

# Paul Valéry

*Kawkab al-Sharq, 15 December 1933*

Gentlemen,

I wanted to begin these remarks with a genuine thanks, one I owe to the YMCA, for so kindly asking me to speak to you, in this lecture, about Paul Valéry. I wanted, in offering this thanks, to touch on a particular point: that in accepting to speak on this subject, they granted me one of the happiest opportunities imaginable — the opportunity to spend a week, or more than a week, closeted alone with one of the greatest of French writers, one of the greatest of poets, and one of the most exalted of philosophers.

I do not know whether I will be able, over the course of this lecture, to bring you even somewhat closer to this writer-poet-philosopher's own outlook, this man I am about to speak to you about — but I do know, with genuine certainty, that I have gained, over this past week, something of real and considerable value, and that I remain indebted to the YMCA on this score.

But I had scarcely entered this hall before I saw something else, something that makes this duty of thanks weigh heavier still, and doubles whatever measure of it I owe you: this reception you have so graciously granted me, one I do not know how to describe even to myself, nor how properly to thank you for — a reception that has made me feel there are, among Egyptians, those who so kindly extend their own affection to this humble person, and grant him a welcome I do not believe I deserve even a part of, let alone all of.

I now want to spend no further time on these topics on which lecturers usually spend their own time — thanks and greetings. I want to launch straight into the subject I am about to speak on, and I assure you I genuinely need a great deal of courage to launch into this particular, weighty subject. Suffice it to say that I am about to speak to you of a man the very least one could say of him is that he is genuinely incomprehensible — a man who writes in the language of clarity and lucidity itself, the French language, and writes for a people among the most refined of peoples, among the most capable of understanding prose, poetry, and philosophy; a man who writes in an age in which the intellect, and the social intellect in particular, had advanced far enough to resolve

a great many problems and puzzles — and who, for all of that, remains incomprehensible to a great many French people themselves.

Paul Valéry is the very banner of French literature in this present age. He was born in the year 1871, and had scarcely reached the age of ten before he travelled to England, residing there a short while, before returning to France, where he spent his own time as young Frenchmen generally spend it in study, until he completed his secondary education. At eighteen, he came into contact, through reading, with the leading men of letters of that era, and continued advancing in his own studies at a calm, unhurried pace, until the year 1894, when he travelled once more to England, residing there for a considerable time. On this occasion, he came into contact with a great many English poets and writers, men of letters, journalism, and art — and it appears this long residence in England genuinely shaped him. He then returned to France; loving poetry at the time, and attempting to compose it himself, he wrote a number of poems, publishing them in some of the many literary magazines then widely circulated.

Scarcely a few years had passed before Paul Valéry became one of the well-known, prominent figures in France, French magazines vying with one another for the right to publish whatever poetry, whatever prose, he might grant them. But he had barely turned thirty, had barely won this fame he won with such strange speed, before news of him suddenly went silent, and people began asking after him, unable to find him, searching for him, unable to trace him — and he remained so for long years, before suddenly reappearing just before the war, this new person entirely different from the person they had once known.

From that time on, Paul Valéry became a genuine obsession for writers, men of letters, critics, and thinkers in France. People could scarcely read whatever he wrote, whatever prose or verse he composed, without violent disagreement breaking out among them — disputing one another in the harshest terms, rejecting one another, hurling accusations of ignorance, stupidity, obscurity, and affectation at one another, exactly the kinds of things men of letters throw at each other in dispute. Then, in these recent years, Paul Valéry's own standing grew so great that he genuinely imposed himself upon people — even those most vehement in rejecting him, most bitter in their own hatred of him, found themselves compelled to admire him, whether they loved him or not. And then Paul Valéry was crowned with the very crowning honour the French themselves recognize: elected a member of the French Academy —

standing now the very highest of the French in rank, the most significant of them in literature, whether in poetry, prose, or any of the other various arts men of letters engage with.

I was reading, this very morning, a chapter written by one of the greatest of French writers, who died only two months ago — Abbé Bremond — on Paul Valéry, an introduction to a book written about this poet. And I found this great writer genuinely captivated by Paul Valéry, captivated in a truly strange way, a captivation that drives him quite beyond himself, forcing him to say: "I read this book, and understand nothing of it — but its resistance to my own understanding neither alarms me, nor discourages me, nor turns me away from reading it; it draws me toward this same reading, rather, since no sooner do I begin reading than I sense this man is saying something genuinely significant, something I absolutely must understand, and reach — so I labour at it, whatever labour it takes, searching, digging, reading, reading again, going back over what I have already read, yet understanding nothing at all. And the more obscure it grows for me, the more passionately drawn to it I become — because I find, in his own words, a music no one, under any circumstances, could ever turn away from, or grow indifferent to."

The truth is, this man's own personality is genuinely strange, strange across every one of its artistic and intellectual dimensions — and it is enough to know a few of this man's own views to see clearly that he is a writer unlike other writers, a poet unlike other poets. This man ranks among those most capable of writing prose, most capable of composing verse — and, at the very same time, among those who most bitterly hate writing, most thoroughly avoid composition. He himself says he has never once written except under real compulsion, and that, were he not somehow obliged to treat some subject or other, whether in verse or prose, he would never have treated anything at all, never written anything at all — for within this man reside two entirely different persons. One of these two persons is Paul Valéry's own self; the other, Paul Valéry's own intellect.

His first person — his "self" — is composed of heart and emotion, feeling, inclination, and passion; this person, composed of those very qualities that make a man sensitive, susceptible to being moved by things, moved by whatever he sees, reads, and hears.

Beside this first person stands his other person — his "intellect": this person who wants only to understand, wants to proceed only from

understanding, deliberation, insight, analysis, and reasoning, arriving at the very core and true nature of things. And while Paul Valéry's own "self" is a clear mirror reflecting the varied shapes of things and passions exactly as they are — loving, and loving to excess, hating, and hating to excess, moved by every sensitive stimulus — his own "intellect," by contrast, compels him toward patience, forces him toward stillness, drives him to study, to analyse, to reason through, subjecting every one of his own traits, every one of his own emotions, everything he feels, to analysis, reasoning, and dissection. He is always studying himself, analysing himself, always comparing what he feels against what he finds, what he senses against what he wills. This is why so many writers who have studied this man have said his own life amounts to nothing but a violent tragedy, nothing but a sorrowful, heart-rending struggle between his own intellect and his own self.

A famous French poet — Paul Claudel — once wished to explain this kind of struggle between a great man's own self and his own intellect, and offered a parable to illustrate it; Abbé Bremond then came along and applied this same parable to his own poet, Paul Valéry.

This parable is genuinely charming in itself: there are two persons, one a man, the other a woman. He names the man Animus — Latin for the intellect — and names the woman Anima — the self, or soul. Paul Claudel tells us life between this married couple is neither easy nor simple, but a marriage of perpetual dispute — even so, the wife is the wealthy one, the one of real means, the one who enables her own husband to live in the fullest sense of that word: she brought him her own dowry, prepared his own household, and provided him everything he needed to live a genuinely comfortable life. It would only have been reasonable for the husband to be genuinely grateful, genuinely aware of this kindness, genuinely appreciative of this blessing — and so he was, at first: content, delighted, genuinely happy in his wife's own company, and she happy too. They lived like this for a time — not a long one, though, since the man soon grew rebellious, arrogant, and overbearing toward his own wife, soon convinced himself he was too great to be beholden to her, grew haughty toward her, subjected her to his own domineering, arrogant authority, and began turning away from her, scorning her, holding her in contempt. Then, one day, this husband returned to his own home, and, before entering, heard a beautiful voice worth listening to — a sweet, delicate, moving voice — and had scarcely begun listening, lingering over it, before he found himself utterly captivated by it.

He then went in to his own wife, and asked her to repeat what he had heard, to sing that same piece once more — but she met him with a certain scorn, and so he began to scheme, and scheme to excess, trying every possible means to induce his wife to sing again — but got nothing at all from her; she would, the moment she saw him, simply stop singing entirely, and return to being an ordinary woman, distinguished by nothing at all. Our own husband, meanwhile, remained genuinely infatuated, genuinely obsessed with that voice, wanting only to hear it again.

He devised a scheme, disguised himself, and took to going out, then returning secretly, hiding himself, so his wife would believe herself alone, with no one there — and she would sing, and he would delight in that singing, listening to it still. But this man remained arrogant, entirely full of himself, genuinely vain, unwilling to remain indebted to his own wife for anything, even for this beautiful voice he now heard — and so he vowed to himself he would labour and strive to fashion, for himself, varieties of song that would make him entirely independent of the kind of song he heard from his own wife. And he succeeded in exactly what he set out to do: drawing from within himself a song more exalted, more distinguished, and far more moving than this same song he had once heard from his own wife.

This parable, offered by Claudel, represents for us the struggle, or the tension, existing between poets' own selves and their own intellects — it is precisely the parable that helps us picture this man, Paul Valéry, who is, as I have told you, both self and intellect at once.

Paul Valéry possesses a genuinely powerful sensibility, a genuinely acute one, a genuinely fertile feeling — but possesses, alongside all of this, a genuinely powerful intellect too, so that between his own intellect and his own self there rages a violent struggle, one that ends, always, in the intellect triumphing over the self: this thinking, analysing, reasoning intellect overcoming this feeling, pliant, poetic self, one that senses things, and cannot help but be moved by whatever it senses.

Paul Valéry, in his own youth, was genuinely moved by his own emotions, moved by whatever he found, felt, and sensed, and stood, at one point, on the very verge of becoming, like other ordinary poets, a man who had surrendered himself wholly to his own heart, his own emotion, his own feeling — but soon rebelled against his own self and his own emotions, subjecting himself instead to the intellect's own authority:

studying, analysing, reasoning, probing every one of his own faults, discerning within himself every flaw and every merit. And this dissection, this analysis, this reasoning convinced him that the intellect was everything, and the self ought to be nothing at all — so that he came to distrust everything a man produces, distrust everything a man creates, whether poetry, prose, painting, or any other artistic domain, caring for none of it unless he had first subjected it to the intellect, and grown genuinely certain it matched what the intellect itself wanted man to be.

Paul Valéry was once asked, in some interview, what he had wished to become in life — and he answered that he had wished to become a naval officer, since he was born in the city of Sète, a port town on France's own coast; growing up looking out upon the sea, watching warships dock in that same harbour, he developed a genuinely intense admiration for the navy, and for the military navy in particular, wishing for nothing so much as to become a naval officer. But he was never able to fulfil this wish, since, in his own childhood and youth, he was never able, by any means whatsoever, to grasp even the simplest, most elementary mathematical questions. He was a genuinely poor arithmetic student, struggling to understand the very basics of calculation, geometry, and algebra — understanding nothing at all.

It is genuinely obvious that a man incapable of grasping even the basics of mathematics stands no hope of becoming a naval, or military, engineer. What is genuinely strange, though, is that Paul Valéry's own poor grasp of mathematics stood between him and fulfilling this very ambition he had aspired to — so that he was unable, whether to his own misfortune, or his own good fortune, or the good fortune of everyone else, to become a naval officer.

And yet he had scarcely grown older before he became one of the most celebrated scholars of mathematics — turning himself toward arithmetic and the mathematical sciences only after he had already passed the age when he might have become a naval officer. He turned himself toward mathematics not because he loved mathematics, but because he turned himself, rather, toward studying his own self: he wanted to discern how people think, how they observe the things around them, and how, through this same thinking, they manage to arrive at the discovery of knowledge, and the works they produce from it.

This meant he set aside everything people had already achieved in knowledge and art, and began studying nature and mathematics all over

again, as though he were the very first man — finding himself confronted with this puzzle that is the universe itself, wishing to study this universe entirely on his own, without the assistance of any other human agent. He began studying himself, and studying whatever surrounded him, and this same study led him exactly where it had led others before him: he found mathematics to be foundational, and became, in the end, one of the most capable men in the mathematical sciences.

This own discovery — Paul Valéry's own discovery of mathematics, his own reinvention of it, exactly as the Greek mathematicians once invented it before him — his own discovery of the laws of mechanics and mathematics, all of this had a genuinely enormous effect on this man's own understanding of literature and art, since it shaped this man's own mind into a purely mathematical form. He would say to his own friends: "I am genuinely certain intellectual progress will eventually arrive at algebraic and mathematical formulas becoming the highest ideal for people, whenever they speak, whenever they converse, whenever they produce works of art."

Paul Valéry's own discovery of scientific facts and laws is not, in itself, a matter of any real significance, since he merely rediscovered geometry and algebra — bringing nothing genuinely new, given that people had already discovered these things long before, since Euclid's own time.

There is no doubt mathematics itself owes nothing whatsoever to Paul Valéry — but he has nonetheless arrived, through all of this, at a genuinely new theory for understanding literary works. Paul Valéry believes any literary work genuinely deserving of that name is, in truth, nothing but a mathematical construction, nothing but a piece of architecture, nothing but a work of engineering — so that whoever wishes to write an essay, or compose an ode, must necessarily submit to the laws of mathematics, exactly as an engineer submits to them when raising any building.

This may appear, on the surface, a simple enough matter, one people scarcely sense the effect of in the lives of writers — but you will sense it clearly enough once you see that Paul Valéry holds in the deepest contempt that very kind of literature we call "inspired" literature: literature a man produces without any real labour, without striving over it or genuinely crafting it, literature that issues from a man exactly as light issues from the sun, or fragrance from a flower — literature in which

a man's own hand does nothing but simply utter it. This kind of literature he neither respects nor loves, and he remarks that writers who draw their own inspiration from nature are people holding out their own hand for alms falling to them from heaven.

The single most distinctive thing about Paul Valéry is that he does not wish to be a receiver in art, but wishes, rather, to be an agent; does not wish to be moved, but wishes, rather, to move; does not wish for inspiration to descend upon him, but wishes, rather, to genuinely create art from nothing.

He wants to compose poetry, and dictate it to nature itself; he tried, then, to dictate to nature, tried to realize this ideal of his, tried to genuinely construct his own literature by design, to create it according to this exalted image he had formed of it — and found this was no easy matter at all. He arrived, though, at certain results: he wrote, he composed — and, looking back over it, found whatever verse he had composed failed, in every case, to express what he had actually wanted to say, and whatever prose he had written failed to depict what he wanted to say. He came to believe, then, that composition, in prose and verse alike, was something a man genuinely wishing to express what lies within his own self correctly ought not to rely upon at all. He came to believe it was better for a man to think, study, analyse, reason, imagine, and represent to himself whatever meanings he wishes to represent, content with this same pure artistic pleasure alone, never degrading these images down to that ordinary, banal level people exchange with one another whenever they write and compose. For this reason, he abandoned both poetry and prose entirely, and devoted himself instead to study and reflection.

One day, in the year 1913, as far as I recall, a group of his own friends, headed by the French writer André Gide, asked him to publish some of his own earlier poetry in a French magazine then just being launched — and he refused; but they pressed him further, and he pressed his own refusal further still, until they pressed so insistently that they finally overcame him, gathering together a body of the poetry he had composed in his own youth, back when he still attempted to write verse, typing it out and presenting it to him. He took up this old poetry, and began looking it over with a certain contempt and disdain — until it occurred to him to take it up for a bit of revision, changing a word here, putting another in its place, striking out a line there — and found real pleasure in this kind of work, sensing that, for all his own contempt of

this poetry and prose, he found real pleasure in this very thing he professed to hate. Yet he remained, all the same, insistent that he would not become a poet, or a writer again — caught, then, in a violent war with his own self, finding pleasure in handling poetry, and deciding, therefore, to compose one simple, short piece, to close out whatever verse he had already written, making it something like a farewell to the poet's own life. He reckoned this final poem would never exceed forty lines, after which he would divorce poetry entirely, irrevocably, with no return. He began thinking through this poem — and, as you will recall, he never drew his own inspiration for poetry from nature, but genuinely constructed it by design — and, thinking it through, ended up spending four whole years on this single poem, and this same poem, which he had reckoned would never exceed forty lines, reached nearly five hundred and ten. I believe you will agree with me that four years spent composing a single poem is a genuinely considerable thing. We knew, in our own ancient Arabic literature, the "annalists" who would spend a full year polishing a single ode — poets like Zuhayr and al-Hutay'a. Our own friend Paul Valéry, though, is not content with the single year we know — his own year runs to four whole years.

The charming thing is that he composed this poem and titled it *La Jeune Parque* [The Young Fate] — a poem depicting the various phases passing over a man's own conscience across the course of a single night, or the conscience's own inner conversation with itself at a particular moment.

The charming thing is that this poem was published, and people read it, and understood nothing of it. Stranger still, Paul Valéry himself, when asked about this poem's own meaning, could neither identify it, nor explain it, nor announce it to the world. Stranger still, this very poem — the one Paul Valéry had intended as his own farewell to poetry — drove him back into poetry with real, violent force, so that he found himself plunged headlong into composing verse again, a poet in spite of himself, composing poetry against his own will.

The charming thing, too, is Paul Valéry's own defence against this charge of obscurity levelled against him. He tells certain interlocutors that the causes of obscurity trace back to several things: one being that the meaning you wish to express may belong to that class of meanings with no established name at all, so that you find yourself forced to depict that meaning by reaching for words never devised for it. Suppose, he says, the word "chair" did not exist in the language, and you wanted to

convey the meaning of a chair using words never devised for it, straining to bring these words as close as possible to that meaning — your own effort, however great, could never substitute for the one, specific word itself.

"And I myself composed this poem on a matter of the psyche, and language remains genuinely impoverished when it comes to matters of the psyche: the soul's own emotions, its own inclinations, its own passions have no words genuinely capable of conveying them well. Add to that, when I wanted to make use of the few words that do exist in the language for this purpose, I found them dry, harsh words, unsuited to poetry, and was forced to discard a considerable number of them — forced to this by language's own poverty. It is not my own fault my poem turns out obscure — it is the fault of a language that simply lacks the words."

Another cause of obscurity: when you say a given text is obscure, this obscurity is something shared between the text and its own reader — the text is obscure because it is genuinely difficult, and the text is obscure because whoever reads it lacks the intelligence and cultivation needed to understand it. Naturally, people will never admit the obscurity comes from themselves — they will always insist they are intelligent, and that the obscurity comes from the text; that writers and poets alone fall short, failing to convey to them what they wish to convey.

One of the most important qualities distinguishing Paul Valéry, then, is craftsmanship — labour, the very attempt to construct. For, as I have told you, he genuinely crafts his own poetry, crafting it according to the rules of mathematics and geometry alike. A line of poetry, for him, is not mere speech spoken, but a mathematical work executed; an ode, for him, is nothing but a mathematical unit, requiring genuine coherence between its own parts, genuine harmony and consonance between meaning and expression, then between meanings themselves, between words themselves, and finally between the very letters composing each word. Paul Valéry's own poetry ranks among the most precisely calibrated poetry we read, and among the most capable of depicting exactly what it sets out to depict.

One observation made of Paul Valéry is that, when he writes prose, he inclines heavily toward abstract meanings, and, when he does offer images, they are never the visual kind, but psychological or sensory images, grasped through hearing, taste, or touch. When he composes

poetry, by contrast, his own images, all or nearly all of them, are visual images, seen with the eye.

We search for whatever meanings Paul Valéry actually intended, and can scarcely find them at all; we ask him himself what he meant, and he answers: "I meant nothing!" He was asked: but you have composed a poem? He answered: "I said nothing at all — I made something: this very poem, which says whatever you hear it say, and it falls to you to search it out for yourselves."

Although it remains genuinely difficult for me to depict Paul Valéry's own particular art for you, I would still like to translate two or three lines of his own poetry — not so you might feel their own beauty, since I am genuinely certain that, translated into any other language, they lose that beauty entirely; there is no beauty in his own poetry capable of surviving translation, word for word, into any other language — but I offer you these lines so you might see his own method of thought and poetry.

These lines are voiced through the serpent, depicting Satan as he tempts Eve to eat from the tree, as the Torah tells it. The serpent — Satan — speaks of himself, saying: "I was present the way scent is present, the way the flavour of some thought is present, one whose own depths can never be fully brought to light."

He means Satan was present with Eve in a manner scarcely felt, scarcely sensed at all — present in a genuinely hidden way, one that led the devil to picture himself as the scent of a flower. And who, after all, can see, or hear, the scent of a flower?

It then occurred to him that this simile alone was not enough, since a flower's own scent can still be smelled — and so, pushing the concealment further, he devised another, even more subtle and hidden simile, making the devil liken himself, instead, to the flavour of a thought. Imagine — a thought possessing its own flavour, or scent! What admits of no doubt, though, what not even Paul Valéry's own most bitter opponents and detractors can possibly deny, is that those who hear his own poetry, whether or not they understand French, provided they know how to properly hear poetry read aloud, can scarcely hear it without finding, in it, a genuine, musical pleasure — a pleasure they seek the source of, and cannot identify. It does not come to them from understanding, since they do not understand; nor from mere hearing, since they do not even know the language — it is something resembling magic itself.

I do not know — and perhaps Paul Valéry himself does not know — how he managed to infuse this music into his own poetry; and the charming thing is that he infused this same music into his own prose as well.

You may believe me: I read, this very day alone, a small book of Paul Valéry's twice over, having already read it twice before — and I assure you I will read it many more times yet. I understood the smaller part of it, and failed to understand most of it — yet I find in it a pleasure unlike any other pleasure.

This book's own subject is dance — do not be alarmed, do not be alarmed; there is nothing in it to fear. Paul Valéry depicts Socrates — and you will see, from Socrates's own name, that we are far removed from mere entertainment. Picture Socrates, and two of his own students, conversing at the end of their own supper, when a troupe of dancing women suddenly appears, dancing before them — the dialogue between Socrates and his own companions turning on the art contained within this dance, and the meanings within it that serve as a foundation for aesthetics itself. You can see, then, that this book belongs nowhere near the licentious sort one might fear for its effect on morals — it is, rather, a work of the highest philosophy. I do not wish to summarize this book for you — what I wish to say, rather, is that what genuinely delights one in reading Paul Valéry is, before anything else, this verbal music affecting our own ears and hearts, one we find ourselves attached to, captivated by, seeking within it whatever beauty we seek — finding ourselves entirely able to do without whatever meanings Paul Valéry himself actually intended.

Among the views genuinely worth pondering by anyone who composes poetry are the very views Paul Valéry himself holds on the meaning of poetry. Paul Valéry, in one of the rare moments when he managed to speak with real clarity, offered a simple enough definition of poetry: for him, it is the capacity to depict, in words, those very things a man feels, or wishes to depict, through tears, when he weeps, through cries, when he cries out, through laughter, when he laughs, and through whatever movements come to him, whenever he is moved by any stimulus at all.

Paul Valéry holds that language, by its own nature, is incapable of depicting this thing with any real precision, yet holds, too, that depicting it in words remains an absolute necessity. He holds that the highest,

truest poetry is what he calls "pure poetry" — and, asked about pure poetry, tells us this pure poetry can never truly be realized in more than a single line at most, since it is this precise, sincere, exact depiction of a single emotion, with nothing whatsoever of what prose is capable of conveying allowed to enter into it.

And since everything prose is capable of conveying corrupts poetry the moment it enters it, and since prose is capable of conveying every meaning and every emotion, it follows that poetry — true poetry — can never really exist at all.

This pure poetry, Paul Valéry's own highest ideal, is not something that actually exists — it is an ideal a poet might realize, at most, in a single line, or part of a line, and, quite often, is never realized at all.

How I wished I might dwell on Paul Valéry at greater length! I have, up to now, spoken to you of only the simplest aspects of this man — I have not spoken to you of his own approach to prose, nor of his own particular views in philosophy, nor of his own various other opinions. And yet time has already passed, and I find I have already gone on at excessive length. It is enough for me to have succeeded in winning from you this genuinely wonderful thing I never expected: your own beautiful, attentive listening to this account of such a strange poet.