

On a Poem

Al-Risala, 15 October 1933

One evening in the year 1920, the French man of letters Jacques Rivière called upon his friend, the great poet Paul Valéry, and found before him a number of different drafts of a poem he had composed—or rather, was still composing. He made off with one of these drafts, then went out and published it in one of the great French literary reviews.

This poem was *Le Cimetière marin* (“The Graveyard by the Sea”); and you should know that Paul Valéry never finishes a work of his art, but simply abandons it. He explains this to us himself, in some of the essays he has written, saying that poets and artists in ancient times never completed a work of theirs, but went on working at it—revising it, refining it, taking from it and adding to it, harmonising its parts—pursuing perfection for as long as any path toward it remained open to them, until, when circumstance forced them to let it go, they surrendered it either to the fire or to the public. For fire and public are, to Paul Valéry and to those artists nearest his own way of thinking, one and the same: both put the artistic work to death as far as its creator is concerned, since he alone possesses it fully, burning it outright and severing the bond between it and himself, making it now the property of another, who represents it to himself as he wishes or as he is able, and tastes it and understands it as he wishes, or as his own particular faculties of understanding and taste allow him.

And Paul Valéry holds fast to this ancient artistic tradition; he never finishes, as I have said, a poem, nor a chapter of prose, but goes on refining and polishing it, striving toward this near yet unattainable goal, which is perfection—until circumstances force him to relinquish his poem, or his chapter, or his book, to some thieving friend like Jacques Rivière, or to some insistent publisher, or to any of the circumstances that release the works of poets and writers, taking them out of their own hands and into the hands of readers. And so this poem was imposed, in the form we now know it, upon its own author by sheer compulsion; and had he been given the choice, he might well have chosen a different version from among those he had before him; but he happened, one day, to find that the new French review had published, on his behalf, the poem *Le Cimetière marin*, and he had no choice left but submission and acquiescence.

It is, indeed, very difficult to find in the whole of French literary history a poem that has stirred as much debate, provoked as fierce a controversy, and given rise to as many-branched a dispute, as this poem of scarcely a hundred and forty-four lines. French critics spent years studying it, analysing it, seeking out its meanings and purposes and the manifestations and inner workings of its beauty, and still they could not agree—indeed, could not agree on a single thing about it—until their disagreement reached its furthest extreme. Some raised the poem to the loftiest ranks of the immortal masterpieces of poetry; others brought it down to the depths of nonsense, unworthy of pause or attention.

And the matter passed beyond the literary magazines and journals into the great daily newspapers, and the dispute grew so heated, and the controversy so organised, that one of the foremost critics found himself obliged to undertake a rigorous and far-reaching investigation, selecting two passages from the poem and putting them before well-known writers and critics, asking them what they understood by these passages, and what opinion they held of them. This led him, in turn, to question them on one of the fundamentals of the poetic art, on which it appeared they could reach no agreement whatsoever—namely, clarity: is it a necessity of good poetry, or is it something good poetry can dispense with? Or, to put it with greater precision and clarity: must good poetry be clear and plain, understood at once by whoever hears or reads it, or can poetry be good even when obscurity stands between it and the understanding of its readers and hearers? No sooner had this inquiry begun than the old dispute over the poem and its author flared up again, as harsh, violent, and many-branched as ever. And in the midst of all this, Paul Valéry was elected a member of the French Academy, and his election stirred the rancour of the rancorous and the fury of the furious, and made the dispute more heated and more violent still; and you may say, without exaggeration or excess, that the whole of educated France was occupied, in the years '27, '28, and '29, with this poem and its author.

The affair of this poem came at last to the Sorbonne—and how little the Sorbonne concerns itself with the poetry of contemporaries!—and there was a professor of literature there, Monsieur Gustave Cohen, who took it as the subject of his course on the interpretation of literary texts, and then took it as the subject of a book he called *Essai d'explication du «Cimetière marin»* (published by Gallimard). All this violent commotion, and the poet himself silent, saying nothing, still, doing nothing—or rather, saying and doing nothing that touched upon this violent

dispute—until the author of the investigation I mentioned earlier was driven to write to him, informing him that most of those who had answered the questions put to them acknowledged that his poem had a meaning, but could not agree on what that meaning was, differing sharply in how they arrived at it, and asking him to explain what he had intended, so as to end the doubt and settle the dispute. The poet did not answer. Another writer, too, was driven to demand of him, in one of the great newspapers, that he explain to the public what he had meant to say in this poem, so that it might become clear which of the critics had erred and which had judged rightly, describing him as proud and eager to provoke the critics—but for all this, he still gave no answer.

Then, when the Sorbonne professor's book at last appeared, people looked and found that the poet himself had furnished it with an admirable and delightful preface—one that some described as dizzying, so full was it of meanings and opinions, at once so clear that the veil is never entirely lifted from it, and so obscure that it never quite relieves its readers of the need for reflection, prolonged inquiry, and thought. And when one read this admirable, delightful, dizzying preface, one found in it no answer to the pressing questions the critics had put to the poet, hoping he would explain to them what he had intended; one found instead, in this preface, opinions that left one despairing of ever arriving at the meanings the poet had intended when he composed his poem. He says, for instance: people ask me what I meant to say; but I meant to say nothing—I meant only to make a thing, and it is my desire in making that thing which said what they now read. And he says, for instance, that an artistic work put out by a poet, or a writer, or any other artist, no sooner leaves the hand of its maker than it becomes one of the common instruments that people employ as they wish, or as they are able. Which means that once a poem is broadcast among people, each of them is free to understand from it whatever he wishes, or whatever he can. As for what the poet himself intended, that is a matter confined to him alone at the moment of composition; he may well have forgotten it, or turned from it to other meanings, and so he ought not to be asked about it, nor required to explain it to others.

And what is stranger and more curious still is that the poet praises the very book that interprets his poem, saying that it has brought the poem closer to the young, to his students, and has captured well those of its qualities that touch upon its music and harmony—yet he then asks: has the interpreting professor succeeded in arriving at the meanings the

poet intended, or has this success eluded him?

All these opinions, and other opinions besides, offered by the great poet in this delightful preface, if they do not reveal the meanings he deposited in his poem, reveal something else, which I think is more solid and of greater import than these meanings—namely, the poet's own doctrine on the art of poetry, and what it ought, in his view, to rise above this clarity that corrupts art utterly and brings it near to vulgarity. He holds, for instance, that the beauty of poetry comes from your renewing, within yourself, the artistic pleasure each time you renew your reading of it, and from your discovering, in a second reading, beauties of art you did not discover in the first, indeed finding, in every reading, new arts of beauty you had not found in the readings that came before. And you find this continuous, varied pleasure only because you are capable, in each reading, of discovering a new meaning that stirs within you a new sense of beauty. He holds, too, that poetry has qualities that preserve it from death, or preserve it from an early death—qualities bound up with its metre, its rhymes, and these particular images you do not find in prose. And the death of the artistic work comes, in his view, from people's understanding of it: if you read a book and understand it, you have killed it and finished it off. There is, then, a fierce struggle between the reader and the thing read; if the reader understands, he has triumphed. And the artistic work truly worthy of the name is the one that overcomes its reader and defeats him—without, however, forcing him into despair and hopelessness. From this our great poet concludes that prose, by the very nature of its composition, is closer to death and nearer to extinction, because it is closer to being understood and nearer to being digested, unprotected by these finely-wrought armours we call metre, rhyme, music, and image.

And if you add to this preface what our great poet has written, in various places and on various occasions, about poetry, prose, and literature in general, you could sum up his doctrine of pure poetry, or elevated poetry, as they call it. Poetry, to him, is speech—but speech of a distinguished kind, and its distinction must come not from its meaning alone, but above all from its form. The reality of poetry is felt, rather, in its form and shape; it is felt in its metre, which must dazzle the ear and move it; it is felt in its harmony, which must stir in the soul the pleasure of music, or a pleasure loftier still than the pleasure of music, since it touches the mind and the feeling and the ear all together; then it is felt in its images, which must astonish the imagination and, with it, the senses;

and then it is felt, before all else and after all else, in this quality I do not know how to name or to define, which compels you to inquiry and reflection, and to a struggle with what you read, free of weariness and free of despair.

And naturally, once this fierce, protracted dispute over this poem had broken out, it was inevitable that it should cross the borders of France, and that foreign critics should give it the same attention the French themselves gave it, as they give attention to everything this poet produces. This poem was translated four times into Spanish, three times into English, three times into German—but the strange thing is that it was also translated, into French itself, as verse. It was translated by Colonel Godchot, who sent his translation to the poet, and the poet wrote back to him, saying:

“I thank you most sincerely for the translation you have sent me of *Le Cimetière marin*, into a language closer to clarity. I shall add this translation to the four Spanish translations, and to the three English translations, and to the three German translations, and to the other translations of this poem that have come my way. I was greatly pleased by the effort you have expended, which shows how careful you have been to preserve as much of the original as you could; and if you have been able to translate this poem, then it cannot, after all, be so obscure as people say. For a truly obscure poem would require a change far more radical than the one you have made, before its translation could become an easy matter. I am indebted to you, then, for this clear proof that *Le Cimetière marin* is a thing that can be understood, if the reader takes some little care in reading it, and has some little desire to understand it.”

I think the irony in this letter is too plain to need my pointing it out. Perhaps you will ask me to translate this poem for you, in whole or in part; but I must beg to be excused, for two reasons.

The first: that I find, in reading the poem, a truly refined and powerful pleasure, but I cannot say that I understand it in its true sense; and there is no shame in this for me, so long as the French critics and men of letters themselves—who naturally know their own language and literature better than I do—differ so widely in their understanding of it.

And the second: that Paul Valéry himself holds that to translate poetry into prose is to kill that poetry, to caricature it, and to efface the marks of beauty within it; and I take refuge in God from committing this crime, or falling into this sin.

But Egypt has poets—or I hope Egypt has poets—who have a good command of French; might they not race one another to render this poem into Arabic verse? And might our friends at Al-Risala offer, to whichever poet wins this contest, a prize fitting the effort he will have expended—an effort that will indeed be a formidable one, but one that will place before the readers of the Arabic language a model drawn from among the loftiest and most splendid models of modern poetry.