

Cemetery Thoughts

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“Gesang ist Dasein.”

Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus* (3)

I remember my first encounter with Valéry's *Le cimetière marin*. Like all first-time readers, I was baffled by the poem's dense imagery and its curious blend of mysticism and intellect. The language was obscure, as were the transitions from line to line, and from stanza to stanza. But the intensely metaphysical-mystical aspect of the poem strongly attracted me, along with its stunning formal perfection, play of sounds and seductive rhythms. Over the years I have grown closer to the poem and have learned a great deal from it about what a great poem is.

The epigram from Pindar's *Pythian Ode* II, addressed to Hieron of Syracuse, may be regarded as Valéry's note to self: “Do not, dear soul, eagerly pursue deathless life, but exhaust the resource that is within your means [*emprakton*].” The French poet here joins the Greek poet in urging his “*dear soul*”—the soul he loves and which he seeks to keep clear of danger—to resist the temptation of longing for immortality. He will inure his soul against eros, as it appears in Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. The poem's overt anti-Christian teaching must be combined with this critique of Plato and the philosopher's “supersensible world.” The poem, in its own way, is in league with Hegel's idea—brilliantly displayed in “Force and the Understanding”—that *there is only one world*. The world of appearance, *Erscheinung*, is the only world that is. For Valéry, this identity is not dialectical in Hegel's sense: there is no identity between time and conceptual

unfolding. In the end, the thought of the poem is much closer to that of Heidegger and his *Sein-zum-Tod*.

The Roman numeral headings are part of the poem and serve to mark time monumentally. They also emphatically demarcate the stages of the poet's consciousness, as the poet meditates, enraptured, on the play of images that are before him: the glittering, beguiling surface of the sea and the human artefact, the cemetery, which reminds the poet of his mortality and of the attempt to transcend mortality through various sorts of dreams and illusions, both pagan and Christian. The Roman numerals are imposingly classical. They recall the grandeur of an empire that is now only an abiding memory.

A 6/4 rhythm pervades the whole. It is present in the 10-syllable line (4+6), and in the 24 stanzas (the poem is six-by-four), which seem to be in 6 groups of 4. The 6/4 rhythm recalls the French dance known as courante—"running" or "coursing." The number 24 represents the elements of the Greek language, the books of Homer, the hours of a day, and no doubt much more.

The Roman numerals go with another prominent aspect of the poem: the abundance of Latinate words like *édifice*, *altitude*, *terrestre*, to name a few. We must be careful not to breeze past these deliberate Latinisms, which are embedded in modern French (and English). They are part of the word-image world and echo of antiquity the poet means to conjure. Their sound, their look on the page, and their historical resonance affirm the poet's austere anti-romantic stance. They also suggest, to our modern ears, a scientific detachment from the human-all-too-human—the objective stance of a soul that braces itself for the irrefutable facticity of *Dasein* or what is inescapably *there*.

I

“This tranquil roof, where doves (or pigeons) walk.” The first line immerses us in perplexing symbols. It is not “the” or “a” tranquil roof but *this* one, *ce*—the roof that is there, now. The poet beholds, and in reading the poem we are one with his beholding. Reality is dream here: the sea-surface is not a roof, but it looks like one; the little boats on the water are not birds, but they look like birds. The world is the world of representation, the world of potent revelatory symbols. To read the poem, we must give ourselves—yield—to this receptive dreamy mood that will reveal, at times, harsh unyielding truths. The dream-state is also a state of acute awareness, the state in which things usually hidden from us, or which we hide from ourselves, come to light.

The sea-surface moves but not in a linear fashion. It vibrates, pulsates. We view this quivering surface, this wave-motion, as framed by the solid objects in our foreground—by the pines (which are ever green, a symbol of eternal life) and by the tombs (the image of inevitable death). The quivering is not merely visual, in other words, but also eidetic. The sea quivers between the poles of life and death. As we shall see, it contains these poles in its dialectical nature, its unity of opposites.

It is high noon or, as the poet calls it, *Midi le juste*. It is the time of day when the sun achieves the peak of its arc and divides this arc into two equal parts—equitably, justly. At high noon there is no escape from the burning light—the truth—that descends on sea and cemetery alike. One thinks of Joseph Conrad’s statement that his goal as a writer of fiction was “to render the highest possible justice to the visible universe.” Conrad obviously did not mean that he was interested in theodicy, in justifying the world. He meant rather that his vocation was not to flinch; it was to capture in writing the world as

it is and as it appears, in defiance of all wishful thinking. The composer-god is not a being but a state or condition, the condition of *Midi le juste*. The Sun, if we may call it that, com-poses or puts together a cosmic scene by means of fire: fire is the element here of divine demiurgy, the fire of creation. But the scene is composed in another way too: it is the serene godlike composure and peace of a settled way of things—a way that abides. The scene inspires this very state in the thinker-poet who beholds, whose *toit* already hints at the intimate bond between outer world and inner world (*toi*)—between the composed-ness of the scene and the godlike composure of the *theôros*, the one who looks on thoughtfully. The sea undergoes composition out of fire. To call it “the sea, the sea” is true to the appearances. The repetition, the rhythm and music of the line, is the appearance in the poem itself of the undulating sea-surface—and also the poet’s moving in sync with it. A wave indeed has a linear component: it travels. But its periodicity is a kind of rest: the laws of nature that govern oscillation are the “look of eternity” that shines through the turbulent world and stabilizes it. One perceives this lawfulness in the eternal return of waves: the visible music of Same in Other.

All this the poet sees and in seeing thinks. “O,” he says—and the exclamation, the affect of wonder and passionate openness to the whole, resounds through the poem. It recalls Valéry’s statement that all lyric poetry “is the development of an exclamation.” Indeed, the poem is full of exclamation points, the first of which occurs right after the line “*La mer, la mer, toujours recommencée!*” There is thought, *pensée*, and there is *ré-com-pense* afterwards. The I thinks and is gratified, at peace with having thought, with intellectually *having seen*. The recompense is sweet payback for the act of thinking. *Penso*, in Latin, is to weigh, also to counterbalance in an act of justice. (Think of

“compensate.”) It is also to weigh in one’s mind, to *ponder* or consider. Here *pénsee* is godlike, as the poet, in response to the gift-image of the divine poetry of world-making, identifies with the gods, who contemplate and are calm. The poet, in beholding the expanse of glittering undulating action (the flash of the whole’s beguiling surface), is compensated for his thought by a godlike peace: he beholds, in a privileged dream of the mind, the composure and calm of Olympian *theôria*. The last line of the stanza—*Q’un long regard sur le calme des dieux!*—beautifully captures, in its lulling lingering sound, the state of prolonged godlike peace.

But later (and inevitably), thought will become the thought of the mortal human that suffers the fate of mortal self-consciousness. The poet will become pensive and melancholy. His *pensée* will become grave, ponderous, and oppressive, as he descends from the glittering surface of eternal shining-forth (Spinoza’s *natura naturans*) to the humiliation of imperfection, limit, and death.

II

The poem as a whole reads like the revelation of (anti-Christian) mysteries: the secrets of change. The poem starts high: with images of godlike peace. And yet the fascinating tremble of the glittering whole must contain death: for a spark to appear, a spark must die. Scintillation is a perpetual life-out-of-death. This is the “pure work” of stanza II. The flashes look like thousands upon thousands of diamonds. But they cannot be diamond-hard. To use Spinoza’s terms, they are passing *modes* in the great sea of *substance*—*Natura* as the god who constantly appears in boundless effulgence. Already in II, the poet is aware that surface means surface of what is not the surface, the surface of a concealed

depth. This is the abyss: the sea as both infinite expanse and infinite depth. It is not “the” sun but “a” sun that reposes. Following Heraclitus—“the sun is new each day”—the poet is true to how the world appears. It is as though the sun died every day and was every day created anew: its eternality is eternal rebirth. The sun seems to rise up out of the abyss and sink back down into it. Also, to call the sun *un soleil* saves the appearance of motion that has been suspended. The poet is experiencing the Sun not as the body that appears to move, or the object of scientific theory (sun as revolving body or body around which we revolve), but as this burning light-source that is there *right now* in the scene, as if in a painting, and that seems in the privileged moment of high noon to hover and cease to move. In the poet’s experience, which the poem invites us to share, the Sun is a revelatory wonder-inspiring *symbol*.

Why are the *ouvrages* pure? Perhaps because they are the sheer flashing forth from their first principle: they are not altered in any way, not mixed and corrupted by consoling myths of origination. Nature is, in a sense, the true and only God—Nature not as effect (*natura naturata*) but as “eternal cause,” as infinite productivity and being-at-work (*natura naturans*).

Time scintillates rather than marches on. This is because the poet is seeing an image of the whole of all things summed up. In his godlike (and ironic) lookout point on the hilly cemetery, he is above it all, at least for now. *Le Temps scintille et le Songe est Savoir*: “Time scintillates and the Dream is to know.” Two senses are at work here in the second half of this provocative concluding line. In the first, the dream is to know because the human soul, in its *eros*, longs to know the absolute, to see what the gods see. The philosophic intellect gazes at the phenomenal world and is tempted to go beyond it, to the

noumenal *rêes ultimae* or “things-in-themselves.” This is the ultimate Dream of Man, the butterfly that Man chases without ever catching. But in another, more positive sense, the poet’s dream-state, which appears wondrously as a divine gift (a sort of pagan grace), the truth that *is* appearance is revealed—not to discursive reasoning or philosophy but to poetic intuition and receptivity to the play of images. Time may be said to scintillate only from this divine perspective that regards things *sub specie aeternitatis* (Spinoza again). Otherwise, from the ordinary finite perspective of thinghood, time marches on.

This final line, *Le Temps scintille et le Songe est savoir*, has special weight, as if it were the culmination of the previous lines in the stanza. The capitals highlight *Temps* and *Songe*, give the words universal stature, and also cause them to be intimately paired. Time is time that is summed up, seen from the eternal (or apparently eternal) vantage point; and *songe* is not any dream but rather this privileged Dream that is a state of poetic cognition.

III

This is a truly beautiful stanza, breathtaking in fact in its sound, rhythm, and imagery. Yvor Winters singles it out for special praise, as though to say: “Now that’s poetry.” Note the hypnotic effect of the repetition of parallel grammatical structures—the wave-like flow of appositions. And not a complete sentence to be found! No main verb.

The treasure is “stable.” That is, it is solidly, dependably there—a structure. It is lasting—the source and fund that is never exhausted and never to be budged. It is a certain kind of structure—a temple or structure for the gods. Simple—yes, unadorned with artifacts of human sentiment and consolation and therefore truthful. The fire-

composed sea-surface, the dream-image of the whole, is a fitting temple for the goddess of wisdom—a temple of Minerva. It is not a mass of water but a mass of calm: a massive condition or state. We can see the glittering sea-roof; it is visible. But what is visible is, again, not water, not a thing, but *reserve*. Reserve is a source and place of storage but also a condition. To be reserved is to be discrete, to have one's inner state composed and held in check. There are depths within, but they are discretely covered, kept secret, by the glittering surface. The simple Greek temple stands in sharp contrast with the cemetery's symbols of Christian consolation—with non-pure, non-simple adornment.

The water, *Eau*, is also an eye, *Oeil*—the lens-shaped body of water that the poet beholds. It is supercilious because it evinces the gesture or affect of a raised eyebrow or *supercilium*. This imagined expression of ironic disdain goes with the images of purity, simplicity, reserve and Olympian aloofness. The poet addresses this Eye or shiny haughty surface as something that guards within it *sleep* under a veil of flame. The shiny surface connotes the daylight world of consciousness. But beneath (ah, beneath!) there is “*so much sleep*” (the sheer amount is wondrous), so much potency that is *down there* below the conscious world—the world of unconscious, unsounded depth.

The poet continues this sequence of mystical-seeming appositions, as he goes from treasure to temple to mass to reserve to water to eye to—silence! “O my silence,” that is, “O that which is within me that is deeper than my most brilliantly conceived words! That which ‘sleeps,’ buried beneath my words and my intentions! This is my pure potency—what has not yet risen, and may never rise, to the level of consciousness and language.” Edifice in the soul: the word *édifice* is one of those deliberate Latinisms with which the poem abounds. It is a fussy learned word, which means originally the making (*facio*) of a

temple (*aedes*). The sea is a kind of undulating never-failing structure made of flashes and foam. Note that the poet has refrained from thinking of the sea as watery or wet: for now, sight alone matters. The poet sees himself, the edifice that is himself, in the edifice that is the sea, with its shining rooftop and its dark Underneath. The poet has built himself up over the course of years. He has absorbed, and even enhanced, what we call *culture*. He embodies the House of Culture (*Bildung*) that has been built up over the course of centuries. Much of the poem is, indeed, about the poet's record of an experience in which inner and outer mirror each other—each other's structures, each other's truths, each other's play of divine Up Here and mortal Down There.

The *mais*, “but,” is important. The poet has been reminded of his inarticulate, perhaps inarticulable, depths—the “silence” that is the unfathomable mysterious source and foundation of his brilliant light-filled words, his glittering, rhythmically undulating *poiêmata* or “makings.” The poet must be imagined as peering down into himself, as if from a height: he is experiencing his depth from a height. The *mais* brings him back up to his surface: “Yes, I am an abyss, like this seascape in front of me. And yet this Dark, this Silence, is crowned with a glittering surface—like my poems, which somehow emerge from the Down There that is also my Not Yet.” Both together—abyss and surface, the Dark Down There and the Bright Up Here—form the edifice that is a source of the poet's abiding wonder. *Toit* here is experienced as *Toi*.

IV

The word “temple” derives from *tempus*, time. “Temple of Time” is an etymological spelling out, a lesson for mortals about the unity of the divine and the deathbound. The

temple to Minerva was the glittering sea-surface. But now a metamorphosis occurs, as the image shifts—the poet’s meditation shifts—from sea to cemetery. The cemetery is truly a temple of time, that is, the sanctified solidly present home of mortality. The monuments endure and are made of stone, but each proclaims to those of unclouded mind: “It is a stone-like lasting truth that we all die because change rules the whole.”

The cemetery is summed up in the feeling-filled exhalation we call a sigh (*soupir*). It is the affect of mortal self-consciousness as it contemplates the last release of breath and the final destination. To think of death is to go down into our abyss. We each carry a personal grave within ourselves in our dark, pre-representational self-consciousness. To reflect on ourselves, on our interior, is to go down into ourselves, to retreat from the daylight world of representation and the consoling aspect of solid thinghood. The poet *mounts* to this “pure point.” Physically, he had to climb a hill to be where he is now, sitting in a raised cemetery that overlooks the sea. But his soul also mounts to the truth that surrounds and pervades him. The poet settles into this truth of death and grows accustomed to the cemetery-mode, as though it were a rarefied ether that required more than human lungs. He is surrounded, he says, by “*my* sea-outlook.” The poet is one with the objective truth that reveals itself. He is keenly aware of himself as this individual here at this time in this place and is justly proud of his ascent to the divine above-it-all perspective that he now enjoys. He refers to his “supreme offering to the gods.” No doubt this refers to his godlike creativity—his writing of poems, like this one. The scintillation has generative force: it suffuses the whole place, the whole *altitude* or lofty state to which the poet has accustomed himself, with a “sovereign disdain.” Although in a cemetery, where once living beings descend into the earth, the poet experiences the place as one of

godlike recognition, where, as we have seen, dream is knowledge.

V

The poet shifts from the cemetery-temple to the profound and intimate bond between pleasure and death. Pleasure, delight, is produced in the act of consumption. The eating of fruit is, of course, a chemical transformation in which something Other than me becomes the Same as me in the act of eating—assimilation. But the poet is interested in another feature of this common act. We eat because we desire. But what do we desire? Not only sustenance but also pleasure and gratification. Fruit is juicy, sweet and satisfying—a fitting symbol of life itself. It delights, like the sound of the delicious line: *Comme le fruit se fond en jouissance* (the favorite line of students in a Valéry preceptorial I once led). But the delight is born only when the fruit is destroyed, consumed. We think here of Hegel's notion of desire (*Begierde*)—negativity, the drive to negate what is Other. The cemetery is the place of preserved absence: the once-living beings have been consumed by their fire of life. Their form has been turned into their absence, as the poet will soon remind us—a *fruitful* absence that feeds the surrounding grass, plants and trees. This is the implied connection between stanzas IV and V. We are the always-consumed fruit of the Whole. We are being urged to think that somehow we are to the cosmos what fruit is to our faculty of taste, that the cosmos gathers delight from our vanishing form.

In the curious chain of ever-changing images, the poet moves from fruit to smoke—another form of absence (and of exhalation). He drinks in, breathes in, his “future smoke,” *future fumée*. The sound captures the fizzle of out-going fire. This future smoke is *life* after it has gone up in flames as a natural result of the life-process. Again, this

seems to recall Heidegger's *Sein-zum-Tod*. The smoke image is combined with the sound of the waves as they hit the shore: it is the cosmos singing its endless song of change, beautifully caught in the musically shushing sound of the French *changement*. The sky or heaven, the great *Ouranos*, sings to the poet's consumed soul. The transformation of form into absence, life into death and cosmic renewal, is the music of the whole. It is *not* the soul music of the *Timaeus*, with its eternal form-like ratios.

VI

We dwell with the sky, which the poet addresses as though it were a god. The sky combines beauty and truth in its song of change. "Look at me, who changes!" This is both confession and boast, as the poet puts himself into the light of truth. The pride to which he refers recalls the earlier suggestion of the poet as a being committed to and in the grip of intellectual activity. As maker and thinker, the poet is godlike, but there is also a "strange or unaccustomed laziness," that is, non-activity, non-actuality. Non-actuality, yes, but "full of power or possibility." In the wake of (*après*) all the poet's proud productivity and sleep-like potency, the poet "abandons himself" to the sunlit place of the dead. He gives himself up resolutely to *everything* that the light is and illuminates. The reference to the poet's "shadow," which is also of course his Shade, is stunning. He sees his shadow because the sun strikes his body, which, being opaque, turns light to dark, prevents the light from going straight through him. Shadow becomes symbol once it is cast on the gravestones: it is the poet's future "smoke" and "shade"—his future union with the dead. The quivering, frail movement of this shadow *tames* the poet by schooling his fierce pride of life, his productive potency and his will to stay integral and individual.

Frail movement masters human will and human pride, however strong.

VII

The poet's soul is exposed to the torches of the solstice, that is, to the high point of the sun's annual arc. This conspires with high noon, the high point of the sun's diurnal arc, to intensify the force and violence of the sun as *focus* or burning point. The poet both endures and supports (*se soutient*) the "admirable justice of the light with pitiless weapons." The light is not a god who loves man. It is Apollo, the god without pity whose arrows pierce as they illuminate. As my mother used to say when she told me something she knew I didn't want to hear, "The truth hurts." Yes, sometimes it does. And some endure the hurt of the pitiless Light, while others cover it up with consoling myths about the best of possible worlds and a timeless Beyond.

The poet stands on the side of deadly Apollo: he seconds the piercing rays that destroy illusion and preserve "justice" by showing things to be exactly as they are. The poet is acknowledging his place within the Whole. Indeed, he has a new pride: a mirror's pride! "I give you back pure [notice the justice-word "render"] to your original place [that is, your origin]." Why pure? Because the poet does not flinch and does not mythologize or corrupt. He takes it, as it were, like a man. But he also acknowledges that in thus taking it, he fulfills what would otherwise be left unfulfilled: the Whole's awareness of itself (the self-consciousness of Apollo). "Regard yourself!" he exclaims. That is, "Behold yourself face to face." The poet is a shadow being. We already know that. But his shadow-nature is necessary to the Whole, integral to the structure or *édifice* of the Whole. This idea is new to the poem's unfolding. If the Apollo-source is to be one with itself, if it

is to reflect itself and be fully circular and all-embracing, it needs an opaque surface. The poet is that surface. His opacity, his shadow nature, which includes everything that makes him non-divine and mortal, fulfills a cosmic function. The world, as we later hear, is the Great Diamond, which, like all diamonds, has its fault line. Imperfection is not the result of man's Fall. On the contrary, imperfection—ontological evil—is woven into the very fabric of the Whole. Creation *is* the fall. This idea is made explicit in Valéry's Serpent poem, where the biblical Serpent (imagined as a sophisticated French seducer, dandy and metaphysician) champions gnosticism and sings the praises of Non-being.

I cannot leave the stanza without remarking on the perfect sound of its final line, in which the poet has captured in words the garbled, opaque character of his inner being:

d'ombre une morne moitié.

VIII

Light, so prominent in the preceding stanzas, now vanishes, as the poet descends into his dark interior, a descent induced by the meditation on the sea. He *sounds* his depths, which resound in the lightless world of pre-representational self-consciousness. Sound leads the way, as the poet accumulates Hegel-sounding terms of self-reference: "O for me alone, to myself, in myself." He travels backward, as it were, from the bright sea-surface of his poetic words and the world of representation to the pre-posed dark Inner that is the wellspring and living heart of the poem. He puts himself in the very moment of poetic unfolding: pre-creation. He is *between* the void of non-being and the "pure event" of poetic discovery (that next word, that next line, that next image). The poem will be his grandeur, but it is not there yet: it is still a house-a-building. The poet has placed himself

into the very temporality and *Dasein* of the poem itself, which has a source and a living heart. He waits. He cannot will the next word, the next line, the next image into being. As Nietzsche tells us, a thought comes when *it* wants to.

The poet's Inner is a vast container or cistern—bitter like the sea, somber like the cemetery. Bitter because it is the nothing that is the self, somber because it is a depth one goes down into (like a grave). The future of the poem is also the future of the “poem” that is the rest of the poet's mortal life. What will come out of the hollow that is my self? Who knows! The inner cistern is in any case a sort of echo chamber in the soul. With what does it resonate? With the poet's pure unpredictable potentiality—an “always future hollow,” that is, a depth that is truly *pro-fond* or has its bottom (*fond*) always ahead of itself (*pro*). Heraclitus again comes to mind: “You would in your going never traverse the boundaries of the soul, so deep is its logos.”

IX

The sea is a “false captive of the foliage.” From the poet's visual perspective, the sea is framed, contained, by various tree branches. But it is not really contained: it transcends all frames and contains all things. The *golfe* or abyss “eats away” the thin fence-work: it is a *golfe mangeur*. No doubt this is because of the diffraction of the reflected light. But it also refers to the whole as that which ultimately devours all boundaries, which are, in the end, thin and weak. Again, not really a being but an all-embracing condition (of change), the sea as image of the whole contains even what is long past.

On intimate terms with the sea, the poet interrogates it dreamily: Do you know? That is: Do you have within you? The poet closes his eyes, perhaps not all the way. As we

know, this act increases the effect of dreaminess, blurring, diffraction. The secrets are things hidden from the poet's eyes: he cannot see beneath the dazzling sea-surface. Also, he is thinking of the mystery that is his total self: his *body*, his *brow*, the *thought* behind the brow. This thought, the poet's fascination with the Whole, draws him to this "bony place." It is, as it were, the inevitable encounter of spirit and skull. The glimmer of the sea mirrors the glimmer of his thought: the sparkle "thinks there" of his absent ones. The *mes* here does not refer to the poet's personal dead but rather to *all* the absent things that are in the poet's mind and have become intimately "his." He is personally identifying with their absence, which he experiences as an eternal vanishing.

X

The poet reflects further on the connection between sea and cemetery. The cemetery is enclosed, sanctified (ultimately not by a Church but by the truth-revealing Sun), and full of light-energy. The Latinate "terrestrial" gives an objective, scientific dignity to the place that is "offered up" as a sort of earthy death-gift to the light. The poet *likes* being where he now is, in the place lorded over, dominated, by cypresses (trees that are shaped like flames). The place is "composed of gold," that is, put together and settled by the rays of Apollo. The hard gravestones "tremble" because of the light that falls on them, graces them. They too are a symbol of change. And the sea? It is "faithful." As the next stanza makes clear, the sea is the faithful watchdog that guards the mysteries of change. *La mer* sleeps "over" and "above" the gravestones like a good *mère*. Here we must put ourselves into the poet's visual perspective, from which the sea, as observed from the raised bit of earth, appears to be above the tombs. That is how it would look in a painting.

XI

The “splendid bitch,” that is, the dormant sea (symbol of abiding change), keeps off the idolaters. Here, again, we must be careful to note the Latinate *splendide*, or else the word becomes superficial: splendid means “shining, glorious.” The idolaters are Christians, and possibly other believers in personal immortality, who would corrupt and darken the scene and its revelations with wishful thinking and the denial of world and change. The poet is the “good shepherd,” who, in this inverted world, makes sure people do *not* follow Christ and his promise of a timeless Kingdom.

With an amazing near-comic irony, the sunlit gravestones become “mysterious sheep”—mysterious because they guard the mystery of change, the having-been of those once present who are now absent (as individuals). The tombs are “tranquil,” that is, sea-like: composed and dignified. The seeming of the tombs, their being as symbols, keeps away the thought of providence (“prudent” doves), heaven (“empty dreams”), and angels (“curious” because always poking their noses into our lives to see what’s going on, perhaps in order to record it).

XII

“Having come here.” A simple beginning to a fascinating stanza, the theme of which seems to echo Heraclitus: “a dry soul is wisest and best.” The future is lazy because the dead aren’t going anywhere and have nothing to do: they have no agenda. They are now perpetually lying down on the job. The insect, the cicada, is precisely formed (*net*), even skeletal in its design. It scratches the dryness and makes the sound it makes: it joins the

symphony of the shore's song of change. All is dryness. This is the new idea, the Dry, which comes after the stanza about the corrupting influence of "wet" sentimental notions and symbols. The sun is bountiful, a source of life and warmth. But it also dries out and cooks what it illuminates and warms (recall Baudelaire's carcass poem).

Thanks to the sun, once-juicy beings become desiccated, stripped down, skeletal, reduced and analyzed into their elements. Here again, the physical mirrors the intellectual and the unflinching. "Analysis kills." Yes, and in so doing it reveals elemental truth. Moisture is "received into the air" and becomes "I know not what severe essence." It is sublimated. "Severe" because strictly reduced, as well as harsh with respect to our sensibilities, which like to hold on to the individuality and wholeness of self and thing. Life is "vast" in the Latin sense of the term: not so much expansive as *wasted*. In another inverted world of symbols, life, because it is the place of constant desiccation and moist-becoming-dry, is *drunk* on everything that passes away in this process. It is an orgy of evaporation, a constant influx of moisture that once was. We recall the fruit and its disappearing form in the earlier stanza. Life is drunk on absence or non-being, on a disappearing act that never quits. "Bitterness is sweet, and the mind clear." To the poet's mind, which supports and seconds the fact and mystery of change—of life as the process of life-becoming-death—desiccation is an essential condition of life's sweetness; and the mind that can grasp and accept this is "clear," that is, unclouded by sentiment.

XIII

We are at the midpoint of the poem's arc and life, as the poem itself reminds us (*Midi là-haut*). The dead are hidden well—that is, well taken care of qua dead people—in the

earth. This continues the composite image of watchdog, shepherd and sheep. Now, in addition to the Dry, we get the Warm. The earth keeps the dead nice and toasty. It keeps the mystery of change dry (uncorrupted and unsentimental).

Again there is the reminder of the cosmic condition—high noon, when the sun hovers in a moment of seeming eternity, the Now of terrible revelation and poetic “absolute knowing.” Again the Whole is personified as intellect. We think of the myth in the *Timaeus*, where the cosmic sphere resembles a gigantic always revolving, always thinking head. The cosmic sphere (for that is what the sky looks like) thinks itself as it sparkles and creates (like the ultimate Poet that it is) and fits itself, is at home with itself. The Whole is a *tête complète*, a filled-out or complete head, and a “perfect diadem.” The line scans the same both forwards and backwards, in imitation of the Whole’s perfection. “I am the secret change in you,” says the poet. The large theme here is the one that pervades the poem: the poet sees in the scene an image and symbol of himself as poet and thinker. Why secret? Because of the poet’s mortal opacity, his participation in murk and muddle. The poet completes the perfect head and diadem by virtue of his imperfection, his otherness with respect to divine effulgence.

XIV

Change is a feature of the whole: there is nothing hidden about it. But the sort of change that the poet qua human uniquely embodies is his inner changeableness and emotionality: his fear, repentance, doubt and hesitancy. These are all negative and retreating emotions, feelings that cause us to feel our limits. “You [the poet addresses the Whole with the familiar] have only me to contain” all these things. The idea here is that these

imperfections had to exist if there was to be any creation at all (creation is a fall from the “purity of non-being” [the Serpent poem]). The imperfections had to go somewhere, and human selfhood was that place. Humanity is the dumping ground for necessary cosmic imperfection made self-aware. And yet, it is for that same reason the elevation of our imperfection to the status of a cosmic requirement. This idea seems to derive ultimately from Plato’s *Timaeus*, where human corruption completes and perfects the cosmic Animal.

The poet experiences himself as the “fault” of the cosmic diamond, the Whole that shines forth. Then there occurs one of several ellipses in the poem (...), as the poet shifts, through the word “but,” to the change that is going on *underground*. There is a whole race of people down there—not a people determined by age, sex, race, nationality, personality, etc., but rather a “vague” people. That is, their outlines are blurred. But also they are a vagrant people: they *wander* in the sense that their being is in constant biochemical transformation. They wander in a “night” “all laden with marble.” If they could look up, their perceived “sky” would be the dark underside of the gravestones, and there would be no stars or moon! The vague people are constantly “traveling,” migrating, into the roots of the trees. They have taken their part, taken sides, with the fact of change. They *live* change, or are utterly committed to the change-advocates (as opposed to those who sentimentally resist change). They have taken this side “slowly,” that is, in a gradual process of chemical breakdown and transference of nutrients. Perhaps *lentement* also refers to our all-too-human unwillingness to take the side of change, which involves the dissolution of the individuality to which we desperately cling. But slowly—that is, by and by—we come to be participants and advocates of change, if not in word then in deed.

XV

Being dead is a congealing. This is another inverted world of symbols. The dead are reduced and dissolved, yes. But they have also been compacted and concretized into “a thick absence.” This is one of the poem’s most amazing images. The thickness is the material substance of nutriment formed by decomposition. The earthy or red clay has “drunk” the white kind (bone and whatever marrow it contains). Death is life’s way of recycling life. The decomposing dead and the nutrients they contain are a *gift* passed on to the flowers.

But then the poet turns to questions that will lead quickly back to the harsh truth of change and the evanescence of feeling. “Where are the familiar phrases of the dead, the personal way of being, singular [or colorful] souls?” Well, they have gone back to their origin in the Whole and its song of change. This fact is stated with brutal irony: “The worm wends its way (or files) where tears used to form.” The worm of mortality replaces and triumphs over all mortal care.

XVI

The poet’s reflection on the passage of all human things into death continues. He lists the scenes of youth and its flirtations: “the shrill cries of tickled girls [in flirtation]/ the eyes, the teeth, the moistened eyelashes/the attractive breast that plays with the fire [of sexual arousal], the blood [passion] that shines on lips that offer themselves/ the final gifts [that men want to touch] and the fingers that defend them.” All this—not just the beings, bodies, and parts of bodies, but the whole vibrant scene of lusty youth—goes under the

earth and enters the cosmic *jeu* or game, the play of coming to be and passing away.

XVII

The poet now turns to himself with the formal or respectfully distant (and ironic) *vous*. “And you, great soul—who do you think you are? Do you think yourself, a dignified and non-silly being, immune to the game of the preceding stanza? Do you have lingering dreams of immortality, a dream that will no longer have the colors of a mere seeming or lie, colors that wave and light make here on eyes of flesh? Do you think you will one day, after death, ‘see’ the Thing-in-Itself and the deathless Ideas of things in their hyper-uranian heaven? Do you think, great soul that you are, that you are less mortal than the tickled girls? Will you sing, write poems, when you are vaporous?” In this last question, the poet slyly deletes the *vous* from the *quand* clause: his future will indeed be a deletion.

Then the poet sides with change: “Go! All flees!” He embraces his mortal fate, answers his question. His presence, he says, is porous. That is, his presence and being—there is not solid but full of holes: it is riddled with non-being. He then adds, cryptically, “holy impatience dies too!” Impatience is the refusal to wait it out, also the refusal to suffer the change that all things must suffer. “Holy” impatience probably refers to the Christian holdout who says no to change and refuses to enter into the game, and who is impatient for immortality. That refusal, in the end, becomes part of the game. It too dies.

XVIII

The rejection of the belief in personal immortality now reaches its peak. Immortality is “skinny,” “black” and “gilded.” She is a consoler “frightfully laurelled.” The description

is perhaps prompted by a figure the poet has seen among the monuments. This consoling mother figure makes of death “a maternal breast.” She represents “the beautiful lie” and the “pious ruse.” We all recognize death and yet we all (or most of us) reject it: the empty skull and the eternal grin (death’s last laugh)! The stanza is explicit and needs little commentary. Making Lady Death into a mother figure recalls these lines from Wallace Stevens’ *Sunday Morning*: “Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,/Within whose burning bosoms we devise/Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.”

XIX

This stanza goes much deeper than the preceding one, which is bluntly dismissive in its tone and language. The *pères profonds* are our ancestors, who were also our teachers and guides. They are deep down now but once may have been profound in the other sense of the term. In any case, they are now “uninhabited heads,” heads with nobody home. Their profundity is now *only* their being buried deep in the earth. Indeed, the poet says addressing them directly: “You *are* the earth, and you confound our steps.” Once, our profound fathers guided our steps. But now their gravestones just make walking harder, just as their death is a stumbling block for us, as we make our way through life. Note again that the poet suggests a personal deletion by suppressing the implied subject *vous*.

The profound fathers are eaten by physical worms as they lie “under the table” of the graveyard. But the true worm, which eats away at every still living self-consciousness, is busily at work *above* the table. We who live on the surface of the earth are on the table of life as food for this gnawing worm. We are devoured more deeply, more truly than the profound fathers. This true worm—the *ver* that is *verum*—is “irrefutable.” That is, he is

an undeniable part of human experience: the abiding essence of man as self-consciousness and desire. This worm in the self—which *is* the self qua self-referring—lives on life (that is, on the living). He never takes a day off: *il ne me quitte pas*.

XX

The poet continues to meditate on the Inner Worm. What is its right name? Love of self (amour-propre)—or maybe *hate* of self? The hate reminds us of the verb *remordre*: to experience remorse is to bite oneself back, to punish oneself. The poet observes that the “secret tooth” of this worm is so close to everything he is and does that it takes on all names. The statement reminds us of La Rochefoucauld’s long maxim on amour-propre, which pervades our being, takes on many names and lives even in his (apparent) death and denial. The worm of selfhood is everywhere: its name really doesn’t matter. “It sees, it wants, it dreams, it touches. It likes my flesh.” This Worm is so intimately bound up with me that it even follows me to bed and invades my dream life. There is no getting away from it, no rest. “I live to belong to this living thing” that constantly feeds on me, and is me.

XXI

I always like getting to the Zeno stanza, which Valéry (with his accustomed cheek) claims to have thrown into the poem to please the philosopher types. The repetition of Zeno’s name captures the zing of Zeno’s argumentative arrows, the brilliance of his paradoxes. Zeno is from Elea and a student of Parmenides, the philosopher who denied the reality of motion. Zeno is cruel because he arouses thought only to stop it in its tracks

and kill it. His paradoxes are, simultaneously, birth and death. He stirs us into thought and then blocks our way. (As Aristotle says somewhere in his *Physics*, Zeno's paradoxes are bad for our intellectual digestion: they "block" us.) This too is related to the warning against every form of immortal longing, not just the Christian form. Philosophy leads to antinomies and nothing more. It is, in the end, a tragic love affair and instance of Hegel's Unhappy Consciousness, perhaps best summed up in the critical philosophy of Kant. In any case, the arrow in this stanza is both the arrow in the famous paradox and the arrow that *is* the paradox, the logistical zinger. The arrow quivers, flies—and yet does not fly! Zeno is the enemy of change. He sings a beguiling song that tries to counter the song of change in stanza V. The intellectual ring of the famous paradox gives birth to me, wakes me up intellectually, and the arrow that is the argument kills me, aborts my effort to think about the world of change and to make progress.

From the Eleatic enemy of change the poet now returns to the sun. He exclaims: "Ah!" This "Ah!" is not a continuation of the wonder the poet felt earlier. The role of the sun within the poet's ever-shifting meditation has changed. The poet has caught it in the act of changing, seen its potential for distraction—and Zeno has brought this to light. The "Ah!" expresses a truth just discovered about a familiar but until now hidden object. The sun does everything we have seen in the poem: it is fiery demiurge and cosmic composer. But it is also a great tempter—*the* tempter (see the *Serpent* poem). The sun suspended at high noon seems to stand still in a moment of absolute knowing and intellectual stasis. But its shining there, its holding out the prospect of changeless Being (Eleaticism), is in fact a great shadow in the mind. It moves like the shadow of a tortoise for the soul. It is glory-seeking Achilles frozen, crippled, in a moment of non-action and thereby falsified.

Philosophic thought has robbed Achilles of his fire-like glory, which he can achieve only if he is allowed to stride forward—to his death. In sum, Homer is more truthful than Zeno, or Plato. He does not reduce motion, especially tragic motion, to a changeless Idea.

XXII

The poet rebels. Zeno has made him rebel. Momentarily charmed by the prospect of changeless Being as it gleams in the sun-god as eternal symbol, the poet utters a decisive (that is, a cutting) “Non, non!” He commands himself to get up, to get on with life, to move into “the next era.” This is striking language for an individual. It is as though the poet feels in himself the need for a whole age of humanity to move into its future, to break free of ideas that constrain its bond with temporal unfolding and possibilities that have yet to emerge. “Break,” he tells his body, “this pensive [or ponderous] form.” Rodin’s gnarled Thinker comes to mind. “Breathe in,” he tells his breast, “the birth of the wind.” The poet, held in a seemingly timeless meditation on life, death, and self, experiences a rebirth, a resurgence of the primordial will to live. The stanza suggests, or perhaps asserts, that thought and life are irreconcilable opposites, that thought (*penser*) is inevitably melancholic and static (ponderous or weighty). Thought is a spell in need of eventually being broken. It is the ultimate Siren song that charms and distracts intellectual non-Christians like our poet.

A freshness of the wind restores the poet’s soul, which has been stolen away by the Muse of eventually morbid contemplation. “O salty potency!” the poet exclaims, as he exhorts himself (and us) to run into the wave, that is, to stop gazing meditatively at the water and actually get wet and lively!

XXIII

Just as the previous stanza began with “no,” this one begins with “yes”—as if to say, “Yes, you beguiling one, I too am under your spell, which is undeniable.” “Yes! Great sea gifted with deliriums.” We have gone from the sun to an exhortation to run into the water, and then back to the beguiling sea-surface, which now, in light of the previous stanza, has become a mythic monster, the Hydra. The “great sea” causes delirium, a profound confusion of mind—a bad sort of drunkenness and obsession (hence the Pindar quote). The surface is like the smooth undulating skin of a panther and a Greek horseman’s cloak, or *chlamys*, riddled with thousands upon thousands of “idols of the sun,” that is, idols of immortality. The image recalls Bacon’s four Idols but here no doubt refers to the various theories of philosophers. It recalls Schopenhauer’s observation that “we find philosophy to be a monster with many heads, each of which speaks a different language” (*The World as Will and Representation* I, 17). (Once Valéry admitted that thinking, for him, was a kind of idol or false god, but the best idol he knew.) The by now familiar use of inversion reappears: the numberless glittering lights on the sea-surface are really *black holes*, pits in the fabric of becoming, into which aspiring minds fall (compare Melville’s obiter dictum about how many minds have fallen into “Plato’s sweet head” in *Moby Dick*).

The poet perceives the sea at this point of his meditation as “absolute hydra,” that is, the Water-Monster of Absolute Knowing, or rather the desire for this knowing (which, as Kant asserted, reason can never possess but can never stop seeking). The Hydra is drunk on its blue flesh: it constantly eats itself, is turned on itself in an act of eternal self-

reflection and self-consumption (again Rodin's gnarly thinker). The poet addresses the Water-Monster with the familiar: "you who bite back [*Qui te remords*] your glimmering tail in a tumult like silence." It is the image of infinite desire that feeds on desire and never transcends itself. It is the "place" where the silence of eternity is indistinguishable from mere noise. In gazing at the tranquil roof, one might think that the sea is summed up in the calm of the gods and in the knowing silence of repose. But that is not the whole truth. This silence, from the perspective that has now emerged, is a violent tumult that is *like* silence.

XXIV

Stanza XXIII is the only stanza that does not end with a strong mark of punctuation. It ends with a comma, whose "dynamic quality" pushes on into the final stanza of the poem, as the poet turns away from the Water-Monster of infinite desire to the wind of rebirth and renewed life. The wind rises, says the poet: "one must try to live!" He does not say that one must live but that one must try to. Life is an effort, an act of will or resolve. One must *try to live* in the face of all that has been revealed and experienced in the poem. High noon is a privileged moment, as is the human act of solitary contemplation. But it is still only a moment of life, not the whole. And so, at the end of this deep and complex experience, the poet reenters the realm of life and human feeling. He experiences the return of time as a process of moving forward.

The wind, which is prominent here, is the very life-breath of the Whole that saves the poet from melancholic meditation. The wind (*penuma* and spirit) opens and closes the notebook in which the poet has been writing: it infuses the pages with a kind of life,

corporeal life. The wave now is experienced not as moving on eternally but as finding its welcome climax on the rocks: it issues forth in a spray, as we may imagine, of delight (an echo of the earlier fruit). The poet addresses his pages full of brilliant words—words, which, like the sea-surface, have a rhythm of their own. “Fly away, pages all dazzling!” he says, as if the book had become a great bird now ready to take on new life and face the public. He exhorts the waves to break on the shore, and the waters to break the tranquil roof that for so long held and fascinated him. He wants the surface to be tranquil no more. And he imagines the little boats as now pecking at and penetrating the sea-surface, no longer merely walking on it. The dream of knowing that the sea has evoked must in the end be dispelled through a combination of effort and yielding. A poem, once written, must at some point be given up...

Summary

The poem is an artfully composed record of a human experience. It both expresses that experience and makes a statement about it. The poem invites us to be part of the poet's inspired dream-state. It encloses a sort of intellectual hypnosis in which truths otherwise not sufficiently felt and known come to light in a privileged moment of revelation—poetic cognition. The poet is at first, and for a while, under the spell of high noon. He meditates on the mirroring of Self and World, Poetic Composition and *Cosmopoiêsis*, and the likeness between Poet and God as Demiurge. Pondering the brilliant surface of things leads to pondering what is beneath: the surface reveals that there is a depth, and the poet, resolved to endure the Truth-Ray of pitiless Apollo, goes down into that depth—and down into himself. He encounters the pure potency that is the mysterious source of his

godlike brilliance. This is the resonant Non-Being he carries within himself and which presages his inevitable Non-Being in death. This meditation and self-encounter brings out and emphasizes the ponderous nature of *penser* or thought. The poet is not pure intellect, and he is not yet dead. He must therefore break the spell of thought and resolve to come back to life. He must regain the human perspective and recover the exuberance and non-thought that is life.

He must also *stop writing the poem*. He must let go of this dazzling bird so that it may fly out of his hands, out of his control, and into the world. At some point, pure potency — for a poet or maker—must *die* as potency. It must give way to the poem that has a life of its own: it must yield to actuality. A poem, as a finished product, is oddly at odds with change or process, even though it can, as in the present case, brilliantly capture in its musical way movement as a series of psychical states.

What, then, is a poem in the cosmic song of change? What does its perfection and finish tell us about our striving to be more than process, more than change? Is a poem, in the end, inescapably the manifestation of our longing to be—immortal?