# A NEW FIGURE IN FRENCH THOUGHT AND LETTERS*

BY VICTOR S. YARROS

STRICTLY speaking, I am not going to review a book but to introduce an author of distinction and influence. The volume that serves my purpose is called *Variety*, because it is a collection of miscellaneous articles and essays, some literary and critical, some philosophical, some metaphysical. But there is unity in this variety—the unity imparted by a point of view. The author is Paul Valery, who is little known outside of France but who deserves to be, and will be, better known before long. He is the successor of Anatole France in the French Academy, though the contrast between the two men is striking. He is a poet, an essayist and a critic. He is an intellectual writer, and his style is a difficult one. He has ideas and yet he is supposed, mistakenly it seems, to overemphasize literary form and rules of composition, especially as regards verse.

He lacks the grace, the charm, the polish and finish of Anatole France, but he goes deeper into the questions he deals with. France was a skeptic, a satirist, a pessimist who yet loved humanity, a social and moral radical who loved truth and justice as an artist rather than as a prophet. Valery is a scholar inclined to mysticism, but his mysticism is scientific, not religious. He has more in common with Einstein than with Plato or St. Paul. He has created at least one character—M. Este, who is as different as possible from France's delightful M. Bergeret of the inimitable "Histoire Contemporaine." I hope some day to introduce Este to you, together with his interlocutors.

*Variety* opens with two short essays on Europe's intellectual crisis before and after the great war. The three literary essays include an analysis of La Fontaine's long poem "Adonis," a fore-

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word to a volume of ultra-modern poems by Lucien Fabre, and a brief but suggestive tribute to Marcel Proust. The philosophical and metaphysical essays deal with Edgar Allen Poe's poem "Eureka," little read nowadays, and a study of Leonardo da Vinci, which serves as a peg whereon to hang a number of Valery's personal theories and speculations.

What are the subjects touched upon in the volume? Let me merely enumerate them to indicate the scope or field of the author's interest. The nature and essence of Europe's intellectual crisis, the function and laws of poetry, the role of reason and instinct in the quest for truth, the stuff of the universe, the possibility of theorizing about the beginning of things, the relation between science and religion, between reason and feeling, the soul and the body, the limits of understanding, the universal man, the symmetry of nature.

Let me quote the author's introductory note. It reads:

"Each of these essays is the result of a circumstance; the author wrote none of them simultaneously. Their subjects were not of his choice; even their length was sometimes ordered. Almost always surprised, at the beginning of his work, at finding himself involved in an unaccustomed order of ideas and suddenly placed in an unexpected state of mind, he was obliged each time to recover the natural direction of his thought."

This is not very lucid, but it means that the author wrote on subjects with which he was not very familiar and upon which he had no definite views, so that he had to make sure the views he was expressing were not inconsistent with his general philosophy of life and of art. The essays, then, are journalism, but very good journalism.

Let me briefly summarize their leading ideas or propositions.

The essays on the European intellectual crisis affirm that "the disorder consists in the free coexistence in all cultivated minds, of the most dissimilar ideas, the most contradictory principles of life and knowledge," and that when we speak of a modern epoch we must bear in mind that chaos is its essential characteristic. This, by the way, is also the leit-motif of Anfre Gide's remarkable novel *The Counterfeiters*, recently translated, which I may recommend heartily in passing as a novel of power, of deep interest and of artistic as well as ethical significance.

If Europe is passing through a crisis, will it be able to pass it safely and at the same time maintain its supremacy in the world? After all, Europe, as any map shows, is only a cape of Asia, and perhaps Asia may conquer, or reconquer, Europe after all. What, the author asks, *Is* Europe? He answers—*Europe is a functional conception* or a state of mind. The European and the American, who is merely a transplanted European, are distinguished by a burning desire for knowledge, an ardent and disinterested curiosity, a happy blend of imagination and logical precision, a skepticism that is not pessimistic and a mysticism that is not resigned.

By these qualties Europe has secured ascendancy, but it has been endangering its supremacy by diffusing its knowledge, sharing its intellectual wealth and lifting up the inferior masses of Asia and Africa. It has been wiping out its one advantage and restoring the primitive advantages of *numbers, size* and *area*. Is Europe then, doomed? The author intimates that perhaps we have some chance, some solution of the problem, but he does not develop this thought, merely hinting that the solution will be found in studying the struggle of the individual against social life, of personality versus group pressure.

The essay on Adonis is, as I have said, fine and thoughtful literary criticism. The poem itself is not profound; it is a tale of love, adventure and death. Valery says that to read it is to discover that good writing has a fascination of its own, that sweet form and pure melody are grateful to our ears and minds in a day of discord, excess and obscure and bizarre styles.

In the foreword to a volume of poems, the author sketches the development of French poetry and explains the rise of symbolism and its aftermath. We are reminded that France has no didatic or philosophical poetry like the Divine Comedy, and that poetry from every essence other than its own and of recapturing from music which had made wonderful progress, that which was a quality or property of poetry. Valery does not believe in this absolute purity of poetry; it leads, he thinks, to sterility and emptiness, but he admits that some of the elements of symbolism may be incorporated into the sounder, more vital and more human poetry of the future. And yet, paradoxically enough, while pleading for fullness, richness and humanity in poetry, and deprecating dreams of unattainable and barren perfection, Valery throws out this sug-

gestion: "I feel sure that the future will be able to construct a language for the intellect based on the two sciences of algebra and geometry." And he seems to expect that discussions of poetic literature will be carried on with great benefit to criticism and mutual comprehension in this precise language of symbols and abstractions.

The essay on Poe's "Eureka" is a sort of confession of faith and avowal of loyalty to a man who led the author, at the age of twenty, when he was divided against himself, full of inconsistent notions, unable to write or think coherently, out of the darkness into the light. Poe's poem gave Valery a new orientation, a point of view and a philosophy. Poe, in that poem, expounds the doctrine of final causes, of reciprocal adaptation, of the symmetry of the universe reflected in the inner structure of the human mind. Each law of nature, says Poe, depends at all points on all other laws, and Valery asserts that Poe in this and other propositions anticipated Poincare, Carnot and Einstein. But to Valery, Poe appealed less by the *validity* than by the *beauty* of his conceptions, and what particularly attracted him was the claim that "the poetic instinct leads one blindly to the truth." Valery, at the age of twenty, did not know his Keats.

The essay entitled "Variations on a Theme from Pascal" is virtually a discussion of Kant's famous statement about the effect on him of the starry heavens above him and the moral law within him. What, asks Valery, is the effect of night when the heavens are starry? Pascal said he was always "terrified by the speechless universe, the eternal silence of the heavens," but Kant had no such sense of terror, while the Greeks and both the old and new testament tell us that the heavens declare the glory of God, that the morning stars sang together, that there is music in the universe, a music that charms even the gods. Valery admits the terrifying power of the universe, but he points out that while the mind seeks explanations of the riddle of creation, and is discussing such questions as the curvature of space and the finite or infinite character of the universe, the heart arrives at the idea of a ruler of the universe, a powerful being, a god. Night, says Valery, is the ally of the heart, not of the mind; it reduces words to an inner still voice; it generates spontaneous reactions; it removes the day's bridge between the ego and the non-ego; it leaves us in the presence of two incom-

municable natures. The heart is eager and anxious; the mind is patient, curious, critical.

The tribute to Proust is remarkable for its sympathy and insight, as well as for its discussion of the differences between the drama and the novel and the role of the novelist in letters and in life. Proust dealt with a small group of aristocratic and fashionable persons, but his art is great, and, says Valery, in his personal depths Proust sought for the "metaphysics which informs and characterizes every society or class."

The longest and concluding essays in the volume discuss the nature and methods, the doctrines and conceptions of Leonardo da Vinci. These are extraordinarily profound essays. They sum up and illustrate Valery's own philosophy. He evidently accepts Leonardo's motto—*Obstinate rigor*. He sees in Leonardo *the universal man*, a man of genius and at the same time of the most robust common sense; a man who adores the human body while adhering to the theology of his time; a man who takes the whole world for his object and his guide; a man who is at once a realist and idealist, an artist and a man of science. I should like to quote many gems of thought and of speech from these two essays, but my time limit forbids. I must content myself with a few specimens:

"Truth in the raw is more false than falsehood."

"Nobody is equal to the exact total of his appearances."

"Our greatest brilliance is closely allied to our greatest chances of error."

"The value of inspirations depends on their meeting our needs and on the conscious use we make of them—in other words, on the collaboration of the whole man."

"The superior man is never an eccentric."

"The wonder is not that things *are*, for the alternative of being and nonbeing is too simple; the wonder is that things are *such as they* are and not of a different nature. The figure of this world is one of a family of figures."

"The intellectual man must finally reduce himself to an indefinite refusal to be anything whatsoever."

"The author is never the man; the life of the one is not the life of the other. The true life of a man can never be utilized in an explanation of his works."

"Man is not the cause of his work but rather the effect. A criminal is not the cause of his crime, but its effect."

"It is our own functioning that alone can teach anything about any possible thing."

"The mind that constructs a work of art out of incompatible elements must have known their secret affinities."

"The author in the vast majority of cases is incapable of describing, even to himself, the paths he followed to reach his goal; he is master of a power whose nature he does not know."

I think I have indicated sufficiently that "Variety" is a book worth reading and pondering, and that Valery is a thinker and author it would be interesting and profitable to know better than we do today. He is often obscure and he seems to imply that clarity is inconsistent with depth. He is unfair to Anatole France and to the critical and intellectual tendencies represented by that wonderfully lucid and attractive writer, but he is a true poet and an earnest thinker—a seeker of the significance and value of all things. He despises shallowness and pedantry, and even his errors are instructive.