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Adorno and Valéry The origins of an inseparable nexus

Abstract

This essay explores the theoretical nexus between Adorno and Valéry, arguing that their relationship is not one of derivation or borrowing but rather an inseparable consonance rooted in shared conceptual moves. The analysis traces the origins of this nexus, examining how Adorno immediately recognized in Valéry's interweaving of poetry and theory (Dichtung und Theorie) a dialectic of spiritualization that becomes central to his own aesthetic thought. Also, through the catalytic force generated by Adorno's confrontation with Benjamin around 1936, Adorno discovered in Valéry a "second degree materialism" that locates material contradiction within pure form itself, making spirit a kind of material consumed by the very process of aesthetic configuration. Valéry emerges as the Artist – not merely the Künstler but the acrobat of form who, through rigorous submission to the Sache, reveals how absolute spiritualization exposes its own material constraints. This ambivalent figure, politically conservative yet dialectically revolutionary, becomes for Adorno the deputy (Statthalter) of a humanity redeemed through aesthetic wholeness, pointing toward art's transcendence of itself into the true life of human beings.

Keywords

Adorno, Valéry, Second degree materialism

Received: 09/05/2025

Approved: 30/07/2025

Editing by: Giulia Zerbinati

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1. *A methodological remark*

Without any claim to be original, I believe that Adorno's relationship with Valéry is among the most significant ones he had in constructing his own theoretical project. This is true insofar as such a project is characterized by the intensity with which it affects the side of the aesthetic, as well as the domain of art. This belief is corroborated by some elements on which I have had the opportunity to dwell elsewhere, starting from the end, that is, from *Aesthetic theory* (Matteucci 2012). So, having already considered this relationship from its outcome, I would now like to identify a possible *terminus a quo*. In this regard, it will be necessary to proceed very carefully, but perhaps a few interesting elements might be brought to the fore.

However, it won't be enough to speak here of origins in a merely chronological sense. If it is true that to Adorno the relationship with Valéry turns out to be crucial, then it becomes interesting to try to understand not its contingency, but its essential character. That is, it is necessary to question the theoretical framework that may have nurtured the *tightening* (so to speak: both the *establishment* and the *becoming tight*) of this relationship.

The impression sought to be explored here is that Adorno immediately saw in Valéry's words (and perhaps, even more, in Valéry's style of carrying out reflection) conceptual moves similar to his own. In short, between Adorno and Valéry there seems to be established "upon encounter" not a *relation* (a proportion between different elements, a commensuration), but, as the title of this essay states, a *nexus*, that is, a system of consonances and resonances in which a shared root is voiced. Therefore, for Adorno it is not a matter of deriving or borrowing elements from Valéry's thought, but of expressing, through his own conceptual production, a theoretical sense that can be seen as common (although, by itself, it does not fully encompass the standpoint of either of them).

Incidentally, I believe that the importance of this nexus is also due to its exemplarity in relation to a peculiarity of Adorno's theoretical attitude, which can be found, moreover, in perspectives that are similarly irritating (on the philological level) for their ability to metabolize and re-signify others' theoretical stylistic features. Perhaps, this further explains Adorno's own sense of being involved in a strong connection to Valéry's reflection, with which this method of theoretical resonance is particularly effective when tested against his own inquiry.

2. Valéry on the scene of Adorno's writings

To my knowledge, the first time Valéry's name appears in a published text by Adorno is in *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* in 1949. This is an important essay. Indeed, Adorno chose to open the collection *Prismen* in 1955 with it, adopting the title of the 1949 essay as the general subtitle of the volume.

The passage in which Valéry's name appears is particularly complex and denotes a non-superficial assimilation of his thought. Here it is in full¹:

[...] it is only in the process of withdrawing into itself, only indirectly that is, that bourgeois culture conceives of a purity from the corrupting traces of a totalitarian disorder which embraces all areas of existence [*Spuren des zur Totalität über alle Bezirke des Daseins ausgebreiteten Unwesens*]. Only in so far as it withdraws from a *praxis* which has degenerated into its opposite, from the ever-changing production of what is always the same, from the service of the customer who himself serves the manipulator – only in so far as it withdraws from Man, can culture be faithful to man. But such concentration on substance which is absolutely one's own [*die absolut eigene Substanz* = substance which is absolutely inherent], the greatest example of which is to be found in the poetry and theoretical writings of Paul Valéry [*wie sie in der Dichtung und Theorie von Paul Valéry den großartigsten Niederschlag gefunden hat*], contributes at the same time to the impoverishment [*Aushölung* = erosion] of that substance. Once the mind [*Geist*] is no longer directed at reality, its meaning is changed despite the strictest preservation of meaning. Through its resignation before the facts of life and, even more, through its isolation as one "field" among others, the mind aids the existing order and takes its place within it [*steht er dem bloß Seienden bei und wird selbst zu einem bloß Seienden*]. (P 23-4)

Strikingly, Valéry debuts on the scene of Adorno's writings as a proper protagonist. In the passage quoted above, one of the most fruitful movements in Adorno's thought is well recognizable, as it will also be bound to occur throughout the material eventually included into *Aesthetic theory*. It concerns that pole of 'purity' which, if isolated and hypostatized, becomes the mark of a commodified or commodifiable deterioration of the *Geist*, that is, of the *mind*, and which therefore must instead be located in a flow of restored energy current with material reality, if it is to be

¹ Adorno's passages are cited by quoting the corresponding acknowledged English translation (if any), according to the abbreviations listed at the bottom of the essay, followed by the page number. In cases where the translation is considered unsatisfactory, the original German text is also quoted. When a word or sentence quoted in German is followed by a different translation preceded by "=", the formulation is mine.

preserved and grasped in its actual productivity. It is in this regard that Adorno summons Valéry. Not, however, as a defendant, but as a witness (perhaps a reticent one, but a witness nonetheless).

The experience that Valéry is invited to expound is, in fact, that of the singular interweaving of expressive and conceptual research, *Dichtung und Theorie*, which has characterized his thinking as a whole. Such interweaving is achieved by taking the process of configuration to the extreme with *hostinato rigore* (as the motto of the Leonardo dear to Valéry goes). In short, this means carrying out a poetic-theoretical reflection capable, in its own form, of remaining tenaciously true to the *Sache*. It involves the enactment of a reflection that then possesses permanent aesthetic features, both because it brings poetry and theory together and because it is stubbornly inscribed in the living body of its own *Sache*, in its own materiality. Moreover, this reflection is aesthetic because it is bound to exceed all logical-rational closures: in being pursued rigorously in every single fold and aspect of the *Sache*, the idea of a pure form fatally yields contradictions that are as logically irreducible as they are aesthetically fruitful.

The more the spirit, or mind, that operates in this way, remains inscribed in its own rigorously attacked *Sache*, the more it aims to rise programmatically above material contingency to realize itself ‘purely’, and the more, in experimenting itself as substance, it achieves its own erosion (*Aushölung*) rather than its own celebration or glorification. That is, it becomes, as substance, the nourishment consumed by its own exercise. Hence, at least *secondarily*, substance serves here as material (or, if you will, substitutes for it). As such, it is consumed by the activity of the configuration which it enacts and in which it seeks to realize itself, as indeed happens even to every *primary* material insofar as the configuration seeks to be intrinsic and not extrinsic or external. Adorno asks Valéry precisely to testify how absolute spiritualization makes *operatively* evident that same material constraint that it *thematically* appears to repress: “Valéry honors the material stratum as the only one stratum in which the artistic spirit gains mastery of itself [*Das Stoffliche ehrt er als die Schicht, in der allein der künstlerische Geist seiner selbst mächtig wird*]” (N 166).

This Valerian motif runs across Adorno’s speculative path as a whole. It is in this sense that two passages from *Aesthetic theory* – that unfortunately are at least partly neutralized by the English translation – should be read:

Admittedly, the spiritualization of art is not a pristine process [*ein trüber Bodensatz beigemischt*]. Whenever spiritualization is not fully carried out in the concretion of the aesthetic structure [*Gefüge*], the emancipated spiritual element is degraded to the level of subaltern thematic material [*etabliert sich das entbundene Geistige als Stoffschicht zweiten Grades* = establishes itself as a second-degree material layer]. (AT 92)

In any case, even so apparently formal a category as that of articulation [*Artikulation*] has its material aspect: that of intervention in the *rudis indigestaque moles* of what is sedimented [*abgeladert*] in the artwork [*Kunst = art*] this side of its autonomy; even aesthetic forms [*ihre Formen* = the forms of art] tend historically toward becoming material of a second order [*zu Stoffen zweiten Grades* = second-degree materials]. The means, without which there would be no form, undermine form. (AT 146)

3. *The horizon of a second degree materialism*

Given the rich content underlying the first direct quotation from Valéry, it seems evident that in 1949 Adorno had already gained a full degree of familiarity in dealing with that thought. On the other hand, it is perhaps impossible to pinpoint elements concerning the beginning of such a relationship that are completely certain. Yet some clues can be gathered by further investigating the problem concerning the “second degree” material and the related dialectic of spiritualization around which the two aforementioned passages of *Aesthetic theory* revolve.

In the most extensive essay Adorno devotes specifically to Valéry, dating back to 1960, we read:

The mind, condemned to death, [*Todverfallener Geist*] sympathizes with the material element [*mit dem Stofflichen*], the element within mind that is not itself mind [*nicht selber Geistigen mitten im Geist*]. In this second order materialism [*Materialismus zweiten Grades* = second degree materialism], Valéry joins Walter Benjamin, whose aesthetics probably learned more from Valéry than anyone else. For Valéry, material things [*die Stoffe*] are an antidote to a self-destructive mind that he, like Nietzsche, suspects of being an “amplifier”, falsifying experience by intensifying it. (N 166)

The fact that Valéry is so vigorously associated with Benjamin is in itself relevant. But even more relevant is how Adorno justifies this association, made by virtue of a shared “second degree materialism”. In other words, what then shines through behind the filigree of the theoretical kernel constituted by the Valerian motif we recalled above, is a critical

reception of Benjamin's aesthetic perspective, that becomes an integral component of the resonant horizon within which the Adorno-Valéry nexus tightens. This is because Benjamin's aesthetic reflection, in turn, would have learned from Valéry the basic moves of its own establishment. The perimeter of the same dialectic of spiritualization would be that of a *second degree materialism*, capable of locating in the formal dynamics of spirit the material logic of configuration according to the expression-construction polarity – and thus capable of locating the trigger of material contradiction in pure form, for example of seeing in architectural forms (such as the *Passages*) the expression of a material basis nourished by the dreams of a collective, or at least social, unconscious.

The Benjaminian feature that completes the framework of the Adorno-Valéry nexus is undoubtedly of great importance. All in all, one can hear Benjamin's voice echoing when Adorno speaks, in the aforementioned places, of a "second degree" as far as material, materialism, etc. are concerned. Indeed, in the famous essay *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility* it is Benjamin who speaks of a "nature [...] of the second degree [*eine Natur zweiten Grades*]" (Benjamin 2008: 35) that would be established by film through editing. This seems to accomplish the highest realization of the Valerian spirit-substance, which, as Adorno observes, precisely aims at this: "Spirit becomes spirit only when it comes to recognize [*innewird* = becomes aware of] its own quasi-natural character [*Naturwüchsigkeit*]" (N 167).

The sublimity of the Valerian-Benjaminian perspective with which Adorno feels resonant lies in its ability to treat form, substance, spirit, as material – but as material and not as matter, bearing in mind that, unlike the latter, material is imbued with historical sedimentation and thus is never to be resolved into mere factuality. Yet the boundary that marks this difference could turn out to be extremely blurred. As a consequence, a more than legitimate dialectic of spiritualization fatally runs the risk of rendering such a dimension naturalistic (as shown by the difficult handling of such issues as "aura"). Moreover, in every revolutionary drive lurks the pitfall of regression, of conservatism, of the nostalgia for times gone by, which causes the dis-alienation not to be pursued and achieved historically, but to be distorted and projected into the past as a primal conciliation that should be restored. But for Adorno this remark is not a mere reproach. For this reason he will repeatedly place Valéry's greatness in his ambivalence, that is, in his ability to colonize an extremely thin and dangerous borderline ("I have been reading Valéry with great pleasure

and not a little anxiety”, wrote Adorno in a passage on which I shall return).

The framework we are analyzing must therefore possess a radically dynamic connotation. To fully understand the latter, it may be useful to consider another way in which Adorno presents the “second degree” theme. Again in the extensive 1960 essay he focuses on the way in which Valéry juggles the relationship between two equally decisive needs: the need to escape (psychic-empirical) subjectivity and the need to reject the myth of the given, to emancipate oneself from the factual. To Adorno, Valéry will always be the one who, within the system of this apparently divergent dual necessity, provides a solution that moves from respecting the rights of form as *non-factual* objectivity:

The emancipation of painting and sculpture from resemblance to the object and of music from tonality [*Was in Malerei und Plastik von der Ähnlichkeit mit dem Gegenstand, in der Musik von der Tonalität sich lossagt*] is essentially motivated by the drive to recreate in the work, immanently, some of the objectivity [*dem Gebilde rein von sich aus etwas von jener Objektivität wieder anzuschaffen* = to give back to the product moving from the product itself some of the objectivity] it loses when it stops at a subjective reaction [*Reflex*] to something pregiven, whatever form it takes. The more the work of art divests itself critically of all the determinants [*Bedingungen*] not immanent in its own form [*Gestalt*], the more it approaches a second-order objectivity [*desto mehr nähert es mittlerweile einer Objektivität zweiter Potenz sich an* = progressively an objectivity to the second power]. (N 152)

The ‘Valerian resultant’ that follows the escape from Cartesian dualism consists, then, in form as “second degree material” per se, or – as the passage in question also states – in an “objectivity to the second power”. It is not yet form meant as sedimented material that constitutes the characteristic Adornian trait. It does, however, represent a preliminary stage of it, insofar as this resultant always has a counterpart in that sort of “subjectivity to the second power” that Adorno spots in Proust (“Proust’s naïvété is a second naïvété. At every stage of consciousness a new and broader immediacy arises [*reproduziert sich*]”; P 181). It is thus an interplay of divergent forces that establishes the proper meaning of each position that emerges within the field, so that we must read the nexus with Valéry in a vectorial sense:

In the litigation implicitly pending between them, neither Proust nor Valéry is right [*Weder Valéry noch Proust hat recht in dem latenten Prozeß, der zwischen ihnen anhängig ist*], nor could a middle-of-the-road reconciliation be arranged. The

conflict between them points up in a most penetrating way a conflict in the matter itself [*der Sache selbst*], and each takes the part of one moment in the truth which lies in the unfolding of contradiction. The fetishism [*Fetischisierung*] of the object and the subject's infatuation with itself find their correctives in each other. Each position passes over into the other. Valéry becomes aware of the intrinsic being of the work [*des Ansichseins der Werke*] through unremitting self-reflection, and, inversely, Proust's subjectivism looks to art for the ideal, the salvation of the living. (P 183)

This is further corroboration of the fact that, in the various pivotal aspects of the conceptual framework we are trying to evoke, there is a persistent consonance with Benjamin – who spoke of Proust, Gide, and Valéry as the sides of the “equilateral triangle of the new French literature” (Benjamin 1991b: 79).

4. *Benjamin's enhancing function*

By virtue of this, it seems promising to hold that it is within Adorno's relationship with Benjamin that the original manifestation of basic features of the nexus with Valéry must be sought. An essential document becomes, then, the correspondence between Benjamin and Adorno.

In this epistolary exchange, which began in 1928, Valéry's name does not immediately appear. In fact, only in the letter from London dated March 18, 1936, written to criticize Benjamin's famous essay on the work of art, Adorno makes the first explicit reference to Valéry. This *locus* is remarkable. This is particularly significant for us also because such an occurrence of Valéry's name in the hitherto known Adornian *corpus* is unprecedented, at least according to the materials that have been accessible to me.

This mention of Valéry, which appears here almost rhapsodic, is once again placed in the context of the dialectic concerning “second degree material”, as confirmed by the manner in which Adorno also refers to Mallarmé and Borchardt:

I know of no better materialist programme than that remark of Mallarmé's, where he defines a work of literature as something that is not inspired but rather is made out of words, and the greatest of the reactionary figures, like Valéry and Borchardt (especially the latter's essay on “Villas”, which could be recuperated in a materialist sense in its entirety, in spite of one appalling comment about the workers), also harbour this explosive power within the innermost cells of their work. (C 129)

Whether this is really the trace of Adorno's very first attention to Valéry I honestly do not know. However, something supports the fact that this is not an entirely wild guess. One clue is inferred *ex negativo* from a recent and updated survey by Manfred Clemenz of the Adornian workshop in the period up to the 1930s (Clemenz 2024). It is striking that, despite the fact that this survey devotes large sections to the elaboration of the aesthetic problem in early Adorno's thought, it nowhere feels the need to refer to the name of Valéry, who is never mentioned in this book. The impression one gets is that the unfolding of Adorno's thought, at least until the mid-1930s, does not lead one to consider Valéry a relevant thematic reference of his. A finding corroborated by the lack of relevant references to Valéry in the now classic biography of Adorno written by Müller-Doohm (2003) with great wealth of documentation.

Furthermore, it must be pointed out that the letter from March 1936 is the first place in general where Valéry is summoned within the Benjamin-Adorno epistolary exchange. It is true that Benjamin's reading of Valéry dates back at least to 1925. In fact, in two letters to Scholem that year he expresses his enthusiasm for the dialogue *Eupalinos* (as well as for the essays in *Variété*) (Benjamin 1994: 268 and 277)², while the following year he published his first, however brief, paper on Valéry (Benjamin 1991a). Yet before March 1936 Benjamin never mentions Valéry in any of his letters to Adorno. Thus, while it is plausible to think that Adorno 'got to know' Valéry through Benjamin, it is not at all clear how that happened³.

Moreover, it would not be fair to think that Adorno was attracted toward Valéry as a result of his reading of Benjamin's essay on the work of art. Bear in mind that the version of this essay read and criticized by Adorno in March 1936 is not the final one, where Valéry is prominently present right from the long opening quotation. Instead, in the version read by Adorno, Valéry's name *never* appears⁴. So, it would be wrong to think that Adorno's mention of Valéry in the letter from March 1936 is due to a suggestion drawn directly from this text by Benjamin.

² Before these letters (included in the selection edited by Adorno and Scholem, to which we refer as it is also available in English) there are no references to Valéry in Benjamin's extensive correspondence.

³ For a survey of the ways in which Benjamin and Adorno relate to Valéry starting from the analysis of precise textual elements see Zaccarello 2007.

⁴ It is for this reason that in the present paper I refer to the English translation of the so-called "second version" of Benjamin's essay.

This is not to say that Benjamin's essay played no role. However, it seems to have acted in a different way than that of establishing something. Rather, it brings out and promotes the operative context that underlies the whole network being woven. Of this we have some evidence. Following the letter in question, a process of restructuring began in Benjamin's relationship with Adorno. This led the two to meet in Paris in early October in a week that reinvigorated their friendship, so much so that from then on the two would begin to call each other by name in their correspondence. It was in those days that Benjamin gave Adorno the then newly released edition of Valéry's *Pièces sur l'art* with the following dedication: "In lasting commemoration of our Paris days in October 1936" (C 152). It is then not far-fetched to think that in October Valéry was a crucial subject of their talks. And this is perhaps how, on the Adornian horizon, the figures of Valéry and Benjamin ended up merging into a single cardinal point orienting the analysis of "second degree materialism" that would never again leave Adorno's compass from then on.

Immediately after that Paris stay, on October 15, 1936, Adorno confessed to Benjamin that he had sunk into reading Valéry, showing himself at once engrossed and frightened by that conservative perspective with a revolutionary power, because of its ability to productively guard the boundary of pure configuration: "I have been reading Valéry with great pleasure and not a little anxiety. The connection between war and absolute poetry is indeed striking here. Naturally, most of all in his essay on progress. Nevertheless – or perhaps because of this – what an impressive figure" (C 150).

Through his famous essay on the work of art, then, Benjamin seems to play an *enhancing* function on the nexus Adorno realizes he has with Valéry, a function that actually is perhaps not limited only to promoting latent energies in the field of Adorno's reflection. For another conjecture might be possible in light of the detection of this function. It is about a kind of feedback effect. It would not strike me as surprising that the exchange with Adorno in Paris in 1936, which took place in the context of the Valerian resultant of the dialectic of spiritualization, was the reason that later led Benjamin to make explicit his own intimate resonance with Valéry by modifying the essay on the work of art to include conspicuous Valerian traces, as well as to carry out the same dialectic as a function of aura, as will happen in the version of that concept that is appreciated (adornianly speaking) in the marvelous 1938 essay *On some motifs in Baudelaire*.

5. “Der Artist” Valéry: a near-fatal attraction

In a nutshell, the hypothesis I am suggesting is that Benjamin was useful to Adorno not to establish but to enhance a nexus with Valéry that was immediately revealed to be inseparable. If this is the case, then what comes before 1936 is even more relevant to us: the question becomes whether before sinking into reading Valéry, Adorno was already attuned to the Valerian stance. In this regard, I limit myself to a few remarks.

It was said above that until the early 1930s Valéry as an author seems to be off the radar of Adornian scholarship. Yet it was in the very early 1930s that Adorno developed some *Theses on the language of the philosopher*, where it emerges how much he was ‘geared’ and even ‘ripe’ to meet Valéry. In them Valéry’s voice resonates, as harmonics that already belong to the Doppler effect of an approaching event.

In particular, the whole thesis #9 seems to trace similar Valerian reflections on “poetic” language in its ability to abolish any sign/sense dualism. In this way, the very forms of language become – precisely – *second degree* material for a mimetic-expressive gesture that merges the aesthetic and the theoretical:

All philosophical critique is today possible as the critique of language [*Sprachkritik*]. This critique of language does not merely have to concern itself with the “adequation” of words to things [*Sachen*], but just as equally with the state of the words on their own terms [*Stand der Worte bei sich selber*]. It is to be asked of the words themselves [*es ist bei den Worten zu fragen*] how far they are capable of bearing the intentions attributed to them, to what extent their power [*Kraft*] has been historically extinguished, how far they can somehow be configuratively preserved [*wie weit sie etwa konfiguratativ bewahrt werden mag*]. The criterion of this is essentially the *aesthetic* dignity of words [*die ästhetische Dignität der Worte*]. Such words are recognizable as impotent; those [*Als kraftlose Worte sind kennbar solche die* = Are recognizable as powerless those words that] in the linguistic work of art – which alone preserves the unity of word and thing [*Sache*] against scientific dualism [*Dualität*] – were succinctly forfeited to aesthetic critique [*der ästhetischen Kritik bündig verfielen* = fell without scraps into the domain of aesthetic critique], while up to now they themselves were permitted to enjoy the full measure of philosophical taste [*Gunst* = favour]. Thereby the constitutive meaning of aesthetic critique is surrendered in favour of knowledge [*Es ergibt sich damit konstitutive Bedeutung der ästhetischen Kritik für die Erkenntnis* = This results in the constitutive meaning of aesthetic critique in favour of knowledge]. (T 38)

The critique of language advocated by Adorno is a search for the performative capacity of the word (which should therefore “be configura-

tively preserved”), thus for its material “significance” (*Bedeutsam-sein*) and not for its ideal “meaning” (*Bedeutend-sein*). This applies to that which retains aesthetic force because it has proved to exceed the technique of aesthetic critique. The latter employs thematizing structures instead of indulging the energy operatively flowing in language as an articulation of the *Sache* and its aspects. In other terms: it is a technique which denotes instead of linguistically “miming” the *Sache*, as Valéry sets out to do in his interweaving of *Dichtung* and *Theorie*, and as Adorno believes negative-dialectical thinking must do.

An implication of this statement is the restoration to language of the not merely designative (*signifikativ*), but mimetic-expressive (*bedeutsam*) capacity to preserve the nexus that historically ties the word to the *Sache* – because, as we also read in these *Theses*, in the dialectic realization of thought, objects “are not at all adequately given through language, but rather adhere to language and stand in a historical unity with it” (T 36). Which entails a non-occasional abandonment of the “comprehensibility [*Verständlichkeit*]” of philosophical language that is the basis of its coupling with the aesthetic. Here then is presented in perhaps its most basic form the root of the Adorno-Valéry nexus. Valéry, in fact, has long theorized and practiced this incomprehensibility as salient feature of language in the eminent sense (which he defines as “poetic”), which vanishes “in the practical or abstract uses of language that is specifically *prose*” in which “the form is not preserved, does not outlive understanding [*compréhension*], dissolves in the light [*clarté*], it has acted, it has made itself understood, it has lived” (Valéry 1958: 209) – and it lives no more. To a kind of *ante litteram* Valerian resonance thus goes back that cornerstone of *incomprehensibility* that remains a crucial fulcrum of Adornian thought up to all the materials of *Aesthetic theory* (see above all: AT 118).

Therefore, Valéry’s stance *always* seems to Adorno to be a dialectic ‘for the *Sache selbst*’, that is, deriving not from ideological options but from the lucid phenomenology of the significance innervating the material real. This can be seen in the way Adorno pairs him with Hegel, with respect to whom a resonance nexus is identified that is known to be philosophically unfounded, but which for that very reason is extremely powerful. For it is because Valéry seems formally (i.e., as far as explicit stances are concerned) distant from Hegel that their encounter on the level of theoretical content assumes considerable value. Thus, while, on the one hand, with respect to Valéry Hegel “must originally have been very distant”, on the other hand, “all the more emphatic is Valéry’s advocacy of the dialectic, something to which he is compelled against his own

education [*Bildung*] and temperament, solely by the ‘freedom in relation to the object [*Freiheit zum Objekt*]’ to which he tries to do justice in his thinking” (N 150). However, at the same time, this explains the ambivalence that will always connote the relationship Adorno keeps with Valéry, seen as having a political orientation opposite to his own and, nevertheless, the ability to grasp better than any other partisan thought structures that turn out to be as correct as ever from a peculiar negative-dialectical point of view.

Emblematic in this regard becomes the conclusion of *Der Artist als Statthalter*, Adorno’s first thematic study of Valéry, published in 1953, which takes the form of a lengthy review of the German edition of Valéry’s essay on Degas. This conclusion holds the key to the secret of the study’s seemingly cryptic title, built on two unusual nouns that can be understood only in their mutual relationship and that define the ‘field of existence’ of Valéry as the vector of Adorno’s aesthetic theory.

First, it should be noted that Adorno, throughout the course of his reflection up to *Aesthetic theory*, always refers to Valéry with the epithet “der Artist” (see Matteucci 2012). This term, which is probably a Gallicism (as in the same aesthetic context is, for example, “apparition”), should not be confused with the usual German term for “artist”, namely “Künstler”. The German “Artist” is also equivalent to circus acrobat, prestidigitator, magician. But not, to Adorno, in the sense of a diminution. It indicates the polarity tending toward a subject of a relational experience that has, as its integrative dynamic polarity (that tending toward an object), a specular *analogon* punctually noted in *Aesthetic theory* as the “geheimes Apriori” of the aesthetic field as such, which is “secret” because it is lodged in its material grains. Thus, on the one hand, “Artworks are static as much as they are dynamic; art genres that fall below approved culture, such as circus tableaux and revues and probably mechanisms such as the water fountains of the seventeenth century, confess to what authentic artworks conceal in themselves as their secret apriori [*geheimes Apriori*]” (AT 80; and see 81, 161). On the other hand, on the side of “subject”, the *Artist*’s acrobatics leads beyond the *Künstler*: “The name ‘artist [*Artist*]’ is borne both by the circus performer and one who has most turned away from effect, who champions the audacious idea of art, to fulfill its pure concept” (AT 280).

In his various writings, Adorno uses the German term “Artist” infrequently and almost exclusively in relation to French culture. This is corroborated, for instance, by the use Adorno makes of it, exceptionally, with reference to Alban Berg, when, in the late monograph on this master of

his, Adorno links him to French culture, thus making him an *Artist*: “Berg the *artiste* [*der Artist*] recognized Baudelaire as his predecessor, no less than Proust did” (Adorno 1991: 12). But even more interesting is that Adorno retrieves this term whenever, since the 1950s, he speaks of Valéry, who seems to be for him “*der Artist*” *par excellence*, that is, the producer of art who is irreducible to the *Künstler*. This is because he is credited with transcending the domesticated perimeter of the “fine arts” precisely in virtue of his “material” radicalization of artistic *Gestaltung*. As stated again by Adorno in his 1958-1959 *Ästhetik Vorlesung*, it is first and foremost to Valéry that we should think of when we have to find cases of those “who are themselves involved in specific artistic work, who have specific experience of the material and may perhaps reflect upon it to themselves [*und sie unter Umständen in sich selber reflektieren*]” (Adorno 2018: 16), merging thereby in such materiality the process of reflection with that of production – i.e., *Theorie* and *Dichtung*.

Valéry takes the material back to the extreme of its meaning, as seen in reference to language. Thus, coming almost to silence, to the breaking point he reaches with extreme form, he exhibits its ‘natural’ significance. This means responding to the inherent trend lines of the force field, thus also making ‘creative’ subjectivity a kind of material of the work. This is where a virtuosity intervenes that transfigures the *Künstler* into *Artist*, namely the one who amazes without letting prevail the subjectivistic will to express an ‘own’ throb of the soul. In this way Valéry suggests the landing of the aesthetic beyond art (understood in a modern and bourgeois way), because he shows its ability of retrieving an anthropological wholeness through a resonance with the qualitative totality of the *Sache*. The non-instrumental materiality of the latter turns out to be charged with a significance that is not known, that is not cognitively reduced to the content of the *ratio*, since instead it always prompts new expressive behaviors. It is in honoring the qualitative wholeness of the sensible that human beings have a chance to redeem their own wholeness. And this is why “*der Artist*” Valéry stands out, to Adorno, as the “deputy [*Statthalter*]” of a humanity that appears where the utopia of the aesthetic *as a negative* is cultivated, that is, as that which in its own qualitiveness always eludes any metrical determination.

In relation to this, it becomes perhaps useful to read carefully in their entirety the last lines of the 1953 essay:

What he [Valéry] demands of the artist [*Künstler*], technical self-restriction, subjection to the subject matter [*Sache*], is aimed not at limitation but at expansion.

The artist [*Künstler*] who is the bearer of the work of art is not the individual who produces it; rather, through his work, through passive activity, he becomes the representative [*Statthalter*] of the total social subject. By submitting to the requirements of the work of art, he eliminates from it everything that could be due simply to the contingency of his individuation. Also intended [*mitgedacht*] in this kind of representation [*Stellvertretung*] of the total social subject, of the whole, undivided human being which Valéry's idea of the beautiful invokes, is a state of affairs [*Zustand*] that would cancel out the fate of blind isolation, a state of affairs in which the total subject would finally be realized socially. The art that achieved self-awareness as a consequence of Valéry's conception would transcend art itself and fulfill itself in the true life of human beings [*Die Kunst, die in der Konsequenz von Valérys Konzeption zu sich selbst kommt, würde Kunst selber übersteigen und sich erfüllen im richtigen Leben der Menschen*]. (N 120)

"Der Artist" Valéry, in short, is the one who, while antinomian, glimpsed the utopian landing site of the aesthetic even beyond art as *Kunst* – that same extra-artistic landing site which also welcomes a later consideration by Adorno (dating back to 1965) that shows how far his critical valorization of the aesthetic was from any elitist ideology and any religion of art by virtue of this dialectical, and not paradoxical, interweaving with Valéry's thought:

Beauty today can have no other measure except the depth to which a work resolves contradictions. A work must cut through the contradictions and overcome them, not by covering them up, but by pursuing them [*Schönheit heute hat kein anderes Maß als die Tiefe, in der die Gebilde die Widersprüche austragen, die sie durchfurchen und die sie bewältigen einzig, indem sie ihnen folgen, nicht, indem sie sie verdecken*]. Mere formal beauty, whatever that might be, is [*wäre*] empty and meaningless; the beauty of its content [*die inhaltliche (Schönheit)*] is lost in the pre-artistic sensual pleasure of the observer. Beauty is either the resultant of force vectors [*eines Kräfteparallelogramms*] or it is nothing at all. A modified aesthetics would outline its own object with increasing clarity as it would begin to feel more intensely the need to investigate it. Unlike traditional aesthetics, it would not necessarily view the concept of art as its given correlate [*Veränderte Ästhetik, deren Programm sich desto deutlicher umreißt, je dringender das Bedürfnis nach ihr zu spüren ist, betrachtete auch nicht mehr, wie die traditionelle, den Begriff der Kunst als ihr selbstverständliches Korrelat*]. Aesthetic thought today must surpass art by thinking art. It would thereby surpass the current opposition of purposeful and purpose-free, under which the producer must suffer as much as the observer. (Adorno 1997a: 17)

Abbreviations

AT = Adorno 1997b

C = Adorno, Benjamin 2003

N = Adorno 2019

P = Adorno 1981

T = Adorno 2007

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