

Fragments pour une Poétique

Comments by Gérard Berréby¹

The manuscript of *Fragments pour une poétique (suivis de quatre poèmes à parfaire)*,² lost ever since the 1960s, was – corroborating our intuition – discovered at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in the Guy Debord Archives. Then a carbon copy of the 93-page-long typescript was exhumed from the archives of Raoul Vaneigem, its author.

The entirety presents itself as a theorization and a proposition for the staging of what would be “integral poetry,” the poetics capable of “rendering poetry concrete,” the action of thought. At the origin of this project was the necessity of its author to respond to the question posed by Hölderlin in these verses,³ used as the epigraph to his text.

Better to sleep than to be in solitude
And waiting without companions, not knowing what to do
Or what to say and, in these petty times, what good are poets?

Made up of two parts, *Fragments pour une poétique* sketches out a “poetics for a perpetual avant-garde,” which is a desire that is partially realized, since the text leads its author “from Lautréamont to the situationists,” to quote the author’s own words.

In the first part, Raoul Vaneigem mixes together fragments, epigrams and aphoristic formulae to construct a kind of manifesto – composed of détournements, quotations and passages that he himself wrote – that exhibits the form in which his integral poems will be realized: “Who will reproach me for anticipating with pleasure, for describing – beyond these fragments – a still inaccessible work? In truth, I feel like the architect of a town whose planning animates and – in its future reality – joins up with the life of the crowds flowing through its streets.”

Against the works of the poets – that “new race of castrati” concerned with representing the illusions of the world rather than transforming the “objects in the world” into “objects for mankind” – Raoul Vaneigem sets in motion a radical poetics with Hegelian accents, a new “science” born from the fusion of dialectics and poetry, which aims at “diversifying in its unity” life and its poetic potentials: “The real offers less of interest through the sign than through the meaning, therefore only the complexity of the sign reveals the richness of the meaning.” “Instead of becoming transfixed in front of the mirror, the poet throws stones at it.” Only poetry takes action. As the author says, the *object of a poem* is “the synthesis of the excitations recorded in the brain upon the appearance of each element that comes from the words, the syntax, the images, the sound, the rhythm.” Consequently, the creation of an integral poem – in which the “spiral syntax (...) mixes together images, ideas, sounds, cries, words, rhymes, gestures” – is a gesture to be repeated ceaselessly, the poem always carrying in itself the seeds of its own future negation.

¹ Published in Raoul Vaneigem and Gérard Berréby, *Rien n'est fini, tout commence* (Allia, 2014). Translated by NOT BORED! 15 November 2014. All footnotes by the translator.

² “Fragments for a Poetics (followed by four poems to be perfected).”

³ Cf. the poem “Bread and Wine.”

The second part is preceded by “Remarques sur l’exécution des poèmes,” a series of clarifications whose objective is to recall that the poems that follow are composed of verbal images but also graphic and audio representations that, taken together, are capable of dialectically creating a third form. On this occasion, Raoul Vaneigem also dictates several instructions relative to the measures to be taken so that integral poetry can be accomplished.

The “*quatre poèmes à parfaire*” present themselves in the form of four columns that share each of the pages in the second part, describing and bringing alive visual and audio instances of foreshadowing, fixed images or animated sequences that appear on different screens. The author establishes an intensification of the meanings of the poems that must be perfected in their implementation in everyday life. While the images and the superimposition of images and sounds emphasize the poetic dynamism, the plurality of the screens accentuates their integrated character and exhibits a coherent investigation *in* and *towards* meaning. The meaning sought out by the image is doubled or contrasted according to the desired effect; the details persist by concretizing themselves at the same time. Thus the poetic image, “like a forbidden word during oppressive times,” can, for example, be represented as follows: “1. Roots, 2. Closed Eyes, 3. Sealed Lips.”

The “*quatre poèmes à parfaire*” make explicit reference to Lettrism, to its cries of rage and hypergraphical innovations. Isidore Isou, founder of the Lettrist avant-garde, in which Guy Debord participated for a time, is mentioned several times in this work.

Fragments pour une poétique closes with two pages⁴ in which Raoul Vaneigem summarizes his approach and recalls to the reader that this new poetics, which is to be collectively perfected in everyday life, has no other accomplishment than being revolutionary.

Fragments pour une Poétique

Text by Raoul Vaneigem⁵

Poetry is the shadow of man. It extends him; increases him; diminishes him; deforms him; sticks to his body by an invisible hinge; follows him; precedes him; or walks at his side. At least from the perspective of the gods, because, for man, it is his actions that create his worth, that are the roots of being in him, and that surround him. Which only shows how the poetic work, with a malaise equal to its lucidity, offers to us a laughable reflection of our own gestures, ancient gestures colored by magic, everyday gestures, new gestures, sacrilegious gestures, bizarre gestures, gestures by which makes and unmakes himself in the intertwining of his myths. Poetry opposes the pure and useless scraps of its inconsistency to the attempts of the Faire.⁶ Nevertheless, this is the moment in which philosophy effaces itself to allow room for an art of living, for a style that demands analysis, the slow analysis and revalorization of the Forms and Shades. Faced with the decline that menaces it, poetry is ready to be made concrete and, through a return to its sources, to be crowned a new force and form of action so that its magical virtue,

⁴ Reproduced elsewhere in *Rien n'est fini, tout commence* and in what follows here.

⁵ Circa 1960.

⁶ This would appear to be a typographical error: *faire* is a verb (to make/to do), not a noun.

long veiled, is rekindled in the fire of the sciences. The will to be done with the individual as a point of comparison doesn't cease to affirm itself in innumerable attempts at collective expression. From Lautréamont to the situationists, the same urge pushes personal awareness to surpass itself, to get free of itself and to re-find itself in the flux of the tides, among the unanimous swelling of the waves and the always-singular crests of foam. Concrete poetry, by simultaneously joining together action and philosophical meaning, claims to renew the previously broken links of grand communication and to open itself to the human under the sign of liberty, disalienation, and the totality. How could such a poetry – an integral (or totalitarian) poetry, a poetry that simultaneously covering thought, dream, fantasy, magic, awareness and action, simultaneously multiple and singular, limited and unlimited – how could it avoid a fundamental ambiguity, an imperfection, something uncompleted or an oversimplification in its presentation (dependent on the bookish form and writing), which, here, is its own? What are these *fragments*? In no case are they works of traditional poetry or theory. If one must situate them, it would be somewhere between coded messages, magic formulae, work songs, revolutionary hymns and literary agitation. Reading them is like reading a musical score whose meaning and value come from its performance. One must bring to these texts lives that only audio-visual technology can kindle in the hearts of the masses; one must bring them into collective action, which, by transfiguring them, will assign to social praxis its veritable measure, which is that of man-become-world. If their critique can be reduced to this simple assessment, essentially tied to the comprehension by and collaboration of a large number of people, they were the work of a single one.