

Jean Galard

The Poetics of Conduct

The aesthetic comprehension of existence is, after all, something we all share, as evidenced, for example, by the common use of the notions of “routine,” “monotony,” and “dullness,” by the frustration we feel when we have to lead a confined and impoverished way of life, which has been condemned to a platitude, and even as reflected in the metaphorical extension that is sometimes attributed to the opposition formed by “poetry” and “prose.”

Since Romanticism, the notion of “poetic” has claimed a field of application that goes beyond the sphere of words, which includes, for Chateaubriand, certain ancient practices (festivals, pilgrimages,) which, with George Sand, extends to the rural lifestyle as a whole. In the following century, Sartre interpreted an African lifestyle, which Senghor praised under the name of Negritude, as an expression of a poetry of farmers opposed to a prose of engineers (Sartre 1949, 265). Although far from romantic themes, Valéry points out a fact of language (“We say that a landscape is poetic; we say it under a circumstance of life; we sometimes say it of a person”) and takes up the premise that this use implies (“I know that there is poetry in this skyscraper”) (Valéry 1957, 1362, 1386). In the *Poetism Manifesto* [*Manifesto Poetismu*], Karel Teige claims to prefer the vibrations that life offers to the five senses over the detached flowers of literature: “a poetry of Sunday afternoons, picnics, luminous cafes, intoxicating cocktails, lively boulevards, spa promenades, but also the poetry of silence, night, quiet, and peace” (Teige 1972, 111).¹

How can objects, places, living conditions, beings, and behaviors seem to be full of poetry? If there is only one set of received ideas, then how and by whom were they given?

¹ English quote from: Teige 2010.

Jean Lacouture pointed out that Malraux had engaged in fighting for the Chinese, Vietnamese and Spanish, while he had remained outside the ranks of the Popular Front. He noted that this attitude is found in the third-world left of the 1960s, who preferred to be passionate about Palestinians or Vietnamese rather than the French proletariat, and concluded: "A never-ending debate, and perhaps without purpose. There are foot soldiers and cavalry. Nomads and sedentary people. Poets and prostitutes" (Lacouture 1973, 184–185). It is too hasty to eliminate the subject of debate by dividing poets and prostitutes into congenial varieties according to whether they are dedicated to a particular mode of action, as well as to preferences for tastes and colors that are understood as something that is not to be discussed. On the other hand, we could change our perspectives if different ways of living and acting were to be compared, criticized and discussed on the basis of such elaborate terminology as discourse analysis, and, to begin with, according to the alternative of poetry and prose. Instead of leading to a naturalistic typology of characters, this transposition of literary categories would give everyone the freedom to decide the tone, the genre, and the register in which they would write their lives. An individual, or even a group, may choose to behave in a poetic manner or to consent to prose, depending on the circumstances or the state of their aesthetic convictions.

Let us assume that poetry, instead of being first and foremost a collection of (verbal) objects, is a process whose autonomy would be sufficient for it to operate equally in word constructions, object dispositions, and gestural compositions. If poetic operation consists in a certain functioning of signs² (and not in the use of certain signs,) a poetics of conduct becomes conceivable, which would not be stopped by the obvious heterogeneity of words and gestures in the task of determining the properties of this functioning.

Without any ambition for an exactness (conforming to the uncertain essence of Poetry,) and without any guarantee other than the fertility of the model Jakobson built to classify the functions of language, we will start with the definition of the poetic function he proposes—even if this means exploring the deductions that would result from a different definition.

The poetic function highlights the material side of signs; it accentuates the sensory particularities of a message, which then refers mainly to itself instead of dissolving itself when used, in favor of the experience mentioned or the information transmitted; it organizes the sequences of signs in such

² Translator's note: the French word "le signe" has two meanings: 1) an indication or mark—as a sign of something's existence 2) as a movement or gesture.

a way that the perceptible character of their construction is maintained (Jakobson 1963, 218). What are the processes that make it possible to obtain this visibility of language that has become “self-contained?” They are, in the first place, the “figures,” and perhaps only them, if this term is understood broadly enough to mean everything that renders language perceived as such, and not only that which deviates from its most frequent use (Todorov 1971, 51; Ducrot, Todorov 1972, 351–352).

However, the perceptible aspect of certain sequences of signs is manifested in the order of conduct, as well as in that of language. The “savoir-vivre codes” used to form a rigorous equivalent of treatises about good speech or good writing. Their existence would be sufficient to prove that conduct is eligible for the same rhetorical approach as language. The gestures they codified make the “visibility” of conduct possible, just as patterns permit that of language.

Just as literary analysis had to combat the discredit that was thrown at the supposedly empty “forms” when the concern for a so-called “substance” prevailed, so should the analysis of conduct begin by rehabilitating the gesture, which was hastily belittled by being dismissed as external and secondarily related to the truth of intentions. True intent would be one that is materialized through action. Intentions would be false, affected, when they are content with gestures. Yet there is no difference between an act and a gesture in terms of the different intentions behind them. The movements of a worker appear sometimes as acts, sometimes as gestures, although the intention behind them is not supposed to have changed. They are acts until described. They are gestures as soon as we pay attention to them. Gesture is nothing other than an act considered in its entirety, perceived as such, noticed and retained. The act is what remains of a gesture whose moments have been forgotten and whose results are only considered. Even if its intention is practical and interested, the gesture is visible. The act is summed up in its effects, even if it was intended to be spectacular or gratuitous. The first imposes itself with the perceptible character of its construction; the other passes like prose that has delivered what it had to say. Gesture is the poetry of action.

Conduct is gesturalized by means of figures that are partially the same as those that have been inventoried by discourse theory. Repetition poetizes customs. Graduation marks happy careers, as does the antithesis of unexpected successes or spectacular falls. The ellipse signals freedom of movement. Irony mimics attitudes while preserving the indicators that invalidate their meaning. Holocausts, in the midst of a riot, sometimes constitute meta-

phors (when they devastate official buildings), and sometimes metonymies (if they destroy private property) of revolutionary symbolism. The refusal to shake hands is litotic; the hug a hyperbole.

It is true that some behavioral figures would remain unnoticed (would not exist as figures) if language did not intervene to highlight them. No conduct, perhaps, can be considered elliptical unless it is stated that the steps have been “skipped.” As for repetition, which is so crucial in the order of verbal poetry, it poses a problem when it concerns gestures. On the one hand, it is commonly experienced as an unfortunate necessity: ordinary tasks are monotonously repeated. Yet it appears as an agent of poetry according to the spontaneous aesthetics that governs, for example, anecdotal narratives, where the imperfect reiteration is willingly used. “The Surrealists met every day at the Cyrano.” The past becomes all the more mythical as it has become more habitual. “I too have often heard that urine patinates bronze. Pere Maillol ‘watered’ the large statues in his garden every day. Often, he confided to me in Marly-le-Roi, he even ‘held it’ in Paris to save this precious elixir for his bronzes” (Bressai 1964, 251).³ An occurrence which may have been unique is worth recounting as a rite. Brassai tells how Picasso, when he lived on rue La Boétie, worked for Albert Skira, whose office was in the next building: just as he had finished a copperplate, instead of picking up the phone, he picked up a trumpet and played *Ta-ta-ti, ta-ta-ti, ti-ta-ta, ti-ta-ta*; immediately Skira came running (Bressai 1964, 129).⁴ Would this gesture preserve its charm if we assumed that it took place only once? Repetition plays a decisive aesthetic role. But we must ask ourselves if this role is not bestowed upon us by the verbal mode of the imperfect, if it does not result from a device of expression rather than from a poetic virtue that would be attached to repetitive reality itself, and in a nutshell whether the poetry of repetitions is not entirely the work of language.

The creative resources of behavior are likely to be very limited compared to the possibilities of the fictional arts, and more particularly those of the pure language arts. Some conducts may be described as unfeasible. For example, the one Cocteau imagines: “If my home was on fire and I could save only one thing—I would save the fire!” Here, the beauty of this gesture comes from the ambiguity of the word “fire,” from its symbolism. It is a fictitious gesture, made up entirely by a play on words. Action would not

³ English quote from: Brassai 1999, p. 277.

⁴ English quote from: *ibidem*, p. 141.

only be useless (fire is easily obtained anywhere but in a fire⁵), it would even be impossible (fire is not simply transported: it is this or that burning object that would be removed from the embers.) Therefore, it is to language that we must relate, here again, the power of poetization that exerts to the apparent benefit of conduct.

Should we generalize? The question arises as to whether conduct is not irremediably prosaic in relation to the discoveries to which the words lend themselves. We may be tempted to answer that gestures, as such, are neither poetic nor prosaic, that the decisive role belongs to language, that it is through language that poetry comes to behavior, which is aesthetically neutral as long as literature does not take it over.

Alfred Jarry once showed in a striking way that an apparently insane gesture suddenly makes sense if you think about uttering the most literally appropriate verbal expression for it. In a local bar, which he had entered carrying his firearms as usual, he fired his revolver at a glass mirror, which shattered. In the midst of general commotion, he turned to the woman seated next to him and said, "Now that the ice is broken, we can talk." The polysemy of the word "ice,"⁶ as was the case earlier with the word "fire", is essential in the constitution of such an act. It would therefore not exist if it were not said.

In Cocteau's sentence, the two meanings of "fire" are linked by a symbolic relationship, physical combustion being the agreed meaning of spiritual intensity. On the other hand, Jarry brings together two meanings of "ice" that have no connection to each other. Thus Cocteau's pseudo-gest has a "poetic" effect that can be considered relatively easy; it is only clever, while Jarry's is unusual and "surrealist." But both share a common feature: they illustrate verbal power, rather than that of the gesture.

So it is true, in a sense, that there is poetry only in poems (as there is adventure only in novels, intrigue only in stories, and dramatization only in theatre) and that a gesture may owe most of its beauty to the talent with

⁵ Translator's note: Like the Latin term *focus*: fire as a home, a hearth, a symbolic source of warmth. To be more precise this statement should be understood as follows: "fire" is easily obtained anywhere but in "spiritual intensity." I have decided to leave the word "fire" because of its ambiguity in modern English, especially the American slang use of the word "fire." If something is "fire," then this is understood as synonymous to "awesome," "extremely appealing," and "exciting." It is like the word "ablaze," meaning either burning fuel in heat combustion, or to shine with emotion. Compare with definition 4 (BRILLIANCY, LUMINOSITY) in: *The Merriam Webster Dictionary*, [online] <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fire> [accessed: 25.03.2019].

⁶ Translator's Note: In French, the word for ice is "la glace," which can mean: ice, ice cream, glass, or mirror.

which it can be told. However, provided that these privileges of literature are not minimized, we can recognize the processes available to it to try to implement them differently elsewhere. When apprehended with a sufficient degree of abstraction, they appear as aesthetic operations, likely to be defined differently according to the substance of the art that uses them.

The most remarkable of these processes is the one that consists in reinserting meaning into certain forms in which functional constraints were meant to be insignificant. In an artistic text, as Iouri Lotman says, "there is a semantization of the extra-semantic (syntactic) elements of the natural language" (Lotman 1973, 53). The same operation, which is found in the cinematographic practice of slow motion or freeze-frame, will also consist, under other modalities, in breaking the course of conduct, in focusing attention on one of its moments, to give it a meaning that is dissolved by a sequence of acts.

Greimas pointed out the ambivalence of certain bodily activities that, depending on the situation, take on opposite semiotic statuses. A movement, such as lowering the head, may appear as a complete gestural statement (a greeting;) on the contrary, it may, while being physically identical, be part of a sequence (passing through a low door.) From being a statement, it then becomes an element with the status of a phoneme, a minimal unit that reduced to itself means nothing. A single movement can then be defined either for an entire program with meaning, or for a subprogram, as Greimas compares it to the meaningless syllable. In the latter case, it is limited to ensuring the transitivity of the sequence. In the first case, we will say it is intransitive. A bodily movement, which in itself was likely to constitute a program and therefore to be charged with meaning, "disintegrates" when it is incorporated into a broader syntagma (Greimas 1968, 14–15).⁷

Through a terminological decision not made by Greimas, but which seems to be in line with the use of language, let us consider as gestures only the intransitive bodily movements, which are entire programs. It must be admitted that the same movements, when they merge into a larger syntagma, when they de-semantize, lose their status as gestures. Since there seems to be no movement that is always in a semantically neutral position, nor is there any movement that is definitively outside the process of de-semantization, one must expect that, in all corporal uses, the class of gestures will be mobile. A comedian can form in gesture the movement of the arm borrowed from a sower: he re-semantizes it by inserting it into his con-

⁷ Included in: Greimas 1970, 49–91, see especially pp. 65, 60.

duct, since this movement does not belong there as it does to a farmer who sows a field. A simple spectator, likewise, has the opportunity to re-semanticize an element of someone else's conduct and to see, for example, a "noble gesture" in a place where the sower has neither the feeling of being noble nor even the desire to make gestures.

This accounts for a remarkable property of gesture, namely that it makes it possible to speak, by virtue of the semantic richness that can be attached to any movement of the body, but while leaving the resource to defend oneself as having said nothing at all, thanks to the perpetually possible absorption of this movement into a syntagma that neutralizes it. The significance of gesture is always transmitted with the possibility of its denial. A movement is capable of presenting itself as a carrier of an autonomous meaning that is easily readable and then disappears immediately in the innocence of an insignificant practice. It says what it wants to say, but it has already kept silent, it fades away, it must not be stopped, it has never been a gesture. It is because all movements, all postures are able to be intransitive, but they can also immediately get rid of their semantic charge by incorporating themselves into a sequence, either by the subsequent effective construction of the sequence, or by a simple change in punctuation that reveals a fragment of a sequence where a complete statement could have been read. Alleviating the constraints of a schedule is the most banal way to remove from a departure, for example, the meaning that it had indeed been given, but that we prefer to annul. When I walk out, I indicated my disagreement, enmity or indifference; however, this departure is no longer a gesture, if the rest of the program summons me further on.

For language to have such latitudes, it would have to be possible, on the one hand, for a word to cease being a word, and eventually become a meaningless syllable, and on the other hand, for a syllable to suddenly be as valuable as a word. The first condition, to be honest, is satisfied, since it is by reference to linguistic experience that Greimas defined the phenomenon of de-semanticization in order to signal its presence in gestural order; the word *or* disappears in *ore*, which cancels itself out in *more*, which in turn is neutralized in *humored*.⁸ What about the reciprocal process? What magic could ever make the *ore* in *more* buoyant or make the *or* in *ore* suddenly rupture?

⁸ Translator's note: In the original French the words used are: *or*, *port*, *porte*, *rapporter*. Original phrase: le mot *or* s'annule tel dans *port*, qui s'annule lui-même dans *porte*, qui s'annule à son tour dans *rapporter*. Mais le processus réciproque? Quelle magie pourra jamais faire espérer le *port* dans la *porte* ou faire briller brusquement l'*or* dans le *port*?

Poetry is the art of these metamorphoses. Let us now call the poetic function the power of language to vary the range of meaningful elements. As an example of augmentation, we can think of Queneau's devices, causing the sound material to be absorbed from one word to another (volatilizing the Arts by writing: "We lizards love the Muses" (Queneau 1952, 115). As for the narrowing of units, this seems to be the objective of the processes most constantly mobilized by what is known as poetry. By multiplying the statements in which a word reappears, repetition dissociates it from each context, preventing it from blending into the sequence that would confiscate it. Alliteration creates meaningful units within the words themselves. The establishment of unexpected correspondences revives the primitive metaphors that many words contain but that usage has extinguished, or invents fictitious etymologies, which dislocate customary aggregates. A formal permanence underlined by rhyme or assonance produces a leap of degree that causes the word to rise out of the linear discourse. At the extreme of this constriction, and as Leiris has lavishly shown, vowels and consonants regain their flavor, fragrance and tactile quality, while alphabetic characters unleash the full symbolic power of their graphics. "Poetry fades away and the Sabbath freezes when letters and words take their place on the line and become dead letters after having been Kabbalistic springs of illumination" (Leiris 1949, 38–71).⁹

The similarity is then clear between poetry—which Jakobson also defines as a language in which "the inner form of words, in other words the semantic charge of their constituents, finds its relevance" (Jakobson 1963)—and a certain type of behavior that should be qualified as gestural because it is characterized by the abundance of re-semantized movements.

This type of behavior is obviously quite different from the habit of gesticulating. Just as verbal poetry is not the mere accumulation of linguistic units which the sensibility of an era has already charged with the weightiest meaning, so too conduct determined by the poetic function does not consist in a multiplication of gestures, if we mean by this the movements already codified by the communication system in force. Rather, it is a creation of gestures, i.e. the liberation of movements that are still unnoticed, thanks to the dislocation of the sequence that contained them. In the most favorable situation for gestural activity, which is theatre, the opportunity for this distinction is obvious: a ham is content to repeat, as is, the gestures they have experienced, while the true actor's search aims to decompose behavior into meaningful units that are usually imperceptible.

⁹ See the entire chapter «Alphabet», pp. 38–71.

When applied to conduct, the poetic function dismantles the pragmatic sequence of movements; it contradicts the absorption of means by a goal, of the immediate by a perspective; it emphasizes the manner of acting, the method used, and converts the choice of process into a real objective.

To vote or to abstain. Although it is true that these are two gestures, they are not immediately granted as such. Voting is first and foremost an act, which seems to be entirely committed to a transitive effort in favor of an outcome, in relation to which it represents a disempowered means. On the contrary, abstention is immediately a gesture; it concretizes in the moment the sense it intends to attribute to the actual election. However, it also reveals that participating in a vote is also a gesture; it underlines that the acceptance of suffrage is already significant in terms of an approval given to the system that organizes the dispossession of responsibilities; it highlights that “voting, whatever the ballot paper, is voting for the vote and already accepting the institutions” (Jeanson 1974, 257–258).

However easy it may be to criticize, in return, the inefficiency of excessively pure gestures, it must at least be recognized that they are the ones that bring out, by contrast, that the most pragmatic conducts are, for their part, composed of forgotten gestures.

Jacques Vaché, as we say, never extended his hand. This other gesture of abstention projects a renewed meaning on the contrary gesture, suddenly reveals to others the strange habit of the mechanical handshake and re-semanticizes a movement that is usually overlooked as a gesture.

Poetry, whether verbal or gestural, revives dead signs, so that all prose becomes more vivid.

Translated by Adrian Mróz

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Galard Jean (1986), *La beauté du geste. Pour une esthétique des conduites*, Paris: Les Impressions Nouvelles, pp. 14–32.

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