



# PAUL VALÉRY, A MAGNIFICENT JACK-OF-ALL-TRADES

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*Paul Valéry (1871-1945) was a writer, poet and philosopher, elected to the Académie française in 1925. An eminent figure in the world of letters, he left a rich and varied body of work that is always worthy of interest. Here's a brief overview.*

Paul Valéry is unclassifiable. He eludes us all the time: neither quite novelist, nor philosopher, and really at ease in verse, given to ideas, epitomizing that last race of masters we call "men of letters." When people try to give him credit for the arts or literature, Valéry shirks, dodges and sabotages. He hates history, loathes philosophy, reviles literature and reviles the novel. He excelled everywhere; prodigious, he cavorted with and surpassed everyone else by way of a single idea. Antiquarian, he mingled with the modern, foresaw, gifted with a talent for anticipation, like a soothsayer.

This illustrious writer, sometimes a Faustian scholar, sometimes a dandy, bow tie tied and ringed little finger, nicknamed the "civil servant of literature" by Paul Nizan, for his acts of resistance and his glory as a writer, was entitled to national homage in 1945. He was first and foremost a remarkable orator, whose speech in honor of Goethe, model "among all the Fathers of Thought and Doctors of Poetry, *Pater aestheticus in aeternum*," is a perfect illustration of his talent. His eulogy for the "Jewish Bergson" is a measure of his courage under the Occupation, in 1941. This modern [Bossuet](#), under the wings of the eagle of Meaux, paid tribute to his ancestor in *Variété II* (1930), praising his grandiose prose, the strength of his style, his talent for saying everything, his brilliant orations, monuments of what remains, in language, when the ideas of a time are outdated and men, distant from their tributes, end up unknown.

Valéry had no theorized philosophical system, unlike the dominant German thought. We find him somewhere between Descartes, rigorous in method, and Leonardo da Vinci, edified by the architecture of intelligence. Still inhabited by the Greeks, he used the form of dialogue, *Eupalinos* (1923) and *L'idée fixe* (1932), like Plato, and returned to the simple idea that philosophy is a quest: a quest for the absolute, for truth and purity. In his *Cahiers* (published, 1973-1974—Ed.), he writes: "I read philosophers badly and with boredom, as they are too long and their language is unsympathetic to me." Sensitive to the sentence, the maxim, that make up the French charm of thought, he went everywhere, said what he wanted, constrained his free thought, meandered through ideas under the strict arches of art, in fragments and leaflets.

First there was that famous night in Genoa. On a night that resembled a crisis, he was converted. Thereafter, he devoted himself to intelligence, to the realm of the spirit, to the quest for precision. In

1896, at the age of twenty-five, this mystic of the Idea wrote *La soirée avec Monsieur Teste*, a strange novel-essay in which, through the intermediary of his double, Monsieur Teste himself, high priest of the Intellect, Valéry begins to think about the detachment of the soul and sensibility, in the wake of *Méditations métaphysiques*. And nothing but that.

## **Austere and Solemn?**

Among the innumerable papers, texts and published thoughts, Valéry is, in *Tel quel* (1943) or in his *Cahiers*, haunted by the idea of a hidden God: "The search for God would be man's most beautiful occupation." The importance and quality of these notes show that a project to write a "Dialogue des choses divines" ("Dialogue of things divine") preoccupied Valéry all his life. "Everyone keeps his own mysticism, which he jealously guards," he insisted. Man finds himself only insofar as he finds his God.

All too quickly, Valéry's austere, solemn character is attributed to his poetry, which is frozen and mumbling. What is taken for gelid is icy other than a classical demand taken to the heights. "Most men have such a vague idea of poetry that the very vagueness of their idea is for them the definition of poetry," Valéry, obsessed with perfection, wanted this "holy language." This quest, resolutely, detached him from the world of letters, novelists and journalism: "The writer-whore exists only to surrender himself. To this class belong those who claim to say what they are, think and feel;" and he adds in *Tel quel*: "There is always something fishy about literature—the consideration of an audience. So, there's always a reserve of thought in which lies all the charlatanism of which every literary product is an impure product." Then to finish off literature as if in the arena: "A novel is the height of crudeness. We'll see one day. Those who look from the deep, rigorous side already see it." So much for that.

Behind his reputation as a pure wit, Valéry was a great sensualist. His poetry is a perfect demonstration of this. The charm of bodies, the trance of music, long, delicate movements, the sign of the hand, the form of the dance, the praise of water—this is the Valéry universe. In *Album des vers anciens* (1920), inspired by Mallarmé, we find, under the appearance of a solid poetic arch, lascivious and moving, volatile and light figures and forms taking shape, as in "Baignée" ("Bathing") which, through a play of periphrases, makes us guess a young woman in the water:

*A fruit of flesh bathes in some youthful pool,  
(Azure in trembling gardens) but out of water,  
Singing curls with strength of the casque,*

*Gleams the golden head which a tomb slices at the nape.*

## **Above the Fray**

Later, Valéry wrote *La Jeune Parque* (1917). In this song of love and death, where life mingles with mythology, we can admire these lines: "island... summit that a fire fecundates barely intimidated, woods that will hum with beasts and ideas, with hymns of men filled by the just gift of ether." These rhymes sound like onomatopoeia, making us believe for a moment that Valéry, a musician, is moving from the Académie to a jazz club.

At twilight, in *Corona & Coronilla* (*published in 2008—Ed.*), the old man writes a few poems to his young lover, Jeanne Voilier, whom he knows to be far from his arms:

*You know it now, if you ever doubted  
That I could die by the one I loved,  
For you made my soul a leaf that trembles  
Like that of the willow, alas, that yesterday together  
We watched float before our eyes of love,  
In the golden tenderness of the fall of the day.*

This poem, written on May 22, 1945, two months before the poet's death at the age of seventy-four, denotes a tenderness, a touching intimacy, not devoid of flowery lyricism. It's a far, far cry from the night of Genoa.

Bruised by the horrors of war, Valéry descended from the clouds, returning *inter homines*, deluded by certain illusions. He no longer believed in history, as he wrote in *Regards sur le monde actuel*: "History justifies whatever one wants. It teaches rigorously nothing, because it contains everything, and gives examples of everything... The danger of letting ourselves be seduced by History is greater than ever."

With History out of the way, Valéry seemed to turn to mathematics, as he murmured in his drafts: "Simple solutions, expedients, that's all-human conduct, in politics, in love, in business, in poetry—expedients, and the rest is mathematics." He confessed in 1944 in *Le Figaro*: "Politics is the maneuvering of the more by the less, of the immense number by the small number, of the real by

images and words; in other words, it's a mechanics of relays."

Paul Valéry was above the fray. Neither stupidly left-wing, nor fatally right-wing. He was a circumspect observer of nations. He was an eminent member of intellectual Europe, like Rilke in Trieste, [Zweig](#) in Vienna or Verhaeren in Brussels. Like the others, Valéry saw the great Europe of letters and sovereign nations, shattered by the appalling world war. Did he already see the post-war era? "Europe will be punished for its policies; it aspires to be governed by an American commission"—that's for sure.

Europe, according to Valéry, is inhabited by tradition. This Europe, saved from technocracy and finance, is a civilization, "Romanized and Christianized, subject to the disciplinary spirit of the Greeks," starting from Jerusalem, Athens and Rome. The grandiose axis. Yet this remarkable Europe, shaped by a superior spirit, remains no less fragile. This is Valéry's despairing assessment of a Europe whose ancient parapets have been overcome by technology, the mass of a *fin de siècle*: "We civilizations now know that we are mortal."

This tension between the order of civilization went hand-in-hand with a defiant and suspicious view of governments. We owe him this simple, trenchant phrase, mingled with cynicism and raw lucidity: "War, a massacre of people who don't know each other, for the benefit of people who know each other but don't massacre each other." Sounds like Bardamu at the start of *Voyage au bout de la nuit* ([Journey to the End of the Night](#))! Who'd have thought Valéry an anarchist?

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[Featured](#): *Portrait of Paul Valéry*, by Georges d'Espagnat; painted in 1910.

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