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VALÉRY'S GRAVEYARD

Le Cimetière marin

Translated, Described, and Peopled



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CHAPTER 1

The Cemetery

“My verse is made of *words*,” writes Valéry, echoing his master Mallarmé’s reply to a painter, who though “full of ideas” could not make verse to his own liking: “It is not with ideas, my dear Degas, that one makes verse. It is with *words*.” Let us begin with the principal words of the title *Le Cimetière marin*, prose though it is.¹

§1.1 A Dream of Health

Cimetière, “cemetery” or “graveyard,” is in origin the Greek word *koimētērion*, which means a “sleepery,” a sleeping-place or dormitory; specifically, a certain kind of dormitory, the place in a temple where a suppliant would slumber in order to obtain divine aid in dream. As such, a cemetery is a place for dreaming as well as a burial ground, and there is no denying the dreamlike character of the *Cimetière marin*, with its rapid shifts, vivid images, shadowy forms, and strong feeling. Further, whatever dreams may come to the dead, this poem evidently belongs to one that is aware of his living body: now the poet rises effortlessly to a great height, now he is irresistibly pulled down; he is rooted to the spot, or caught, as if in the race around Troy (M15). In the consecrated ground of the sleepers he alone experiences life; he breaks free and runs.²

The Greek practice of oracular dreaming in such a precinct is also suggested by the epigraph to the poem. Among Pindar’s odes for the victors in athletic contests the one from which these lines are drawn is exceptional, for it is occasioned not by a victory, but an illness, that of the poet’s patron King Hieron of Syracuse; hence it is based on prayer and consolation. Not celebrating the winning of a laurel crown, nevertheless it features the tale of Coronis, whose name is a word used for a wreath of

¹ Verse: C 1:257. Degas: *Poésie et pensée abstraite*, CE 1:1324. To Marcelle Crespelle Valéry said of the title phrase *Cimetière marin* (which as verse would be an *hémistiche*, six syllables), “A melancholy insomnia gave birth to the first word; a leaking faucet brought forth the second. I had the title; all I had left to write was the poem.” *Deux matinées avec Paul Valéry*, in *Paul Valéry vivant* (Marseilles: Cahiers du Sud, 1946), 232. Insomnia makes one wish for sleep: see the text immediately following in §1.1.

² Dreams may come: cf. *Hamlet* 3.1.66.

flowers by a famous poet before Pindar. Although favored with the seed of Apollo, she “loved things absent” (ἤρατο τῶν ἀπεόντων), and straying to the bed of another, was destroyed. But the god saved her child, his son Asclepius, “the gentle craftsman/of body-strengthening relief from pain” (τέκτονα νοδυνίας / ἤμερον γυιαρκέος), who is the model for the healer Pindar desires. This physician later became divine, and it was said that a night in his temple would result in advice from the god himself. Yet oracles were ever uncertain and obscure; a message received in the dark dormitory, even if from the divinity, may not always have promoted health. Around the staff of Asclepius twined a serpent, ambiguous bearer of wisdom and danger; Valéry liked to draw a similar figure, in which the staff was replaced by a key.³

Relaxed after his thinking, the poet in the early stanzas may succumb to the spell of the holy precinct, trusting that his “dreaming contemplation that is knowledge” (M8), the *Songe* of the second stanza, cannot be illusion—that he is no *songe-creux*, who “dreams emptily” (cf. M12). His edifying state leads him to construct the edifice of the next stanza; that is, to make a temple, or a tomb (Latin *aedes*). But “Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it,” warns the psalmist. If the poet is truly a *thinker*, he must not fail to exercise the resources of thought, which is the sovereign of his soul. As Hegel explains, “He who seeks edification [*Erbauung*] only, who wants to enshroud his earthly manifoldness of existence and thought in mist, and craves the indeterminate enjoyment of this indeterminate divinity, may look to where he can find this; he will easily find the means to become enthusiastic over something and thereby to puff himself up. But philosophy must beware of wishing to be edifying.” In the psalm of Solomon just quoted we read (according to one interpretation) that the Lord “giveth [his gift] to his beloved in sleep”; and in fact he did bestow wisdom upon Solomon in a dream. So Hegel continues, regarding those who follow the path he has described, “by enshrouding self-consciousness and relinquishing the understanding

³ Ode: *Pythians* 3 (quotations: lines 20, 6, the latter trans. Race). Coronis: Greek *korōnis* means “curved,” or as substantive, something curved; cf. Latin *corona* (“crown”) and its English derivatives. Famous poet: Stesichorus, in *Greek Lyric* III, LCL (1991), fragment 187, p. 88. Advice: Aristophanes, *Plutus* (*Wealth*) 400–412, 633–747. Figure: one such, between the letters P V, is reproduced from C (CNRS) 16:141 in vol. 1 of the Peter Lang *Cahiers/Notebooks*, p. 539; another version appears as the colophon of the volumes of the Princeton *Collected Works*. On Asclepius generally, including records of cures, see Emma J. Edelstein and Ludwig Edelstein, *Asclepius: A Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1945 [reprinted, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998]); also C. A. Behr, *Aelius Aristides and the Sacred Tales* (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1968).

they think to become His beloved [*die Seinen*], to whom God gives wisdom in sleep; thus, indeed, what in sleep they receive [or conceive, *empfangen*] and give birth to are, consequently, dreams." Not every contemplative dreamer is a Solomon. If the poet rises swiftly to his "pure point," yet the journey before him will require that, like Dante, he descend again and "go by another way" (*tenere altro viaggio*).⁴

§1.2 Epic and Pastoral

The ancestors of all Western graveyards lie in Homeric epic. They too are indicated by the title, as a result of an ambiguity. *Le Cimetière marin* may refer not only to a cemetery that is *by* the sea, as in "sea cliff" (*falaise marine*), but also to one that is *of* the sea, as in "sea salt" (*sel marin*). This duality is reflected in the association of graveyard and sea in the poem; for example, of "the marble roofs of the houses of the dead—that is to say, gravestone slabs" (M6) with the "roof" that is the surface of the sea. Now the *Iliad* takes place on a battlefield by the sea, and what is that but a terrible graveyard peopled by the wrath of Achilles?—that wrath which

πολλὰς δ' ἰφθίμους ψυχὰς Ἄϊδι προΐαμεν
 ἡρώων, αὐτοὺς δὲ ἐλώρια τεῦχε κύνεσσιν
 οἰωνοῖσι τε πᾶσι.

sent down to Hades many valiant souls
 of warriors, and made the men themselves to be the
 spoil for dogs
 and birds of every kind.

Again, the site of the *Odyssey*, for all its adventures on land, is surely the sea itself, and there most of the shipmates of Odysseus come to rest.

⁴ Montaigne calls himself *songecreux*: 1.20 (*Que philosophe, c'est apprendre à mourir*), p. 85 (Frame, 60). The form *pense-creux*, indicative of thinking rather than dreaming, occurs in Dostoevsky's *Demons*, 1.3.7. Psalm: Psalms 127.1–2 (Vulgate, 126.1–2). Another reading is "gives his beloved sleep." The reading here, which is Luther's, is defended in Th. Booij, "Psalm 127,2b: a Return to Martin Luther," *Biblica* 81 (2000), 262–268. Solomon: 1 Kings 3.5–15 (Vulgate, 3 Kings). Hegel, *Preface*, 8–9 (Oxford paras. 9–10). Valéry "was so convinced of the emptiness of dialectic that he never took the trouble to read Hegel": Judith Robinson, *L'Analyse de l'Esprit dans les Cahiers de Valéry* (Paris: José Corti, 1963), 26, n. 11, citing C (CNRS) 15:534, 28:923, in both of which places he says that he is ignorant of Hegel. Cf. his comments in a 1943 letter to Heidsieck, *Œ* 2:1503. Dante: *Inferno* 1.91.

πολλὰ δ' ὃ γ' ἐν πόντῳ πάθεν ἄλγεα ὄν κατὰ θυμόν,
 ἄρνύμενος ἦν τε ψυχὴν καὶ νόστον ἐταίρων.
 ἄλλ' οὐδ' ὧς ἐτάρους ἐρρύσατο, ἰεμένός περ.

Many the woes he suffered in his heart upon the sea,
 seeking to win his own life and the return of his comrades.
 Yet even so he did not save his comrades, for all his desire.

Thus the place where the warriors lie, and the place where the mariners lie, are each indicated in the opening lines of the epics; in our poem they are suggested not only by the title, but also by the “pines” (long a poetic term for ships) and “tombs” of the second line.⁵

Such promises of Homeric descent are fulfilled by the form of the whole, which is strongly reminiscent of the epics. There are twenty-four stanzas, as the epics have twenty-four books, and we will see that the climax of the poem occurs in the same place as in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (§8.1). Moreover, the development generally resembles their common plot: the story of a man (Achilles, Odysseus) who, after long stress of war, is out of his proper place of honor. He thinks he knows that place, but in fact it is hard to glimpse, its truth remains to be revealed. He pursues it as he can see it, the recompense for his toil, but his ambition is misdirected; he suffers the loss of his companions (warriors, shipmates) and is immobilized. Ultimately he emerges from obscurity, destroys his enemies, overcomes a separation from a great equal (Priam, Penelope), acknowledges the source of his being (Peleus, Laertes), and takes the place that was his—until his labor begins again, that will lead to his mortal end. Along the way he has become acquainted with death, including his own, and has taken counsel from the dead (Patroclus, Teiresias and others). —And if our poem is like the Homeric epics in strategy, it is similar as well in tactics, for Valéry, like Homer and his Odysseus, is a poet of concealment and revelation, of power *latent* in the word—power

⁵ *Iliad* 1.3–5. *Odyssey* 1.4–6. Pines: e.g., Virgil, *Eclogues* 4.38, has “nautica pinus,” literally “the sailor’s pine,” i.e. “the ship of pine.” Valéry’s own translation does not carry over the synecdoche: *Les Bucoliques de Virgile*, CE 1:247. Cf. A.-F. F. de Saint-Ange’s version of *Metamorphoses* 1.134–135, “Et la mer vit les pins, avec orgueil flottans,/Insulter la tempête, et braver les autans,” (“And the sea saw the pines, pridefully floating,/insult the storm and brave the gales”), *Les Métamorphoses d’Ovide traduites en vers*, new ed. (Paris: Crapelet for Desray, 1808), 17; the Latin does not have “pines.” Cf. also Tirso de Molina, *El burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra* (*The Mocker of Seville and the Stone Guest*), 542–543, and Osip Mandelstam’s “Pindaric fragment” *Нашедший подкову* (*He Who Finds a Horseshoe*), in *Poems*. English examples are in *OED* s.v. “pine.”

exploited by the ancient poet in the long anticipation of the fulfillment of Achilles' oath, and in the history that springs from Odysseus's scar. So the title may express the Homeric, or super-Homeric, pride, that comes to light in the fourth stanza's disdainful rising above the "wide expanse [...] / That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne": this sea-poetry is worthy of its predecessors.⁶

Yet the *Cimetière marin* is short, by comparison—in length about one percent of a Homeric epic—and for the most part it is pastoral in character, rather than descriptive of strife; in fact the poet fancies himself a shepherd in stanza 11. In this way it follows the lead of Theocritus, whose pastoral poetry was imitated by Virgil in the *Eclogues*, which Valéry translated into French verse. For, as A. S. F. Gow puts it, according to "the principles of which [Theocritus] and Callimachus were the chief exponents [...], long Epics on the Homeric pattern were out of date, and [...] the times now called for smaller scale and higher finish of detail." Theocritus's goatherd prefaces his contribution to an exchange of songs by saying how he hates those who pretend to compete with Homer in long poems. In more recent times Edgar Allan Poe states flatly that "a long poem does not exist." "What we term a long poem," he says, "is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones—that is to say, of brief poetical effects."⁷ Valéry agrees: "The long [*grands*] epic poems, when they are beautiful, are beautiful even though they are long, and are so by fragments." One day he asked André Gide, "Do you know anything more tedious [*embêtant*] than the *Iliad*?" As for the "higher finish of detail" expected by Theocritus, Valéry remarks, "Voltaire said wonderfully well that 'Poetry is made only of beautiful details.' I say nothing else."⁸

⁶ Oath: *Iliad* 1.233–244. Scar: *Odyssey* 19.386–475. On structural similarity to other verse cf. M4. Expanse: Keats, *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*.

⁷ Gow: *The Greek Bucolic Poets*, trans. A. S. F. Gow (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1972 [reprint of Cambridge University Press ed., 1953]), 49. Similar language in *Theocritus*, ed. Gow, vol. 1 (Cambridge University Press, 1952), xxii. Goatherd: Theocritus, *Idylls* 7.45–48. Cf. Callimachus, *Epigrams* 30 and *Aetia*, fragment 1. Edgar Allan Poe, *The Poetic Principle*, in *Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 71; *The Philosophy of Composition*, 15. Valéry refers to this opinion of Poe in C 2:1002.

⁸ Fragments: *Rhumbs*, *Œ* 2:638. André Gide, 25 Oct. 1938 (describing the previous day), *Journal 1889–1939*, Pléiade (1951), 1325. Voltaire: *Au sujet du Cimetière marin*, *Œ* 1:1502. The reference may be to the *Discourse on Tragedy*, where Voltaire writes, "The beauties of detail are what sustain works in verse and make them pass down to posterity." As an instance of Valéry's attention to detail, consider that the first three lines of our poem begin with the letters C E M, a sequence which he often uses to refer to *Corps Esprit Monde* (Body Mind World): see C, Index analytique, s.v. "Corps (C), Esprit (E), Monde (M)." (The

Putting together the Homeric and Theocritean resemblances, we may view our poem as a heroic performance in a little space, a work epical-pastoral, as Polonius might call it, if not a “poem unlimited.” Whatever Valéry’s knowledge of classical sources may have been, for him as for Virgil the models that shape the poem are Greek.⁹

§1.3 The Poet by the Sea

These Greek literary connections bring to our attention that the title of the poem could be taken to signify Greece itself, that ring of earth and marble around the sea, a kind of Atlantis sunk beneath time—a “stable treasury” indeed (stanza 3), like Shelley’s Athens, which quivers with life as our roof does:

Within the surface of Time’s fleeting river
 Its wrinkled image lies, as then it lay
 Immovably unquiet, and for ever
 It trembles, but it cannot pass away!¹⁰

Or more generally the Mediterranean classical world. France too, at the time the poem was written a vast graveyard of nations; or all Europe: “the most, the most precious graveyard,” an admiring outsider calls it: “The precious dead lie there, each stone over them speaks of such ardent past life, of such passionate faith in their deeds, their truth, their struggle, and their science....” And even the whole world of land and water, “for of famous men the whole earth is the sepulcher.”¹¹

It is further possible that the title names as well as signifies; that the poem is a burial-place of the *poet’s* “ardent past life.” He explains, “Works seem to me, I must confess, like the dead residues of a creator’s vital acts,” and the narrator of his *Evening with Monsieur Teste* says, “[A]ll

next lines begin L O Q, possibly suggesting speech [Latin *loquor*, “speak”] or rags and tatters [*loques*]; and the second stanza has almost the same six initial letters.)

⁹ Polonius: *Hamlet* 2.2.415–419.

¹⁰ Shelley, *Ode to Liberty*, stanza 6. Cf. Hegel, just before the passage on the “Bacchanalian revel” (M16): “Appearance is the coming to be and passing away that itself does not come to be and pass away,” *Preface*, 35 (Oxford para. 47). Shelley’s fourth line is a modification of a line of Wordsworth’s *Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle, in a Storm, Painted by Sir George Beaumont*, which has a number of points of contact with the *Cimetière marin*, including a “treasure-house divine” of time.

¹¹ Outsider: Ivan Karamazov, in Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (New York: Random House, 1991), Book 5, chap. 3, p. 230. Sepulcher: Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 2.43.3.

[the words] that I have myself uttered to others, I have always felt them become distinct from my thought,—for they were becoming *invariable*.” The locus classicus for this sentiment is the *Phaedrus* of Plato, a pastoral by the river’s edge; and Nietzsche takes up the theme, asking “What things do we copy when we write and paint...?” The answer is, “Alas, always only what is just about to fade and is starting to lose its fragrance! Alas, always only passing, exhausted thunderstorms, and late, yellow feelings! [...] And it is only your *afternoon*, you my written and painted thoughts, for which alone I have colors, many colors perhaps, many motley caresses and fifty yellows and browns and greens and reds....” These two are among the most poetical of philosophers; that is why they feel so keenly the oppression of the fixed word, of whatever in speech is said and done.¹²

One may undertake to clear fallen leaves from the well of inspiration.

I’m going out to clean the pasture spring;
I’ll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may).

But this may not suffice, since the lament over finality expresses the fear of death, the artist’s dread of expiring with his works.

I have a sinne of feare, that when I have spunne
My last thred, I shall perish on the shore.

Bringing its full weight to bear, the dead past imposes upon Baudelaire’s would-be singer with the cracked soul its characteristic stillness: his voice

Semble le râle épais d’un blessé qu’on oublie
Au bord d’un lac de sang, sous un grand tas de morts,
Et qui meurt, sans bouger, dans d’immenses efforts.

Seems the thick rattle of a wounded man, forgotten
at the edge of a lake of blood, under a great heap of dead,
and dying, stirless, with immense exertion.

¹² Works: Frédéric Lefèvre, *Entretiens avec Paul Valéry* (Paris: Le Livre, 1926), 107. Invariable: *Monsieur Teste*, *Œ* 2:15. Cf. “Things won are done; joy’s soul lies in the doing,” Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida* 1.2.313. *Phaedrus*: see especially 274b ff. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 296, *Werke* 5:239–240. In their origin the thoughts were “*schlimmen Gedanken*” (“wicked thoughts”); cf. Valéry’s *Mauvaises pensées et autres* (*Wicked Thoughts and Others*), *Œ* 2:783 ff. Most poetical: as Philip Sidney says of Plato, in *An Apologie for Poetrie*.

Like one leaf in a pile, immobile as Achilles in our twenty-first stanza, he lies there as if on a battlefield of the *Iliad*—in which epic, nevertheless, death is said to make way for new life.

οἷη περ φύλλων γενεή, τοίη δὲ καὶ ἀνδρῶν.
 φύλλα τὰ μὲν τ' ἄνεμος χαμάδις χέει, ἄλλα δὲ θ' ὕλη
 τηλεθόωσα φύει, ἔαρος δ' ἐπιγίγνεται ὄρη·
 ὡς ἀνδρῶν γενεὴ ἢ μὲν φύει ἢ δ' ἀπολήγει.

Just as are the generations of leaves, such are those also of men.
 As for the leaves, the wind scatters some on the earth, but the
 luxuriant
 forest sprouts others when the season of spring has come;
 so of men one generation springs up and another passes away.

The past is not only obstructive, but generative too. Perhaps then it is not accidental that in French the third and fourth lines of our poem can be heard (although not seen) to say “Noon the just composes there—from the late sea—the sea, ever rebegun.”¹³

Nothing of this is felt at first by our poet, who gazes past the tombs down upon the roof of the sea, witnessing activity as if from a lofty Lucretian sanctuary (*editum templum serenum*)—but perceiving as yet no Lucretian storm.

Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis,
 e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem;
 non quia vexari quemquamst iucunda voluptas,
 sed quibus ipse malis careas quia cernere suave est.
 suave etiam belli certamina magna tueri
 per campos instructa tua sine parte pericli.
 sed nil dulcius est bene quam munita tenere
 edita doctrina sapientum templa serena,
 despiciere unde queas alios passimque videre
 errare atque viam palantis quaerere vitae.

Pleasant it is, when over a great sea the winds trouble the waters,
 to gaze from shore upon another's great tribulation:
 not because any man's troubles are a delectable joy,

¹³ I'm going: Robert Frost, *The Pasture*. Feare: John Donne, *A Hymne to God the Father*. Baudelaire: *La Cloche fêlée, Les Fleurs du mal* 74. *Iliad* 6.146–149. The late sea: hearing “feu la mer.”

but because to perceive what ills you are free from yourself is
 pleasant.
 Pleasant is it also to behold great encounters of warfare
 arrayed over the plains, with no part of yours in the peril.
 But nothing is more delightful than to possess lofty sanctuaries
 serene,
 well fortified by the teachings of the wise,
 whence you may look down upon others and behold them all
 astray, wandering abroad and seeking the path of life.¹⁴

§1.4 The Graveyard Decomposed

The central word of the title has, in prose, two syllables: *cime-tière*. The first is a word in its own right, meaning “top,” “summit,” “height”; and also, spelled *cyme* though no different in origin, the kind of inflorescence so called in English too. The second syllable sounds like *tiers*, “third,” formerly in general adjectival use, now chiefly employed, as adjective and noun, in the sense of “third party,” “third person,” “outsider (to a couple or group),” and in the sense of “a third (fractional part)” of a whole.¹⁵

The notion of a *tiers* was of some importance to Valéry. For example, he judges that “It is unworthy [*indigne*] to make use of arguments that are not valid in solitude, that work only in public, by means of *third parties* [*tiers*], on *third parties* as *third parties*.” More generally, in his preface to *Monsieur Teste* he writes of his former self, “It seemed to me unworthy to divide my ambition between the concern for producing an effect on others and the passion to know and acknowledge myself as I was.” These are expressions of pride: discoursing with himself, the thinker stands apart from the bystanders, who cannot understand. “Essence de moi—fort incomprise par les tiers” (“Essence of me [*or My essence*—greatly misunderstood by outsiders”), says Valéry to himself. Regarding the contrast between his work of composing the *Cimetière marin* and the poem as finished fact, he further remarks that “the notion of *Author* is not simple; it is so only in the *eyes of third parties* [*tiers*].” This makes our poet’s initial position in the graveyard equivocal. Looking down in pride from his vantage point, a height of personal deservingness after his effort of thought—what can be called a *cime*—he is himself a

¹⁴ Lucretius 2.1–10, trans. Rouse/Smith. The translation is line for line, except for the seventh and eighth lines. There the Latin word order suggests that the sanctuaries or temples are lofty by virtue of the teachings of the wise.

¹⁵ Prose: as distinguished from verse, in which mute *e* before a consonant or aspirate *h* often serves as the vowel of a syllable (cf. n. 1 of this chapter).