

Description of the Poem

1. I must begin with an introduction to my introduction. The one I had planned was relatively brief and involved an allusion to Ronsard, together with a translation of a couple of lines of his sonnet to Helen; but I somehow got carried away, and will have to inflict the whole sonnet on you, for which I apologize in advance. Now, my introduction proper.

My talk will be a labor of love and a work of propaganda. One follows from the other. Lovers have always delighted in describing the features of what they love, though it must be admitted that especially if they are poets (for example), they have not always done so in a disinterested way. The loving description has been of one thing, and the propaganda has been for another. Ronsard makes the point with unusual baldness and great panache in his sonnet to Helen, which goes somewhat as follows.

When you are very old, beside the fire,
Sitting and spinning there by candlelight,
Speaking my verse, you'll say, in awed delight,
"Ronsard described me when I inspired desire."

You'll have no servant then who will not raise
Her head, though half asleep from weariness,
At the sounding of my name, and she will bless
Your name with your, and my, immortal praise.

I'll be a boneless phantom under earth,
Taking my rest within the myrtle grove;
You'll be a beldam hunkering at the hearth,

Regretting your disdain and all that love.
Trust me, then, sweet: gather we, while we may,
Gather we rosebuds from this very day.

Ronsard's description of Helen turns out to have had an ulterior motive. The advertisement for Helen has really been an advertisement for

Ronsard and propaganda for his peculiar cause. I, clearly, have no such purpose.¹

2. I wish to try to promote and further enjoyment of this poem chiefly by means of description. I am not at all sure that I shall succeed, for this poem, to start off with, has been translated into French. There are not many poems, I imagine, that have had the privilege of being translated into their own tongue. —I now address myself to the task of description, with one preliminary remark about what I shall describe.

Valéry commented, when saying something about this poem: "Literature, then, interests me *profoundly* only to the extent that it urges the mind to certain transformations,—those in which the stimulating properties of language play the chief part. [...] The force to bend the common word to unexpected ends without violating the 'time-honored forms,' the capture and subjection of things that are difficult to say; and, above all, the simultaneous management of syntax, harmony, and ideas [...], are in my eyes the supreme objects of our art."² I do not think that among these objects it will be possible for me to say anything here about harmony, except perhaps briefly at one or two points. I shall be able to speak only of what can come under the headings of syntax and ideas, and what in

¹ The sonnet is no. 43 in the 1584 edition of *Sonnets pour Helene (Sonnets for Helen)*, Book 2.

Quand vous serez bien vieille, au soir à la chandelle,
Assise aupres du feu, devidant et filant,
Direz chantant mes vers, en vous esmerveillant,
Ronsard me celebroit du temps que j'estois belle.

Lors vous n'aurez servante oyant telle nouvelle,
Desja sous le labeur à demy sommeillant,
Qui au bruit de mon nom ne s'aïlle resveillant,
Benissant vostre nom de louange immortelle.

Je seray sous la terre et fantôme sans os
Par les ombres myrteux je prendray mon repos:
Vous serez au fouyer une vieille accroupie,

Regrettant mon amour et vostre fier desdain.
Vivez, si m'en croyez, n'attendez à demain:
Cueillez dès aujourd'hui les roses de la vie.

See, e.g., Pierre de Ronsard, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, Pléiade (1993), 400–401.

² Literature: *Au sujet du Cimetière marin*, CE 1:1500.

general can be thought of as transformations within time-honored forms. I shall first make some general statements about the poem as a whole; then I shall read the English version of the poem—it might be altered in one or two places—and I shall read it in the hope that my preliminary remarks will make it somewhat easier to follow as a whole; then I shall go into more detail about particular parts of the poem.

3. First, the title, *The Graveyard by the Sea*, may lead one to expect a reflective poem, something like Gray's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*. The expectation is not wholly false: death is one of the ideas of the poem. —A word about the graveyard itself. It is situated in Sète, Valéry's birthplace and the place of burial, and situated in the south of France. The sea is the Mediterranean. I have here a drawing made by Valéry to illustrate his own poem, showing the cemetery by the sea and the scene which confronts us at the beginning of the poem. Its shape is somewhat like this:



[Valéry's drawing, reproduced above, is now sketched on the blackboard.] That is an oversimplification. On the whole, on the left and downwards it is dark, though there is a good deal of white at the same time; and on the whole, and much more definitely, on the upper side it is white. But let me describe it in a little more detail.³

It is in rather sharp black and white. The sea is seen from a point high above the graveyard. It is bathed in light. The sky does not appear; the sea goes right up to the top of the picture. It fills the upper half of the drawing, and appears, as it were, *above* the tombs. This explains at least the last line of the tenth stanza, which says, "The faithful sea sleeps there *upon* my graves!" The sea may be said to be framed by trees and tombs. The trees resemble cypresses, and have a torch-like form. There is a funerary monument, also somewhat torch-like, surrounded by black metal railings. There is a small edifice with a tiled roof, upon which is something somewhat dove-like. The sea is lightly sprinkled with forward-leaning triangles, which are doves in the first line of the poem, and sails in the last line. There is a half-hidden marble cross, and a very heavy-looking marble slab. The sketch appears to be a small collection of properties made use of by Valéry in the poem.

4. Returning to the poem, we find an epigraph from Pindar:

Do not, dear soul, strive after deathless life,
but use to the utmost the resources in your power.

This informs us that *deathless life* is another of the ideas of the poem. It also suggests something about its form. The epigraph has the form of an *exhortation*. The speaker exhorts his soul to abandon the concern with deathless life and to concern itself with what it can use. I think the first part of this exhortation corresponds to the first twenty-one stanzas, in which the poet directly addresses his soul twice. These stanzas present variations on the theme of deathless life, culminating in a scornful rejection of immortality in the seventeenth and eighteenth stanzas. The theme of death is hinted at in the fourth stanza, in the word "supreme," and then grows to dominate the rest of the poem up to the eighteenth stanza. The last three stanzas of this first part, the nineteenth to the twenty-first,

³ Thomas Gray, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. Sète: the present spelling of the name, changed from Cette in 1928. The drawing is reproduced by permission from Paul Valéry, *Charmes*, ed. Robert Monestier (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1975), 101.

are concerned with the theme of a sort of *death-in-life* produced by thought.⁴

Corresponding to the second part of the epigraph are the last three stanzas of the poem, which consist of an explosive exhortation to the body. The body, then, corresponds to the phrase, “the resources within your power.” The actual word translated by “resources” can also be translated by “machine,” the term used by Descartes for the body—and Valéry was a Frenchman and a great admirer of Descartes. The word “machine,” in Valéry’s own thinking, also corresponds to the word “poem,” the product of the *poet’s* using to the utmost the resources within *his* power. He says, “A poem is a kind of machine for producing the poetic state by means of words.” I may say incidentally that there is a certain resemblance between Ronsard’s sonnet and the poem of Valéry, despite the fact that one is merely a sonnet and the other a rather lengthy poem in a very special stanza. Ronsard’s sonnet can be divided, rhetorically speaking, in the ratio of 6 to 1. That’s to say six lines of description to one of propaganda. In the same way Valéry’s poem can be divided, rhetorically speaking, in the ratio of 7 to 1; that is, seven parts discussing the question of deathless life and one part an exhortation to the body—an exhortation to life. Both of them end with an exhortation to *live*, and before—in the earlier part—the discussion goes on in terms of immortal life and death.⁵

I should have added, by the way: when Valéry says, “A poem is a kind of machine for producing the poetic state by means of words,” I don’t think by “poetic state” he means anything like dreamy reverie.

5. Valéry himself has something to say about this poem taken as a whole, and let me quote from him for the last time.

If anyone wonders [...] what I “wanted to say” in a certain poem, I reply that I did not *want to say*, but *wanted to make*, and that it was the intention of *making* that *wanted* what I *said*...

As for the *Cimetière marin*, this intention was at first no more than a rhythmic figure, empty, or filled with meaningless syllables, which obsessed me for some time. I noticed that this figure was decasyllabic, and I pondered on that model, which is very little used in modern French poetry; it struck me as poor and monotonous. It was of little

⁴ Epigraph: *Pythians* 3.61–62.

⁵ A poem is...: *Poésie et pensée abstraite*, *Œ* 1:1337. Cf. *Calepin d’un poète*, 1463, “[the poet’s] *objet d’art*, the machine for producing the poetic emotion.”

worth compared with the alexandrine, which three or four generations of great artists have prodigiously elaborated. The demon of generalization prompted me to try raising this *Ten* to the power of the *Twelve*. It suggested a certain stanza of six lines and the idea of a *composition* founded on the number of these stanzas, and strengthened by a diversity of tones and functions to be assigned to them. Between the stanzas, contrasts and correspondences would be set up. This last condition soon required the potential poem to be a monologue of “self,” in which the simplest and most enduring themes of my emotional and intellectual life, as they had imposed themselves upon my adolescence, associated with the sea and the light of a particular spot on the Mediterranean coast, were called up, woven together, opposed...

All this led to [the theme of] death and suggested [the theme of] pure thought.⁶

6. One final general observation. There are many *transformations* in the poem. A whole series of them can be fitted to a structural device, which made it necessary for me to have the blackboard brought in. [A horizontal line is drawn across the blackboard, about halfway up.]

That is the structural device. Its richness may not be immediately apparent. It is not so obvious as the “divided line.” This line—this horizontal straight line—acts as a boundary. It divides what is above from what is below, what is light from what is dark, what is high from what is deep, what is outer from what is inner. The line has two sides, the lower one shadowy, the upper one bright, and along the bright side of the line, the following transformations occur:

a quivering roof;
 the scintillating surface of the sea;
 time itself, scintillating;
 the roof of a Greek temple;
 the eye;
 the surface of the sea regarded as an eye;
 the gold tiled roof of an edifice in the soul;
 the poet’s soul, likened to a breast exposed to the sun;
 the side of the poet’s body exposed to the light;
 perhaps the eyelids,
 and perhaps a dog;

⁶ *Au sujet du Cimetière marin*, *Œ* 1:1503–1504. The French *vouloir dire*, “to want to say,” is usually translated “to mean.”

the marble roofs of the houses of the dead—that is to say, gravestone
slabs;
a sort of wellhead in the soul;
the graveyard itself, a fragment of earth offered to the light;
the flowers springing from the earth;
and last, but by no means least, a tortoise's shell.

Above the line, the following transformations occur:

the shining Mediterranean sun, and a sky filled with light, both being
themselves, and also symbolizing being itself, eternity, and a sort of
pantheon;
a demiurge;
the unmoved mover;
pure intellect;
pure poetry;
a sort of divine non-being;
perhaps the remote abodes of the gods of Lucretius.

However, the Christian world of light, the abode of the angels, seems to
be conspicuous by its absence.⁷

Below lie:

the depths of the sea;
the depths of the soul;
a treasury of silence;
the rich abyss over which the soul of the poet broods, and which is some-
times a hollow void;
sleep;
the poet's shadow;
the dead;
the enriched earth from which the flowers spring;
and last, but by no means least, the shadow of the tortoise.

The time of the poem: it is high noon, at the summer solstice, the still
point of the turning year.⁸

⁷ Divided line: *Republic* 509d–511e. Demiurge: see Plato, *Timaeus* 24a, 28a, 29a, and
subsequently. Mover: see *Physics* 8, especially chaps. 5, 6, 10; *Metaphysics* 12.6–7. Gods:
Lucretius 1.44–49, 3.18–24, 5.146–54.

⁸ Cf. "the still point of the turning world": T. S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton* II, IV (also *Coriolan* I).

I shall now read the poem—the version, I should say. [The English version of the poem is read.]

7. I shall now talk about some parts of the poem in more detail, and in doing so, for the first five stanzas I will be doing some reading line by line from the version. I shall try to bring out some of what I conceive to be Valéry's transformations, and I shall begin with those first five stanzas, the first four of which form a unit, whose theme might be called *contemplation of the divine* as a form of deathless life.

In these stanzas the sun is itself, and a symbol of the divine. The sea is itself, and a symbol of the thinking or contemplative soul. Let us begin at the beginning.

This peaceful roof, where white doves come and go,
Quivers between the pines, between the tombs.

As one of my two or three discussions of harmony—or sound, at least—I'd like also to read these two lines in French.

Ce toit tranquille, où marchent des colombes,
Entre les pins palpité, entre les tombes.

If you think of those lines as French you will see that they end with *colombes* and *tombes*, which are very satisfyingly sonorous words, utterly conventional, like "June" and "moon," and worthy of Victor Hugo. There is something rather reassuring about it. If, however, you look at the *meaning*, you find there is a strange word there, even alarming. The roof *palpité*. The roof palpitates. That does not suit Victor Hugo, I feel. The question then is, for us as readers, what is being said? Thinking at this moment, I suppose, that we are looking at a roof, or have been set before a roof, of some edifice within the cemetery itself, we may easily conjecture that what we are seeing is a shimmer of heat rising from the roof of some building in the heat of summer, and that can be thought of as a sort of palpitation. But still, why call it *palpité*? Why not use some word like "shimmer"—or the word "shimmer" itself, its French equivalent? Well, if you say the line to yourself you'll see that the previous word gives an extra *p'*. It "entre les pins palpité." *Pin pa pi, pa pa pa, pa pa pa*. Pulse pulse pulse. What is being wanted, I think, by the use of *palpité* is the idea of there being something *living* about this edifice that has its roof. So, *palpité*. (However, I prefer to use "quivers"—to have a palpitating roof, even if

it's only metaphorical, is somehow a bit sensational, it seems to me, in English—I don't know.)⁹

We are, then, thinking of this roof as being in the cemetery. But now we read the next two lines:

There Noon the just composes with its fires
The sea, the sea, the ever rebegin!

Where's "there"? As far as I can see, "there" can only be either the roof itself or the space between the pines and tombs through which we see this roof. Therefore it seems that what is being implied is an identity between the roof and the sea, which can of course be thought of as a roof. Now if the roof has now become the sea, what has happened to the white doves? Well, we may conjecture that they're white sails, and of course that is borne out in the last line of the poem. What has happened to the palpitation? Well, presumably that has become—the line says, "Noon the just composes with its fires/The sea, the sea, the ever rebegin!" It's the *composed* sea. What does that mean? That the palpitation is a manifestation of the interaction between the fires of the sun and the ever-restless surface of the sea, which I presume for the moment, and I think we will see, results in something like shimmering on the surface of the water, corresponding to the shimmering heat-haze on the roof of the supposed edifice.

Then the last two lines:

O recompense after a strain of thought
To gaze and gaze upon the gods' repose!

We have introduced the ideas that I've called thought, sight, and the gods' repose. I should have also said that I took for granted that "Noonday the just" was the sun. But the oddity, I suppose, is that the sun, though it's obviously the sun, is not *called* the sun, it's called "Noonday the just." What does that mean? I think it's intended to be a personification and to have us think in some way of Noonday as a being, an impartial being who divides the day evenly into two parts, equal parts, without making any distinctions; and, as we will see later on, when we find out

⁹ *Colombes* ("doves") and *tombes*, in that order, form the final rhyme in Hugo's *À Théophile Gautier (Toute la lyre 36)*, whose concluding lines Valéry calls "without doubt the most beautiful verses that he wrote, and perhaps that anyone has ever written": *Victor Hugo, créateur par la forme, Œ 1:589–590*.

it's at the solstice, will also be dividing the *year* into two equal parts. So this is a suggestion of a *being*.

The phrase "the calm of the gods" makes more definite the implications of the personification of Noonday as a kind of divine being. What kind of a divine being? Well, he composes. What does that mean? He calms things down, and he also composes, as a composer composes. He has composed the sea, the restless surface of the sea, into an artistic composition. So the suggestion of the divine being here is that of a divine artist who composes. How does he compose? He composes by being still; he composes by his composure, in short. The sun's stillness is reflected in the sea, which may now be personified as gazing upon its calm and composed god, the sun. The poet himself is gazing upon this reflected calm with his "eyes of flesh"—this is his own phrase, as he uses it in the seventeenth stanza—and perhaps he is gazing with the eye of the soul upon something divine and impartial.¹⁰

8. The hint that he is doing so is amplified in the next stanza. The first two lines—

How pure, how fine a flashing work consumes
Diamond on diamond of sightless foam

—the first two lines seem to refer primarily to the sun and to the sea. The sun now seems to be a kind of creating and destroying demiurge, whose instruments are the pure rays of Mediterranean sunlight, whose matter is the imperceptible foam, and whose product is the geometrically shaped, scintillating diamonds which he takes up, uses, and uses up. The third line,

And what a peace appears to be conceived!

suggests that the result of this using and using up is an appearance of a calm that is literally an appearance. —Why, by the way, is the foam "imperceptible"? If the sea is rippled, we might think that the foam is merely potential foam in the ripple. If there are wavelets, breaking slightly, we might think that we are too far above them to perceive the foam.¹¹

¹⁰ "The calm of the gods": in the translation, "the gods' repose." "Eyes of flesh": in the translation, "fleshly eye." Eye of the soul: cf. *Republic* 519b, 533d; *Metamorphoses* 15.62–64 (quoted, §6.2).

¹¹ "Imperceptible": in the translation, "sightless."

The third line also reintroduces the theme of thought with the words *se concevoir*, “to conceive oneself,” or “to be conceived.” This, together with the word “pure” in the first line, which is echoed in the next-to-last line, may suggest the theme of pure thought to which Valéry referred in the words which I quoted earlier. This in turn suggests that the second half of the stanza is a parallel to the first half. The *visible* sun is now replaced by *a* sun, which is an eternal cause and so invisible and divine. This symbolic sun is poised at rest above the abyss of the soul, whose thinking surface moves in time, the form of inner sense. The eternal cause works upon the surface of the soul with its pure influence, calming the flux of thought and producing as *its* pure works a scintillating time and a dreaming state which is knowledge. Dream appears to have replaced the word “thought” of the first stanza. It does not imply random reverie, but rather, settled and ordered contemplation. The scintillation of time corresponds to the flashing diamonds on the surface of the sea. It represents an almost perfect calm, and at the same time a constant tremulousness like the palpitation of the roof in the first stanza. It suggests a state of soul which has *almost* escaped from the temporal movement from one thought to another in inner discourse, which has *almost* become a pure and perfect reflection of the divine. It is this dreaming contemplation that is knowledge.¹²

The third line also may suggest, because of the word “appears,” or “seems,” that this calm too, like the other one, is but an appearance, something merely thought of and not genuinely begotten. The word *Songe*, which is translated “Dream,” *may* have the connotation of illusion; and that means that the dream *may* be a midsummer day’s dream. However that may be, this state is enchanting, uplifting, rich, thoroughly edifying. To edify, of course, means to make an edifice.

9. This is all expressed in the third stanza, in which four of the elements of the first stanza—the roofed edifice, the sea, the eye, the soul—are put together in a shimmering kaleidoscope of correspondences. The eye of the soul suggested in the first and second stanzas makes an almost explicit entrance.

Grammatically the stanza is very simple. It contains no principal verb; it consists of a series of appositive phrases—or perhaps I’d better read it.

¹² Form of inner sense: see Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B49 and elsewhere.

Firm treasury, Minerva's simple fane,
 Deep mass of calm, and visible reserve,
 Supercilious water, Eye sheltering within
 So much of sleep beneath a veil of flame,
 O my silence!... Edifice in the soul,
 A brimming of gold, Roof of a thousand tiles!

It contains no principal verb; it consists of a series of appositive phrases, addressed in turn to the roofed building, the sea, the soul. The sequence is rounded off by a return to the roofed building, which has now been settled in the soul. Despite the intricacy of the correspondences, the stanza seems very symmetrically ordered. It is, ultimately, an apostrophe addressed by the poet to his rapturous inner silence, which is free from discourse.

"Stable trésor": the building of the first stanza becomes a treasure-house of gold. "[T]emple simple à Minerve": a divinely simple temple, dedicated to the rich simplicity of the divine wisdom. Here the Olympians put in an appearance in the person of Minerva, partly perhaps to have the word "temple" make appropriate suggestions, partly perhaps to prepare the way for the theme of sacrifice appearing in the next two stanzas. Stable and massy, the temple is visible—but is a "visible reserve." It holds in reserve a reserve of riches. In the third line, the building becomes the sea: "supercilious water," transformed at the same time into a visibly supercilious, and also reserved, gazer. The image presented to the eyes of the *flesh* for supercilious water is, I believe, that of the sea, seen as rising like a steep forehead with its ripples or wavelets suggesting the slightly furrowed brow that accompanies a supercilious gaze. The glittering eye of the gazing sun next becomes a visible "veil of flame" which shuts in and holds in reserve its sleepiness. The last apposition, "O my silence!" turns the eye of the sea into the eye of the soul and its sleep into the soul's inner silence. The final line and a half, "Edifice in the soul,/A brimming of gold, Roof of a thousand tiles!"—they round off the stanza, placing the edifice in the soul and roofing it, apparently, with undulating golden tiles of thought. The correspondences of roofed edifice, sea, and soul, seem to be now quite explicit. This encourages me to regard the last word of the stanza as a deliberate pun. The word *Toit*, as sound, means both "Roof" and "Thou." In addressing the roof, the poet is also addressing himself. This simply cannot be rendered into English.

(I would like to make one impromptu comment on my substituting for "Pinnacled with gold," "A brimming of gold." The French word is *comble*, which is a very troublesome word, as it can be an adjective, mean-

ing “full”—very full—totally full—jam-packed. As a noun, it can have two different meanings: one, that which protrudes from the top of a vessel holding liquid just before it spills over, just before it becomes the overflow—the superabundance of what is contained; and then, by some kind of mistake, it also came to mean “roof.” —Though it’s not inappropriate that it should mean “roof”; but some etymological difficulty occurred in Low Latin, sometime. The problem is: do we want *comble* to be an adjective? And I think we don’t. And I’m happy to say that as far as I can see there is no grammatical warrant for regarding it as an adjective in this particular context.¹³

(We can have, therefore, the noun. Now it seems that as the second part of the apposition uses the word “roof,” it would be rather foolish to say “roof” at the beginning too. So what we want, I think, there, is the idea of *comble* which means something coming out of the top, fullness—with all its fullness. So therefore I thought “brimming” would be better than “pinnacled,” which is trying to do the same thing but, I thought, less successfully.)

10. “Time” from the second stanza, and “temple” from the third,—let me say the fourth stanza:

Temple of Time a single sigh resumes,
To this pure point I rise, to equipoise,
Surrounded by my circular sea gaze;
As my supreme oblation to the gods,
Serene the scintillation sows upon
The lofty deep a sovereign disdain.

“Time” from the second stanza, and “temple” from the third, come together at the opening of the fourth stanza in the phrase “Temple of Time.” The edifice in the soul is an edifice in time, the medium in which the soul is bathed. As a temple, it is dedicated to timelessness. But it is resumed in, or by, “a single sigh.” This may mean that the gaze upon the eternal that the temple represents is itself a summing-up of all time into a single point—eternity in an abridged form, so to speak. It is a glimpse occupying the time of a single sigh, something fugitive, whose passing is to be regretted and sighed after, but also to be sighed for and aspired to.

“To this pure point I rise, to equipoise.” Now the poet rises to his “pure point,” perhaps like a priest ascending to the roof of his own

¹³ “Pinnacled with gold”: the author’s earlier translation of “*comble d’or*.”

temple, perhaps like Dante ascending to the empyrean. The pure point should be the highest point of contemplation of the divine. The poet appears to mount, and accustom himself to his position.¹⁴

[Here there is a gap of perhaps a sentence or two.]

... phrase "my [...] sea gaze" to have the multiple references established in the preceding stanzas. That is, references to the sea, likened to an eye gazing at the sun; to the eyes of the flesh, gazing upon the sea, which is gazing at the sun; and to the eye of the soul, seeing in the sea an image of itself gazing upon the divine. All this makes it a very "circular sea gaze." Speaking more literally, the word "surrounded" suggests to me that the poet may have risen in imagination high above the sea.

As my supreme oblation to the gods,
Serene the scintillation sows upon
The lofty deep a sovereign disdain.

The words "offering to the gods" appearing in the fourth line suggest priestly sacrifice in the service of the temple of Time. Here the poet makes his highest sacrifice to the gods. He scatters upon the deep from his glittering gaze a complete and royal disdain. This is a development of the theme of *pride*, introduced with the phrase "supercilious water" in the third stanza. The deep should represent the realm outside the temple of Time; that is, the temporal realm of wind, and wave, and water, in which we live, and move, and have our being. If that is so, then this aspiration to otherworldly being seems to be convicted here of hubris. But the word "supreme" also suggests death. The phrase "supreme hour" means the hour of death. So besides indicating a culmination of what has gone before, the word "supreme" heralds the approaching theme of changing being and death.¹⁵

This is the end of the discussion of contemplation of the divine.

11. The fifth stanza—a very remarkable one—introduces the theme of death and the dissolution of the soul. It also transforms the theme of *consuming* into the theme of *eating*, a theme which will become more prominent as the poem proceeds. Let me read it.

As the fruit melts away into enjoyment,
To delectation changing all its absence
Upon a palate where its form is dying,

¹⁴ Dante: *Paradiso* 30.

¹⁵ Live, and move: cf. Acts 17.28.

I breathe in deeply my approaching smoke,
 The sky sings to my consummated soul
 The changing of the shores to murmurous clamor.

The eating of the fruit is described with more-than-Keatsian lushness. The fruit loses its form upon the “palate fine,” changing its presence into absence, into delight and delectation; the fruit dies for the pleasure of the consumer. Similarly, the soul of the poet delights in inhaling in anticipation, as if smelling and savoring an excellent cigar, the smoke of the future sacrifice that will consume his soul. This conception of blissful nothingness, of delight in non-being, is, in its expression here, one of the most striking of the many examples of the figure of speech called *oxymoron* that are stated or implied throughout the poem. The most familiar example of this figure is, I suppose, the phrase “bitterness is sweet” in the twelfth stanza. This conception of luscious non-being far outdoes Keats’s desire to “Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget/What thou among the leaves hast never known,” etc. This savoring of one’s own annihilation may also initiate a later theme that one may call the theme of *cannibalism*.¹⁶

12. I shall now begin to move more rapidly. For a while I shall hardly do more than give a résumé of the ideas.

The last line of the fifth stanza,

The changing of the shores to murmurous clamor

—another oxymoron (though it’s an ambiguity in the French, by the way)—introduces the theme of *changing being*. We withdraw from gazing upon the sky and the sea, from the perhaps overweening contemplation of the divine light, which is now restored, as is only just, to its original solitary purity. The brilliance of the sea is replaced by the brilliance of the graveyard earth and marble under the blazing sun. The poet has begun to walk, and the sun has passed the zenith. The poet becomes aware of his shadow passing over the graves, and this reminder of insubstantial being tames his former access of pride. He is struck, in the seventh stanza, by the thought that a being that can restore the light to its place, as he has just done, must possess a “drear moiety of shade,” a dark side, perhaps like the back of a mirror, or like the shadow of his body, that he has

¹⁶ Palate: Keats, *Ode on Melancholy*, line 28. Fade: *Ode to a Nightingale*, lines 21–22. On the word “consummated” see §2.4.

just perceived. He turns to the dark side of the line, and the theme of *darkness* begins to be explored.¹⁷

The eighth stanza—let me read it:

O for myself, to myself, in myself alone,
Close to a heart, at the wellspring of the poem,
Between the deep void and the pure event,
I await the echo of my inner greatness,
A sonorous cistern, darkling, harsh, resounding
Hollowness ever future to the soul!

Here he seems to be—in himself, to himself, for himself alone—like a solipsistic creator-god, considering his own dark inner resources. He is as if leaning over a dark well where nothing can be seen. Is it a void? Or is it filled with obscure greatness, from which may issue an echoing song, a pure poem? All he hears promises nothing for the present. This appears to be an expression of the poet's anguish over the periods of aridity which I believe are great sources of torment to poets, especially to pure poets.

I'd like now to read it in French.

Ô pour moi seul, à moi seul, en moi-même,
Auprès d'un cœur, aux sources du poème,
Entre le vide et l'événement pur,
J'attends l'écho de ma grandeur interne,
Amère, sombre et sonore citerne,
Sonnant dans l'âme un creux toujours futur!

"Sonnant dans l'âme un creux toujours futur!" Creux... creux... creux.... What an astonishingly nasty little sound! In the context it sounds like an anemic frog down there. This seems to me a most eloquent way of expressing poetic despair.¹⁸

13. The poet now turns to the sea, which appears to him as a dazzling animal, not restrained by the bars of the upright trees but free to devour the grillwork of the graveyard. The light forces him to close his eyes. He begins to feel the downward pull of the graveyard. The spark of thought within his brow turns to his absent ones underground.

¹⁷ Purity: cf. the last words of Phèdre in *Phèdre*, lines 1643–1644. Shadow: it is not implied that the shadow appears only after noon, as Sète is outside the tropics.

¹⁸ Cf. Theocritus, *Idylls* 7.41, βάρραχος δὲ ποτ' ἀκρίδας ὡς τις ἐρίσδω ("I compete [with other singers] like a frog against cicadas").

In the tenth stanza he opens his eyes and contemplates with pleasure the graveyard, a fragment of the earth open to the light but dominated by the dark torches of the cypress trees. Unlike the sea, it is composed with earthy materials: gold, marble, and the somber cypresses. The marble that trembles here, like the palpitating roof and the scintillating sea, is earthy stone and not symbolic tile. Suddenly the animal sea reappears—but now as a protector, not an attacker, as the traditional faithful dog is, that sleeps upon his master's grave. The function of this faithful dog is somewhat paradoxical. He is to keep away the spirit of idolatry embodied in the images of religious faith within the graveyard: the doves, symbolic of the Holy Spirit; the guardian angels—who are also perhaps very inquisitive; and the images which feed vain dreams of deathless life. The poet himself is the good shepherd of this little flock, and he will feed his sheep.¹⁹

In the twelfth stanza we find that the idleness of the grave pleases the poet. He has left behind the supposed idleness full of power of the early stanzas. The thought of the dissolution of the body into its elements and their reception into some infinite vast is a bittersweet thought to a clear mind. It is like the honeyed bitter cup of Lucretius.²⁰

In the thirteenth stanza we find carried on the thought of "The future here is only idleness":

The dead lie easy, well settled in this earth
Which warms them and dries up their mystery.

Now the grave is a fine and private place. But at this moment earlier themes are reintroduced. "Noonday above" comes back—clearly a symbolic Noonday, since it has not moved, and it now seems to be exactly an unmoved mover. But the poet himself has now changed his relationship to this unmoved mover. In relation to him he has become a symbol of change, of imperfection. No longer like this unmoved mover, or aspiring to be like him, but the flaw in the diamond of the perfection of the unmoved mover, filled with uncertain and wavering thought. On the other hand, the uncertain "wavering folk" beneath the trees—that is, the dead, who are lying easy in idleness—are coming to resemble the unmoved mover. They're taking his side, as it were.²¹

¹⁹ In stanza 11 of the translation, "long" is an adverb ("for a long time") modifying the verb "pasture," and is to be pronounced in a phrase with it, followed by a slight pause before "mysterious."

²⁰ Lucretius 1.936–950, 4.11–25.

²¹ Grave: cf. Andrew Marvell, *To His Coy Mistress*, line 31.

14. In the fifteenth stanza, then, we turn completely to the dead underground. And here we get a kind of recall of the fifth stanza: the same verb, *fondre*, “to melt,” reappears. “They have”—the dead, that is—

They have melted down into thick absentness,
 Red clay has drunk the white specific form,
 The gift of life has passed into the flowers!
 Where are the dead’s familiar ways of talk,
 The personal touch, the one and only souls?
 The larva spins and threads where tears were formed.

The first part of this stanza, I believe, should recall the theme of the fifth stanza, because it introduces the theme of melting down and being eaten. But, however, the forms of the dead, in the churchyard, are no longer losing *their* specific form in order to give pleasure to the red clay, they are losing their specific form in order that they may be transformed into new forms. The second half of the stanza embarks upon an old Villonesque theme, Where are the souls of yesteryear?²²

The next stanza, about the “teased and tickled girls,” provides the answer. Everything “goes back under ground,” and back “into the game.” The gift of life passes into the flowers again and again.

In the seventeenth stanza—let me read the fifth stanza again:

As the fruit melts away into enjoyment,
 To delectation changing all its absence
 Upon a palate where its form is dying

—I said that what resembles this in the fifteenth is,

They have melted down into thick absentness,
 Red clay has drunk the white specific form,
 The gift of life has passed into the flowers!

Now let me take the second half of the fifth stanza:

I breathe in deeply my approaching smoke,
 The sky sings to my consummated soul
 The changing of the shores to murmurous clamor.

²² Cf. “But where are the snows of yesteryear?,” D. G. Rossetti’s translation of the refrain of Villon, *Ballade des Dames du temps jadis* (*Ballade of the Ladies of Bygone Time*), *Testament* 329–356 (quoted, §6.4).

This is the looking forward to the dissolution of the *soul*. And in the preceding verse we have:

As my supreme oblation to the gods,
Serene the scintillation sows upon
The lofty deep a sovereign disdain.

I think we now, in the seventeenth stanza, return to a rejection of what is said here. "And you"—the tone, I think, is savagely ironic, or sarcastic—

And you, great soul, what are your hopes? A dream
Divested of the specious coloring
That gold and the wave show here to fleshly eye?
And will you sing when you're to vapor gone?

Here at last the implied connotation of *Songe* as an illusion, I think, gets its full weight. The illusory idea of the soul—that it would rapturously embrace, under a singing sky, non-being—is simply rejected with contempt in this stanza. In fact one might say it itself is dismissed with "sovereign disdain." Everything flows; even the impatience of the divine will die, says the stanza.²³

The word *sainte*—the word "saint," which is actually the word used in the last line, and yet doesn't seem quite appropriate to the stanza itself, may prepare for the more Christian connotations of the next one, which completes the dismissal of immortality:

Gaunt immortality, decked out in black and gilt,
Ghastly consoler, laureled horribly,
You make of death a mother's loving breast,
A pious fraud.

That phrase seems to make it clear that what is being dismissed is immortality as a religious consolation.

15. Now we have done, then, with immortality. But we have not yet done with *thought*. The graveyard larva was brought in in the fifteenth stanza; now, in the nineteenth stanza, we meet the graveyard worm. "Men have died [...] and worms have eaten them." But there is a worse worm, unknown to the ancestors, eaters of flesh and drinkers of wine,

²³ Everything flows: attributed to Heraclitus by Plato. References are given in §6.5, n. 21. In the translation, "La sainte impatience" is rendered by "discontent divine."

who now lie in their final drunken stupor under the table of the tombstone. The true worm lives not on dead but on living beings; and the living being, in turn, lives by being lived on by the worm. This means *Cogito, ergo sum*. Every time that I am aware I think, I am aware that I exist. The central meaning of the true worm seems to be that of consciousness of self, of obsessive self-scrutiny, a kind of self-mastication, fascinating and repulsive, so that it is uncertain whether it is an effect of self-love or self-hatred.²⁴

I hope to be forgiven for some imaginative extravagance—in what follows.

Now we come to a bridge passage before the grand finale. Valéry makes his transition to his exhortation to the body. And I will read the transition.

Zeno of Elea! Cruel Zeno! Say,
Has your wing'd arrow made its way through me,
Thrumming and flying?... yet it does not fly!
The sound begets me but the arrow kills!
Ah! sun... A tortoise shadow for the soul
Is Achilles motionless... in mighty strides!

The poet begins his transition by turning to the particular, to the philosopher, to Zeno, as an instance of pure thought. He addresses him in distress. Zeno is cruel. He has pierced the poet with his winged arrow that cannot fly. (You all know, of course, that the reference is to the paradoxes of Zeno proving that motion is impossible. One paradox proves that an arrow simply cannot fly, and another one proves that if the tortoise has a start on Achilles the fastest will never catch up with the slowest.) The arrow thrums and flies, but it cannot fly, since thought will not allow it to fly. Yet the arrow is not at rest. Like the scintillating surface of the sea, like the scintillating surface of the soul, the arrow is poised and trembling between motion and rest. In fact this is the cruelty of the paradox. The soul is poised in a strange equipoise between rest and motion.²⁵

Now I derived all that from the first four lines. But then we have:

Ah! sun... A tortoise shadow for the soul
Is Achilles motionless... in mighty strides!

²⁴ Men have died: Shakespeare, *As You Like It* 4.1.107–108. Eaters of flesh: cf. Proverbs 23.20.

²⁵ On Zeno's paradoxes see *Physics* 6.2, 6.9, 8.8.

What do these lines add? First of all, they add one more transformation to the structural device, just simply by juxtaposition. We have the sun, we have the tortoise's shadow, and obviously in the middle we have the tortoise's shell. But there is perhaps—well, there's certainly—more to it than that. It's the last embodiment of the structural device of the straight line with the voids above and below—or, the infinities above and below. Next, the ending of the previous line with "kills" and the opening of the next with the exclamation "Ah! sun...," which is cut off, immediately suggests that the poet has taken on the guise of a fallen Homeric hero, bidding farewell to the sun. And so, enter Achilles, the most swift-footed of the Homeric heroes. But, alas, he cannot make it: he can't move. To have Achilles figure in this paradox was the unkindest cut of all; but of course it was not Valéry's invention—he has just made the situation a bit more excruciating. Achilles appears as if he were a warrior on a Greek urn, "motionless... in mighty strides!" He appears as the mere *shadow* of the slowest type of motion, the tortoise. The soul is reduced to the same pitiful state.²⁶

There is, I believe, one further suggestion to be made. In the account of Achilles' pursuit of Hector in the twenty-second book of the *Iliad*, we read the following: "As in a dream a man is not able to follow one who runs from him, nor can the runner escape, nor the other pursue him, so he could not run him down in his speed, nor the other get clear." These lines present a sort of Achilles-and-tortoise pursuit as the content of a dream, a nightmare; and I believe that the last two lines of Valéry's stanza present the paradox of Zeno as producing a nightmare of powerlessness to move. If this is so, then the first lines of the next verse—"No, no!... On your feet! [...] Run to the sea," etc.—if this is so, then the anguished "noes" of the following stanza are the cries of the poet, starting up from his nightmare and exhorting his body to refute the irrefutable worm in the only possible way, that is, by breaking the frame of thought, by running. This is the only resource within his power—the Dr. Johnson mode of refutation. It is not "I think, therefore I am," but "I breathe, therefore I run!" Instead of breathing in the smoke of non-being his lungs must breathe in the nascent wind, and the fresh, cool breath of the sea restores his soul to him not as a thinking soul but as the principle of

²⁶ Sun: in Homer, to live is "to behold the light of the sun" (ὄρᾱν φῶος ἡελίου), e.g. *Iliad* 18.61, *Odyssey* 4.540. To die is "to leave the light of the sun" (λείπειν φῶος ἡελίου), *Iliad* 18.11, *Odyssey* 11.93. Unkindest: cf. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* 3.2.188.

motion, bodily motion, so that he actually can run and plunge into the waves for a second baptism in the wet waters of bodily life.²⁷

16. The next stanza begins:

Yes! Great sea, deliriously dowered,
Panther skin, chlamys rent and holed
With innumerable idols of the sun,
Absolute hydra, drunk on your own blue flesh,
Biting without remorse your flashing tail
In din and tumult like to quietude,

The wind is rising!...

After the nay-saying, the yea-saying: reborn, the poet apostrophizes the great sea as his new divinity. The great sea can replace the sun and its significance. The great sea can be the sea before the poet as a part imagining the great sea of the world, which in turn may symbolize the great sea of life. This great sea, dowered with deliriums, is clearly Greek, and Dionysiac. It looks here like a panther, the beast of Dionysus, whose name is said to mean “all beast” and whose coat is spotted. It looks like a Greek young man’s cloak, with holes of idols—or, in Greek, images—of the sun in it. That is, a blue cloak—in Greek, a wine-dark garment—spotted and spangled with silver, surely appropriate to Dionysus. (There’s a certain wine-cup with a picture of Dionysus on it in which he is wearing such a robe, but I have no idea whether Valéry ever saw it or not.) The Dionysiac sea now transforms itself—as is proper to do, for anything Dionysiac—into a many-headed water-snake, the Greek hydra, drunk here not upon absence but upon its own blue, that is to say wine-dark, flesh. This hydra makes me think of the Greek Oceanus, surrounding the world, biting its own tail, so to speak.²⁸

²⁷ Dream: *Iliad* 22.199–201. “Run to the sea” is of course another version of the phrase “hasten to the water” in the *last* line of stanza 22. Johnson: Berkeley’s immaterialism “Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, ‘I refute it *thus*.’” 6 Aug. 1763, in *Boswell’s Life of Johnson* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 333. Cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, LCL (1925), 6.39: “When somebody declared that there is no motion, [Diogenes (of Sinope)] got up and walked about.”

²⁸ Panther: *panthēr* (πάνθηρ), supposedly from *pan-*, “all,” and *thēr*, “beast.” On this folk etymology see *OED* s.v. “Idol” is from *eidōlon* (εἰδῶλον), “image.” “Wine-dark” translates *oinops* (οἴνοψ), a Homeric epithet of the sea, from *oinos*, “wine,” and *op-*, “look,”

Despite the implied ban on bookishness in the last stanza, which I haven't read yet, I can't refrain from asking whether the last line of this stanza, "In a tumult like to silence"—the tumult in which the great hydra is biting its own blue flesh—should be understood not only acoustically but also in the light of that famous statement about truth which goes: "Truth is thus the Bacchanalian revel where not a member is sober, and because every member no sooner becomes detached than it by that very fact collapses straightaway, the revel is, just as much, a state of transparent calm."²⁹

Now let me read the last stanza.

The wind is rising!... We must try to live!
 The boundless air opens and shuts my book,
 The wave dares spring in powder from the rock!
 Fly away, pages, fly a dazzling flight!
 Break, waves! Break with exultant surges
 This peaceful roof where jibsails used to peck!

The first four words end the sentence begun in the preceding stanza. This disorderly overflowing betrays the poet's mounting Bacchic excitement. He sees the sea as a challenge. Then the rushing wind shuts his book for him; the sea, by its daring to spring out from the rocks, dares him to do the same; he scatters his white pages to the winds, and at his exhortation they become the white doves of the first line, in exhilarating flight, leaving their roof behind to be smashed into an exultant phantasmagoria.

That is the end of my description. By way of tailpiece I will reread what Valéry said about his meaning. "If anyone wonders [...] what I 'wanted to say' in a certain poem, I reply that I did not *want to say*, but *wanted to make*, and that it was the intention of *making* that *wanted* what I *said*."

"see." On the cloak see §9.1. For Oceanus in Homer see especially *Iliad* 18.399, 607–608, 21.193–199; *Odyssey* 11.13–19, 20.65.

²⁹ Hegel, *Preface*, 35 (Oxford para. 47).