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Paul Ryan, *Paul Valéry et le dessin*. Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, Bruxelles, New York, Oxford, Wien: Peter Lang, 2007. 352 pp. Frontispiece, text, notes, index of names, bibliography, illustrations comprising 55 plates. \$91.95 U.S. (pb). ISSN 1437-3130, ISBN 978-3-631-56414-1.

Review by Brian Stimpson, Emeritus Professor, Newcastle University.

Valéry and drawing: a fascinating subject at once partially familiar and curiously unknown, acknowledged perhaps in passing but not always given the consideration it merits alongside the more widespread perception of Valéry as the intellectual, the analyst, the writer—unless in metaphorical terms as a poet painting with words. In this context, the work of Paul Ryan makes a new and invaluable contribution to Valéry scholarship by bringing to light and critically examining the immense amount and range of Valéry's own graphic work.

It is of course well-known that Valéry had intimate contact with the artistic world of his time; to such an extent that this cultural richness was a substantial given fact of his everyday social life. He was married to Jeannie Gobillard, the niece of Berthe Morisot (herself the sister-in-law of Édouard Manet). He lived in an apartment below that of Julie Manet and her husband Ernest Rouart. He was surrounded by the paintings of contemporary artists, was a good friend of Degas and Henri Rouart who both had substantial collections of works of art, and was on warm terms with Renoir (who painted a portrait of Jeannie), with Monet (whom he would visit at Giverny), with Redon (who was a frequent visitor) and many more. And equally, the range of Valéry's writings on art is made clear from his early essay, *Introduction à la méthode de Léonard de Vinci*, through his essays on Veronese, Rembrandt, Corot, Manet, Morisot and many others, to the extended portrait of Degas in *Degas Danse Dessin*.^[1]

But the connections between Valéry and the world of art and, more specifically, artistic vision go very much deeper in both a practical sense and a conceptual one, relating to the crucial question of visual perception. Anyone familiar with the *Cahiers* of Paul Valéry cannot but be aware of the extent and significance of his drawings, whether the striking full-page watercolours, the imposing pen-and-ink sketches, the architectural representations, the recurrent images of serpents, often entwined around a large heavy key, as well as the inordinate number of doodles, scribbles, half-sketched figures, portraits and so on, not to mention the odd spider, bicycle and cat. Art historians and Valéry scholars alike have for some time been aware of the profound significance of art for Valéry the thinker and writer, both from a theoretical and a practical perspective. The essays on art and, more especially, the writings in the *Cahiers* address certain issues which are a recurrent feature of Valéry's interests: concerns with the circumstances and modes of production which reveal an acute sensitivity to the milieu in which an artist may work; topics such as colour and composition and the generative process of the creative act. Above all, one encounters a sustained interrogation of the gaze—the analysis of the object of the gaze inextricably bound up with the presence of the person who is looking and the act of observing itself, establishing a continuous dynamic between the visual reality and the image created in the inner eye. Indeed, so fundamental was this notion to Valéry that it took precedence over all matters, both scriptural and intellectual. He valued above all his own

particular way of looking at things, to the extent that, as he wrote in 1908, he wished to “[se] dépouiller de tout hors le regard.” [2]

Thus, the question of Valéry’s own artwork is something that has been intriguing Valéry scholars for a long while, but until this time no one has had access to the wealth of material produced during his lifetime. There was not even a complete inventory of what he had produced and Ryan has rendered a considerable service in hunting down and charting the full extent of this incredibly rich material. The research is based upon a thorough examination of all manner of sources located in many different libraries as well as much previously unknown material from private collections. Ryan brings out especially the major role of the small private notebooks that Valéry carried around with him from his early years and throughout his life, some of which are specifically devoted to drawings. By setting these notebooks and other unpublished documents alongside the material in the twenty-nine volumes of the *Cahiers* CNRS, the published work and the correspondence, he is able to interrogate skilfully the different forms of relationship between text and image, sometimes complementary, sometimes as a form of commentary, sometimes acting quite independently of each other. The developments in the types of visual expression and in the different media that are employed are examined both from a chronological perspective and from a more synchronic examination of recurrent themes and motifs.

The book is divided into three parts, “Le genèse du dessin,” “Théories et conceptions graphiques” and “Les *Cahiers*.” The first chapter presents a revealing insight into the various manifestations of drawing in the early years of Valéry’s adolescence from 1886 onwards, predating by many years the contacts with artists in Paris and revealing already certain predominant concerns: marinescapes, ports and boats, portraits, architecture and the nude figure, as well as, already, evidence of the continual fascination with the imponderable and ultimately insoluble question of self-portraiture. Although the chapter presents an abundance of new material, one would have welcomed more comment on the artistic merit of these productions and specifically on Valéry’s use of line and colour. After reviewing the links with painters and painting over the period 1890-1945, Ryan then turns to an examination of the place of drawing in the private notebooks in one of the most original of the sections, the sketch-books and the various poetry manuscripts. Ryan is particularly effective when discussing the artistic techniques employed, as in passages such as this: “D’autres aquarelles [...] utilisent la saturation de la teinte autant que l’effet du lavis, restituant le modelé des objets par le biais de la coloration plus ou moins dense des volumes et laissant au blanc de la page, lorsqu’il transparait, le soin de rendre l’espace du ciel et de la mer” (p. 91); or when analysing the way in which “le dessin fera peu à peu place à l’illustration schématique ou géométrique abstraite ...” in the poetry manuscripts (p. 99).

The second part of the book, which is oriented towards Valéry’s theoretical conceptions, emphasises his view, which was also that of Degas, that drawing is an act of the intelligence, a phenomenon of will and not of sentiment. Ryan negotiates with some skill the manifold quotations to be drawn from the *Cahiers* and constructs a coherent account of Valéry’s continuing analyses of the gaze, of the relationship between “l’œil et la main,” of the role of immediate and long-term memory, and of the crucial part played in the creation of artistic form by tentative experimentation, by uncertainty, and by formlessness. Inspired by the groundbreaking work of Robert Pickering in this field, Ryan successfully demonstrates how the very process of writing and organisation of the space of the manuscript page is determined by fundamentally graphic considerations.[3] At the same time, the cogent discussion of line and representational similitude might have been strengthened by linking the theory to the practice and discussing in some detail some of the illustrative plates at the end of the book (for example, plate XLV of a female figure seen from behind, looking at herself in a mirror [p.342]). Are there, for example, ways in which the theoretical perspective of art as an operation of the

intelligence can be seen in Valéry's own paintings and drawings? And to what extent can the conceptual perspectives be seen to arise from his own sketches, as well as from his familiarity with the works of the great painters cited?

The final part is devoted to the *Cahiers* of Valéry and here, after charting the principal developments in their form, structure and use, Ryan adopts a thematic overview of the many *thèmes graphiques* that recur throughout—the hand, the foot, the room, the window, the tree, the shell, the port, the serpent turning upon itself and many others. The examples are supported by numerous quotations from the notebooks that relate to the topics, in which Valéry at times risks becoming the best interpreter of himself. Following the helpful list (as part of the bibliography) of all the manuscripts and unpublished documents relating to the subject, the book publishes a generous series of fifty-five illustrations of Valéry's graphic work, including self-portraits, hands, landscapes, ships, shells, mathematical shapes, and watercolours, striking even in black-and-white reproduction.

While it is true that there has been no comprehensive study of Valéry's artistic practice before this publication, Ryan might, nevertheless and without diminishing the originality of his work, have drawn greater support from other Valéry scholars who have shared this view.[4] The book makes an invaluable contribution to the field in presenting the fruits of the very detailed and comprehensive research. Such is the scope of material to be encompassed, it is inevitable that the need to give account of the whole leaves little room for detailed analysis of individual works of art. All the same, and a small number of examples notwithstanding, one might have wished for more detailed analyses of the way that Valéry draws and paints—the looseness of line, the approaches to composition and perspective, the relationship between colour and contour (and sometimes, as with Degas, their non-conformity). In a similar vein, the remarkable images reproduced at the back of the book might seem to call out for the occasional passage of detailed commentary. All in all, Paul Ryan has argued persuasively for a fuller, more considered appreciation of Valéry's graphic prowess and for its recognition in the whole cosmos of Valéry's thought and sensibility.

NOTES

[1] Paul Valéry, "Introduction à la méthode de Léonard de Vinci," *Œuvres*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, vol.1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), pp.1153-1199, (first published in 1895). The principal writings on art were brought together in volume H of the N.R.F. edition of Valéry's *Œuvres* (1938) entitled *Pièces sur l'art - Degas Danse Dessin et divers écrits sur la Peinture* and subsequently in the Pléiade edition, vol. 2 (1960), pp.1161-1371.

[2] Paul Valéry, *Cahiers*, vol. IV (Paris: C.N.R.S., 1957-61), p. 248. As Ryan points out, Valéry distinguishes between vision and the gaze. "L'œil est organe de la vision, mais le regard est acte de *prévision*, et il est commandé par ce qui *doit* être vu, *veut* être vu," Paul Valéry, *Œuvres*, vol. II (Paris: Gallimard, 1960 and 2000), pp. 757-758, as cited in Ryan, p. 139).

[3] Robert Pickering, *Paul Valéry, la page, l'écriture* (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 1996).

[4] I am thinking, for example of the work of Serge Bourjea, Patricia Signorile, Gabriel Fedrigo, Valerio Magrelli and myself. Though some are listed in the bibliography, few feature in the text itself. Discussion of other critical work in the field—differentiating and acknowledging where appropriate—would only enhance the work and serve to demonstrate the author's undoubted broad knowledge and scholarship.

Brian Stimpson
Emeritus Professor, Newcastle University
Brian.Stimpson@ncl.ac.uk

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