**Valéry, (Ambroise) Paul (Toussaint Jules) (October 1871 – July 1945)**

Paul Valéry is the author of an oeuvre that comprises several genres and attests a polyvalent thinker. Celebrated for his poetry, he is an innovator in imagery and the lyrical subject as in his adaptations of classical form. Introduced at the age of twenty into the milieu of symbolist authors, he left eye-witness accounts of the development of symbolism and insightful analyses of its significance in language arts. His essays and lectures reveal him a critic of historical and philosophical discourses and a forerunner in modern literary theory as he moves its object from a local evaluation to a theory of literary production. An interlocutor of many pre-eminent scientists of his time, he collaborated alongside them in cultural commissions. Although he consistently objected to being labeled a philosopher, esthetic invention, the phenomenology of thought and the functions of language are among his subjects of predilection in his poems, essays, dialogues, drama and notebooks.

Valéry was born in Sète, on the Mediterranean coast of France, to a Genovese mother and a father of Corsican origin. As early as 1884, he nurtured an interest in architecture and naval arts; he nevertheless turns to letters and drawing as he deems his aptitude in mathematics insufficient. While studying law, with little interest, in Montpellier, he reads several philosophers and expository treatises by mathematicians and scientists; most notably among the earliest referenced in his letters and notes: Helmholtz, Maxwell, Faraday, Thompson, and Henri Poincaré, whom he often re-reads throughout his life. In 1890, a chance encounter with Pierre Louÿs proves pivotal: Louÿs soon introduces him to André Gide, leads him to publish several of his poems, encourages his to write to Stéphane Mallarmé, whom he subsequently meets, as well as Huysmans and Paul Claudel, in 1891, then several other symbolists at Mallarmé’s Tuesday gatherings after his definitive move to Paris in 1894.

Although signs of an intellectual crisis are evident in his letters since 1891, the often mythified event of October 1892, known as the “Genoa night”, remains the temporal marker of what Valéry retrospectively described as a rebirth experience, its emotional and intellectual causes bearing the necessity to annul their effect by opposing to them the very consciousness of the nature of mental phenomena. From this first glimpse of the function of the “conscious consciousness” issues Valéry’s lifelong study of the workings of the mind, traceable in lose papers coeval with the Genoa crisis, then in the over 260 *Notebooks*, the first dating from 1894, to which he consecrates his first waking hours throughout his life. His later publications on Edgar Allan Poe and Mallarmé reference the place of this self-awareness in the creative process and define the influence of these admired authors as resulting strictly from the capacity of their works, similarly to those of Wagner or Da Vinci, to evoke a figuration of the living and thinking being that produced them. Valéry’s first literary figures of the mechanisms of intellect are the *Introduction à la Méthode de Léonard de Vinci* (1895) and *La Soirée avec Monsieur Teste* (1896). His renown following the publication of *La Jeune Parque* [*The Young Fate*] (1917) and *Charmes* (1922) ushered a phase of theoretical writing, public addresses – readings of his poetry, prose and drama; lectures; conferences and interviews – and a series of honours, nationally and internationally. It is also a period of experimentation with prose poetry, within the space of his Notebooks, some published in *Autres rhums* (1927) and *Mélange* (1941). In 1933, his views on teaching earn him the directorship of the newly created Centre Universitaire Méditérranéen de Nice, taken from him in 1941 during the Vichy government and reinstated in 1944. In 1937, he is named to the Chair of Poetics at the Collège de France.

Valéry’s innovation in creating *dramatis personae* that represent the mechanics of the mind inaugurates his modernity in theorizing the universal. In the *Introduction*, his fictitious Léonardo represents the power of a mind and its acts in the creative process, using analogies from the physical sciences and mathematics to depict the abstraction that is the Leonardo method, while the non-object-specific basis of the method devised affirms its claim to universality. His celebrated poem, *The Young Fate*, was originally meant as a farewell to poetry, to be added to those written between 1889 and 1900 for a collected edition. The Fate is a figuration of the sequence of changes in the state of consciousness through a night, with the poet’s express intention of investing within it his study of the functioning of a being, rendering the various phases of consciousness in sections akin to musical modulations. A comparison between draft papers from his old verses and the new poem may prove informative as to subject and method. Before the first printing of this masterpiece, Valéry had already begun writing several odes, later included in *Charmes*, the collective title referencing the incantatory effect of poetry. Detailed descriptions of his creative process with reference to specific poems illustrate his poetic theory, whereby conditions of form, increasingly specified, come to define the subject of a poem, itself a representation of a given moment in an act of invention. His essays, dialogues and lectures formalize the study of invention in comparative poetics, mainly with architecture and music, its acts founded on the relation between the spontaneous and the reflective, the sensory event and the fabrication of the intellect – a moment in the gap between being and knowing – and the functions of language in this process. In his lectures at the Collège de France, Valéry recaptures the universal reach of the word poetics in its original sense, treating “of the fabrication of the “works of the mind” in general”, following his conviction, perhaps most succinctly stated, “that, in the liveliest phase of intellectual research, there is no difference, other than nominal, between the inner workings of an artist or poet, and those of a scientist.”

**Collected works**

*The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*. Jackson Mathews, ed. (Princeton, 1958)

*Paul Valéry, Oeuvres*. Jean Hytier, ed. (Gallimard, 1957)

**Selected works**

Poetry

*The Young Fate* (1917)

*Album of Early Verse* (1920)

*Charms* (1922)

*L’Ange* (1946)

*Agathe* (1956)

Essays, Dialogues

*Introduction to the Method of Leonardo da Vinci* (1895); *Note and digression* (1919); *Leonardo and the Philosophers* (1928)

*An Evening with Monsieur Teste* (1896)

*Philosophy of the Dance* (1921)

*Eupalinos or the Architect* (1921)

Drama

*My Faust* (1941)

Conferences, Prefaces, Lectures

*On Poe’s “Eureka”* (1921)

*Letter about Mallarmé* (1927)

*Remarks on Poetry* (1928)

*I Would Sometimes Say to Stéphane Mallar*mé (1932)

*Concerning* Le Cimetère marin (1933)

*Memoires of a poem* (1937)

*Man and the Sea Shell* (1937)

*The existence of Symbolism* (1938)

*Aesthetic Invention* (1938)

*Poetry and Abstract Thought* (1939)

Notebooks

*Cahiers*. 29 volumes. (facsimile, 1957)

*Cahiers*. Judith Robinson, ed., 2 volumes (Anthology, 1974)

*Cahiers 1894-1914*. Celeyrette-Pietri, Pickering, eds. 12 volumes. (1987-2013)

*Cahiers / Notebooks*. Brian Stimson, ed., 5 volumes. (Anthology, 2000)

Correspondence

André Gide et Paul Valéry, Correspondance : 1990-1942. Peter Fawcett, ed. (2009)

Correspondances à trois voix. Peter Fawcett, Pascal Mercier, eds. (2006)

Paul Valéry – Gustave Fourment. Correpondance :1887-1933. Octave Nadal, ed. (1957)

Lettres à quelques-uns. (1952)