

PAUL VALÉRY  
TRANSLATED BY MARTIN TURNELL

# Collected Works of Paul Valéry

*Masters and Friends, Volume 9*



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The Collected Works of Paul Valéry

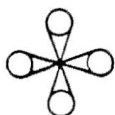
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VOLUME 9



PAUL VALÉRY  
MASTERS AND  
FRIENDS

*Translated by  
Martin Turnell*



*With an Introduction by  
Joseph Frank*

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## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION, <i>by Joseph Frank</i>	ix
Pontus de Tyard	3
Sketch for a Portrait of Descartes	6
Descartes	13
A View of Descartes	36
A Second View of Descartes	69
The Return from Holland	72
Variations on a <i>Pensée</i>	86
Bossuet	108
Swedenborg	110
Voltaire	130
Address in Honor of Goethe	147
Stendhal	176
Gérard de Nerval	213
The Temptation of (St.) Flaubert	223

Villon and Verlaine	232
Verlaine Passes By	253
Four Letters on Nietzsche	259
Recollections of J. K. Huysmans	265
Durtal	269
At the Grave of Pierre Louÿs	284
To Rainer Maria Rilke	290
A Memory of Rilke	292
Homage to Marcel Proust	295
Funeral Address on Bergson	302

*APPENDIX: Comment from the Notebooks*

Descartes, 309

Pascal, 315

Bossuet, 322

Swedenborg, 323

Voltaire, 325

Goethe, 327

Stendhal, 330

Flaubert, 334

Verlaine, 336

Nietzsche, 337

Rilke, 340  
Proust, 341  
Bergson, 342

NOTES	353
INDEX	393





## Introduction

A LARGE PART of the published work of Paul Valéry consists of occasional literary and cultural reflections on the most varied and diverse topics. Essays, prefaces, official speeches, reminiscences of old friends and literary comrades-in-arms—all poured forth from Valéry's pen in a steady stream during the latter part of his life. Collected in the five volumes of his *Variétés* (which do not, however, by any means exhaust all his published prose of this kind), these casually incisive and elegant articles did much to spread the prestige of Valéry's name among a wide circle of readers. They are much more easily accessible than his dense and hermetic poetry, his subtle and chiseled Socratic dialogues, or his several volumes of gnomic fragments and aphorisms which can only really appeal to the *cognoscenti* of his work. And if the average cultivated reader has made some firsthand contact with Valéry, it is probably in the pages of his famous *La Crise de l'esprit*, which in 1919 stated with classic brevity the theme of the decline of the West through an excess of the very rationalism whose discovery had been its greatest triumph.

Valéry's essays were called out by the most haphazard occasions, and many were speeches delivered as part of his functions as a member of the French Academy. So many and so varied were the chores imposed on Valéry by this august

body that he once, in a letter to Gide, jokingly called himself "the Bossuet of the Third Republic." It is a tribute to Valéry's independence and originality that, despite such ceremonial auspices, he always managed to produce something far surpassing the level of conventional eulogy or ritual celebration. Valéry, as a matter of fact, never approached any subject except in terms of his own peculiar intellectual concerns and philosophical preoccupations; and these were quite different from the historical and literary interests of the scholar or critic, as well as from the doctrines of the major philosophical currents in France during his lifetime. (Though personally friendly with Bergson and Alain, Valéry perhaps comes closest of all in tendency to the Neo-Kantianism of Léon Brunschvicg, who, as he notes in a letter, "quotes me in all his books.") Not until the appearance of Sartre's *Situations* can we find any French essayist who matches Valéry's literary authority and stylistic brilliance, and who combines these qualities with so strongly marked and sharply individual an intellectual personality.

Valéry's thought, however, is the product of an extremely idiosyncratic blend of heterogeneous elements, which are much more difficult to pin down than Sartre's obvious philosophical affiliations. And perhaps the most useful task one can perform, as an introduction to the essays collected in *Masters and Friends*, is to use them for the purpose of disengaging the various aspects of the *Weltanschauung* that forms their common background.

## I

The first complex of ideas that may be noted in Valéry's essays derives from his early and crucial contact with the spiritual world of French Symbolism. Like all important

literary movements, French Symbolism carried with it a freight of values and attitudes that went far beyond the merely "literary"; and these values became a permanent part of Valéry's sensibility. Certainly the most important of such values was the Symbolist *mystique* of art and the artist; and in his farewell to Pierre Louÿs, Valéry recalls the fervor of their common participation in this cult of the aesthetic. "Thirty years ago, the word 'artist' meant for us someone who lived apart, a dedicated person, at once victim and priest, a person who was singled out by his gifts and whose virtues and weaknesses were not those of other men." At the age of eighteen Valéry announced to Louÿs that his bible had become Huysmans' *A Rebours*; and while he soon discarded the musky trappings of this breviary of Symbolist decadence, the influence of the climate of ideas it represented can hardly be mistaken in his outlook.

It explains, for one thing, his reverence for the rare and precious personality, the creative source and center of all culture, whose disappearance he was so often to lament later on. Valéry's idea of culture always remained an aristocratic one, centered around discreetly charismatic individuals and small spiritual elites whose features are strongly suggestive of the Symbolist *cénacles* (and particularly the *cénacle* of Mallarmé) that he had known as a young man. It also helps to explain his contemptuous disdain for politics, and his indifference (at least on a theoretical level) to the ordinary issues of morality. The Symbolists turned their back on the whole realm of the political and social as inimical to the pursuit of the highest refinements of art; and Valéry notes, with some satisfaction, that Descartes had also assumed the same indifference to the politics of religion in his day in order to pursue the highest refinements of thought. Similarly, if the virtues and weak-

nesses of the artist are not those of other men, then morality has no right to impose its prescriptions on the creative spirit. Valéry takes a slyly malicious delight in pointing out this highly amoral moral to the eminently respectable audience attending his lecture on "Villon and Verlaine."

Another example of this indelible Symbolist impress on Valéry's thought may be found in his persistent preoccupation with mysticism and with other irrational currents of speculation such as Illuminism and Theosophy. Valéry, as we shall soon see, is perhaps the most intransigent rationalist to have appeared among major European writers since the eighteenth century; but his fascination with such a figure as Swedenborg, to whom he devotes a lengthy essay, can easily be understood if we remember his Symbolist origins. For the metaphysics of Symbolism was very close to that "spectral learning" which Valéry mentions in connection with Gérard de Nerval—a learning "tinged with theurgy, gnosis, the cabala, deciphered myths, and every kind of mystery that could be absorbed by a mind longing too avidly for light."

Just how imbued Valéry himself was with such "spectral learning" may be gleaned from a letter that he wrote to Mallarmé at the age of twenty, in which he confides to his *cher Maître* that the poet "defines the mysterious echo of things and their secret harmony, as real, as certain as a mathematical relation to all artistic spirits . . ." The only novels of Balzac that Valéry mentions, and the ones he clearly knows best, are those in which the theosophic, Swedenborgian tendencies of the great realist are most prominent (*Séraphitus-Séraphita*, *Louis Lambert*, *La Peau de chagrin*); the work of Flaubert that he prefers to all others is that compendium of mystagogical heresies, *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*. Valéry also admires Huysmans' trilogy of novels

about a religious conversion, and accords special praise to the final volume, *La Cathédrale*, for consisting of an "extraordinary network of modern metaphors in which we catch, as though in its entirety, the tremor of the vast and exact alphabet of symbols willed by the Middle Ages."

The poetic impulse in these novels of Huysmans is carefully contrasted with the standard products of French turn-of-the-century Naturalism; and Valéry's attacks on the novel as a form, which gained him a great deal of notoriety, are unquestionably the echo of a taste inculcated by Symbolist aesthetics. Nothing was more opposed to the Symbolist ambition to transform the world into art, to find the poetic talisman that would liberate its secret harmonies and reveal its magic unity, than the apparent ambition of the Naturalists to reproduce the thousand and one insignificant details of everyday life. And behind Valéry's sallies at the expense of the novel looms the rivalry between Zola and Mallarmé, with the one gaining the plaudits of the vulgar and the other the adoration of a handful of the elect. Whatever their origin, however, some of Valéry's barbs are extremely shrewd criticism. He remarks aptly that the Realism of the 1850s confused scientific observation with the crude unselectiveness of the naked eye; and he notes that such writers as Flaubert and the Goncourts, who lavished the most sophisticated prose on the most ordinary and commonplace characters, only succeeded, as a result, in obtaining an effect of extreme artifice rather than of reality.

For Valéry, the art of the novel always remained identical with the Naturalism he had rejected as a young man; and in an "Homage to Marcel Proust," of all places, he still continues to define the essence of the form exclusively in terms of verisimilitude. "There must be no essential difference be-

tween the novel and the natural description of things that we have seen and heard," he writes. "Neither rhythm, forms and figures of speech, nor even any definite structure are obligatory." One is hardly surprised, after this, at Valéry's admission that he had "scarcely read a single volume of Marcel Proust's great work." But as is so often the case with Valéry, his direct literary insight and his power of generalization somehow manage to overcome the limits of his taste. Proust's genius, he also remarks brilliantly, consists in being able to convey the "infinity of possibilities" which is the very essence of human consciousness, but which is usually suppressed because the business of living requires selection and choice.

Stendhal is the only major novelist to whom Valéry devotes an important essay; but, as he intimates rather coyly, there are special reasons for his attachment to this paradoxical figure. He had read *Lucien Leuwen* at a moment in his life when the love affair in the book became entangled with a romantic infatuation of his own; and this trapped him into a betrayal of his critical principles, which required a strict avoidance of confusion between his private feelings and those stimulated by the author's craft. Moreover, Valéry sees Stendhal's novels primarily as "vaudeville" or "opéra"; the highest praise he can give is to compare them with Voltaire's wittily extravagant *contes philosophiques*. Valéry shows an acute sense of literary history in linking Stendhal with this eighteenth-century tradition, whose influence is patent in the fragments of his own *contes philosophiques* (published as *Histoires brisées*). The point is, though, that Valéry could tolerate prose fiction only when its authors disregarded the canons of Realism, like Voltaire and Montesquieu, or played fast and loose with them like Stendhal.

It was the formlessness of the novel of Realism, the fact that

it presumably modeled itself on the fluidity and aimlessness of quotidian experience, that impelled Valéry to exclude it from the realm of true art; and no concept, of course, was more important for Symbolism than that of form. For Mallarmé, the world existed solely to be transmuted into his *grand œuvre*; the function of life, with all its passions and values, could only be to dissolve its identity into the structure of this grandiose creation. Valéry too never tires of affirming the importance of form, and he assigns to it, like Mallarmé, a superiority over all other human concerns. Bossuet, he asserts, is important not as a defender of the Christian tradition but as a great stylist; and in a comparison that recalls both Gautier and Malraux, Valéry praises Bossuet's prose because its structures can be enjoyed "just as passionately as . . . the architecture of a temple when its sanctuaries are deserted and the feelings and causes which led to its construction have long lost their force." It would be difficult to find a critic who gave more weight to the purely formal properties of literature than Valéry, though for the most part his comments do not go beyond general appreciations of the type just quoted. Strangely enough, however, it was this very devotion to the concept of form that prompted Valéry to react against Mallarmé and the Symbolist worship of art, and to turn away from literature entirely for a period of about fifteen years.

## II

If the experience of Symbolism accounts for one strand of the ideas that come together in Valéry's essays, then another strand may be traced to his remarkable way of reacting against this very same movement. This reaction is the most important event in Valéry's literary biography, and unquestionably has



deep personal and emotional roots. It is linked, in the first place, with the sentimental-intellectual crisis that he went through in 1892—a crisis that was resolved during a sleepless night in Genoa punctuated by the lightning flashes of a violent thunderstorm. The upshot of this crisis was Valéry's determination to master his sensibility by turning it into an object for rational scrutiny and investigation. "This crisis set me against my 'sensibility' so far as it threatened the freedom of my mind," Valéry wrote in 1944, the year before his death. "I tried, without any great success at first, to oppose the awareness of my state to that state itself, and the observer to the sufferer." This effort could not help but lead Valéry away from the purely emotive world of literary expression, and hence, too, away from the idolatry of art that was the cornerstone of Symbolist values. These latter were now all immolated "to the one that had to be created to rule over the others, the *Idol of the Intellect*."

Another factor to be considered here is Valéry's personal relation to Mallarmé. Valéry had the greatest admiration for this master of verbal music and mysteriously evocative imagery; but there could hardly fail to be, all the same, a certain rivalry between an elder poet and a gifted young disciple filled with insatiable creative ambition. Valéry was acutely conscious of this inevitable competition between the literary generations, and often uses it as a critical schema—for example, when he explains the baroque affectations of Huysmans' style by the necessity of distinguishing himself from Gautier, Flaubert, and the Goncourts. The same tension existed between Mallarmé and his most talented follower; but rather than seeking a further nuance or complication of style, Valéry broke with literature altogether as the first step in discovering his own literary path.

To understand Valéry's development at this period (the mid 1890s), when he gradually abandoned literature to study mathematics and physics, we must remember that he had always been haunted by the dream of uniting science and art. Valéry's interest in the exact sciences had been originally stimulated by a reading of Poe's *Eureka*, that extraordinary and isolated effort to imagine a poetic cosmos in scientific terms; and he had always been fascinated by Poe's suggestion of a scientific poetics, based on an infallible knowledge of the psychological responses of the reader. Even at the very height of his Mallarmé-ism, we have seen him speaking of the "mysterious echo of things" being "as real, as certain as a mathematical relation." Art and science had thus never been inseparably opposed for Valéry, though they had always been for Mallarmé; and this is the point at which Valéry asserted his originality vis-à-vis the Master. "I told him [Mallarmé] one day that he had the makings of a great scientist," Valéry writes disingenuously in his *Letter on Mallarmé*. "I do not know if the compliment was to his taste because he had no idea of science that would make it comparable to poetry. *He opposed them, on the contrary* [italics added]. But I could not help making a *rapprochement*, which seemed to me inevitable, between the construction of an exact science and the design—evident in Mallarmé—of reconstituting the entire system of poetry by means of pure and distinct notions. . . ."

Valéry was certainly aided in making this *rapprochement* by the influence of the writings of Henri Poincaré, the great mathematician and philosopher of science, whose physical silhouette is sketched in "Verlaine Passes By." Poincaré's writings, Madame Valéry has told us, remained constantly on her husband's night table; and one can imagine Valéry's excitement when he began to grasp the implications of Poin-

caré's stress on the pure formalism of mathematics, which, like Symbolist poetry, strove to "donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu." "Matter has no importance for them [mathematicians]," writes Poincaré in his *La Science et l'hypothèse*, "they are only interested in form." Symbolism and science became one in this search for forms which, depending only on human creativity, were yet capable of endowing reality with a new and more profound significance.

The conception of "form" thus provided a bridge by which Valéry could move from art to science without really abandoning one for the other. Indeed, what Valéry accentuates in the *Introduction to the Method of Leonardo da Vinci* (his declaration of intellectual independence) is the unity of the two rather than their diversity. This unity derives from their common ability to create forms and structures from an agglomeration of raw materials, and to impose continuity on the seemingly haphazard and disorderly; and Valéry's intellectual aim henceforth was both to establish this unity and to clarify its operations. What Mallarmé had done for poetry, Valéry could see as only a particular solution of a much larger task; what Mallarmé had tried to do only intuitively, Valéry would try to do for the activity of the mind as a whole—the common source of both science and art—with the rigorous tools of mathematical analysis.

The recent publication of Valéry's *Cahiers*, which he always considered his most important work, has shown with what tenacity and application he pursued this ambition all his life—the ambition of working out nothing less than a "mathematics of mental structures," which would illuminate the forms of all types of mental activity. Using his considerable knowledge of modern science as a guide, Valéry tried to find ways of describing mental activity in its most general pattern

based on analogies with mathematical and physical models. Judith Robinson, who discusses these efforts in detail in her excellent *L'Analyse de l'esprit dans les Cahiers de Valéry*, also points out how close he came, quite independently, to many of the ideas of such thinkers as the Vienna school of logical positivists and their English disciples, the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, and Norbert Wiener's theory of cybernetics. Nothing definitive came of these efforts during Valéry's lifetime; and the ultimate value of his *Cahiers* from this point of view still remains to be decided. What is important here, however, is not so much the substance of these speculations as their spirit. For they reveal the scientific cast of Valéry's mind, and his conviction that only the axiomatic clarity of mathematics furnishes a standard by which all knowledge should ultimately be judged.

## III

Valéry evolved, then, from the enchanted world of late-Symbolist occultism to what might be called the aesthetic rationalism (or, more exactly, mathematicism) that constitutes the unique position of his maturity. One would have to go back to Taine and Renan to find any French essayist displaying a comparably intransigent belief in science; and it is amusing to recall that these precursors of Valéry were the progenitors of the Naturalism he abhorred. The "science" that Valéry admired, however, was not biology or historical positivism but mathematics; and this made it possible for him to reconcile his passion for lucidity with his aesthetic sensibility. For mathematics, as Valéry had learned from Poincaré, was the creation of pure "forms" which dominated and transformed the empirical rather than conforming to its exigencies. Moreover, it was not too difficult to transfer the emotional

attitudes developed in the exquisitely rarefied mandarin-world of Symbolism to the equally select world of a scientific elite. The language of higher mathematics was perhaps even more baffling than the poems of Mallarmé; and the stance of superiority and aloofness to the common herd cultivated in the *cénacle* could easily be assimilated to the objectivity and neutrality that science ideally demands of its initiates.

If Valéry did not succeed in working out his quixotic project of a “mathematics of mental structures” (or at least of putting such a “mathematics” into communicable form), the traces of his private cogitations are everywhere discernible in his essays, emerging, like the tip of an iceberg, to reveal the hidden mass beneath. Nothing is more central to Valéry than the desire to use the methods of ratiocination developed by mathematics to dissolve the mysteries of mental life—among which, of course, is the mystery of artistic creation itself. Valéry abhors such words as “genius” and “inspiration” because they imply an ultimate barrier to rational comprehension; and it is precisely this barrier that he wishes to break through. Hence his unbounded admiration for a figure like Descartes, who was determined to apply mathematical reason to *all* the problems of traditional philosophy and metaphysics.

Leonardo the artist-scientist is the hero of Valéry’s youth; Descartes—the mathematician-philosopher determined to master the universe of the spirit—is the idol of his maturity. No more in the one case than in the other do Valéry’s essays on his heroes jibe with all the historical facts; but as he said in a marginal note, appended, thirty-five years after publication, to his first Leonardo essay: “In reality, I named as *a man* and *Leonardo* what appeared to me then as the power of the mind.” The same may be said of most of Valéry’s major essays, which, whatever their nominal subject, turn out to be

one or another variation on the powers, attributes, and functions of the mind; and this point must be understood if we are to do justice to Valéry's essay on Pascal, "Variations on a *Pensée*." For if the heroes of what Valéry called his *Comédie de l'esprit* bear the names, at various times, of Leonardo, Poe, Mallarmé, and Descartes, the villain of this Comedy is never anyone other than Pascal. No one is hounded by Valéry as relentlessly as the great mathematician who was also a great *prosateur*, and who disgracefully preferred the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to Valéry's Idol of the Intellect.

Valéry's essay on Pascal is so obviously a hostile philippic that there is little point in assessing the fairness or validity of its arguments. More important is to understand that, in Valéry's eyes, Pascal had committed the great betrayal: he had renounced his superb mathematical gifts for the sake of Christian salvation. Even worse, his baneful distinction between *l'esprit de finesse* and *l'esprit de géométrie* would have outlawed as futile the whole Cartesian attempt to master the realm of the spirit by mathematics. Nor could Valéry's haughty temperament endure the lack of pride and dignity natural to the whole Christian attitude of humility and self-degradation. Pascal's intellect, he writes scornfully, "cannot bear to think that it has fallen into the nets of time, number, and dimension, that it is trapped in the terrestrial system." To this we may contrast Valéry's own attitude in *Le Cimetière marin*, where, after contemplating the full extent of man's nothingness, the poet refuses to renounce life and affirms his ecstatic submission to these very same "nets of time, number and dimension":

Non, non ! . . . Debout ! Dans l'ère successive !  
Brisez, mon corps, cette forme pensive !

## INTRODUCTION

Buvez, mon sein, la naissance du vent !

...

Courons à l'onde en rejaillir vivant !

Nietzsche would certainly have sympathized with Valéry's feeling that to dwell too long on man's weakness and misery is unhealthy and vitally debilitating. And the essay on Pascal is not the only point at which we can detect a convergence between the impeccably mannered (if mordantly ironic) member of the Academy and "the nervous poet Nietzsche," who took "to the idea of energy as to a drug," and who philosophized with a hammer rather than with a stiletto. Valéry's "Four Letters on Nietzsche," which do little more than acknowledge the receipt of some volumes from Nietzsche's French translator, hardly do justice to the extent and complexity of their mutual interrelation. Along with the writings of Henri Poincaré, the works of Nietzsche were constantly at Valéry's bedside; and according to Édouard Gaède, who has thoroughly investigated the matter in his brilliant *Nietzsche et Valéry*, the poet was among the first readers of Nietzsche in France.

Both share, as we have seen, the same attitude to Christianity and indeed to any form of the supernatural or transcendent: Valéry's repugnance for what Nietzsche called the *Hinterwelten* may be less violently expressed, but it is no less deep and intractable. And there is a good deal of Nietzsche's manner as an essayist in Valéry's tendency to see his subjects not as private individuals but as "types of the creative life," as characters in his *Comédie de l'esprit*. Unlike Nietzsche, however, Valéry was not at all interested in unmasking the hidden emotive impulses stirring behind ideological disguises. He wishes, rather, only to understand the immanent psychic

mechanisms of the mind by which these structures are produced. Mysticism for Valéry is simply a kind of non-Euclidian geometry whose axioms and postulates have not yet been ascertained; and in the essay on Swedenborg, he struggles to find analogies in artistic experience for the mystic's certainty of the "truth" of his visions.

The name of Nietzsche occurs several times in Valéry's essay on Stendhal; and both are united, to be sure, in their admiration for this quirky and capricious figure, whose vivacity and loquacity remind Valéry of Balzac's illustrious Gaudissart—the literary prototype "of those prehistoric commercial travelers who dazzled and exasperated their corner of the inn table in the days of the last stagecoaches and the first railways." As a sheer piece of literary and historical criticism, Valéry's scintillating pages on Stendhal are the finest in the book; but Valéry would not have been true to himself if he had remained simply on this literary level. Stendhal's *égotisme*—his continual effort, as Valéry sees it, to dramatize and enjoy the spectacle of the multiple facets of his own personality—inevitably leads to reflections on the need of the personality both for absolute independence and autonomy and, at the same time, for the approval and admiration of others.

Valéry, however, is no La Rochefoucauld who delights in exposing the essence of human nature to be vanity and self-love; he distinguishes very carefully between the noble pride which spurs to creative achievement and the ignoble vanity that searches merely for tawdry self-advantage. One of Valéry's profoundest and most characteristic insights is to attribute the origin of pride, not to any base motive, but to an instinctive negation of the common fate of death. "And so the horror of death produces out of its darkness some insane



will to be *unlike*, to be independence itself and the absolutely singular being, that is to say, a god." It is little wonder that Valéry himself finds such remarks to be more appropriate "as a marginal comment on *Ecce Homo* than on *Henri Brulard*." The shadow of Nietzsche's Superman may indeed be discerned lurking behind these reflections on the Absolute Self, whose need for autonomy and singularity deeply appealed to Valéry; and Nietzsche's insistence that man should strive to surpass himself often echoes more restrainedly in Valéry's pages. But rather than involving the creation of a new table of values for mankind, what this means for Valéry is the attainment by the mind of the highest degree of reflexive self-consciousness.

Despite this indebtedness to Nietzsche, and the intense admiration for Wagner that he shared with all the progeny of Baudelaire, Valéry's knowledge of German literature did not go very deep. He knew English well enough to translate some of Poe's *Marginalia* as well as a poem of Thomas Hardy's; once he had even intended to translate *The Red Badge of Courage*; but though he was acquainted with Rilke personally, and much impressed by the necromantic quality that emanated from the latter's presence, he was unable to read his work. This lack of any intimate contact with German literature (despite Valéry's employment of the Faust theme) no doubt accounts for the weakness of his essay on Goethe, which is the only place where one feels that he is not quite up to a subject imposed by chance. (It might be remarked that the problem of coming to terms with Goethe has been a stumbling block for more than one non-German man of letters. T. S. Eliot does little better in the Goethe essay included in *On Poetry and Poets*; only Santayana and Ortega y Gasset come to mind as having acquitted themselves honorably of

the formidable task of tackling the German colossus.) The strength of Valéry's literary essays derives from the quality of their personal insight, the refractions of Valéry's ideas projected through the prism of other creations or personalities; and when his sensibility has not been truly engaged, as in the Goethe essay, the result is more rhetoric than substance.

Valéry does his best, to be sure, to find the points at which his own interests might give him some access to Goethe. Like Leonardo, Goethe too aspired to be a universal man and combine art and science; certainly he is the greatest incarnation in modern times of this perennial Valéryan aspiration. As a result, Valéry dwells a good deal on Goethe's scientific side, and implicitly turns him into an anti-Pascal whose love of sober, scientific knowledge saves him from a Hamlet-like despair before the terrors of death and dissolution. Goethe's attitude, however, as Valéry rightly remarks, was based on a "*mystique* of objectivity," a refusal to believe that "there was anything in the *subject* more significant or more important than was to be observed in the least *object*." Valéry could sympathize with this cult of Appearance so far as it tended towards the dispassionate study of nature and seemed to coincide with his own emphasis on "form"; but he knew very well that Goethe's idea of science was very far from being his own.

Goethe, after all, had been the great opponent of Newton and hence also of Descartes—the opponent of all the mathematical, quantifying tendencies of modern science that Valéry so much admired. If Goethe also wished to wipe out the Pascalian distinction between *finesse* and *géométrie*, he unquestionably preferred to give the hegemony over knowledge to the former, rather than to assign it, like Valéry, to the latter. This is why Goethe attempted to substitute his own

science, based on qualitative observation, for one that dissolved appearance into a network of mathematical relations. Valéry could hardly fail to pick up this challenge to his own most cherished principles; and it is no surprise to find that Goethe, though a universal genius, "was perhaps lacking in mathematical sense."

Luckily, though, there is a passage in *The Metamorphosis of Plants* in which Goethe expresses the desire to have botanical concepts so clearly defined that they could be used "in the same way as algebraic formulas." This harmless phrase is enough for Valéry to exclaim that he has caught the anti-Newtonian Goethe "en flagrant délit d'intention géométrique," i.e., reaching out despite himself for "a variety of symbolic calculus, analogous to those so frequently invented and used in modern dynamics and physics." In this manner, Valéry gracefully glides over the hiatus separating Goethe's conception of universality from his own "universal man," and sacrifices the chance to measure his position against a truly intimidating foe. The essay concludes with a dazzling display of fireworks and capital letters describing the meeting of Goethe and Napoleon, which is sufficiently characterized in Valéry's laconic comment on this article in a letter to Gide: "Napoleon: external stuffing."

## IV

Valéry was fond of declaring that his favorite historical period was the late eighteenth century, and that, if given the choice, he would prefer to have lived during the years in which the resplendent civilization of *Le Roi Soleil* was beginning to set. "I imagine this period must have been one of the most brilliant and satisfying ever known to men," Valéry writes. "It was

marked by the glittering close of one world and the powerful struggles of another to come to birth, also by a highly refined art, by forms and manners that were still very temperate, by all the strength and all the graces of the mind. There were magic and the differential calculus; as many atheists as mystics; the most cynical of cynics and the oddest of dreamers. The excesses of the intellect were not unknown, yet were counter-balanced—sometimes in the same head—by an astonishing credulity.”

Passages embodying the same idea turn up so frequently in Valéry that one may take them, not only as the expression of an historical predilection, but also as the fulfillment of an emotional need. Nor is it difficult to explain why the contemplation of this personally selected golden age should have given Valéry so much satisfaction. It images a world in which French neoclassical taste still reigned supreme, and in which—though precariously—it was still able to contain and master the extremest tensions of the free play of the intellect and the emotions; and this world appealed so powerfully to Valéry because its various aspects reappear in his own work. Do we not find in his own creations an adherence to neoclassical forms combined with a never-ending thematic struggle between consciousness and being—the struggle that the mind always discovers between “what it can know and what it is?” Valéry’s delight in a world where both magic and differential calculus were equally powerful currents of thought reflects his own creative universe, which could produce both a volume of poetry called *Charmes* and conceive the project of a “mathematics of mental structures.” The same weave of tensions and contrasts defines the spiritual horizon of the admirer of Poe, Mallarmé, and Baudelaire on the one hand, and of Descartes, Riemann, Poincaré, and Einstein on the other.

The interest and fascination of Valéry's essays derives precisely from the scope and variety of his intellectual ambitions, which aimed at nothing less than to unite what the whole history of modern culture has driven apart. But one can understand why, like his own Monsieur Teste, Valéry liked to dwell so loftily in the realm of pure abstraction and possibility, or, to use his own term, of pure "form." For the moment he looked at the reality and actuality of the world created by his mathematical predilections, the poet and man of letters could not prevent himself from uttering a cry of protest. This protest is heard very clearly in "The Return from Holland," a group of reflections devoted to the revered memory of Descartes. "Is not the Method, after all, the Charter of a realm of Number whose whole ambition is now apparent to us, even if we cannot yet grasp its full power? . . . Life itself, which is already half enslaved, circumscribed, streamlined, or reduced to a state of subjection, has great difficulty in defending itself against the tyranny of timetables, statistics, quantitative measurements, and precision instruments, a whole development that goes on reducing life's diversity, diminishing its uncertainty, improving the functioning of the whole, making its course surer, larger, and more mechanical." Valéry's pacans to the triumphs of mathematical reason are often accompanied by such a menacing bass, warning of the insidious destruction of the *quality* of life brought about by the transformation of man's environment.

Another type of warning can be found in his speech on Voltaire, delivered at a solemn séance in the Sorbonne shortly after the liberation of Paris in 1944. In what sounds as close to being a *cri du cœur* as we can find in Valéry, he declares: "It might be said that all our intellectual efforts, the whole of the incredible increase in our positive knowledge have served

only to raise to a savage and crushing power the means of bringing the human race to an end, having first destroyed the hopes it had nourished for centuries of taming its own nature." The desperation that one hears in these lines may well explain the unusual nature of this essay, which speaks a different language from the one generally audible in Valéry's pages. Whether this language is only Valéry's response and adaptation to the demands of a particular occasion, or whether it indicates a genuine modification of his point of view, is difficult to say; but the whole emphasis of the essay, in any case, runs counter to positions he had taken in the past.

For Valéry does not celebrate, as we might have expected, Voltaire the antagonist of the Church and the supernatural, and the enemy of his enemy Pascal; nor does he so much as mention those marvelously lively *contes* that he was inclined to consider the very apogee of French prose fiction. Rather, he invokes the shade of Voltaire the crusader against inhumanity and oppression, the advocate of humanity who, with the pen as his sole weapon, successfully fought against the much more formidable arsenal of the French monarchy. "The decisive event of [Voltaire's] career, the guarantee of his immortality, was his metamorphosis into the friend and defender of the human race." Such "defenders of humanity" had received short shrift from Valéry in the past, as we can see from a passage in his *Cahiers* (1907) on the same subject. Here we find him excoriating "the charlatanism discovered by Voltaire who, at a favorable moment, made of the man of letters a universal, political, prostitute-idol, a sort of Augustus Caesar elevated by popular opinion—as if the truly superior man could be recognized by the crowd." This facile and self-complacent contempt for the mob is one of Valéry's least attractive traits; and it is, regrettably, far more typical

than his panegyric on Voltaire for devoting himself to the service of mankind, or for dedicating his literary gifts to a moral-political cause. It is possible, however, that the harrowing events of the war years had shaken Valéry's faith in the Idol of the Intellect which he had hitherto revered so ardently and exclusively, and had opened his eyes to the need for other values as well.

However that may be, several other passages in the same essay reinforce the impression of novelty and possible metamorphosis. "After all," Valéry says, "the Gospels and the Rights of Man are in agreement on the one essential point: the infinite value of the human person." This "infinite value," as we see, is no longer identified solely with the geniuses who embody the Absolute Self and its ruthless will to autonomy and power. Valéry also praises Voltaire for appealing to men's hearts as well as to their reason (though he was far from having accorded the same privilege to Pascal). "He [Voltaire] invoked reason, *but he aimed at men's hearts*. What could prevail against this alliance between truth and pity?" This implicit avowal that pity could *aid* reason and truth is perhaps the most startling about-face in Valéry's last public utterance. It may be supplemented by the following extract from the *Cahiers*, written a few months before Valéry's death in July 1945. "—That is the *fact*. The most obscure of facts. Stronger than the desire to live and the power to understand is, after all, this blasted H[cart]."\*

Taken along with Valéry's constant laments about the state of the modern world, such passages reveal the gnawing cleavage that he could never assuage between his humanist

\*It is impossible to translate the nuance, both blasphemous and reverential at the same time, contained in the play on the words "*sacré C[œur]*."

sensibility and his conceptual commitments. This cleavage, to be sure, provides the major theme for all his work; but while he can turn it into superb poetry, and dramatize its antinomies effectively in various prose and semi-poetic genres (*Monsieur Teste*, *Eupalinos*, *L'Idée fixe*, the fragments of *Mon Faust*), he could never find any convincing way of bridging this contradiction in his essays. These latter remain, as Émile Faguet once said of Voltaire, "a chaos of clear ideas," in which every part is beautifully perspicuous and the whole a blooming, buzzing confusion. It would be unfair to come down too heavily on this lack of consistency, especially since Valéry always disclaimed any ambition to construct a philosophical "system"; but one can legitimately object, it seems to me, to his refusal ever to acknowledge this contradiction as a problem that he had an obligation to admit or to confront. Even in the Voltaire essay, it is significant that the change of position is not accompanied by any hint of *personal* retraction or reconsideration.

The Valéry who laments the degradation of the quality of life conveniently forgets that he is the same Valéry who accepted, as his sole and highest value, the intellectual method and outlook that brought this degradation about. The advocate of intellectual exactitude and Leonardo's *ostinato rigore* criticizes mercilessly on the one hand what he glorifies extravagantly on the other—and never a word betrays the suspicion that perhaps his views might require some adjustment or modification. More precisely: if we accept Valéry's own criterion of *mathematical rigor*, by what conceptual standard can he justify the values that lead him to speak of life as being "enslaved" because of its increasing quantification? Neither the idea of "life" nor that of "enslavement" (in this sense) can be unequivocally defined. One can imagine the



withering scorn with which Valéry would have treated a mere "philosopher" who had attempted to denigrate science by means of such concepts. Their lack of precision would have been tartly thrown in his face, and he would be disposed of in this way without a moment's hesitation.

As a thinker, then, Valéry is much too inclined to evade the implications of his own thought, much too eager to maintain an imposing posture of infallibility. He is forever having his intellectual cake and eating it too by assuming the simultaneous stance both of a high priest of science and a humanistic prophet of doom. The major criticism that can be made of him on this score is not so much conceptual or logical as it is personal: Valéry is simply too self-indulgent toward his own position, and never measures himself by the standards he applies so sternly to others. This is one respect in which the zealot of the highest intellectual self-awareness falls distressingly short of even a modest approximation to his own goal.

Rather than dwelling on Valéry's shortcomings, however, it is much more profitable to conclude by stressing his achievements. No modern writer has *lived* the adventure of the scientific mind with as much depth and intensity as Valéry; and it is never superfluous to defend the virtues inculcated by science against the distortions of passion and prejudice (though one wishes that Valéry had imbibed a little more of the personal humility that science—as well as religion—is supposed to foster among its devotees). The creations of Valéry proved that the highest abstractions of the intellect could be united with the most subtle refinements of the aesthetic sensibility, even if this was a personal feat that could not be generalized into a doctrine or "method." Moreover, in a Western world presently divided, so far as philosophy is concerned, between an irrationalism parading as ontology

## INTRODUCTION

and a rationalism that cannot get beyond skeptical self-destruction and methodological paralysis, the example of Valéry's aspiration towards universality is not to be ignored. Henri Bergson is once reported to have said: "What Valéry has done had to be attempted." One may add that, if Western culture is to remain faithful to its great tradition, it will have to be attempted again and again.

JOSEPH FRANK



# MASTERS AND FRIENDS



## Pontus de Tyard

PONTUS DE TYARD is no very great figure. His name simply makes us think of the *Pléiade*, a constellation from which he borrows a little of the light that has helped him to find his way down to our time.

But if learned attention will concentrate on and linger over this companion of Ronsard and du Bellay, it will discover in Tyard almost all the noble qualities which went to the making of the great men of his period. We know that they were equipped with all the talents, and the whole gamut of human desires was implanted in their fiery souls.

The century from Leonardo to Francis Bacon is particularly rich in universal minds. The curiosity to feel, the voluptuous pleasure of knowing, the passion for creation were carried, in those fabulous times, to an unprecedented pitch. The arts, the sciences, Hebrew, Greek, mathematics, speculative or practical politics, war, theology . . . there was nothing that did not seem desirable and, as it were, delightful and easy to those multifarious monsters, thirsting after knowledge and power, who devoured the whole of the past and gave birth to a whole future.

Our Pontus was a man of the same stamp though of smaller stature. The poet was an astronomer; the astronomer a bishop; the bishop an agent of the King, and served as his pen in the

polemics of the day. The emblems of the lyre, the miter, the astrolabe might have figured on his tomb. But the fourth corner of the tombstone could well have been decorated with another emblem which, it seems, would be as suitable for Tyard as the others. It would be one of those sublime big-bellied bottles of which he made large and joyous use provided they were filled with Burgundy, which was the wine of his country as well as his own choice.

As for love, Tyard, like everybody else, did not fail to pay the tribute due as of right to that inescapable master. He was much occupied with a certain Pasithée. But in exchange, love made him a present of quite a number of charming lines; it inspired the *Livre des erreurs amoureuses*, where we find graceful things like this:

*O calme nuit qui doucement composes  
En ma faveur l'ombre mieux animée  
Qu'onque Morphée en sa salle enfumée  
Peignit du rien de ses métamorphoses . . .*

I must not forget, in speaking of Pontus de Tyard, that one tradition credits him with having been the first poet to write sonnets in our language. There is some doubt about the merits of our bishop's claim, but this very doubt is a source of fame, for the sonnet is one of the happiest of poetical inventions: the sonnet, whose brevity and strictness of form were feared by neither Michelangelo nor Shakespeare, a form which condemns the poet to perfection, so that the mere suspicion of introducing it to the French is infinitely honorable.

Tyard had a weakness for inversion, which he used a little too often and too markedly; but in poetry it is a useful and

significant liberty, for it inflicts a noble torture on the normal and humdrum course of expression.

Taking advantage of a total eclipse of the sun to disappear from this life, Tyard died in 1605, aged but not bowed by eighty-four revolutions of our planet; having loyally, and without getting them too mixed up, served Apollo, Venus, Urania, Henri III, Bacchus, and the Church.



## Sketch for a Portrait of Descartes

FIFTEEN YEARS ago you could still see, in a street near the Place Royale, a police barracks where soldiers in the reserve came to have their papers checked and stamped.

A man would go in and take his bearings across a dignified but home-like courtyard. The offices he was looking for were on the left, in one of the arcades shaped like basket handles—all that remained of a fairly ancient cloister. Its ruined majesty fitted in very well with the easygoing life, half public and half private, which the First Empire had brought with it. There was an absent-minded orderly; a few canary cages fixed to the pillars; forage caps and pots of flowers in the windows; here and there white breeches were hanging on a line to dry. Year in and year out, about a hundred thousand men who were liable for the call-up had to cross this courtyard. I do not know whether it ever occurred to a single one of them that he was being made to undertake a pilgrimage. The very authorities who ordered it, high as they were, did not know its real objective. They imagined they were simply manœuvring the reserves for their own purposes; but they were compelling us, without realizing it, to pay a visit to one of the greatest monuments in the history of thought.

The barracks had taken the place of a convent, and the

police that of the Minim friars. It was there that Father Mersenne, a very useful and quite an important man in intellectual circles at the beginning of the seventeenth century, lived and died; he was an easygoing, inquisitive religious who propounded problems and sometimes conundrums for the whole of intellectual Europe—a somewhat different Europe from the one we know; he was the agent of scientific ferment and the intermediary between scholars of differing religious creeds; the childhood friend, the loyal and overzealous friend of Descartes, the propagator of his theories, and one of the most engaging of those lesser men whose role is possibly essential to the development of great men and the unleashing of great events. Some systematic research into the history of such assistants, hangers-on, confidants, or intermediaries, always to be found in the proximity of genius and among the tiny active causes which produce the great events, would be quite a novel and, I imagine, quite a rewarding study.

When Descartes was in Paris people used to call on him in the morning in the rooms of the invaluable Father Mersenne at the convent of the Minims in the Place Royale. It was there that he met M. Mélian on July 11, 1644. When he arrived from The Hague in June 1647, he went to stay with the Abbé Picot in the Rue Geoffroy-Lasnier, where he wrote the preface to the *Principles*. He left for Brittany, where he had some business to transact, came back by way of Poitou and Touraine, and was greeted on his return to Paris at the beginning of September by the good news that a pension of three thousand livres had just been granted him by the King at the instigation of the Cardinal Minister. News of this kind has grown rare.

It was then that "M. Pascal the younger, who was in Paris, felt a desire to make his acquaintance and had the satisfaction

of a talk with him at the Minims' convent, where he had been told that he would find him. M. Descartes had the pleasure of hearing him describe the experiments on the Vacuum which he had performed at Rouen, an account of which was being printed and a copy of which he sent to him in Holland some time after his return there. M. Descartes was delighted with M. Pascal's conversation."

I am too much concerned for the fame of the latter to transcribe the rest of the story.

One day when I was passing by, I noticed with distress that on the site of the ancient home of the Minims there was a cube-shaped building, whose whitewash was far too fresh and bright, surmounted by cannon balls with plumes of flame carved in soft stone. The police had been moved into this block. I liked them better when they were in the former convent, the police being a sort of military order, though it appears to have no objection whatever to the marriage of its members.

There are few countries in Europe where a house that was consecrated by the presence of so great a man and had heard such a conversation could have vanished as discreetly as in France. There was no tablet on the wall of the Minims to tell what it had seen. No one seems to have known what I have just related, which I found in Baillet, since not a single soul complained, or opposed the destruction of the building. Everything disappeared in the cloud of dust raised by the demolition squad.

In this respect Descartes has been unlucky. No statue of this admirable man in Paris—an omission that I am content should remain unremedied. He has been given only a rather poor street, though it is enlivened by noises from the Polytechnique and faintly haunted by the ghost of Verlaine, who

died there. Lastly, we have allowed his bones to be mislaid somewhere around Saint-Germain-des-Prés; and I have not heard that anyone is looking for them for the crypt of the Pantheon.

But, prudent man that he was and an incomparable artist when it came to working on the most intractable materials, he built a tomb for himself with his own hands—a truly enviable tomb. In it he placed the statue of his mind, a statue so clear and lifelike that you would swear it is alive and speaking to us in person, that there are not three centuries between us but rather a possibility of contact, a distance no greater than between one mind and another, or between a mind and itself. His monument is the *Discourse*, which, like everything that is precisely expressed, is virtually incorruptible. A decorous yet homely language, which is not without its pride or its modesty, transmits to us the fundamental intuitions and attitudes shared by all thoughtful men, in such sensitive and remarkable form that the result is less a masterpiece of resemblance or verisimilitude than a real presence, and one actually nourished by our own.

There are no difficulties, no images, no scholastic trappings, nothing in the text which is not said in an inward tone of the simplest and most human kind, and only just a little more precise than the natural one. The author, who might be speaking to us, seems to have confined himself to clarifying, exactly recounting, and at times very clearly articulating the immediate expression inspired by his memories and his hopes. He has assumed that tone which first teaches us our own thoughts, and rises in silence from our concentrated attention.

An inner word, striving after no effect or artifice, being our own closest and surest possession, however much our own it may be, cannot but be universal.

A part of Descartes' aim was to make us hear and under-

stand *himself*, that is, to inspire in us the kind of monologue that was his own necessity, and make us repeat his own vows. *He wanted us to discover in ourselves what he had found in himself.*

This was his prime intention. Every innovator of an intellectual order must find a way of making himself irresistible. Some captivate us by their charm; others wear us down by the rigor of their method; Descartes communicates his own life to us, so that the sequence of his impressions and actions may initiate us into the ways of his thought by the same natural path of events and meditations which he had followed since youth, and which is similar to many other paths though it leads to very different points of view.

By making us identify ourselves with his beginnings, thus easily involving us in his career, he succeeds with little difficulty in enlisting our sympathy for his rebellious adolescence, for he speaks to us of our own—our resistances and our lordly judgments. Having completed his education and dismissed it as virtually useless (for in fact, education is more or less useless to the man who is unable to use what he would never have discovered for himself), he wandered all over Europe, purging his mind by travel and by action in a war which was then in progress, in which he seems to have participated as fancy moved him. He kept away from books, which can be rather a nuisance in the army; he went in for mathematics, an art that needs nothing but a pen and can be practiced anywhere, at any time, and for as long as our heads will stand it.

What a luxurious form of freedom! What an elegant and voluptuous way of being oneself, when a man can thus lose himself in *things*, and yet grow stronger in his ideas! . . .

The accidental, the superficial with its rapid changes, stimulate and clarify what is deepest and most constant in a person who is really born for a high intellectual destiny. In full in-