Jan Baetens

**Larbaud, Valery (1881—1957)**

Valery Larbaud was a major representative of modernist literature in France and a key figure in Europe’s cosmopolitan literary life during the interwar period.

He was the only child of a pharmacist who had been owner of the Vichy Saint-Yorre mineral water springs. After the death of his father, when he was eight, he was educated by his mother and aunt. Later, the family fortune gave him the opportunity to travel Europe in great style. His name is still attached to the evocation of the Orient-Express and the life of luxury in spas and prestigious hotels. Attributed to its fictional protagonist, the young and naive American billionaire A.O. Barnabooth, his first book, *Poèmes d'un riche amateur* (*Poems of a Wealthy Amateur*, 1908), was trend-setting for a new, typically modernist form of lyricism in which the themes of travelling and modern life (trains, speed, machines, technology) were combined with a very rhythmic exploration of the free verse techniques and the use of highly inventive metaphorical speech. The first books he published under his own name, such as *Fermina Márquez* (1911) and *Enfantines* (*Scenes of a Childhood*, 1918) were autobiographical memoirs written in a very classic and fluent, yet melancholic style. His later work entailed a wide range of genres. A major and very typical work is *Jaune bleu blanc* (*Yellow blue white*, 1927), the title being a reference to the colors of the ribbon holding together the texts in prose and verse (letters, literary essays, portraits of other writers, examples of literary tourism) that were to be gathered in book form. After World War I Larbaud became more and more a writer in prose, regardless of any traditional divide in style and genre. Often living abroad for longer periods and extremely gifted for languages, of which he spoke six, Larbaud has played a key role in the defense and circulation of modern, if not avant-garde literature of the 1920s and 1930s, although his own work and preferences will always prove rather eclectic and more traditional than the work of some authors that he has promoted. Particularly important in this regard was his manifold involvement in the literary life of the 1920s. First, his participation to the journal *Commerce*, which he coedited with Léon-Paul Fargue and Paul Valéry (29 issues between 1924 and 1932), and whose literary program tried to strike a difficult balance, in these years of literary upheaval, between innovation and classicism. Second, his long-standing commitment, between 1924 and 1929, as a corrector and chief editor, to the French translation of Joyce's *Ulysses*. Third, his tireless dedication to the work of many of his contemporaries, whom he translated and commented on in countless smaller and larger publications. He wrote extensively on the pleasures of reading and is also the author of a remarkable essay on translation, *Sous l’invocation de saint Jérôme* (*Invoking Saint Jerome*, 1944). After an attack of hemiplegia and aphasia in 1935, he spent the rest of his life in relative poverty but greatly honored by the whole literary community.

References and further reading

Paratextual material