

Three Poems by Valéry

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Paul Valéry (1871–1945) is one of the group of French poets who influenced the Modernist movement in English literature and helped English poets re-discover the full resources of their own language. His style engages both the intellect and the emotions; it offers enticing ambiguities and a rich lyricism in traditional French metres rather than the *vers libre* that was being explored by some of his contemporaries. Indeed, although his poetry represents the height of the French Symbolist movement that has its roots in the *correspondances* of Baudelaire, it was published mostly after Symbolism had been supplanted by other French poetic movements and experiments. For Valéry had given up poetry in 1892 to pursue various philosophic interests and returned to it only twenty years later; he published his first volume in 1917, and his modest but influential output ended in 1922.

Valéry's poetry embodies the pleasure of the free, integrated person who is confronted by modernity with its inclination towards the ant-hill society (or, as Baudelaire called it, the *fourmillante cité*). His exploration of reality combines the discipline of method with an openness

La Fileuse

Lilia . . . , neque nent.

Assise, la fileuse au bleu de la croisée
Où le jardin mélodieux se dodeline,
Le rouet ancien qui ronfle l'a grisée.

Lasse, ayant bu l'azur, de filer la câline
Chevelure, à ses doigts si faibles évasive,
Elle songe, et sa tête petite s'incline.

Un arbuste et l'air pur font une source vive
Qui, suspendue au jour, délicieuse arrose
De ses pertes de fleurs le jardin de l'oisive.

to serendipity, and he focuses his attention in a freedom between the natural laws of language (as he puts it) and the constraints of a conventional artifice of prosody, between the craft of the poet and inspiration from the divine.

Valéry is keenly interested in what he calls the poetic state, which he compares to a kind of dream-state. Objects, though they remain the same (or seemingly the same) as the objects of ordinary perception, are brought into a new harmony with the whole of our psychic sensibilities. While we all experience these states at fortuitous times, the office of the poet is to induce such a state through the use of language.

As the forgoing suggests, Valéry views poetry as a mode of self-exploration. He seeks to combine 'presence,' his term for attention to sensation, with 'absence,' his term for attention to thought, memory, and imagination. He avoids mere narcissism through his openness to Being superior to himself. And his exploration is always attentive to language and its limits: avoiding mere conventionalism, purifying the words of the tribe (in the phrase of his great master Mallarmé), and testing thought against living experience. His strict adherence to conventional structures combines syntax and prosody such that the sound and sense of the verse are made to seem inseparable. Thus, while an attractive image creates one kind of charm, the quiet intensity of his language creates another, so that his poems continue to yield a meditative pleasure in multiple re-readings.

The Spinner

Lilies . . . , neither do they spin.

Seated, the spinner in the casement blue—
The garden nods and sways melodiously;
The old wheel snores, and she becomes entranced.

Weary—having drunk the azure—of spinning
The nestling hair elusive to her frail
Fingers, she dreams; her little head bows down.

A bush and pure air make a lively stream
Suspended in the sunbeam: delightful sprinkles
Of flower-losses bathe the idler's garden.

Une tige, où le vent vagabond se repose,
 Courbe le salut vain de sa grâce étoilée
 Dédiant magnifique, au vieux rouet, sa rose.

Mais la dormeuse file une laine isolée :
 Mystérieusement l'ombre frêle se tresse
 Au fil de ses doigts longs et qui dorment, filée.

Le songe se dévide avec une paresse
 Angélique, et sans cesse, au doux fuseau crédule,
 La chevelure ondule au gré de la caresse . . .

Derrière tant de fleurs, l'azur se dissimule,
 Fileuse de feuillage et de lumière ceinte :
 Tout le ciel vert se meurt. Le dernier arbre brûle.

Ta sœur, la grande rose où sourit une sainte,
 Parfume ton front vague au vent de son haleine
 Innocente, et tu crois languir . . . Tu es éteinte

Au bleu de la croisée où tu filais la laine.

Hélène

Azur ! c'est moi . . . Je viens des grottes de la mort
 Entendre l'onde se rompre aux degrés sonores,
 Et je revois les galères dans les aurores
 Ressusciter de l'ombre au fil des rames d'or.

Mes solitaires mains appellent les monarques
 Dont la barbe de sel amusait mes doigts purs ;
 Je pleurais. Ils chantaient leurs triomphes obscurs
 Et les golfes enfouis aux poupes de leurs barques.

J'entends les conques profondes et les clairons
 Militaires rythmer le vol des avirons ;
 Le chant clair des rameurs enchaîne le tumulte,

A stem, in which the wandering wind relaxes,
 Bends the vain salute of its starry grace
 Devoting to the wheel its splendid rose.

The sleeper spins a lonely woolen hair:
 Mysteriously the subtle shadow weaves
 Into the thread of long and sleeping fingers.

The dream unwinds angelic laziness:
 Ceaseless, onto the sweet ingenuous spindle,
 The hair waves gladly under her caress . . .

Behind so many flowers the azure hides,
 The spinner girded round with leaves and light:
 The sky of green is dying. The last tree burns.

Your sister the lofty rose, a smiling saint,
 Perfumes your hazy brow with gentle wind
 Of innocent breath; you languish . . . You are fading

In casement blue where you were spinning wool.

Helen

Azure! It's I . . . I come from caves of death
 To hear the breaking waves resound on high;
 I see again the ships in radiant light
 Reborn from shade on oars of golden thread.

My solitary hands have called these lords:
 My fingers—pure—amused by salty beards,
 I wept. They sang their exploits dark and feared;
 The waves engulfed their boats to high stern boards.

I hear the deep conches and martial horns
 Impose their rhythm on the flight of oars:
 The clarion song of rowers leads th' uproar;

Et les dieux, à la proue héroïque exaltés
 Dans leur sourire antique et que l'écume insulte
 Tendent vers moi leurs bras indulgents et sculptés.

La Ceinture

Quand le ciel couleur d'une joue
 Laisse enfin les yeux le chérir,
 Et qu'au point doré de périr
 Dans les roses le temps se joue,

Devant le muet de plaisir
 Qu'enchaîne une telle peinture,
 Danse une Ombre à libre ceinture
 Que le soir est près de saisir.

Cette ceinture vagabonde
 Fait dans le souffle aérien
 Frémir le suprême lien
 De mon silence avec ce monde . . .

Absent, présent . . . Je suis bien seul,
 Et sombre, ô suave linceul.

The gods on rich heroic prows exalted
 With ancient smiles, by spume and froth insulted,
 Stretch out to me indulgent, sculpted arms.

The Cincture

Just when the sky the hue of cheeks
 Allows the eyes to cherish it—
 When at the golden perishing point
 The weather plays in rosy pinks:

Before one muted with delight
 That such a painting has enthralled,
 A Shadow dances in a cincture
 Evening is about to seize.

This cincture vagabond and free
 Sets, within the aerial breath,
 To quivering the utmost bond
 Of my silence with this world . . .

Absent, present . . . I'm well alone
 And sombre, soft exquisite shroud!