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Hoffmann, Daniel

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Paul Valéry and the Poetics of Attention

By

Daniel Richard Hoffmann

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

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Committee in charge:

Professor Suzanne Guerlac, Chair

Professor Debarati Sanyal

Professor Harsha Ram

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Abstract

Paul Valéry and the Poetics of Attention

by

Daniel Richard Hoffmann

Doctor of Philosophy in French

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Suzanne Guerlac, Chair

This dissertation is about how we pay attention to poetry. Paul Valéry's work in particular is famous for asking us as readers to attend to a kind of language that isn't always resolvable into any one idea, any one meaning. His poems speak, though that speaking doesn't always give way to a something-said. In this project, I ask— if poetry falls shy of what it stands to say, what does it mean to hear it? What is this listening that falls so beautifully shy of what we stand to hear, and meaningfully so?

Over four central chapters, I explore what it looks like to attend to what we cannot resolve: be it the purely possible, the liminal, or the ever-emergent. Attention, I argue, takes many shapes: waiting, listening, weariness, even sleep. I show that these forms of attention constitute the experiential flipside of Valéry's purely formal poetic language. Indeed by entering his poetics from the standpoint of embodied experience, we realize that the unresolvedness of his work is not synonymous with the difficulty of its less-than-representational language. As a whole, then, this project countervails the widespread tendency to see Valéry's work as a mere harbinger of the 20th-century's preoccupation with the procedures of language, an approach that so often elides the specificity of the poet's relationship to the sensual world of lived experience.

For my parents

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I

Introduction

“... as a prelude holds and holds.”
- Wallace Stevens

Anguish

Valéry’s *Idée fixe* (1932) opens onto a narrator beleaguered by anguish. “J’étais en proie à de grands tourments,” it begins.¹ How strange that something as immaterial as our thoughts should be capable of afflicting us somatically, he thinks. They’re just ideas, and yet he finds himself unable to escape their uncompromising somatic reality.

The trouble with vanquishing these thoughts shares something with the trouble of ideas in general. The irony of the title—*Idée fixe*—is that the narrator doesn’t believe there’s any such thing as a fixed, or stable idea. “Idée fixe!” the narrator declares, “j’ai horreur de ce terme. Quelle qu’elle soit, une pensée qui se fixe prend les caractères d’une hypnose et devient, dans le langage logique, une idole.”² Contrary to what we conventionally understand by the term, for Valéry, ideas are not stable conceptual entities, but a mode of change. Think of them as a form of movement, he tells us, the very motion of a transformation—they’re an event, “une idée-événement.”³ When we arrest this motion, or event of the mind into a fixed “idea,” we falsify it. We become hypnotized, as though by an ‘idol,’ for anything that can be circumscribed with such fixity is no idea at all. The idol is always false.⁴ The narrator’s *idée fixe*, then, is the fact that there is no such thing as an *idée fixe*. He’s transfixed (obsessed, and therefore anguished) by what fundamentally isn’t fixed. He’s gripped, in other words, by something that he can’t seem to grasp.⁵

How is the narrator meant to relate to his anguish, then? If thoughts are a form of motion, we might reason, how are we said to *have* them? What is this strange verb of possession that links us experientially to what we can’t quite define?

Woefully the narrator makes several attempts to escape this conundrum altogether. He undertakes elaborate and difficult mental exercises, hoping that by immersing himself in his research, by pushing deeper into speculation, that his anguish would simply go unnoticed. “Approfondi[r] pour ne pas voir,” he says, an attempt to hide

¹ *Œuvres II*. Paris: Gallimard, 1957. p. 196.

² *Ibid.*, p. 207.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Indeed it’s not the luster of the golden calf that captivates; it’s the radiant fixity of its embodiment—that the boundless godhead should know so miraculously finite a form.

⁵ What interests Valéry in this dialogue, as well as in so much of his work, is the fugaciousness of thought, its movements, its emergence as such. We should note that this interest aligns with the larger preoccupations of his intellectual life—not *what* the mind produces, but the intricacies of its procedures, the sheer range and force of its possibilities.

the forest in the trees.⁶ Work does little to relieve his mind, however; “la substitution ne se faisait pas.”⁷ He decides to take a more conventional approach to the problem, to move about, to meander through the city, and by so doing, perhaps to flee his anguish on foot. And yet, like work, walking allows him neither to relate to his anguish nor to truly escape it. If anything, he discovers, walking lends it a rhythm, and in turn, an added reality to its already troublingly somatic existence. “La loi des pas égaux se plie à tous les délires,” he laments.⁸

Eventually, and here we arrive at both the heart of *Idée fixe* and the point of entry into the present study, the narrator follows a road that leads to the sea. Along the coast, there in the distance, is a patch of uneven rocks that parallels the line of the horizon. With a quickened step, and with his eyes turned upward into the moving blooms of color, unfolding in the sky, he descends into what he describes as the perfect disorder of those rocks, “le désordre parfait de leurs formes de rupture et de leurs bizarres équilibres.”⁹

The disordered angles and dispositions of the landscape seem at first merely an extension of his state of mind, as if arriving at respite from his affliction meant finding an image of its disorder in the world around him.¹⁰ What the rocks provide by way of relief, however, exceeds a strangely sympathetic image of his own condition. In ways that work and movement on flat ground could not, the rocks allow him to attend to his affliction in all its unresolvability, to come to rest within its very inconstancy. The rocks upset any attempt to lay out those movements in advance. They disrupt walking as a measured equilibration of one’s steps with the fixed and therefore predictable surface of the ground, providing the narrator with a way of inhabiting a physical position within the landscape that is also (and at the same time) endlessly “éventuel,” that is, endlessly *emergent*.

By way of the rocky surface, he enters into a figurative while material relationship to the abstract mental anguish that afflicts him: a relationship which (as though in chiaroscuro) allows the materiality of the world to blend seamlessly into the endlessly forthcoming nature of thought. Here, ideas are delivered from the inhospitality attendant on the immaterial flux that paradoxically defines them, and his anguish, in turn, proves not merely a passive state of affliction, but a form of emergence—a mode of change—he can truly inhabit, even as it eludes his grasp. The band of rocks that he traverses, in its perfect disorder, is the argument that there’s a *place* to be found, even in the “éventuel.”



Finding Place

As it turns out, this has everything to do with poetry. The American poet Billy Collins once wrote about his experience of teaching poetry to his students: “All they want to do /

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1174.

¹⁰ By finding our troubles reflected back at us, often we can relate to them with understanding, rather than feeling them afflict us, unseen and unresolved, from within.

Is tie the poem to a chair with rope / And torture a confession out of it,” he jokes (ll. 12-14).¹¹ I imagine the image would have appealed to someone like Valéry, to someone for whom ideas, be they poetic or otherwise, simply won’t sit still. Along with Collins, we can hear Valéry despairing of the impulse to compress, or bind our ideas into tidy units of meaning, as if when properly tied down, an idea (or a poem) would speak plainly, confessing its meaning to the reader. In his poem, Collins is reminding his students that there are other ways of relating to poetry, ways more in keeping with poetry itself. We can hold it up to the light “like a color slide,” or “press an ear against its hive,” he says (ll. 8; 10). It may behave like something we feel inclined to tie down and sweat into confession, but there’s little use in trying to get it to confess something it doesn’t really know.

Collins is talking about finding a way to be *with* the poem, rather than raging against it. In his own way, and with the context of poetry, he speaks to the condition and challenge of Valéry’s narrator who, having conceded to the inconstant and ever-emergent nature of thought (to its definitional lack of fixity), discovers a way not of resolving this flux into something stable, but a way of attending to it *in* and *as* it escapes his attention. It’s as if the narrator were dealt a color slide, and he went to look for light.

There’s a beautiful simplicity to the opening moments of *Idée fixe*, then. The narrator isn’t looking to tie down these motions, this flux of thought. He’s looking for a way of inhabiting precisely what eludes him, and it’s with this basic desire that we arrive both at the central conceit of *Idée fixe* and at the heart of the curiosity this dissertation explores. The narrator is looking for somewhere to stand, for a place to *be*—for a place, in other words, to come to rest in what is otherwise an experiential economy in which rest (or fixity) has been declared a false idol of the mind. This is also the experiential economy made available to us as readers of Valéry’s poetry. How do we find a place to *be* in a poetic economy of language, meaning, and experience defined by its placelessness? by a language that seems never to settle on any one idea, any one meaning?

It isn’t often that we walk away from one of Valéry’s poems with a stable idea of *what* has been said. He once defined poetry as language that you can’t seem to paraphrase, reminding us that what the poem offers us isn’t reducible to the ideas we make of it—that *what* it says is bound up inextricably in *how* it moves, modulates, or impends, and that the only way of reconnecting to what it says would be, quite simply, to hear it again. This isn’t a failure on the part of the poet to say what he means. For some, as it is for Valéry, this is the very specificity of the poetic: that the poem should fall so beautifully and meaningfully shy of what it stands to say.

In the narrator’s attempts to inhabit what he can’t quite resolve (the flux, the very motion of thought itself), he speaks to the condition and challenge of a reader who, when faced with a poem, must find a way of relating to meaning that seems never to truly settle—that proves as palpable as it is elusive, as real as it is endlessly emergent, as available to us as it is inseparable from the voice in which it falls shy of acquiring a definitive shape.

In the chapters that follow, then, and like the uneven landscape in *Idée fixe*, I offer a way of coming to rest within this restless poetics of “imminence, movement, and

¹¹ “Introduction to Poetry.” *The Apple That Astonished Paris*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1988. p. 58.

modulation,” as Lloyd Austin famously summarizes.¹² As whole, this study is a way of inhabiting the experiential specificity of poems that speak without leaving us with a certain sense of a something-said. I ask: if these poems fall shy of what they stand to say, what does it mean to hear it? What is this listening that simply won’t accrue into a something-heard? In the end, I show that this falling-shy is on the one hand the very essence of the poetic, and on the other, both the promise and the site of its livability.



Difficulty, alas

I refer to “restlessness,” or “unresolvability,” and by those terms I mean to qualify something of Valéry’s poetics that has historically gone by another name, and in turn, been read through another lens. The term “difficulty” has been part of our critical vocabulary for some time now. I think of a critic like Charles Bernstein, for instance, who recently published a critical work on modernist poetry entitled *Attack of the Difficult Poem*.¹³ As a reader of the poems he discusses, I admit that the title rings true in more ways than one. To think that even preeminent critics like Charles Bernstein not only find these poems difficult, but argue that such “difficulty” is at the heart of what they mean to accomplish, is somehow not only satisfying, but encouraging. And yet above and beyond facilitating a certain relationship to modern poetry, the term has also provided the critical community with a way of accounting for the procedures of the poems themselves. Difficulty isn’t simply what we can expect of them as we read, nor merely what we are meant to forgive ourselves in the process. As Malcolm Bowie summarizes, echoing the opinions of many of his contemporaries, “in the work of many modern poets, difficulty is the very *life* of the poem.”¹⁴

Usually it’s the language of modern poetry that strikes us as difficult. I think of a poem like Valéry’s ‘Vue,’ for instance. With its dense and impossibly tangled syntax, is it any wonder that critic Michel Phillippon should have opened his reading of the poem with a bit of warning: “Le poème est d’une lecture assez difficile”?¹⁵ The poem unfolds as a single grammatical phrase. Verbal endings don’t immediately pair with their subjects. Subordinate clauses are so thoroughly embedded within one another that it demands time and focus to discern where one ends and the other begins, making its “difficulty” not so surprising.¹⁶

The less obvious dimension of the poem’s difficulty, however, relates to how these linguistic peculiarities were part of a larger set of shifts concerning the referentiality

¹² Austin, Lloyd James. “Modulation and Movement in Valéry’s Verse”. *Yale French Studies* 44 (1970). p. 38. Web. 15 Mar. 2015.

¹³ Chicago: University of Chicago, 2011.

¹⁴ Bowie, Malcolm. *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. p. 4. See also studies such as: Diepreveen, Leonard. *The Difficulties of Modernism*. London: Routledge, 2003. Print, and Diepreveen, Leonard. *Degrees of Difficulty: Modern American Poetry Explained and Unexplained*. New York: New York University Press, 2009. Print.

¹⁵ *Paul Valéry: Une poétique en poèmes*. Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1993. Print. p. 146.

¹⁶ In Chapter IV, I offer a close reading of this poem in particular, in part as a way of pushing back against its reputation. Even Suzanne Nash suggests that with its impossibly difficult syntax, it “looks as if it might have been written by Mallarmé.” *Paul Valéry’s ‘Album des vers anciens’: A Past Transfigured*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983. p. 206.

of poetic language. As the traditional story of 19th-century poetics goes, during this period poets began turning to the plasticity of language over and against its capacity to represent. Language no longer referred to the extra-linguistic world, but was, through its very unfolding, a world unto itself. In his remarks at the Library of Congress shortly after the death of Valéry, T.S. Eliot famously distilled the fundamentals of these ideas into nothing less than poetic doctrine, one he applied wholesale to poetry as far back as that of Edgar Allen Poe. “Poetry no longer *says* something, it *is* something,” he argued.¹⁷

This conception of poetry that Eliot formulates so compendiously is a mainstay of my curiosity, and in many ways the point of departure for the present project as a whole. There’s something elusive about the idea, and in turn something rarefied and unlikely about the poems that work within it. What does it really mean for a poem to no longer *say*, but to simply *be*? What does that actually look like?

Behind Eliot’s declaration lie not just a history of 19th-century poetry, but also the story of the evolution of a particular conception of poetic language. Traditionally this tale begins in the early part of the 19th century with the practitioners of *l’art pour l’art*—that band of beauty-driven bards who triumphantly expunged the socio-political from the world of the poem, refusing to depict the political tumult taking place outside their windows. Later, as if in a kind of literary one-up-manship, it was the Symbolists who purportedly carried these tenets to their logical conclusions, who outdid their aestheticist progenitors by banishing the extra-linguistic from the poem as well. Indeed it was Mallarmé who, as early as the 1860s, began thinking about the function and behavior of language as somehow less than necessarily representational. His famous poetic injunction to paint “non la chose, mais l’effet qu’elle produit” was the first major step away from the expectation that language should refer outwardly toward the extralinguistic world at all.¹⁸ As Barbara Johnson summarizes, it’s not that language “does not refer (‘suggest’ or ‘allude,’ as Mallarmé puts it), but that there is something about language that makes it more like a prism than like a window.”¹⁹

Indeed our approach to the poetry of the late 19th century has been largely dominated by this narrative of poetry’s progressive rarefaction. It’s a story, moreover, told with a vocabulary that only perpetuates this sense of Symbolism’s exile from the livable world of the here and now, and of its undisputed belonging in the rarefied realm of theory and abstraction. “Silence,” the void, “Nothingness,” Valéry’s mythical “poésie pure,” a poetry too pure to be written. Both in letter and in spirit, the trouble with this narrative is that it ends up creating a certain number of critical biases. When we think of Symbolism’s place in the history of letters as having essentially severed the extra-linguistic from the world of the poem, it comes as little surprise that their legacy should be one of hermeticism and self-enclosure. And yet it’s also possible to see Valéry as largely indebted to the phenomenality of the very world he chose *not* to represent, and his work, contrary to its reputation and through some other lens than the referentiality of language (or its absence), can appear surprising in its devotion to the lived and the livable.

This project grew out of my attempts at squaring the tenor of these traditional

¹⁷ *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings*. Omaha: University of Nebraska, 1992 (Reprint). p. 16.

¹⁸ “Letter to Henri Cazalis (30 October 1864).” *Œuvres complètes II*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992. p. 1130.

¹⁹ “1885, June: The Liberation of Verse.” *A New History of French Literature*. Ed. Hollier, Denis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998. p. 800.

readings with my own experience of the poems themselves. My intuition was that while we all agreed that there was something rarefied about them, their “rarefaction” meant something different for me than it did for the critics I was reading. Crucially, these poems never struck me as vacant. There was always a substance to them, something experientially capacious about these poetics, even in their preoccupation with the absence of a something-said, and even in their devotion to the operations of a less-than-representational language.²⁰

Accordingly, I became less and less interested in theory-driven readings that seemed to magically transform all of Symbolism into the harbinger of 20th-century literary theory—that is, into poems portending the vast and all-important signifier to which the following century was so monomaniacally devoted. Indeed so extensive, so pervasive is the influence of the concept of the signifier in particular on our readings of this poetry that I find myself reaching for a more forceful term to stand in for our intellectual dependence. A crutch, perhaps, but one so securely fastened to the limbs of the critical mind that we have long mistaken it for our own extremity.²¹ It’s not that the poets of this era didn’t step willingly into the questions of signs and signification, or that they in fact didn’t see their work (Mallarmé and Valéry in particular) as bound up inseparably in their conceptions of language; it’s simply that approaches that move through referentiality and signification often elide, neglect, and/or *distort* the experiential dimension of these poetics. They offer these poems to us colored by the struggle, effort, difficulty, and strain of their theoretical underpinnings. They suggest a pure poetry of the intellect.²²

At the same time, and in more general terms, when we refer to the difficulty of such poems, we suggest that what we can expect from poetry is simply a more vexing version of an experience that exists in simpler, easier, prosaic forms. It suggests that poetry and prose produce two different versions of the same experience, one simply more demanding than the other. More importantly, perhaps, when we go so far as to equate the “life” of the poem with difficulty, we implicitly bind the success of the poem to the failure of the rational mind that looks to reason with it. It’s as if the task of the poet was

²⁰ By “capacious,” I mean that his poetics “furnishes hospitable conditions for entering and tarrying,” as Lisa Robertson once defined the term. “It shelters without fastening; it conditions without determining.” *Nilling*. Toronto: Bookthug Press, 2006. p. 12.

²¹ Whence critical approaches to Symbolist and post-Symbolist poetics like that of Julia Kristeva, who, in her seminal article “Pour une sémiologie des paragrammes,” famously binds the activity of poetry *writ large* to the workings of a linguistic system of signs and signification. “La pratique littéraire,” she summarizes, “se révèle comme exploration et découverte des possibilités du langage; comme activité qui affranchit le sujet de certains réseaux linguistique (psychiques, sociaux); comme dynamisme qui brise l’inertie des habitudes du langage et offre au linguiste l’unique possibilité d’étudier le *devenir* des significations de signes.” *Recherches pour une sémanalyse*. Paris: Seuil, 1969. p. 176.

²² Many critics suggest that at its most fundamental, Valéry’s poetics is one of sustained, rarefied intellection. This particular perspective on his work dates back to his contemporaries, like Maurois, André. *Introduction à la méthode de Paul Valéry*. Paris: Éditions des Cahiers Libres, 1933. There’s also, for instance, Sewel, Elizabeth. *Paul Valéry: The Mind in the Mirror*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952. And Hartmann, Geoffrey. *The Unmediated Vision: An Interpretation of Wordsworth, Hopkins, Rilke, and Valéry*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954. Web 15 Jul. 2013. Among the more contemporary, Elizabeth Howe’s study comes to mind: *Stages of Self: The Dramatic Monologues of Laforgue, Valéry, & Mallarmé*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1990. And Mairesse, Anne. *Figures de Valéry*. Paris: L’Harmattan, 2000.

merely to find new (and beautiful) ways of derailing the intellect in order that the sonorous, or formal qualities of the poem might win out.

In a book called *The Unmediated Vision*, the critic Geoffrey Hartman gives an account of Valéry's poetics precisely along these lines.²³ Hartman argues that Valéry's unconventional use of language—both its sound and syntax—is meant to “retard” our ability to grasp the sense of the poem at hand. “The poet uses every means to retard in us that faculty of the intellect often named induction by which we are enabled to make a quick or conventional guess at the referent of a phrase.”²⁴ He goes on to argue that it's through these “retardations” that the poem suspends the act of knowledge we equate with reading: that its difficulty delays an act of cognition, and does so as the poetic act par excellence. What this makes of poetry, unfortunately, is little more than a carefully orchestrated moment of cognitive failure, set to the rhythms of the alexandrine, and thinly veiled under a layer of melody.

It seemed to me, however, not only possible, but fruitful to think about the “life” of the poem somewhat differently. The underlying contention of this project is that these poetics, while forged in and around ideas about non-representational language and the operations of signification, are not entirely reducible to those ideas. The “life” of these poems need not be synonymous with the difficulty of their language, nor with the referentiality they thereby refuse. As a whole my efforts represent a willingness to see Valéry's poetry not just as the end product of Rimbaud's famous injunction to “trouver une langue,” but also as a way of amending and re-organizing the basic terms and categories of experience, of finding new relationships to the world.²⁵ In other words, these poetics don't simply strive to signify differently; they strive to live differently. That's our point of departure.



Attention

While the referentiality of language (or its absence) is what accounts for the unresolvability of meaning's production, it's a specific notion of *attention*, I propose, that accounts for the experiential specificity of a poem that lacks a something-said.

Traditionally we understand attention as a form of concentration, or a state of focus directed toward an object. “Every one knows what attention is,” says William James in his landmark study *The Principles of Psychology*. “It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought.”²⁶ Attention is an act of narrowing in on a selected object, we tend to think, and it's for this reason that we so often talk about it in visual

²³ Hartmann, p. 102.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ “[Le poète] devra faire sentir, palper, écouter ses inventions ; si ce qu'il rapporte de là-bas a forme, il donne forme ; si c'est informe, il donne de l'informe. *Trouver une langue.*” “‘Lettre du voyant,’ à Paul Demy, 15 mai 1871,” *Œuvres complètes*. Paris : Gallimard, 1992. p. 1012.

²⁶ New York: Holt, 1890. p. 404.

terms, as a kind of cognitive spotlight that lingers over one object of focus before moving to the next.²⁷ It's a mental energy that works to grasp, to seize, to possess.

Valéry's poetics offers an altogether different understanding of attention: not an act of the mind as it apprehends what it confronts, or as it isolates an object of focus, but an experience both constituted and upheld by what it can't quite resolve.²⁸ As such, the attention we'll explore in this project is an experience closer to what we overhear in its etymology than in its conventional usage. From the Latin *attendere*, meaning 'to outstretch,' it conjures a kind of openness, an expansive receptivity. To attend to someone is often an act of loving-care; there's something 'tender,' or delicate about the mind in this capacity. The term also carries a less transitive valence when it refers simply to an act of being present, a form of attendance: the way we *are* in relation to an event, or a taking-place. Finally, in French, *attendre* is an experience of time, one that can either move us toward an object, or unfold in and of itself. To wait is as much a relationship to a future event as it is finding oneself fit to the draw of time. Thus, if "attention" as a term lends itself to the deeply embodied forms of experience we explore in this project, it's thanks to an etymology that blurs the line between the cognitive and the embodied, between the transitive and the intransitive. Ultimately I argue that while "difficulty" accounts for the less-than-referential dimension of poetic language, it's attention, conceived etymologically, that accounts for the experiences made possible in and through the unresolvability of that language.²⁹



Methodology

The critical approach to the question of attention I develop here draws from several methodological traditions. The distinctly phenomenological perspective of this study stems from the work of the Geneva School critics, especially that of Jean-Pierre Richard. His phenomenological approach to literature is an attempt to access the mind of the poet (the shape of the author's imagination) by moving through the works themselves. In practice, this methodology always leads him back to the authorial encounter with the sensual word, even in the ethereal realm of Mallarméan silence. This was in fact the basis for the excoriating charge leveled at Richard by the narratologist Gerard Genette in the

²⁷ Cf. Scholl, Brian J. 'Objects and attention: the state of the art.' *Objects and Attention*. Ed. Scholl, Brian. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002.

²⁸ In his highly influential studies *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (1990) and *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (1999), Jonathon Crary also pushes against a conventional understanding of attention by demonstrating that the attentive perceptual practices of the late 19th-century are informed by larger social and cultural forces. Just as modernity's "fragmentation, shock, and dispersal" shapes attention is into something other than a "willed state of exclusive focus," here I show how a conception of attention is shaped by a poetics that moves, shifts, and impends (8). Cf. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991. *Suspension of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000.

²⁹ Valéry began his 'Mémoires sur l'attention' as an entry for the Prix Saintour (1905), though it went unsubmitted and largely unfinished. Thematically the essay bears a bit less on attention *per se* than on the challenges of describing it psychologically, and in turn, on the limits and obstacles to the field of psychology in general. Indeed it comes in the wake of such inquiries into attention as William James' *The Principles of Psychology* (1890).

late 60s. As Genette caustically remarks in reference to the critic's canonical work on Mallarmé:

Mallarmé cannot possibly be 'seeking absence,' much less finding it, since as Richard would have it he can only be 'expressing rarefaction from the starting point of plenitude, and pointing to the hollowing out of things by way of things truly present before us.' The phrase 'truly present' flatly contradicts certain meditations on language which go back all the way to Mallarmé himself.³⁰

Like Richard, I see no such contradiction between absence and plenitude, and in this project, I pursue a similarly unlikely consonance between a poetics marked by imminence, liminality, and possibility (on the one hand) and a kind of experiential capaciousness (on the other).³¹



In **Chapter I**, I situate Valéry's poetics of attention within a larger literary historical context. By pushing back against the signifier as a critical lens, I reveal an alternative path through literary history—one that links Valéry not to his traditional progenitors (Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud), but to a poet famous for his attentive (and famously visual) engagement with the material world around him, Théophile Gautier. Here I offer a new and original reading of the overlooked connection between these two poets, and by so doing, suggest an alternative (and more deeply embodied) conception of Symbolism's development.

In Chapters II through IV, I explore how attention is shaped by three different forms of unresolvability. Each chapter, like the landscape of *Idée fixe*, offers a way of moving into the richly experiential dimensions of these forms of unresolvability that conventionally seem to lack those dimensions altogether—features of his work, in other words, that tend to pass as a source of difficulty.

In **Chapter II**, for instance, I address the central conundrum of form. How can we attend to the form of a poem as an object of attention when form, by its very definition, isn't an object? I argue that doing so, for Valéry, means conceiving of form as a kind of

³⁰ *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Seldon, Raman. London: Prentice Hall Europe, 1985. p. 47.

³¹ In a more contemporary context, my approach to Valéry's work aligns with certain aspects of the nascent tradition of "surface reading." In their quasi-manifesto published in *Representations* (2009), critics Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus distinguish their own critical approach from what they define as "symptomatic reading." Fueled by a hermeneutics of suspicion, this latter interpretive method suggests that "the most interesting aspect of a text is what it represses, and as Frederic Jameson argued, that interpretation should therefore seek 'a latent meaning behind a manifest one'" (15). Surface reading, on the other hand, is an attunement to what is "neither hidden nor hiding... A surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to look *through*" (17). In its resistance to the surface/depth binary by which interpretation is but an act of unmasking, surface reading aligns methodologically with what Valéry asks of us in his own literary practice. Both for surface readers and for Valéry, form isn't the promise of depth. Instead, "depth is continuous with surface and is thus an effect of immanence"—a line I cite from Best and Marcus, though that could have just as easily come from Valéry himself. If there's something to unearth within this poetics that speaks without a something-said, it's in the unfolding of its surface, not within its depths. Best, Stephen and Marcus, Sharon. "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations* 108 (Fall: 2009), pp. 1-21. Web 12 Feb. 2016.

event, as a taking-place. I show through a sustained, chapter-long close reading of his iconic poem ‘La dormeuse’ how we can behold this event of form—that *she* may be asleep, but her form is always already *wakeful*.

While in Chapter II, wakefulness is our path into the experiential dimensions of form, in **Chapter III**, sleep is our path into the experiential plenitude of the liminal. In Valéry’s poems, liminality appears both as a motif and as an operation of the poem itself. On the one hand, he often writes about the mind caught between sleep and wakefulness, or about the shifting colors of twilight, caught between day and night. On the other, the poems themselves are governed by a kind of neither/nor—a work that excites and much as defies our readerly attention, that speaks as much as falls shy of a something-said, and liminally so. This chapter moves through three of Valéry’s texts that bear on sleep—‘La fileuse’ (poetry), *La Soirée avec Monsieur Teste* (prose), and ‘Agathe’ (prose-poetry)—and by so doing, argues that even in the liminal waning of the conscious mind is the waxing of an unlikely form of experience.

Chapter IV is about poetry’s relationship to the possible. More specifically, it’s about how and why Valéry’s work invites us into an *experience* of the possible—into a living, palpable sense of something that falls so beautifully and paradoxically shy of actuality—and does so as the poetic act par excellence. In a reading of his famous ‘Le nénuphar blanc,’ I show how Mallarmé conceives of possibility as central to the procedures of poetic language. In turn, we explore how Valéry moves beyond a Mallarméan conception of possibility (*qua* feature of language) by situating it within the waiting body—as he, in two final poems, offers us a way of attending to possibility through an experience of time.



In this project, I take seriously the idea that criticism is an act of pleasure, and that at its best, it becomes not only a way of desiring the text (too often criticism doesn’t desire the text it reads), but an extension of its pleasures, curiosities, and confusions. In the readings of the following chapters, I stick very close to the texts themselves, and I do so as a way of entering into them, of making them speak. As Valéry suggested, we can make ourselves an ‘instrument’ of the written word, “de manière que *notre voix*, notre intelligence et tous les ressorts de notre sensibilité se soient composés pour donner vie et présence puissante à l’acte de création de l’auteur.”³²

This project is about this “vie et présence puissante,” a dimension of these poems that takes shape in a deeply embodied conception of reading—a way of contending with an object of inquiry only as it escapes us, as it unfolds (unresolvably) in and by way of our own attention. Critic and poet Mary Ruefle offers us a way of understanding the relationship between our attention (here, a kind of listening, we might imagine) and the act of writing:

I used to think I wrote because there was something to say. Then I thought, ‘I will write because I have not yet said what I wanted to say’; but I know now that I continue to write because I have not yet heard what I have been listening to.³³

³² *Œuvres II*. Paris: Gallimard, 1957. p. 1134.

³³ *Madness, Honey, and Rack*. Seattle: Wave Books, 2012. p. 103.

So too is the writing of this project continuous with what we've yet to hear, and as such, continuous with our listening. As a whole, it's the argument that are some truths that indeed fall beautifully and meaningfully shy of the ideas we stand to make of them: truths that speak only in what we fail to hear.

II

Théophile Gautier and the Shape of Attention

“(…) tantôt vu, tantôt non vu,
jamais hors de vue.”
Paul Valéry

In this chapter, I propose a literary historical genealogy for Valéry’s poetics of “attention.” I argue that the roots of the kind of attention we’ll consider in enormous detail over the next three Valéry-specific chapters can be found in the work of Théophile Gautier, a poet whose influence on Valéry in particular has remained under-addressed in critical literature. In what follows, then, we’ll situate the preoccupations of the next three chapters within the larger context of the evolution of 19th-century poetics, as well as begin animating the concept of “attention” that unfolds in and *as* this project as a whole.



It comes as little surprise that so many of Théophile Gautier’s contemporaries should have spoken of his visual relationship to the world around him. He began his artistic career as an aspiring painter, after all, and he was one of the founding editors of the interdisciplinary journal *L’Artiste* (1832). For most of his life, he supported himself as an art critic, writing commentaries and reviews of the official *Salons* (1840, 1841, 1845, notably). Indeed his guide to the Louvre’s collection of early modern paintings was quite popular in his day (1866).³⁴ This is, of course, to say nothing of the sumptuous world he conjures for us in his most famous (and famously visual) collection of poetry, *Émaux et camées*, or of his affiliation with those fervent ‘observers’ of the external world, the Parnassians. He is, more than most, and as Mallarmé states so compendiously, one for whom the external world *exists*, and in whose hands it appeared ‘more resplendent than ever before.’³⁵

And yet this visual attachment to the world around him isn’t without its complications. For as much as his work offers us to see, we often find him pondering the limits of the visible. In *Émaux et camées* (1852), for instance, the poet privileges objects

³⁴ *Le Musée du Louvre*. Paris: Citadelles & Mazenod, 1866. Web 10 Mar. 2015. For a history of its publication and contemporary reception, see Snell, Robert. *Théophile Gautier: A Romantic Critic of the Visual Arts*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

³⁵ “Je veux chanter une des qualités glorieuses de Gautier,” said Mallarmé in a letter to Catulles Mendès, “le don mystérieux de voir avec les yeux... Je chanterai le voyant, qui, placé dans ce monde l’a regardé, ce qu’on ne fait pas. Je crois que me voici, tout à fait, rattaché au point de vue générale.” Mallarmé, Stéphane. “Le tombeau de Théophile Gautier.” *Œuvres complètes II*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992. p. 1213.

and materials whose complex visual qualities resist any simple attempt at apprehending them. Pearls recur throughout the collection, emblematically in this respect. It's their strange and perplexing luster that speaks so emphatically to the poetic mind—a shine that emerges paradoxically out of its clouded surface. In 'Caerulei oculi,' the poet contends at a distance with a woman of a strange and affecting beauty, "Une femme mystérieuse / Dont la beauté trouble mes sens" (ll. 1-2). In her cerulean eyes the bitter blue of the sky blends with the glaucous hues of the sea: a conspiracy of color, merged together "dans la langueur de leur prune" (l. 9). As such, her beauty depends less on any one physical (and visibly delimitable) trait than in the uncertain collusion of its qualities. It's the potent and inscrutable power of such a color, coupled with her piercing gaze that so effortlessly transfixes the poet, that seems to demand that it be seen, while offering very little to be determined beyond an "azur indéfini" (l. 16).³⁶

Here the poet proves less invested in the nature of this "azur indéfini" than in the tenuous connection upheld by that lack of definition, in the hold such beauty seems to have on the poetic mind. These moments are emblematic of a world that speaks to—but also very often *resists*—vision, and to my mind, it's Gautier's great achievement to have attended so closely not simply to objects, qualities, and substances that push back against the discerning power of vision, but to the experiential specificity of that struggle.

On one hand, this chapter is about the specificity of that experience as it spans and develops over the course of Gautier's career, beginning with his first novel, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), and culminating in his famous collection of poems, *Émaux et camées* (1852). I argue that by attending so closely to the experience of an unresolvable world of sensual form, Gautier transforms a poetics of looking into a broader poetics of attention. As we'll see, his work shifts our focus away from the binary of what we either see or don't see, and toward the act of attention that both underwrites and exceeds that binary. When an act of looking falls shy of a something-seen, rather than thinking of that engagement as a failed act of vision, Gautier not only recuperates the negative of its falling-shy into a positive act of attention, but also places that act of attention at the very heart of his poetics.

On the other hand, this chapter is also about the legacy of this particular economy of experience in the poetics of Valéry. I argue that by conceiving of an act of attention in and by way of the unresolvability of its object, Gautier can be read as an important progenitor both of Valéry's poetics of attention and of Symbolism more broadly. As a critical lens, moreover, Gautier's work allows us to enter Valéry's poetics from an experiential, deeply embodied point of view. It colors Valéry's work, in other words, as something other than a rarefied poetics of the intellect. It suggests that it has something fundamental to do with how we relate, attentively, to the sensual world around us. As we'll see, these two poetics of attention share unexpected and meaningful ties of kinship.



³⁶ The poet's strange and conflicted attachment to the woman's beauty (how she holds his attention) is not unlike the experience of attempting to discern that hypothetical limit point in the blending of two colors: an attempt to find some measure of their proportions in one another, as if grasping the chemistry of their combination were enough to understand its alchemical effects on the mind.

Gautier's poetics of attention begins, of all places, in a novel. In the opening pages of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, we find its protagonist, a poet named d'Albert, wearied by his state of anguish. It begins as a vague sense of longing, a kind of *ennui*. "Rien n'est fatigant au monde comme ces tourbillons sans motif," he explains.³⁷ Eventually, through a letter he writes to a friend and confidant, we learn that at the source of his anguish is a desire not simply for a mistress, but for a mistress of staggering perfection, and that it's this hazy, ever-evasive ideal that haunts him with the strange and unrelenting force of *ennui*. He is plagued by a notion of beauty as vague as it is unrealized, such that the anguish produced by its absence is perhaps the most immediate assurance that it exists at all.³⁸

D'Albert, after all, is no ordinary admirer of beauty. He avoids the company of old men because he finds their wrinkles offensive. He gives money only to beggars whose features are 'picturesque.'³⁹ He would never strike a handsome dog or horse, he reasons, nor ever employ a servant of an unprepossessing appearance. As for a mistress, he longs for the kind of beauty found only in the marble statuary of the ancient Greeks, or in the portraits of Titien. She is twenty-six, he imagines. A blond with dark eyes, though her skin has the hues of a brunette. She has thin wrists and long hands, like those craning limbs in the portraits of the Italian mannerists, made to appear so delicate and unworldly. In this, he shares something of the legendary plight of Pygmalion, the Cypriot king who loved the ivory statue of a beautiful woman so deeply that the gods granted it life. And like Pygmalion, for whom the gods reconciled the inert beauty of a statue with the carnal exigences of the king's desire, so too does d'Albert await his ideal-made-flesh: that union of an ideal (and therefore abstract) beauty with the tangible (and therefore graspable) dimensions of human form.

Wearied by the 'aimless aspirations' that hold him bothered and restless at the beginning of the novel, d'Albert finally decides to take action, to seek out his ideal. "J'ai assez rêvé; à l'action maintenant."⁴⁰ Here, in embryo, are the beginnings of what I see as one of the major innovations of the novel: namely, the progressive displacement of an iconically Romantic relationship to an abstract ideal based on passive and afflicted longing (i.e., that "élan sans but" with which the novel begins) in the interest of an *active* engagement with an ideal as elusive as it is materially present. The novel as a whole can be read as a series of attempts at moving beyond rêverie ("à l'action maintenant"): at finding ways of relating to what was only ever an abstract and haunting notion of an ideal in the bodied realm of the here and now. And as its protagonist makes clear, that transition is hardly an uncomplicated one.

D'Albert's frenzied pursuit of an ideal mistress eventually leads him to a woman we come to know only as Rosette, or thus he refers to her for having first appeared to him atop a flight of stairs in a rose-colored dress.⁴¹ Her name is less a reference to her (the

³⁷ Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966 (Reprint). p. 12.

³⁸ That the novel should begin with its protagonist struggling against an anguish he cannot resolve should echo the beginning of this project when, in the Introduction, we first encountered Valéry's protagonist in *Idée fixe*, struggling to inhabit the very placelessness of his anguish.

³⁹ Gautier, p. 87.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁴¹ Ross Chambers has much to say about this dress in his capacious article "Pour une poétique du vêtement." Therein he explores the various relationships between women's bodies and their clothes in

individual) than it is a reflection of d'Albert's perception of her, and of the role she plays in the complicated workings of his desire. She is young and charming, and while it depends largely on the day (to say nothing of his mood), he does, in fact, find her 'pleasing.' And yet he admits that she is ultimately little more than a transitional figure: a stopgap solution to the larger problem of the as-yet realized mistress of staggering perfection for which he so desperately yearns. In no uncertain terms, she is a prop in the larger theatrics of his desire. "Ah, que de fois, pauvre Rosette, tu as servi de corps à mes rêves et donné réalité à tes rivales... tu n'étais qu'un... moyen de *tromper un désir impossible à réaliser*."⁴² As such, she provides a tenuous means of connecting the embodied realm of the here and now with what has otherwise revealed itself as only ever *possible*. She lends physicality to the disembodied ideal that precedes (as much as exceeds) her, while never truly becoming its embodiment.

In an effort to "tromper" this unrealizable desire, he indulges in the most carnal version of Beauty's hypothetical possession, giving in to the impulse not simply to find or behold, but to *grasp* it.⁴³ He stages several installments of (sexual) role play, including an elaborate (and costumed) version of *Beauty and the Beast*. He 'has' her in carriages, he explains, in the moonlight, and in a huge marble bath. He plays the part of a triton, and she, that of nereid. "Cette femme," he remarks, "était à moi. – J'en faisais ce que je voulais... Je lui avais ôté son nom et je lui en avais donné un autre. C'était ma chose, ma propriété."⁴⁴ In his quest to "posséder" his ideal, he tires himself out 'possessing' Rosette in ways both carnal and conventional. Sleeping with her, however, does nothing to convince him of having moved any closer to what he yearns for. He has a mistress "en apparence," and yet "il ne me semble pas *avoir* une maîtresse."⁴⁵ In the end, it seems that d'Albert's attempts at placating an impossible desire with the carnal immediacy of a woman who only sometimes 'pleases' him, only goes so far.

This search for an embodied ideal—which is also a way of struggling against its abstraction—does not just take place as a turn toward the immanently corporeal, however. In another (ultimately unsuccessful) attempt at squaring away the conflict between the real and the ideal—at closing the distance, that is, between his earthly desires and the immaterial ideal that fuels it—d'Albert makes use of Rosette in a somewhat different way. She may not have been the realization of Beauty he longed for, but there was nevertheless a moment during one of their encounters that left him with a sense of having moved somewhat closer to that ideal. He and Rosette were out for a ride on horseback when what he describes as a moment of communion took place: not with Rosette, but with the world around him. Faced with the beauty of the natural world, he finds himself in a semi-delirious state of aesthetic absorption, one he transfers quite effortlessly onto his companion. As he leans in for a kiss, so encompassing is the moment—the seemingly fated orchestration of the breeze, the wide bands of pale blue that run along the horizon, the lull of the ride on horseback—that he can no longer tell whether he is himself or someone else. The kiss takes place as if she weren't there at all,

poems by Hugo, Baudelaire and Gautier. *Michigan Romance Studies*. (Vol. 1, 1980). p. 30. Web 25 Dec. 2014.

⁴² Gautier, p. 179.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

as if the meeting of their lips were merely an outward emblem of some inner communion: he with the moment itself. He admits that the reality of the moment somehow lived up to *an* ideal—that it shared something of the ideality he had been pursuing so fervently—if only because he lost track of himself in the process: lost track, that is, of the limits of reality, and with them, the ability to distinguish between the two (traditionally opposing) realms. Whereas earlier attempts to grasp what disallowed (by its very nature) for any such possession lead to little more than spiritless physicality with Rosette (a soul-less plunge into the carnal, into the abundantly graspable), here, on the other hand, we have a lapse of the bodied here and now: a lapse of the physical world in the interest of a purely spiritual one. Or, to crib Wordsworth (and by way of marking the Romanticism of that lapse), a moment wherein we are “laid asleep in body / And become a living soul.”⁴⁶ This (ultimately provisional) access to the ideal takes place as d’Albert loses track of the limit point between himself and the outside world: an induced harmoniousness with his environment, reminiscent (surely) of Rousseau’s water-side communion in the fifth of his famous promenades.⁴⁷

At this point in the narrative, d’Albert has only ever encountered a falsely embodied ideal (Rosette) and struggled unsuccessfully with various versions of a *dis*-embodied ideal. Through the fictional personas he invents for them during role-play, d’Albert attempts to lend a physical presence to his ideal, while at the same time ignoring everything of its brutal reality. The ideal to which Rosette was meant to lend her physical presence, however, proves as spiritually deficient as it is excessively physical. Hardly the embodiment of the ideal he had hoped for. Alternatively, rather than pretending reality isn’t what it is, d’Albert tries losing track of reality altogether. In the moment of his kiss with Rosette, and at the sounds of the nightingale, he works against the material contingencies that shatter—or at minimum, weaken—the fiction of his connection with the ideal. We can think of these moments, then, as either a moment of transcendence, or as the erasure of self through ecstatic communion *à la* Rousseau. These scenes are attempts at getting around what he recognizes as the ‘impossibility’ of an embodied absolute: a way of lapsing into the realm of the very ideal he so monomaniacally pursues.

There is, however, as I see it, no small measure of irony in the way Gautier chooses to represent these provisional and unsuccessful connections with an Ideal.⁴⁸ In these moments—*pace* most critics—I see Gautier consciously ironizing a conventionally Romantic attachment to the abstract, to the metaphysical, or to an Absolute one *feels* to

⁴⁶ “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey.” Cited in Bloom, Harold. *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961. p. 134.

⁴⁷ A similar moment of lapse occurs later in the narrative, though this time it takes place when he hears the song of a nightingale. As he wanders down a country path, the world grows still. The leaves no longer rustle in the wind, and the water seems as if suspended from the mouth of a nearby fountain. The silence becomes so complete that the beating of his own heart grows dim, so silent he can hear the grass grow, or a word, proffered from miles away. The nightingale begins to sing, and suddenly “je ne pensais plus, je ne rêvais pas, j’étais confondu avec la nature qui m’environnait, je me sentais frissonner avec le feuillage, miroiter avec l’eau, reluire avec le rayon, m’épanouir avec la fleur, je n’étais plus moi que l’arbre, l’eau ou la belle-de-nuit. J’étais tout cela, et je ne crois pas qu’il soit possible d’être plus *absent de soi-même* que je l’étais à cet instant-là” (192).

⁴⁸ While she doesn’t address the case of *Maupin* in particular, critic Claudine Lacoste shares this sense that Gautier is perhaps much more tongue-in-cheek than we tend to presume, and that he is so throughout his œuvre. See her concisely argued article “L’ironie ludique chez Théophile Gautier.” *Irony and Satire in French Literature*, Vol. 14 (1987), Charlotteville: University of South Carolina.

exist, but cannot quite define: “Quelle est donc cette beauté que nous sentons, et que nous ne pouvons définir”?⁴⁹ Eventually the novel introduces a form of experience tied less to Gautier’s Romantic progenitors (that is, to forms of experience marked by the ineffable, by the *informe*, and inevitably by the malaise that is its unfortunate bi-product) than to Parnassianism’s ‘cult of form.’

Parnassianism represented a major shift in literary and aesthetic preoccupations: from the effusive sentimentality of the Romantics—those “pleurards” and “débraillés” who both rallied around and perpetuated the lyricism of Musset and Lamartine—to the studied and sober observation of the external world.⁵⁰ As critic Robert Denomé has outlined, its proponents sought to attenuate the “emphasis on the highly imaginative recreation of ideal truth” with an interest, rather, in observation of concrete reality.⁵¹ As Barbara Johnson summarizes, Parnassianism was known foremost for its devotion to the principles of impersonality and impassivity, and to *form*.⁵²

With this in mind we turn to the novel’s eponymous character in order to understand how d’Albert leaves behind those ‘aimless aspirations’ with which the novel begins—how he moves beyond rêverie—and instead, embraces what will eventually become a more Parnassian (though no less fraught) relationship to the formal, material world.



At long last, d’Albert encounters the kind of beauty that had only ever haunted him as a specter: “j’ai trouvé le corps de mon fantôme.”⁵³ The only problem is that the earthly embodiment of formal perfection he sought for so long does not materialize in the body of a mistress, nor even that of a woman—or so he believes—but in the body of a young man.

Théodore is a young woman in disguise: Magdalena de Maupin. She decides to dress, act, and live as a man, to circulating among them in order to learn who men really are before she commits to marriage. Théodore’s introduction adds new dimensions to d’Albert’s ‘impossible’ desire, for his ideal is no longer immaterial, and thus, no longer something that afflicts him vaguely, abstractly, in the forms of *ennui* that befell him at the outset of the novel. It has taken shape, “je l’ai vu, il m’a parlé, je lui ai touché la main, il existe: *ce n’est pas une chimère*.”⁵⁴ Such is the cosmic irony to befall d’Albert that his desire for an ideal should be realized in the flesh, but in the still-conflicted body of an androgynous man: in the ambiguous and haunting form of a living sphinx. At first he makes every attempt to lay to rest the question of Théodore’s gender, to prove once and for all that he is, in fact, the woman he wants (or needs) him to be, and that his love for the beauty of what has taken shape as a man is not the ‘monstruous’ love he fears it might be. He convinces Théodore to join him in staging a performance of Shakespeare’s *As You*

⁴⁹ Gautier, p. 142.

⁵⁰ Martino, Pierre. *Parnasse et symbolisme*. Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1958.

⁵¹ Denomé, *The French Parnassian Poets*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972. p. 134.

⁵² “The Dream of Stone.” *A New History of French Literature*. Ed. Hollier, Denis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998. p. 743.

⁵³ Gautier, p. 248.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

Like It, if only to subtly persuade his androgynous beauty to play the part of Rosalind: a woman who spends the better part of the play disguised as a man. During the performance, d'Albert studies the curves of Théodore's body, the way s/he moves across the stage. He will wait until Théodore grows weary, hoping that in a moment of nonchalance or of forgetfulness, some faint "ligne féminine" might show more plainly. He attends to every movement, every motion of his/her body. He studies the form of his/her arm as s/he throws back his/her hair, and the way s/he sinks into the comforts of a chair, hoping to perceive some secret in the habits of the body. "Je regardais," he recalls, "je cherchais," "j'épiais," "j'analysais," such that "jamais personne n'a été couvé du regard aussi ardemment que [Théodore]." ⁵⁵

Théodore's androgyny, however, resists resolution. ⁵⁶ In fact, it exceeds his physical comportement (that is, it exceeds the visual), and extends to those moments when his character—"son esprit"—is undeniably that of a man. With a mind solely on his formal features, d'Albert thinks, 'yes, unquestionably she is a woman!,' but then an abrupt gesture, a virile accent, or some 'cavalier manner' casts his conclusions back into uncertainty, destroys "mon frêle édifice de probabilités, et me rejet[er] dans mes irrésolutions premières." ⁵⁷ Théodore appears to him with all the trappings of feminine beauty, and then send a foil flying from his hands. ⁵⁸ Staging the play resolves very little of d'Albert's confusion. Through a dizzying layering of genders, roles, and theatrical illusions, Théodore merely enacts within the play the cross-dressed confusion s/he perpetuates off-stage, leaving d'Albert as conflicted as ever.

The undecidability of Théodore's gender leads his admirer to liken him to the figure of Hermaphroditus, the mythical son of Hermès and Aphrodite. ⁵⁹

Il ne se peut rien imaginer de plus ravissant au monde que *ces deux corps tous deux parfaits, harmonieusement fondus ensemble*, que ces deux beautés si égales et si différentes qui n'en forment plus qu'une supérieure à toutes deux, parce qu'elles se tempèrent et se font valoir réciproquement: pour un adorateur exclusif de la forme, y a-t-il une incertitude plus aimable que celle où vous jette la vue de ce dois, de ces reins douteux, et de ces jambes si fines et si fortes que l'on ne sait si l'on doit les attribuer à Mercure prêt à s'envoler ou à Diane sortant du bain?

Here, the androgyne is a figure for that harmonious while disquieting collusion of opposites, "fondus ensemble," and as a result, one "qui vous laisse par moments flotter dans les plus inquiétantes perplexités." ⁶⁰ By refracting the question of the Ideal's material embodiment through the figure of the androgyne, and here we arrive at the crux of the matter, Gautier grants tangible dimensions to the problem while doing away with none of its unresolvability. Finding the embodiment of his ideal in Théodore does nothing to

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

⁵⁶ By the end, of course, it *is* resolved when d'Albert discovers that Théodore is in fact a woman, and then sleeps with her in the final pages of the novel. My attention, here, is to the struggle that precedes that revelation, and that defines the majority of the narrative leading up to its resolution.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁵⁹ See Albouy, Pierre. "Le Mythe de l'androgyne dans 'Mademoiselle de Maupin.'" *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France* 72.4 (1972): pp. 600–608. Web 26 Feb. 2013.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

resolve the problem of its possession. Instead, s/he provides a new, tangible version of the problem itself: like Hermaphroditus, an emblem of its very paradox.⁶¹

There is a particular variety of desirous energy that we encounter across the novel, and that I read at the heart of the novel's curiosity. It begins as a lofty, anguished, and stereotypically Romantic form of *ennui*, those "élans sans but" with which the novel begins. Théodore, I'm suggesting, drastically changes the nature of that *ennui* by embedding it within the tangible dimensions of form. He contends with a figure that eludes his grasp not because it's abstract, but in spite of its material presence before him. It is elusive, and unresolved, *in and through* its material embodiment, even as it's truly there and present before his eyes. Théodore constitutes a new and unique conception of form, then: as (un)determined, as real as it is unresolvable.

At one moment, d'Albert finds himself at his window, gazing out melodramatically at the fog settling over the river, and at the figures he can't quite identify in the field beyond. "J'use mes yeux," he says, "à vouloir saisir dans le lointain une forme incertaine et trompeuse." That is, he exerts his eyes not in a realized act of perception, but in the desirous energy—in the *vouloir-saisir*—that compels him to do so. Here I see an important distinction between what afflicts d'Albert at the outset of the novel and the struggle born out in the *vouloir-saisir* of the latter half of the novel. The figure of the androgyne generates a kind of experience less fraught by vague *ennui* than actively driven by this *vouloir-saisir*.⁶²

Critics have read the figure of the androgyne in a number of ways, though not for how it reshapes the experience of the protagonist. More often than not, the androgyne is read as a figure for ineffability, and in turn, as a recalcitrant signifier that won't play its part in the workings of representation. Indeed the critical tendency is to see Théodore's body as a kind of text: a conflicted proto-modernist signifier that casts doubt on, if not *is* the very "martyrdom" of representation.⁶³ Accordingly, critics see Gautier as either deeply entrenched in (and perpetuating) a tradition of Romantic *aporia*, or tilting into the traditions of a nascent modernism, complete with the lexicon of post-structuralism *avant la lettre*. From this tradition emerge critics like Marselène Barsoum, whose remarks in her study of *Maupin* so fully evince these terms and concerns that it bears citing nearly in its entirety. Here she reads the androgyne as text:

The androgyne embodies the Idea which does not submit to language... [Gautier] has this recalcitrant referent hovering in the interstices of repetitions and the interplay of signs to demonstrate that the androgyne is non-demonstrable, but that it exists as an Idea and that the text of the androgyne is a narrative on the irremediable limitations on language.⁶⁴

And here are her conclusions about the novel as a whole:

⁶¹ Other critics have made much of the figure of the androgyne in Gautier's poetics, including Ross Chambers in *Spirit of Théophile Gautier: une lecture*. Archives des lettres modernes. No. 153 (1974).

⁶² There's a similarity between the thought-driven anguish of *Idée fixe*—that finds itself upheld by the rocks that line the sea—and the figure of the androgyne: both uphold, rather than resolve the problem; both deliver the unresolved from abstraction. Both grant it *form*. See my Introduction.

⁶³ Barsoum, Marselène. *Théophile Gautier's 'Mademoiselle de Maupin': Toward a Definition of the 'Androgynous Discourse'*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001. p. xi.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Gautier explores language in *Mademoiselle de Maupin*; therein lies his modernity. ... At that moment of [language's] failure, as Michel Foucault has noted, language turns back on itself. Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, incapable of containing the androgyne, becomes a self-referential text. No longer entirely mimetic, the novel narrates instead the process of writing and comments on the nature of language. Gautier does not cease to rail against the shortcomings of language throughout the text. Indeed, he fulfills what Lyotard suggests is the role of the thinker, namely, to reveal the irremediable opacity of language.⁶⁵

Her reading insistently places Gautier on a trajectory toward modernist preoccupations with text, language, repetition, and the “interplay of signs.”⁶⁶ Through this lens, the androgyne is either a linguistic or a 20th-century theoretical problem, and never, as I propose, an *experiential* one. In order to demonstrate the sophistication of Gautier's thought, we need not superimpose on him the vocabulary and conceptual complexities of the following century. What does it actually mean to call *Maupin* a “self-referential” text? Where does that get us? How does that help us understand the specificity of the questions Gautier poses through the figure of the androgyne?

Rather than reading Théodore as a conceptual leap into the structuralism of the following century, it's possible to read the figure of the androgyne for the ways it reshapes the contours of d'Albert's experience. By having his protagonist grapple with a kind of indeterminacy that obtains even paradoxically in the sculptural precision of material form, Gautier transposes the rapturous, ethereal flight of the Romantic imagination away from an abstract and disembodied ideal (an experience of formless anguish) and toward a sensual world of material form. Form—a determining force—becomes a site of indeterminacy, and as such, demands and creates a unique form of attention, a way of relating to what is as real as it is elusive, as material as it is undefined.

This attention that transpires in and through the unresolvability of its object is what I mean to summarize in the neologism *vouloir-saisir*. I argue that it's an experience that begins here in the desirous energy of d'Albert, though it's also (crucially) the abiding experiential mode of Gautier's later poetry. Neither an act of the imagination, nor a way of grasping what he relates to, here we're offered a form of attention caught in (and constituted by) the unfolding unresolvability of its object. Moving forward, we should remember that between the Romanticism he ironizes in *Maupin* and the Parnassianism he never altogether embraces is Gautier indeed at his most innovative: a poet who preserves a place for the unresolved, even as he moves to embrace a poetic practice turned abundantly and passionately toward the material presence of form.⁶⁷



The Shape of Attention

The *vouloir-saisir* that plays out so palpably in Gautier's poetry sets itself apart from a conventional, attentive gaze. To roll that distinction into focus, I argue, means arriving at

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Similar to my own approach, Barbara Johnson also emphasizes the distinct quality of this desire in Parnassianism's commitment to both the indestructible and the unsatisfiable. “This equation between desire and impossible satisfaction is often represented by the Parnassians as the love of a statue.” Hollier, p. 745.

the experiential specificity of his larger poetics. What, then, does this *vouloir-saisir* look like?

In his study *L'Œil vivant*, critic Starobinski reminds us that at its most basic, the “gaze” is a ‘living link’ to the world we inhabit: not a static connection to the world-observed, but a vital and desirous energy that draws us to observation itself, that pulls us at the world: traditionally speaking, with the promise of some secret revealed.⁶⁸ The world we confront, argues Starobinski, is a living emblem of what it masks, and no less the obstacle we must surmount in its pursuit. The “gaze” pursues these hidden realities: “une réalité provisoirement dissimulée, mais saisissable pour qui saurait la débusquer et l’appeler à la présence.”⁶⁹ As such, the “gaze” has less to do with appearances than with relations. It’s less visual than psychological—less a matter of vision *per se* than a matter of our common desire to relate to, or access what the world suggests so consistently that it’s keeping from us, “demandant à rejoindre le visage derrière le masque.”⁷⁰

There are poets whose attachment to the world is driven by the ever-elusive beyond, an “au-delà” that sends the poetic gaze toward, and then through the given, and that haunts the looker with this tantalizing promise of a something-concealed. Many of Baudelaire’s poems are emblematic of this particular version of the gaze, and as such, provides a useful counterpoint to Gautier’s *vouloir-saisir*. In Baudelaire’s work, we often find the poet pursuing these ‘hidden realities’ with great fervor. Through that famous act of *déchiffrement*, the poet discerns a “réalité provisoirement dissimulée,” and through the spiritual adventure known as poetry, calls it into presence.

In ‘Élévation,’ for instance, the poet soars above this life of ordinary reality (the world as it commonly appears), and from above, is said to understand that famous and cryptic “langage des fleurs et des choses muettes” (ll. 19-20).⁷¹ From the skies, flowers are more than flowers: they speak a language of flowers. In a language of analogy and connection, they speak of their (unspoken) relationship to other things. These are not the clichéd flowers of poetry’s past, for the pleasure they produce is not in the colors into which they blossom, but in the analogical language through which color speaks mysteriously and variously of rhyme, fragrance, and/or image. It’s the poet’s gift to be able to ‘see’ the world as a reference beyond itself, to see it *cede* to the mysteries, to the connections that lie dormant—unearthed and unspoken—within the present, that “autre côté d’une présence.”⁷² It’s this connection to other things that the poet is said to understand “sans effort,” that can be *seen* from such great heights in a poem like ‘Élévation.’

In his own right, critic Jean-Pierre Richard glosses this aspect of the Baudelairean gaze as a preoccupation on the part of the poet with “profondeur.”⁷³ It’s the haunting allure of depth, he argues, that draws the attentive mind of the poet toward the natural world. “Au fond de chaque objet possédé par le rêve le poète découvre brusquement l’appel d’un autre objet, destiné à se creuser lui-même vers d’autres horizons.”⁷⁴ Progressively, “par enfoncements successifs,” depth is what moves the poet from object

⁶⁸ Paris: Gallimard, 1961. Print. p. 11.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁷¹ Baudelaire, Charles. *Les fleurs du mal*. Paris: Gallimard, 1999. p. 23.

⁷² Starobinski, p. 11.

⁷³ *Poésie et profondeur*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1955. p. 3.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

to object—“comme un soleil dans un soleil”—as if with the promise of that “réalité provisoirement dissimulée” that Starobinski speaks of. For Richard, the law of universal analogies is a perpetual “invitation au voyage”: “cette loi propose à l’imagination de suivre, à travers le réseau sensible des correspondances, le trajet d’une signification unique qui circulerait et s’approfondirait d’objet en objet.”⁷⁵

Starobinski and Richard provide an understanding of the gaze by identifying the kind of object on which it so consistently falls: something hidden within a depth. And yet depth, or the hidden, I argue, is as much a way of qualifying *what* the Baudelairian poet pursues as a way of qualifying *how* that pursuit takes place. In order to glimpse at this gaze, we need to see it in movement; we need to see it take place. There is, I argue, a movement to be found in the gaze as it meets up with the object of desire.

In his soaringly beautiful *L’Air et les songes*, Gaston Bachelard writes about the imagination, though we can apply his methodology to our own consideration of the attentive gaze—both are moving acts of the mind. In *L’Air*, Bachelard reminds us that the is a kind of spiritual mobility, “le type de mobilité la plus grande, la plus vive, la plus vivante.”⁷⁶ Studying the imagination, he says, requires that we see it in movement, that we attend to its behaviors, “sa vie.”⁷⁷ His work is an attempt to map out the *life* of the imagination: not *what* it imagines, but the manner of its imaginings, hoping to discern some regularity, some regular and visible shape to its movement. In the works of the authors he engages, he attempts to account for these movements of mind, to arrive at a “véritable *hodographe* qui résumerait son cinétisme,” he says.⁷⁸

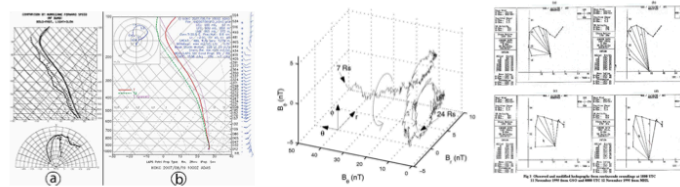


Fig. 1. Examples of hodographs.⁷⁹

The term hodograph combines the Greek word *hodos*, or ‘way,’ with the word for writing, or the written, *graphos*. Etymologically, it’s the writing of ways. In fluid mechanics or meteorology, hodographs are a means of graphically plotting motion. There’s no-thing to be read in them, only ways. There is no substance of the winds, for example, only their movement and course through space, the motion that lends them (if only graphically, provisionally) the definition they otherwise lack. Here, content is only ever synonymous with form. The winds only *are* by way of their course through space.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁷⁶ Bachelard, Gaston. *L’Air et les songes: essai sur l’imagination en mouvement*. Paris: José Corti, 1943. Print. p. 12.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁷⁹ Cited in N. N. Potravkin, E. B. Cherepetskaya, I.A. Perezhogin, and V.A. Makarov, "Ultrashort elliptically polarized laser pulse interaction with helical photonic metamaterial." *Opt. Mater. Express* 4, 2090-2101 (2014). Web. 8 May. 2015.

A hodograph of the Baudelairian gaze reveals the content of its form, the contours of its taking-place.⁸⁰ It shows us that the gaze *is* only by way of its unfolding, and it offers us what amounts to the choreography of the mind that knows and repeats its attentive dance by heart. In this hodograph, we find that the movements of the Baudelairian gaze are governed by a logic of supercession—that is, a movement whereby *what* the poet confronts *cedes* to what it inspires, to the hidden reality that lies just beyond the world as it appears.⁸¹ To move as the mind of the Baudelairian poet moves is to be swept into the unfurling of *déchiffrement*, and as the laws of universal analogy move us through one world and into the next. The Baudelairian gaze, in other words, to reframe in hodographic terms what Starobinski and Richard offer us as the quality or nature of the object of that gaze, falls upon a world that soon vanishes in what it inspires—a movement that slips beyond what it confronts, that sees the world cede (as though solvently) to some hidden, deeper reality.⁸²

There are several moments in Gautier’s early poems in which the poet’s attention does in fact resemble this supercessive movement of the Baudelairian gaze—when *what* the poet visually confronts *cedes* to its beyond, as it confronts the world as an endless “invitation au voyage.” In ‘Études de mains,’ for instance, the flesh is quickly lost in the world onto which it opens. In the opening stanzas, we read of the poet’s encounter with the plaster mold of an exquisite hand, “pur fragment d’un chef d’œuvre humain” (l. 4).⁸³ The sight of the hand sets off a reverie, wherein the poet seems to *see*—as if by reading the lines on its palm—the life it lived, the hair it caressed, the scepter it held, etc. (ll. 18-24). Indeed Maxine du Camp—in his preface to the collection—tells of Gautier’s encounter with the actual mumified hand of the hardened criminal Lacenaire, sent to the guillotine in the winter of 1836. As if in the hand itself:

On y voit les œuvres mauvaises
Écrites en fauves sillons,
Et les brûlures des fournaies
Où brouillent les corruptions;

Les débauches dans les Caprées
Des tripots et des lupanars,
De vin et de sang disprées,
Comme l’ennui des vieux Césars!

(ll. 62-69)

⁸⁰ I refer to a “Baudelairian gaze,” though I don’t mean to suggest that every one of his poems functions in this way. I argue that several of his iconic poems do, and as such, that we can use them here as an illustrative counterpoint to Gautier.

⁸¹ In this project, I consciously adopt the alternative spelling for supersession. By using the ‘c’ as in supercession, I emphasize that it’s about one thing *ceding* to another.

⁸² In the Introduction, I mentioned surface reading’s resistance to a hermeneutics of suspicion—the driving ideological force behind interpretative methods that see the text as having hidden, or repressed some deeper truth. The task of the critic, in this perspective, is to gaze upon it as Baudelaire does. The critic acquires the prophetic (of elect) status of the Baudelairian—the one capable of unlocking the secrets that lie hidden before us.

⁸³ *Émaux et camées*. Paris: Gallimard, 1954. p. 45.

The hand is a catalyst; it unlocks the wilds of the imagination, and in its unfurling, subsumes the hand itself, as though the mind were on a Baudelairian flight into the ether—to a place from which he could read this cold, mute language of the palm.

Critic Madeleine Cottin sees this poem as representative of Gautier's creative process more broadly: an object becomes a source of images and sensations, all seemingly unleashed by contact with the sensual object, as if set free by the poet's encounter.⁸⁴ I agree that this is indeed the movement or shape of experience in 'Étude' specifically, and that certainly this movement of mind is one we find in abundance in Baudelaire, though a closer look at other Gautier poems can reveal that this supercessive movement is perhaps less emblematic than we might have assumed. For there are just many poems that seem to consciously revise this model of the attentive gaze (that re-write its choreography) than that align with it—poems, in other words, whose movements, when seen hodographically, are closer to the *vouloir-saisir* we first encountered in *Maupin*.



Take, for instance, Gautier's 'Diamant du cœur.'⁸⁵ The poem centers on the relationship of a poet-lover to an unconventional memento. While most lovers choose simple, material objects as keepsakes—a slipper, a glove, a lock of hair—the poet-lover of *Diamant* keeps a tear-drop fallen from the eye of his lover onto a verse of his poetry (presumably a love poem written to his mistress).

Tout amoureux, de sa maîtresse,
Sur son cœur ou dans son tiroir,
Possède un gage qu'il caresse
Aux jours de regret ou d'espoir.

(ll. 1-4)

The opening stanzas turn our attention to encounters with conventional objects: caressing a lock of hair, or hiding a glove where no other hand can hold it. Possessing these objects—or, for that matter, their status *as* objects—is never really at issue. What the poet-lover selects as his keepsake, however, isn't possessed as are the others.

Moi, je n'ai ni boucle lustrée
Ni gant, ni bouquet, ni soulier,
Mais je garde, empreinte adorée
Une larme sur un papier:

Pure rosée, unique goutte
D'un ciel d'azur tombée un jour,
Joyau sans prix, perle dissoute
Dans la coupe de mon amour!

(ll. 28-35)

⁸⁴ *Émaux et camées*. Gautier, Théophile and Cottin, Madeleine. Paris: Lettre modernes, 1968. Print.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

In its ‘disquieting’ lack of fixity, the “tache obscure” foregrounds both the problem of its possession and the complexity of its relation to the poet-lover. For what begins as a kind of dew (“pure rosée”) solidifies into a jewel (“joyau sans prix”): an only momentary solidity, however, for it dissolves back into a liquid by the end of the stanza (“perle dissoute / Dans la coupe de mon amour” [ll. 15-16]). It exists as a saturation, a mottling of ink: one that suggests to the mind of the poet-lover a diamond blooming from a sapphire (ll. 17-18).

This poem redefines what we understand by “possession,” for if the poet-lover can be said to ‘possess’ the tear-drop as “un gage,” or “un charme,” he does so in and through its saturation of the page, its dissolution in and across substances, and in the endless visual modulation that is its only constant. Indeed the idea of a keepsake which is both enclosed (“dans une boîte,” “dans un sachet”) and enclosing (in the sense that the glove ‘encloses’ the hand of the lover, or that the object contains some part of that lover) is overturned by the keepsake chosen by the poet. The shift from traditional keepsakes to the tear-drop represents, then, the displacement of a logic of enclosure (content) by a logic of surface and form, and with it, the inception of a kind of relationality toward the material world that undertakes ‘possession’ in a drastically different way. He possesses his keepsake only as it’s renewed across substances: a possession underpinned by a transubstantiation of the “tache” that disallows for possession altogether, and yet *is*, in its resistance, possessed as such. Even in its transubstantiation, the “tâche” is never superceded by memory, or lost in poetic reverie. A sapphire, a diamond, a drop of dew—it *is* that it is none of these, movingly, and without the promise that its shifting form will ever point to the woman from whose eye that tear-drop once fell.

A hodograph of Gautier’s attentive gaze, then, offers us a portrait of a mind not unlike d’Albert’s as he struggles to resolve the form of Théodore into a gender he can seize with the logic of a binary—an experience constituted (and upheld) by form’s very resistance to resolution. In ‘Diamant,’ the gaze of the poet can do little more than return to a kind of form as accessible as it is elusive; its hodograph captures that movement of return and renewal. It offers us the shape of its circling-back. And by circling back, its unresolvability (its resistance to supercession) accrues into the terrain on which to come to rest: it constitutes the experience of attention as such.⁸⁶

Comparatively, then, ‘Diamant’ stands in sharp contrast to what has become the *locus classicus* of the intersection of memory and the material world in the poetry of the 19th century. In ‘La chevelure,’ again, serving here as a counterpoint to Gautier, Baudelaire famously reinvents the topos of an object’s ability to conjure something absent.

Ô boucles! Ô parfum chargé de nonchaloir!
Extase! Pour peupler ce soir l'alcôve obscure
Des souvenirs dormant dans cette chevelure,
Je la veux agiter dans l'air comme un mouchoir!
(ll. 2-5)

For Baudelaire, the scent released from the movement of the lock of a woman’s hair is imbibed like a “vin de souvenir,” and the synesthetic proliferation of scents, images, and

⁸⁶ Notice the ties of kinship between this moment in Gautier’s poem and the opening of Valéry’s *Idée fixe* in which the narrator learns to attend to his anguish in and by way of its unresolvability.

memories that ensues takes place as an inebriation and flight of the poetic imagination. Synesthesia, in other words, is a poetic faculty that unfolds in the mind of the poet, apart from the object (or scent, in this case) that originally sets it in motion. It transpires in the space left by the supersession of form. By definition, it's a kind of attention in which form is always solvently giving way to something else. Gautier's version of the topos stops short of the synesthetic moment. If something proliferates out of the "tache obscure," it does so only as the poet continues to relate to it in its visual undecidedness—a movement of return, in other words, upheld in the unresolvability that transpires in form itself.

Color in particular is a privileged source of inspiration for the synesthetic mind, though it doesn't always have to supercessively give way to what it inspires. Gautier's poem 'Symphonie en blanc majeur' provides a (final and) triumphant instance of the non-supercessive qualities of *vouloir-saisir*. It's the argument that supercessive synesthesia isn't the only way of attending to color.

On the one hand, 'Symphonie' is a soaring paean to the inexhaustible beauty of a color: white. On the other hand, and when seen hodographically, it's an act of attention caught in (and constituted by) the endless, shifting unresolvability of that color.⁸⁷

The poem begins as a tale about the ancient Rhine, with swan-women (these "femmes-cygnés") bathing and singing along the banks (ll. 1-3).⁸⁸ Their snow-like plumage captivates the poet, and soon, one of them distinguishes herself from among the rest (ll. 9-10). Slowly he becomes absorbed by the whiteness of her plumage—"Blanche comme le clair de lune," "A des régals de chair nacrée" (ll. 11; 15). Critics have pointed out that the poem, indeed like a symphony, plays out in movements.⁸⁹ The first opens into an initial flourish of lustrous textures—the white satin of a dress, blooms of white camellias. Quickly however, a battle erupts within the serenity of these initial images—"ces grandes batailles blanches." It's either satin or marble, snow or flesh. The more the poet returns to this color, the more unsettled (or conflicted) it reveals itself to be. What is this whiteness, the poet is lead to ask? What is it made of? It prevails precisely as what substance, material, or texture?⁹⁰

De quel mica de neige vierge,

⁸⁷ The two historical points of reference for the poem are Saint-Beuve's 'Les rayons jaunes' and Banville's 'Symphonie de la neige,' both inspired by a letter written by Diderot. The transition from the Saint-Beuve iteration to Banville's is also the measure of Parnassianism's hold on the newer, younger generation of poets forming around Banville and Gautier. The latter privileges the description of the color, rather than "simply a unifying device for the poet's sentimental meanderings" (291), making it a shifting point from the sentimental Romanticism of Saint-Beuve to a more Parnassianism preoccupation with form—a shift "from sentiment to virtuosity." Brown, Calvin, "The Color Symphony Before and After Gautier." *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 5, No. 4, Fall (1953), pp. 289-309. Web. 4 Jun. 2013.

⁸⁸ As Constance Schick argues in her own reading of the poem, in addition to the Germanic legend of the swan-women, one particular woman was also at the source of this poem: Mme Kalergis.

⁸⁹ Emanuel Mickel's close reading of the poem insists on this musical subdivision of sections. See his "An Interpretation of Gautier's 'Symphonie en blanc majeur.'" *Modern Philology* 68.4 (1971), pp. 338-344. Web. 4 Jun. 2013.

⁹⁰ In Chapter III, we'll see that this is also precisely the question of the poet in the opening lines of 'La dormeuse,' in which the poet inquires into both the nature and provenance of the restful woman's beauty. What is it? and where does it come from? Both poets' poems, I should add, if only to foreshadow, end up turning these questions on their heads. They point to the substance, while the poet will redirect our attention to *form*.

De quelle moelle de roseau,
De quelle hostie et de quel cierge
A-t-on fait le blanc de sa peau?

(ll. 29-32)

Is it geological, this snow-white mica? or is it botanical? Is there even a kind of divinity to its whiteness? “quelle hostie”? In the many stanzas that follow, the poet probes and navigates these shifting aspects of the color white in much the same way that composers and musicologists have assigned characteristics to given musical keys. Indeed Gautier sets his poem to the color white, and by so doing, provides us with a way of understanding what unfolds therein.

More than a technical designation, musical key is often associated with the prevailing feeling, or mood of a piece. To set a piece within a particular key (here, to set the poem to the color white) is to situate what transpires musically in relation to a tonal or affective center, though one that’s difficult to definitively name. Despite this difficulty, the 18th century in particular saw a flurry of writings devoted to discerning the characteristics of each key, whence the famous list of qualities assigned by Christian Schubart: for instance, Db major—“a leering key, degenerating into grief and rapture. It cannot laugh, but it can smile; it cannot howl, but it can at least grimace its crying.”⁹¹ Or C minor— “declaration of love and at the same time the lament of unhappy love. All languishing, longing, sighing of the love-sick soul lies in this key.”⁹²

Less inherent than empirical, these subjective attributions diverge from one listener to the next. While in C-sharp minor Schubart overhears “an intimate conversation with God,” Schrader overhears “the tone of despair.” While in C-major Schubart overhears “innocence, simplicity, children’s talk,” Charpentier overhears a “warlike” quality, a kind of “manly earnestness and resolve.”⁹³ Indeed the trouble with defining the mood of a key is that, like the famous definition of the lyric, we don’t so much *hear* that mood as *overhear* it. For where *is* this prevailing feeling? Where does it reside? in what form? Is it in the notes themselves? in their intervals? Or beyond the materiality of the sounds themselves?⁹⁴

Ultimately, musical key is less an object whose characteristics we can delineate than a prevailing set of characteristics we overhear *as* we listen (that *are* as they prevail): something bound up less in the object itself than in the experience in which it’s held. It’s no-thing we hear, fit to the act of listening. To write a poem about the key of white, then, is to look as Schubart listens—to attend less to what whiteness offers him than to what prevails (to what we overhear) in our experience on which it so fully depends.

‘Symphonie’ ushers us into a kind of listening as though constituted by the very objectlessness of the ‘thing’ we listen to. Is it the frothing of the sea, this whiteness? the pale complexion of marbled skin?

⁹¹ “Characteristics of Musical Keys.” Western Michigan University. Web. 23 Jan. 2016.

⁹² Translated by and cited in Steblin, Rita. *A History of Key Characteristics in the 18th and Early 19th Centuries*. UMI Research Press, 1983.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Music theorists of the early to mid 19th century tended to view key as somehow part of music’s transcendentalism—that if something obtained within it like a mood or feeling, it was somehow beyond or outside the notes themselves. It wasn’t until the 20th century’s that key began to be theorized through a kind of materialism, that is, as intra-tonal. See Steblin.

L'argent mat, la laiteuse opale
Qu'irisent de vague clartés;

L'ivoire, où ses mains ont des ailes,
Et, comme des papillons blancs,
Sur la pointe des notes frêles
Suspendent leurs baisers tremblants;

L'hermine vierge de souillure,
Qui pour abriter leurs frissons,
Ouate de sa blanche fourrure
Les épaules et les blasons;

Le vif-argent aux fleurs fantasques, (...)
(ll. 42-52)

Notice how we're never delivered beyond the unfolding conflict of the color itself, how in nearly every other line our attention is redirected explicitly back into whiteness: an insistence on return, moreover, that's in large part structured by the binaries of the *rimes croisées* and of the quatrains. Notice how whiteness doesn't so much carry the mind away into a "libre essor" (there is no flight here) so much as blooms in place in the light of the poet's attention, his *vouloir-saisir*.

Ultimately the whiteness that unfolds not beyond, but within itself over the course of the poem culminates in the 'sphinx' of the penultimate stanza—"the signifier par excellence of non-communication and enigmatic meaninglessness," as Schick reminds us in her own reading of the poem.⁹⁵

Sphinx enterré par l'avalanche,
Gardien des glaciers étoilés,
Et qui, sous sa poitrine blanche,
Cache de blancs secrets gélés?

(ll. 62-65)

There's something consciously over-wrought about the layers upon layers of whiteness here in this penultimate stanza. At first it feels like we're excavating these layers—through the avalanche of snow and down into the sphinx it conceals, a sphinx whose breast is in turn an avalanche of white, under which is yet another cache of frozen white secrets, we're told. Here, surface doesn't cede to depth, for beneath the white surface of that avalanche (where a mystery is concealed) is nothing less than more whiteness ("sa poitrine blanche"); and beneath that whiteness, more whiteness ("de blanc secrets"). The poet plumbs a depth constituted entirely by an unfolding surface—a depth articulated by the very resistance of whiteness to cede.

In Baudelaire, the mind pushes gently up against the surface of the world, sure of its hidden secrets, and sure that it will surrender onto something even more beautiful. Here, Gautier seems to consciously subvert the conventional logic of surface and depth, mystery and revelation. Whiteness doesn't beguile as a veil yet to be drawn back; it doesn't signify by way of an opacity we long to overturn. Rather it beguiles as iridescence beguiles—as a shimmering that moves nowhere else than within the very play

⁹⁵ *Seductive Resistance: The Poetry of Théophile Gautier*. Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994.

of its surface. The mystery of the sphinx, then, isn't contained *within* or beyond, but *upon* its white, snowy surface. Indeed what else is an avalanche than a shifting surface of snow? To be buried in an avalanche is to be enveloped in surface, to experience the shifting of surface as a kind of depth unto itself.

This whiteness doesn't give way. It hides nothing. The attention of the poet won't see it abrade. It cedes to nothing other than the endlessness of its own unresolvability. There's an important irony to the final stanza of the poem, then. It asks in the form of a declaration who could possibly melt this frozen secret. Who could see it swell with warmth and life? Who, in other words, could make this implacable whiteness blush?

Sous la glace où calme il repose,
Oh ! qui pourra fondre ce cœur !
Oh ! qui pourra mettre un ton rose
Dans cette implacable blancheur !

(ll. 66-69)

Who can bring this whiteness to life? The short answer is: well, the poet can, as he just did, though not by seeing it cede to rosier hues. The rhetorical declaration here reminds us that the basic temptation of whiteness is to fill it in, or on its empty surface to place something, anything. In Baudelairian language, white is indeed the perfect "invitation au voyage." 'Symphonie,' however, reveals that white need not cede to any-thing in order to unfold, to bloom under the *vouloir-saisir* of the poet. If whiteness comes to life under his gaze, it's in its implacable emptiness that it does so.

While the Baudelairian poet is said to "s'élancer vers les champs lumineux et sereins," where the world speaks of harmony and connection with what it conceals, Gautier's poet "s'élance vers l'ombre impossible à saisir," or in the case of 'Symphonie,' towards an implacable whiteness "impossible à saisir." Compare their movements. The former unfurls as a movement of supercession in which the object of our attention gives way to a new and ever-receding horizon, that finds itself subsumed by what it inspires. The latter, and as we find in 'Symphonie,' unfurls as a movement of return and renewal, a form of attention (a *vouloir-saisir*) constituted in and by way of the endless unresolvability of its object, one whose beauty isn't to be found in the depths to which it yields, but even (if not especially) in the blooming emptiness of its surface.



Valéry & The Legacy of Gautier's Attention

There exists a remarkable, unexpected, and meaningful continuity between the forms of experience we find here in Gautier's work and the experience of form we find in the work of Valéry. Indeed, by drawing out that continuity, I argue that Gautier (along with his sensual world of material form) can shape our approach to a poet whose work is also devoted to form, but to the pure, self-referential form of poetic language.

In our approach to Gautier's work, we attended not simply to the nature of the unresolvability that characterized the poet's object of attention (be it the androgyne, the tear-drop, etc.), but *how* that unresolvability shaped the movements of the mind—not *what* makes it unresolvable, but what new and unique forms of experience it opened onto (or constituted) as such. This is how we arrived at a conception of *vouloir-saisir*. We saw

it hodographically: a form of attention constituted in and by way of the unfolding unresolvability of its object.

In similar ways, when we approach Valéry's writings on poetic language, we're faced with two options. On the one hand, we can focus on how he defines the nature of the object of our readerly attention: in this case, poetic language (or form). We can think of these conceptions as stable definitions. And yet, Valéry doesn't define the difference between poetry and prose, for instance, as a difference in kind (for the language of one is also the language of the other), but as a difference in function. They aren't different objects of attention; they behave (or function) differently. As such, and on the other hand, we can also, as we did with Gautier, choose to see Valéry's conceptions of poetic language *in movement*. We can attend to how a less-than-representational poetic language moves and behaves as it meets up and shapes the readerly mind, just as the unresolvable form of the androgyne shaped the *vouloir-saisir* of the young d'Albert.

In 'Infini esthétique,' for instance, Valéry defines the aesthetic as an 'order' to which he opposes the practical.⁹⁶ In the latter, he explains, fulfilling a need means eliminating it as such. When I'm hungry, for instance, I eat in order to satisfy (and thereby eliminate) my hunger. Satisfying it means doing away with the sensations that originally produced that need to begin with, "annuler."⁹⁷ On the contrary, when confronted with a work of art, I don't satisfy my need for aesthetic experience by eliminating it as a need. Unlike the practical order, the aesthetic is one in which needs are not satisfied to the point of elimination, but subsist even in their fulfillment. The work of art, Valéry tells us, calls for the renewal (not the erasure) of the impressions and sensations that produce the experience in the first place:

la satisfaction fait renâître le besoin, la réponse régénère la demande, la présence engendre l'absence, et la possession le désir.⁹⁸

The aesthetic, then, is a paradoxical space in which conventional oppositions don't necessarily obtain, such that desire and the satisfaction (read: the elimination) of that desire need not exist to one another's exclusion. For Valéry, art satisfies the need that it simultaneously creates. The aesthetic is what compels us to fail at meeting our desire with some material end, and to prolong it, to renew our attachment to the impressions and sensations that provoke it.

Attention to the aesthetic, then, is a non-supercessive movement of mind. As such, this experience of renewal moves in ways that aren't dissimilar from those that describe the attention (the *vouloir-saisir*) of the young d'Albert. Indeed Théodore embodies the long-awaited object of the poet's desire, though s/he satisfies that desire not by eliminating it as such. Quite the opposite: Théodore satisfies the desire that s/he simultaneously creates, filling in with bodily presence the very absence s/he thereby upholds. Gautier's *vouloir-saisir*, in other words, is plainly at work within our own experience of the aesthetic as Valéry defines it—a connection that only registers *hodographically*. That is, when we see both the definition of the aesthetic and the figure of the androgyne in movement with the attentive mind of the beholder.

⁹⁶ 'Infini esthétique.' *Œuvres II*. Paris: Gallimard, 1960. p. 1342.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1343.

Consider what comes into focus when Valéry expands the distinction between the aesthetic and the practical into a distinction between poetry and prose. In ‘Questions de poésie,’ and speaking in an explicit vocabulary of movement, Valéry tells us that prose is like walking. It has an end point outside of itself, a destination. “Elle est un acte dirigé vers quelque objet que notre but est de joindre.(...)”⁹⁹ When we arrive at the destination, we find that the movement itself has been subsumed by the end it attains. The going itself has been abolished, as if absorbed “dans l’acte accompli,” he says. So it is with prose. When language fulfills its communicative function, it vanishes in what it communicates. “Je l’ai émis pour qu’il périsse.” It disappears in the solvent clarity of the idea to which it cedes. “Elle a fait comprendre; elle a vécu.”

Poetry, however, is like dance. To dance isn’t to move outward toward an end external to the movements themselves. Rather, dance is its own end. It *is* only for itself. “Elle est, sans doute, un système d’actes, mais qui ont leur fin *en eux-mêmes*.”¹⁰⁰ Dance, like poetry, is a kind of movement that isn’t absorbed by the end it achieves. It moves nowhere, and fulfills itself as such.

In Valéry’s evocation of prose, strangely enough, we encounter a falling-away that phenomenologically relates more to the fragility and ephemerality of the traditionally poetic: ‘abolished’ or ‘absorbed’ in the act it accomplishes, ‘perishes’ in the something-said. Here, however, that movement qualifies prose in its inability to survive its own utterance. Thus while the practicality of walking belies its dissolution, the ephemerality of dancing belies an unexpected subsistence: a resistance to dissolution. We think that poetry’s rarefaction should make it ephemeral, or fragile. And yet in Valéry’s estimation, poetry is what subsists. It doesn’t die for having lived. Poetry is language that resists its own supercession by the meaning it seems predestined to convey.¹⁰¹

Imagine, on the one hand, a hodographic image of a reader’s relationship to a purely formal, and therefore less than referential poetic language. We notice that its movements are non-supersessive: that is, that language would endure, that it would not fall away or perish in the end it achieves, or the idea it communicates. It would move and behave like a dance. We’re unable to paraphrase it; we can only speak it again.

On the other hand, imagine a hodographic image of the mind of the poet as he stares longingly into the cerulean eyes of a woman—eyes, to crib from Wallace Stevens, in which “sea and sky roll as one.”¹⁰² Now imagine placing these moving images side by side. By comparing what they imagine (literally, give image to), we would find that the movements are part of a coherent choreography of the mind—that it’s a single dance in which the poet’s desirous relationship to the woman’s unresolvable eyes passes seamlessly into the reader’s relationship to a poem.

⁹⁹ Valéry, p. 1371.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

¹⁰¹ When we understand what someone says to us, for example, we think nothing (or little) of the language with which it was said. It dies in its being-spoken. It’s the walking that vanishes in the corner store at which we arrive. On the contrary, when we don’t understand what someone says to us, we ask them to repeat—we ask them for the form of their utterance once again, for in its being-spoken, it doesn’t give way to what it means. And because it subsists, because form doesn’t cede to its content, the mind can do little more than return to that same form once again.

¹⁰² “Sea Surface Filled with Clouds.” *Harmonium*. Faber and Faber, 2001. Web. 30 Jan. 2014.

Here I consciously slip from how the Gautier phenomenologically confronts the world around him to how we both hermeneutically and phenomenologically confront Valéry's poems. For this is precisely what happens to poetry over the course of the 19th century: as the extra-linguistic is reduced to the intra-linguistic, as everything is reduced to language or text, our experience is as though internalized by the poems themselves. I argue that in order to understand the kind of attention demanded of us as readers by Valéry's poems, we need not turn to the conceptual vocabulary of the 20th century; instead, we can turn to the living forms of experience that these poems have internalized, and that Gautier's work make available to us. We should recognize, in other words, that the rarefaction of poetic language is continuous with a living, *experiential* rarefaction, not only with the theory into which it will culminate a half-century later. We need to read these poems *as we live*, not only as we think.



The larger picture here is that the richly experiential dimensions of Gautier's *vouloir-saisir* can not only offer us an alternative way of approaching Valéry's famously rarefied conceptions of poetry, but can reshape the literary historical landscape linking one poet to the other.

Critics don't often place Gautier in conversation with Valéry. It's a rare bird of a discussion, and when it does take place, it tends to take shape in one of two traditional ways. On the one hand, critics bring these poets together by way of a topical link, for instance through their shared preoccupation with the dancing body. Whence studies like Stefano Genetti's "Le discours sur la danse de Gautier à Valéry" (2012), an approach which, while fruitful in its own way, establishes a merely circumstantial connection between the poets.¹⁰³ On the other hand, critics conceive of their relationship by way of the larger literary movements with which they've been so closely associated—that is, by way of the overlap between Parnassianism (Gautier) and Symbolism (Valéry). This is the approach we find in studies such as Pierre Martino's *Parnasse et symbolisme* (1941) and Raymond Marcel's *De Baudelaire au surréalisme* (1958). Both critics read the famed impassivity of the Parnassians, for instance, as a prelude to the impersonality of the Symbolists. Both see aestheticism's turn inward and away from the socio-political world around him as a prelude to poetry's turn towards the procedures of its own language. The traditional version of their connection, then, is one that emphasizes the radical rarefaction of both.

The trouble with this latter approach is that while we've looked broadly and generically at the overlap between the principle tenets of the movements for which these poets have become so representative, we have (by so doing) either overly-abstracted or lost track of the specificities of the connections born out within the poems themselves. If Gautier relates to Valéry in particular, it's only as a representative of a literary tradition to which, as we've seen, he ultimately cannot be reduced. Indeed the Parnassians are famous for their sober (if not positivist) observation of the external world, as well as for their resistance to the hazy uncertainty of mystery of all kinds. And yet as we've seen,

¹⁰³ "Le discours sur la danse de Gautier à Valéry: un espace littéraire allégorique et réflexif." *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*. Vol. 112, Issue 2 (2012), pp. 431-441.

Gautier doesn't shy away from the unresolved. By actively contending with sensual forms that push back against the discerning powers of vision, then, Gautier can be seen as quietly challenging the positivist underpinnings of the very tradition that he's so consistently asked to represent, and that serves (in turn) as the basis for our understanding of his relationship to the Symbolism of the latter half of the century.

On the other end of the equation, we tend to situate Valéry somewhere between the Mallarmé he couldn't help emulating and the Rimbaud he couldn't stop reading.¹⁰⁴ The basic features of Valéry's poetics tend to be calculated through this particular equation of influence: a poetics at the confluence of an attunement to the procedures of poetic language (Mallarmé) and an unbridled willingness to illuminate alternative patterns of the world (Rimbaud).¹⁰⁵ Rarely do we see Valéry as indebted to Gautier, for even Valéry situates himself as one of the many heirs of Baudelaire—the poet who, alas, has taken up so much of the lime-light in histories of Symbolist poetics.¹⁰⁶

By reframing Gautier's poetics of looking as a poetics of attention, not only do we see him as less than wholly synonymous with Parnassian ideals, but we can also discern in his departure from those ideals the basis for a more far reaching connection to the Symbolism with which he's so rarely associated. On the other hand, and in ways that speak more directly to the goals of the present study, by entering Valéry's poetics by way of Gautier's, we reframe its rarefaction, self-referentiality, "difficulty" (*bref*, all the ways in which it eludes us) within the embodied, experiential realm of the living here and now. We frame a poetics of rarefaction as a deeply livable, as having as much to do with the conceptions of language it espouses as with the attentive relationship to the world it also (thereby) seems to demand. Valéry's poetics, in this light, rather than a purified poetics of the intellect, has something fundamental to do with how we relate attentively to the world around us.

By aligning the poet's relationship to the sensual world with the reader's relationship to an unresolvable formal language, I frame our approach to Valéry's work in these next three chapters as with deeply embodied conception of reading and attention—one that (experientially) is as much a grappling with a purely formal language as an attentive relationship to a mottled tear-drop. We read as a kind of *vouloir-saisir*. Indeed Gautier's work offers us a world that so often challenges the very attention into

¹⁰⁴ This is the abiding position (explicit or implicit) of such studies as: Pickering, Robert. "Writing and the Page: Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Valéry." *The Modern Language Review* 87.1 (1992). pp. 56–71; Scott, David. *The Modern Language Review* 83.2 (1988). pp. 456–457. *Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Valéry: New Essays in Honour of Lloyd Austin*. Ed. Bowie, Malcolm. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

¹⁰⁵ Indeed so great an admirer was he of Mallarmé and so voracious a reader of Rimbaud that Robinson-Valéry positions even the existential crisis of Valéry's famous "nuit de Gênes" between these two legendary literary coordinates: "la prise de conscience de son 'désespoir' devant les 'perfections' par rapport à lui, des deux poètes, ses aînés prestigieux Rimbaud et Mallarmé, novateurs comme jamais (encore) il n'avait pu l'être."

¹⁰⁶ One notable exception to the critical tradition can be found in Scott Hamilton's study *Ezra Pound and the Symbolist Inheritance*. Hamilton suggests that Pound's own literary historical understanding of the networks of influence moving from the early to late 19th century indeed displaces Baudelaire in favor of Gautier as the leading progenitor of Symbolist poetics. As Hamilton summarizes, "Pound exorcizes the ghosts of Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Mallarmé by turning to Théophile Gautier, a poet who preceded, anticipated, and was celebrated by the Symbolists." Pound identifies in Gautier's poetry, in other words, and in ways comparable to my own position here, "an originary node similar to what most critics sees in Baudelaire" (14).

which it draws us—that forces attention to take place beyond the binary of what we do or do not grasp. And in this push-and-pull between looking and less than anything we see; between attention and its ever-elusive object of attention; in this conception of sensual form as something that both shapes and eludes (that *is* the very site of an undoing); in this *vouloir-saisir* is something of Valéry’s own poetics of attention at its most fundamental: an experience caught in the unfolding impossibility of its object.

III

The Event of Form

*“Que d’heures j’ai consommées
à regarder [la mer] sans la voir.”*

Paul Valéry

In the previous chapter, we established a continuity between Gautier’s relationship to an unresolvable world of sensual form and Valéry’s conception of an unresolvable poetic language: a language that, like the cloudy luster of a pearl, doesn’t ‘resolve’ itself into any one referent, any one meaning. I argued that Gautier’s experience of the material world shares unexpected and meaningful ties of kinship with Valéry’s experience of the world of poetic form—in other words, that at the heart of both poetics is a form of non-supercessive attention that unfolds in and through the very unresolvability of its ‘object.’

In this chapter, we shift our focus to the work of Valéry. While Gautier attends to a material world whose formal qualities resist any simple attempt at discerning them, Valéry finds something unresolvable, as we’ll see, in *form itself*. In what follows, I argue that in his famously beguiling poem ‘La dormeuse’ (1920), Valéry both conceptualizes an unresolvability that obtains in form alone, on one hand, and on the other, offers us a glimpse of what an experience of that unresolvability looks like, his own version of a *vouloir-saisir*.¹⁰⁷

Methodologically speaking, whereas the argument of the previous chapter unfolded linearly from one text to the other, across a host of literary periods, the present chapter will unfold expansively from within (or *as*) a single poem. In what follows, we’ll settle into the poem, into its ‘actions and sensations,’ as Valéry says. The ambition here isn’t so much to explain or delineate Valéry’s conception of form as it is to animate the kind of “attention” into which it invites us.

La dormeuse

Quels secrets dans son cœur brûle ma jeune amie,
Âme par le doux masque aspirant une fleur ?
De quels vains aliments sa naïve chaleur
Fait ce rayonnement d’une femme endormie ?

Souffles, songes, silence, invincible accalmie,
Tu triomphes, ô paix plus puissante qu’un pleur,
Quand de ce plein sommeil l’onde grave et l’ampleur
Conspirent sur le sein d’une telle ennemie.

Dormeuse, amas doré d’ombres et d’abandons,

¹⁰⁷ ‘La dormeuse’ first appeared in *L’Amour de l’Art* (2) in June, 1920, under the title ‘Dormeuse,’ and accompanied by a small image by Pierre Laprade. It was published again in 1922 in the collection *Charmes*, and then again in *Poésies* in 1929. It wasn’t until its fourth publication that Valéry added the definite article, ‘La.’

Ton repos redoutable est chargé de tels dons,
Ô biche avec langueur longue auprès d'une grappe,

Que malgré l'âme absente, occupée aux enfers,
Ta forme au ventre pur qu'un bras fluide drape,
Veille ; ta forme veille, et mes yeux sont ouverts.



Valéry's 'La dormeuse' is about the fascination of a poet. In the opening lines of the poem, we find him gazing rapturously upon a woman as she sleeps, recumbent and radiant and beautiful in the warmth of the afternoon.¹⁰⁸ As a whole, the poem inquires into the nature of this state of 'fascination.' It asks—what *is* this hold on the mind of the poet, and what exactly is it about the sleeping woman that proves so captivating?

It's easy to walk away from the poem with the sense that precisely *what* enraptures the poet is the woman he sees. Indeed one way of reading the poem is simply to watch it gather line by line into an image of the eponymous woman, as though the poem were there simply to make good on the promise of the title, to be the body of the woman made flesh. There's so much to *see* here, after all. We can see the fall of her chest as she sighs, for instance, the way her arm languidly drapes her torso, and the shadows settling in the curves of the body. Even the very premise of the poem—sleep itself—draws us by the hand into the logic of the image, for in sleep the moving forms of life settle into stillness, and as they do so, begin to approximate the fixity of the still-image with the body itself. Sleep, we might say, makes near-images of us all. This natural, sleep-filled fixity is perhaps what explains the poet's long-standing obsession with sleeping women. Perhaps it lends itself more readily to his endeavors; as though it better accommodates his 'ocular concupiscence,' as Gautier once described; as though the end-game of his fascination were indeed to steal away with her in image, closed up safely in the locket of the mind.

And yet despite the stillness into which it invites us, and as seductively visual as certain features of the poem prove to be, much of what the poet relates to over the course of the poem cannot be so easily held in image.¹⁰⁹ As the poem progresses, more and more slips beyond the purview of the poet's contemplative 'gaze.' We read of the radiance, for example, ("ce rayonnement") that seems to stir upon the body of the sleeping woman,

¹⁰⁸ Critic James Lawler wrote perhaps the most compelling (and beautiful) account of the motif of the sleeping woman in Valéry's poetics. My own approach to the poem, while greatly indebted to Lawler's insights, will downplay the iconicity of the woman, and in turn, her status as a motif. It seems to me that if this poem in particular resonates with others in Valéry's corpus, it's not out of shared imagery, but out of its underlying preoccupation with form (on one hand) and ways of looking (on the other). "Lucidité, Phénix de ce vertige..." MLN, Vol. 87, No. 4 French Issue: Paul Valéry (May 1972), p. 626. Web. 20 Mar. 2013. Also see Leroux, Virginie. "L'erotisme de la belle endormie," *Seizième Siècle* 7 (2011). pp. 15–35; and Grubbs, Henry A. "Two Treatments of a Subject: Proust's 'La Regarder Dormir' and Valéry's 'La Dormeuse.'" *PMLA* 71.5 (1956): pp. 900–909. Web 20 Mar. 2013.

¹⁰⁹ Here I consciously frame the premise of the poem in ways that echo our discussion of Gautier's work—how he so often turns to substances and materials that both invite and defy our vision, or that end up exceeding the vision on which they also depend. Notice that Valéry, too, will move toward attention by way of the softening or loosening of vision.

though where exactly *is* this radiance, the poet wonders? Where is it coming from? Where does it reside? A stanza later, we read not simply of the allure of a body at rest, but of the very ‘lull’ of her repose—an “accalmie” that befalls her (conspiratorially, he’ll say), though where exactly? in what form? Where do we look when what calls out to the eyes of the mind falls short of any one thing we might see? Where do our eyes come to rest when *what* ensnares us is not simply the body of the sleeping woman, but the reprieve of sleep itself? the very resplendence of its radiant calm?

The longer we spend in its company, the more we realize that there’s something in fact quite restless about this poem so full of rest, as though the poet were looking for something he isn’t quite in a position to see. There’s something about the body of the sleeping woman that’s always displaced by the finger that looks to pin it down, like the bit of eggshell you can’t quite finger at the bottom of the bowl. The poem may initially invite us to understand the poet’s state of captivity as a visual relationship to something-seen (in this case, to the woman in all her obvious, restful splendor), and yet precisely what enraptures him proves to resist and/or exceed that faculty of vision in which he finds himself ensnared. Accordingly, even as certain features of the poem speak directly to the eyes of the mind, like a painting, there’s reason to be suspicious of the image the poem so casually offers us, and in turn, of the ways of looking on which that image depends. The sleeping woman, I suggest, is a set-up, a red herring; we should be wary of seeing too much too quickly.



What is the ‘object’ of his gaze, then? What precisely is the mind tethered to here? These are the questions that loom large within the opening stanzas, though we’re given something of an answer by the final tercet.¹¹⁰ ‘What is it about her that proves so captivating,’ it asks? ‘It’s her form,’ the poet triumphantly replies in the penultimate line. And yet, an only momentary sense of resolution, for what does it really mean for her ‘form’ to be the object of his fascination? How could form be the ‘object’ of his fascination, after all, when form, by its very definition, is not an object?

This is the age-old conundrum of form, its internal discrepancy. As critic Angela Leighton puts it, form “both is, and is not, what it represents. Its whole bent is towards materialization,” she explains, “towards being the shape or body of something. Form, which seems self-sufficient and self-defining, is in fact restless, tendentious, a noun lying in wait for its object.” Form is hard to think about independently of the something for which it “lies in wait,” the body in which it materializes. It’s a determining force that declares itself only by virtue of the thing it determines. Whence the particular allure of form, its tantalizing game: that it should be so available inaccessible, so inaccessiblely at

¹¹⁰ In his meticulous reading of the poem, Michel Philippon also emphasizes the importance of opening the poem with a set of questions. “Si la femme y est un objet, elle est surtout un objet d’étonnement métaphysique: comment peut-on dormir ainsi? Les formes interrogatives de la première strophe n’attendent nulle réponse. Plus que des questions, ce sont des énigmes: l’être médiat ne peut saisir l’être immédiat, et la femme demeure un mystère pour l’homme.” My own approach to the poem suggests that more than the woman, the ‘enigma’ here is how the poet goes about relating to what he beholds. That’s a question to which the poem does, I argue, offer an answer. *Paul Valéry: une poétique en poèmes*. Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1993. p. 108.

the disposal of the mind that looks to circumscribe it. Form isn't reducible to the content it's always busy determining, successfully or not, and as such, has the unique condition of not being synonymous with its own embodiment. It begs the question, then, how anyone might ever be said to forge a relationship to form as an 'object' of fascination unto itself. Is there even an "it" to speak of on its own?

Here the conundrum of form is also the conundrum of the poem, for as soon as we understand the 'object' of the poet's fascination as the form *of* the sleeping woman, we have, for all intents and purposes, lost the true object of his fascination to what it determines. We lose the body of form to the body by which it appears, whereas here, precisely *what* holds captive the mind of the poet is *form alone*, rather than the sleeping woman by virtue of whom it declares itself.

In order to understand why we must separate form from the form *of* what it embodies, we have to step back from the poem, if only momentarily. For why should the form he confronts not be allowed to organize into an image of the beautiful woman, lying restfully in the warmth of the afternoon? What's so wrong with the poet seeing the figure before him gather into a quiet little image of sleep?

The answer lies in what Valéry understands as the fate of form in the various ways it can announce itself to the mind. Remember that for Valéry, the difference between the language of prose and the language of poetry is less a difference in kind than a difference in function. The language of one is also the language of the other, he says, the only difference being how language behaves within each: "la poésie implique une décision de changer la *fonction* du langage," he explains.¹¹¹ When language fulfills its communicative function, as I explained in the Introduction, *what* we say 'disappears' behind what has been said: our utterance is superseded by the meaning it conveys, lost to the idea as such. In his various writings, we find Valéry appealing to a vocabulary of dissolution, disappearance, supercession, if not outright abolition and death to describe how form behaves in this capacity. "L'acte même du discours," we read, "ne se conserve pas; elle se dissout dans la clarté; elle a agi; elle a fait son office; elle a fait comprendre; elle a vécu."¹¹² Prose is a behavior of language wherein form dies for having lived. It vanishes in the end it achieves. Unlike prose, when language ceases to behave as communication, it foregoes value as 'signification,' Valéry tells us, while retaining or acquiring value as an utterance. Remember that poetry is what happens when language holds out—when it resists its own disappearance, when it doesn't fall away once it's uttered. In the realm of the poetic, "rien ne sera résolu, achevé, aboli par un acte bien déterminé."¹¹³ Poetry is language that resists its own supercession by the meaning it is seemingly pre-destined to convey. It is an act of endurance—a resistance to supercession.

Returning to the poem, it's as though the poet is insisting *that form be seen*, that it be *heard*, and in order for it to be seen and heard, he must learn not to lose form in the embodiment it becomes, or, "(ayant) fait son office," see it dissolved in the radiant clarity of the image.¹¹⁴ The poet strives to relate to the form of the woman as though it were a poem we've yet to hear, yet to appreciate, if only for having too quickly heard what it has to say—heard it speak, in other words, of the beautiful body on which its voice depends,

¹¹¹ *Œuvres II*. Paris: Gallimard, 1957. p. 1372.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 1326.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1373.

having seen it disappear (superseded, as if absorbed) by way of the something-seen. The ambition of the poem, then, is to find a way of *preserving form as an utterance*, rather than as a something-said: to relate to the woman as the occasion on which form might speak—not of *what* we see or hear, but as itself, in all its splendor.¹¹⁵

The ‘object’ of the poet’s fascination, then, is all a proverbial blur. It’s ‘visible’ only in the half-light of its own paradox, in the space between its conceptual poles that it’s always busy traversing—that it *is* and *isn’t* what it represents. We can circumscribe it only through the circumscription it makes impossible, for the goal is to relate to form neither *as* the woman nor *independently* of the woman, but to catch at it in the chiaroscuro of that neither/nor—both the woman and not the woman, both something and no-thing: to form as an uncertain dance with (and as) the body in whom it risks its sudden and dramatic annihilation.

Like the poem before us, then, the form of the sleeping woman won’t settle (motionless) into any one thing we can exchange for content in a larger economy of meaning—or as Mallarmé once said of prose, like a coin passed silently from one hand to the next.¹¹⁶ Rather what we find here is form at its most moving, its most dynamic—form that speaks in a voice just shy of anything we might hear in it. Ultimately the poem will provide us a term for this life of form; it will tell us that form is wakeful, or *waking*. And yet like the poet, we have to find our way to this idea, for it isn’t a notion that sits comfortably in the mind. The poem teaches us by example how to relate to form such that it might resist its own supersession in the image. It’s didactic in this respect. It offers us what I like to think of as two portraits of a mind: the first, the mind as it fails at relating to form (as it sees too quickly) and only second, as it figures out how to do so. In the first attempt, as I’ve begun to suggest, fascination will resemble a transitive mode of seeing. The poet will desire form *qua* something-seen, and strive to relate to the form of the woman as a static ‘object’ to be held. In this first approach, he seems to hope that the immobility of sleep might countervail the moving elusiveness of form, that it might be put to proverbial rest once and for all.

The poem will chart a course away from this particular approach to form, however, for in the second attempt, fascination will no longer resemble a transitive mode of seeing, but an ambi-transitive mode of attention—that is, a kind of subject/object relationality that is synchronously and undecidedly, I will argue, both transitive and intransitive, relating to form as though it were an object, all the while conceding that no

¹¹⁵ It’s both lamentable and true that Valéry rarely seems to celebrate the women in his poems for themselves. More often than not, they’re made to be vaguely synonymous with sensual beauty. Here’s critic Charles Whiting on ‘La dormeuse’: “The tercets are heavy with sensuality and praise for the beauty of her body. The poet addresses her familiarly and with affection. But there is nothing in these tercets to tell us how profoundly this spectacle transforms the poet, how much this woman means to him... The poet is doing nothing more here than relishing fruit-like sensual flesh and esthetic beauty.” Here, I admit that my own understanding of the poem is in keeping with this impression—the sleeping woman occasions (is the catalyst and site of) a set of reflections on the nature of sensual form. *She*, the woman, the individual, is largely (if not completely) overlooked. Also, see Crow, Christine. in *Paul Valéry and the Poetry of Voice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. pp. 134-139.

¹¹⁶ In his ‘Crise de vers,’ Mallarmé qualifies prose as a system of communication and exchange, the act of taking or placing “dans la main d’autrui en silence une pièce de monnaie.” *OC I*, p. 879. For an insightful discussion of Valéry’s complicated relationship to prose, see Stimpson, Brian. “Counter-fiction.” *Reading Paul Valéry*. Ed. Gifford, Paul and Stimpson, Brian. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. pp. 138-152.

such object exists as such. ‘La dormeuse,’ then, will be shown to be much more than the motif it only initially resembles; it’s about more than a poet embedded in an endless, static, and stereotypical *vis-à-vis*. The innovation of the poem is that it manages delicately and beautifully to articulate a mode of subject/object relationality wherein there’s something necessarily restless about the object, and when relating to it in any other way (as any one thing) would mean its very disappearance, its abolition “dans un acte bien déterminé.”

Before we step inside the poem, I should add simply that as such, the poem does what poetry does best—it opens up shades of conceptual space between the categories of mind according to which we conventionally define our experience. It’s a half-light that illuminates what light obscures. Does he love me? or does he not? Is love bitter? or is it sweet? Poetry isn’t a movement toward sharply delimited categories of mind, or a way of choosing between them. Rather, it’s a way of prolonging the moment just shy of conceptual resolution, of seeing a concept be (like the form of the woman) both endlessly imminent and endlessly withholding (a conceptual equation we’ll return to in more depth in the final chapter), such that a new and unconventional experience might obtain in that space *between* the concepts of our daily, prosaic lives. Here, the poem does just that by tempering the transitivity of the poet’s fascination, allowing it to take place somehow in-between a transitive and intransitive act of the mind.

What would a relationship to such a less-than-object look like, the poem asks? What is this ‘hold’ on the mind that takes place in a poem in which no-thing is ever held? In the broadest possible terms, I propose reading Valéry’s ‘La dormeuse’ as an apprenticeship of the mind, as an ‘object’-lesson in the phenomenology of form. More specifically we’ll watch as the mind of the poet adapts to the particular challenges of form, and as Gautier once did, as he leaves behind a mode of seeing for a mode of attention. In turn, we’ll think more deeply about the specificity of the kind of attention offered here in the poem (Valéry’s own version of a *vouloir-saisir*), and to do so, I’ll propose a more nuanced conception of attention as an unconventional form of *beholding*.



Burning Secrets and Other Red Herrings

Before the poem offers us a notion of beholding, it will offer us a portrait of the mind as it’s initially inclined to greet form, how the mind is both swept along by its seductions and thwarted by its difficulties. When in the presence of the slumbering woman, and when confronted with a beauty that both captivates and confounds, the poet responds with a question: ‘What makes her so radiant,’ he asks?

Quels secrets dans son cœur brûle ma jeune amie,
 Ame par le doux masque aspirant une fleur?
 De quels vains aliments sa naïve chaleur
 Fait ce rayonnement d’une femme endormie?
 (ll. 1-4)

Is this “rayonnement” the outpouring of some inner goodness, he wonders? Is it the index of something deeper within the body? What ‘nourishes’ the warmth that makes her so

resplendent? These opening questions aren't altogether surprising. Indeed they lean with the natural inclinations of the rational mind, assuming as they do that what he confronts both *is* something and *comes from* somewhere, an intuition of both content and provenance. In the first line, for example, he wonders if the slumbering woman isn't quietly burning secrets, there beneath the veil of sleep—"Quels secrets dans son cœur brûle ma jeune amie?" Perhaps this "rayonnement" is the index of something hidden, he muses, the traitorous blush of a secret-concealed.

Secrets 'burn' when we're feverish to reveal them, or do they burn as a way of ensuring that they'll never be revealed? Does the common idiom of the 'burning secret' figure the ardor with which we yearn for its revelation, or the most immediate assurance that it will always be withheld? Is it the desire to know or the impossibility of knowing that burns so igneously in the idiom? Here in the poem it becomes a unified image of desire-unrequiting: a desire that takes place in and through its unfulfillment. Indeed in the opening line we read that *she's* the one burning a secret: "brûle ma jeune amie," wherein 'she' is the (inverted) subject of the verb, and the verb an act of concealment. At the same time, however, what we hear while reading the line aloud is that secrets burn all on their own: "quels secrets brûle(nt)," wherein 'secrets' is the (heard) subject of the verb, and the verb a desire for revelation.

The beauty of the image, then, is that we find her concealing these secrets in the fiery emblem of the poet's desire for revelation, consigning them to nothing in the very blaze that upholds them (that kindles them) as the promise of something. It's a complex image that depends in many ways on the ambi-transitivity playing endlessly in the sights and sounds of the line, the "brûle(nt)" which collapses into a unified conflict both what we read and what we hear, both concealment and the desire that it not be so.

"Ambi-transitivity" refers to a verb that can be both "transitive and intransitive without a morphological change." As such, in its ability to both take and not take a direct object, the "brûle(nt)" of the opening line anticipates (it holds here in embryo) the form of attention toward which the poem as a whole will move: one that's capable of contending with form not as some-thing we reach out and seize, but as somehow implicated in an transitive act of the mind whose object defies the very transitivity by which that act takes place. Here in the opening line, we're invited to begin loosening our sense of the transitivity that conventionally underwrites the motif of the contemplative poet *vis-à-vis* an object of vision. We're given the first (and not the last) instance of a transitive verb playing out intransitively, or an intransitive verb inflected with the strange and unexpected behaviors of the transitive. This synthetic middle ground between the poles of the (in)transitive is indeed the first step in conceiving of the kind of attention at work in the poem as a whole.

If it isn't in fact some secret, perhaps what appears by way of this "rayonnement" is even more fundamental, he speculates. Perhaps it's her 'soul,' made strangely visible in the radiant warmth of the slumbering body—

Ame par le doux masque aspirant une fleur,
(l. 2)

again, an intimation of content, of some-*thing* more essential than the outer forms of the body. Here, 'aspirer' speaks to both senses—"to inhale" and 'to aspire, or yearn to.' Thus, rather than a soul 'inhaling a flower,' it's as if the soul of the sleeping woman were

aspiring to flower by way of the breath, “*aspirant une fleur*”: a soul, we might think of it as saying, yearning to bloom through the tender mask (that sweet pretense) of the body.¹¹⁷

What we’re given to notice is that the poet’s fascination in these opening lines is nearly synonymous with the speculative thinking it occasions. Unlike the kind of attention with which the poem will end, here he relates to the sleeping figure as a hermeneutic problem—as a set of signs he might decipher, or the promise of some secret reality, hidden away in slumber. As such, we might think of his initial fascination as abiding by what critic Jean Starobinski conceptualizes as “*l’œil vivant*”: the ‘gaze’ not merely a connection to the world-observed, but a vital and desirous energy that draws us to observation itself, that pulls us at the world with the promise of a secret-revealed. Recall that this desire for the hidden—this bloom of the imagination that launches us beyond the forms of the world we confront—is what we identified in the previous chapter as a thoroughly Baudelairean poetic gesture: an act of imagination more than one of attention.¹¹⁸ Similarly here in the poem, the poet’s ‘living eye’ seeks out the face behind the mask, the “*âme*” of the second line, the “*secrets*” she must be burning; the poet relates to her resplendence in an archetypally Baudelairean effort to discern and unmask some “*réalité provisoirement dissimulée*,” on one hand, and on the other, to “*l’appeler à la présence*.”



Form as Conspiracy

There are hints, however, even in the first stanza, that no such provisional reality is there to be uncovered, lying silently behind the mask of the body. Indeed we begin to suspect that there’s no-thing to unmask, that surface is not the index of a depth. Notice the lexical choices the poet makes:

De quels *vains* aliments sa *naïve* chaleur
Fait ce rayonnement d’une femme endormie?
(ll. 3-4; my emphasis)

¹¹⁷ Readings and translations of this line tend to differ drastically from critic to critic. Here is one of my favorites, in the form of a paraphrase, from Lawler: “Drawn to the mask, the poet postulates a ritual vaporization that changes the woman into radiance and the air she breathes into a flower.” *Ibid*, 626. Here’s a less contemporary reading from critic Henry Grubb: “The image is not too clear: does it mean that the woman is actually holding a flower to her nostrils, or is she merely lying in a position that suggests it?” “Two Treatments of a Subject: Proust’s *la regarder dormir* and Valéry’s ‘*La dormeuse*.’” *PMLA* Vol. 71, No. 5 (1956). p. 907.

¹¹⁸ “Le caché est l’autre côté d’une présence. Le pouvoir de l’absence... nous ramène au pouvoir que détiennent, de façon assez inégale, certains objets réels: ils désignent, derrière eux, un espace magique; ils sont l’indice de quelque chose qu’ils ne sont pas. Obstacle et signe interposé, le voile de Poppée engendre une perfection dérobée qui, par sa fuite même, exige d’être rassaisie par notre désir.” This brand of fascination is a mode of attention that relates to form only as the necessary intermediary between the mind and the ‘hidden’ meaning of the world we encounter. I take from Starobinski the idea of the gaze as a “*lien vivant entre la personne et le monde*,” but insist that Valéry’s poem offers us a different logic: one not based on form as “*obstacle et signe interposés*.” *L’Œil vivant: essai*. Paris: Gallimard, 1961. p. 10.

To inquire into the source of that ‘nourishment’ might well be an effort made in ‘vain,’ we read (“quels vains aliments”), as might the attribution of her radiance to some “naïve chaleur” prove the folly of a young poet’s naïveté. By the end of the first tercet, the “Âme” he once suspected to be at work behind the mask of the body (in l. 2) is absented: “l’âme absente, occupée aux enfers” (l. 10). Notice as well the language of thwarted conquest: the poet coming up against an ‘invincible’ lull, or her triumph in l. 7 (“tu triumphes, ô paix”).

The poem begins to chart a shift away from the assumption that *what* enraptures the poet is some-thing to be deciphered. The more fascinated he becomes, the less object-focused his ‘gaze’ becomes. We overhear the logic of Starobinski’s “œil vivant” ceding to a new logic of attention. The first line of the second stanza, for instance, opens onto a list of nouns, as if to delineate the constitutive elements of the woman’s restful beauty (to find substance there) and to call them by name—

Souffle, songes, silence, invincible accalmie,
(l. 5)

Notice how much Valéry gives us to listen to in this verse. We slip from sibilant (“souffle, songes, silence”), from one cavernous vowel to the next (*ou, on, en*). The crucial irony here is that while the stereophonics of the line make themselves so present, so tangibly felt (*there’s so much to the line*), there’s also remarkably little ‘substance’ to the substantives it names. We’re met with the discarnate and ethereal: ‘whispers,’ ‘dreams,’ ‘silence,’ the very ‘lull’ of her repose. The line outsings itself, with more materializing on the tongue than in the referents it looks to “appeler à la présence.” As such it’s not that the line doesn’t sufficiently name what he confronts, but that the poet seems somehow *closer* to the elusive beauty of her radiance in these sibilant nothings than in the secretive somethings with which we began, or in which these sounds are meant to accrue. The line, I think, begins to draw our attention to the surface of the poem (to find more in the voice than in what it names), just as the attention of the poet begins to detach from these intuitions of content, and float to the outer body—not to the matter behind the forms of the body, but to the matter of form.

In many ways the prepositions of the poem are a perfect summary of this shift. The transition between stanzas (from “*dans* son cœur” to “*sur* le sein”) maps out these changes in the assumptions of the fascinated poet, from what secrets she burns *within* her heart to what strange and inscrutable ‘conspiracy’ of silent forces is at work “sur le sein,” that is, *upon* the body rather than behind or within it.

Tu triumphes, ô paix plus puissante qu’un pleur,
Quand de ce plein sommeil l’onde grave et l’ampleur
Conspirent sur le sein d’une telle ennemie.
(ll. 6-8)

We can almost overhear the poet untethering himself from the terms of the question with which he began, or brushing off the vestiges of his Baudelairian past. At play here is less a fiery curiosity concerning *what* makes her so radiant than an attention to the simple fact of radiance, we might say—not its content or provenance, but the allure of its mere *taking-place*. It’s as if, in order to shift away from form as a something-seen, the poet

begins to relate to form as though it were more durational than static: that is, as though the substance of form were bound up in how it took place, how it behaved.

As a figure for this ‘taking-place’ of form, over and against *what* it is, consider Valéry’s use of a verb like ‘to conspire’: “Conspirent sur le sein,” we read (l. 8). At first, the term elicits the same intuition of content that befell the poet at the outset. We assume, along with the poet, that if a conspiracy is afoot, surely it’s because a ‘plot’ is being hatched by the body before us. And yet, while there certainly *is* a conspiracy here, it’s not because any-thing is being conspired, strictly speaking. The term comes from the Latin *con-spirare*, meaning ‘to breathe together,’ and here Valéry allows its etymology to speak synchronously (and in perfect harmony, like a semantic chord) with its conventional meaning. The content of the conspiracy (its plot) is only ever the *con-spirare* (the breathing-together) by which it transpires. Its content is its taking-place.

In more general terms, and as the so-called ‘content’ of the conspiracy, the ‘plot’ is a mere conceptual convenience, as is the sleeping woman here in the poem, we might add: only the most reified version of the conspiracy that *is already* by way of its advent as such. A conspiracy need not coalesce into a plot in order to constitute a substantive threat to power, after all. Its reality obtains in advance of its materialization, such that the very onset of whispering (its first, weightless movements in the lungs) isn’t merely sufficient grounds to name the conspirator, but the real, material basis on which to sentence him to death! A whisper is not but a whisper—it demonstrates that the reality of the thing declares itself not *as* any one thing, but in its taking place.

Parenthetically I should add that this reading of the ‘conspiracy’ of form (that it’s less some-thing than a taking place) has everything to do with poetry in the broadest sense of the term. Valéry once said that if such a thing as “poésie pure” were to exist, it would refer to a language in which Ideas as such would be less important than their movement, their transformation one within the next. It would mean that the “jeu des figures contiendrait la réalité du sujet”—that is, that the play of form would contain the reality of the thing by which it appears. There is a certain kind of ‘purity’ to this conception of the conspiracy after all, for its reality isn’t dependent on its materialization; its reality is bound up in its advenence (the “jeu” Valéry so often speaks of).¹¹⁹

It’s not easy to conceptually acclimate to such an idea: that *what* holds the mind fascinated is somehow beside the point. In more philosophical terms, we might say that the poet is learning to relate to form as what philosopher Claude Romano calls an “event before anything.” As a kind of philosophical shorthand, the notion of an “event” can help us adjust to the idea that the ‘object’ of the poet’s fascination is not strictly “in the order of beings, nor can it be assigned to a univocally determinable being,” as Romano says of “events” in general. He continues: “An event ‘is’ not (a property or an ontic attribute), but simply happens: it is the pure fact of occurring, which is made evident only when it has taken place and in which nothing takes place other than the ‘taking-place’ itself.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Thus, rather than thinking of Valéry’s famous “poésie pure” as a poetry too pure to be written—as though it obtained in some pure and therefore abstract realm, divorced from the here and now—think of it as something that exists as easily as a con-spirare: at the very and mere incipience of the breath. I’ll have a lot more to say about the breath in Chapter IV.

¹²⁰ *Event and World (Perspectives in Continental Philosophy)*. Trans. Mackinley, Shane. New York: Fordham University Press, 2009. p. 26 (my emphasis).

The beauty of the poem is that it admits to the difficulty of such an idea from the very beginning. The poet intuiting some ‘soul’ within her radiance is the mind ill-calibrated to the ‘eventuality’ of form, to this breathing-together that *is* (in its nothingness) the very substance of the conspiracy, the very ‘object’ of his fascination. Over the course of the poem, we watch as the mind of the poet calibrates to this idea—to *the evential rather than the substantive reality of form*. This is the ambition of the poem as a whole, and in order to realize this shift, we find Valéry appealing to more than just the figure of the conspiracy.

By the end of the second stanza, for example, Valéry propagates a mode of evential thinking by drawing on a vocabulary of the sea. Moment by moment, the form of the sleeping woman begins to behave less like a resplendent object of vision than a rolling play of swell and reprieve, an endless modulation that refuses to be arrested into image. What was once the burning work of alchemy in the opening stanza, cedes to its homonymical “accalmie” of the second—that is, from an easily accounted-for combustion of elements to a more elusive radiance that stirs (filled with motion, ocean-like) on the lull of her repose, “invincible accalmie” (l. 9).¹²¹ Indeed, “accalmie” was once a verb (a movement) gleaned from the sea: ‘accalmir,’ meaning “les instans dans un coup de vent, où le vent et la mer tombent un peu.” It’s the movement of reprieve itself.

Several lines later, we find him naming the ‘conspirators’ in sea-like language as well, as though they were substantively-formed agents in the act of conspiring: “l’onde grave et l’ampleur,” he calls them (l. 11) A wave, however, isn’t any-thing. It is a shaping or a cresting—a verb (a happening) transmuted by the ruse of language into agent: that is, into a ‘wave’ (a subject) doing what waves do (a predicate).

When we say “lightning flashes,” for instance, and here we digress into more abstract language only momentarily, the action is conflated with its agent; we don’t distinguish between what lightning is and what lightning does, the event of lightning from the “ontic substrate” whereby it becomes the action of an agent.¹²² “We have posited the action as something that acts,” Nietzsche explains, referring to this inclination of the mind as the “seduction of language”: that by linking happenings to subjects, for example, actions to agents, effects to causes, it’s implicitly asserted that “everything that happens relates as a predicate to some subject.”¹²³

What we call ‘lightning’ is not a ‘being’ that possesses a certain *mode of Being*, for it is *not a being at all*, but ‘is’ precisely *nothing else* than the *flashing itself*: it is the ‘taking-place’ of an event that gives a place for the “thing” and not the inverse; it is from the verbalness of the verb that the subject derives, instead of the verb being conceived as that which expresses the ‘action’ of an agent.¹²⁴

Accordingly, we could perhaps rephrase our understanding of the poet’s original intuitions of substance with which ‘La dormeuse’ opens. We could say that the poet was

¹²¹ One can’t help but think, as critic Henry Grubbs once did in his article on Valéry’s sleeping woman, of the “lutteuse endormie” that appears so resplendently in Mallarmé’s early poem, *Tristesse d’été*. There’s little doubt Valéry lifted language, images, and more, directly from Mallarmé’s poem. Consider (at minimum) the lexical overlap: from Mallarmé, “lutteuse endormie,” “ennemie,” and then, the line with the most striking resemblance, the first of the second stanza: “De ce blanc flaoiement l’immuable accalmie.”

¹²² Romano, p. 4.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

victim to the “seductions of language,”—that the predicate spoke of subject, that this “rayonnement” spoke too quickly of those burning secrets, or that he sees too quickly what we, as readers, also see too quickly—the forms of the poem, like the sensuous forms encountered by the poet, visually accruing into an image of what the title conjures before we even make it inside: *la dormeuse*.

So too is the “ampleur” we encounter in l. 11 (“l’onde grave et l’ampleur”) not some-thing, but the measure of a happening—the degree to which something *is*, or takes place. How to describe the ‘ampleur’ of a thing, before or independent of the thing itself? How to attend to the draw of her breath, for example, over and against the air she breathes? or the lull of her repose? as if separable from the body in which we see it coalesce into life, into her, into a quiet little image of sleep?

The conceptual resonance between the sea and form does little to resolve the latter into an ‘object’ of fascination. In Valéry’s work, neither is ever a something-seen. “La mer, la mer, toujours recommencée,” he intones so famously in ‘Le Cimetière marin,’ conceding that the sea will never settle, never cease—never come to rest as any-thing other than the very propensity to happen again. Here the rolling rhythms of the sea are an instance of emergence, the very ‘advenence’ that precedes and exceeds wave, water, and swell. “Que d’heures j’ai consommées à la regarder sans la voir,” to resituate our epigraph. “C’est qu’un regard sur la mer, c’est un regard sur le possible.”¹²⁵

Thus we’re asked to conceive of the poet’s fascination not by linking contemplative subject to an object of contemplation, but to step into that rarified space between the phenomenal advent of a thing and the moment at which the thing comes into being as such, to calibrate the mind such that it might linger in that space of an “event before any-thing,” in which the reality of form is eventual rather than substantive, or substantive only by way of the eventual, and in turn, the act of the mind by which we relate to form is necessarily ambi-transitive.

There’s so much to ‘see’ and ‘hear’ as soon as we loosen our sense of the something-found. In the first line of the third stanza, we find the entire arch of this shift to the eventual mapped out within a single verse, in fact. We find the matter of form speaking as an eventuality. It’s the moment when we’re invited as readers to read in the way the poet learns to see. In the opening syllables of the line, he invokes the sleeping woman by naming her (“Dormeuse”), only to recast the woman in an apposition (“amas doré d’ombre et d’abandons”) (l. 9). Consider what becomes of the identity he ascribes to her in those first syllables. He conjures her in name as surely as does the title, and yet, as I’ve suggested, do we perhaps see or hear too quickly? “Dormeuse” is the configuration of phonic signs that builds into a something-heard. We hear *dor-m-eu-se*, and we’re delivered unto an image. We arrive at the something-heard, the something-seen.

Its phonically sumptuous apposition, however, gives voice to the same core sounds of the noun (*d*, *or*, *m*) all the while refusing us the something-heard, “amas dorés d’ombres et d’abandons.” Does an image come to mind? Can these “amas” be held in image? or is it something other than an image that stirs in the forms of the line? It’s as if the apposition gives us, as readers, a second chance to listen again to what we’ve too quickly heard—to no longer relate to such resplendence with the eyes and mind of the intellect, and with the assumptions attendant on the kind of fascination with which we began, but to somehow attend the gilded-shadows-amassing (the “amas doré d’ombres”)

¹²⁵ *OC II*, p. 1335. We’ll take up the question of the possible in Chapter IV.

that stir unseen and unheard in the world we allow to coalesce so easily as the “Dormeuse.” The apposition allows the (here, phonic) form of the “dormeuse” to speak as an event (it’s the sound of form’s resistance to supercession), rather than as a something-said, and as such, transforms the verse itself into the poem in microcosm—the first two syllables, the mind that sees or hears too quickly; the remaining syllables, the mind beholding what will never be held, but will take place nevertheless: those gilded shadows amassing—the moving, elusive, and paradoxical taking-place of form alone.

Dormeuse, amas doré d’ombres et d’abandons.
(l. 9)



Wakeful Form

In ‘La dormeuse,’ then, Valéry offers us an understanding of form by which the ‘object’ of the poet’s fascination is only ever the very fact of its endless (sea-like) occurring. At stake here, as I’ve suggested, is a conception of both what form *is* and how form *behaves* (one by way of the other), and yet certainly Valéry isn’t the only poet to take a stab at its conceptualization. In his own right, Mallarmé refers to the “miroitement” of poetic language, or the play of its plasticity: a ‘shimmering’ of sounds, textures, and materiality that takes place on the page before us. If meaning transpires in the forms of language, he explains, it does so not because meaning is embedded within it, but because it takes place (as if iridescently) across the moving surface of language.

There are undeniable ties of kinship between this vocabulary of form’s behavior (its “miroitement”) and the ideas at work here in ‘La dormeuse.’ The difference is that in Valéry’s poem, this “miroitement” is less an idea than an experience. He provides us with a portrait of the mind experiencing this eventuality, and in order to do so, he appeals not simply to ‘shimmering’ (a qualitative description), nor to a philosophical vocabulary of the ‘event,’ as I have, but to a conceptual language of lived, everyday experience. It’s as though he’s reminding us that the eventuality of form isn’t the esoteric or theoretical claim about the nature of language that it seems to be. We know this eventuality more intimately than we could have ever suspected, he seems to say. We can learn to recognize something of its essential qualities and behaviors in . . . In other words, one way of conceiving of form as event, Valéry tells us, is to relate to it as a wakefulness—to attend to form *as* wakefulness itself.

Ta forme au ventre pur qu’un bras fluide drape
Veille; ta forme veille, et mes yeux sont ouverts.
(ll. 13-14)

‘Sleeping woman,’ he seems to be saying, ‘your repose bears such gifts—those “dons” that stir phonically though not substantively within “abandons”—“that you, *you* may be asleep, but the form of your repose is always already *wakeful*.’

First notice the symmetry that unites the last lines of the first and last stanzas. It’s a conceptual as much as graphic parallel that walks us from *what* ‘makes’ her so radiant to *that* her form is so wakefully radiant: from “fait” to “veille,” from one logic to the next.

(...)
Fait ce rayonnement d'une femme endormie?

(...)
Veille; ta form veille, et mes yeux sont ouverts.
(ll. 4, 14; my emphasis)

Indeed it's not inconsequential that Valéry should enjamb the third and fourth line of the opening quatrain at a (transitive) verb of making—"Fait ce rayonnement"—and should thereby attach so much of his initial speculation about her radiance to the question of its production, as if understanding his own fascination meant understanding how this "rayonnement" was made. "Mon premier mouvement d'esprit a été de songer au *Faire*," he remarks in a quiet (and typically unrelated) little essay on sea shells, for the idea of 'making' is the first and most human of ideas, he tells us.¹²⁶ "Qui a donc fait ceci," he asks, turning the shells around in his hand, raising them one by one, we might imagine, to the eyes of the mind?¹²⁷

A subtle tension emerges over the course of the essay on shells that here echoes the shift in the poem: between the active and conscious 'fabrication' of the shell on one hand (how the poet greets form in the first stanza), and its passive, as if effortless 'formation' on the other (how the poet learns to greet form in the final stanza, as a wakefulness all on its own). In part, Valéry tries to understand how we might conceive of the natural 'formation' of the shell when the eyes of the intellect see only with the mind and logic of a 'maker.' In the opening stanza and in much the same way, we overhear the poet desperately trying to re-make the sleeper's radiance in thought. To name it; to point to its provenance. What the essay on sea shells teaches us, however, and what 'La dormeuse' will only eventually suggest in its final lines—this time, enjambed at a verb of wakefulness—is that speculating about the 'making' of what we behold is only the most logical, the most immediate impulse of the rational mind; it's how we react in the "moment naïf," as he calls it in the essay on shells, when the mind first musters its categories of understanding, and when we see too quickly. Thus the poem slips from active and transitive 'making' to passive and ambi-transitive waking. Rather than seeing it with the logic of a maker, he needs only attend its endless formation, its endless waking.

The larger point here is that there's nothing to awaken in form. Nothing to be done; no maker to discover, for form is a waking all its own. Like the poet, we think that reading (or here, looking) means awakening something in the lines that slumber away on the page—that reading means discovering once and for all what language is quietly dreaming about in our absence (that something-seen behind the sensual 'mask' of language we confront). If the poetic line attracts and beguiles us, it's because we have yet to awaken its deepest secrets, we think—that is, yet to unearth what burns igneously within its core, as if meaning were the dream of language. We greet the forms of the poem like a shell, and, turning it around in our hands, palming its shape, examining its textures, we find ourselves swept up in the spirals, or drawn into some small, hidden place (that unspoken heart of the helix), as though its inward-turning lines were indeed a

¹²⁶ *OC I*, p. 889.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

line of sight leading straight into the mystery of its creation and the nature of its current existence. We palm this shell of a poem as though it will cede, as though it will tell us what we ask to hear.

What the poem teaches us, however, is that we need not awaken meaning out of the great sleep of language, for language wakes all on its own. Recall Mallarmé's famed injunction that poets should 'cede the initiative' (that is, should cede the act of signifying) to language itself. Mallarmé chose to understand language not as something through which he speaks, but as a voice that's always already speaking. Here, in 'La dormeuse,' what Mallarmé once articulated theoretically (and in terms of language), Valéry now articulates through the slumbering body (and from the perspective of the reader). The form of a slumbering body that's always already wakeful is the voice of a language that's always already speaking.



We've seen the poem establish how *not* to relate to form (as content yet to be awakened, as the mask behind which some reality is there to be unearthed), but we need to think more deeply about the verb that here animates form, 'veiller.' What kind of verb is 'waking'? What are the implications for the mind that looks to relate to it? to this 'waking' form?

At its most straightforward, 'veiller' means to be awake: "de ne pas dormir pendant le temps destiné au sommeil."¹²⁸ It's a verb of vigilance and attention, coming from *vigilare*: to be wakeful or to keep careful watch. It's important to overhear other valences and applications in the term as well, however. In the expression 'veiller sur quelqu'un,' for instance, it becomes less an intransitive *state* of vigilance than a transitive *act* of care: a being-present in a particular capacity, or a tending-to that reaches out to the world as its direct object.¹²⁹ "Veille," then, can be said to occur transitively in some ways and intransitively in others. In it, we overhear a passive wakefulness, a vigilance (not a form of attention we lavish *on* someone or something, but that we simply hold open; a pure and expansive receptivity) shading into a more active, object-focused form of attention, or an act of loving-care. "Veille" is ambi-transitive—a verb that can be either transitive or intransitive without a morphological change,¹³⁰ and as I want to suggest, a verb whose two grammatical dimensions can often speak synchronously.¹³¹

¹²⁸ "Veiller." *Le Robert*. 1997. Web 1 Jan. 2016.

¹²⁹ At one moment in Chénier's *Elégies*, the verb "veiller" takes on a beautiful luminousness. "C'est moi, près de son lit, qui fit veiller les feux pour garder mes amours," a looking after the light by which, or through which, he upholds his love.

¹³⁰ Carnie, Andrew. "Subcategories of Verbs." *Syntax: A Generative Introduction*. New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2013.

¹³¹ Mallarmé plays with (in)transitivity in his poems as well. In "Une dentelle s'abolit," for instance, the movement of the eponymous lace against the dim windowpane (one which does and does not reflect) is described paradoxically as both a transitive and intransitive action, perhaps both at the same time: this conflict, this lace "Flotte plus qu'il n'ensevelit," in which *flotter*, which generally takes no object, is inflected with the transitivity implied by *ensevelir*, which we could imagine only with great difficulty as an intransitive verb. The movement of the lace, in other words, is caught in a kind of suspension across transitivity: it both does and does not take an object; it both is and is not its own object; it both is and is not divided against itself, both ('unanimously') a presence and an absence.

Consider, for instance, the most beguiling use of *veiller*. The command “veille à ce que” might be rendered in English as something like ‘see to it that,’ as in, ‘see that he wakes in time.’ How do we measure its realization as an act? Where, or at what point does the verb obtain as a doing? Is it ever a doing? or does it always, meaningfully and successfully, fall short?

In this case, “veille” is less an act than a disposition of mind: a ‘making as if to do,’ and therefore not wholly an act unto itself. ‘To see to it,’—neither to realize something, nor to passively attend a realization that takes place independently of us, but to somehow be implicated in that realization, there in the chiaroscuro space in which we need not act in order that action occur. “La veille,” says Valéry, “est la puissance, en général, des actes. Elle est comme leur commencement commun; la première condition pour qu’un acte quelconque soit.” Indeed Valéry claims for wakefulness the power of an act, though not the status of an act itself. The subjunctive he deploys in this particular formulation lives up to itself here as the mood of the unrealis, a ‘that it might be thus.’ Both less than one and more than the other, “veille” is suspended (floating unmoored) between a state and an act—a state that takes place, strangely enough, in an economy of act and action.

By animating form with an ambi-transitive verb of wakefulness, then, Valéry animates the very conundrum of form with which we began. To echo and link our syntax: both less than one and more than the other, form is suspended (floating unmoored) between something and a mere taking-place—a taking-place that we relate to as if in a transitive economy of ‘objects.’ He suggests that the life of form is inseparable from the moving neither/nor of its (in)transitivity—that form occurs in the liminal space between the terms of its paradox (that it *is* and *isn’t* its object), that it speaks transitively *of* something, toward something, reaching out to something other than itself, as though it were an act, even as it obtains intransitively all on its own, “self-sufficient and self-defining,” as Leighton puts it. By ambi-transitively bringing form to life, Valéry shows us that the life of form, in other words, is to be found and held in the moving, unresolvable pull between the body that it isn’t and the *isn’t* that it would be without the body.

How do we imagine this state that occurs as though it were an act? this no-thing that behaves as if it were some-thing, and that we grasp only in its movement from one to the next? “Veille,” Valéry wrote in the *Cahiers*, “// On est, comme par un acte perpétuel.” That is—

we *are* (passively, merely), as if by some perpetual act.

Now, by adapting his language: form *is* (passively, merely), as if by some perpetual act. A speech act, perhaps, as though it had something to say.



We arrive at the final, triumphant line of the poem. There is one question left unposed, and it’s the central one. Form is an event, yes, and to truly understand its eventual quality (its life, the very verbalness whereby it takes place) is to concede to what Valéry gives us as its wakefulness—that it *is*, that it *occurs*, only *as if* by some perpetual act, *as if* by saying something. I’ve claimed, however, that Valéry’s contribution here is not only to

have given us such a beautiful vocabulary of the taking-place of form, but to have completed a phenomenology—to have shown us what it looks like to relate attentively to such wakefulness. The question then is that of the relationship between the poet as attentive observer and what is (as if independently of him) wakeful form.

The final lines of the poem go as follows:

Ta forme au ventre pur qu'un bras fluide drape
Veille; ta forme veille, et mes yeux sont ouverts.
(ll. 13-14)

Here's the crucial detail—Valéry's formulation elides the term of relationality we've been waiting to hear. He seems to leave unanswered the question of how we actually relate to form as wakefulness. You'll notice that the poet isn't the one wakeful *to* sensuous form. The line doesn't read, 'I perceive a wakeful world,' or 'I am wakeful *to* the world.' Instead, eyes are open, form is waking, and yet where is the relationship that links the two? Why is form not the grammatical object of his gaze? Why leave the link undrawn?

Claude Romano, returning briefly to a philosophical context, describes our relationship to events as follows:

Although an event is *impersonal* with respect to me, unlike a fact it can never be an *object* (understood etymologically as pure vis-à-vis *Gegen-stand*): I am implicated in it *myself*, as soon as I understand it precisely *as such*.¹³²

Short of a vis-à-vis is a self (or subject) "implicated" in the taking-place of the world around her. And by "implicated," Romano refers in philosophical language to precisely what Valéry, in the poem, expresses through an omission—that point of contact between subject and event, between self and the taking-place of form.

(...) ta forme veille, **et** mes yeux sont ouverts.
(l. 14)

There is, in other words, a glaring, beautiful, and extraordinarily meaningful phenomenological lacuna separating waking form and open eyes. It suggests that we cannot relate to form as an object; nor can our experience of form be entirely intransitive. Rather, our attention must take place in that undrawn link between open eyes and waking form—in the "et" in which the relationship between subject and object is voiced silently in an ellipsis, and as such, finds its most beautiful and subtle definition. Indeed rather than reading 'waking form' and 'open eyes' as two points (an object and a subject) yet to be linked, perhaps if we thought of them as Mallarmé thinks of a verse (if we allowed them to exist within that single verse)—not as separate words, separate ideas whose connections accrue into the meaning we seek, but a 'new and total word' unto itself, as Mallarmé described. Perhaps, this is all to say, we need only fold that phenomenological leap into the experience itself—to allow attention to take place in the unfolding impossibility of the something-seen, to 'see' only by finding ourselves there, with open

¹³² Romano, p. 31.

eyes, attentive, holding on to no-thing, while held (in some way) by the wakeful taking-place before us.



Conclusion : (Be,) held

It's hard work being a reader. All that attention paid, all the exertion we've just offered to the poem. Indeed we're accustomed to lending so much of our wakefulness to poetry, to this resplendent world of sensual, poetic forms. We've just done as much, in some sense; we've been wakeful to all these ideas, to all these beautiful turns of mind.

What we're offered in 'La dormeuse,' however, is an alternative conception of readerly attention, animated through the poet's own fascination with form. The poem tells us that reading isn't about awakening these ideas within the poem, or exerting ourselves in a great battle with their difficulty. We wake nothing at all; instead, form wakes, and our eyes are open. Thus like the poet whose open eyes relate *to* wakeful form only through the ellipsis in which no-thing can transitively be grasped, so too should we return to the poem—should we hear it spoken again—and attend to 'La dormeuse' not as woman we see too quickly, but as an event of form we can learn to *behold*.

What the poet beholds, and what we're asked to relate to in the poem itself, will never really allow itself to be *held*. To behold form isn't about seeing it or holding to it until we're left with some false sense of its possession. Rather, beholding is what happens when our attention moves out toward an 'object' with the desire to grasp it, only to circle back around toward the beholding subject and become (seemingly) the exertion (the sheer power and presence) of the relationality itself. Beholding is what happens when the desire to reach out and grasp leaves us not with a something-reached, but with the sense of having *been* reached, seized in some strange way by a wakefulness that isn't exactly our own. It's less about finding something to behold than finding a way to *be*, *held* by the relationality itself.¹³³

Who knew that sleep should have so wakeful a form? Indeed Valéry turns plenty of things on their head over the course of this poem. He offers us a scene of sleep that's also full of wakefulness. He offers us an image of a woman whose form undoes the very body it represents. He draws us in with the promise of an image, and then offers us less

¹³³ For many reasons, 19th-century poets had a particular fixation with the traditions surrounding the Catholic monstrance—more specifically, it seems to me, with the spatial and attentive relationship enacted by the practice. The monstrance is the often-gilded vessel which, in the absence of the priest and/or ceremony, houses the consecrated host. The host is set between panes of glass, and the monstrance in turn is placed on the altar for adoration. What we would call "adoration" in this context is less a matter of *what* the mind of the congregant can hold of the object of attention (here, the host) than the hold of the object on the mind of the congregant. The power of that act of beholding has everything to do with finding oneself *held* by the act itself—an act in which the host is less objective than eventual, I would suggest: one whose taking-place replaces the taking-place of a formal mass.

Parenthetically I want to mention that it's perhaps not for nothing that Valéry's poetics of beholding so intimately shares this language of religious adoration, for it's a conceptual language that extends quite easily to the basic mechanics of compassion—a force (an attention) that we exert toward an object or person, only to find ourselves enveloped, or enfolded, as though absorbed and comforted by a relationality (an 'object') not entirely our doing though not distinct from what we do.

than any-thing that can be held in image. He awakens our attention, only to offer that wakefulness to form itself.

Ultimately we can end where we began, with our epigraph: “Que d’heures j’ai consommées à regarder [la mer] sans la voir,” Valéry declares.¹³⁴ It’s these hours that the poet devours, not the sea—the time that belongs to the sea itself, that *is* the sea’s unfolding. To watch without seeing, to attend without any-thing to attend to other than these hours—these open, endless hours—in which nothing is seen and everything is present.

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¹³⁴ *OC II*, p. 1335.

IV

Valéry at the Edge of Sleep

“Il n’y a pas de phénoménologie du sommeil.”

Jean-Luc Nancy

This chapter is about Valéry’s poetics of sleep. By that I mean not simply that his work is full of sleep (which it is, in fact—full of slumbering bodies, full of languor and dream) but that sleep has something fundamental to teach us about his conception of poetry.

In the previous chapter we looked deeply into a poem that was ostensibly about a sleeping woman, though what we found was an unlikely conception of her slumbering form as a kind of ‘waking,’ or wakefulness: “ta forme veille, et mes yeux sont ouverts.” We established that for Valéry, form is an event, and that to attend to the eventuality of form is to attend to what Valéry understands as its ‘waking,’ the very swell of its taking-place. Attention, then, is less a conventional vis-à-vis that connects us as subjects to an object of attention than an experience that transpires at the liminal threshold (as though suspended) between ‘open eyes’ and ‘waking form.’ ‘La dormeuse’ ends with a tantalizing overture onto a notion it intimates more than explains—namely, that *liminality* is at the heart of the experience into which form so wakefully invites us.

While in ‘La dormeuse’ we conceived of the form of the slumbering body by way of wakefulness, in what follows we’ll see how Valéry explores the liminality of that experience by way of sleep. It seems odd at first that sleep should prove so central to wakefulness, or that in these chapters, wakefulness should be found in such abundance in the matters of sleep. Indeed we tend to think of sleep as the conceptual flipside of wakefulness—a quiet place within, a place beyond, the other side of the proverbial rainbow. And yet in Valéry’s work we find that these categories aren’t antithetical—they pass in and out of one another endlessly, such that wakefulness isn’t simply the absence of sleep, and sleep isn’t irrelevant to the ways we do the best of our wakeful living.

I argue that the faint, liminal edges of sleep—those moments when the mind stirs undecidedly between wakefulness and slumber—can shape our understanding of the liminality we encounter in his poetry. More specifically, I argue that just as the liminal, sleep-filled mind belies an unlikely experiential plenitude, so too can the liminality of his work be understood not as the source of its abstraction, but as the promise of its livability.¹³⁵ In this chapter we’ll move through four generically diverse texts—two

¹³⁵ As such this chapter represents an intervention in an established critical conversation about the various relationships between poetry and sleep. My own approach is to focus not on what makes sleep a problem (philosophically speaking, as most studies do) but on how it lends a philosophically rarefied concept a degree of livability, oddly enough. My own approach, in other words, reverses the direction of most inquiries: not what makes sleep difficult to think, but how it can teach us something about how we do our living. Notable in this larger discussion of sleep and poetry, see Simon Wortham’s incredibly erudite *The Poetics of Sleep: from Aristotle to Nancy*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. Also cf. Schwenger, Peter. *On the Borders of Sleep: On Liminal Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. Or Anne Carson’s lyrical wonder of an essay, “Every Exit is an Entrance.” *Decreation*. New York: Vintage, 2012.

poems, one work of prose, and one prose-poem. Each was chosen for the ways it refracts the question of the liminal to different ends; as a whole, they constitute not a monolithic conception of liminality, but a varied, moving, and sometimes outwardly contradictory set of approaches to the richly experiential dimensions of the liminal.

We'll begin with a poem about an instance of liminality we observe in the twilight sky, 'La ceinture.' What makes the poem unique is that it lays the groundwork for conceiving of liminal twilight not as a narrow and elusive neither/nor (a kind of conceptual conundrum, neither day nor night), but as an object of attention that draws us into the very capaciousness of the liminality we observe. In order to attend to the liminal, Valéry demonstrates, we step *into* the liminal.

It's with this embodied conception of liminality that we'll move into the texts that bear on sleep. The first of these is both the central text of the chapter and the one to which we'll devote the most time and attention—Valéry's famous poem 'La fileuse.' At its most basic, it's a poem about a woman who slips into slumber at her spinning wheel, thread still in hand. More than any other poem, it offers a complex image of the embodied and liminal onset of sleep, as well as a way of thinking about sleep's central paradox: that it appears by disappearing.

The final texts of the chapter shift our focus more explicitly from the embodied dimensions of the liminal to the question of attention. And if anyone is to reveal a form of attention proper to the very dimming of attention in the liminal onset of sleep, it's Valéry's fictional 'man of attention,' Monsieur Teste. We'll consider the strange scene of sleep that transpires at the very end of the *Soirée*, when the eponymous hero slips into slumber by the light of the narrator's candle—a scene in which we ask not simply what it means to experience the liminal, but what it means to witness it.

Finally, and as a kind of coda to our exploration of the liminality of sleep, we'll briefly consider an unfinished text called 'Agathe': the hauntingly beautiful second chapter to the *Soirée*. Therein Valéry will go beyond speaking *about* the liminal mind by speaking to us in the very *voice* of the mind as it mingles with the night: 'Agathe,' he names her—or "l'intérieur de la nuit de Teste."¹³⁶ We'll find an arrestingly beautiful articulation of the paradox of sleep's 'non-appearing,' along with a strange and unlikely set of figures (including phosphorus, of all things) for a kind of visibility that obtains even in the darkest regions of sleep—a darkness *by which we see*.

In the broadest terms, this chapter is meant to draw out the experiential dimensions of a poetics, we think, so preoccupied by its own "pureté" that its only possible life is that rarefied and cerebral life of the mind. On the contrary, this chapter is about the living present—a way of settling into the taking-place of what seems neither here nor there. Again, this chapter is meant to be continuous with many of the ideas first introduced in the previous chapter—i.e., the event of form, its taking-place, etc. My hope is that several of those ideas will be overheard and refracted through the discussion that follows. Formally I should mention that this chapter takes its cue from the object of inquiry: for Valéry, as we'll see, the proverbial tipping point between wakefulness and slumber is all tipping and no point. Thus we'll tip and tip and tip, until the going itself leaves us with a living, capacious sense of the somewhere at which we'll never quite arrive. Thus, as we move deeper and deeper into sleep, look less for a cohesive conception of liminality than for an abiding sense of its livability.

¹³⁶ *OC II*, p. 1388.

Liminality

To claim for the liminal a kind of experiential plenitude, or a capaciousness, as this essay does, and eventually as Valéry will be shown to have done with sleep, is to depart from a traditional understanding of the term. As it tends to stand, the idea of the liminal is inhospitable. It refers to the in-between, to the neither/nor; from the Latin *limen*, it denotes the ambiguity of the ‘threshold.’ As such it seems eternally plagued by a disembodied neither/nor. In its definitional inability to *be* either one thing or another, the liminal is often confined to the idea of itself. It’s an abstraction, a no-man’s-land—a concept we think rather than experience. For what precisely is there to be lived? and where?!

Indeed critical theory was quick to pluck the term for itself out of the living fields of anthropology from which it came, first introduced as it was by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in 1909. For him it stood for the “quality of ambiguity that occurs in the middle stage of rituals, when the participants no longer hold their status but have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold when the ritual is complete.”¹³⁷ The term, however, quickly acquired a potent and rarefied philosophical valence in the thinking of Bataille, Blanchot, and Derrida, for instance. For them, its ambiguity found a more theoretical expression in such notions as the *pharmakon* (both ‘remedy’ and ‘poison’), or the *hymen*, as in Derrida’s famous reading of Mallarmé’s haunting undecidability. In the hands of these theorists, the liminal had evolved out of the realm of cultural anthropology to become a powerful abstraction of the notion of difference. It came to play a central role in thinking the undecidedness inherent in the functioning of language, and in turn, in the linking of larger discursive practices to what are ultimately textual traces.

Its relevance in the theoretical world of these thinkers has had an enduring effect on the ways we read instances of liminality in literary texts. Valéry’s poetics in particular (though not dissimilar in this regard from Mallarmé’s) is deeply marked by the liminal. The work of both poets, we might say, is a voice that can’t stop speaking, though *what* it says floats endlessly and inextricably, as if moored, between the speaking it can’t stop doing and the something-said at which it will never truly arrive. This is what Valéry means when he refers to poetry as that prolonged hesitation between sound and sense. It’s a space in which the union of sound and sense is forever withheld, or suspended, unlike prose (in whose economy that union is the very basis for communication). What these poems offer us is a kind of content that’s wholly dependent on the taking-place of their form—a nothing-said, upheld liminally in the very voice by which they speak.

Through the lens of critical theory, this ‘hesitation’ is less experiential than theoretical—a function of the procedures of signification. Mallarmé’s work in particular seems to invite this reading of its liminality, and understandably so, for like the theorists who so often champion him as their progenitor, Mallarmé sees liminality at work in the

¹³⁷ Cited in Turner, Victor. “Liminality and Communitas.” *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction Press, 2008. Web. 26 Feb. 2015.

very procedures of language. Meaning ‘shimmers,’ he says, across the sensual surface of language—not within, but *between* the words of the poetic line: “l’air ou chant sous le texte,” that is, a kind of poetic meaning suspended between air and song. If liminality plays out in the world of objects, it’s in objects that allegorize the work of the poem itself. Whence a recurring cast of Mallarméan figures: “l’écume,” for instance, whose bodily presence betides as a frothing of air; or “la dentelle,” a fabric comprised of absences; or “l’éventail,” whose materiality seems to flicker (ghost-like) into dissolution as it moves. For Mallarmé, in other words, as it will be for those theorists of the signifier, liminality governs the behaviors and operations of *form*—primarily that of language itself.

It’s the fact that liminality *does* play so central a role in the work of Mallarmé and Valéry that we’ve come to read the liminality of their respective poetic projects in similar ways.¹³⁸ And yet, understanding the specificity of Valéry’s own treatment of liminality means taking seriously his position as a *reader* of Mallarmé. Indeed what was for Mallarmé an instantiation of a set of ideas about the nature of language was for Valéry, crucially, an object of his readerly experience. Recall his now-famous account of seeing and hearing Mallarmé’s ‘Coup de dés’ (CDD) for the first time.¹³⁹ It makes plain the importance of this readerly perspective on the rarefaction Mallarmé placed before him. His account focuses less on how the text functions than on the experience of its mystery, the “néants” that became so palpable, so “sensibles” there on the page. Later that night, he relates, after being shown the sprawling manuscript, and as Mallarmé was walking him back to the train station through the darkness, Valéry recalls looking up into the starry, vaulted sky, as though looking into the constellations of the ‘CDD.’ “Il me semblait *maintenant* d’être pris,” he says, “dans le texte même de l’univers silencieux.”¹⁴⁰ It was as he walked into the experience of the text *by way* of the night itself, in other words, “au creux de la nuit,” as he recognized something of the text in the living world he traversed there in the folio of the sky, that the curiosities, questions, and ideas of the ‘CDD’ came alive for the young poet, “maintenant.”

This is all to say that when we find moments of Mallarmé’s poetics quietly at work within Valéry’s, often they find themselves imbued with the passive, admiring, and deeply embodied attention of a reader—that the liminal, in his work, should be less ontological (bearing on the nature of poetic language) than hermeneutic: something we find him grappling with first as a reader, there in the poem before him, but then eventually in the sky, and eventually, in the heavy draw of sleep he works so hard to observe within himself. It’s as though Valéry takes the liminality he experiences at work in Mallarmé’s poetry and follows it fervently into the world around him, within him.

¹³⁸ So often we parse the distinctions between these poets by appealing to their divergent approaches to the contemplative gaze. In her comparative study of the *regard* of both poets, Ludmilla Wills establishes what has become a common critical reading of their differences—in the broadest of terms, that Mallarmé ultimately eschews a material world he might contemplate in the interest of the immaterial and the abstract (ultimately in the interest of the metaphysical), whereas Valéry will dive headlong into the natural world around him. Cf. Wills, Ludmilla. *Le regard contemplatif chez Mallarmé et Valéry*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1974.

¹³⁹ “Dernière visite à Mallarmé,” *OC I*, p. 632.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*



There are alternatives, then, to readings of Valéry's poetics that link its liminality to the operations of a language he inherited from Mallarmé, and that he hands over to the critical theory of the 20th century. To help mark the distinction between these two approaches to the liminal, I want to briefly change the color of our critical lens.

Stepping back from the contexts of poetry specifically, consider the thought experiment in which Bergson has us imagine a sheet a paper illuminated by four candles.¹⁴¹ He asks us to imagine blowing out one candle at a time, and watching as the light changes on the paper below. (We might also imagine the poet in 'La ceinture', for that matter, watching the subtle dimming of light in the twilight sky). It's tempting to assume that with each candle we blow out, we lose more and more of the light—a loss in quantity of a single idea (whiteness, or daylight) or an increase in quantity of its opposite (darkness, or night). Bergson suggests that conceptualizing this shift quantitatively ends up eliding what we stand to see qualitatively—that is, rather than degrees of white, we can see many nuances of white, "des nouvelles nuances de blanc." What was once a quantitative shift in the proportions of whiteness alone becomes the beginning (the opening up) of a breadth of qualitative whitenesses.¹⁴² For the poet at twilight, the liminal sky isn't simply a dwindling, narrowing measure of daylight, but a vast blooming of qualitative differences, "analogue aux couleurs du spectre."¹⁴³

This bloom of qualitative nuances is precisely what I mean by the capaciousness of the liminal. To approach it through the lens of experience is to step into those nuances—to inhabit what may at first strike us as an inhospitable neither/nor. The poet in 'La ceinture' lends his own experience to the liminality of the sky, forming that "suprême lien" between himself and the shifting nuances before him. He embodies the liminality he sees—an endless unfolding of nuance to discover, to feel, indeed to attend to, though perhaps never to entirely grasp.



The Trouble with Sleep

We can begin to revise our assumptions about the experience of sleep in much the same way Bergson and Valéry have begun revising our assumptions about the liminal. We tend to bemoan how "little" sleep we get in a given night, for instance, or how much "more" of that precious substance we want or need. Our language reveals that despite the obvious gray zone between sleep and wakefulness, we tend to think quantitatively about sleep, as though it had limits we could measure. When we conceive of sleep in this way, however, its difficulties are at their most insurmountable. Sleep, after all, has long posed problems

¹⁴¹ *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*. Paris: PUF, 1997. pp. 39-40.

¹⁴² To echo my earlier argument about the influence of Gautier's attentive relationship to a complex, and nuanced material world, we need only consider his famous poem 'Symphonie en blanc majeur,' in which the poet lingers in the vast scope of different whitenesses.

¹⁴³ Bergson, p. 39.

for thinkers and philosophers alike, for it greets our inquisitive desire to know it (to glimpse it) with a logical paradox—that sleep only appears by disappearing.¹⁴⁴

As Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, “il n’y a pas de phénoménologie du sommeil,” for in order for there to be such a phenomenology, there needs to be a conscious mind, and in the case of sleep, it’s true—we’re never exactly there when it happens.¹⁴⁵ In sleep we’re both the diver and the abyss, Nancy writes, and it’s unclear whether in the depths of that abyss we’re ever in a position to distinguish between the two.¹⁴⁶ What’s more, there’s also the question of what we can expect to appear when sleep ‘appears.’ For sleep, it would seem, *has* no mode of appearance.¹⁴⁷ It appears only by disappearing. Or rather, as a non-appearing.¹⁴⁸ “Il ne montre de soi que sa disparition, son enfouissement et sa dérobade,” as Nancy puts it.¹⁴⁹ And if, under the best of circumstances, such a disappearance does in fact reveal itself, whatever that might mean, in what kind of writing, text, or poem could we ever manage to re-present it? How could we hope to represent sleep when it’s barely a presentation, barely a presence, Nancy rhetorically asks:

C’est à peine présentation ou présence. La présence du dormeur est la présence d’une absence, *la chose en soi est chose de pas-de-chose*. Masse pourtant massive, massée, roulée, blotie autour de ce soi qui existe en insistant dans une inexistence.¹⁵⁰

When we conceive of sleep, then, as the measurable absence of the conscious mind, there’s perhaps no possible picture of sleep itself, no way of glimpsing the darkness into which we fall. As such, sleep obtains as the most inhospitable of paradoxes, like death itself. As Blanchot reminds us, sleep appears only when we *are* no longer. By what possible light, then, could we ever perceive the darkness? what light would not be the very undoing of the darkness we wish to know?

Rather than sleep *per se*, Valéry prefers the “soft edges” of sleep.¹⁵¹ In the many volumes of the *Cahiers*, for instance, to which he devoted so many of his mornings for over forty years, we sometimes overhear him observing the slumber from which he was likely still emerging while writing, there at his desk in the early morning.¹⁵² He wrote not

¹⁴⁴ Cited in Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Tombe de sommeil*. Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2007. p. 14.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.* In the *Cahiers*, Valéry had posed a similar question about the self who sleeps—a question, moreover, that stirs everywhere below the surface of Nancy’s reflections. Here’s an entry from 1918: “L’homme qui s’endort, s’abandonne...; s’adapte en dedans, *s’adapte à n’être pas* et, comme il s’adaptait à être, à se séparer...; Consent à n’être que soi-même; change d’espèce” (Pl. VI, 867). The sleeper adjusts both to no longer being and to being only himself, to both “n’être pas” and “n’être que soi-même.” The ‘I’ who sleeps, then, is one who lacks distinction. ‘I myself become indistinct, I coincide with the world,’ Nancy describes. ‘I only exist in the effacement of our own distinction.’

¹⁴⁷ Nancy, p. 31.

¹⁴⁸ Blanchot uses nearly this exact language in his essay on night in *L’Espace littéraire*. We’ll turn to this essay more explicitly in the final portions of the current chapter when we consider ‘Agathe.’

¹⁴⁹ Nancy, p. 32.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34, my emphasis.

¹⁵¹ I borrow the expression from Schwenger, Peter. *At the Borders of Sleep: On Liminal Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

¹⁵² Cf. *Cahiers*, III, 801 (Pl. II, 21), *Ibid.*, XXIV, 641 (Pl. II, 187), *Ibid.*, III, 395 (Pl. II, 18), *Ibid.*, XXII, 674 (Pl. II, 184), *Ibid.*, VIII, 538 (Pl. II, 452-453), *Ibid.*, IV, 513 (Pl. II, 44), *Ibid.*, VII, 76 (Pl. II, 99), *Ibid.*,

only *in* the early hours before dawn, but about them—about those moments when the light was still gathering, barely visible, in some remote corner of the sky, and when the mind, new and unsure of itself, still acclimating to the climb, had only just begun to lift into awareness.

By approaching sleep as a liminality, then, the paradox of sleep is transformed from an inhospitable place (in which we *are* no longer) into a shifting placelessness which, in Valéry's hands, becomes an experience unto itself—a placelessness in which to *be*, even by way of our progressive absence. The same holds true for Valéry's poetry, moreover, for when we conceive of its liminality by way of sleep, its so-called "difficulty" becomes more than an obstacle to understanding. Indeed we don't quantify what we hear in his work; we don't measure our understanding—we step into it, and experience that 'prolonged hesitation' between sound and sense as a capacious taking-place: an event that fills the room with no-thing but a voice, lingering so beautifully shy of the thing it won't say.¹⁵³

I want to turn at long last to our texts that bear explicitly on liminality and/or sleep. Each will add a contour or two to the overall shape of the question of liminality, though I should say that none of the texts in question today end up resolving the matter of sleep once and for all. That lack of resolution shouldn't exactly come as any surprise, however. Unresolvedness is important for Valéry in general, not just when it comes to trying to watch sleep happening, but also when it comes to thinking *writ large*. He often writes about the experience of the mind as it grapples with what it can't quite finish distilling, and happily so. Here's an entry from the *Cahiers* from 1902, one through which we can frame our own entry into the texts:

Il ne faut pas se préoccuper des solutions mais des positions. Ne jamais se hâter de résoudre mais approfondir et déterminer la difficulté—la tailler comme un diamant—la faire éclatant et pure.¹⁵⁴

What does it mean to inhabit a 'position' within the elusive, rather than resolving it by way of solution? to 'determine' difficulty without resolving it? What does it look like for a problem to be both determined and unresolved at the same time? In this metaphor, it means cutting the problem into a prismatic version of itself. The angle of the cut of a diamond is clean and sure, and yet it's also the precision of the cut that un-resolves the light. Valéry's writings string up the problem of sleep like a prism, both determined (in shape) and undetermining (in effect), cut with a clarity that refracts these ideas into a moving, glittering, and unresolvable array (a qualitative multiplicity) of color.



IV, 513 (Pl. II, 44). Also cf. Poussant, Pierre. 'Le sommeil et le rêve.' *Fonctions de l'esprit*. Paris: Collection Savoir Hermann, 1983. pp. 81-102.

¹⁵³ Here I re-introduce something of our vocabulary from the previous chapter in order to signal the broader connections beginning to amass between the conceptions of form we discussed previously and the present discussion of liminal experience.

¹⁵⁴ *Cahiers* II. p. 574.

‘La ceinture’

Consider the poet’s approach to liminality in a poem like ‘La ceinture.’¹⁵⁵ Therein he reminds us to ‘cherish’ the sky, though he specifies that the only moment of the day when our eyes are capable of doing so, oddly enough, is *twilight*.

Quand le ciel couleur d’une joue
Laisse enfin les yeux le chérir...

(ll. 1-2)

It’s tempting to assume that the poet turns his attention to twilight for all the beauty it stands to offer—the slender, sidelong light, for instance, or the way its colors seem to shift and move (the way they ‘blush,’ “couleur d’une joue”) under the weight of an impending darkness (l. 1). It’s a moment full of ready-made appeal. And yet if the eyes of the poet are ‘allowed’ to cherish the sky at twilight, it’s not for what it offers us, the poem seems to say. If anything perhaps the opposite is true, for twilight is also the moment at which the sky (here the object of the poet’s attention) disappears into the darkness. It’s the moment at which the sky and its own disappearance, we might say, appear together.

We can only cherish what we stand to lose. To cherish something means holding onto it precisely by way of the loss it makes visible, or palpable in the object before us. It means touching the loss that our love bears quietly within itself. This explains why the poem is colored by such beautiful sorrow, I think, for the poet relates to the very thing he mourns—a sky colorfully and beautifully laden with its own disappearance. More than its inherent beauty, then, it’s the delicate liminality of the twilight sky (the fact that it visibly harbors its own disappearance within itself) that here nourishes the poet’s attention, and that becomes the basis for the experience he calls ‘cherishing.’

The irony of the poem is that this liminality, rather than posing an obstacle to the contemplative gaze of the poet, is paradoxically what allows his eyes their attachment. Twilight may suspend the sky between presence and absence, and yet it’s that very suspension that allows his eyes to cherish it. ‘La ceinture,’ then, doesn’t merely argue that it’s possible to relate to liminality as an object of attention; it also argues that liminality constitutes a unique form of experience unto itself.

What does this experience look like? What does it look like to cherish the sky at its ‘gilded point of perishing,’ “au point doré de périr” (l. 3)? What does it mean to hold close to something by way of the very dissolution in which it comes to an end?

To begin with, it’s a ‘mute’ pleasure, the poem tells us—

Devant le muet de plaisir
Qu’enchaîne une telle peinture, (...)

(ll. 5-6)

for in what possible voice could the pleasure of twilight speak? a voice suspended between absence and presence? Just as twilight invites us to *see* the sky, flush with its

¹⁵⁵ ‘La ceinture’ was first published in *Les Écrits Nouveaux* (IX) in March, 1922. It subsequently appeared in the first edition of *Charmes* (1922), and then again in the re-editions of the collection, notably those of 1929, 1938, and 1942. Few variations exist between publications.

own disappearance, so too are we asked to *listen* to its voiceless pleasure. Indeed if we cherish a loved-one without speaking, it's because our silence lends a voice to the absence we relate to so palpably in the person before us. The pleasure we hear in the twilight sky, similarly, is 'mute' in order that its absence can be heard.

Heard, then, but also seen, for by the second stanza, the liminal sky transpires yet again as a vision: a strange and mysterious shadow, an impending darkness, dancing "à libre ceinture" (l. 8).

(...)
Danse une Ombre à libre ceinture
Que le soir est près de saisir.

Cette ceinture vagabonde (...)

(ll. 7-9)

This is one of Valéry's strangest and most bewildering figures, admittedly. "Je n'ai pu comprendre cette pièce," Alain famously confesses. "Je ne sais point du tout qu'est cette ceinture." A 'freely-girdled shadow,' a 'wandering cincture,' dancing in the sky before us. Like many critics, Monic Robillard reads the "ceinture" as a figure for the muse, presumably who wears the belt as she dances in the sky. The poem, then, could be said to evoke her visitation to the mind of the poet, and in turn the state of "ravisement" in which she leaves him. Thus, an "exquise représentation de la vision poétique," she calls it.¹⁵⁶ For her part, Christine Crow emphasizes the sheer number of ways we can understand the figure. "The dancing shape is at the same time a woman, a cloud, a floating girdle or belt, an image of death, an erotic fantasy—all of these and none of them."¹⁵⁷

Rather than focusing on what it resembles, I propose considering quite simply the strangeness of the figure at its most basic. It's a 'belt,' which is to say a *line*. When worn, it grants distinction to the waist, and in turn, shape and definition to the body. By definition, it's a way of enclosing, encircling, and thereby circumscribing. This is a poem, however, about a sky poised between day and night, and that therefore *has* no line by which to define it. It's about our welcome inability to circumscribe. Where exactly do the sky's golden hues lapse into those of rosy pink? At what point will the night fully assume the light of day? Whence the adjectives that set loose the work of the cincture—"libre," "vagabonde." Here it dances rather than defines. It entices the mind as though there were something to delimit, a line to be drawn, and yet it allows the mind of the poet to seize nothing of the definition it seeks.

Think of the eponymous "ceinture," then, as a reflection of the behavior of the attentive mind, yearning to delimit (to discern) something in the shifting hues of the sky, in the seamless onset of darkness—that is, in the liminality whose ambiguity eludes every effort to 'cinch' it at the proverbial waist. That limit point between day and night is neither formless nor formed. Here it's a 'wandering'—a liminality that dances with the mind that looks to discern it.

'La ceinture' is the line that will not be drawn; instead, it's the distinction between day and night that will always wander, "vagabonde," "libre," though by so doing

¹⁵⁶ *Sous la plume de l'ange: de Balzac à Valéry*. Paris: Droz, 1997. p. 184.

¹⁵⁷ *Paul Valéry and the Poetry of Voice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982. p. 152.

will allow the poet an *intimacy* with the sky as never before. This is the crucial turn of the poem. For the fall of distinction between day and night is also, here, the progressive fall of the distinction between self and world. Indeed by the third and final quatrain, the poet tells us of being absorbed, drawn into intimacy, an “utmost bond with the twilight sky.”¹⁵⁸

Cette ceinture vagabonde
Fait dans le souffle aérien
Frémir le suprême lien
De mon silence avec ce monde (...)
(ll. 9-12)

The poet relates to twilight by finding himself—on this ‘aerial breath’—assumed into the event itself. He recognizes and experiences something of his own fragility in the dying of the day, as though the day’s ‘gilded point of perishing’ were also somehow his own (l. 3). It’s this additional liminality between self and object of attention that allows the “ceinture” to stand in for the work of the mind. The poem proves unique, in other words, in how it conceives of an attentive relationship to twilight. It shows us that the poet doesn’t simply sit back, contemplative, and attend to those shifting shadows as an elusive object of attention. When faced with a liminality that defies the kind of attention we’ve learned to apply to the world of objects and possessable things, the poem seems to say, *step into it*. For Valéry, there is no gazing at liminality without assuming it into the body, without finding it quivering in the silent bond of himself with the world. “Absent, présent...,” the final tercet reads, “Je suis bien seul, / Et sombre, ô suave linceul,” as though the twilight shroud were indeed his own, as though he were alone, enveloped in a bond so complete, so utmost that the distinction between himself and the liminality he attends to in the sky quietly falls away (ll. 13-14).

The lesson of the poem is that there’s something to be felt as much as seen here in the liminal. In order to relate to that liminality caught in the shifting hues of the sky, the poet needs to step into that liminality himself—to experience it as much as select it as an object of attention, and one by way of the other. If this poem exemplifies Valéry’s particular approach to the liminal, then, it does so by seeing the poet wading into the experiential plenitude (the waxing) of what is otherwise merely the waning of an object of attention. Here there’s something to attend to (with the body) even in the suspension by which no-thing is there to be seized, there to be possessed. The poem suggests that while twilight is a dwindling, a darkening, a narrowing, its liminality is also, oddly enough, radically and experientially *capacious*.¹⁵⁹



¹⁵⁸ I borrow the translation “utmost bond” from Turnage, William. “The Cinture.” *RAMIFY: The Journal of the Braniff Graduate School of Liberal Arts*. Dallas: University of Dallas, 2004. Web. 11 Oct. 2015.

¹⁵⁹ Recall Robertson’s definition: something that “furnishes hospitable conditions for entering and tarrying; it shelters without fastening; it conditions without determining.” *Nilling*. p. 12.

‘La fileuse’

What are the aspects of this capaciousness? What does it look like? ‘La fileuse’ is the first poem of the *Album des vers anciens*. It opens the collection with a young woman, listlessly spinning wool into thread as she’s lulled into dream, thread still in hand. Over the course of the poem, we watch as her head begins to sway, as her grip begins to loosen, and as the elements of the wakeful world around her become intertwined in the onset of sleep.

There are several important features of this poem that together provide a beautifully living image of the capacious bloom of sleep. The conceptual set-piece of the spinning wheel, however—rolling, plaiting, weaving—informs much of how these features unfold; the poem transpires as a complex interpenetration, a weaving together of its various elements. Thus a critical reading that moves linearly through its stanzas would only repeat the enlacing of its features. Accordingly, I approach the poem thematically rather than linearly in order that the conceptions of sleep out of which this poem is woven might appear more clearly in themselves.

La fileuse

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.

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, aux doux fuseaux 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.

As a point of entry into the poem, I want to offer an image of the scene by way of a painting that was sure to have inspired the poem. This is Gustave Courbet's *La fileuse endormie* (1852):



Fig. 2. Courbet, Gustave. *La fileuse endormie*. 1853. Oil on canvas. H. 0.89 ; L. 1.17 m.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Valéry first saw the painting at the Musée Fabre in Montpellier, and it was likely to have informed no small measure of the poem's inception.¹⁶⁰ Here it will help us situate and

¹⁶⁰ In "Valéry et Courbet: origine de 'La fileuse,'" Jean Dubu makes an historical argument for the link between Courbet's painting and Valéry's poem. Therein he provides a chronology of the paintings movements from Salon to museum, as well as several possible periods in which the painting could have been visited by Valéry. *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, no. 2 (April-June 1965). pp. 239-243. Web. 10 Oct. 2013. For his part, James Lawler also mentions the likelihood that the Courbet served as both "source and provocation" for the poem.

Moreover, Valéry would not have been unaware of the historical filiation of the motif. The image of a woman, asleep to her domestic task, was far from new by the mid-19th century. In her study on Courbet's work, Linda Nochlin identifies several 17th-century Dutch antecedents to the image (most notably Vermeer's *Girl Asleep*), along with a half dozen from the 19th century as well. Nochlin reminds us that spinning is traditionally associated with the domestic life of women. "A *sleeping* spinner, then," she

visualize several of the key features of the poem, but it will also (by contrast) throw into relief what makes Valéry's iteration of the motif unique in its approach to the matter of sleep. Consider how the poem shapes our understanding of the image.

To imagine Valéry standing before the painting is also to wonder what caught his eye. There are, after all, many ties of kinship between painting and poem—aspects of the painting he seems to have preserved by spinning into the lines of the alexandrine. There's an unmistakable languor in each of them, to begin with the most obvious carry-over—a “paresse / Angélique,” a lassitude (“Lasse”) that pulls her gently into slumber. In both, she nods into sleep with the weight of abandon (“sa tête petite s'incline,” “se dodeline,” ll. 6, 2). Beyond the centrality of the spinning wheel, there are also *flowers*—here in the painting, they lilt in a vase behind the wheel, leaning as if with the weight of the spinner's restfulness. In the poem, the flowers are given a space all their own—the ‘melodious garden’ out her window (a window Valéry adds to the scene, moreover).

I like to imagine, however, that it was more than the flowers, more than the diffuse, corporeal languor of the painting that caught and held Valéry's attention. I prefer to think it was the slender, filiform bit of thread resting quietly in her open grip which spoke to the mind of the poet above all else; that it spoke (visually, with its delicacy, with the movement its static image belies) of the sleep into which she falls, as though something about it were indeed sleep's perfect summary. It is, I want to imagine, Valéry's *punctum*, and as such, his (and our) point of entry into the matter of sleep. It's the place in the painting where the poem takes place.



Fig. 3. Detail from Courbet, Gustave. *La fileuse endormie*. 1853.

explains, “conveyed a sense of duty abandoned, womanly virtue along with it. A kind of slutishness, or at the very least, sexual availability has been thought of as a corollary of idleness in the moralizing imagery of Northern art since at least the sixteenth century.” Courbet's reinvention of the motif, however, departs from this moralizing tradition, Nochlin argues. It would have been received in far more banal ways by a contemporary viewer, especially one familiar with Courbet's particular brand of realism. “Unlike his seventeenth-century counterparts, the sensual availability, the self-abandonment implied by the motif of work neglected in the image of a young woman who falls asleep at her spinning wheel, is a source of delight, not a cause for reproach.” At minimum, the image would have been read a banal, realist scene of domestic life, and at its most fantastic, a scene that conjures the dreaminess, if not the romance of a story like *Sleeping Beauty*. Courbet. London: Thames & Hudson, 2007.

For Barthes, the *punctum* designates what is often an accidental or unintended detail of a photograph.¹⁶¹ This detail reaches out and seizes the attention of the viewer by ‘pricking’ us, sometimes violently, he explains—“piqûre, petit trou,... ce qui me point.”¹⁶² The reason I use the term to designate Valéry’s point of focus in the painting is that this little detail of the thread, as in the strict sense of the *punctum*, seems to ‘disturb’ the rest of the scene. It intrudes noisily into this otherwise silent image of a sleeping woman, mentally absented from her labor, enclosed within the quietude of her mind. The thread ‘punctures’ this sense of her absence. It disturbs the elsewhere in which she resides. It is, we might say, a ‘little hole’ in the sleep to which she seems to belong so entirely. Indeed Barthes will claim that there’s usually something ‘aberrant’ about the *punctum*; what’s ‘aberrant’ here (from *aberrare*, or to ‘wander away’¹⁶³) is that the thread invites our attention to wander from the absence that looms so imposingly, so completely in her closed eyes, or in the weight of her heavy head. It begins, with a small prick, to penetrate the spotless absence of her slumber.

The mere presence of the *punctum* should change our reading of the image, Barthes claims. For us here, as I like to imagine it was for Valéry, the detail of the thread challenges our sense that sleep is a totalizing absence, a there-beyond, the darkened realm below the line of wakeful reality. Like the poem, the thread is the argument for a strange and unlikely palpability in the dissolution of the wakeful world. She is, by virtue of that slender bit of thread, both carried along into sleep as well as paradoxically present to her progressive absence from the world of the wakeful. Indeed the poem transforms this little moment on her fingertips from some empty remnant of a wakefulness she once enjoyed into the very *feel* of disappearance itself, coursing through her listless fingers.

a. Sensation

One of the poem’s most important features, then, is that it should grant even the liminality of the onset of sleep such a *sensual* reality, that it should place disappearance itself (the waning of the conscious mind) there at our fingertips, “à ses doigts si faibles.”¹⁶⁴ I say this knowing well that the primacy of sensation in a poem about sleep should smack of an incongruity, for we tend to think about the onset of sleep as the dimming of awareness, and with that dimming of awareness, a dimming of the faculty of sense by which awareness situates itself in relation to the world. The disorientation we experience when leaving sleep behind, for instance—those moments in the early morning when the mind is still wrapped in wax-paper—often passes as sensation ill-embodied, as though the body had yet to acclimate to its own sense of feeling. In this perspective, the task of the waking mind, we think, is to re-adjust to the sensations that have long lain dormant throughout the night; we stretch as though to re-open a channel for the

¹⁶¹ A painted detail isn’t ‘accidental’ as it can be in a photograph, admittedly. It is, however, like the strict sense of the *punctum*, marginal. *La chambre claire: note sur la photographie*. Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1980. Print. p. 48.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁶⁴ The intersection of the mind, body, and sensual world is of course central to Valéry’s larger thinking. In the *Cahiers*, it represents an entire category of inquiry, and bears a single designation, ‘CEM,’ or ‘corps-esprit-monde.’ “L’esprit est un moment de la réponse du corps au monde.” See Judith Robinson-Valéry in *Reading Paul Valéry: Universe in Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. p. 82.

sensations that had long ceased to run their course through the limbs of the body, an atrophy whose force we've yet to reverse. 'La fileuse,' I suggest, countervails these assumptions by harmonizing sensation with the dissolution by which it ends.

Valéry isn't alone in granting a central role to sensation in the onset of sleep, and no less in the production of dream. Stepping back from the poem for a moment, in *L'énergie spirituelle*, published several years before the *Album*, Henri Bergson had argued for the porosity of the membrane separating our wakeful and sleeping lives.¹⁶⁵ He observes that against the darkness of sleep, for instance, as evidence of this porosity, bits of luminous, 'visual dust' often appear—colorful spots that bloom and move, that change in shape and nuance. The eye is awake to this visual dust even in sleep, for it's a sensation produced as much internally by the eye itself as by the intervention of stimuli from the world around us.¹⁶⁶ The ear is both receptive to outside sounds (even in the depths of sleep) and active with its own inner sensations, claims Bergson: "bourdonnement, tintement, sifflement—que nous distinguons mal pendant la veille et que le sommeil détache nettement."¹⁶⁷ When awake, the voice of the world around us speaks more forcefully than the world within. In sleep, however, the mind is at last disposed to attend to the inner world as well. Illness, infections, and the various discomforts of the body surface in sleep. Even the contractions of the lungs, the small events of the nervous system, moments that take place unnoticed in our waking lives, all have their place in the production of dream and the makings of sleep.¹⁶⁸

For Bergson, the primary sense at work in sleep is the visual, though the tactile can play its own role in shaping that and other senses as well. We read, for instance, that various pressures or strictures on the sleeping body, like a leg wrapped too tightly among the blankets, can "se transformer" into a vague sensation of inequality.¹⁶⁹ It was thanks to these material circumstances that a dreamer, Bergson recounts, "rêva un jour qu'il était devant deux piles de pièces d'or, que ces piles étaient inégales et qu'il cherchait à les égaliser."¹⁷⁰ In another example, Bergson relates that after waking from a dream of flight,

¹⁶⁵ Bergson, Henri. "Le rêve." *L'Énergie spirituelle*. Paris: PUF, 1919.

¹⁶⁶ This idea isn't new. Aristotle insists in his own right on the persistence of the wakeful world in sleep. "Some persons," he claims, "actually perceive sounds, light, savour, and contact: feebly, however, and, as it were, remotely. For there have been cases in which persons while asleep, but with eyes partly open, saw faintly in their sleep (as they supposed) the light of a lamp, and afterwards, on being awakened, recognized it as the actual light of the lamp." 'On Dreams,' trans. J. I. Beare, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. The Revised Oxford Translation, Vol. 1. Ed. Barnes, J. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984. pp. 734-735.

¹⁶⁷ Bergson, p. 88.

¹⁶⁸ Dream, like perception, claims Bergson, takes place at the confluence of sensation and memory. "Dans les deux cas il y a, d'un côté, des impressions réelles faites sur les organes des sens, et, de l'autre, des souvenirs qui viennent s'insérer dans l'impression et profiter de sa vitalité pour revenir à la vie" (100). He identifies a shared mechanism in both, and distinguishes them only by the "concentration" that obtains in one and not the other. "Le rêve est la vie mentale toute entière, moins l'effort de concentration" (104). Perception requires "un effort positif" that the sleeper no longer has the force to give, such that the passage into dream is not our entry into some strange and irrational other life (that other side of reason, the great realm of the unconscious) but all of life, simply minus the concentration (104). I see Valéry re-writing this famous Bergsonian definition of dream when he states in the *Cahiers* that "le rêve est une vieille bornée par l'impuissance. La veille est un rêve borné par la puissance—corrigé. Le présent est ce qui limite, corrige, ramène le rêve. La puissance est ici la possibilité de montages. (1927-1928, XII, 501).

¹⁶⁹ Bergson, p. 90.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

or simply of levity, the sleeper will realize that his feet had lost “leurs points d’appui” in the physical world.¹⁷¹ The dream ‘develops’ these sensations—as though the state of sleep were the chemical solution in a photographic procedure, as though dream were a sensation blooming in a photographic tray, there in the darkroom of the mind.

Valéry’s ‘La fileuse’ is full of transformations of this kind—moments when the sensations of the material world are spun (or ‘developed’) into something new in the unfurling of sleep. Often this takes place through a blurring of the faculties: aural and visual, visual and tactile, etc., just as Bergson’s visually resplendent piles of gold begin as too little circulation in the leg. In the opening stanza of the poem, for instance, we read of a swaying, melodious garden,

où le jardin mélodieux se dodeline
(l. 2)

Through Bergson, we can imagine that the garden she dreams about is melodic for everything she once heard in the visual splendor of the actual garden out her window—half notes of lavender, a staccato of color, buds of melody, we might imagine, all woven together into an aurally luxuriant vision, animated by the ‘swaying’ of her head as she nods into sleep.

Sleep disturbs and revises the basic workings of sensation, then. In this example, as it is for Bergson, it’s as though the force of sleep manages to detach the melodic from the melody, red from the rose, allowing qualities and objects and behaviors to intermingle (to be transformed) in ways that our wakeful state will not allow for. The ‘melodious garden’ figures the very possibility, then, of detaching from the world of objects in the onset of sleep, though remaining attached (liminally) to the abiding qualities of those objects, to carry them along with us into dream.¹⁷² Consider the line in which we read of how weary the young woman becomes of spinning this “chevelure.” Notice how and where the *quality* of the thread falls in relation to the thread itself—

Lasse, ayant bu l’azur, de filer la câline
Chevelure (...)
(ll. 4-5)

It’s not for nothing that the poet enjambs lines four and five, leaving the adjective “câline” to float at the end of the verse, lying in wait for a noun to qualify (the eventual “Chevelure” of line five). Critic Daniel Bougnoux, in his incredibly meticulous analysis of the poem, highlights the fruitful ambiguity of the enjambment. “Tenue en fin de vers ou de souffle avant le rejet du substantif, comme on tient une note en musique, l’épithète semble un instant qualifier le sujet, la fileuse, plus que son objet la chevelure.”¹⁷³ While I agree that the *rejet* is incredibly consequential, I think it invites a slightly different

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² This is also, of course, the premise of the famous opening scene of ‘Combray,’ in which the young Marcel finds himself (for the better part of fifty pages) poised somewhere between the world of the wakeful and the world of dream—in which the trappings and sensations and images of one are slipping back and forth into the other.

¹⁷³ “Le poète au rouet (sur un incipit générateur de Valéry).” *Cahiers du XXIème siècle*. Vol. 2 (1991). p. 90. Web Mar. 2014.

reading. For the enjambment has us reading of her spinning “la câline” before we read of her spinning “la câline / Chevelure,” as though sensation were set adrift from the object to which it’s conventionally moored, as though what she spins were less an object with qualities (as it would be to the wakeful mind) than a quality all on its own—the spinning not of fibers, but of softness, of coaxing-ness itself, “filer la câline.” The quality becomes the very ‘object’ of her attention here (rather than another attribute for the spinner herself, as Bougnoux suggests), even as the object in which it’s embodied is momentarily suspended both poetically across the line break and experientially in the liminal threshold of sleep. How can sensation possibly take place even in the dwindling of our conscious and cognitive relationship to the world of objects, we ask? Here, he answers, by transpiring (as if) independently of the object on which it only wakefully depends.

What exactly happens, however? How do these unmoored sensations nourish the work of dream? How do they behave in the ‘porosity’ Bergson spoke of? In the third stanza of ‘La fileuse,’ the poet tells us that both the trees and the swirling of the air outside become a living ‘source’ for the dream that transpires in her mind.

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

(ll. 7-9)

Here the ‘source’ of dream is suspended, “suspendue au jour.” By this we’re given to understand that the material world of sensation and image is dispersed, no longer belonging solely to the material world in whose objects it so conventionally obtains, nor solely as something dis-embodied, or simply imagined. To find the “arbuste et l’air pur” suspended in the onset of sleep is indeed to see them transformed into a ‘living spring’ of dream. It’s only when sensation becomes “suspendue” in the liminal onset of sleep that it can ‘water’ (“arrose”) the flowering gardens of her dream, not with *what* she senses (for she’s slowly leaving that material world of sensation behind), but with “ses pertes de fleur”—that is, nourishing her dreams with the very ‘loss’ of flowers, the very waning of the flowers in which the garden blooms.

If sensation is transformed in the onset of sleep, then, it doesn’t take place by way of an addition, you’ll notice; this isn’t melody added to the garden, or an image, *added* to a melody. Rather it’s by way of a loss (an object or quality falling shy of itself) that this transformation occurs. Notice the larger evolution of the stanza—how terms of suspension, loss, and dissolution (“suspendue,” “pertes,” “oisive”) combine almost seamlessly with terms of growth, onset, and blooming (“vive,” “arrose,” “jardin,” and “fleur”). Something flowers, in other words, even in the suspending of the material world of sensation in the onset of sleep. With this notion we move closer to the second main feature of the poem—one that, like the primacy of sensation, we can also *see* in Courbet’s painting by way of Valéry’s poem. In this scene of waning attention, we’ll see, is a waxing of an alternative economy of act and action.

b. (In)Action

This isn't the only iconic "chevelure" in the poetry of the period, after all, nor is Valéry the only poet to have granted such pride of place to the work of its 'undulation.' Recall the poet who, now canonically, once prized out the sweltering heat of Africa, the languors of Asia—*bref*, 'a whole world, distant and defunct'—from within the depths of a lock of a lover's hair.

(...) Pour peupler ce soir l'alcove obscure
Des souvenirs dormant dans cette chevelure,
Je la veux agiter dans l'air comme un mouchoir!
(ll. 3-5)¹⁷⁴

Baudelaire's poem 'La chevelure' is about the confluence of memory and sensation, specifically those memories lying enclosed within the material world, waiting to be unearthed. Notice the fundamental departure by Valéry. Whereas the Baudelairean poet *wrests* those sleeping memories from the "chevelure" ("Je la veux *agiter*"), the Valéryan spinner joins them in sleep—she *rests*, and in her rest, the memory of the spiraling air (l. 10) joins the spinning of the wheel, and the garden is remembered as a melody (l. 2).

The juxtaposition of these two poems reveals contrasting economies of action. In Baudelaire, the conscious and acting poet wrests or wrestles those 'sleeping' memories from the material world. The poet's effort is also an exertion, a will; a deliberate and knowing act on the part of the poet. Whereas in Valéry, the spinner is poised at the *end* of action, at the end of production, and at the dimming of her conscious agency. Here in 'La fileuse,' nothing is wrested from the "chevelure." It's in her lassitude that memory and sensation bloom in sleep.¹⁷⁵

This alternative economy of action and production begins even in advance of the poem itself, in the epigraph. "*Lilia, ... neque nent*," it reads, a line Valéry adapts from the Book of Matthew. The full passage reads: 'Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin.'¹⁷⁶ Here an experiential economy of 'growth' (the lilies) is contrasted with one of labor (the production of thread). With its premise of the waning mind, and the end of production, the poem invites us to enter into an poetic economy built out (or by way) of dissolution.

This shift is as challenging as it is profound. It works against our expectations, for aren't we accustomed to poetry requiring will and strain? Do poets not wrest meaning from the world, from the "chevelure," and poring over the lines of a poem, do we not wrest meaning from the page? Poetry *is* an exertion, we think; it's a form of toiling, "agiter." And yet it's here in 'La fileuse' that we begin to find that *ease*, too, has its place in poetry. That we might alight on meaning not by wresting it from language, but by letting-go; that the poet might happen on some bloom of meaning not by toiling, but by attending to the very coming-to-an-end of our conscious and deliberate efforts of mind. 'Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin.'

¹⁷⁴ Baudelaire, Charles. *Les fleurs du mal*. Paris: Gallimard, 1999. p. 45.

¹⁷⁵ I hope this notion resonates with our discussion of 'La dormeuse,' in which we as readers aren't asked to awaken anything in the poem; rather, form wakes, and our eyes are open.

¹⁷⁶ *New Jerusalem Bible*. Book of Matthew. 6. 28-29.

Indeed it's not for nothing that Valéry chooses to open his collection of poetry with a scene in which the mind drifts into sleep, after all, away from the task at hand. By so doing he invites us into this strange and unlikely economy of act and action. Valéry did write a poem about a bee sting, after all—a poem that pricks, that jolts the mind to attention. He could have begun there. Instead, we open the collection to a young woman whose very weariness isn't simply an end, but a dissolution in which something begins, something flowers. The lesson here is that the 'commodity' produced by the spinner (not unlike the poem *qua* product, or commodity) isn't spun, but grown: here, by the gentle, as if effortless letting-go in the onset of sleep.¹⁷⁷

There is something to be seized in this letting-go, a way of situating ourselves within the very drift that unseats us. This is what sleep teaches us. It's also what the poet learned when faced with that "muet de plaisir" at twilight—a sky that proffers itself to us in silence, through a letting-go of the voice by which it might speak. Like the spinner, and in turn, like the lilies that "toil not, neither do they spin," something blooms and grows in the waning of active creation, and as readers we're invited to settle into that liminality.¹⁷⁸

c. 'Fil,' 'file,' 'filer,' ...

The last feature of the poem I'd like to distill from its lines is also its most salient. The poem is marked by an extraordinary continuity of movement. There's a *steadiness* to the unfurling that transpires both in and *as* the poem. There's an identification of one with the other, argues Bougnoux, echoing the famous reading of the poem by Leo Spitzer. "La fileuse déroule sa laine comme le poète le texte que nous lisons, et l'on vérifie que la laine et le texte s'épuisent en effet simultanément."¹⁷⁹ To Spitzer's observation, Bougnoux adds another layer of identification, this time one that transpires homonymically: the spinner "file la laine" as much as *file l'haleine*, he argues, such that the poem carries both the movement of the thread and the movement of sleep within itself. Indeed I also see Valéry outsourcing the steady rhythm of sleep's encroachment onto the lines of the poem, as in line six, I would add—"Elle songe, et sa tête petite

¹⁷⁷ Valéry isn't the only poet to find something blooming in the waning of active creation, moreover. For his part, in 'La Musique et les Lettres,' Mallarmé declares that we're captives of a world in which "certes, n'est que ce qui est." Our only way of acting upon a world that contains no "au-delà," a world limited to what *is* and to which "on n'ajoutera pas," is to catch at new relations: "tout l'acte disponible reste de saisir les rapports, rare ou multiples." The role of the poet is to perceive the relationships of the world that escape us ("échappant"), those that touch not what we notice but what we *neglect*: "tel qu'il frôle notre négligence." As such, the kind of creation that poetic practice represents must be understood not in the positive sense of going beyond (by adding to) what *is*, but is here framed as a leaving behind of the world as it commonly appears. Creation is a kind of "négligence" that we enact upon the world in order to seize those new relations: a kind of practice that is as productive as it is passively receptive, as writerly as it is readerly.

¹⁷⁸ There is an echo of this tension between active production and passive growth that emerges in Valéry's essay on sea shells, moreover. Therein, the mind is inclined to conceive of the spinning helixes of sea shells with the logic of a maker—how does one construct, or 'make' these shapes? "Faire" is the first and most human of questions, he suggests. Rather, the work done over the course of the essay is to recalibrate the mind to the natural 'formation' of the shells, a more difficult task. "L'homme et la coquille." *OC I*. p. 890.

¹⁷⁹ Cited in Dubu, p. 241.

s'incline," wherein the dieresis lends its rhythm to the passage of the wheel, the unraveling of thread, and the steady unfurling of sleep itself.¹⁸⁰

The continuity of movement we find in sleep, then, here takes place as a continuity of language. Throughout the poem we oversee a set of morphological transformations: nouns, verbs, participles, etc. as if spun from the root *fil-*, and as the poem unfolds (as "le songe se dévide"), we oversee these various morphological evolutions: *fileuse* (noun), *filer* (infinitive), *file* (present tense verb), *fil* (noun), *filée* (past participle), *filais* (imperfect verb). The recurring use of the root word draws us into the transformations of the poem, into its essential continuity, like a lullaby.¹⁸¹

Filer is a verb of production, to "transformer en fil; une matière textile."¹⁸² But it's also simply a verb of change: to unwind, to unfurl, evenly and continuously, like a bird song, "filant sa note si pure, si pleine" (as Balzac once spoke of the nightingale). In the proverbial phrase "le temp file," it's the passage of time itself that unwinds, unfurls, evenly and continuously. Here in the poem, all of these valences are woven together, such that its most obvious reference is to the spinning of that cloudy bloom of wool into thread, but no less to a prolongation of movement: a drawing-out of time, imagery, and sensation. The poem sets up a delicate set of slippages between these elements, and we watch as they lengthen into one another: the drone of the wheel, the drunken sway of the body, the weariness of her heavy head, nodding into sleep; from the feel of the thread to the echoes of its delicacy in the slender stem of the 'splendid rose' (l. 12), leaning with its 'starry grace,' with its restlessness in the 'vagabond' wind (l. 11), the way its petals seem to curtsy as it leans, not unlike the spinner nodding into sleep; and from its delicacy to the movement of its weightlessness across the sleeping fingers of the spinner, back to the roll of the mechanical wheel, turning out and away, and onto the dying of the light beyond her window... The poem unwinds, unfurls, over and over again, such that by the end of the poem, each element (image, movement, sensation, state of mind) seems to have proceeded from one another in an endless series of transformations, gently woven together, *filé(s)*. To my mind, this is one of Valéry's finest figures, for it conjures quite easily the work of the poem itself, whereby "work" I understand (I nearly *feel*) the unfurling of language—the way it slips through the spinner's fingers as easily as the

¹⁸⁰ In his short, incredibly beautiful essay on lullabies, Nancy reminds us that the verb "s'endormir" propagates a dangerous illusion: that falling asleep takes place all on its own. Rather, Nancy suggests that sleep is something that always befalls us, that *makes us* fall into ourselves. We are lulled into sleep *by* sleep, he claims. We are carried into sleep by a cadence we don't even notice, for that lull (that cadence) is the rocking onset of absence, "la cadence de l'absence qui pénètre dans la présence," and like a tide, he explains, "lèche le sable et à chaque retour l'imprègne un peu plus avant, déposant des flocons d'écume sommeilleuse." The cadence of sleep, this force, he explains, is rhythmic, regular, and repetitive, just like a lullaby, and here, just like the rhythmic dieresis of l. 6. For Nancy, sleep *is* its own lullaby. Rocking lulls us to sleep because sleep itself, "dans son essence, est lui-même un bercement, non pas un état stable et immobile." It's a matter of high and low, right and left, he explains, "des grandes symétries, dissymétries et alternances qui gouvernent les cristaux, les marées, les saisons, les cycles des planètes et de leur satellites," to which we might add the there-and-back of the spinning wheel, throwing itself out and away, the drone of its motion, the steady rhythms of its passing.

¹⁸¹ Lawler also remarks on the repetition of words: "Sense impressions are mingled, a few words insistently repeated, and a series of verbs establishes the single scheme of sleep." "Lucidité, Phœnix de ce Vertige," *MLN* Vol. 87, No., 4 French Issue: Paul Valéry (May, 1972), p. 618. Web. 2015.

¹⁸² "Filer." *Le Robert*. 1997. Web 1 Jan. 2016.

reader's eye slips from line to line, or the reader's voice which remembers the feel of sounds only just left behind.

In 'La fileuse,' sleep is a lengthening force, though by that I don't mean that it's anything we might measure. Rather I mean that in sleep's progressive onset we find a qualitative proliferation (a drawing-out, a bloom) of sensations, images, and states of mind. It's the poem's great achievement, I argue, to have placed us not simply in relation to those qualities, but within their very *unfolding*. By so doing, the poem also reminds us how easy it is to casually overlook the event of that unfolding, the happening of what happens.

Indeed the opening tercet, considered in isolation, shows us what it looks like for the mind to overlook these qualitative nuances. It reduces the unfolding of sleep to a clear and simple chronology, a movement from here to there. Notice the clarity of its spatial and temporal deitics :

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

(ll. 1-3)

'Seated,' she's there before us, being lulled away by the movement of the wheel, droning on in the present tense ("qui ronfle"), and by the end of the stanza (a mere three lines into the poem), the past tense proleptically announces that she's already fallen asleep: "Le rouet ancien qui ronfle l'a grisée," (l. 3). The entire temporal arch of her fall is chronologically circumscribed within the space of its three opening lines.

The rest of the poem, however, contrary to this initial glimpse at sleep, will take what transpires in this opening tercet and re-write its central event, though this time, by lengthening the fall into a qualitative proliferation—by ushering us into the very happening of sleep. To refine our vocabulary a bit more philosophically, we can animate these ideas through Bergson's example of a shooting star, lacerating the night sky. There's the space the shooting star traverses, and then the action itself by which that space is traversed.¹⁸³ The former is its 'movement,' he explains; the latter is its *mobility*. As Suzanne Guerlac summarizes, "Whereas the distance traveled can be measured in space—we can map out the successive positions of the trajectory—the mobility itself is felt as intensity. It performs the synthesis of the positions moved through."¹⁸⁴

In the first tercet, to rephrase, sleep is a movement. We move from point A to point B, from wakefulness into slumber. Sleep is a trajectory. In the eight stanzas that follow, however, sleep is offered to us as a 'mobility.' In its lengthening, its drawing-out, we're swept into a flow of time that's difficult (if not impossible) to measure, for it's a flow closer to duration than simple time, less a movement we might circumscribe than a mobility. To look back on the experience of sleep evoked in the poem is to see it not as a space we traverse, but as an intensity we feel. The shift from the first stanza to the rest of the poem is the shift from what Bergson would call a distinct multiplicity to a confused multiplicity—from a liminality we measure as the in-between of a movement from one point to the next, to a liminality we feel in all its experiential capaciousness.

¹⁸³ "Il y a deux éléments à distinguer dans le mouvement, l'espace parcouru et l'acte par lequel on le parcourt, les positions successives et la synthèse de ces positions." Bergson, p. 55.

¹⁸⁴ *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006. p. 68.

To think ‘durationally’ about the liminality of sleep, then, is to see ‘La fileuse’ as a kind of temporal synthesis, distinct from the narrative time we’re offered in its opening stanza. Past, present, and future seem to speak synchronously here, as though the poem allowed us to hold in mind (all at once) the interpenetration of the various parts of sleep’s onset, and by so doing, allowed us to experience the richness of its intensities, the proliferation of its experiential qualities, its *duration*. The poem, then, could be said to mimic the temporal synthesis of consciousness, transforming the distinct parts of a movement into a mobility, offering us an experience of sleep we’re asked to feel rather than measure—or like a melody, perhaps, to simply *listen to*. “Ne pourrait-on pas dire,” Bergson asks of melody, “que, si ces notes se succèdent, nous les apercevons néanmoins *les unes dans les autres*, et que leur ensemble est comparable à un être vivant, dont les parties, quoique distinctes, se pénètrent par l’effet même de leur solidarité?”¹⁸⁵ The onset of sleep may seem like a movement *through* or across liminality, though the achievement of the poem is to have offered these elements to us “*les unes dans les autres*,” as an ensemble (*as a living mobility*) ‘comparable to a living being,’ the quiet melody of sleep itself.



‘La soirée avec Monsieur Teste’

Moving forward into the next, sleepy text, we should retain this attunement to the duration of sleep—that is, this relationship to the onset of sleep not as a chronology we map from beginning to end, but as a mobility that reveals a heterogeneity of nuances, qualities, and intensities, and that we are, in some way, asked to both feel and *witness*. Indeed what’s so strange about Valéry’s work is that he so often places himself in the position of a witness; or us, as readers, in that position along with him. We watch as watching comes to an end in the onset of sleep, either in ourselves or in the Other lying before us. What does it mean, however, to witness such a thing as sleep? to behold its liminality?

Valéry’s legendary prose work, *La soirée avec Monsieur Teste*, and the lesser known, largely unfinished text he eventually entitled “Agathe” both speak to the desire to bear witness to this “unwitnessable drama,” as critic Simon Wortham once put it.¹⁸⁶ Liminality is an essential feature of both of these texts, but also, I argue, central to the way we approach them critically. Recall that Monsieur Teste was originally conceived as a novel, and that it was meant to unfold over the course of three chapters. The *Soirée* ends with a scene of sleep—a scene of vigil, in fact, in which the narrator sits with our eponymous hero as he slips into slumber, a witness to the dwindling drama of sleep. “Agathe” was meant to be the second chapter to the *Soirée*. She was to begin where the *Soirée* ends.¹⁸⁷ So much of my reading depends on what was once projected to be the only nominal division between these two texts, and it’s somewhat surprising that the little

¹⁸⁵ *Essai*, p. 75. Cited in Guerlac, p. 66.

¹⁸⁶ Wortham’s study is largely concerned with the ties of kinship between sleep and death as an “unwitnessable drama,” specifically as it plays out in Blanchot’s *L’arrêt de mort*. I apply it here to speak to the paradox that preoccupies both Nancy and Blanchot.

¹⁸⁷ Like the *Soirée*, “Agathe” was begun in 1898 and taken up from time to time over the next several decades. It once bore the title “Manuscrit trouvé dans une cervelle.” *OC II*, p. 1387.

criticism that does exist on “Agathe” specifically should have thought so little about that continuity. “Le sommeil continue n’importe quelle idée,” the *Soirée* ends, strangely enough—a coming-to-an-end that does so by declaring a continuity, an endless suite. (Indeed it also conjures the continuity we found in ‘La fileuse.’) To my mind, like the faint borders of sleep, this division should be read as a liminal one, that the two texts should be allowed to lengthen into one another, like notes in a melody. The liminal connection *between* these two works, then, is central to our approach to the conceptions of the liminality of sleep we find *in* the works themselves.

In order to step into that threshold, however, we need to begin with the *Soirée*. If anyone is to shed light on the subtle onset of sleep—its duration—it’s Monsieur Teste. And in order to understand the perspective on sleep he can provide, we first have to know a bit more about him.

A triumphant feat of the imagination, Teste is an attempt to spend the day in the company of the mind itself, I like to think. He is both the most conventional of fictional characters, then, and the most problematic of them all. He eats, works, sleeps; his apartment is redolent of mint and bitter cigars. He has all the trappings a fiction, and yet he is also none other than the very exertions of the mind—its turns, transformations, and struggles. He is a figuration of the very work of consciousness itself, Valéry explains. And as such, it’s the very impossibility of truly conceiving of Teste as any one person—the struggle of apprehending thought *per se*—that lends him “une sorte de vie,” the energy of his only ever potential existence. “Pourquoi Monsieur Teste est-il impossible? *C’est son âme que cette question.*”¹⁸⁸

Marvelously, far from constituting an obstacle to our understanding, the effort with which we conceive of Teste is what brings him alive as a figure.¹⁸⁹ “Ce personnage de fantaisie... a vécu d’une certaine vie— que ses réticences plus que ses aveux ont induit quelques lecteurs à lui prêter.”¹⁹⁰ If we lend him this ‘life,’ we do so not for what he offers us (“ses aveux”)—we don’t compile him as a series of traits, as we do for most fictional characters—but for what he withholds (“ses reticences”). His ability to stand as a figure for pure mental effort, and in turn, for the potential of the human mind, is predicated upon our inability to fully apprehend him. Teste is a function of his being-read, of his ability to resist us. “Je dis que le problème de cette existence suffit à lui donner une sorte de vie.”¹⁹¹

More than the nature of Teste as a figure for the mind, however, it’s also his predilections as a fictional character that make him so relevant to the question of sleep. He is uninterested in what he already knows, we read. “Que m’importe ce que je sais fort bien?” The only thing that attracts him is the relative ease or difficulty with which he comes to know it. Thus, he loves change and movement; combinations and flux, he tells us. I imagine he would read ‘La fileuse’ with only the greatest of pleasure. He devotes himself entirely to the manner or form of what takes place, unconcerned by what these operations produce. Rather he seeks to inhabit the operations themselves.

¹⁸⁸ Paul Valéry. *Monsieur Teste*. Paris: Gallimard, 1946. p. 34.

¹⁸⁹ Valéry is clearly a fan of these happy reversals—the sky is at its most living, most beautiful when suspended in twilight. Twilight isn’t an obstacle, however. It simply rewrites our sense of presence. Teste is much the same—he is the promise of something new and powerful, but only through the impossibility he constitutes.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

To understand Teste as a man of this unique brand of attention, then, is also to understand him as a man of ‘degree’—“Je mets un soin extreme à mesurer ses *degrés*, à ne pas m’attacher.”¹⁹² He attends only to the proportions of the world, to the ‘extent’ to which something is or is not. Unmoved by its fiscal realities, to provide the most beautiful of Valéry’s examples, he follows the fluctuations of the stock market with great care (the silent music of its vicissitudes), and at times reads its numbers aloud, like poetry: “huit cent dix millions soixante quinze mille cinq cent cinquante,” all the while following nothing of its calculations, he says. If Teste makes for an excellent sleeper, it’s because the kind of attention he represents is (as if) made for such a peculiar and elusive ‘object’ of attention as sleep. He’s predisposed to relate to sleep the way he does to the fluctuations of the stock market. It’s the mobility (that silent music) that intrigues him above all else.

The *Soirée* ends with a beautiful scene of sleep that’s full of just such attention, and yet it’s only when set against an earlier scene in the story that attention come sharply into focus. Thus, in what follows, I want to draw out the continuity between these two moments. Neither takes more than a few words to mention in the narrative, and yet there’s so much to be heard in them. In both, strangely enough, something red happens.

a. Red Attention

Teste brings the narrator to the theater for an evening performance. We find them standing at the edge of a loge, peering out at the great bursts of brilliance in the auditorium below, when the narrator, for whatever reason, somewhat unexpectedly, tells us that Teste was red. “Il était rouge.”¹⁹³ The room itself is a “grandeur” of red and gold, and so on one hand, we can understand this reddening as simply the glow of his environment, the light around him, washing up on the surface of the body. And yet we’re given to understand that this reddening is more than simply atmospheric. It’s a distinctly corporeal happening, a reddening from within.

It’s not for nothing that at the moment Teste goes flush with heat and color, his attention begins to swell. Through a treasury of Mallarméan imagery, we follow the surge of Teste’s attention. He alights on bare arms, warm bodies, and the rustling of figures in the fading half-light of the auditorium, a glimpse here and there of woman’s flesh, smooth as a pebble. These are large, vaporous spaces. The frothing light appears to be stirred by the living fans of the audience. The thrum of the crowd seems to ‘hold’ him. There from his perch, he sees a young man in the distance, then a woman, then a group of figures, dozens of small faces (as if glowing) in the upper galleries. He breathes in the whole of the scene, the theater in its entirety: the glowing stupor of the audience, transfixed by the actual spectacle to which Teste pays no mind at all. Indeed, *he doesn’t watch the performance*. Instead he attends only to the attention of the audience—a *swell*, the poet tells us, that takes place in inverse proportion to the dimming of the lights in the auditorium. Attention waxes as the light wanes, and in concert with all of this, there in his loge, the face of Teste: reddening along with the environment.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

The spectacle to which Teste so lovingly devotes his attention, then, isn't a spectacle of things, but of *degrees* (or qualitative nuances). Here, the object of his attention is neither the light nor the performance on stage that the light is meant to illuminate. Instead, it's the very foaming of the light: the scale, or extent of its taking-place.¹⁹⁴ Not the fans held by the women in the audience, but the quivering of those fans in the vapor; the surges (of color), the flares (of laughter in the pit below).

b. Red Sleep

Later, at the end of the evening, as Teste begins to drift off into slumber, the narrator remarks that his reddening hand was already asleep. "Sa main rougissante dormait déjà."¹⁹⁵ Here the flush of sleep echoes the flush of attention: a palor-gone-crimson that defines one as much as the other. As in the scene at the theater, it's this *going-flush* that most interests me, even though the directions of these two moments diverge. The flush of attention is an onset, while the flush of sleep is a dissolution, and yet they're brought together here within a single experience. Flushness is another way of saying degree. It's a mobility—a rush, a blooming—of blood in the body, the index of a subsurface shift of forces, the mark of the extent to which something transpires.

In many ways, then, we can read the attentive scene at the theater as both anticipating and providing a way of conceptually navigating the weary scene of sleep at the triumphant end of the *Soirée*. We're invited to understand (to experience) the latter through the former. The shared phenomenology of these two scenes suggests that the mind attending to the blooming attention of the audience (to the swells of light, the flares of laughter, *bref*, the phenomenality of the phenomena taking place in the auditorium) is not dissimilar from the mind attending to the blooming of sleep, the very swell of absence.

At its most fundamental the parallel Valéry constructs invites us to attend to sleep as the spectacle we never get around to actually watching, as Teste does (or doesn't) in the theater. He's there in the loge, gazing out into the brilliance, attentive to the blooming around him, unconcerned with the performance itself, just as later, bundled up in bed, there's no spectacle to watch other than the blooming of the very attention by which it might be seen, though never will. Sleep, in other words, is a theater in which there's everything to attend to (the blooms of light, the flares of laughter, the swell of attention itself) and yet no performance we'll ever get around to watching.



Back at Teste's apartment after the theater, and after the late-night cigars and conversation, Teste makes a curious appeal. He asks the narrator to stay with him as he falls asleep: "Restez encore," he pleads, "vous ne vous ennuyez pas. Dans peu d'instants

¹⁹⁴ This passage in particular should evoke the sea-like language of the first tercet in 'La dormeuse,' as well as our discussion of eventuality not as *what* transpires but its sheer taking-place. Notice here how this notion acquires a spectacular dimension—lights and flares and theatricality.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

je dormirai. Vous prendrez la bougie pour descendre.”¹⁹⁶ It’s an odd request, for the narrator isn’t asked to dress him for bed, or to physically help him into the blankets. At most he’s asked to simply *remain*, to linger a bit longer with the candlelight as Teste mumbles his way into sleep. As such, I like to think of this scene of sleep as a kind of vigil (from the Latin *vigilare*, or ‘to awake’) and by vigil I mean those quiet moments of attention in which the narrator is wakeful to the onset of sleep, in which he lends his presence to impending absence.

Once Teste is asleep, the narrator slips away with the candlelight. And yet this isn’t the end of the story in any conventional sense. Consider the final lines of the narrative: “Le sommeil continue n’importe quelle idée...,” we read as Teste trails off. Here the narrator’s wakeful attention (this vigil) is being continued, prolonged; it’s being drawn into the depths of sleep. What results isn’t simply an ending, but the beginning of ‘Agathe’—the voice of the mind of Teste being drawn into dimness, as though illuminated by the last, drawn-out vestiges of the narrator’s watchful vigil, the voice of a mind speaking its own dissolution.¹⁹⁷

Notice that the binaries of internal/external, subject/object, but no less that of wakefulness/sleep have been consistently challenged by Valéry’s texts. Here the narrator witnesses the onset of sleep from the outside looking in, though when we see the *Soirée* as continuous with ‘Agathe,’ we realize that it’s the narrator’s wakeful vigil that Teste seems to draw into sleep with him—a scene of interiority rendered as an external drama, witnessed by an external party. In ‘La fileuse,’ the poem situates us as readers at the uncertain limit point between a narrator-like perspective from which we gaze on the woman as she falls asleep and a perspective that’s also palpably subject to the distortions and transformations of the mind in its dissolution, the garden, for instance, that ‘sways’ in our own eyes as much as in the sleeper’s. Or in ‘La ceinture,’ in which gazing upon liminality from the outside means, for the poet, stepping into that liminality. ‘Agathe,’ therefore, is the logical extreme of this blurred boundary between what we witness and *that* we witness, between spectator and the something-seen. The text is the voice of the mind in the deepest regions of sleep: it attempts to evoke an act of bearing witness, the very dissolution of the possibility of doing so, and the sleep that is the least likely object of attention.

In a letter to Gide, Valéry explains that at Agathe’s inception, he began to imagine a woman in a prolonged state of catalepsy, or catatonia, “une de ces femmes qui dorment deux, trois ou dix ans de suite,” and that he wondered what would transpire in those years if no new thought were introduced into the sleeping mind.¹⁹⁸ In practice, he appeals to a vocabulary that he admits is a little less than felicitous, and meaningfully so. Attending to what the mind carries into sleep means studying what he refers to as “l’appauvrissement

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁹⁷ In her article, “Agathe, ou le manuscrit trouvé dans une cervelle: Genèse et exégèse d’un conte de l’entendement,” critic Nicole Celeyrette-Pietri address the material circumstances of the text’s inception, as well as its original conception as a suite to the *Soirée*. She neglects, however, the conceptual continuity with the end of the *Soirée*. *Archives des Lettres Modernes*. (195) Série Paul Valéry. p. 4. Web 2015. As Jarrety puts it, ‘Agathe’ is “le discours d’un Je qui en dit la présence intérieure, et cette puissance du Sujet est ce qui fait d’Agathe une œuvre doublement jumelle de *La Jeune Parque* et de *La Soirée*.” *Valéry devant la littérature: Mesure de la limite*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991. p. 272.

¹⁹⁸ *OC II*. p. 1387.

(ou autre chose) du donné avec lequel elle s'est endormie.”¹⁹⁹ That is, studying the impoverishing, the ‘growing-slight,’ “ou autre chose,” and it’s precisely this ‘something else’ that Valéry will pursue over the course of the text—the thoughts, sounds, and images of the day carried, or lengthened so deep into the abyss of night that they begin to ‘thin,’ to weaken.

Just as ‘La fileuse’ and the *Soirée* uncover an experiential capaciousness to the dissolution of the mind in the onset of sleep, so too does ‘Agathe’ overhear in the going-silent of the mind a *voice*. Agathe is this voice—the thinning out, the prolongation of the mind as it slips endlessly into the darkness. In what follows, first we’ll consider how Valéry evokes the phenomenality of this “appauvrissement,” and second, we’ll arrive at a conception of a radiant darkness—a darkness by which we see.



‘Agathe’

Let’s consider ‘Agathe’ more closely. It begins like this:

Plus je pense, plus je pense...²⁰⁰

The text opens with such momentum. The repetition is productive, expansive: it lengthens thought into more thought. Rhythmically, we might say, something accrues. And yet in French, homonymically, “plus” means ‘more’ as well as ‘no longer.’ In the opening line, we can hear those divergent meanings playing out simultaneously: ‘the more I think, no more am I thinking,’ ‘no more am I thinking, the more I think.’ The movement it enacts is both expansive and self-emptying, both ‘more’ and ‘no longer.’ Here we’re introduced to one of the text’s signature mobilities, as it were: a lengthening that becomes a loss, a drawing-out that builds into dissolution, “plus je pense, plus je pense...”

Consider the second “paragraph” of the text, and as you do so, attend to how it moves: how his language assembles more and more of what thereby proves to *be* no longer.

Une idée devenue sans commencement, se fait claire, mais fausse, mais pure, puis vide ou immense ou vieille: elle devient même nulle, pour s’élever à l’inattendu et elle amène tout mon esprit.²⁰¹

Here again we glimpse at the motion(s) of the mind as it’s carried along (“elle amène tout mon esprit”), an image of dissolution in movement. An idea, he says (“une idée!”) but one that ends up (“devenue”) without beginning. It’s a beautiful deepening of the paradox of sleep—an idea that evolves away from its own beginning, an idea that takes place by coming to have never begun. Think of it as a movement that *accrues as it abrades*.

The language of the passage unfurls itself (moreover) rhythmically, by turns, and by so doing, maps a movement of mind: “claire, mais fausse, mais pure, puis vide ou

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1388.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

immense ou vieille,” and we watch each turn (“mais,” “ou,” “puis”) add another contour, another direction to the hodograph. There is no “substance” to the line (no Thing represented) other than the movement (the form) by which it unfolds, by which falsity turns to purity, emptiness slips into immensity, by which wakefulness dissolves. It *is* by way of its undoing.²⁰²

Valéry uses not only a certain mobility to describe the onset of sleep, but also figures of length, depth, and direction.²⁰³ Eventually the drawing-out of thought becomes the slow and monotonous loss of thought (“la perte monotone de pensée”), and yet it doesn’t end there: “la perte monotone de pensée me prolonge, et m’oublie,” we read. Notice how he assigns his direct objects. In the onset of sleep, he seems to say, it’s not that “we” forget who we are, where we were, or what we have been; to think so would be to peer in on sleep from the side of the wakeful, and as Valéry seems to be saying, there’s so little sense in addressing the darkness from the shores of light when the darkness is what we seek to know. Rather it’s the loss of thought that begins to act upon *us* (“me prolonge, m’oublie”), a conversion of forces whereby unknowing begins to forget the knowing self.

I’m the first to admit that there’s something deeply disorienting about this idea. And yet once we acclimate to its direction—once we see it in movement—I think it becomes incredibly meaningful. In the onset of sleep, we know ourselves backwards, he says: “tu te connais à reculons,” a formulation we could also perhaps understand as knowing ourselves by way of our own diminishment, “à reculons.”²⁰⁴ Here the thinker becomes the object (not the subject) of thought. We’re disentangled from the actions of our waking minds, rooted out of the act itself. Again, like we saw by juxtaposing Baudelaire and Valéry, this is a unique economy of action. We are yielded by dissolution; we are drunk into some dream. In the onset of sleep, if I can rephrase, rather than letting go of your conscious self, allow the very loss of consciousness to forget you all on its own.

Central to the phenomenology of sleep offered to us by ‘Agathe,’ then, is this reversal: becoming the object of our own experience. Finding a way of coming to rest within the experience of this reversal is the ambition of the text, and in order to find ourselves more at ease with the notion, I want refract the idea through a painting that historically has little to do with Valéry’s work, though one that proves germane to our discussion here by having so often been read in the same way sleep is read: as a morass

²⁰² More than one critic has read this passage as the very definition of the “fragment.” In her comparative article linking Mallarmé’s *Igitur* with Valéry’s “Agathe,” Ursula Franklin argues that the formal decision to write this text as a “broken” prose-poem (as a fragment) reflects the larger ambition of the text: to think through the operations of the *esprit*, which are, for Valéry, never a clear image, never a completion. It’s always necessarily fragmented. Thus, “Agathe” may have been conceived as a “roman d’un cerveau,” she argues, but it necessarily (if not deliberately) went unfinished as such. Cf. “Toward the Prose Fragment in Mallarmé and Valéry: *Igitur* and *Agathe*.” *French Review*. Vol. 49, No. 4. (1976 March), pp. 536-548. Web 2014.

²⁰³ In using Bergson’s notion of duration to explicate this drawing-out in the context of ‘La fileuse,’ we thereby invite a possible misunderstanding. We should be sure not to understand lengthening as a spatial term—by that I don’t mean that we’re capable of measuring this onset of sleep. Indeed Bergson himself was quick to point out how language bears within itself the conceptual assumptions we don’t hear ourselves making. We should be wary of thinking too spatially of terms such as this. I use them (despite the misunderstanding or conflation they invite) because they are, ultimately, Valéry’s.

²⁰⁴ Valéry, p. 1390.

of inscrutability, a foggy conundrum, an image we strain our eyes to see, and always fail at doing so. I want to use this image to help us approach the conceptual operations (these reversals, these paradoxes) we find in ‘Agathe.’

The American artist James McNeill Whistler painted *Nocturne: Grey and Silver* in 1873. When it was displayed several decades later, it bore the name of what the artist presumably ‘saw’ as he painted it, “Westminster Palace in Fog,” though frankly I can’t think of anything more beside the point.

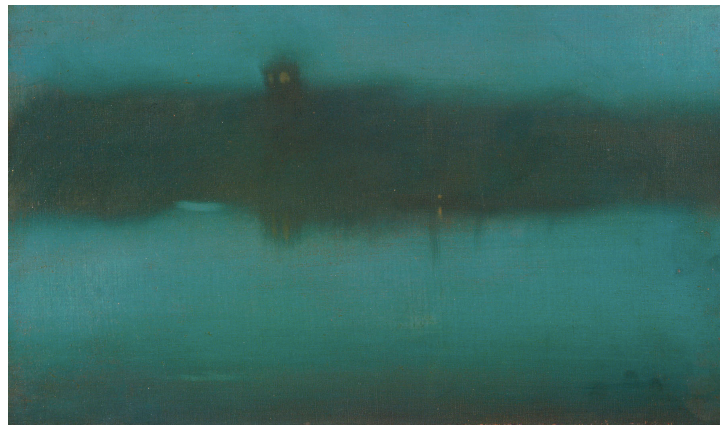


Fig. 4. Whistler, James McNeill. *Nocturne: Grey and Silver*. 1873. Oil on canvas, 31.1 x 51.4. Philadelphia Museum of Art. The John G. Johnson Collection.

Like many of the paintings he would later refer to as *nocturnes*, the image is a haunting, glass-like wash of color and darkness. He achieves its strangely luminous effect with a runny chemical mixture of his own creation: copal, turpentine and linseed oil.²⁰⁵ Here’s a conventional account of the painting taken from an exhibition catalogue:

This is one of Whistler’s most simplified Nocturnes, consisting of three bands of grey-black and deep blue. Here Whistler pushes his evocation of darkness to the limit, actually making the details in the picture difficult to see. Peering into the depths of darkness, the eye seeks to focus, and constantly fails.²⁰⁶

I’ve never been comfortable referring to poetry as “difficult,” & I’m also not convinced that we ever really leave a poem behind with a sense of “failure,” strictly speaking. And the same holds true for painting. I’ve always found these terms a bit misleading, and for several reasons. First, when we equate “failure” and “difficulty” with the work of the poem, we implicitly bind its success to the failure of the rational mind that looks to reason with it. As such, the task of the poet is merely to find new (and beautiful) ways of derailing the intellect in order that the sonorous, or formal qualities of the poem might win out. Second, and by implication, poetry would prove to be little more than a carefully orchestrated moment of cognitive failure, set to the rhythms of the alexandrine, and thinly veiled under a layer of melody. Not unlike “difficult” poetry, the eye that “constantly fails” to focus on what the *Nocturne* “depicts” analogously links the success of the

²⁰⁵ James McNeill Whistler. Ed. Dormont, Richard and MacDonald, Margaret F. National Gallery of Art, Washington: Tate Gallery Publications. p. 121.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

painting to the failure of the eye that can seemingly strive to do little more than “see” or “focus” on what it encounters, and then dwell in its failure.

I wonder how ‘Agathe’ might shift our understanding of the darkness, on one hand, and on the other, how the luminous darkness of Whistler’s work might help us visualize the movements at work in ‘Agathe.’ After all, “seeks to focus and constantly fails” is such a tiring prospect, whereas in ‘Agathe’ we read of the *ease* with which the poet is absorbed into the night. ‘It costs us nothing to belong to this abyss,’ Valéry tells us. There is, after all, an ‘incomprehensible facility’ to the experience of the painting, perhaps because it’s no longer *we* who think, or see: who cling to the final remnants of the day as they sink away into darkness. Rather, it’s the steady disbanding of light *that prolongs us*, that sees the mind distend; it’s the onset of darkness that seems to drink us into some dream, to yield us (more and no longer). This is not the dissolution of the shoreline, nor a clocktower we fail to perceive. On the contrary, *this is the eye’s absolution*. It’s not that my eye is failing to see; it’s that the image, faintly awash in fog, has begun to forget me, “la perte monotone de pensée me prolonge, et m’oublie.” It’s an image of the darkness unknowing my sight. *Nocturne* is a way of visualizing what Valéry achieves rhetorically in ‘Agathe’: a visible darkness, a strange luminousness, and in turn, a moving image of the mind speaking in the voice of its own dissolution.



CODA

On Phosphorus

I want to conclude with the small though spell-binding mention of phosphorus in one of the final lines of ‘Agathe.’ It provides us with one final way of thinking about the unlikely legibility of the darkness of night, or the experientially luminous quality of the neither/nor. The line reads:

Sur l’ombre sans preuve, j’écris comme avec le phosphore (...) ²⁰⁷

Perhaps what makes this line so striking has something to do with the dark allure of the element’s alchemical past. Or perhaps it’s simply the appeal of the prospect of an inkwell, brimming with liquid phosphorus. At the same time, the figure of phosphorus is important for the associations it inspires, and for the metaphors on which it builds. On one hand there’s at least the beginning of a nod to that evening with Teste in the darkening auditorium, when the narrator beholds first the dimming of the audience in the fading half-light, and then the ‘vast phosphorescence’ of those thousand, attentive faces. To phosphoresce is to glow, and in the *Soirée*: to glow with attention, like the bloom of blood that reddens the face of Teste as he stares out onto the colorful brilliance. On the other hand (and a bit less obviously), there’s also a sly, side-long reference to Mallarmé’s famously darkened inkwell, the one from which we write “noir sur blanc,” that is, from which nothing is luminously written:

²⁰⁷ Valéry, p. 1391.

on n'écrit pas, lumineusement, sur champ obscur,

Mallarmé wrote, suggesting that the mystery of poetry resides (as if) in the darkness of the ink itself, that it precedes language's very existence on the page.²⁰⁸ Here, Mallarmé's "gouttes... de ténèbres" are elementally re-written. Rather than writing "noir sur blanc," Valéry's sleeping poet writes phosphorescently onto the surface of an uncertain darkness—his writing is the drawing-out of the light.

"Phosphorus" comes from the Greek meaning 'bringer of light' (or in Latin, "lucifer," as in the Lucifer matches which bore its name throughout the 19th century). Leibniz was among the element's first great admirers, having witnessed the substance erupt into flame at a court demonstration. A "fire unknown to Nature itself," he called it. Phosphorus is an "immortal emblem of the soul, burning and burning on."²⁰⁹

Among the most fascinating attributions of light-phenomena to phosphorescence are the meteorological, and it's by way of this atmospheric version of (what was once assumed to be) phosphorescence that we return to 'Agathe's night, to the centerless darkness of Teste's mind at rest, and to a figure for awareness visible to itself in its own going-dark. Scientific records from the nineteenth century abound with lustrous fogs, luminous mists, and gleaming zones of clouds, all thought to be phosphorescent.²¹⁰ On the Isle of Skye, for example, an explorer once observed a group of clouds being brought across the Atlantic. It was "self-luminous at night," he describes, "not occasionally, but permanently."²¹¹ There's also the famous account of a luminous fog lingering over Geneva:

The moon being new, was invisible and absent from the heavens above. But a vast fog, not damp enough to wet the earth, but so opaque as to render invisible the borders of the river, ... hovered permanently over Geneva and its environs. This fog *diffused so much phosphoric light*, that M. Wartmann could easily distinguish books, etc., upon his table, without having recourse to any other light.²¹²

This is a fog to see by, and yet one that paradoxically renders portions of the world invisible, those "borders of the river," obfuscated by the very mists that obviate the need for light. "Let the heavens be overcast," he continues,

let the stars be hidden by an unbroken mass of clouds, and still a sufficiency of light will be diffused in the open country to prevent the difficulty... which would attend any attempt to walk in a dark cave, or in an apartment the shutters of which are closed.²¹³

There is a "*sufficiency*" here that belongs entirely to the darkness, one seemingly at work

²⁰⁸ "L'Action restreinte." *Divagations*. Paris: Gallimard, 2003. p. 262.

²⁰⁹ We should note that despite what the name suggests, phosphorus is not (strictly speaking) "phosphorescent." The latter term refers to "the re-emission of absorbed energy in the form of light," whereas the glow attributed to the former is the result of combustion with oxygen, and is therefore chemiluminescent, not phosphorescent. Valéry likely, though not necessarily, uses the two concepts interchangeably, equally fecund metaphors that they are.

²¹⁰ Phipson, T. L. *Phosphorus: Or, The Emission of Light by Minerals, Plants, and Animals*. London: Lovell Reeve & Co., 1862. p. 6-7.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

²¹² *Ibid.*, p. 79.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

behind the pale visibility of night in certain seasons, “the faint diffused light,” we read in another account, “which guides the steps of the traveller in cloudy, starless and moonless nights, in autumn and winter, even when there is no snow on the ground.” Is *Agathe* not also something of a moonless, starless night in an inhospitable season? Is the visibility of the text not also faint and diffused? This is a pale and atmospheric visibility (a wakefulness) that proceeds from neither moon nor stars, whose diffusion across the darkness could only be likened to that of the moon’s reflection on the snow, *were the moon only there...* In ‘*Agathe*,’ there is no moon, and no snow on the ground, and yet there’s a *sufficiency* by way of which we see, by which a vigil is upheld, just as banks of snow appear blue in the night: a lightless, alchemical blue in which visibility betrays the darkness to which it’s seemingly condemned.

It appears to me that the atmosphere and the clouds themselves act in these cases like... phosphori. Being exposed to the light of the sun the whole day long, it is very probable that they emit a phosphorescence at night.²¹⁴

So too in ‘*Agathe*’ does unawareness glow with the once-absorbed energy of the awareness it progressively dissolves. *Agathe*’s night is suffused with a ‘light’ (“une lueur”) to which it does not belong. This isn’t a light source that breaks open the darkness; phosphorescence is not a light as is a flame. It is the luminous re-mission, a glow proper to “le reste du jour brillant,” prolonged into the night until it becomes proper to the night.

In other words, to discover a capaciousness that belongs fundamentally to liminality is to discover a visibility that obtains within the darkness. To approach the dissolution of the mind in the onset of sleep as other than an inhospitable neither/nor is to read by this “luminous fog”—an attention proper to the very dimming of attention, like a light proper to its very absence.



‘*Agathe*’ was never finished, nor was it ever appended to *Monsieur Teste*. Valéry worked on the text from time to time, although it’s clear that he found other ways of working with the ideas therein. “Je suis beaucoup plus satisfait de mes éternelles notules que d’*Agathe*,” he wrote, referring to the reflections on sleep and consciousness he carried out in his daily *Cahiers*. After Valéry’s death, and under the direction of his daughter—a daughter he named *Agathe*, for what it’s worth—the unfinished text was published in limited edition.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

V

Poetry and the Possible

*“A wild incipience in the air /
as if everything stilled /
is deeply active (...)”*
Stephen Dunn

This chapter is about poetry’s relationship to the possible. More specifically, it’s about how and why Valéry’s work invites us into an *experience* of the possible—into a living, palpable sense of something that falls so beautifully and paradoxically shy of actuality—and does so as the poetic act par excellence.



Poets have a long history of dwelling on things which, at times to their great dismay, either don’t happen or don’t exist at all. Think of all the longing, all the yearning that has created so tiresome a figure as the poet at his most stereotypical—preoccupied by an absent lover, an unrealized ideal, etc. It’s easy to think of the language of poetry, in turn, again at its most formulaic, as a kind of salve—a way of resolving into language what escapes any actual thing (or lover) we might possess.

Consider that by the late-19th century, however, it’s no longer to the poet’s dismay that the object of his desire should prove less than any-thing that actually exists. The merely possible, we might say, is no longer a problem to which poetry offers a solution. Mallarmé in particular becomes famous for seeing the unfolding of the purely possible (these “virtualités,” he says so famously) as a feature of poetic language itself. In his hands, language internalizes the object of its yearning; it becomes the very site of the possibility that so enthralls the mind. Indeed it’s truly one of the great evolutions of the genre to have begun as a way of longing after something unrealized, something only possible, and to have assumed that object of desire into its very genetics—to have become the living possibility for which it was once the balm.²¹⁵

Thus the larger literary context out of which Valéry’s own exploration of the possible emerges is one in which possibility isn’t simply a recurring theme in poetry, but central to its very operations. Accordingly, I want to begin this chapter by looking at how Mallarmé uses possibility to elucidate the workings of poetry, and then shift our focus in the second half of the chapter to how Valéry uses poetry to elucidate an experience of possibility. In other words, we begin here with the absorption of the possible into the very

²¹⁵ In Chapter I, I argued that Gautier’s *Maupin* contains this larger poetic shift in embryo—that is, that while the novel begins with a form of longing for some lofty, abstract, and unrealized Ideal, it ends by transposing that object of desire into the unresolvable form of the ‘living Sphinx,’ Théodore. Form isn’t the solution to the poet’s formless Ideal; form simply internalizes its unresolvability.

nature of the poetic (Mallarmé), and end with what the poetic can reveal about the nature of the possible (Valéry).²¹⁶

This movement through the complex imbrication of possibility, poetry, and experience will take place through three poems in which, we might say, nothing happens. Or rather, in which what we're offered is something less than verifiably actual, and happily so. The second two poems are written by Valéry, though I want to begin with a poem by Mallarmé, and not only because it so succinctly contextualizes the possible as a poetic question. 'Le nénuphar blanc' (1891) is also what I see as the most direct source of inspiration for the final Valéry poem we'll discuss both in this chapter and in the project more broadly, a poem called 'Les pas' (1921). Both take as their subject matter the steps of a 'feminine possibility,' as Mallarmé puts it—that is, the only-possible presence of a woman who may not even exist, though who looms as an all-elusive object of the poets' attention. In 'Nénuphar,' Mallarmé poses a fundamental question—what form can such a possibility take? How, or in what shape, are we to relate to something that remains poised just shy of the actual?

Next we'll move to two poems by Valéry: 'Vue' (1896) and 'Les pas' (1921). I choose these two poems from among others that speak to possibility because I see them, each in its own way, concisely embodying the defining conceptual revisions Valéry makes to Mallarmé's conception of the possible. First, in 'Vue,' Valéry will insist on the *existence* of the possible—how it plays out in the living body of the beholder, and more specifically, on the breath. As we'll see, Valéry's exploration of the possible moves against an everyday conception of the term, for while we tend to think of it ideationally (as a concept that obtains in the mind alone; a non-reality, an only imminent reality, distinct from the world we *live*) Valéry will insist on the role of the possible in the ways we do the best of our living—that is, on possibility's role in Being itself.²¹⁷ Second, through a reading of 'Les pas,' I'll argue that not only is possibility subject to time, but that in Valéry's hands specifically, it becomes a particular *experience of time*. I'll end our divagations by suggesting that for Valéry, to attend to possibility is to find oneself fit to the very draw of time—that is, to *wait*.

Ultimately these two poems will add another (and final) contour to the shape of the core concept of "attention" we've been pursuing over the course of this larger study—first, an attention to form, and to its eventuality; then, an attention to the liminal, to the neither/nor by which that eventuality declares itself; and now, an attention to what *is* (in its own, quiet way) without being actual. These final poems will enact another small but explicit version of the larger critical gesture here, which is to take the kind of rarefaction we hold in our minds as ideation, as abstract thinking, and to transpose it (to vitalize it) in the living body—a shift I mean to map out if obliquely in the subtitles of the present chapter, from 'A Figure for Possibility' to 'A Breath of Possibility.'

²¹⁶ By so doing, I make a larger argument about how Valéry's work is both consonant with and divergent from that of Mallarmé—the latter preoccupied with conceptions of language, the former with what it means (what it looks like) to experience those conceptions in real time.

²¹⁷ Here we can align Valéry's insistence on the sheer "existence" of possibility with the broader, more philosophical enterprise of someone like Heidegger, who, in his canonical *Being and Time*, defines 'Da-sein' as nothing less than "the possibility of being free for its ownmost potentiality of being." In other words, 'Da-sein,' or existence, is understood as the very being of being-possible. So too can we situate Valéry's inquiry at the intersection of possibility and ontology. Cited in Edwards, Paul. "Heidegger and Death as 'possibility.'" *Mind* 84.336 (1975). pp. 548–566.

Finally, a small *nota bene* concerning vocabulary in this chapter. I want to acknowledge in advance the set of conceptual slippages we'll undergo in moving through the following poems. From the possible, to the potential, to the imminent; Valéry's work moves often interchangeably between them. I want to allow Valéry's work to shift and move with the energy of what is ultimately a shifting and unstable conceptual field; I want to focus less on how we might define or parse these instances of the less-than-actual and more on the movement (the *experience*) of their unresolvability. I propose moving along with the texts as they themselves grapple with these concepts that seem inevitably to flow in and out of one another.



A Figure for Possibility

Valéry always said that what you can summarize probably isn't beautiful. You can't put verse into prose, he declared, for we recognize poetry (by definition) in the impossibility of its abridgement. To concede as much means that I can only resign us to begin with a summary of Mallarmé's 'Le nénuphar blanc,' though in what follows it, we'll slowly move back through everything that escapes the prose with which we begin.

Here's what happens in 'Le nénuphar blanc' :

In a small skiff, the poet undertakes a journey downriver.²¹⁸ He sets out in search of water plants, we're told, and with the vague intention of greeting his unknown neighbor, "l'amie d'une amie." En route his boat meets resistance in the ribbon-like plants that float up from the river bed, and he's left to linger partially adrift in the swamp-like congestion of the stream. From there, a rustling on the banks, possibly the sound of footsteps, leads him to suspect that this woman he has yet to meet is somehow upon him, but he's either unable or unwilling to establish whether or not she's actually there. Eventually the poet abandons his plans to meet her, and instead imagines gathering up the eponymous water lily, "vacance exquise," a symbol of the 'feminine possibility' that exceeds any individual woman he might encounter, and rows away. The story ends with a conversation 'better' for not having been had, "mieux que (s)a visite," and with the contended poet basking in the wake of an encounter that never took place.

I want to ask two main questions of this poem. The first stems from its principal achievement: to have granted this "possibilité féminine" a shape, a form, that is, a kind of reality short of anything (or anyone) that actually exists. The possible takes shape here, though in what possible form could it do so? Second and ancillary to the first, how does 'Nénuphar' reveal something about possibility's larger relationship to the poetic? What role does Mallarmé assign to possibility in the workings of poetry more generally, as seen through the lens of this poem in particular? These questions, as I've suggested, will

²¹⁸ Critics are quick to cite Mallarmé's Seine-side property at Valvins as a possible source for this prose poem. He writes often and with great affection about his time there, as well as for the skiff he was known to have enjoyed especially in the summer months. For a full account of the property as a site of so many literary encounters, see Rosemary Lloyd's exquisitely researched work, *Mallarmé: The Poet and His Circle*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005. pp. 114, 142.

position ‘Nénuphar’ both as a point of departure and as a foil for Valéry’s own approach to the less-than-actual.



In order to draw us into an atmosphere of possibility (is there a more intuitive way of gathering up a possibility than in an ‘atmosphere’?), Mallarmé first constructs a spatial and temporal setting for the poem that blurs both any actual sense of certainty and any certain sense of actuality. The poet-rower undergoes his journey in a daze, wondering where he is and what he’s been doing: “Qu’arrivait-il, où étais-je?”²¹⁹ While he remembers setting out into the water, he’s confused at having forgotten the going itself, “l’oubli d’aller.”²²⁰ Consider the precarity of this particular confluence of psychic and physical states—that he should both move and forget that he moves, that his movement should be bound to an act of forgetting. The terms of his uncertainty are paradoxical unto themselves. We read that the poet’s eyes are turned inward (“les yeux au-dedans”) and yet “fixes sur... l’oubli d’aller,” that is, transfixed by what he has forgotten.

From the outset, then, Mallarmé situates us within the tension not only between remembering and forgetting, but also between motion and stillness, between progression and suspension. This tension extends to the spatial setting of the poem—that is, mid-stream in a tangled skiff, as though moored to the endless fluidity of the stream. Similarly, as the poem unfolds we’ll find this only would-be encounter (as though) tethered to the rushing course of a taking-place. We’ll find ourselves, like the poet in his skiff, in a text that provides only the most tenuous and paradoxical sense of situatedness—a poem that shifts and trembles in the stream of its own inertia. Nothing happens! and dramatically so! Thus if the temporal and spatial contexts of the poem lend themselves to an encounter with the purely possible, it’s because the basic building blocks of that context neither enable nor disallow, neither set in motion nor arrest.

The arch of a bridge, half-occluded by the dangling trees above the water’s surface, indicates to the poet-rower that he has nevertheless stumbled upon the woman’s property. He fancies the kind of woman who would choose a “retraite aussi humidement impénétrable,” and he begins to imagine that she shares a kind of intimacy with the surrounding landscape.²²¹ Here’s how he describes the property and its relationship to this only would-be lover:

Un joli voisinage, pendant la saison, la nature d’une personne qui s’est choisi retraite aussi humidement impénétrable ne pouvant être que conforme à mon goût. Sûr, elle avait fait de ce cristal son miroir intérieur à l’abri de l’indiscrétion éclatante des après-midi; elle y venait et la buée d’argent glaçant des saules ne fut bientôt que la limpidité de son regard habitué à chaque feuille.²²²

²¹⁹ *Divagations*. Paris: Gallimard, 2003. p. 102. In his own reading of the poem, in addition to the uncertainties onto which the poem opens, Roger Pearson will emphasize the “unwilled” quality of the trip, “as though the poet were barely willing to abdicate from the state of pure poetic reverie.” *Mallarmé and Circumstance: The Translation of Silence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. p. 37.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² *Ibid.*

With their enclosure of silver-misted willows, hidden away from the din of afternoon strollers, the silent spaces of her property are said to resemble her own ‘inner mirror.’ I can only assume it’s the reflective quality of “son miroir”—or perhaps it’s the gleam of the willows themselves—that initially leads us to think of the landscape as somehow ‘reflecting’ the woman he seeks, as though her property were indeed the beginnings of an encounter by proxy: a here-she-once-was, and now *is* by extension. Indeed it’s tempting to think of the landscape as transforming this regretful absence of a woman into a willowy, silver-misted presence. And yet upon closer inspection, we realize that the landscape does (in fact) nothing to make this woman any more present than before. For the landscape is her ‘retreat,’ yes: her haven, a place, and yet it’s equally an act of seclusion and withdrawal, “une retraite.” The landscape is as much the place in which to find her as the site of her retreat from ever being found, for there’s little to see in this impenetrable “voisinage” other than the ‘limpid’ quality of her gaze, we read—“la limpidité de son regard habitué à chaque feuille.” What does it mean to perceive in the landscape not a reflection of the woman, but the mere transparency of her gaze? to perceive only the clarity of a “regard” that knows every leaf of the property?

We hold an object that once belonged to a loved-one, and we say: here by way of this object, the loved-one is now more present to me than before. The loved-one’s absence, we think, is tempered by the presence of this object to which she was once attached, that she once loved or touched. Here in ‘Nénuphar,’ Mallarmé overturns this logic. For the poet (as though) holds a landscape where an only-possible lover may or may not reside, and says: here by way of these surrounds, the woman is still less than actual, though now this ‘feminine possibility’ seems to stir, to move quietly in the breeze, there in the silver (scintillating) mists of the willows.

In other words, what Mallarmé conjures in this passage isn’t the way the poet-rower senses something of her presence in the property, but the way the shimmering, self-reflective qualities of that property serve to animate the escape of that absence from a system of representation that might transform her into someone present. Rather, what these willows offer the poet is her scintillating escape from actuality.

By asking the landscape to figure nothing of her presence, the poet reminds us that relating to possibility can’t happen by re-presenting it in any conventional sense. Here what the poet yearns for is a kind of figure (here a landscape, but later, the lily!) capable of encompassing not *her*, but the ways in which she remains so beautifully at a remove from actuality. Indeed so much of what we’re offered in this poem *is* (and dynamically so) only at a remove, echoed rhythmically and syntactically in that initial pretext of visiting “l’amie d’une amie”—or more precisely, the ‘place(ment)’ occupied by the property of this friend of a friend, “l’emplacement occupé par la propriété de l’amie d’une amie.”²²³ The poem is entirely governed by this logic of removes, and its brilliance is that rather than offering us an encounter with a woman *at* a remove (an absence signified through a presence), it offers us a possibility *in* and *as* the dynamics of the remove itself. To wit: this placement of a property of a friend of a friend (and on and on it goes) doesn’t move us along a chain of references to the elusive presence at its end; rather it offers us the space (the echo, the scintillation) of the remove itself.

It’s in these terms that ‘Nénuphar’ begins to articulate something of Mallarmé’s larger poetics, for the glittering of this feminine possibility (escaping any re-presentation)

²²³ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

is also what occurs at the incantation of the flower—“je dis: une fleur,” Mallarmé famously wrote, and what ‘occurs,’ as though musically, as a shimmering, is something ‘other than the known bloom,’ “autre que les calices sus,” played in a language that circumscribes its object with the contours of oblivion.²²⁴ This is the “essentiel” of poetic language—that language should not designate, or call into presence, the notions we hold in our minds, but that it should offer us their vibrating, near-disappearance (“sa presque disparition vibratoire”), the theoretical analogue to the silver-misted willows.²²⁵ Poetry doesn’t simply offer us something that escapes designation by language. Poetry is the animation (the life) of the escape itself, Mallarmé seems to be telling us. Through this lens, ‘Nénuphar’ is as much a quest for an only-possible lover as a quest for a figure in which that possibility might come to life—a sign that doesn’t designate her, or right her absence by offering presence, but that will enact the escape in which her possibility might declare itself to the poet, and ultimately through which she might be possessed as such.



Suddenly an imperceptible rustling along the banks of the stream makes the poet-rower wonder whether this woman isn’t upon him, “hantait mon loisir.”²²⁶ Without any mention of a step taking place, the possible step of this would-be woman ceases, he says, ending before it’s even begun.

“Le pas cessa. Pourquoi,” the poet wonders?²²⁷

Before we move too quickly into the evocation of this gentle step, I want to point out perhaps the obvious—that to focus on a footstep is to focus on a particular kind of aural *sign*. As an ‘index’ in the Peircean sense of the term, a footstep by definition points to its object not by way of an established convention (as an octagon signals ‘stop’ by way of our collective understanding), but by way of a real, often material connection to its object—that is, the step indexes the foot that takes it. How strange, then, that a poem so preoccupied by mere possibility should also center on a sign that points so intractably to the reality of the thing that creates it?! that’s made not by convention, but by reality itself! Is there a step without the foot that takes it, after all? And yet it’s precisely this real, living connection to the sign’s object that makes the index so tantalizing a sign, I argue, to imbue with a lack of actuality.

How then to write a footstep that indexes a mere possibility? How to evoke a reality underwritten by something that’s less than verifiably actual? Through a beautifully meandering passage, full of quiet motion, Mallarmé allows us to overhear the reality of what isn’t actual (a sign that indexes the less-than-anything that creates it) by offering us something ‘other than the known’ step, as it were. These lines move us back and away from the actuality of the step by reducing it to the incipience by which it opens, on the one hand, and on the other, to the wake in which it *is* no longer. He poetically suspends

²²⁴ “Crise de vers.” *Divagations*. Paris: Gallimard, 2003. p. 259.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

the step, we might say, into its various phenomenological pieces, as though to remind us that the steps we take are full of spaces and movements of undoing.

It's helpful to think about this step like the one captured (or lost) by way of É.-J. Marey's chronophotograph from 1891, almost exactly contemporary to Mallarmé's work moreover, wherein light dissolves the movement of the step into a mere spectre of itself. Such is the bewildering effect of the chronophotograph that it seems to illuminate less a concrete-something than the very process of an undoing. It's an image that has always conjured for me Mallarmé's "presque disparition vibratoire," the vibratory near-disappearance of an image which, through a kind of visual echo, speaks of a step that's 'other than the known bloom,' that allows us to overhear the very disappearance of any step that might be represented.

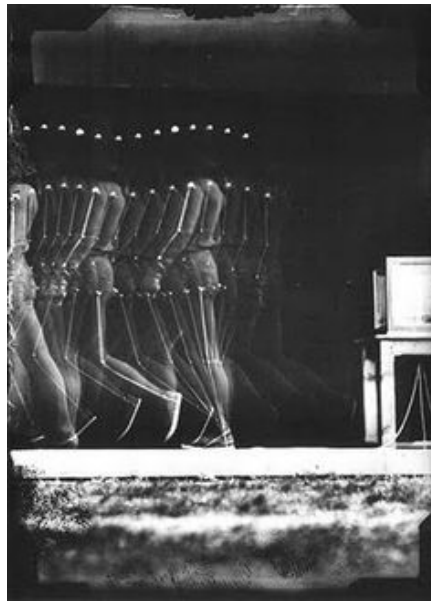


Fig. 5. Marey, Étienne-Jules. 1891.²²⁸

The image arrests less than it unmoors. In the same way, the rustling of the footstep we're offered in the following passage doesn't so much refer to the foot that makes it as instantiate the very disappearance of that foot. Think of an echo—a sound whose perpetuation through space is also the sound of its annihilation. As you read through the passage, watch (as in the image) as the foot quietly escapes its own representation:

Subtil secret des pieds qui vont, viennent, conduisent l'esprit où le veut la chère ombre enfoncée en de la batiste et les dentelles d'une jupe affluant sur le sol comme pour circonvenir du talon à l'orteil, dans une flottaison, cette initiative par quoi la marche s'ouvre, tout au bas et les plis rejetés en traîne, une échappée, de sa double flèche savant.²²⁹

²²⁸ This particular chronophotograph is part of Marey's multifaceted study of human locomotion. Here he records "variations in the horizontal speed of thigh, knee, and ankle during a complete step at different cadences from forty to ninety steps a minute. Graph: 1891: C43, D70." Cited in Braun, Marta. *Picturing Time: The Work of Étienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. p. 358.

²²⁹ Mallarmé, p. 104.

The language of the passage focuses on the way the hem of the woman's skirt glides open in advance of the step itself. It circumscribes ("circonvenir du talon à l'orteil") the course of the step to come. Rather than the 'beginning' of the step, its opening is referred to as its 'initiative,' as though to direct our attention to what precedes even the beginning of the step. In turn, rather than the close of the step, the poet shifts our focus to its wake, to what trails behind it. In this passage, in other words, the movements, the incipience, the wake of the step; all of these parts efface the whole. These elements proliferate until the step is nowhere other than in the movements to which it cannot be reduced. As such, the step becomes less an index of the woman's presence than an index of the non-actuality by which she eludes her own trace, an index that is itself comprised of absences, of space, of movement: an 'imperceptible' something he perceives as her possibility, and yet that he discerns no more clearly than we the "step" in the chronophotograph.²³⁰

Of course he could investigate the step more closely; he could discern whether or not it was she who made the step, "que d'interroger jusque-là le mystère." And yet why would he when so 'vague' a notion suffices: "si vague concept se suffit," he says, suggesting that the pleasure of this only-possible woman would in fact be undone should she appear, for she's a generality that excludes every visage, he explains. The 'precision' of her face would undo what the indeterminate rustling of the world around him had begun, "ce charme instinctif." In this suspension on the water, "mieux que sa visite," the poet-rower feels closer to her when separated than he ever could if together. "Séparés, on est ensemble," he says.²³¹ There in the stillness above the water, his "dream suspends the hesitant one." So beautifully imprecise is this possibility that he wouldn't even know how to desire it, he says. Instead, the poet draws himself into the vague intimacy offered to him by the step:

Je m'immisce à de sa confuse intimité, dans ce suspens sur l'eau où mon songe attarde
l'indécise.²³²

There's perhaps no better exegesis of this passage than the chronophotograph above, for in the water-like prism of the image, we're indeed welcomed into a 'vague intimacy.' We're offered a step that seems as though suspended in ripples across a watery surface, "suspens sur l'eau," where a kind of dream suspends the certainty of a step into a beautiful blur of hesitation, "l'indécise."



²³⁰ Indeed if the chronophotograph represents something (that is, makes it measureable for the first time, as it did), it's locomotion, rather than a step *per se*. It's in this way that we can read an image that does indeed make measureable ('represents') something for the first time as an image that escapes representation.

²³¹ Barbara Johnson finds a vexing "numerical ambiguity" in this line in particular. "The adjective 'séparés,' for example, is plural in form and yet designates isolation. The word 'on' is singular and impersonal where one would expect *nous*, personal and plural. The subject and verb of the first part of the sentence are thus singular and universal in a context of private coupledness." "Allegory's Trip-Tease: *The White Waterlily*." *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980. p. 16.

²³² Mallarmé, p. 104.

We arrive at a critical juncture. The poet is stilled enfettered to a living inertia, there in the flowing rivulet. With the realization that this ‘suspension’ is perhaps ‘better than any visit,’ that he is content with the mere possibility of her, the question becomes:

“Que faire?”²³³

It’s easy to undervalue this question that flirts so easily with the rhetorical—whether to do, what to do, etc. And yet looking forward, the fact that Mallarmé’s poet *does* something here will prove central to the departure Valéry enacts in his own iteration of this motif. What are we to do with this “suspens sur l’eau?” with a mere possibility, the poet asks?

Résumer d’un regard la vierge absence éparse en cette solitude et, comme on cueille, en mémoire d’un site, l’un de ces magiques nénuphars clos qui y surgissent tout à coup, enveloppant de leur creuse blancheur un rien, (...) partir avec.²³⁴

With a glance, he tells us, gather up this virginal absence as one would a lily (the bloom that mirrors and sleeps on the water’s surface, enveloping “un rien” within its hollow whiteness) and leave. “Partir avec,” quietly, he says, in order to preserve the illusion that would be broken should she appear, or with a sound, that would betray the ‘theft’ of this ideal flower, “rapt de mon idéale fleur.”

As Barbara Johnson emphasizes in her reading of the poem, this journey into an encounter that doesn’t happen culminates in the figure of the water lily, which is to say, in figuration itself. Johnson argues that while the poet ultimately foregoes a literal sexual encounter with the woman, he indeed leaves with its figurative stand-in. “Here, an abstract nothing occurs on the literal level, while a concrete sexual description is being fleshed out on the figurative level of the poem.”²³⁵ The point here is that for Mallarmé, an encounter with possibility doesn’t simply move through figuration, but through a specific kind of figure: namely, the *symbol* of the water lily. Why, when faced with what to *do*, should the poet gather up this “vierge absence éparse” as one would a lily?²³⁶ Why the lily? And what is it about the symbol specifically that lends itself to what is less than actual?

A brief review of a few basic figures is in order. Recall that in a simile—for instance, ‘my love is *like* a red, red rose’—the tenor (love) is being compared to the vehicle (red, red rose). The two units of comparison are in fact both semantically and syntactically separate. In a metaphor, the tenor is said to *be* the vehicle, though they remain separate syntactic units in the larger figure—‘my love *is* a red, red rose.’ In a symbol, however, from the Greek *symballein*, meaning to ‘fuse together,’ the tenor is collapsed into the vehicle. They’re one in the same, leaving us with the radiant simplicity of a ‘red, red rose.’ Thus it’s the tenor’s ability to share a body with its vehicle that makes the symbol so potent a figure for something as abstract and disembodied as this ‘feminine possibility.’ Possibility shares a body with the absence by which it has no presence.

²³³ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

²³⁵ Johnson, p. 16.

²³⁶ Mallarmé, p. 105.

This feature of the symbol is what some critics have evoked as its self-sameness, and it's thanks to this feature that "the thing represented by a symbol must always be something very important and holy for those concerned," Auerbach explains in his famous essay, 'Figura,' "something affecting their whole life and thinking."²³⁷ This something is not only expressed or imitated in the sign or symbol, but is considered to be itself present and contained in it. Thus the symbol itself can act and be acted upon in its place; to act upon the symbol," and here we get to the crux of the matter, "is conceived as tantamount to acting on the thing symbolized, and consequently magical powers are imputed to it."²³⁸

In order to understand why the symbol lends itself to the possible, I want to linger for a moment in the overlap between Mallarmé's evocation of the lily (on the one hand) and the definitions of the symbol we're offered by a few of the figure's famous theorists (on the other). Auerbach's language aligns quite beautifully with that of Mallarmé, with both referring to the 'magical' quality of the symbol: "un de ces magiques nénuphars clos qui y surgissent tout à coup," in the poet's words. "Clos," perhaps, because of its self-contained, self-same quality, as Benjamin will famously highlight in his own right, the vehicle synonymous with the tenor. (Indeed even the opening consonants of the 'né/nu/phar' are self-same, as Dragonetti points out in his reading of the poem.²³⁹) If for Mallarmé the lily blooms and appears all of a sudden, "tout à coup," it's because as Benjamin explains, the "measure of time for the experience of the symbol is the mystical *instant* in which the symbol assumes the meaning into its hidden, and if one might say, wooded interior."²⁴⁰

In the symbol, Benjamin reminds us, citing Creuzer, "a process of substitution takes place. The concept itself has descended into our physical world, and we see it itself directly in the image."²⁴¹ In the symbol, "we have a momentary totality." Possibility, then, becomes "incarnate, like the great and mighty natural world of mountains and plants."²⁴² Recall that the poet-rower's initial design was to go out in search of water *plants*, though through Benjamin's definition of the symbol, the poet's search can be read as a search for symbolism itself: "en quête des floraisons d'eau," both a quest for them ("en quête") and an inquiry into them (*homn.* 'enquête')— into these plants, this lily, these *symbols*, in other words, wherein possibility acquires a body even as it escapes actuality, in which the tenor of an ideal is synonymous with the vehicle from which she's so palpably, beautifully, and eternally absent.²⁴³

There's redemption for this 'exquisite vacancy,' then, in the happy collapse of the vehicle into the tenor, for the symbol grants this unrealized "possibilité féminine" a

²³⁷ *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*. Trans. Manheim, Ralph. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. pp. 56-57.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

²³⁹ Dragonetti, Roger, and Kathryn Crecelius. "'le Nénuphar Blanc': A Poetic Dream with Two Unknowns." *Yale French Studies* 54 (1977). pp. 118-139. Web 2014.

²⁴⁰ *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Trans. Osborne, John. London: New Left Books, 1977. p. 161.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ Dragonetti argues that this "quest for water flowers" becomes a quest for "'cygnes' or 'signes,'" a quest for signs, and ultimately a quest for figuration. "Only the closed lily remains" of this possible encounter, he explains, "with petals folded in like the useless wings which anticipate the image of a swan's egg whose 'flights have not flown,'" in turn an evocation of similar flightless flights in 'Le vierge, le vivace, et le bel aujourd'hui,' we should add.

certain organicity. To gather up this lily is to see possibility gather into a momentarily totality: organic, ambiguous, and “translucent,” as Benjamin remarks of the symbol, echoing what we saw earlier as limpidity.²⁴⁴ Indeed in his search for a form for possibility, it’s as though the poet moves from the landscape in which he glimpses the ‘limpid’ quality of her gaze to (more narrowly) the “translucence” found in the symbol of the lily. *Neither offers us a tenor other than the empty clarity of its vehicle.*

Ultimately, the “*nénuphar*” is less a representation of any actual woman than the very incarnation of possibility’s escape from that representation—not a woman, then, but the hollow, translucent, and radiantly empty body of a feminine possibility. In this ‘mystical instant,’ the lily assumes this less-than-actuality into its hollow interior, “vacance exquise,” and with a few more rows of the oar, the poet steals away with it, “rapt de mon idéale fleur.” Indeed to ‘steal away’ with the symbol (“rapt”) is to suggest moreover that the possession of this “possibilité féminine” isn’t naturally the poet’s, that it’s an artificial possession: or that the artifice of sign, figure, and language is a necessary feature of this tenuous possession of the possible.²⁴⁵



The broader picture here is that Mallarmé is making a claim not just for the power of the symbol, but a claim for the larger poetics in which the symbol so centrally participates. For if we find Mallarmé thematically taking up this question of the unrealized, at stake in that endeavor is less an understanding of what it means to actually experience possibility than an understanding of how possibility is always already at work in poetic figuration. In other words, if figuration grants us access to possibility in Mallarmé’s work, it’s because possibility allows us to glimpse into the workings of figuration itself.²⁴⁶

It should hardly come as any surprise that what seems to be an extra-linguistic experience should become, in Mallarmé’s hands, an intra-linguistic one. It’s his great legacy to have brought to modern letters an attunement to these procedures, as Barbara Johnson once remarked of his larger influence. To this I would add (more precisely) that it’s also his great achievement to have found the unfolding of possibility at work in the very genetics of poetic language. Indeed the possibility that acquires an organicity in the symbol of the water-lily is no different, I argue, from the ‘something other than the known bloom,’ as Mallarmé puts it in the “*Crise de vers*.”²⁴⁷ What we learn from the fluvial adventure of ‘*Nénuphar*’ is that language has the power to encompass within its hollow silences the ever-elusive object of our desires by enacting them as endless possibilities. When faced with an ungraspable possibility, then, the symbol (and the

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

²⁴⁵ In Roger Pearson’s beautiful reading of the poem, he ascribes to the symbol’s “silence” its ability to embody possibility, to point to so many “somethings,” he says: “The ‘imaginary trophy’ which he takes home from his journey is, like a water-lily on the point of unfolding its petals, an absence filled with myriad somethings; and the text itself, by venturing down the stream of narrative but eventually leaving its reader to imagine ‘cette indicible mine que j’ignore à jamais,’ thereby creates a silence filled with ‘rêve.’” Pearson. *op. cit.* 37.

²⁴⁶ Suzanne Nash, like many critics, will also end up reading the merely possible woman as ultimately a figure for poetic language: in her words, “self-referential, obscure, remote, but promising through symbolic figuration a superior reality somewhere in its depths.” Nash. p. 76.

²⁴⁷ Mallarmé, p. 258.

poetics into which it accrues) is salvific. This is what ‘Nénuphar’ teaches us—that to relate to the possible means moving through figuration, and more specifically, through a kind of poetic language capable of embodying what cannot be entirely contained. We get to possess the unpossessable—the woman who escapes and surpasses any one woman he might meet, the flower we won’t find in any bouquet, the something-said that the poem will (as though) so audibly leave unspoken.



Taking a step back from the poem, and in more schematic language, we might say that for Mallarmé, then, an experience of possibility is inseparable from an experience of language. His work connects us not to an experience of possibility *per se*, but to an experience of poetry *as governed* by the unfolding of possibility. Valéry’s work, on the other hand, will make less instrumental use of the possible by turning to the actual, living experience thereof.

To be clear, this isn’t to deny Valéry’s indebtedness to Mallarmé’s poetics of possibility; indeed the ties are unmistakable.²⁴⁸ To say, for instance, that form is the shimmering of a virtuality, and that the endless falling-shy of these possibilities is at the heart of that shimmering, would apply as easily to the work of one poet as to that of the other. The difference, then, is that for Valéry, the unrealized, the possible, these particular versions of an all-elusive object of attention overflow the figuration on which Mallarmé saw it depend so reciprocally—figure as the path to possibility, and possibility as the mechanism of the figure. It’s as though Valéry took what Mallarmé theorized in terms of poetic language, internalized it, and then began to question what the presence of the unrealized looked like in the lungs, for instance, in the mind, in the heart of the reader (and the poet) for whom the possible was as much the logic of a poetic language as a vast and inviting horizon of actual experience.²⁴⁹

Valéry will shift our focus toward the living experience of the possible, as I suggested earlier, in two primary ways; we’ll address them one by one in the two final poems of the chapter. First, in the poem entitled ‘Vue’ (1896), Valéry will inquire into how possibility acquires an existence not simply in the language of the poem, but in the body itself. By so doing, he’ll make a compelling case for the living, corporeal *existence* of the possible that isn’t gathered up and possessed (as a theft) as it is in Mallarmé’s work. Second, through a reading of ‘Les pas’ (1921), I’ll argue that central to this conception of a palpably existing possibility is the idea that possibility, for Valéry, is an experience of time. Surely the temporal dimension of possibility isn’t completely absent from Mallarmé’s poem. We remarked that the story takes place amidst a bewildering set of temporal coordinates, caught between going and not have gone, I suggested, between a present (on the one hand) and a non-event that has no present (on the other), precisely

²⁴⁸ Valéry was to acknowledge this indebtedness to Mallarmé himself. “Je sens trop que je n’en pourrais parler à fond sans parler excessivement de moi-même. [Mallarmé] a joué sans le savoir un si grand rôle dans mon histoire interne, modifié par sa seule existence tant d’évaluations en moi.” “Lettre sur Mallarmé.” *OC I*, p. 634.

²⁴⁹ This is indeed an alternative schematic of their differences; a more traditional conception of those differences points to Valéry’s preoccupation with process (and to the work of *l’esprit*) over and against Mallarmé’s preoccupation with effort and language itself.

because it's unrealized. And so it's not that Mallarmé doesn't acknowledge possibility's relationship to time, but that 'Nénuphar' seems more interested in the *temporality of the symbol* in which it's held (that "mystical instant") than in an actual experience of the unfolding of possibility *in time*.

Our point of departure into the specificity of Valéry's own work, then, is on the one hand a refocused temporal horizon in which to inlay the question of the possible, and on the other, a body and mind in which to live it out.



A Breath of Possibility

There's a radiant simplicity to Valéry's poem 'Vue' (1896).²⁵⁰ It begins with the kind of idea that's so obvious, so fundamental as to lie invisibly in the light of its own self-evidence—that speaking is formed on the breath. The poem asks us to settle into this idea—that just shy of what we say is the voice with which we say it, and that just shy of that voice is the breath by which it occurs. 'Vue' transforms this idea into something quite powerful, for it invites us to relate to the breath as more than speaking's physiological underpinning. What if we were to think about the breath, it muses, as the *possibility* of speaking? As such, when it fills the lungs or stirs quietly on our lips, we can witness the breath become the very *existence* of that possibility—the living, palpable reality of something that has yet to happen.

We can see already how 'Vue' could be read as a way of reposing the question we saw in Mallarmé's 'Nénuphar': namely, what form can possibility take? Here, think about Valéry shifting our focus away from the form of language to the existence of the body—to the form of our very living. Valéry shifts the point of contact between the mind and the possible, in other words, from the symbol of the water-lily to the very course of the breath across the lips.



One way of moving into this poem is to imagine the quiet sensation of a breath poised to proffer a word or two, though falling shy of ever doing so. The essence of the poem can be fit to that sensation—to the breath-filled incipience of only possible speech.

I'll cite the poem in its entirety shortly, though before I do so I want to make a few remarks about the setting into which we're invited. The few contextual clues we're given place a woman perhaps on a 'beach' ("la plage," l. 1), or on a boat overlooking the beach, warm and half-asleep under the sprawling 'azure' of a cloudless sky. As a poem about a recumbent woman, it rejoins many of the other sleeping women we've encountered over the course of this project. We're reminded once again of the centrality of the motif, though as I've shown before, and as it will hold true for 'Vue,' the poet's insistence on the sleeping woman as an object of contemplation isn't free of the irony that

²⁵⁰ 'Vue' was written and first published in 1896 in *Centaure*. It contained few variants in its later publications in the *Album des vers anciens*.

would transform her into something other than a simple representation in which to find oneself absorbed. It's perhaps precisely because the image of a languishing woman had become so iconic by the late 19th-century (that it had been represented so many times and in so many ways) that she should become, in Valéry hands, parcel to a poetics that never ceases to challenge the limits of the representable. Indeed central to my own approach to these poems about recumbent women has been to attend closely to the operative irony of that central motif.²⁵¹

Syntactically, 'Vue' reads as a vast, seemingly endless hypothetical. It tells us that if a long, strange set of conditions is fulfilled, the breath of a woman (mingling with the breeze on the ocean) could form itself into something like speaking. Despite the relative simplicity of this core experience, for most critics, 'Vue' numbers among the most inaccessible of Valéry's poetic works. "D'une lecture difficile," says Michel Phillippon of the poem, and with its dense and tangled syntax, in addition to everything that stands to happen, though doesn't, who could reproach him that impression?²⁵²

I want to consider the implications of this term for a moment, for the trouble with a term like 'difficulty' in this case specifically is that while it qualifies an experience of the poem's irregular syntax, it also disfigures the ease that belongs so fundamentally to the experience of something that falls shy of occurring. For isn't it just as true that the poem spares us the effort of grappling with any-thing at all? We should be wary, I argue, of allowing this sense of effort, induced by the language of the poem, to discolor the ease that will prove so central to the experience into which the poem as a whole invites us.²⁵³

In order to calibrate the mind to this ease, indeed to approach this poem through some other lens than that of effort, and difficulty, it's helpful to think about what happens here in its fourteen lines (here we draw back from the poem a bit) as a storm that doesn't take place. Like a storm, we might say, it *impends without occurring*. 'Difficulty' would mean having to weather the storm's actual occurrence, or better yet, would mean confusing the poem for the storm itself, as though the poem were indeed a great tempest of an event, one whose vast, syntactic swells we were being asked to survive. Here the only thing we endure is the event of the storm's impending—an imminence, we could

²⁵¹ See my reading of 'La dormeuse' in Chapter II.

²⁵² Indeed the large majority of readings we find of the poem emphasizes the bewildering complexity of the poem's syntax. Within this critical vein, most notable are the readings by Michel Phillippon, "La femme balbutiante: Vue," in *Paul Valéry: une poétique en poèmes*, and Suzanne Nash, "Vue," in *Paul Valéry's Album des vers anciens: A Past Transfigured*. Nash sees a clear imitation of Mallarméan difficulty in 'Vue.' She claims that the language alone is argument enough that it might easily have been written by Mallarmé himself. "One is tempted to put Mallarmé at the helm of the ship," she remarks (209). Unlike Nash, however, Lawler is less inclined to read the poem as "une imitation complaisante." He explains: "'Vue' montre une volonté d'annexion où le poète parvient à définir un monde de lumière, de vapeurs. Il se laisse guider par la seule analogie alors que chez Mallarmé l'analogie est d'abord fonction d'un dispositif logique. Il en résulte (...) un bonheur plastique qui est bien de Valéry et non d'un autre." "Valéry et Mallarmé: le tigre..." (89).

²⁵³ I use the term 'ease' in order to echo the beginnings of an argument that runs throughout this project—that 'difficulty' is a category of experience that fundamentally misshapes these poems. In my chapter on the liminality of sleep, ease was a way of calibrating the mind to the waxing of an experience even in the waning of conscious attention; it allowed me to draw out the experiential plenitude of dissolution itself. Here I offer a different use of the term, for to relate to 'Vue' with anything more than ease (with effort, or with the will to understand and grasp) is to transform it into something that's certainly more than actual. Ease is a way of helping the poem along—helping it remain just shy of what that stands (so palpably) to happen. I'll have a few closing remarks about ease in the epilogue.

say, lingering in the air before the storm, declaring itself as little more than a silent charge in the atmosphere. The storm impends as a stillness in the air just as the imminent possibility of speaking impends on the breath of the woman. The poem, then, isn't the invitation to bring the full force of our efforts to bear in a great struggle against this air of impending. It asks quite simply, I argue, that we step into the quiet of our own expectancy. It asks us to endure a storm that lingers as though palpably in the hollow of its own possibility.²⁵⁴

Vue

Si la plage penche, si
L'ombre sur l'œil s'use et pleure,
Si l'azur est larme, ainsi
Au sel des dents pure affleure

La vierge fumée ou l'air
Que berce en soi puis expire
Vers l'eau debout d'une mer
Assoupie en son empire

Celle qui sans les ouïr
Si la lèvre au vent remue
Se joue à évanouir
Mille mots vains où se mue

Sous l'humide éclair de dents
Le très doux feu du dedans.



The poem opens with a strange and bewildering set of conditions and hypotheticals. “Si,” it intones, over and over again, as though to ensure that the whole of the poem will resound in an echo of possibility:

Si la plage penche, si
L'ombre sur l'œil s'use et pleure,
Si l'azur est larme, ainsi (...)

(ll. 1-3)

There are three of these *if*'s standing independently in the first stanza, along with a fourth that appears in the third stanza, and a fifth one buried coyly in the “ainsi” of l. 3. Critics have made much of the fact that the initial line of the poem is bookended by hypotheticals. “Le premier vers,” remarks Philippon in his magnificent reading, “est emblématiquement encadré par deux ‘si’ qui mettent en évidence le caractère suspensif, hypothétique, éventuel de ce début.”²⁵⁵ While I agree with this traditional reading of the

²⁵⁴ That is should ‘impend’ already introduces a major shift from Mallarmé. Here the possible is more explicitly the imminent, a poised-to-appear. As such, ‘Vue’ inlays the kind of possibility we find in ‘Nénuphar’ into a more explicit temporal horizon of anticipation.

²⁵⁵ Philippon, p. 147.

opening line, it's the "ainsi" of line three that strikes me as the more tantalizing instance of this "caractère éventuel." Consider that while the term semantically and syntactically signals a shift to the main clause (*si* x, *ainsi* y), it does so by voicing yet another 'if' in the final phoneme, "-si." Quietly echoing the broader ambition of the poem, then, it offers us an event that speaks only in the voice of its own possibility—"ainsi."

Certainly the most unexpected result of all these hypotheticals is what they enact in the voice and experience of the reader. As I suggested, at the heart of this poem is a breath mingling with the air of the sea, one that passes quietly out of the lungs and across the lips of this restful woman, leaving the subtlest residue of salt against her teeth, "au sel des dents" (l. 4). It's in this breath, I'm arguing, that the mere possibility of speaking acquires a tangible reality; it grants sensation to something that has yet to transpire. In nothing less than an act of poetic transubstantiation, by repeating the *si* five times all told, the poem has us as readers reproducing the quiet sibilance of the woman's breath against the teeth, *si*... It's a recurring phonic event that places the only-possible event of speaking on the lips of the reader. We can feel speaking falling shy of itself against the back of our own teeth as the poem formally enacts the possibility of precisely what won't occur.

There's perhaps no greater achievement than to walk the reader unknowingly into such an experience. By so doing, the poem achieves what Valéry always hoped the critical act would become, and what this project as a whole strives to realize in some small measure: a way of making ourselves an 'instrument' of the written word, "de manière que *notre voix*, notre intelligence et tous les ressorts de notre sensibilité se soient composés pour donner vie et présence puissante à l'acte de création de l'auteur."²⁵⁶ Here the 'life' and 'presence' of what only stands to occur, and that we so often overlook, isn't simply conceptualized by the poem *as* experiential; living out Valéry's ideal, the poem sees to it that this mere possibility *becomes* experiential on the lips of the reader.

Notice, finally, how the opening hypotheticals play on the natural behaviors of the mind, how they exploit our assumptions. We hear the opening suite of conditions, known as the protasis, and we find ourselves anticipating the main clause, the apodosis. We lift as though with the expectation of landing (we're swept toward the future), for the 'if' is an opening, a lifting of the mind in the direction of what we anticipate will appear. In the poem, the apodosis is deferred and deferred again by this marching accumulation of conditions, as the beginning of the poem keeps on beginning—as nothing happens precisely because it can't escape its own incipience.²⁵⁷ The syntax so profoundly obfuscates the central subject/verb of the clause through inversion and enjambment that the main clause arrives almost unnoticeably; it takes several re-readings before its role in the larger syntax of the poem becomes clear.²⁵⁸ From a readerly perspective, the suite of conditions stalls the poem, allowing it to speak only as a stammering, a faltering ("un

²⁵⁶ *Cahiers II*. Paris: Gallimard. p. 1273.

²⁵⁷ The opening line of Stephen Dunn's poem 'So Far' comes to mind, as it seems eerily in touch with precisely the essence of Valéry's own poem: "A wild incipience in the air / as if everything stilled / is deeply active (...)." *Different Hours: Poems*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000. p. 67.

²⁵⁸ And yet is there any reason for it be clear? We should be reluctant to settle into that clarity, for the driving purpose of the poem's irregular syntax is to provide us a way of lingering shy of that main clause, of finding ourselves (as if) suspended in that opening lift, in the opening movement of anticipation. We'll return to the effect of this deferral on the experience of the reader at the end of our reading.

balbutiement,” as Phillippon has conceptualized it), as though the happening of the poem were being filibustered by the conditions attendant on its own possibility.²⁵⁹



This *possible* event isn't the only way in which the poem situates itself (and us) just shy of the actual, for it's an only possible event we can relate to, therefore, only *potentially*.²⁶⁰ Just as the poem walks back the actual to the purely possible, so too does it shift our focus from 'seeing' this less-than-something to the very *potential* to see, from "une vue" to "la vue," we could say.

That the poem should stop short of a realized act of sight, even with a title like 'Vue,' departs from a traditional reading of the text. Often critics suggest that the poem constitutes an 'unconventional' form of seeing. "Il faut regarder le monde de travers," says Phillippon, "se laisser aller à un angle de vue non-conventionnel qui rénove son objet."²⁶¹ The 'leaning beach' of l. 1 becomes emblematic in this respect, for it leans (as though inflected) with the unconventional point of view we apply to it. "As the title indicates," Suzanne Nash writes for her part, "this is a poem *about* seeing," one in which the 'eye,' the 'beach,' and the sprawling 'azure' all amount to the poem's "thematized seascape," there as though for the readerly eye to feast upon.²⁶²

And yet it seems to me that while the title promises us a vast, sweeping vista of a sonnet, what the poem ends up offering us indeed falls shy of everything we stand to 'see.' To look back on this poem as an image, I argue, is to look back on a red herring.²⁶³ Consider for instance how strangely vision is (dis)assembled here in the opening stanza; notice how much or how little transpires by way of an act of sight. We do encounter verbs that typically describe the activities of the eye ("penche," as when our heads are tilted, "s'use," "pleure," "est larme") though we find them attached as predicates to what are typically objects of vision ("plage," "l'ombre," "l'azur"). Whence the quasi-surrealist shadows that strain and cry like an eye, or an azure that 'is' a tear-drop (ll. 2-3). The stanza confounds the basic syntax of vision, confusing subjects with objects, and removing the agency of the subject from the act of seeing. All the elements of vision are here (subjects and objects), though they've yet to be meaningfully assembled into a realized act of sight, in other words. The result is that vision *exists* in this stanza, to be

²⁵⁹ Phillippon, p. 148.

²⁶⁰ Rather than parsing the complex philosophical distinctions between these terms, I choose instead to let them mix and collide, *as they do so consistently* in Valéry's own work. 'Vue' is illustrative in this respect—a poem as much about a possible speech act as the potential to hear it, to witness, or even to be the one to make it.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

²⁶² The poem "identifies an experience of perception susceptible to time," she argues, "(thing seen, 'vue,' in the past tense) with both the poem's thematized seascape and the linguistic presence inscribed before the reader's eyes, *une vue*" (208).

²⁶³ An irony of this ilk is one we've seen before. In Chapter III, for instance, the eponymous 'dormeuse' proved the most tantalizing of red herrings—an image we see too quickly, too easily, I argued, for when we do, the true 'object' of attention (form itself) gets swallowed up in the clarity of the image, lost in the figure into which it gathers. As we saw, 'La dormeuse' asks us to leave behind what we see (the sleeping woman) in the interest of what we stand to behold: the wakeful taking-place of form itself. See my chapter, "Sleep's Wakeful Form," for the full argument.

sure, though not because there's anyone doing the seeing, nor because there's anything to be seen: that is, not because it's *actual*. Pace Nash, I want to suggest that by disjoining the syntax of vision, the poet disjoins the *actuality* of the vision it describes. As a result, the poet leaves vision not simply potential, but palpably so.

This is the beginning of the poem's philosophical complexity—that there should be both an existence and an experience of vision short of anything we might see. Indeed the poem points us to a question: short of its conversion into actuality, is there any possible experience of potentiality itself?

This is the conundrum that Agamben famously explores in his now-canonical essay 'On Potentiality.'²⁶⁴ As Valéry does in 'Vue,' Agamben reads the longstanding potential/actual binary we traditionally trace to Aristotle. Rather than a conception of potentiality defined by its structural opposition to actuality, Agamben works toward a conception of the potential that might "conserve itself and save itself in actuality," that is, that would prove more than merely the Other to the actual. He frames the question with Aristotle's reflection on the aporia of the senses. If "the senses do not give any sensation," Agamben cites from the *Physics*, it's because the faculties of sight, touch, etc. are not actual, but potential.²⁶⁵ If they're not actual, then, and there is no sensation of the senses themselves, how could they be said to exist, he ponders? If the event of the poem is only possible, and the ability to 'see' this possibility only potential, what *exists* here in the poem? What is this experience that it insists is so palpable? and that it yearns for us to step into?

We tend to think potentiality is only a potentiality to do, or to be. I have the potential to complete a dissertation, by which I mean that I possess a latent ability to do so. One philosophical line of thinking will hold that short of writing it (short of actuality), there is no experience of that potentiality; there is no sensation of sight short of actual seeing, just as there is no experience of my potential short of the dissertation that actualizes it.²⁶⁶ Agamben notes that this is the position of the Megarians, who, as Daniel Heller-Roazen explains, "hold that potentiality exists only in act and in this way abolishes the autonomous existence of what is potential. According to the Megarians, the kithara player, for example, can be said to be capable of his art only in the moment in which he actually plays his kithara."²⁶⁷

By potentiality, however, Agamben (reading Aristotle) understands not simply the flipside of actuality, not simply non-Being as such, but "the *existence of non-Being*, the presence of an absence," he says.²⁶⁸ To be near to this idea, consider the language we tend to use when speaking about our faculties. We 'possess' the faculty of sight, we say; we 'have' an ability to hear, even when we're not actively listening. Our language suggests that while the faculty of sight isn't a sensation *per se* (while it's only potential), it doesn't follow from this that we don't 'possess' it. For the same reason, Agamben is interested not simply in potentiality as non-actuality, but in the experience of that non-

²⁶⁴ *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Trans. Heller-Roazen, Daniel. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. p. 177.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

²⁶⁶ This is what Aristotle understands as generic potentiality, as in the potential of a child to become President, for instance, one he could only realize through some "alteration (a becoming other) through learning."

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

Being: that potentiality should be something we live, in other words, even as it know no actuality.²⁶⁹

As both an argument and a figure for this “existence,” Agamben offers us the darkness. “Even when we do not see,” he cites from Aristotle, “we distinguish darkness from light.” Because we can *see* darkness, because we can see the lack of light, this “privation,” it stands to reason that potentiality isn’t simply the non-existent underbelly of actuality. “If potentiality were (...) only the potentiality for vision, and if it existed only in the actuality of light, we could never experience darkness (nor hear silence, in the case of the potentiality to hear). But human beings can, instead, see shadows, they can experience darkness: they have the potential not to see, the *possibility of privation*.”²⁷⁰ We experience potentiality, then, not simply in the potential to sing, but in the potential to not-sing, to not-write, to not-act. This is where potentiality becomes experiential—when we realize that it exists not only when hearing takes place in the something-heard, but when potentiality is an experience of not-doing, the experience (or existence) of non-Being. This is what Aristotle means when he says that “the same is potential both to be and not to be.”

Returning to Valéry’s “Vue,” there would be no poem if potentiality were only livable in its transformation into the actual. Here we have a poem thanks to everything that *isn’t yet*, not simply thanks to everything that wasn’t, and now *is*. In Heller-Roazen’s terms, “actuality reveals itself to be simply a potential not to be (or do) turned back on itself, capable of *not* not being and, in this way, of granting the existence of what is actual.”²⁷¹ The argumentative move is in fact less complicated than its double negative suggests. “Potentiality and actuality are simply the two faces of the sovereign self-grounding of Being,” Agamben concludes; “at the limit, pure potentiality and pure actuality are indistinguishable.”²⁷² This conception of potentiality is a conceptual system much closer to that of Valéry’s poem than a reading that sees it as actualizing anything at all. To borrow Agamben’s language, the poem becomes the “preservation” and the “salvation” of the potential. Instead, “potentiality survives actuality and, in this way, gives itself to itself,” he says. Potentiality, to restate his claim, finds an existence without being undone by actuality.

Moreover, I want to suggest that we find this philosophical conception of potentiality not only in ‘Vue,’ but stirring as well in the larger poetics in which it participates. In the Introduction to this project, I explained the importance of Valéry’s choice of words when distinguishing poetry from prose—that in the latter, language (or form) doesn’t ‘survive’ its own utterance; it finds itself superseded in the meaning it’s as though predestined to convey. In poetry, however, form subsists; it *survives* (echoing Agamben’s own choice of words). Central to this conception of poetry is what I’ve called a logic of non-supersession²⁷³—when poetic form doesn’t ‘die’ for having lived, Valéry says, when “l’effet ne dévore pas la cause.” Notice that Agamben’s reading of potentiality is governed by a similar logic of non-supersession in that the kind of

²⁶⁹ This is a perfect summary of the poem’s ambition. It asks us to live something that knows no actuality, that’s only an impending.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 181, original emphasis.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁷² *Ibid.*

²⁷³ See Chapter II.

potentiality that interests him (the “*existence* of non-Being,” rather than non-Being *tout court*) isn’t superseded by the actuality to which it’s traditionally antithetical, or into which it might traditionally be thought to disappear. Potentiality acquires an existence without being undone by actuality, just as poetic form survives the meaning that would otherwise supplant it in an economy of prose.

Agamben, then, allows us to connect our reading of potentiality to the broader vocabulary of Valéryan poetics (this experience of non-supersession), as well as to the Mallarmé text in which the unrealized was first absorbed into the procedures of language. His text reveals, moreover, a useful shorthand for thinking about this “existence” of which Valéry and Agamben both speak, this living privation as possibility into which the poem delivers us. In the *Physics*, Aristotle refers to potentiality as the ‘having of a privation,’ and will remark that such a privation “is like a face, a form (*eidos*).”²⁷⁴ I find this phrasing incredibly helpful for our reading of the poem. Think of ‘Vue,’ at its most basic, as this face of privation—the face of the falling-shy, an evocation of the very form of possibility, and a form (an existence!) that doesn’t lapse into actuality for living on the lips of this woman.²⁷⁵



By the second stanza, we glimpse the opening term of what is technically (though certainly not obviously) the apodosis, or main clause. To resituate us a bit, the poem reads: ‘if these strange things happen, then, *y*.’ Normalizing the syntax of the main clause, the *y* would read: “la vierge fumée ou l’air affleure.” In its original inversion:

(...) pure affleure

La vierge fumée ou l’air
Que berce en soi puis expire
Vers l’eau debout d’une mer
Assoupie en son empire (...)

(ll. 5-8)

Is it a breath, this “vierge fumée ou l’air”? a whisper? a coil of smoke? At minimum we know that it’s “vierge”: ‘virginal’ in that it has yet to happen, in that it would only be the initial stammering of speech (“le balbutiement primordial de la poésie,” says Phillippon), or that it would, even as it exists, remain untouched by the eye of the poet. Consider the strangeness of the disjunction, moreover, “ou,” for what is smoke if not air at its most visible—coils and currents and eddies, tinged in blue for the eye? Is this “vierge fumée ou l’air,” then, something visible or something invisible? It’s unclear that there’s any relevant answer here, for grammatically they play out as appositions to one another rather than as a disjunction—as though the “ou” were in fact an ‘où,’ less an either/or than a resonant hollow ‘where’ visibility and invisibility obtain together in possibility. The

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁷⁵ By the end, “l’œil,” “dents,” “la lèvre,” even the “joue” of “Se joue” reminds us of the face that will never appear, for it becomes, like Aristotle once said of potentiality, the very face of privation, a portrait of absence at its most impending.

“ou,” then, doesn’t so much put us to a decision as offer us a ‘place’ (an ‘où’) in which to tarry shy of that decision, in which to linger.

Critics have pointed out that the poem unfurls as a single, grammatical phrase—that it takes place in a single breath. Surely it wasn’t without reflection, then, that Valéry came to decide on the key verb of the only main clause: “*affleure*.”

On one hand, “*affleurer*” denotes a form of appearance (‘to show on the surface’), though on the other, an only tenuous appearance: to appear “*sous telle ou telle chose*,” as of rocks that gently impend below the surface of the water. It evokes a subtle, delicate form of visibility, in other words, so subtle as to fall shy of something we see with any conviction. Additionally within the term we overhear the adjectival expression “*à fleur*,” as in to rise “*à fleur de quelque chose*,” meaning to rise ‘nearly’ to the level of something, though again, only nearly.²⁷⁶ It’s from this expression that *fleur de sel* takes its name, in fact: a product that comes from skimming off the utmost layer of salt from shallow pools. What results are parings of salt at their near-nothingness: so delicate as to be (in the mind of an extravagant) as though the very texture of immateriality.

Here in the poem, to animate this “*vierge fumée ou l’air*” with a verb like *affleurer* is to suggest that it imposes itself (or would) as weightlessly as a wafer-thin scale of salt applied to the tongue. This seems like an outlandish comparison, but recall the bewildering “*sel des dents*” of the opening stanza. We’re asked to taste something of this tenuousness. Indeed it subtly permeates the poem like salt in the breeze of the sea. By speaking in the voice of an adjective, moreover—“*affleure*” as *à fleur*—it’s as though it were closer to a quality than an action. As *fleur de sel* imposes only the quiet suspicion of the aroma of violets, or so they say, so too does this “*vierge fumée ou l’air*” impose nothing but the faintest “*soupçon d’un commencement*.”²⁷⁷

It’s this lingering modulation of air that the woman (“*Celle*”) is said to “*berce en soi puis expire*,” to cradle and then release: a drawing in and out of the lungs. This (in)visible possibility expires “*Vers l’eau debout d’une mer*,” though “*debout*” not in the sense of a verticality, but in the sense of “*qui tient debout*,” an *enduring*. It’s something that ‘stands’ to happen, though doesn’t.

We’ve evoked the presence of a woman, though like the poem, we’ve failed to explicitly introduce her. She’s the woman on whose ‘lip’ this less-than smoke, less-than air, would barely flourish. And yet she’s conjured only through the synecdochal ‘lip’ (in addition to the ‘eye’ and the ‘teeth,’ also both synecdoches), and by way of the demonstrative pronoun, “*Celle*.” They’re each a hollow reference to an absent referent.

Celle qui sans les ouïr
Si la lèvre au vent remue
Se joue à évanouir
Mille mots vains où se mue (...)

(ll. 9-12)

There is no woman (or antecedent) to which the demonstrative pronoun refers back.²⁷⁸ It points only to an absence: a pronoun whose antecedent is the invisible whole amid its visible parts. She is said to “*se joue[r] à évanouir*,” again, as we explored in Chapter II, a

²⁷⁶ “*Fleur*.” *Le Robert*. 1997. Web 1 Jan. 2016.

²⁷⁷ Philippon, p. 149.

²⁷⁸ Here, yet another echo of the ‘*Nénuphar*.’

play on the (in)transitivity of the verb. Intransitively, she occurs as a passing out of sight (“évanouir”), an evanescence; but the phrase can also be read as her transitively making those ‘thousand vain words’ of the following line “évanouir,” as though her lips spoke less than they rendered imperceptible. Notice as well that what we hear is this evanescence, reinforced by the aligned rhyming positions of “ouïr” and “évanouir.”

Ultimately these lips that gently move the air could only possibly proffer those ‘thousand vain words’ of the final quatrain (l. 12)—‘vain’ because they play out as a dissipation (“expire,” “évanouir”), words ultimately unspoken.

Mille mots vains où se mue

Sous l’humide éclair de dents
Le très doux feu du dedans.

(ll. 12-14)

All that resides in those thousand, vain words never-spoken are the stirrings of the “très doux feu du dedans” of the final line—the soft, gentle kindling of something that could “affleure[r]” the surface, the half-light (“doux feu”) of the possibility with which we began.



The complexity of the logic of unfulfilled or unrealized predications intensifies greatly over the course of this transition into the final stanza. It’s here, where syntactic and conceptual units are endlessly embedded within one another, that we truly realize what a meticulously wrought arabesque of a poem we have in front of us. We can reorder its logic, though by doing so we also tidy up a concept that obtains only in the highly controlled chaos of the line. Nevertheless, here’s the logic of the poem’s end: it’s in those “mille mots vains,” it says, that the ‘inward fire stirs, or evolves’ (“où se mue”). They’re words that we don’t hear, however, that might only be spoken if the opening conditions are met. It stands to reason that if the fire of the final line is contained within the words she doesn’t speak, that there is in fact no where for that fire to *be*. The result is that this pure, inward beauty is contained entirely within these outward (exterior) predications. The resounding “dedans” of the final line, then, mimics and perpetuates the structure of the bait-and-switch we discern in the title, for while it seems to deliver us unto pure interiority, that interiority is contained entirely in an externality that has yet to transpire.

The poem deliberately blurs this inner/outer binary just as it works to blur that of the actual/potential: in other words, just as the storm it offers us is only the event of its impending. The homophonic rhyming words “de dents” and “dedans” do the work of blurring this distinction between the light of this woman’s interiority and the mere ‘flash’ of its possibility.

(...) éclair de dents
(...) feu du dedans.

(ll. 13-14)

Think of this “feu du dedans” as the actuality of what only stands to happen (the storm), and the “éclair de dents” (this flash of pearly white) as the glimmer of its possibility (its impending). The point of making them phonically synonymous is to make them conceptually synonymous. This ‘inward fire’ is displaced onto its outward ‘flash,’ just as the actual storm is displaced onto the flare of its impending, just as *what* she says is displaced onto the glimmering possibility of doing so.



The world of ‘Vue’ is remarkably similar to the world Valéry describes in “Méditation avant pensée” (1901), to which we’ll give the final word on this poem.²⁷⁹ It reads as a small, wistful reflection on the mind before thought, when everything for which the mind will have a category or concept is actively *potential*. In these moments, the mind “suppose, mais diffère” everything that can or will be conceived. “Rendre purement possible ce qui existe,” he says, in what is perhaps a perfect summary of the poem, “réduire ce qui se voit au purement visible—telle est l’œuvre profonde.”²⁸⁰

In ‘Vue,’ *what* the woman says is reduced to the possibility of saying it, to the breath in which that very possibility occurs both palpably and unspokenly, though why? Why take what exists and render it purely possible? Well, because there’s a radiance (a form of beauty!) to the falling-shy by which an object is less-than-seen, or speech, less-than-spoken. “L’âme jouit de sa lumière sans objet,” we read in “Méditation.” Indeed to say that ‘without’ any actual object, the soul discovers a kind of luminousness is to suggest that there’s a light proper to the objectless-ness of possibility—that without an object, the mind (here the soul) basks in (“jouit”) the radiance of its own emptiness, the very light of visibility itself.

‘Vue’ attunes us to the radiance that belongs to the emptiness of what isn’t actual. While in ‘Nénuphar,’ Mallarmé relates to this quiet radiance in the hollow whiteness of the water-lily, in ‘Vue,’ Valéry finds it in the body, on the breath, in experience itself. This clear, radiant emptiness (this less-than-actuality) is precisely what transpires in the mind that attends to an only-possible storm. The mind *waits* in the charge of that atmosphere, in the event of its impending, and by so doing, *experiences* the radiant emptiness of possibility. “Mon attente,” he says, “est un délice qui se suffit.” In other words, to relate to that only-possible storm is to experience the radiant emptiness of our waiting—to relate to possibility not through the figuration, but in and as our own experience, in our *waiting*. “L’âme jouit de sa lumière sans objet.”²⁸¹

²⁷⁹ From “Poésie brute: Méditation avant pensée.” This suite of prose poems appears in *Mélange*, an album comprised of various fragments of writing, and illustrated with watercolors done by the poet himself. The work first appeared in September, 1939, though the fragments date from as early as 1931. *OC I*, p. 351.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

²⁸¹ Earlier I noted that the opening suite of hypotheticals in ‘Vue’ constituted a kind of poetic filibuster—that the apodosis was being filibustered by the conditions of its own possibility. What we’ve yet to consider is the effect of that filibuster on the experience of reading the poem, and in turn, on the experience it ushers us into. What is, then, the most immediate result of that filibuster? this marching accumulation of conditions that defers and defers again, that casts its apodosis in a light of predication, imminence, and possibility? We *wait*. In some small way it makes us feel our time. In the opening suite of conditions, we’re drawn into a strange, dilated sense of time’s unfolding. We lift as though to land, though in the hands of the poem it’s as though we’re left to linger in the lift itself. Poised just shy of any actual occurrence, we slip

In what follows, I want to bring our discussion to a close with a poem that explicitly conceives of an experience of possibility as a form of waiting. As we'll see, we don't wait for some-thing in particular; instead, it's in that very experience of waiting ("sans objets") that the no-thing the woman says, or that the no-thing that actually occurs can be held (can *live*) in and as possibility.

As critic Elizabeth Jackson reminds us, what we now know as the poem 'Les pas' (1921) began as a series of sketches or notes about anticipation. Those notes originally held the title "Attente," which in French conjures both the neutral sense of waiting and the forward-looking sense of anticipation.²⁸² These sketches began as early as 1901, though the poem into which these notes would build doesn't appear until the *Feuillets d'Arts* of 1921, and then again in its final form in *Charmes* of 1922. Between the notes with which it began and the poem into which it blooms, the question of "attente" acquires a "dramatic sequence" not unlike Mallarmé's 'Nénuphar': a would-be encounter with an only-possible woman whose footsteps he may or may not be hearing in the distance as he listens from the bed in the darkness.²⁸³

As Jackson points out, there are two traditional readings of the poem. In the first, the poem represents the "advent of poetic inspiration," with this would-be lover in the position of an ever-elusive muse—there but not there, the advent of an only possible idea. In the second, the poem is one of simple, "amorous expectancy," in which the poet yearns for the lover he can only hope is poised to appear. Regardless of the role we assign to the lover, Jackson remarks, waiting is "basic to the dramatic sequence" and central to the larger inquiry it constitutes. It's *about* waiting, "clearly stated at the start by 'vigilance,' sustained by syntax which decelerates the rhythm, and emphasized at the end" with the term itself, "attendre."²⁸⁴ In his own right, critic Lloyd Austin reminds us that this state of "poised expectancy" isn't simply an isolated theme in a poem or two, but is in fact central to Valéry's larger poetics.²⁸⁵ For Austin, anticipation informs so much of the poet's thinking because it's a vehicle for change, metamorphosis, and flux. "The idea," Austin writes, "or rather the sensation of flux and change and transition from one mood or state to another continually recurs in Valéry's poetry," for that sensation of modulation and movement becomes an instance of 'l'acte pur des métamorphoses.'²⁸⁶ To anticipate, or expect, then, is to situate oneself within this imminence, within the movements of change and flux proper to impending.

into the temporal expanse of our own expectancy, unlike the poet in 'Nénuphar,' in which that feminine possibility, poised to appear, was gathered up and stolen away with in the "mystical instant" of the symbol.

²⁸² "Sense and Sensitivity in Valéry's Poetry: A Study of 'Les pas.'" *The French Review*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Oct., 1976), pp. 46-53. Web. 2014.

²⁸³ Indeed the overlap between this poem and 'Nénuphar' is obviously unmistakable here. By having first moved through 'Vue,' however, I hope to have begun introducing a set of differences between the two texts that will serve to offset the sheer force of their similarities.

²⁸⁴ Jackson, p. 48.

²⁸⁵ Austin, Lloyd James. "Modulation and Movement in Valéry's Verse." *Yale French Studies* 44 (1970). pp. 19-38. Web 2015.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.



In what follows, I want to add another (and final) contour to the shape of Valéryan possibility by situating our discussion more explicitly within the context of time. I'll argue that being fit to the pull of time (that waiting) is for Valéry central to an experience of possibility. Waiting, Valéry seems to say, is where we arrive when we follow Mallarmé's conception of poetic language to its logical and experiential end-point. It's central to the experiential flipside of a language that won't say any-thing, that speaks only as the endless, unfolding, and paradoxical movement of possibility.

That having been said, I want to avoid making too programmatic a reading of this poem, so before we attend to how it brings these various conceptions of time, possibility, and experience full circle, I want to simply move into the poem for its own sake—to watch it generate the question I've already declared that it poses.

To that end, here's the poem in its entirety.

Les pas

Tes pas, enfants de mon silence,
Saintement, lentement placés,
Vers le lit de ma vigilance
Procèdent muets et glacés.

Personne pure, ombre divine,
Qu'ils sont doux, tes pas retenus !
Dieux !... tous les dons que je devine
Viennent à moi sur ces pieds nus !

Si, de tes lèvres avancées,
Tu prépares pour l'apaiser,
À l'habitant de mes pensées
La nourriture d'un baiser,

Ne hâte pas cet acte tendre,
Douceur d'être et de n'être pas,
Car j'ai vécu de vous attendre,
Et mon coeur n'était que vos pas.

On one level we read of a poet, addressing what he suspects—but does not definitively know—to be the faint footsteps of what might be his lover as she approaches his bedside. He perceives these footsteps only dimly, and only when the turbulence of his mind begins to settle, when the mind falls silent. This is not that distinct variety of chilling, vacant silence we associate with the work of Mallarmé, but a fatherly silence, for lack of a better word. “Enfants de mon silence,” that is: steps born *of*, but also born *out* by the quiet, vigilant mind of the poet (l. 1). These mixed possessive adjectives—“*tes pas*” and “*mon silence*”—indeed point to an important continuity between the mind of the poet and the world of possibility that's unfolding around him: steps seemingly possessed by the real as much as to the imagined, and undecidedly so. Again as we saw in ‘Vue,’ possibility for Valéry is more than simply ideational. It belongs (here filially) to the body and mind of the poet.

By the end of the first stanza, we're left with a number of unanswered questions. Is it really his lover? Are these even footsteps? Does he really hear something, or do they only exist in his mind? These uncertainties are present throughout the poem, and they never really seem to be resolved. The poem's opening declaration, for instance—"Tes pas"—at first seems to assign ownership to the steps, to identify them, and by implication, to point to their reality. They are also, however, homonymically, the very words that declare the lover to a figment, a non-reality: 'T(u n')es pas,' or "tes pas" in the informal (l. 1). Through its divergent semantic layers, it's a declaration that conjures her in and out of existence in one in the same poetic gesture. This is also, for that matter, the "personne pure" that opens the second stanza: both someone and no one, a 'divine,' homonymic shadow that haunts the poet's mind.

At the same time, as undecided as these steps may be, there's no uncertain pleasure he takes in their possible approach. "Qu'ils sont doux, tes pas retenus," he exclaims (l. 6). Notice how the line invites what amounts to an endless plunge through the etymological layers of that suggestive and polyvalent past participle, *retenus*. Perhaps it refers to the softly trodden quality of the path she may or may not be making across the floor. At the same time, it's possible that her steps are simply so faint that it seems as if she's not *making* them, but *withholding* them: "tes pas retenus," steps so slight, in other words, that the only way of referring to them would be by way of steps that never take place at all. Like the opening declaration, these steps withhold the presence of what they also and at the same time seem to declare. They proceed, in slightly different terms, as if by some frozen movement, or as we read in the final line the first stanza, "procèdent muets et glacés."

Notice how the evolution of the poem moves the "pas" with which the poem opens so decisively (with the "tes" only reinforcing this sense that yes, someone is there to take these steps, someone to whom they belong) deeper and deeper into virtuality. By way of a brief detour, there's a beautiful and concise formulation of what we mean by the virtual, and it comes out of all places from a writer whose influence on Valéry was always contested by Valéry himself: Marcel Proust. There is a moment in *Le temps retrouvé* when the narrator describes the way a moment of involuntary memory strangely and unconventionally reconfigures the basic terms of experience. This isn't simply an "empiètement" of the past on the present, but a livable past, brought to life in the here and now. The taste of the madeleine provides sensual, material support for a reality that is no longer actual. The past, he remarks, becomes "réel sans être actuel; idéal sans être abstrait."²⁸⁷ Real, that is, without the trappings of the actualized; ideal though not abstract, no less substantive or robust than our experience of the present: a strange, almost chiaroscuric alloy wherein the force of the real stirs within the unrealized. Coming back to the terms of the poem, similarly we read of footsteps that belong neither to the world of the poet's mind nor fully to the world of verifiable reality, but crucially, that reconfigure the terms of one by way of the other: the vacuity of a merely possible presence with the substance of present existence. Ultimately, in other words, what I'm suggesting is that embedded lexically and conceptually within these "pas retenus" is a presence *upheld* ('tenir') as much as *withheld* ('retenir'). There is not nothing at the heart of this would-be encounter. Instead, there's a possibility. Not a purely ideational

²⁸⁷ *Le temps retrouvé*. Paris: Flammarion, 1986. p. 146.

possibility, not an abstraction, nor a theory, but a possibility flush with the hues of rich and authentic experience—an encounter upheld even as it remains unrealized.



By the beginning of the third stanza of ‘Les pas,’ possibility is more explicitly the name of the game. Like in ‘Vue,’ the lyric voice intones: “Si...,” casting a vast, hypothetical shadow. It’s comparable in this way to the ripple effect of a pebble tossed into a pool of water, a resounding ‘if’ of possibility that opens an ever-expanding space of dilating rings, first washing over the final quatrains, and eventually (almost retroactively) overtaking the bounds of the poem as a whole. ‘If,’ he pleads, ‘with those lips outstretched, you plan on ending my uncertainty with a kiss,’ of replacing that fragile, only possible reality with reality *tout court*, no offense (he seems to say), but don’t. “Ne hâte pas cet acte tendre, / Douceur d’être et de n’être pas, / Car j’ai vécu de vous attendre, / Et mon cœur n’était que vos pas” (ll. 13-16).

There are several intriguing aspects about this final stanza, not the least of which is the unexpected switch from the informal “tes pas” to the formal or plural “vous” and “vos pas.” Or, for that matter, the Mallarméan play on “n’être pas” and its homonymic underbelly, ‘naître pas,’ to be born as a step, born *in* the step, or to not be born, all at once. There’s equally the matter of the final line wherein the beating heart of the poet blends (yet again) with the steps of this would-be lover, “et mon cœur n’était que vos pas,” again the suggestion that the domain of this living possibility is indeed the experience of the poet himself. What I want to focus on for the moment, however, is what might be made of this ‘tender act’ that begins the final stanza. For it seems to me that the deferred kiss of this would-be isn’t the only “acte tendre” of the poem. Phonically therein we also overhear the “attendre” of the penultimate line. “Car j’ai vécu de vous attendre,” or ‘waiting for you was a *life* I lived.’

By ‘waiting’ we hear the poet conjure several forms of experience. Yes, a kind of waiting in the traditional sense of the term. It means to remain, to endure time as it moves us either in the direction of a given goal or event, or as it simply sees us fit to the movement of time itself, no goal in sight. In the term “attendre,” however, we also hear the poet evoke those less apparent and no less present layers of its Latin root *attendere*, meaning ‘to stretch toward,’ but also: ‘to pay heed to,’ or simply to ‘attend to.’ Here, in other words, etymologically, conceptually, and poetically, waiting is as much an experience of time as a volitional and meaningful act of attention. To wait in relation to this mere possibility is also to attend to it, to see one’s waiting and one’s attending bound into a single verb of experience, “attendre.”

The crucial detail, however, is that what the poet attends to here in the poem is far less than any actual thing (or person) we could ever attend to. The possible isn’t an object we wait for. It isn’t some-thing toward which we direct our attention, for to do so (to select these footsteps as the object of our wait) is to stumble into actuality. It would mean deferring the value of our experience onto the end it will eventually achieve (the steps that will eventually arrive), and by which that experience would be lost, superceded by the woman herself. Instead, waiting here is a pristinely objectless experience. “L’âme

jouit de sa lumière sans objet.”²⁸⁸ Waiting is self-sufficient, a pleasure “qui se suffit.” The poet waits, and in that experience the possible is both withheld from any actuality and upheld in the living palpability of time itself—in the feel (this *life*) of waiting.

‘Waiting for you was a life I lived,’ the poet says, ‘and my heart was but your steps.’ Again, as we saw in ‘La dormeuse,’ Valéry leaves unspoken the link between the waiting poet and the steps he precisely *isn’t* said to be waiting for. Here it’s in the waiting body, we’re told, (in the ‘heart’ of the poet, beating out the rhythms of time) that these only-possible steps are to be found—real without being actual; ideal without being abstract. “Mon cœur n’était que vos pas.” The waiting heart of the poet is said to *be* ‘your steps,’ their very existence. If his heart blends with the beat of those only-possible steps, in other words, then their possibility lives wholly in the rhythms of the poet’s wait—not an external object of his desirous attention (nor a symbol we steal away with!), but the heart, the beat, that is, *this life* of waiting itself.



²⁸⁸ Blanchot, Maurice. “L’expérience-limite.” *L’Entretien infini*. Paris: Gallimard, 1969. p. 177.

VI

Epilogue: We Wanted to Carry Out a Search

*“Les biens les plus précieux
ne doivent pas être cherchés,
mais attendus.”*
- Simone Weil

In *Attente de Dieu*, the philosopher Simone Weil tells us that attention is the substance of prayer.²⁸⁹ To pray is to turn our attention wholly toward God, she says. What does she mean by attention?

Attention is easily confused with muscular effort or physical exertion, Weil explains. We tell students to pay attention, and in order to show us how much of it is being so diligently paid, they clench their pencils and furrow their brows for us.²⁹⁰ When asked what they’ve paid attention to, they don’t know, for they’ve been busy contracting their muscles, Weil bemoans.²⁹¹ Indeed to exert oneself like this is to walk the body into an experience of effort and exertion that the mind is only happy to remember as the hard-won fruit of true attention.

And yet, “la fatigue n’a aucun rapport avec le travail,” Weil reminds us, by which she means not that where there is fatigue there is no attention, only that fatigue is often but the illusion of attention. It’s a symptom that proves nothing of its cause. Real attention is produced neither by muscular toil nor by the sheer force of will. On the contrary, it’s a way of suspending the focus of our efforts—

L’attention consiste à suspendre sa pensée, à laisser disponible, vide et pénétrable à l’objet, à maintenir en soi-même à proximité de la pensée, mais à un niveau inférieur et sans contact avec elle, les diverses connaissances acquises qu’on est forcé d’utiliser.²⁹²

Attention isn’t the mobilization of thought; it’s the emptying of thought; like prayer, it means entering into intimacy with something we do not possess. Attention is the experience of opening the mind, leaving it wide-eyed and detached from the object it so

²⁸⁹ “Réflexions sur le bon usage des études scolaires en vue de l’Amour de Dieu.” *Attente de Dieu*. Paris: Fayard, 1966. p. 85.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 92.

conventionally seizes upon, such that something exceeding any singular object might begin to echo in the chamber of that detachment.²⁹³

What does this look like? Earlier, in Chapter III, I argued that the resplendent form of the slumbering woman in Valéry's 'La dormeuse' was less an object to be seized by the attention of the poet than an "event" he might attend. This taking-place of form is a kind of 'waking,' or wakefulness, the poem tells us, though it doesn't follow from this that we're being asked to awaken anything at all. Instead, attention under these circumstances, like beholding, is what happens when the desire to reach out and grasp (here the "event" of form) leaves us not with a something-reached, but with the sense of having *been* reached—having been held, as though in reverse, by a wakefulness that isn't exactly our own.

Weil offers us an image of this attention; we might read it with Valéry in mind. A man, she says, places himself on a mountain top, and "regardant devant lui, aperçoit en même temps sous lui, mais sans les regarder, beaucoup de forêts et de plaines."²⁹⁴ He 'perceives' the vastness of the forests and the plains without looking at them, for they fall below, "sous," or *shy* of the gaze by which he might look at them. This isn't an intuitive approach to the landscape. We have to imagine ourselves with him, there on the ridge. We think that in order to perceive the forest, that we must broaden the breadth of our attention; that to pay attention to the sprawling plain below means expanding the frame of our focus, and in a glance commensurate with the vastness of the object, seizing it all at once.

And yet this isn't the kind of the attention that Weil, or Valéry, offers us. Rather, the man on the mountain top (not unlike the poet in 'La dormeuse') empties his attention of the trees in order to be filled with a living sense of the forest. We unfasten the frame of our attention until everything we aren't looking at ("sans les regarder") pools into our perception as though in reverse, filling up our awareness with everything that escapes the looking we need not apply to it. This is what Blanchot means when he tells us that attention is a way of welcoming what escapes attention: "est l'accueil de ce qui échappe à l'attention," an overture onto the unexpected, "attente qui est l'inattendu de toute attente."²⁹⁵

In Chapter V, it was the possible that pooled so expansively into the poet's perception, filling it up when those footsteps of a would-be lover fell shy of their apparition. He was in bed when this occurred, though it was the only mountain top he needed. The poet doesn't wait *for* her. This only-possible woman isn't the object of his attention. Instead he simply waits: without an object, and without precipitation. His attention waits, as Blanchot would say. "L'attention est l'attente: non pas l'effort, ni la mobilisation du savoir autour de quelque chose dont on se préoccuperait. L'attention attend."²⁹⁶ The poet's attention isn't the mobilizing of his thoughts. Rather, his attention

²⁹³ Blanchot explains this passage from Weil by distinguishing between 'personal' and 'impersonal' attention. In the former, attention is but a means to an end: the organization around the object of attention of "tout ce que l'on sait et tout ce que l'on voit, tout le paysage intérieur et extérieur, lequel semble sortir de l'objet, s'enrichissant de lui et l'enrichissant." In the latter, it's not I who pays attention, and there's no 'object' on which to settle. Rather I find myself 'freed' by the attention which, for a moment, I become, he says. *L'Entretien infini*. p. 177.

²⁹⁴ Weil, p. 86.

²⁹⁵ Blanchot, p. 178.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

is a way of fitting himself to the emptiness of time, and by way of that emptiness, “en laissant vide ce qui est vide” (by allowing those footsteps to remain empty of any actuality), he enters a kind of intimacy with something that falls so paradoxically shy of actuality.

Conventional attention won’t allow for this intimacy, for attention as Weil conceives of it, and as it plays out in Valéry, isn’t a form of waiting with haste. “Ne hâte pas,” the poet says. For as Weil tells us, to hastily seize upon an object of attention is to prematurely fill oneself up: “étant ainsi prématurément remplie, on n’est plus disponible pour la vérité.”²⁹⁷ We’re inclined to attend to what we can grasp, though what we’re left with is a falsity where we expected to find a truth, “des faux biens dont on ne saura pas discerner la fausseté.”²⁹⁸ In the context of poetry, attention that fills itself up prematurely—that arrives at its object (as real as it is false)—is a readerly mind that finds what it’s looking for. The danger is that language can designate too quickly, and by so doing, can die in the utterance that cedes in an instant to what it “means.” It can offer us the object of our search, if we let it.

We search in all innocence, however. The cause of this search—to grasp, to understand—is simply that we want to *do* something, we want to act, and in the context of Symbolist poetry, of course we do! There are difficulties to surmount! “La cause,” explains Weil, “est toujours qu’on a voulu être actif; on a voulu chercher.”²⁹⁹ We want to hear what the poem has to say. We want to find its meaning and decipher its speech. And yet as Weil reminds us, “les bien les plus précieux ne doivent pas être cherchés, mais attendus.”³⁰⁰

It was in our reading of ‘La fileuse’ in Chapter IV that this economy of searching of finding came to the fore. I alerted us to the simple fact that Valéry opens his collection with a poem about the waning of attention, when no more searching is taking place, when the spinner is no longer active except in her listless abandonment of her own attention. We open the collection onto the quiet bloom of passivity, a ‘negative effort’ as Weil would call it, in which a dream is spun not as a product of the wheel, but by way of the spinner’s release from the grip of the fiber—a dream that enters and fills her mind through the movement of that release.



Usually our attention to Valéry’s work is driven by effort and strain. We attend to his poems by mobilizing our thoughts, by going out in search of what we stand to find, by grappling with the “difficulty” of its language. For Weil, however, attention isn’t driven by will, effort, or strain. Attention is an act of desire, and for there to be desire there needs to be pleasure and joy, she reminds us.³⁰¹ In this project, rather than relating to the difficulty of Valéry’s poetics with the force of will and effort, I’ve argued that we can relate to its pleasures and joys through the force of desire.

²⁹⁷ Weil, p. 95.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

When we attend to these poems, rather than struggling against their difficulty, we replace effort with desire. And through our desire, we discover something unavailable to will. For Weil, we can't will the godhead to us; we can only desire him. We can't reach out and grasp what defies being grasped. Instead, we're left to attend to what escapes that grasp through our detachment. We can empty our attention, and by way of that emptiness, we can find ourselves filled with something other than what the poem stands to say: that is, filled with the sprawling plain. We aren't carrying out a search. Our listening isn't a listening *for*. Rather it's an act of attention that allows the poem to fall shy of what we stand to hear in it, and by so doing, to speak *as* a poem: that is, as a half-light that illuminates what light obscures.



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