Valéry Looks at Labor

A recent acquaintance, a middle aged man, has lost his job and feels the need to stay current with changes in his field; he is, after all, an IT specialist whose subject changes "all the time." His plight led me to reflect on the subject of "work" as considered by Paul Valéry and Nietzsche, two of the outstanding thinkers of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The topic of work in its modern form, with the attendant questions of work and leisure, work and boredom or alienation, work and necessity, and so forth, has been discussed at great length for over a century by important analysts, and I plan to do no more here than pull out of the extensive writings of Valéry and Nietzsche a few penetrating comments on the subject that came to mind over the summer, contemplating the condition of my acquaintance, whose situation is not so different from that of many others obliged "to stay abreast" of working conditions. I want to consider two essays of Valéry's, the first of which--"Conquest by Method"--is well-known, and published in 1897, when the poet, who was born during the Paris commune, was only twenty-seven. The second essay, briefer but no less brilliant, is "Remarks on Progress," a few pages that seem to have been casually penned in 1929. By then of course Valéry had observed numerous transformations in Europe and was a much older man, famous all over the Continent, an amateur but serious student of mathematics and science who could claim friendship with Einstein and Bergson. The remarks of Nietzsche are culled from his books and journal entries.

"Conquest" was prepared in response to the anxiety spurred in Europe by the unification of Germany under the chancellorship of Bismarck. Books had appeared in France and England warning that the great economic success of the new German Reich portended serious military danger for other countries concerned with the region's balance of power, and these fears were not

unjustified. The same technique that had been applied successfully to business--the unrelenting application of a logical "method"--could be applied to military science as well. The expansion of wealth in the latter decades of the nineteenth century spawned a new type of consumer, one with what people today call "discretionary income," living far beyond the poverty and scarcity that have marked the history of mankind. Valéry, surprisingly familiar with the new methods of research, marketing and production, is concerned with the birth of a new society and of new human types--the "consumer," to borrow the word that seemed to gain a wider currency in America in the 1960s--who has become the object of slavish attention by a supplier, any supplier, the manufacturer who seeks to satisfy (and perhaps in some instances create) every need or want. "Thinking himself free," wrote Valéry, describing the consumer of the 1890s, "living in innocence, he has been analyzed without knowing it...He has been classified and defined...What he drinks, what he eats, what he smokes and how he pays are known." Only apparently free, the "consumer's" material world, which has become highly elaborated, is shaped by a supplier who may be living several countries away: "The customer," writes Valéry, "does not know how many chemists have him in mind." The supplier studies and shapes the new consumer as well as the products he brings to market, applying "segmentation, classification" to the object of his studies, where the habits, desires and routines of remote and foreign people "become objects of thought, manageable quantities, marked weights"--this is the German "method" that Valéry is describing. But it embodies a form of enslavement for both the buyer as well as the supplier; the German chemist studying the palate of a French or German consumer of German produce or wine observes what Valéry calls "a servile obedience" to the demands of this newly conceived and freshly developing market, somewhat abstract in its form. We are, in short, well into the age of the full emancipation of economics from clerical or monarchical control, of

mass consumption and global expansion, where military power is closely correlated with economic success. This transformation is not entirely to Valéry's taste. "The bourgeois is the romantic's other face," he comments in "Remarks on Progress," an analogy that flatters neither side. He offers the remark, so often observed in the last century, that the bourgeois--"the slave of routine and an absurd partisan of progress"--is committed to a stability which is frequently undermined by a correlative demand for progress. He has "invested his money in phantoms and is speculating on the downfall of commonsense."

In "Conquest," the danger, Nietzsche-like, is one of mediocrity. "Method," Valéry confidently asserts, "calls for true mediocrity in the individual, or rather for greatness only in the most elementary talents, such as patience, and the ability to give attention to everything without preference or feelings. Finally, the will to work." The rise of a new class and a major new power in Europe can be earth-shaking, but these are not the harbingers of a new birth of spirit. "Disciplined intelligence"--Valéry's chosen term for this--in the service of business remains "nothing but an instrument" for manufacturing products of "perfectly average perfection." If it were a matter of "true perfection," the merchandise would not be suitable for a mass market.

In the decades following 1945, this topic would emerge as a question of privacy and its protection. Consider the recent outcry over Web-based social-networking programs that exploit their users' disclosures and news presented on sites nominally devoted to themselves, e.g., Facebook. Consider as well information gathered by search engines tracking those same users' electronic peregrinations over the Internet. The anonymous authorities behind the screen are gathering saleable information about consumers, an undertaking the public has been somewhat tardy in recognizing. Valéry also identifies an early manifestation of the shaping of taste and

consumption via methods of market research and promotion that induce (or accelerate) a new kind of slavery, the tyranny of sameness and the threat of social conditioning.

By 1929, Valéry is casting a fresh look at the technological wonders that had overtaken western life since the composition of "Conquest." With remarkable ease and concision, he delineates in seven brief pages the changes that have made the last decade of the Third Republic (and the rest of Europe) so materially unlike the 1890s, itself a period remote from the ones preceding it. The advent of film, the telephone, deep-sea diving, airplanes (airships, as that generation called them), early recording instruments, such as the Edison Cylinder, "and many strange new things that no one ever dreamed of," have taken miracles out of the realm of fables, i.e., art. "The fabulous is an article of trade," says Valéry, noting that "the real is no longer neatly delimited." He adds:

> The new era will soon produce men who are no longer attached to the past by any habit of mind. For them, history will be nothing but strange, incomprehensible tales; there will be nothing in their time that was ever seen before--nothing from the past will survive into the present. Everything in man that is not purely physiological will be altered...New facts tend to take on the importance of what once belonged to tradition and *historical facts*. [Emphasis in the original.]

We are told now--have been told, actually, for many years--that we need to "adapt" ourselves to changing conditions, to adjust to the transformation produced by an army of technicians and engineers. This is to suggest that the human self is infinitely plastic and malleable and needs to be molded in terms of what "the outside world" (and the market) demands of it. Valéry observes in "Remarks" that French men and women of his generation could easily feel like figures from a "Museum of Ethnography," much like the portraits of wigged monarchs and courtiers hanging in Versailles, overtaken, as they all were, by inventions that appeared in the first decade of the twentieth century. This resonates well with the middle

aged *of my generation,* who grew up with typewriters and TV sets that plugged into the wall and offered no more than three or four "channels." (I fondly keep a memory from the late 1980s of calling a Smith-Corona "support" person in Connecticut from my home in Chicago for help in installing a typewriter ribbon in one of their machines. Years before the Weather Channel and the Internet, we ended this friendly conversation with a discussion of the weather in our respective cities.) In the perpetual struggle of the generations, it is easy to feel left behind by people who are communicating their briefest and most fleeting thoughts to someone living several states (or continents?) away, and a former client of mine, middle aged, confessed that she had acquired a cell phone in order to stay *au courant*. These methods of contact may have their charms, but "men who are no longer attached to the past by any habit of mind," and populations that need to stay abreast of this new gadget or that are unlikely to take an interest in the fine arts.

Born a generation earlier, far more radical and also more influential, Nietzsche sought to dismantle Western (or Christian) virtues root and branch, and attack modern science and rationality while inspiring "a revaluation of values" that would regenerate the race. He too considered the question of transformation and adaptability and "work." In section 128 of Will to Power, a journal entry from 1884, he observes that "the trainability of men has become very great in this democratic Europe; men who learn easily and adapt themselves easily, are the rule: the herd animal, even highly intelligent, has been prepared." In one of the late volumes, Beyond Good and Evil, he describes the average European of the day as "that useful, industrious, handy, multi-purpose herd animal" who hands his life over to society, lending himself to its demands. "They are not very refined in their choice of work, if only it pays well," is an adumbration from a brief and provocative passage (section 42) in The Gay Science. Choicer spirits "are hard to satisfy, and do not care for ample rewards, if the work itself is not the reward of rewards."

Artists and "contemplative men" belong to this category. They will accept danger and privation of all kinds if the work is associated with pleasure and will embrace the same to avoid work that is not. "They do not fear boredom as much as work without pleasure," Nietzsche says. "They actually require a lot of boredom if *their* work is to succeed." Boredom is the "windless calm" these men and women need to experience before undertaking an activity--I won't call it "work"--that engages their interest.

Valéry describes a representative type of his and succeeding generations; Nietzsche delineates and at the same time appeals to an antithetical type. Not exactly the superman, but those who reject the ideals of the French Revolution are the spirits Nietzsche writes for, the "children of the future" who are "homeless" in late-nineteenth-century Europe, described in The Gay Science as a "fragile, broken time of transition." "Live in seclusion so that you can live for yourself," he writes. We should "lay the skin" of three centuries between ourselves and the contemporary epoch, whose ideals are doomed to destruction, the destruction that Nietzsche hoped to hasten with his compositions. "The noise of wars and revolutions," he says, "should be a mere murmur for you." He commands us to stay as remote as possible from what he considers the pestilential spirit of the age, his as well as our own.

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