

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## VALÉRY, PAUL

**Paul Valéry: Life and Works, first half.** Paul Valéry (1871-1945) was born in Sete, on the Mediterranean, and throughout his lifetime he would fixate on seascapes which derive from his early experience of the Mediterranean. Valéry's father was Corsican, and his mother Italian, and the young man was raised in Montpellier. In 1900 he married, and had three children, and settled into what, for nineteenth century French writers, was a stable married life. His academic route was through the University of Montpellier, where he also wrote extensively. After graduation he was working for over a decade as a private secretary, and writing for an appreciative public, for by this time, 1920 and after, he had begun to publish widely. His *Album des vers anciens* (1920), *Album of ancient verses*, revealed him as a poet of exquisite finesse in orthodox prosody; his *Charmes* (1922), which included one of his greatest poems, 'Le Cimetière Marin,' 'The Seaside Cemetery,' in which the hard frost of light on the ocean mirrors the hard deaths at sea which bedaub the rough Mediterranean coast. And then there was the *Soirée avec M. Teste* (1897), *The Evening with Mr. Teste*, which though prose had the hard intellectual abstractness of the poetry of Valéry, or of Valéry's master, Stéphane Mallarmé, and had already before Valéry's volumes of poetry drawn attention to his extraordinary imaginative intellect. In the course of these high profile engagements with the public, Valéry found himself becoming a popular and honored public figure. In 1925 he was inducted into the *Académie française*, and in that capacity began to contribute to public causes, to lecture widely throughout France, and in effect to serve as an unofficial voice of the government on public matters. Inspired by the support of the public, Valéry went on to become a tireless speaker and presence in higher French culture. Valéry founded a noteworthy College in Cannes, in 1932, a meeting place for the study and appreciation of French culture and values. The same Valéry gave the memorial lecture for the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Goethe. By this time, although he had published only some one hundred lyrics, he was widely viewed as the leader of the Symbolist movement, and as a worthy successor to his master, Stéphane Mallarmé.

**Life and Works, Second Half.** Oddly enough, there is a second half to all this. It is a half which begins before the first half, the public figure stage, ended. In 1892, in the aftermath of a violent thunderstorm, Valéry had an existential awareness which broke his will to write. (One might think of Jakob Boehme's vision of the inner meaning of the sunshine on a pewter bowl, in seventeenth century Germany.) As we have seen, Valéry had already written fine work by that time, but in the wake of this 'moment' he wrote nothing more for twenty years. (We have just seen how much else he accomplished, in public, but he could create no more 'literature.')

Encouraged by André Gide, and by now interested primarily in the sciences, he began writing afresh in 1916. This poetry is austere, mathematical. and pure, eliminating life in favor of an intellectualized geometry. (One can feel the constant presence of Mallarmé's poetry here.) This new poetry, with its conventions and mannerisms, leads to obscurity, but to a purity which has led some of his followers to consider his the best poetic work of the twentieth century. He was in this later period also prolific with brilliant aesthetic essays, and with notes on his time.

### Reading

#### **Primary source reading**

*Paul Valéry's Cahiers/Notebooks*, ed. Gifford, Stimpson, Pickering, 2000.

#### **Secondary source reading**

Baudry, Phillipe, *Valery Finder: Metaphysics and Literature*, 2011,

#### **Further reading**

Kristeva, J., *La Revolution du langage poétique*, 1974.

### **Original language reading**

Cioran, Emile, *Valery face à ses idoles*, 2007.

### **Suggested paper topics**

What practical interrelation do you see between Valery's scientific thought and his poetry? Does one enrich the other? What other writers do you know, for whom scientific study is important? Goethe? Zola?

How do you understand the moving experience which led to Valery's prolonged and silent absence from poetry? Was it a 'mystical experience'? Did he ever try to explain this experience?

### **Excerpt**

<http://www.historyguide.org/europe/valery.html>

We later civilizations . . . we too know that we are mortal.

We had long heard tell of whole worlds that had vanished, of empires sunk without a trace, gone down with all their men and all their machines into the unexplorable depths of the centuries, with their gods and their laws, their academies and their sciences pure and applied, their grammars and their dictionaries, their Classics, their Romantics, and their Symbolists, their critics and the critics of their critics. . . . We were aware that the visible earth is made of ashes, and that ashes signify something. Through the obscure depths of history we could make out the phantoms of great ships laden with riches and intellect; we could not count them. But the disasters that had sent them down were, after all, none of our affair.

Elam, Ninevah, Babylon were but beautiful vague names, and the total ruin of those worlds had as little significance for us as their very existence. But France, England, Russia...these too would be beautiful names. *Lusitania* too, is a beautiful name. And we see now that the abyss of history is deep enough to hold us all. We are aware that a civilization has the same fragility as a life. The circumstances that could send the works of Keats and Baudelaire to join the works of Menander are no longer inconceivable; they are in the newspapers. That is not all. The searing lesson is more complete still. It was not enough for our generation to learn from its own experience how the most beautiful things and the most ancient, the most formidable and the best ordered, can perish *by accident*; in the realm of thought, feeling, and common sense, we witnessed extraordinary phenomena: paradox suddenly become fact, and obvious fact brutally believed.

I shall cite but one example: the great virtues of the German peoples have begotten more evils, than idleness ever bred vices. With our own eyes, we have seen conscientious labor, the most solid learning, the most serious discipline and application adapted to appalling ends.

So many horrors could not have been possible without so many virtues. Doubtless, much science was needed to kill so many, to waste so much property, annihilate so many cities in so short a time; but *moral qualities* in like number were also needed. Are Knowledge and Duty, then, suspect?

So the Persepolis of the spirit is no less ravaged than the Susa of material fact. Everything has not been lost, but everything has sensed that it might perish.