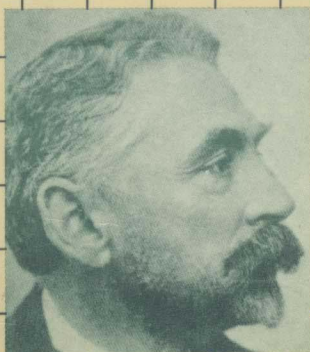
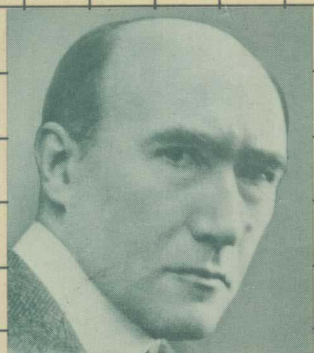


The Critical Cosmos Series

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

French Prose and Criticism, 1790 to World War II



THE CRITICAL COSMOS SERIES

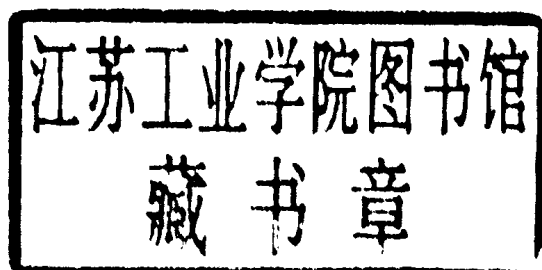
*French Prose and Criticism, 1790
to World War II*

Edited and with an introduction

by *HAROLD BLOOM*

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Editor's Note

This book gathers together a representative selection of the best critical essays available in English on the major writers of French nonfictional prose and criticism from 1790 to the onset of World War II. I am grateful to Chantal McCoy for her erudition and judgment in helping me edit this volume.

My introduction centers upon Paul Valéry, probably the crucial French literary intellectual of this century, and considers his relation to his precursors in the context of his own ideas of influence and originality.

The historical sequence begins with Brian William Head's consideration of Destutt de Tracy, theorist of scientific method and of a "science" of ideology, and a pioneering critic of idealist metaphysics. Lilian R. Furst, writing on Mme de Staël's *De l'Allemagne*, judges it to have been both an illuminating and a misleading intermediary between German and French Romanticism.

Benjamin Constant is seen by Stephen Holmes as a theorist who taught his fellow citizens that "civil liberty and political liberty are mutually interdependent." Andrew Martin, studying Chateaubriand, presents him as a visionary of a primordial world that nevertheless excludes any possibility of a fresh beginning.

Fourier's language is deconstructed by the eminent critic Roland Barthes, who charmingly compares the erotic utopias of Sade and Fourier. The equally eminent theoretician of eros and civilization, Herbert Marcuse, relates the positivism of Saint-Simon and Comte to the advent of the modern discipline of sociology. Michelet, mythological prose-poet of history, is studied in his thematics of death by Linda Orr.

Ceri Crossley situates Edgar Quinet's vision of architecture within the contexts of his philosophy of history and of religion. The critical art of Sainte-Beuve, one of imaginative portraiture of authors, receives an appreciation from Emerson R. Marks. De Tocqueville's inability to work out

the specific dynamics of the French Revolution is the subject of François Furet, while Aaron Noland charts the ironic confrontation of Proudhon and Rousseau, who influenced Proudhon despite every effort made to exorcise him.

Susan Blood finds in Baudelaire's reaction to the advent of photography an allegory or irony of personal resistance, presumably on behalf of a waning Romanticism. Our foremost critic of Orientalism, Edward W. Said, considers the reactions of Renan (and his younger contemporary Massig-non) to Islam as having been emblems of French culture.

The critic Taine and the linguist Saussure are brought together by Hans Aarsleff, who finds in Taine a crucial extralinguistic influence upon Saussure. Mallarmé as prose speculator is analyzed both by Maurice Blanchot, seer of literary space, and by Barbara Johnson, deconstructor of poetic theory. We return to Saussure with Sylvère Lotringer's overview, and then pass to Terry F. Godlove, Jr.'s investigation of the role of theory of knowledge in Durkheim's sociology of religious existence.

Bergson, the central figure in modern perplexities over temporality and duration, is analyzed by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze. An antithesis to the humane Bergson, the French proto-Fascist Maurras, is incisively contemplated by Michael Sutton, who concludes that the essence of Maurras is a Catholicism without Christianity.

In an essay published here for the first time, Kevin Newmark brilliantly uncovers in Gide's profuse multiplication of genres an implicit theory of literature. The equally intricate and dialectical relation between Proust and Ruskin is explicated with great skill by David R. Ellison. Valéry's highly problematic relationship to his sources is deconstructed by Jacques Derrida with his customary inventiveness.

Margaret R. Higgonet sets forth the pervasive effect of the Romantic theory of the imagination upon the work of Gaston Bachelard, after which Jean-Pierre Morel charts the uneasy but crucial relation of the Surrealism of Breton to the speculations of Freud. This book concludes with A. Smock's study of Simone Weil, whose problematic stature (in my own judgment) is not enhanced by Smock's shrewd attempt to domesticate Weil's psychic and spiritual realities in the world of Kafka's *The Castle*.

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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 Valérian 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'accoutre 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 the attitudes towards precursors. Valéry is lucid and candid, and 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, so 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 legitimate, 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 "On 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 gives 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 as to "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 se l'on désespère,
Si l'adorable rigneur
Malgré tes larmes n'opère
Que sons 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.

Destutt de Tracy: Ideology, Language, and the Critique of Metaphysics

Brian William Head

THE CONCEPT OF IDEOLOGIE

Destutt de Tracy presented his colleagues in the Class of moral and political sciences on 20 June 1796 with a problem of nomenclature: what would be the most appropriate name for the “new” science of ideas? (“*Mémoire sur la faculté de penser*”). Inspired by Lavoisier and Condillac on the importance of nomenclature and conceptual reform, Tracy was keen to find a suitable name for a science which, he claimed, “is so new that it does not yet have a name.” The birth of a new science evidently required a baptism; and the best place for this was in the presence of that section of the Class devoted to *Analyse des sensations et des idées*, whose task was precisely the further development of this science. In seeking a new name, Tracy was not yet proposing a thorough overhaul of all the working concepts of the science of thought: the desire to reform its whole nomenclature would only become widely felt when the science itself had been more systematically studied by *savants*. The first step was to find a suitable name to mark off the scientific study of ideas from the prescientific “metaphysics” of the past, just as it had been necessary for astronomy to separate itself from astrology.

Condillac had been content to use the term *métaphysique*, albeit with the qualification that scientific or observational procedures should be used in the gathering and analysis of facts. Tracy regarded this term as quite misleading and discredited. The common meaning of *métaphysique*, said Tracy, is

a science which treats the nature of beings, spirits (*esprits*), different orders of intelligence, the origin of things and their first cause.

From *Ideology and Social Science: Destutt de Tracy and French Liberalism*. © 1985 by Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Dordrecht.

Now these are certainly not the objects of your research. . . . Moreover, metaphysics strictly means something other than physics: yet the knowledge of the faculties of man, as Locke believed, is certainly a part—an important part—of physics, whatever (ultimate) cause one wants to ascribe to these faculties.

The legislators establishing the Institut had wisely refrained from using the term “metaphysics.” But the term which they had used was not very satisfactory; “analysis of sensations and ideas” was hardly a suitable name for the new science; it was rather like saying “analysis of the sources of wealth in a society” instead of “political economy.” Another possibility was the term *psychologie*, which Condillac had sometimes used along with Charles Bonnet. However, Tracy argued that psychology literally meant “science of the soul”; it would not only be presumptuous to claim a knowledge of such an entity, but it would give the false impression that the *savants* of the Institut were investigating first causes. On the contrary, insisted Tracy, “the goal of all your works is the knowledge of effects and their practical consequences.” What, then, was to be the name for this behavioural science to which Tracy and his colleagues were devoting their attention?

Tracy recommended his own neologism: “idéologie, ou la science des idées.” Idéologie, he said, had a very clear etymological meaning, based on the Greek *eidos* and *logos*, and it made no presuppositions about the causes. Hence, it was a suitable word to express “the science of ideas which treats ideas or perceptions, and the faculty of thinking or perceiving.” This formulation of the content of idéologie was by no means neutral, however. Tracy had not only defined the content in behaviouralist terms as knowledge of “effects” and “consequences,” but he had also imported a whole epistemological doctrine by his equation of ideas with perceptions and of thinking with perceiving. This perspective was reinforced and extended in the following passage:

This word has still another advantage—namely, that in giving the name idéologie to the science resulting from the analysis of sensations, you at once indicate the goal and the method; and if your doctrine is found to differ from that of certain other philosophers who pursue the same science, the reason is already given—namely, that you seek knowledge of man only through the analysis of his faculties; you agree to ignore everything which it does not uncover for you.

Here we find not only statements which define the procedures and content of idéologie in terms of “analysis of sensations” and “analysis of (intellectual) faculties,” but we also find sharp limits placed upon what is knowable, or what is to be taken as reliable knowledge. Such knowledge, according to Tracy, must be derived from analysing man’s faculties, i.e. from inves-

tigating the operations of the mind in forming and expressing ideas. Let us examine more closely some of the main themes in Tracy's conception of idéologie.

First, we will take his view that the science of ideas is the fundamental science, necessary for guaranteeing reliable knowledge in all the other sciences. Tracy's reasoning seems to be as follows. All knowledge, regardless of subject-matter, consists of ideas, and their accuracy depends on our capacity for making a series of precise judgements. Knowledge of the processes by which errors arise and by which correct judgements may be formed, is the only basis available for ensuring the reliability of knowledge. The primacy of idéologie over the other sciences arises from the fact that in explaining the general operations of our intellectual faculties, it points out the methods for attaining certainty and avoiding error. Or, as Tracy succinctly wrote: "it is necessary to know our intellectual faculties in order to be sure we are using them well" (*Elémens d'idéologie, troisième partie: Logique*). In his early mémoires on idéologie, Tracy asserted that it was "the first of all the sciences in the genealogical order." Indeed, he went even further, suggesting that

knowledge of the human understanding is really the only science (*la science unique*); all the others, without exception, are only applications of this knowledge to the diverse objects of our curiosity, and it must be their guiding light.

("Mémoire")

Tracy gives two main kinds of reasons for the primacy of idéologie: one relating to scientific method, and the other concerning the nature of human experience. The first argument is straightforward: he asserts that all the sciences require a guarantee of their truth-content; that scientific methods of observation and analysis are the best procedural guarantees of reliable knowledge; that all the sciences should adopt such methods; and that idéologie is central because it clarifies and recommends the logic of scientific method and explanation. The second argument, however, is more contentious and surprising. Here, Tracy argues that the science of ideas is fundamental to all our knowledge because the ideas of an individual are constitutive of his experience of the world and of his self.

In fact, since nothing exists *for us* except through the ideas we have, since our ideas are our whole being, our very existence, the examination of the manner in which we perceive and combine them is alone able to show us in what consists our knowledge, what it encompasses, what are its limits, and what method we must follow in the pursuit of truths in every field. [emphasis added].

This doctrine of the primacy of ideas-as-experience is rather anomalous in what is otherwise a philosophy of monist materialism. The doctrine plays