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PAUL VALÉRY: *Cahiers/Notebooks*. Edited by BRIAN STIMPSON and others. 5 vols. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2000–10. 656 pp, 595 pp, 621 pp, 689 pp, 601 pp.

While largely consecrated by the publication of *La Jeune Parque* in 1917, Valéry's notoriety in his own day and beyond was as much intellectual as poetic, sustained as it was by the legendary but invisible mass of the *Cahiers*, only fragments of which appeared in his lifetime. So, in 1952, Canguilhem quotes one of these in support of his non-mechanistic theory of 'le vivant': 'Si la vie avait un but, elle ne serait plus la vie' (*La Connaissance de la vie* (Paris: Vrin, 1993), p. 150). So, rather later, Deleuze, in *Logique du sens*: 'Paul Valéry eut un mot profond: le plus profond, c'est la peau' (Paris: Minuit, 1969, p. 20). So Calvino, for whom Valéry's 'intelligence', not only of poetry but also of science and philosophy, represents an ideal state for literature at the end of the last millennium, one that 'has absorbed the taste for mental orderliness and exactitude' (*Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 118). But the reality of the thinking to which such fragments relate proves to be more challenging to grasp than deceptively vatic statements like these might suggest. The paradox of the *Cahiers* is that anything approaching the full disclosure of their scale, range, and multiplicity shows that, however exemplary an intellectual model Valéry is, he remains a strange and sometimes intractable one.

The *Cahiers*, as is well known, resulted from fifty years of very singular labour, undertaken in the early hours of practically every morning. On his deathbed, Valéry acknowledged just how exclusive was the outcome, if not the project: 'I know... 1. my mind sufficiently [...] 2. I know, too, *my heart*' (I, 420). And while he was sure of the value of what he had discovered, this would not, he conceded, be 'easy to decipher'

(adding a characteristic devaluation of any idea of *a work* as the issue of thought: ‘Never mind’ (I, 420)).

Soon after Valéry’s death, steps were taken to preserve the notebooks. A microfilm was made, with a view to securing the agreement of Gallimard to publish a complete edition. This project was soon abandoned, and the *Cahiers* were then published in facsimile by the CNRS between 1957 and 1961 in twenty-nine volumes. A critical edition, devoted to the first twenty years of the notebooks, was begun in 1987 (see *French Studies* [FS], 43 (1989), 226–27) and is now near completion. The CNRS facsimile remains the sole near-complete resource available to scholars, and all subsequent editions, including this one, include cross-references to it. And even now, after fifty years of editorial work, the manuscript continues to offer the possibility, however daunting, of a direct engagement with Valéry’s thinking, as substantial parts of it are being made available in Gallica, with a searchable online database linked again to the CNRS edition also being mooted.

The present translation is based on the selected Pléiade edition published in the 1970s by Judith Robinson-Valéry (see *FS*, 28 (1974), 104–06, and 34 (1980), 214–15), which followed one of Valéry’s own classifications of the accumulated notes. Presented in five rather than two volumes, it differs from the Pléiade in its arrangement of the categories that Valéry developed from 1921, using carefully elaborated headings and subheadings. So, the first volume focuses on Valéry’s self-examination (including ‘Ego’, ‘Eros’, among other rubrics); the second is creative and literary in focus; the third deals with the analysis of mind (under such headings as ‘Psychology’, ‘Attention’, ‘Memory’, ‘Dream’); the fourth assembles material largely on scientific themes; the fifth, finally, is the most theoretical in orientation, drawing on Valéry’s sustained efforts to elaborate a

System — to quote one of his own many formulations: ‘I am looking for the most consistent and most convenient way of expressing the constant transformations of consciousness’ (V, 41). In other ways too, this new edition represents an advance, notably in drawing on material not included in Robinson-Valéry, so providing access to recent research into key developments in Valéry’s thought.

To begin to explore Valéry’s project is immediately to find that there is something disproportionate about it, at once so concentrated and, in its accumulated mass, so mutable. Yet the disproportion is a force, in that its recurrence places the ‘moi’ above and outside itself, at which point, owing to the sequentiality of each act of writing, its productive exposure to the contingency of thought is disclosed. The quotidian scene is subject to specific variations (of light or dark, for instance), where a certain mythology of the moment of awakening is gradually elaborated. The scope of the *éveil* is that of a double latency: the potentiality of thought and the laden sense of suspension that it precipitates. Each daybreak, at once specific and ephemeral, externalizes this sense, in that it is its paradoxical nullity that expresses possibility, a possibility that is, above all, that of ideas. The recurrence is existential: being is empty and silent, is open to the advent of an idea, where its condition is that of a certain kind of monologue: ‘I feel like the only existing or thinking being at the centre of a world in which sleeping men play out the role of nothingness.’ And, for the *être* in this state, the focus of the mind’s actions is invariably the mind: ‘Extent to which I feel *I am* the sole monologue set up against the universal muteness. The mental voice gets lost, except its action on the mind itself’ (II, 394).

An advantage, clearly, of the thematic approach taken here is that it allows the reader to witness the fluidity of Valéry’s thinking as he grapples in a sustained way with

central questions that have a bearing on his system. Take that of language, for instance, which was central to his aim of establishing a reliable medium for the analysis of mental functioning. What emerges over the course of time is an acute sense of the relational character of the linguistic sign and in turn a view of meaning as rooted in its ceaseless transformations. The bulk of the respective chapters points also to important continuities: Valéry makes constant reference to Mallarmé, whose power to eclipse all contemporary poets becomes more and more striking with time.

Valéry's *Cahiers* are, then, the space of several distinct intellectual adventures — including, over time, that of the *Cahiers* themselves. At the end of his life, the mass of fifty years of fragments existed alongside the reduplicated notes, some in manuscript, some in typescript, that were the basis of Valéry's classifications. The corpus can be approached and conceptualized in different ways — as a life project, pursued day by day; as a series of focused and sustained intellectual engagements with a range of problems, variously literary, philosophical, scientific; as a prolonged exploration of method; as a self-exploration. These distinct versions all coexisted at the point of Valéry's death and, thanks to all the published versions, they continue to do so today.

Like the new edition of the *Cahiers* written between 1894 and 1914, this series takes a genetic approach, with a particular emphasis here on a practice of translation (shared among nine translators) that privileges the emergent rhythm of Valéry's thinking. The results are impressively readable, although the tendency to favour 'literal' translations does result in occasional moments of opacity, as when, at the very beginning of the first volume, 'Unending auto-discussion' is proposed as a translation of 'Auto-discussion infinie' (I, 41).

Who *was* Valéry? For almost all writers born between 1900 and 1939, he was an inescapable reference point. Thus, for Borges, his was the labyrinth of the mind. In the two generations after this death in 1945, he was intensely read and studied: the twenty-one poems in *Charmes* figured prominently at the modern end point of the literary curriculum of the day. This is scarcely the case now. Between the completion of the CNRS edition in 1961 and the critical edition begun in 1987, there appeared a series of seminal explorations of the central categories of Valéry's probing of mental functioning — including the mind itself (see *FS*, 21 (1967), 373–74), consciousness, the 'moi' (see *FS*, 34 (1980), 222–23), language in general, and poetic language in particular (see *FS*, 38 (1984), 227). Since the first flush of this critical engagement with the *Cahiers*, such efforts have been rather fewer in number, scope, and impact, prompting again the question of how an engagement with Valéry might be undertaken today, within an intellectual landscape that is increasingly different from his. In response to this question, Jacques Bouveresse takes his cue from a lapidary comment of Valéry: 'Nietzsche is not nourishing — he's an intoxicant' (V, 128). Today, some, like Bouveresse, do indeed look to Valéry for a cure to the ostensibly literary turn taken by philosophy, in part under his impetus. But this seems a gesture fraught with risk, in that it betrays the conscious singularity of Valéry's venture ('my principal goal [...] is not a philosophical goal [...]. Nothing can be more mistaken than (for example) mixing up inner observations and arguments' (V, 52)). Rather, we might seek a way to read Valéry so as to reinvent the categories for and through which he speaks, working both with him and against him, and so elaborating new relations and frameworks within which to analyse him, ones that will speak as much to our own concerns as to his. This route in a sense consigns him to history. Yet anyone who reads these volumes will frequently experience the most intense

shock of recognition, and will over and over again find in speaking from our past he continues to exist in our present. And the variety of modes in which we can read him — successively ranging over the full fifty years of this work, or thematically, as here, or in delimited chronological sections — is unparalleled. This exemplary edition, like the ones that have preceded it, shows how Valéry's work indeed remains an open and complex territory, to be shaped and reshaped by whatever intellectual engagements it may in the future elicit.

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