

# **Affinities of the Poetry of Wallace Stevens and Paul Valéry**

## **ABSTRACT**

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This thesis deals simultaneously with the poetics of Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) and Paul Valéry (1871-1945). More precisely, it deals with the poetry and thought of Stevens and with the texts concerned with art and poetry of Paul Valéry; the poetry of the latter is considered only marginally. This is done with the aim to discover the nature of the influence of the French poet on Stevens, who called the former “the prodigy of poetry” at the end of his own life. This influence has shown to be real but still to a great degree invented on my part because I could neither glimpse into the Huntington Library to see what books Stevens possessed and read nor could I trace all the movements of his mind. Nevertheless, it is clear from the way Stevens wrote about having the chance to study Valéry closely when he was preparing his two introductions to the American edition of Valéry's dialogues, that the French poet's oeuvre represented an irresistible lure for him.

In order to bring the two poets, who were contemporaries but never met on one identical platform in real, together I focused, first and most importantly, on the various ways in which Stevens could have approached or encountered the thoughts of Valéry. In the first chapter, I examined the kinds of literary and artistic interests Stevens developed since he began to study at Harvard; I tried to unearth the bibliographical channels that Stevens could have paid or did pay attention to; and lastly, I made a choice of the most important figures, at least as I was able to single them out from his correspondence, in his dialogue with things French. A substantial aid in this research was, of course, criticism touching upon the subject, none of which was happily entirely devoted to this subject alone, except very specifically an essay by Lisa Goldfarb (who published her a full-length study on the influence of Valéry on Stevens by the time I finished writing my thesis) and a chapter on Valéry's aesthetics in a book on Stevens' criticism by Timothy Morris.

These documentable links led ultimately to the structure of the thesis. From it sprung the idea that if I wanted to compare the two poets' ideas on poetry I had to delve into the subject of symbolism which was undeniably a forming influence on Valéry as much as indirectly on Stevens. At the core of the Symbolism connected with the persona of Mallarmé two paramount ideas common to the two compared poets can be found: first, poetry or more generally the deep study of language may result in a method to surpass all the dividing phenomena of the mind in spite of it consequently becoming less accessible to the external observer and, second, that a good deal of consciousness and attention to that

mind itself is demanded by the best of poetry; this is to say a fundamental relation to the self. All of these conditions could be headed by the title of constructive or active imagination<sup>1</sup> – a term Stevens is indissolubly united with. The partly mysterious faculty of the mind he calls imagination is something at once containing, and at once constructing and organizing its own content. Valéry speaks about “l'esprit” in quite the same way except that for him it is never conceivable to separate it from the body to which it belongs starting with his work called *Introduction à la méthode de Léonard de Vinci* which he wrote when he was twenty four years old and Stevens read at seventy four. Most significantly, Symbolism was nurtured and channeled by the philosophy of Kant, his definition of the work of art as determined by the medium in which it is executed, on the one hand, and by the phenomenology of experience of Hegel, on the other. Mallarmé belonged to the first generation taking from him, so did Stevens when he looked for a definition of supreme poetry. Valéry's aesthetics need hardly be mentioned in this context because he developed passionately the inexistent yet achieved structures of “le Néant” in his writing moving the self and the object of art together until he reached the result of an “act of the mind” and “execution” as the true moments of art. Symbolism also promoted the tradition of the arts conversing among themselves – Valéry lived in a jointly artistic and poetic milieu which he inherited from Mallarmé; Stevens on a more individualistic scale did as much as he could in this respect. So symbolism, with its new demand on the purity of the poetic as opposed to the journalistic represented a mark elevated very high, the message being “write only what is indispensable”.

In the third chapter, I concentrated on the subject of pure poetry because, surprisingly, Stevens devoted significant attention to this concept, otherwise associated with Valéry in the twentieth century. In his 1935 lecture “The Irrational Element of Poetry” he enters into a polemic on the subject with Henri Brémond in which he strangely makes it seem as if he did not agree (with the idea that there is some such thing as pure poetry) while at the same time he strives to find the definition of poetry itself and elsewhere talks more or less in the same, revering, manner about a poem by Baudelaire. Stevens opens the concept of “pure poetry” to something largely more deliberate and secular in content than Brémond had in mind, but his own never ending search for what the “supreme fiction” is confirms Brémond's and Valéry's inconclusive statement in this field and that is that poetry cannot be defined; it can only be made. None the less, it is important for any poet who wants to write great poetry to have a limit idea a his art, to paraphrase one of the ideas of Valéry.

The fourth chapter deals with composition as the idea that can be most satisfactorily assigned central in poetry both to Stevens and to Valéry. The latter, of course, had gone through a personal

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1 Lentricchia. *The gaiety of language: an essay on the radical poetics of W. B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968) – Lentricchia attributes this term to the poetry of Mallarmé and Valéry in this book.

experience with the writings of Poe and even wrote about his allegiance to that poet's theory in one of his first letters to Mallarmé (who translated the Raven to French in around 1954) calling him as forever after “Maître”. The choice of this subject for the theme of a chapter also corresponded to my primary intention to engage with what is the matter of the will in the process of making poetry. The significance of conscious composition is discussed on the basis of several very late poems of Stevens such as the “Sail of Ulysses” and on Valéry's dialogue *Eupalinos ou l'Architecte* and other texts such as “Fragments des mémoires d'un poème” or the dialogue *L'âme et la Dance*. The discussion in this chapter turns around the pivoting idea found in both poets that composition of poetry closely relates to the “composition” of the poet's self, or in Valéry's terms, to the relation of the spirit to the body to the world, since only the body, just like the poem, can make any real acts in the world. This chapter has a result of its own which is the recognition of the value poetry held for both poets in question, and that is transformation. Transformation of the artist and, potentially, of an engaged audience.

The last chapter is devoted to a recapitulation of the ideas and a discussion of the results with possible developments into the direction of philosophy (Lévinas – relation of responsibility to the *other* as expressed in the poetry at hand), or into literary science (Cook, Sewell – charms and enigmas).