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The Mystique of Writing: Mysticism and the Poetic Theory of Paul Valéry

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«Il y a toujours eu un mystique en moi»
[There has always been a mystic in me]
(1974, 428)

In his famous Cahiers, the literary crusader Paul Valéry collected thoughts on literature, culture and himself, wrote in an aphoristic style and in an antagonistic tone reminiscent of Nietzsche, disavowed philosophers and philosophical writing, mocked French literary tradition and extravagantly praised the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé and the music of Richard Wagner. Dissatisfied with the course of his own poetry, he renounced it for twenty-one years, a period often referred to by his critical readers as the «Great Silence». He never stopped writing, however, and although his ideas on poetry are far from transparent, he apparently never had doubts about what literary art should be. He ultimately became obsessed with what he called the essential musical components of poetry, and he thought of the poem as language reduced to perfection. In Analects he writes: «I have an innate horror of the vague; I cannot like what is not clear to me» (1970, 602). Because he glorifies the poetic process and points to the rigor of writing, he narrates his own «conversion» to poetry and characterizes the task of the poet in a quasi-missionary tone, as if describing a spiritual calling:

My intent was never to be a poet... But I have at times chosen to act as if I was one and as good a one as possible, bringing to bear all the attention and all the powers of combination and analysis at my command, so as to penetrate into a poetic state at its purest, without remaining there: as a proof, as a means, as an exercise, as a sacrifice to certain divinities. (qtd. in Grubbs 84; emphasis added)

Eventually, this celebration of poetic purity and his disgust for «what is not clear» is abandoned for an idée fixe that is almost diametrically opposed to
clarity, i.e. obscurity. As he writes in praise of a cult of obscurity: «...All that is 'noble,' lofty, and heroic is obscure, incomprehensible by nature, and all that's great has to be incomprehensible... For if the hero were crystal-clear (to himself as well) he would not be heroic» (1970, 359; emphasis in the original).

Purity, clarity and obscurity; the art of suggestion (1974, 1114); multiplicity of signs (1974, 1123); indeterminacy (1974, 1000); perpetual invention (1974, 1077) and supremacy over prose. These attributes Valéry utilizes in his definitions of poetry. In an unfinished passage of the Cahiers, he reacts passionately against the misreading of his ideas on poetic perfection:

Poésie pure! j'ai lancé cette expression et dans ma pensée c'était désigner l'extrême de la poésie réellement faisable, à l'apex de la volonté de la poésie, et donc le type idéal où la technique et l'analyse du sujet-lecteur tendent toujours-- (perfection)--et on en a fait un idéal mystique admettant tout relâchement, et tout (1974, 1110)

[Pure poetry! I have invented this expression and in my system of thinking it designates the highest degree of truly feasible poetry, the apex of the will to poetry and therefore the ideal type in which both technique and analysis of the subject-reader always reach toward (perfection)—and people have made of this [concept] a mystical ideal thus allowing every relaxation, and every... ]

His enthusiasm and optimism concerning the superiority of poetry in relation to other arts, however, begins to fade with time. As he later states in a vaguely elegiac aphorism:

J'avoue que je ne crois pas [ou]s les jours à l'avenir de la poésie. Les excitations qu'elle peut donner sont aujourd'hui fort distancées. Aux esprits de qualité supérieure I difficile I la Science donne plus. La musique. Aux autres, les applications de la Science donnent immédiatement sans l'ennui de la lecture des émotions rapides. (1974, 1110)

[I admit that I no longer believe {everyday} in the future of poetry. The excitement that poetry can offer is nowadays quite remote. To the spirits of superior quality / difficult / Science offers more {than poetry}. Music. To the others, the applications of Science immediately give swift emotions without the boredom of reading.]

Valéry faces a paradox that is inherent in his artistic project. He is alternately an iconoclast and a believer in the practice of the «religion» of poetry. He is

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(1) He also rejects the idea of emotion as participating in literary creation.
also Platonic in his continuous aspiration for what cannot be readily achieved. The purity of poetic language is one of the objects which is «transcendent», that is beyond the reach of the poet. It belongs in an abstract zone— an au-delà poétique, so to speak. Thus, in a passage that is similar to an oracular revelation, he writes of his perception of «the impossible pure»

Je suis monté sur la terrasse, au plus haut de la demeure de mon esprit...
... je connus toute la valeur et la beauté, toute l'excellence de tout ce que j'ai ne pas fait.
Voilà ton oeuvre—me dit une voix.
Et je vis tout ce que n'avais pas fait.
Et je connus de mieux en mieux que je n'étais pas celui qui avait fait ce que j'ai fait—et que j'étais celui qui n'avait pas fait ce que je n'avait pas fait—Cet que je n'avais pas fait était donc parfaitement beau, parfaitement conforme à l'impossibilité de le faire. (qtd. in Guifford and Stimpson 320; emphasis in the original)

[I climbed up on the terrace—the highest dwelling of my spirit...
...I acknowledged the value, the beauty and the excellence of everything that I have done.
Here is your work—a voice said to me.
And I saw everything that I had not done.
And I became more and more aware that I was not the one who had done what I had done—and that I was the one who had not done what I had not done—What I had not done was thus perfectly beautiful, perfectly according to the impossibility of being done.]

Attaining the absolute poetic form becomes in Valéry an esthetic ideal subjected to two potentially antithetical principles: a valorization of rules of composition, which derives from classical art—such as rigidly metrical and stanzaic forms (Wellek 30-31)—and a search for the archaic as a means of poetic renovation, which is modern—the Orphic power of poetry to be figurative and incantatory (Wellek 30). In order to harmonize his clearly ambitious aspirations within the constraints of «reality», Valéry resorts to a method of thinking referred to as «angélisme rationaliste» (Gifford and Stimpson 319), which entails a conceptual reduction of all values to the spiritual level and to the quest for silence. Thus, Valéry, the poet who entered literary history by campaigning for intellectual rigor and proposing the practice of «poetic calculus» as a means to master the poem «after the moment of conception» (Wellek 24), is clearly a proponent of mystic sensibility.

As Judith Robinson-Valéry points out, the expressions «mysticism» and «mystic» are mentioned frequently in Valéry. These concepts function in his
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esthetic as the logical correlative for his intellectual concern with «la pure possibilité de penser» (1963, 211). As Robinson-Valéry emphasizes, mysticism in Valéry is a concept that is devoid of religious implications. The poet—obviously following Nietzsche—abhors religion in general and Christianity in particular. He identifies himself as an agnostic and attacks Christian doctrine, which he sees as destructive of all the values that cause the human spirit (mind) to be creative and powerful (Robinson-Valéry 203). About the New Testament he writes that it essentially contains «[A]utant de négations de tout ce qui fait les belles choses» («Plenty of negation of all that can generate beautiful things»; qtd. in Robinson-Valéry 203). Nevertheless, Valéry expresses deep admiration for the two Spanish Carmelites who devoted their lives and writings to the celebration of pure religion, St. Teresa of Ávila and St. John of the Cross (Robinson-Valéry 1993, 18). A mystic without God in the same manner of his famous archetypal logical character, Monsieur Teste, Valéry borrows from the Spanish mystics their sense of profound valorization of human interiority. As Robinson-Valéry writes

[in a time when [religious] belief is no longer dominant both as a sociocultural value and as an individual value, a deeply idealistic man such as Valéry experiences a sense of insufficiency and tries to overcome it by means of the [internal elements] that he possesses.]

Moreover, for Valéry, the mystic sensibility represents the accomplishment of two of his deepest aspirations: the desire to reach the farthest limits of thinking and the desire for intensity (Robinson-Valéry 21).

Curiously, and somewhat contradictorily, Valéry rejects Eastern mysticism in favor of Western. He abhors the Eastern ethos which, he believes, imposes excessive physical discipline, the «repli sur soi» («encircling of the self») and the search for clarity and wonder through the establishment of a single determining point (Robinson-Valéry 20). He praises in Western mysticism the mystic’s variable degrees of conviction, psychological ambiguities, complex emotions and, most importantly, the linguistic forms that their sensibility generates.\(^2\) Mystical writing is seen in Valéry as coterminous with verbal art because the

\(^2\) He thus alludes to the typical crisis that Christian mystics often suffer in order to both maintain and strengthen their faith.
mystical imagination tests the possibilities of language by basing its narrative imagery on distinctive elements such as dense metaphors and musicality. Valéry's classic definition of poetry as autonomous and therefore «closed and complete in itself, being a pure system of ornaments and accidents of language...» (Wellek 33) describes it in a way that seems virtually indistinguishable from mystical writing. Since he was a reader of William James (Robinson-Valéry 16), it seems likely that Valéry borrowed from the pragmatist philosopher both the thesis that mystic and artistic sensibility converge because both do away with conceptual language and the notion that mystic writing is formally related to music and lyric poetry.

Within canonical Western European modernism, Valéry's position as esthete is unclear. Although as a thinker he displays a «modern» disregard for systematic thinking, relying instead on insights (Wellek 20), as a poet he promotes literary convention, particularly the sonnet, with its system of rules. His disregard for history and the resulting glorification of poetry points to an esthetic essentialism that is classical in orientation. While Valéry, as Wellek indicates, is untraditional in pointing to the «discontinuity between author, work and reader» he is also quite conservative in placing poetry in «a realm of the pure and absolute» (19). As a proponent of a «poetics of rigor» in both metrical and rhythmical terms, he openly disavows the celebrated free verse of modernism. It is, however, his inclination towards experimentalism in thinking that ultimately places him in the domain of the esthetics of modernism. The power of Valéry's ideas, as Wellek explains, «lies in [their] tentativeness, suggestiveness and extremism». These ideas, he goes on to say, are frequently «held only provisionally, for the sake of a specific argument or as a contradiction to accepted opinions, in order to surprise or shock» (20). In Valéry's experimentalism, elements of mystic knowledge such as the search for «perfection» and the notion of «la voix intérieure» («interiority») play a significant role by helping to «creuser» («dig up») from the interior unknown resources of the spirit. Abstract as this type of mystically guided experimentalism may appear, it synthesizes many of Valéry's ideas on literature.

At the age of twenty, Valéry, as Robinson-Valéry notes, first developed a notion that he was never to abandon, namely that literature is «une mystique de développement interne» («a mystique of internal development»), attainable by means of «spiritual exercises». By experimenting with these «exercises» the writer could, Valéry contended, eventually arrive at a language that allows him the freedom of drawing on multiple possibilities of expression (Robinson-Valéry 23). This valorization of interiority in Valéry, which is shaped by the
mystic sensibility, is a necessary prerequisite to the act of writing poetry. As he says in an enigmatic and almost mystic tone: «Je pense en rationaliste archi-pur. Je sens en mystique» («I think as an absolute rationalist. I feel as a mystic») (1974, 418).

Valéry evokes the mystics, as if by aligning himself with them he might trace his own singular line of descent. His constant allusions to mystics and mysticism simultaneously imply a nostalgia for belonging somewhere and point to his sense of his own strangeness and the need to overcome it by directing attention to something even odder. By resorting to mystic sensibility Valéry betrays both idealism and a bit of creative nihilism. The poet is frequently unable to determine the teleology of writing in much the same manner that the mystic cannot prove the truth of what he/she experiences. At times, in Valéry, mysticism appears to be simply a metaphor for mystery, philosophical randomness and melancholy. One telling instance of the poet's juxtaposition of his own spiritual solipsism with that of the mystics' appears in the Cahiers:

Mystiques, ô vous!—et moi de ma façon, quel labeur singulier avons-nous entrepris! Faire et ne pas faire,—ne vouloir arrêter une œuvre matériellement circonscrite—comme les autres font, et nous le jugeons illusoire, mais enfreindre incessamment notre définitif, et toujours, intérieurement, en travail, vous por Dieu, et moi pour moi et pour rien. (1973, 37)

[Ah mystics! you and I too in my own fashion, what an odd labor we have undertaken! To do and not to do— not willing to stop, as others do, a materially bound up work, and even though we deem {this labor} illusory, we go on repeatedly transgressing our definitive {labor} and continue, from within ourselves, to work, you for God and me for myself and for nothing.]

Mystics as practitioners of a philosophy of the senses are also Valéry's allies in his critique of rationalism. He ultimately praises sophistry as ironically «[l]out ce qu'il ya de positif en philosophie» («the only positive [thing] in philosophy»; 1973, 1553). He divides philosophy into two genres: explicative and critical. While criticizing both, he praises mystical philosophy, which, as he puts it, intends to replace explanation and identification by «feeling» «[s]entir le monde» («to feel the world»; 1973, 1553).

It is difficult to distinguish the notion of «feeling» from the concept of «emotion», which Valéry considers harmful to literary art. It may, however, be assumed that this philosophy of the senses, in which the mystic imagination thrives, is related not to emotion but to absence of limits in the act of perception, especially the limits imposed by the philosophical model of categorizing and
classifying events. It is in the openmindedness of the mystics that Valéry sees the possibility of thinking poetically. As he writes:

La règle est bien simple: Là où il n'y rien d'observable, rien de vérifiable--il n'y a, et il ne peut y avoir, que jeux de mots--...jeux de mots, et sans doute quelques images, mais non consciemment tels...
Mais je pense qu'il peut y avoir une technique de la pensée, comparable à la technique des vers.
Acquérir cette technique, dont les mystiques se sont doutés partiellement, sans la rapporter à elle-même--... c'est à quoi devrait se réduire.--ou plutôt s'étendre, la philosophie. (1973, 564-565)

[The rule is very simple. Where there is nothing to be observed or verifiable--there can only be word games--word games, and without doubt a few images, but not consciously so. But I think that there is a technique of thinking which is comparable to the technique of verse-making. To acquire this technique, of which the mystics are partially endowed, without relating it back to itself--is what philosophy should reduce itself to, or rather should extend itself to.]

Valéry's phenomenology is metaphysical in its cult of the perfect form and, as Wellek points out, is clearly reminiscent of Platonism. The poet's preoccupation with perfection culminates, moreover, in his defense of the poetics of the «open work»--or the virtually unfinishable poem--since for Valéry the means of combining and analyzing language which constitute poetry are infinite. To escape the sense of the finite which he is forced to confront in his defense of the «uselessness» of art, he seeks out mystic imagination because it offers freedom from limits. He then juxtaposes this mystical phenomenology with his own singular perceptions as a means to define a theory of thinking beyond the limits of rationalism. He asserts that

... Tout ce qui se pense et se croit est «géné» par la forme du fini, non apparente en général ... Au delà, la fantasmagorie visuelle; au delà, l'hyperfantasmagorie «abstraite»-- la généralisation pure, le Pays des Signes.

Mais il y aussi un En-deçà--Le Pays du MOI--avec ses 2 zones--aussi--celle de la fantasmagorie «mentale»; et l'hyper ou hypozone--de la fantasmagorie mystique. (Le Pays de Dieu). (1973, 1063; emphasis in the original)

[Everything that one thinks or believes is hindered by the form of finite [finitude], which is not generally apparent... Beyond, (is) the visual phantasmagoria, the abstract hyperphantasmagoria--the pure generalization, the Land of the Signs. But there is also a here and now--The Land of Myself--with its 2 zones--one of mental phantasmagoria, and the other the hyper or hypozone of the mystic phantasmagoria. (The Land of God).]
The mystical sensibility substantiates Valéry's theory of esthetic contemplation, which is primarily centered on the practice of poetic investigation. The totalizing perception of the divine that characterizes the mystical mind echoes the poet's view of artistic invention as absolute. He thus distinguishes mystics from «mere believers» or simple practitioners of religion, referring to the mystics as seers, and paying homage to them by asserting that nowadays they «mais aussi rares de nos jours que les tempéraments artistes vrais» («are more scarce than the true artistic temperaments»; 1974, 636).

Mystic writing is in a certain sense a perfect validation for Valéry's theories on the independence--the necessary distance as he describes it--of the author both from his/her readers and his/her own «empirical» subjectivity. Commenting on the evident beauty of various mystic texts, he suggests that it occurs as a result of a writing which does not aim at portraying one's self but instead searches for the «other» The mystics are the best example of the «depersonalized» author that Valéry praises because not only do they not write about themselves but, more importantly, they aim at reaching God through their writings «[c]hez les mystiques, on voit bien qu'ils se donnent Dieu pour public» («in the mystics one sees clearly that they take God as their audience»; 1973, 288). Because mystical writing involves the nearly impossible task of mirroring the divine, it becomes a model for Valéry's defense of the work of art as ambiguous, i.e. «closed», inalterable (Wellek 31), provisional and, as Mme Teste, the wife of his hyper-rationalist character M. Teste, puts it, is a result of «l'instant de diamant» («the diamond moment»; qtd. in Robinson-Valéry 32).

The confluence between Valéry's «classical» modernism and the mystical imagination occurs on at least two other levels. One is linguistic, present in what Paul Gifford describes as Valéry's imagistic mimetism (322), a narrative construct typical of mystical discourse, in which the expressive power of language is continuously tested. The other is philosophical, manifest both in Valéry's defense of freedom of spirit (1973, 93) and in his self-presentation as a hero and a rebel who is «j'amais en paix» («never at peace» 1973, 100). On both levels, Valéry echoes the Carmelite sensibility of St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross, who battled conceptual language in order to establish themselves as writers in much the same way they battled worldly values so as to become religious heroes. Not surprisingly, Valéry ultimately embraces a sort of mystical asceticism in his definition of the task of «the true poet» whose poetry, he maintains, should derive from «the perpetual triumph of sacrifice...» (qtd. in Wellek 24).
The Pure Poetry of the «Spiritual Canticle»: Valéry Reads St. John of the Cross

Oh, I said, but this sings! (1961, 285)

Paul Valéry's reading of the poems «Dark Night» and «Spiritual Canticle» appears in an essay that in its metonymic title, «Spiritual Canticles», appropriately pays homage to St. John of Cross. In this essay, Valéry, taking St. John as an example of literary rigor, restates some of the central aspects of his own theory of poetry, such as the musical properties of poetic language, the depersonalization of the author and the desirability of obscurity in poetic texts as a means to recuperate the «essential graces of poetry» (1961, 283). Valéry's focus on the structural elements of St. John's poetry, instead of on its religious implications, represents one of the first instances in which St. John was recognized primarily as a poet outside of the Hispanic world. The French poet became aware of the work of the Spanish Carmelite by chance through his reading of a book translated into French by an obscure seventeenth-century French Carmelite, Father Cyprian. The poetry of St. John was, Valéry implies, literally a «revelation» for him. Indicating that he first viewed the book as «a literary tomb», Valéry asserts that the book «was not [of] a kind [he] usually read or need[ed] to consult» (1961, 279).

In spite of his peremptory disdain for institutional religion, Valéry, after reading «The Ascent of Mount Carmel»--the famous spiritual treatise and commentary that St. John wrote as an explanation for the poem «The Dark Night of the Soul»--admits that he «was quite astonished to find [the analysis] perfectly clear, or to think I understood» (1961, 280). Valéry's «understanding» of St. John's spirituality apparently resulted from the impeccable logic that the Spanish Carmelite utilized in proving that «ordinary knowledge» is an obstacle to achieving «highest contemplation» (280). In terms of Valéry's own theory of perception, St. John's theology of transcendental love may be seen as simultaneously representing a challenge to the limits of the human intellect and a struggle to overcome such limits. For this reason Valéry apparently accepts St. John's reasoning that «for all that the understanding can encompass, the imagination forge, and the will savor is very unlike and out of scale with God» (qtd. in Valéry 1961, 280) and praises the Spanish Carmelite's theological asceticism. He is fascinated by St. John's cogent ability to «describe intangible things» and his awareness of «the difficulties, chances of error, confusion «provoked by the sensual world and
by the abstract faculties as applied to it...which can degrade the perfection of the mystical void» (281). What is in the beginning a chronicle of a poet's admiration for a remote and unassuming religious literary figure, however, ultimately becomes a treatise on poetics. The translation made by Father Cyprian, a sort of French double of St. John of the Cross, motivates Valéry to interpret both the «Dark Night» and «The Spiritual Canticle» as genuine instances of the esthetic category «pure poetry» that he himself had defined.

In a collection of notes on the subject of pure poetry, Valéry uses a simple analogy to explain the idea: «I use the word «pure» in the sense in which the physicist speaks of pure water» (1961, 185). Subsequently, he speaks of the difficulties one faces in trying to compose a poem that «is pure of all nonpoetic elements» (185) because for Valéry, language fundamentally renders poetry impossible. As he writes:

> However intimate language is to us... it is nonetheless of statistical origin and has purely practical ends. So the poet's problem must be to draw from this practical instrument the means to realize an essentially nonpractical work. (189; emphasis in the original)

Valéry also attacks the critical practice of pursuing meaning in poetry in order to «explain» a poem and deepens the gap between «words» and «sense,» reintroducing one of his dearest theses, that «sound and sense are [rarely] in accord» (191).

Valéry's poetics of the useless, that is the nonpractical character of poetry, emphasizes the arrangement of words in a poem so that one may «compel the inner voice» and leave «the ordinary speech [and] enter a quite different key...a quite different time» (285). His response to the French translation (and eventually to the original text) of «The Dark Night,» «Oh, but this sings!» both reflects a recognition of the rhythmical qualities of St. John's poem and expresses Valéry's view of poetry as ultimately a kind of music.

The texts of St. John of the Cross clearly constitute archetypal poems for Valéry. The Carmelite's poetic language is not only entirely allusive, it is also eminently musical since it derives from a tradition of songs. As Margaret Wilson points out, the quality of St. John's poetry resides in its purely mystic ethos of love and in its consequent lack of concern with moral elements (67). In his major poems, the absence of Christian nomenclature and theology (Wilson 67) is filled by St. John's verbal and visual imagery derived mainly from the Song of Songs, the poems of Garcilaso de la Vega and the Spanish oral tradition of music, the so-called coplas (Brenan 104; 112). Compared to St. Teresa's, St.
John's rhetoric is an example of precision and economy. His awareness of rhythm, prosody and meter, and the authoritative tone of his theological treatise «The Ascent to Mount Carmel», obviously differentiate his writing from St. Teresa's. His use of the sort of formal rhetorical techniques learned in his training in Salamanca distinguishes his texts from those of St. Teresa, who is essentially driven by the necessity to organize and validate her puzzling and compelling visions. Whereas St. Teresa's interior life is populated by «locutions» with God and raptures, St. John's was filled with contemplation and silent prayer (Brenan 22). Saint John does not claim to have had visions and his religiosity is ascetic. He thus places himself above the worldly without focusing as obsessively as St. Teresa does on her sinful condition. Although he believes in holiness and struggles to obtain it, mainly because he feels it is his destiny, he is tolerant of non-spiritual people. He writes, for example, that «[t]he holier a man is, the gentler he is and the less scandalized by the faults of others, because he knows the weak condition of man» (qtd. in Brenan 24).

In many ways, St. John's life and work is a perfect example of «freedom of spirit», an abstract and contemplative detachment from conventional thinking, an idea that appears in both St. Teresa and Valéry. «The Dark Night» and «The Spiritual Canticle», because they oscillate between music and verbal art, are for Valéry songs that celebrate the possibility of liberating poetry from conveying meaning. Despite her rhetoric of excess, St. Teresa shares with St. John and, thus, with Valéry a desire for spiritual freedom, a need to transcend the limits of conceptual language, a sense of writing as mission and an imaginative use of everyday language as a source of expressive forms. These stylistic devices used by St. Teresa and St. John and recuperated by Valéry may be characterized as constituting a mystic esthetics.

In 1942, two years before Valéry wrote his appreciation of St. John, Dámaso Alonso established what came to be known as «the first and still most important analysis of San Juan's poetic style» (Wilson 78). One of Alonso's main concerns is in investigating the sources of St. John's poetic diction. To do so, he traces the recurrence of the various literary and folk traditions that come together in the making of the poems. Some of Alonso's best known arguments include his assertion that St. John's value as a poet derives from his rendering a lo divino both the pastoral poetry of Garcilaso and Busón (Alonso 39) and the

(3) Since Wilson's assertion critiques by José C. Nieto, Giles Hibbert, Margaret Rees and others have appeared. While avoiding the source/influence dynamic of Alonso's analysis they still rely on him as a point of departure in order to make their case.
folk love songs of the Spanish *Cancionero* (83). Besides tracing sources, Alonso, himself a proponent of stylistic criticism, analyzes in detail the part that structural components such as verbs, nouns and adjectives play in the rhythm and duration of the poems. When he abandons close reading to address the poems' thematic, however, he ends up reduplicating St. John's own commentaries (especially on «The Canticle»), which he initially claimed damaged «el puro gozo estético de las bellísimas estrofas» («the pure esthetic enjoyment of the beautiful stanzas»;151). Ultimately, Alonso maintains that St. John's poetry is founded on symbolic allegory which, he asserts «es otra de las razones de nuestra extrañeza, de nuestro sentido de estar en un mundo diferente, cuando pasamos, por ejemplo, de la poesía de Garcilaso a la de San Juan» [is another reason for our feeling of strangeness and our sense of being in a different world when we shift, for example, from the poetry of Garcilaso to the one of St. John] (149).

Alonso's estheticism does not, however, prevent him from resorting to a «spiritual» reading of «The Dark Night» and «The Spiritual Canticle». This spiritual interpretation betrays his difficulty in dealing with the enigmatic quality of the text. Perhaps it would have been incongruous for Alonso to have explored the linguistic and literary composition of the poems only to conclude his argument by endorsing the traditional literary view of St. John's poetry as mysterious and resistant to interpretation. It is, however, precisely this opposition to interpretation which provides the rationale for Valéry's enthusiastic reception of St. John.

Valéry resists treating both the two poems and the commentaries as, respectively, allegory and explanation. For him, «The Dark Night» and «The Spiritual Canticle» are primarily songs, which provide «a symbolic and musical illustration for the treatise of mystical theology». «The Ascent to Mount Carmel» is a «counterpoint» to the poems «which weaves around [them] a whole system of inner discipline» (Valéry 1961, 282). Alonso's notion that St. John might have damaged the beauty of his own verses by simply reducing them to figurative language is entirely absent in Valéry. The French poet sees the relation between the poems and the commentary as one in which the latter confirms that poetry is a result of organized effort and requires «real mental labor or more than superficial knowledge» (1961, 282). In this sense, the poetry of St. John confirms Valéry's defense of «work[ing] [in the making of poetry] as a value», a process which consists in large measure in effacing, remaking and even sometimes abandoning the poem (1961, 177).

«The Spiritual Canticle» is traditionally recognized as borrowing from
Garcilaso's «Second Eclogue» the hendecasyllable meter (Alonso 125), the Arcadian imagery and an elegiac component that characterizes the theme of love lost and regained. The poem extracts from the Song of Songs a sort of incantatory sensualism, which hints at the transcendence of the «possibilities of human existence» (Bloom 4), and the form of «pure secular love poetry» woven around «a series of dramatic addresses between the lovers» (Alter 121-122). As a dramatic dialogue, «The Spiritual Canticle» utilizes the voices of two interlocutors with the occasional interference of a chorus that is reminiscent of epithalamion songs. Clearly, the imagery of the poem is anything but religious. Therefore, attempts to reconnect «The Spiritual Canticle» to the spirituality evoked in its title run the risk of appearing ludicrous. R. O. Jones, for example, maintains that there is little doubt that St. John experienced God in a quasi-sexual manner (Jones 111).

For Valéry, neither the sources of the poem nor the intentions of the poet are fundamental. Although he acknowledges Song of Songs as «the model of the genre» (1961, 284), he prefers St. John's poem to the Biblical text, asserting that the latter is so excessive as to be overwhelming:

Dare I admit here that all the beauties of that intensely rich poem [Song of Songs] leave me somewhat sated with metaphor and that the many gems that load it end by antagonizing my Occidental soul and a certain abstract tendency of my mind? I prefer the pure style of [«The Spiritual Canticle»]. (284)

For Valéry pure style overshadows the poetics of love that is self-evident in both «The Dark Night» and in «The Spiritual Canticle». Obviously, one intention of this emphasis on style is to neutralize the «prosaic» references to sensual love in both poems by arguing that:

The outward appearance of these poems is that of a very tender song, which first of all suggests some ordinary love and a kind of gentle, pastoral adventure lightly sketched by the poet in almost furtive and occasionally mysterious terms. But one must not stop at this initial lucidity: one must, ...come closer to the text and invest its charm with a depth of supernatural passion and a mystery infinitely more precious than any secret of love dwelling in a human heart. (1961, 284)

The fact that for Valéry the «charm» of words consists both in their condensation into poetic signs and rhythm and in their sheer impracticality may be seen most clearly in his scorn for novelists and philosophers, who, he claims «are enslaved to words by credulity [and] must believe that their speech is real by its content and signifies some reality» (1961, 183). To this slavery to reality he opposes the texts of St. John of the Cross which are close to what he believes
poetry should be, «the Paradise of Language», or «[the] perfect union» of the «transcendent» virtues of language which come into existence by opposing «the convention of language itself» (294)

The poems of St. John became available to Valéry through translation, a means he often denigrated, comparing it to «architectural blueprints which may well be admirable; only they make the edifices themselves, palaces, temples, and the rest disappear» (qtd. in Wellek 27). The translator, Father Cyprian, the «curiously invisible» French Carmelite whose perfection in translating «arouse[s] a certain hint of mysticism» (1961, 289) is for Valéry a sort of literary hero. Although few references are made to him in the history of French religious literature and his translation of St. John is virtually unknown, it nonetheless represents an extraordinary tour de force. He manages to maintain in the French language what Valéry calls the purity of St. John’s poetry at the same time that he renounces the role of author for himself. What Valéry admires in the French Carmelite is the fact that, unlike Valéry’s contemporaries, for whom «almost the only thing of importance is to become known» (289; emphasis in the original), Father Cyprian consciously resists the vulgarity of the so-called «moderns». Moreover, the world, asserts Valéry, is even less aware of Cyprian’s translations of St. John than it is of the French Carmelite himself (289). Father Cyprian, himself virtually invisible, is recuperated by Valéry’s reading of the far more visible—though too often ignored—work of St. John of The Cross.

WORKS CITED


Hugo van der Goes (Flanders, 15th c.)
Detail from the central panel of the Portinari altarpiece