

*Modern Critical Views*

# PAUL VALÉRY

Edited and with an Introduction by  
**HAROLD BLOOM**



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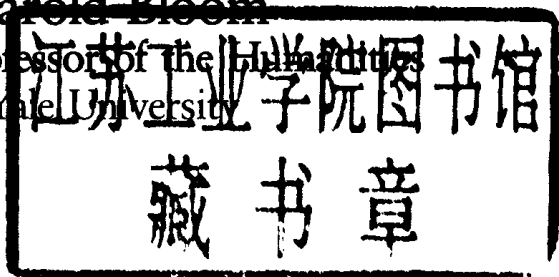
PAUL VALÉRY

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*Edited and with an introduction by*

Harold Bloom

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CHELSEA HOUSE PUBLISHERS

New York ♦ Philadelphia

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Printed and bound in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence  
of Paper for Printed Library Materials, Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Paul Valéry / edited and with an introduction by  
Harold Bloom.

p. cm.—(Modern critical views)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

ISBN 1-55546-315-0 (alk. paper)

1. Valéry, Paul, 1871-1945—Criticism and interpretation.

I. Bloom, Harold. II. Series.

PQ2643.A26Z7259 1987

841'.912—dc19

87-18363

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## *Editor's Note*

This book brings together a representative selection of the best criticism of the writings of Paul Valéry available in English. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Rhonda Garelick for her assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction centers upon Valéry's own criticism, with a particular emphasis upon the link between poetic self-awareness and poetic originality. Geoffrey Hartman begins the chronological sequence with his youthfully exuberant reading of Valéry's sonnet "La Dormeuse," which is viewed by Hartman as an unmediated vision, or pure act of knowledge.

Our strongest modern American poet, Wallace Stevens, pays tribute to Valéry in two appreciative prefaces to the dialogues *Dance and the Soul* and *Eupalinos*. Valéry's poems in prose are then introduced by Octave Nadal.

The subtle euphonies of Valéry's verse are investigated by Lloyd James Austin, after which W. N. Ince analyzes Valéry's peculiar but crucial personage, Monsieur Teste. *La Jeune Parque*, at once a masterwork and Valéry's crisis-poem, receives an exegesis from Charles G. Whiting, while the noted rhetorician Gérard Genette achieves an overview of Valéry's poetics.

René Wellek's survey of Valéry's position in critical history is followed by Jeffrey Mehlman's deconstruction of Valéry's critical stance. James R. Lawler, confronting Valéry's self-awareness, sees it in relation to Mallarmé. In this volume's final essay, Anselm Haverkamp gives a very full reading of Valéry's strongest single poem, the justly renowned "Le Cimetière marin."

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## Introduction

In the preface to his *Leonardo Poe Mallarmé*, Valéry calls these precursors “three masters of the art of abstraction.” “Man fabricates by abstraction” is a famous Valéryan formula, reminding us that this sense of abstraction is Latin: “withdrawn, taken out from, removed.” *It Must Be Abstract*, the first part of Stevens’s *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, moves in the atmosphere of an American version of Valéry’s insight, but the American is Walt Whitman and not Edgar Poe:

The weather and the giant of the weather,  
Say the weather, the mere weather, the mere air:  
An abstraction blooded, as a man by thought.

Valéry fabricates by withdrawing from a stale reality, which he refuses to associate with the imaginings of his masters. These “enchanted, dominated me, and—as was only fitting—tormented me as well; the beautiful is that which fills us with despair.” Had Valéry spoken of pain, rather than despair, he would have been more Nietzschean. The genealogy of imagination is not truly Valéry’s subject. Despair is not a staleness in reality, or an absence of it; it is the overwhelming presence of reality, of the reality-principle, or the necessity of death-in-life, or simply of dying. Valéry’s beautiful “Palme” concludes with a metaphor that seems central to all of his poetry:

Pareille à celui qui pense  
Et dont l’âme se dépense  
A s’accroître de ses dons!

The palm is the image of a mind so rich in thinking that the gifts of its own soul augment it constantly. That may be one of the origins of Stevens’s death-poem, “Of Mere Being,” but Valéry’s palm is less pure and less flickering than Stevens’s final emblem. The two poets and poetic thinkers do not much resemble one another, despite Stevens’s yearning regard for Valéry.

Perhaps the largest difference is in the attitudes towards precursors. Valéry is lucid and candid, and he confronts Mallarmé. Stevens insists that he does not read Whitman, condemns Whitman for his tramp *persona*, and yet he cannot cease revising Whitman's poems in his own poems. But then that is how Whitman came to discuss his relation to Ralph Waldo Emerson—clearly they order these matters differently in America.

In a meditation of 1919 on "The Intellectual Crisis," Valéry memorably depicted the European Hamlet staring at millions of ghosts:

But he is an intellectual Hamlet. He meditates on the life and death of truths. For phantoms he has all the subjects of our controversies; for regrets he has all our titles to glory; he bows under the weight of discoveries and learning, unable to renounce and unable to resume this limitless activity. He reflects on the boredom of recommencing the past, on the folly of always striving to be original. He wavers between one abyss and the other, for two dangers still threaten the world: order and disorder.

This retains its force nearly seventy years later, just as it would baffle us if its subject were the American Hamlet. Valéry's fear was that Europe might "become *what she is in reality*: that is, a little cape of the Asiatic continent." The fear was prophetic, though the prophecy fortunately is not yet wholly fulfilled. When Valéry writes in this mode, he is principally of interest to editorial writers and newspaper columnists of the weightier variety. Yet his concern for European culture, perhaps a touch too custodial, is a crucial element in all his prose writing. Meditating upon Descartes, the archetypal French intellect, Valéry states the law of his own nature: "Descartes is above all, a man of intentional action." Consciousness was for Valéry an intentional adventure, and this sense of deliberate quest in the cultivation of consciousness is partly what makes Valéry a central figure of the Western literary intellect.

Valéry deprecated originality, but his critical insights are among the most original of our century. His *Analects* are crowded with the darker truths concerning literary originality:

The value of men's works is not in the works themselves but in their later development by others, in other circumstances.

Nothing is more "original," nothing more "oneself" than to feed on others. But one has to digest them. A lion is made of assimilated sheep.

The hallmark of the greatest art is that imitations of it are legit-

imate, worthwhile, tolerable; that it is not demolished or devoured by them, or they by it.

Any production of the mind is important when its existence resolves, summons up, or cancels other works, whether previous to it or not.

An artist wants to inspire jealousy till the end of time.

Valéry's central text on originality is his "Letter about Mallarmé" of 1927 where his relation to his authentic precursor inspired dialectical ironies of great beauty;

We say that an author is *original* when we cannot trace the hidden transformations that others underwent in his mind; we mean to say that the dependence of *what he does* on *what others have done* is excessively complex and irregular. There are works in the likeness of others, and works that are the reverse of others, but there are also works of which the relation with earlier productions is so intricate that we become confused and attribute them to the direct intervention of the gods.

(To go deeper into the subject, we should also have to discuss the influence of a mind on itself and of a work on its author. But this is not the place.)

Everywhere else in Valéry, in prose and verse, is the place, because that was Valéry's true topos, the influence of Paul Valéry's mind upon itself. Is that not the true subject of Descartes and of Montaigne, and of all French men and women of sensibility and intellect? What never ceases to engage Valéry is the effect of his thought and writings upon himself. Creative misunderstandings induced in others were not without interest, but Valéry's creative misunderstandings of Valéry ravished his heart away. Texts of this ravishment abound, but I choose one of the subtlest and most evasive, the dialogue *Dance and the Soul*. Socrates is made by Valéry to speak of "that poison of poisons, that venom which is opposed to all nature," the reduction of life to things as they are that Stevens called the First Idea:

PHAEDRUS

What venom?

SOCRATES

Which is called: the tedium of living? I mean, understand me,

not the passing ennui, the tedium that comes of fatigue, or the tedium of which we can see the germ or of which we know the limits; but that perfect tedium, that pure tedium that is not caused by misfortune or infirmity, that is compatible with apparently the happiest of all conditions—that tedium, in short, the stuff of which is nothing else than life itself, and which has no other second cause than the clear-sightedness of the living man. This absolute tedium is essentially nothing but life in its nakedness when it sees itself with unclouded eyes.

#### ERYXIMACHUS

It is very true that if our soul purges itself of all falseness, strips itself of every fraudulent addition to *what is*, our existence is endangered on the spot by the cold, exact, reasonable and moderate view of human life *as it is*.

#### PHAEDRUS

Life blackens at the contact of truth, as a suspicious mushroom blackens, when it is crushed, at the contact of the air.

#### SOCRATES

Eryximachus, I asked you if there were any cure?

#### ERYXIMACHUS

Why cure so reasonable a complaint? There is nothing, no doubt, nothing more essentially morbid, nothing more inimical to nature than to *see things as they are*. A cold and perfect light is a poison it is impossible to combat. Reality, unadulterated, instantly puts a stop to the heart. One drop of that icy lymph suffices to slacken all the springs of the soul, all the throbbing of desire, to exterminate all hopes and bring to ruin all the gods that inhabited our blood. The Virtues and the noblest colors are turned pale by it in a gradual and devouring consumption. The past is reduced to a handful of ashes, the future to a tiny icicle. The soul appears to itself as an empty and measurable form. Here then are things as they are—a rigorous and deadly chain, where each link joins and limits the next. . . . O Socrates, the universe cannot endure for a single instant to be only what it is. It is strange to think that that which is the Whole cannot suffice itself! . . . Its terror of being what it is has induced it to create and paint for itself

thousands of masks; there is no other reason for the existence of mortals. What are mortals for?—Their business is *to know*. Know? And what is *to know*?—*It is assuredly not to be what one is*.—So here are human beings raving and thinking, introducing into nature the principle of unlimited errors and all these myriads of marvels!

The mistakes, the appearances, the play of the mind's dioptric give depth and animation to the world's miserable mass. The idea introduces into what is, the leaven of what is not. . . . But truth sometimes shows itself, and sounds a discord in the harmonious system of phantasmagorias and errors. . . . Everything straightway is threatened with perdition, and Socrates in person comes to beg of me a cure for this desperate case of clear-sightedness and ennui! . . .

We are close again to Stevens's appropriations from Valéry in *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*. The "clear-sightedness of the living man" does not belong to Stevens or to us; it is the particular gift of the reductively lucid Valéry, who is capable of seeing "life in its nakedness." If Socrates here is Valéry the writer, then Eryximachus is Valéry the reader of—Valéry! "A cold and perfect light" is what Valéry has taught himself to see—in Valéry. Reality here is not so much the reality principle of Freud, as it is the next step after the nothingness of the abyss or final void in French Poe and in Mallarmé. A pragmatic Gnosticism, implicit in Poe and developed by Mallarmé, triumphs in Valéry's ironic sermon about "what is *to know*." The universe's terror of its own nothingness causes it to proliferate mortals, as if each one of us were only another desperate figuration. Our errors, our marvels, introduce "into what is, the leaven of what is not."

We encounter here again the vision of "Palme," since we hear the influence upon Valéry himself of:

Parfois si l'on désespère,  
Si l'adorable rigueur  
Malgré tes larmes n'opère  
Que sous ombre de langueur.

"There is a strict law in literature that we must never go to the bottom of anything." Valéry almost did not take his own counsel in his endless quest to explain the preternatural prevalence of his intentional self-awareness. He seems now the last person-of-letters in the French tradition to have been

capable of reconciling acute consciousness of one's own consciousness with the grand fabrications made possible only by abstraction, by a withdrawal from heightened rhetoricity. Compared to him, Sartre and Blanchot, let alone Derrida, come to creation only in the accents of a severe belatedness.

GEOFFREY H. HARTMAN

*“La Dormeuse”*

La Dormeuse

Quels secrets dans son coeur brûle ma jeune amie,  
Ame par le doux masque aspirant une fleur?  
De quels vains aliments sa naïve chaleur  
Fait ce rayonnement d'une femme endormie?

Souffle, songes, silence, invincible accalmie,  
Tu triomphes, ô paix plus puissante qu'un pleur,  
Quand de ce plein sommeil l'onde grave et l'ampleur  
Conspirent sur le sein d'une telle ennemie.

Dormeuse, amas doré d'ombres et d'abandons,  
Ton repos redoutable est chargé de tels dons,  
O biche avec langueur longue auprès d'une grappe,

Que malgré l'âme absente, occupée aux enfers,  
Ta forme au ventre pur qu'un bras fluide drape,  
Veille; ta forme veille, et mes yeux sont ouverts.

The Sleeper

To what secrets in her heart does my young friend set fire,  
Soul breathing in through the sweet mask a flower?  
From what vain nourishments may her indwelling warmth  
Draw this radiance of a woman fallen asleep?

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From *The Unmediated Vision: An Interpretation of Wordsworth, Hopkins, Rilke and Valéry*. © 1954 by Yale University Press, © 1966 by Geoffrey H. Hartman. Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966.

Breath, dreams, stillness, O invincible calm,  
 Peace of more power than a tear, yours is the triumph  
 When the slow wave and ampleness of sleep  
 Conspire on the breast of such an enemy.

Sleeper, gold mass of shadows and yieldings,  
 Your redoubtable rest is weighted with such gifts,  
 O hind with languor long beside a grape cluster,

That, though the soul is absent, busy in the depths,  
 Your form's pure belly draped by the fluid arm  
 Is awake; your form is awake, and my eyes are open.  
(Charmes)

The poet meditates on a sleeping woman. He wonders at the cause and effect of her repose, one so powerful that, though the soul is hidden, her "form" is awake and perceptible to his open eyes.

The poem has a fine but precarious stability. Each stanza, each verse, each word almost, seems to take a new beginning and exist for its own sake. The straight line of sense is continually suspended by precariousness or beauty of phrase. Most readers will be surprised at the opening verse which, with a rhythm reminiscent of Racine, stops short on *brûle*, suddenly perceived as the verb belonging to *ma jeune amie*. This inversion is the first of many to compel a withholding of the conventional sense of the words. Nothing betrays the meaning of a verse which seems to have emerged from a natural yet nonverbal movement of consciousness. Each line seems to carry the emphasis of the voice as voice, before it has become speech, words, differentiated feeling. We are led to reflect how the single verse with its character of independent, inner equilibrium is joined to the next.

In the first quatrain the soldering is achieved by apposition; also by the assonance of, for example, *amie* and *âme*. But there is also an inner parallelism. The second line of the quatrain is characterized like the first by an inversion ("par le doux masque"), and by a slight continuing of the alexandrine accent from the sixth syllable (*masque*) to the seventh (*aspirant*), a weak syllable, strengthened to this emphasis by its assonance with *masque* and *âme*. Thus, in both lines the predominant accent is found not on the sixth syllable but on both the sixth and seventh; this and inversion give the lines their quality of equilibrium at every point. If we go on to verses three and four we find in addition to assonance of the sixth syllable (*aliments*,



*rayonnement*) that their linking is effected through the verb, suspended at the beginning of verse four, but absolutely without climactic result, for the line is almost at once pulled to the center by the long *rayonnement*, and made finally stable by the double, rising anapest of *d'une femme endormie*. And the first stanza as a whole is of course strongly joined by rhyme and by the parallelism of the two questions.

Apposition, inversion, suspension, assonance, to which in isolation no significance may be attached, are the more evident means ensuring the cohesion not only of the first, but of every stanza. Their mutual effect is to remove the poem as far as possible from the pathos of natural speech, preferring a spontaneity more stable and strange. This may be the spontaneity of a mind in resourceful play with the probabilities of rhythm and word.

For each stanza, like the first, develops out of a sudden verbal gesture or apostrophe promising climactic development (“Quels secrets . . . Souffles, songes, silences . . . Dormeuse”), a gesture that each line shares to a lesser degree; but the promise is deceptive, for equilibrium is at once reestablished by the retarding influences of inversion, apposition, and assonance. In the second stanza the tendency toward a free rhythm is so strong that we have one of the rare lines of French poetry composed of three nouns with asyndeton, and in its second part an adjective-noun combination (*invincible accalmie*) with an elision rarely used by Valéry. But the movement is not freed: it subsides as soon as we recognize that all these nouns which seemed independent are mere appositions to “ô paix plus puissante qu'un pleur”; while the stanza concludes with another retarding inversion (“Quand de ce plein sommeil”).

Valéry is most sensitive to what he once called the parthenogenesis of the mind. These retardations aim first to render the spontaneous yet equilibrium motion of consciousness, its fundamental yet precarious continuity, then to cause in the reader a withholding of the commonplace sense of the words. Valéry, like Mallarmé, has broken with the French tradition of expository clarity, though he is clear enough in his own way. An initial obscurity is essential to “La Dormeuse.” The poet uses every means to retard in us that faculty of the intellect often named induction, by which we are enabled to make a quick or conventional guess at the referent of a phrase.

Fullness of sound that seems to cause a perception of rhythm without a simultaneous perception of the literal sense is additional evidence that we are faced with an amiable conspiracy to retard induction. The suspension of sense by sound seems to increase in each stanza until we reach the climax of the third: “Dormeuse, amas doré d'ombres et d'abandons.” There is such vocal joy in this verse that no one would be surprised to find “do-re-mi.”