ignorance of ourselves” and then immediately noted “*functionary* - I said *functionary* in speaking of our ignorance of our body.”(CE1, 915) An intellect cannot grasp all the workings of functions. “All in all, there are functioning that prefer the shade to the light - or to say the least the half-light - that is to say the minimum awareness that is necessary and sufficient to prepare these acts to accomplish or initiate them.”(916)

With the expression “our functionary ignorance” used in the lecture to the surgical society, Valéry meant our innate impossibility to know the workings that our will cannot control, such as accommodation of sight, the internal organs’ activities (e.g. digestion, excretion, etc.), or involuntary movements of muscles. But besides innate ignorance, Valéry didn’t overlook the fact that the adaptation by habit increases our acquired ignorance. Habits are “composed functions”(C1, 906), that is to say, a “connection” as a linkage of functions considerably fixed. It is certain that habits are “an instrument”(962) that enables us to act smoothly and without failure. But this smoothness comes from forgetting the fact that functions are linked to each other, in other words, from ignoring the infinite possibilities of linkages. Indeed, “[the true design of existence] is impossible to follow because it can develop *ad infinitum* at each instant,” so one inevitably “forgets that [one] is walking, that [one] is living every second.”(*ibid.*) In this way “the true design of existence escapes.”(*ibid.*) As Valéry wrote following Bichat’s distinction between vegetative and animal life, “[human being] seems to build [his/her] free body in the image of [his/her] vegetative body.”(900) Habits change connections between the functions that human being acquires through learning something like the innate workings of internal organs. As habits increase expanding differences amongst individuals, our ignorance of our own function increases. This ignored function can be the object of our *discovery* and *possession*, in spite of being *within* our body.

3. Valéry’s physiology

To *discover* and *possess* those functions of mine that I ignore, an external power such as the strong <red> of a red-colored plate should intervene and make them work, as in the perception of complementary colors. However, the intervention of an external power does not always need an external object - for example a red-colored plate. By intentionally keeping our body under control, we can also discover and possess our functions.

On this point Valéry gives the example of the act of reading lines vertically. It is “reading at right angles to the axis of the lines, restoring normal reading and maintaining the *faculty* of reading sideways on.”(991) As reading vertically is different from normal reading and as we are not used to it, it creates more difficulties. However, through such constraining experiences we realize how complex the act of reading is, which we otherwise do naturally. “How many independent conditions are involved in a action such as reading!”(*ibid.*) Moving eyeballs, grasping the alphabet, recognizing certain sequences of the alphabet as words, specifying the meaning of a word, following the point of an argument ... there are so many conditions to be brought together and worked out to perform the simple act of reading. The sense of *possession* is nothing else than the sense of discovery of associations of conditions what Valéry calls “a pyramid of ‘functions’”(*ibid.*) in the blank “space” of which I was unaware. “[S]pace’ dividing into functions whose re-association is possible though not convenient in many respects.”(*ibid.*) To find this divisibility, that is, to separate the connected functions is the *discovery* of the indistinct and the *possession* of what belongs to me.

Such bodily restrictions enable us to realize the complexity and divisibility of seemingly simple acts through “reciprocal limitations”(787) amongst functions, namely, the difficulty of using some functions simultaneously. From such discoveries ensues that, for Valéry, a “*theory of the functioning*” is to “see ‘functions’, in other words to inspect the register of indistinct elements forming a more or less complex diversity.”(815)

It is therefore on this point that Valéry brings to light the true problem for physiology. The latter must search the relationships between complexly connected functions. Valéry criticized the physiologists of his time and thus stated: “it is strange - isn’t it? - that no physiologist has devoted himself/herself to conceive the simultaneous acting of all the functions and how they are dependent or independent from each other, together with their ‘relativity’, their mutual incompatibility, their coaptations, etc.”(823) In fact Valéry described in his *Notebooks* various phenomena that are important for physiology, in relation to connections between functions. “That we could speak or think while *walking*, this little thing didn’t strike any of our physiologists and nothing gave me more to think about.”(1097)[7]

In respect of the discovery of unknown functions, Valéry’s ambition to draw “an intuitive representation of the total functioning of living beings”(784) and his pursuit for “purity” through poetry share the same principle. “The purity I am talking about is nothing but the increasingly sharp feeling about my independent parties and the possession of my well separated function.”(340) What a poem gives to the reader is the representation of a body as a possession of functions, in other words, “the ‘Body’ perceived directly - without visuality.”(1138) The difference between prose and poetry does not consist of the content but of the way of conveyance to the reader. Prose conveys meaning in a useful, practical, and thus *successful* way, while poetry conveys meaning in a restricting way. Because of this difference, only poetry makes the reader *possess* the function used. “So prose and poetry are distinguished by the differences between certain links and associations that are made and undone in our mental and nervous organism, in spite of the elements of these modes of functioning being the same.”(Œ1, 1331) Rhythm and rhetorical devices help the reader to realize various ways of linking and associating those functions while restricting his/her body.

Valéry's attempt to draw through his poetry "an intuitive representation of the total functioning of living beings" developed later into the concept of "Implexe," first introduced in dialogue in *The fixed idea* (1932). According to his definition, the Implexe is "the group of all things that a situation, no matter how it may be, *can* draw from us." (C2, 329) Because variety in individuals is made of functions, I contain in myself various "*functions of the other*" (328). The Implexe is the whole set of possibilities that can be included, both known and unknown ones. "What we know or feel could not be drawn from us anything may also feature in the *implexe* as a negation, an incapacity." (*ibid.*) As the definition says, it is only external situation that draws the negative or incompetent functions from us and makes us discover them.

If poetry is something that makes us discover our functions, it is not necessarily literal poetry that consist of words. Valéry thought there can be a non-linguistic poem, too. For example, for him, "I light a match and it catches" is not a poem, but "I light a match and it doesn't catch" becomes a poem. "It becomes a - poem. The failure makes a fact very sensible; what succeeds, is predicted, or accomplished would be a void fact." (C1, 1103) In general, "in the immense majority of cases the functioning of life is made of *successes and dumbness*." (1104) Of course "normality and healthy-ness are *instrumental* qualities" (1104) and this dumbness through success is, needless to say, nothing but an instrumentalization of the body. Poetry appears where the "*natural course of things*" (1093) is cut off. It is a resistance, a failure and impatience that "*fire* the various implexes, which success would leave *nonexistent in act*." (1103-1104)

Conclusion

Valéry's physiology has only been studied for its terminological inspiration from physiology and has not been taken seriously as a science. But as we have examined in this paper by focusing on the concept of function, his physiology shares the same principle with what he tried to pursue in poetry. Both help us to clarify our functions through experience of failure of prosaic, namely normal physical working. Valéry's idea about the experience of bodily restrictions that tells us much about our functions is very interesting as a physical theory. But some questions are left unanswered. How does his theory, which presupposes an abstract and universal human body, handle sexual or historical differences between individual bodies? Our next task would also be to appraise the limitations of his view of the body as a physiology.

Notes

Valéry's works cited in this paper and their abbreviations are as follows:

Œuvres, éd. Jean Hytier, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pleiade, 2 vols., 1957 et 1960. [= Œ]

Cahiers, éd. Judith Robinson-Valéry, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pleiade, 2 vols., 1973 et 1974. [= C]

Cahiers 1894-1914, éd. Nicole Celeyrette-Pietri, Judith Robinson-Valéry et Robert Pickering, Gallimard, 11 vols. parus., 1987-2009. [= C. int.]

[1] Valéry used the word "pure poetry" publicly for the first time in the preface to *Knowledge of the Goddess*, the collection of poems by Lucian Fabre in 1920. However, Valéry didn't use it explicitly

after that. Expressions such as “pure” or “pure mode” also appear in his 1930s lectures, but “pure poetry” as a serial expression appears only in his private *Notebooks*, mainly when he looks at the 1920s retrospectively. Valéry escaped being involved in disputes over the concept of “pure poetry,” which subsequently spread in American newspapers. During these disputes Valéry kept silent and it was only in 1928 that he wrote his text titled “Pure Poetry” to clarify this concept. Nevertheless, although he did not refer directly to the word “purity,” his basic idea didn’t change and he kept on stressing that prosaic elements should be excluded from poetry. As a matter of fact, the title of this paper uses the word “purity” instead of “pure poetry” precisely to invoke the consistency of this idea throughout his work.

- [2] Goethe did a famous study about complementary colors in his book titled *Theory of colors*, but there is no clear evidence that it influenced Valéry. Goethe argued that every color has an affinity for its complementary color, that both colors call for each other creatively, and that the eye always seeks wholeness. Valéry’s argument doesn’t have the dimension of such a theory of color. Schopenhauer also discussed the “bipolarity of complementary colors” in *On vision and the colors* (1816) - which was written in response to Goethe’s argument.
- [3] The radical attitude that consists in preserving art from “utility” or “practicality” had at the time something to do with a growing sense of crisis whereby art should be used as a nationalistic means to convey ideology. Valéry clearly highlighted this point in the introduction of the *Encyclopedia of France*, volumes 16 and 17, published in 1935.
- [4] Valéry’s terminology of “subjective” perception suggests an influence from the German physiologist, physicist, and philosopher Hermann von Helmholtz (*On the sensations of tone as a physiological basis for the theory of music*, 1965) and Austrian physicist and philosopher Ernst Mach (*Knowledge and error*, 1908). Mentions are made by the editor and annotator of *Notebooks* of the influence from Helmholtz (C.int., 6, pp. 265-266). Similarly, Jean Starobinski discusses in details the influence from Mach, in his study on Georges Canguilhem and Marcel Gauchet (*Action and reaction: the life and adventures of a couple*, 1999).
- [5] Jonathan Crary’s historical study suggests that Valéry’s analysis about “subjective perception” can be considered to be characteristic of the 19th century. Crary argues that in 18th century the eye-subject as a world constructor was thought to be *transparent* and *innocent*, but in the 19th century some new physical conditions of the subject that *dirty* it were *discovered*, and the subject lost its absolute position as an observer of the world (*Techniques of the observer: on vision and modernity in the nineteenth century*, MIT Press, 1992, pp. 67-79). Moreover, through his study of Goethe and Helmholtz, Crary argues that physiology begot this discovery of *physical subjectivity*. However, it should be noticed that the physiology Valéry presupposed is different from that to which Crary refers. For Crary, who focuses on the beginning of the 19th century, physiology is a study that explores the functions of individual organs through experiments. On the other hand, for Valéry, who lived at the beginning of 20th century, it is a study that explores the working of the whole body with its organs all related to each other.
- [6] Valéry also discusses the “similarity,” namely the “non-reality” of simulation. A reader who simulates may unify with the character through the inner sensation of the body, but he/she does not *become* the character in the literal sense. He/she can be conscious of the duality, namely “the coexistence of independent worlds, of a *back side* and a *right side*” (CE2, 703) if he/she wants.
- [7] It is questionable whether Valéry’s assessment is valid or not as a criticism against the physiology of his time. As Marcel Gauchet argued in relation to the idea of reflection (*L’inconscient cérébral*, Le Seuil, 1992, pp. 153-170), the paradigm shift from reductionism to holism began to occur in particular in the field of neurophysiology. Thus, Valéry’s intention to quest after the connections between functions and the workings of the whole body should be thought not as a criticism, but as a proof that he was swimming with the tide of contemporary physiology.