

Descartes a la mode : Nietzsche and Valery on Cognition

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Much of Nietzsche's *Will-to-Power* can be read as a refutation of Descartes' *cogito* : in summing up Cartesian thinking about cognition, Nietzsche finds that Descartes has missed the point. "If one reduces the proposition to 'There is thinking, therefore there are thoughts,'" notes Nietzsche, "one has produced a mere tautology : and precisely that which is in question, the 'reality of thought,' is not touched upon—that is, in this form the 'apparent reality' of thought cannot be denied. But what Descartes desired was that thought should have, not an *apparent reality*, but a reality in itself.¹" Reality in itself, according to Nietzsche, is never discussed or analyzed because people are content with the surface image of things and with their superficial understanding of their own thinking processes. It is in this region that Nietzsche's thought most exactly coincides with that of Paul Valery.

According to Valery, the difference between the creative mind and the mundane mind (for Valery there is a viable and not a specious difference between the two) is that the creative mind sees new questions or unanswered questions in the familiar object. The child asks questions about the familiar object or everyday event and receives in answer a simplistic, received, and monolithic interpreta-

tion of the object or event. Eventually, the child no longer asks or even sees the questions since all queries seem to have been answered. In truth, Valery argues, the cliché, the dogmatic response, is substituting for any authentic interrogation of the object. And language, rather than being the medium of communication and elucidation, precludes any confrontation with the object itself 2.

The common epithet applied to Valery (an epithet which bears out Valery's argument since it prevents us from reading him in an unprejudiced manner) is that of "aesthete." But Valery is not an aesthete, any more than Nietzsche is; both men are led to their positions and to their startling rhetoric by disgust with the traditions which gloss over the perception of the present, a history which binds and blindfolds. We see this frequently in Valery's Nietzschean letters to Andre Gide :

Everything is false ! The dissonance splits the ears of my understanding. Language is poor as a widow. Nature is ugly as if a second rate artist had made it Now nothing is created Mystery doesn't exist, alas ! ... Causes and effects don't exist ! We create them, Gentlemen ! So what does that prove ?

Style ? Go and watch them fabricate it if you want to vomit ! Artists, you will go mad ! Bourgeois, you are stupid ! Who made the universe ? I did ! God is an atom that radiates. God is principle ... God is an Idea. God is ! So God is a few words. That is not much 3

This bombast is the result of despair over an unreflective people. Following Nietzsche's observations to their natural end Valery is convinced of the complete subjectivity men have of their environments and the superficiality of that knowledge.

Valery's notebooks are filled with the analyses of his own thought processes: commenting on his own habit of awakening daily at four in the morning to write in his notebooks for a few hours, Valery writes that "to think otherwise than everybody else (simply by recasting everyone's observations) comes almost as naturally to anyone who feels uncommonly wide awake when most others are asleep. From this I formed the habit of considering the common view of things as an expedient, always untrustworthy" (*Moi*, 333). If Valery is sometimes given to excess in expressing such sentiments, particularly in his notebooks and in his letters to close friends, the excesses are almost always due to his attempt to recast the everyday manner of looking at things. "*Each one of us must perhaps do his utmost to find, or render false, everything that is accepted true by all - - at least in his private usage*" (*Moi*, 333 ; Valery's italics). Like Nietzsche, Valery calls for a revaluation of all values.

When Valery or Nietzsche issue this call for reevaluation, they are rejecting the common Western mode of thought which seeks definitive answers or single interpretations to questions, problems, or things. It is easy to domesticate the world by seeing it simply, in only one way. But, as Ruediger Grimm has noted, for a thinker such as Nietzsche "there can be no 'correct' interpretations, if by correct we mean 'corresponding exactly to reality,' because Nietzsche denies that it is meaningful or consistent to talk about any such realm of stable, self identical entities to which statements could correspond." 4 In Nietzsche's view, and in Valery's we either misunderstand or fail to see the world because of our tendency to simplify, organize, and categorize.

Nietzsche argues for "perspectivism," which he opposes to positivism. Perspectivism holds that facts do not exist; only many interpretations, "countless meanings," exist for phenomena (*WP*, 481). It is not enough, Nietzsche writes, to say that interpretations are subjective; even the subject which makes the interpretation is a *persona*, a thing which is posited, invented by the thinking subject. This subjective interpreter is limited by the horizon of his understanding and experience, his "I"-concept (*WP*, 482). "Our particular case is interesting enough: we have produced a conception in order to be able to live in a world, in order to perceive just enough to endure it - -" (*WP*, 568). These facts and concepts which we take to be the world are distortions since they are wrenched from context, removed from the world. Grimm explains that by "turning our experiences into facts, concepts, truths, statistics, etc. we 'kill' them, rob them of their immediacy and vitality and embalm them, thus transforming them into the convenient bib of knowledge which furnish our comfortable, predictable, smug existences" (*Grimm*, 32).

Nietzsche refers to this process as the "Egyptianism" of philosophers caused by their hatred of becoming. The major culprit for the transformation of things of the world into "conceptual mummies" is language, according to Nietzsche. Language is the deceptive straitjacket which makes permanent and static the concept of a thing, which hands it over to tradition, and which becomes a barrier to understanding. We accept the apparent for the real (*TI*, 36). Language relies upon the notion of correspondence and stability which Nietzsche rejects.

Valery, whether on his own or through his reading of Nietzsche, came to much the same conclusions about language. "I have observed for a long time," he wrote in a letter to Gide in 1901, "that the philosophers have scarcely stirred in reality any but the meaning of words. So they teach us nothing clear about the mind but only the interior or relations of language, this language resting on

nothing" (*Moi*, 230). This language which is signifier without signification is extended by Valery to form a response to the Cartesian *cogito*. If all we know of the world is through language, and if that is the only medium through which we may communicate, it is in fact standing for the world: however inadequate, it is all the world there is. But in that case, our understanding of the world and our knowledge of the self is always a fiction. Valery complains that it is not possible for him to be sure "that the entity Mr. P. V. is anything but a 'convenient notation'" (*Moi*, 215). Our language allows us to make up the world. As Nietzsche notes, "We believe in reason: this, however, is the philosophy of gray concepts. Language depends on the most naive prejudices" (*WP*, 522). Nietzsche's and Valery's arguments run along lines similar to those found in the well-known "Dreaming Argument" in the First Meditation of Descartes, but while Descartes could resolve his doubt in the Sixth Meditation by more or less rejecting his First Meditation premises, Nietzsche and Valery remain sceptical⁶.

For Valery, resolving the problem is made even more difficult because it is necessary to use language to interrogate language and the represented object is continually receding from the representation.

My profession obliges me to use a great many vague *words* and to give the appearance of speculating about them, by way of them.

For me they have no value. I do not really think with these philosophers' words - - which are generally expedients of everyday language to which a specific importance is given, and from which we try to draw some superior knowledge - - attributing a meaning to them, considering them as problems in one attitude of mind while using them as adequate means in another.

For instance, what is Time, Beauty, etc. ? Your *pause* is not promising. A can understand B, who uses these words. But *A does not understand A.* (*Moi*, 318).

Or as Nietzsche points out more strongly, "Compared with music all communication by words is shameless; words dilute and brutalize; words depersonalize; words make the uncommon common" (*WP*, 810). Yet we are willing, according to Nietzsche, to believe in truth, in the concept of stable meaning and shared understanding our representations out of fear and laziness. It is necessary for us to use a "psychological reduction," whether we believe that the world does exist or that the world doesn't; in either case we are relieved of doubt (*WP*, 585). It is impossible to avoid belief: "Believing is the primal beginning even in every sense impression: a kind of affirmation the first intellectual activity!"⁷

Similarly, for both Nietzsche and Valéry, it is impossible to use sense impression to verify existence of anything or any sort of ontological status: like language, the senses can only falsify and simplify. Both sensory data and one's interpretations of sense impressions are already, in effect, coded in the same manner as language; the senses, too, are "mummified" by concepts and are removed from the real. We believe that we know the thing when we have discerned its outline, its surface, or its symptoms, while our conceptualizations are merely the impoverished shell of the real.

At the same time, Nietzsche and Valéry find themselves trapped in a corner. Just as it is impossible to critique language without using language and so participating in the same sort of inevitable errors you are pointing out, it is impossible to declare that those who believe in some sort of stable reality and interpretation are wrong unless one has in mind a stable interpretation which is right. As John Wilcox points out, "Nietzsche cannot consistently upbraid his enemies in this kind of language if he is a non cognitivist himself. Accusing your enemies of ignorance has no point unless you believe in the possibility and desirability of knowledge. There is no bite to the charge that someone has blinded himself to reality unless it is possible to do better - - to see reality for what it is. Nor does it make sense to criticize others for building their values on falsehood unless values can and should be built on truth. But these are precisely the kinds of accusations Nietzsche often makes."⁸ Valéry, too, could not devote himself to his voluminous ruminations on the self, the mind, thinking, and so on, unless he was certain that he could move in the direction of truth; there must be confidence in the existence of a truth to be discovered if the investigator is to go on so tirelessly in his investigations.

It is interesting that the Valéry of the *Cahiers* is something other than the public Valéry, the Valéry of commissioned prefaces, introductions, book reviews, public lectures. He is less interested in purely aesthetic questions (if there is such a thing as purely aesthetic) than one might suspect. He is intrigued by more fundamental questions: what separates my mind from other minds? How do I know when I am actually experiencing something and when I am imagining it? What types of thinking are there? In Judith Robinson's assessment, "the only kind of writing which really interested him was that which taught him something new and positive about his own mind, and hence about the functioning of the mind in general⁹."

Valéry tried to work out these questions in such writings as the *Teste* cycle and the *Leonardo* essays. The hero of Valéry's studies of *Leonardo* is not the

historical Leonardo, but the intellectual master, the Renaissance man (with all of the traditional connotations of that term), the epitome of thinking as reconstructed by Valery. Valery's Leonardo is not a man who once lived, but he is instead a set of attributes; Valery names this set "Leonardo." The mind of this construct "Leonardo" is admirable, to Valery, for the way in which it perceives details and makes connections. Valery's Leonardo is neither crushed by nor unaware of the myriad details of the mundane. By contrast, as Glenn S. Burne has explained in his article on Valery's Leonardo, "Our minds cannot bear to consider with any sustained precision each element of our perception. Hence, most of us are forced to lump things together into conventional classifications¹⁰." Valery's understanding of the artist Leonardo, the artistic or creative mind, seems to mirror Nietzsche's analysis of the artist in *Will to Power*.

Nietzsche finds that this "distinguishes the artist from the laymen (those susceptible to art: the latter reach the high point of their susceptibility when they receive; the former as they give -- so that an antagonism between these two gifts is not only natural but desirable. The perspectives of these two states are opposite: to demand of the artist that he should practice the perspective of the audience (of the critic --) means to demand that he should impoverish himself and his creative power --" (*WP*, 811). The artist's "physiological states" mould the personality of the artist; these states are *intoxication*, an "extreme sharpness of certain senses" (this is an explosive condition which enables the artist to see the extraordinary in the familiar while experiencing an exuberant need to communicate this fresh impression to others), and, unfortunately, from Nietzsche and Valery's perspectives, the "compulsion to imitate." This last quality prevents "laymen" from becoming artists. This compulsion is "an extreme irritability through which a given example becomes contagious -- a state is divined on the basis of signs and immediately enacted -- A kind of deafness and blindness towards the external world -- the realm of admitted stimuli is sharply defined" (*WP*, 811). The artist is understood to be stronger than those who are not artists, simultaneously more susceptible to sensual stimuli yet capable of rising to meet his artistic demands without collapsing under his greater awareness of the world. Nietzsche contrasts the artist with the "scientific man." "Compared with the *artist*, the appearance of the *scientific* man is actually a sign of a certain damming up and lowering of the level of life (-- but also of strengthening, severity, hardness, will power)" (*WP*, 816).

In his *Teste* cycle¹¹ Valery creates a character who is the Cartesian man and the interface between the artist and the scientific man. Certainly Monsieur

Teste was inspired through Valery's reading of Descartes; the *Discourse on Method* provided the scaffolding for Valery's major prose work, "I reread the *Discourse on Method* recently," he wrote to Gide. "It is certainly the modern novel, as it could be written. Notice that the later philosophy rejected the autobiographical part. Yet this is the point to take it up again, and then we shall have to write the life of a theory, just as we have too often written that of passion" (*Moi*, 161; letter of 1894). But Teste was not simply an interesting way for Valery to discuss a philosophical theory. Teste is actually a test of Valery's thinking up to that point in his life; his installments of the Teste cycle over a forty year period represent Valery's thinking on thinking; Teste was his workbook as much as the *Cahiers*. He explained that he was at loose ends after completing his degree, "despair in every direction." Then "I passed through my inner 18 Brumaire which led to the advent of 'Mr. Teste.' ... This meant that I resolved to think with rigor - - to not believe - - to consider as null and void everything that could not be brought to total precision, etc. ... (Moi, 7).

Teste, to Valery, represented a personal and philosophical revolution, as well as a genre experiment. He spoke sometimes of Teste as Flaubert spoke of *Madame Bovary* and *Bouvard and Pecuchet*, Just as Flaubert wished to write a novel with nothing as its subject, Valery wanted to write "A kind of novel (without intrigue)" (*Moi*, 183). After all, Valery noted in "Remarks About Myself" that he and Teste were both bored by events. "Events are the foam of things," he declares. "It is the sea that interests me. We fish in the sea, we sail on the sea, we swim in it But the foam?" (*Moi*, 290-91). The Teste cycle is therefore "the history of a man who thinks" (*Moi*, 180). At one and the same time, Valery identifies with Teste ("My mother sends her salutations to you both. I was about to forget to insert it out of 'Testisme'," *Moi*, 187) and idolizes Teste for his dedication to studying the intellect and the uncommon ("Monsieur Teste's question: 'What is a man's potential?' became my whole philosophy," *Moi*, 306).

Teste and Leonardo were devices through which he could reevaluate all values. Teste and Leonardo, Valery explained in an interview, "are pure mental exercises like little novels of mental research and analysis" (*Moi*, 344). These works were ways of breaking out of the prison, the fact that "man is a closed system in relation to knowledge and acts" (*Moi*, 306). Valery explained that through working out Teste's questions, he was led to "outlaw all Idols. I sacrificed them all to the one that had to be created to subjugate the others, the *Idol of the intellect*. My *Monsieur Teste* was its high priest" (*Moi*, 295).

Valery recognized that his authentic being (one of Valery's notebooks was titled, in English, *Self Book*) was covered with what Glenn Burne has called the "habitual encrustations of personality."¹¹ It was necessary to overcome or transcend the trappings of his personality and the public and private images of Valery. Valery viewed people as protagonists in novels of their own writing and as secondary characters in the novels everyone else was writing. Only someone like Teste could overcome this state through his rejection of cliché. We see this, for example, in the scene with Teste at the Opera, where the spectacle for Teste is in the audience rather than on the stage. Going to the opera is a ritual activity in which behavior must conform to group expectations; Teste, in studying groups within the larger group of the audience, in treating the audience as grist for his speculative mill; is violating and altering the ritual and raising himself above it; Teste valorizes the individual (such as himself) over the group from which he maintains a safe distance. According to Nietzsche, the "basic error" is "to place the goal in the herd and not in single individuals. But now one is attempting to understand the herd as an individual and to ascribe a higher rank than to the individual - - profound misunderstanding !!!" (*WP*, 766). Teste can do nothing about the group, the crowd, the herd; he cannot change it at all; he can only observe, classify, organize, and transcend it, through his interpretation. "Ultimately," Nietzsche notes, "the individual derives the values of his acts from himself; because he has to interpret in a unique way even the words he has inherited. His interpretation of a formula at least is personal: as an interpreter he is still creative" (*WP*, 767).

The Teste cycle, the Leonardo essays, the *Cahiers*, and the correspondence with Gide, and most of Nietzsche's writings as well, are in fact polemical works which attempt to revise the commonplace understanding of the role of artists and philosophers, to make philosophers become *as* artists, to awaken the reader to possibilities of interpreting the world which have been overlooked. In his marginalia to his essay "The Method of Leonardo" Valery writes: "Why artists are useful: they preserve the subtlety and instability of sensory impressions. A modern artist has to exhaust two-thirds of his time trying to see what is visible - - and above all trying not to see what is invisible, Philosophers often pay a high price for striving to do the opposite."¹⁴

Notes and References

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, with commentary by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 268, section 484. In keeping with current practice in Nietzsche scholarship, I will hereafter note only section number and not page numbers when referring to this work. This text will be cited parenthetically as *WP*.
2. See Judith Robinson, "Valery's view of Mental Creativity," *Yale French Studies*, 44 (1970), 9-18.
3. Valery, letter to Andre Gide, August 10, 1891; this letter is published in Paul Valery, *MOI*, Collected Works of Paul Valery, vol. 15, trans. Marthiel and Jackson Matthews (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975), p. 119. This anthology will be cited parenthetically as *Moi*.
4. Ruediger Hermann Grimm, *Nietzsche Theory of Knowledge* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1977), p. 110. This valuable book will be cited as *Grimm*. Grimm makes the point that "Nietzsche's view of reality (the will-to-power) is such that all that exists is an ever-changing chaos of power-quanta, continually struggling with one another for hegemony. Nothing remains the same from one instant to the next. Consequently, there are no stable objects, no 'identical cases,' no facts, and no order. Whatever order we see in the world, we ourselves have projected into it. By itself, the world has no order Yet metaphysics, logic, and language -- indeed, our whole conceptual scheme -- is grounded in the assumption that there is such a stable order" (*Grimm*, 30). See also James D. Breazeale, *Towards and Nihilist Epistemology: Hume and Nietzsche* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1971).
5. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Gods in Twilight of the Gods and the Anti-Christ*, translated and with introduction and commentary by R. J. Hollingdale (Baltimore: Penguin books, 1968), p. 35.
6. See Margaret MacDonald, "Sleeping and Waking," *Mind*, 62 (1953),

- 202-15 ; O. K. Bousma, " 'On Many Occasions I Have in Sleep Been Deceived' - - Descartes," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association*, 30 (1956-57), 25-44 ; and Margaret Dauber Wilson, *Descartes* (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 13-31.
7. *WP*, sections 506-516.
 8. John T. Wilcox, *Truth and Value in Nietzsche : A Study of his Metaethics and Epistemology* (Ann Arbor : Univ. of Michigan Press, 1974), p. 58. Wilcox also notes that Nietzsche frequently praises the senses (pp. 48 ff.). But praising the senses is not a rejection of Nietzsche's attacks on those who believe in the senses without recognizing that their understanding of sense-evidence is both directed and clouded by their preconceptions, and other misleading factors.
 9. Judith Robinson, 'The Place of Literary and Artistic Creation in Valéry's Thought,' *MLR*, 56 (1961), 499.
 10. Burne, "An Approach to Valéry's Leonardo," *French Review*, 34 (1960), 28. Note also Valéry's own statements on the Leonardo essays : " . . . I agreed to write an article on Leonardo Knowing very little about Leonardo I accepted for the reasons stated above and I imagined a Leonardo of my own" ("Autobiography," *Moi*, 8) ; "Vinci is at its worst ! It's a bore I showed it to Drouin with pleasure, who at page thirteen made me observe that I was not talking about Vinci. I knew it only too well. But what can be said of such a man ?" (letter to Gide, Feb. 4, 1895, *Moi*, 172) ; "To me, Leonardo was a kind of intellectual hero standing far above the disorder of my feverish probings" (Valéry interview, *Moi*, 344).
 11. The Teste cycle refers to all of Valéry's various vignettes and fragments of writing concerning Monsieur Teste. These have been very conveniently gathered and well translated under the title *Monsieur Teste*, Collected Works of Paul Valéry, vol. 6, trans. Jackson Matthews (Princeton : Princeton Univ. Press, 1973).
 12. Burne, "An Approach to Valéry's Leonardo," p. 33.
 13. On this scene see Charles Whiting, *Paul Valéry* (London : University of London/Athlone Press, 1978), p. 58. I am in essential agreement with the reading given by C. A. Hackett, "Teste and *La Soirée avec Monsieur Teste*," *French Studies*, 21 (1967), 111-24 : "One might take the stage to represent the world or life, which the audience watches with fascination while Teste and the narrator remain aloof and withdrawn, abser-

bed only in each other. I think, however, that we are intended to see not the stage and performers, but the entire scene, the opera building and all that it includes, as the world. And to represent the world in this way, as a finite, closed system of relationships, is in line with the whole of Valery's thought. Thus, Teste and the narrator, aloft in the box' may symbolize the cons-

cious mind, or the consciousness, which can understand, and impose a pattern on the vital but blind forces, the 'betise,' and the instincts that exist beneath it" (p. 120).

14. Valery, *Leonardo Poe Mallarme*, Collected Works of Paul Valery, Vol. 8, trans. Malcolm Cowley and James R. Lawler (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972), p. 19.

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