

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Paul Valery**  
**- poems -**

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## Paul Valéry(1871 - 1945)

Paul Valéry, French poet, essayist, and critic was born in Sète, France in 1871. His father, Barthelmy Valéry, was a customs officer at the sea port of Sète, and his mother, Fanny Grassi, who was the daughter of an Italian consul and a descended from Venetian nobility.

He was educated in Sette and at the lycée and University of Montpellier, and obtained his licence in 1892 after studying law there. In this same year, Valéry fell in love with a young Spanish girl but suffered a personal crisis. It was at this time he discovered the 'revolution of the mind', during a stormy night in Genoa. He turned his back on writing poetry and dedicated himself to gaining 'maximum knowledge and control of his intellect.' The very act of writing, he decided, was one of vanity, and set to free himself at no matter what cost, from those falsehoods: literature and sentiment. During this time he published two prose works. In *Introduction de la Methode de Leonard da Vince* (1894) he claimed that "all criticism is the cause of the work as in the eyes of the law the criminal is the cause of the crime. Far rather are they both the effects." *La Soiree Avec Monsieur Teste* (1896) which came to be the first part of his Teste cycle.

The publisher Gaston Gallimard, asked Valéry to collect and revise the poetry he had written in the 1890s. Valéry's original plan was to produce a poem of some forty lines, but he finished with one of his major works, *La Jeune Pataque*, which brought him immediate fame.

His 'mélodrames' *Amphion* and *Sémiramis*, found the stage at the Paris Opera in 1931 and 1934. Valéry was elected to the Académie Française in 1925 and in 1933 he was made administrative head of the Centre Universitaire Méditerranéen at Nice. In 1937 Valéry was appointed professor of poetry at the Collège de France. In 1939 he wrote the libretto for Germaine Taillefer's *Cantate du Narcisse*. Valéry died in Paris on July 20, 1945, and was returned to Sète for his burial.

# Les Pas

Tes pas, enfants de mon silence,  
Saintement, lentement placés,  
Vers le lit de ma vigilance  
Procèdent muets et glacés.

Personne pure, ombre divine,  
Qu'ils sont doux, tes pas retenus !  
Dieux !... tous les dons que je devine  
Viennent à moi sur ces pieds nus !

Si, de tes lèvres avancées,  
Tu prépares pour l'apaiser,  
A l'habitant de mes pensées  
La nourriture d'un baiser,

Ne hâte pas cet acte tendre,  
Douceur d'être et de n'être pas,  
Car j'ai vécu de vous attendre,  
Et mon coeur n'était que vos pas.

Paul Valery

# The Graveyard By The Sea

This quiet roof, where dove-sails saunter by,  
Between the pines, the tombs, throbs visibly.  
Impartial noon patterns the sea in flame --  
That sea forever starting and re-starting.  
When thought has had its hour, oh how rewarding  
Are the long vistas of celestial calm!  
What grace of light, what pure toil goes to form  
The manifold diamond of the elusive foam!  
What peace I feel begotten at that source!  
When sunlight rests upon a profound sea,  
Time's air is sparkling, dream is certainty --  
Pure artifice both of an eternal Cause.

Sure treasure, simple shrine to intelligence,  
Palpable calm, visible reticence,  
Proud-lidded water, Eye wherein there wells  
Under a film of fire such depth of sleep --  
O silence! . . . Mansion in my soul, you slope  
Of gold, roof of a myriad golden tiles.

Temple of time, within a brief sigh bounded,  
To this rare height inured I climb, surrounded  
By the horizons of a sea-girt eye.  
And, like my supreme offering to the gods,  
That peaceful coruscation only breeds  
A loftier indifference on the sky.

Even as a fruit's absorbed in the enjoying,  
Even as within the mouth its body dying  
Changes into delight through dissolution,  
So to my melted soul the heavens declare  
All bounds transfigured into a boundless air,  
And I breathe now my future's emanation.

Beautiful heaven, true heaven, look how I change!  
After such arrogance, after so much strange  
Idleness -- strange, yet full of potency --  
I am all open to these shining spaces;  
Over the homes of the dead my shadow passes,

Ghosting along -- a ghost subduing me.  
My soul laid bare to your midsummer fire,  
O just, impartial light whom I admire,

Whose arms are merciless, you have I stayed  
And give back, pure, to your original place.  
Look at yourself . . . But to give light implies  
No less a somber moiety of shade.

Oh, for myself alone, mine, deep within  
At the heart's quick, the poem's fount, between  
The void and its pure issue, I beseech  
The intimations of my secret power.  
O bitter, dark, and echoing reservoir  
Speaking of depths always beyond my reach.

But know you -- feigning prisoner of the boughs,  
Gulf which cats up their slender prison-bars,  
Secret which dazzles though mine eyes are closed --  
What body drags me to its lingering end,  
What mind draws it to this bone-peopled ground?  
A star broods there on all that I have lost.

Closed, hallowed, full of insubstantial fire,  
Morsel of earth to heaven's light given o'er --  
This plot, ruled by its flambeaux, pleases me --  
A place all gold, stone, and dark wood, where shudders  
So much marble above so many shadows:  
And on my tombs, asleep, the faithful sea.

Keep off the idolaters, bright watch-dog, while --  
A solitary with the shepherd's smile --  
I pasture long my sheep, my mysteries,  
My snow-white flock of undisturbed graves!  
Drive far away from here the careful doves,  
The vain daydreams, the angels' questioning eyes!

Now present here, the future takes its time.  
The brittle insect scrapes at the dry loam;  
All is burnt up, used up, drawn up in air  
To some ineffably rarefied solution . . .  
Life is enlarged, drunk with annihilation,

And bitterness is sweet, and the spirit clear.

The dead lie easy, hidden in earth where they  
Are warmed and have their mysteries burnt away.  
Motionless noon, noon aloft in the blue  
Broods on itself -- a self-sufficient theme.  
O rounded dome and perfect diadem,

I am what's changing secretly in you.

I am the only medium for your fears.  
My penitence, my doubts, my baulked desires --  
These are the flaw within your diamond pride . . .  
But in their heavy night, cumbered with marble,  
Under the roots of trees a shadow people  
Has slowly now come over to your side.  
To an impervious nothingness they're thinned,  
For the red clay has swallowed the white kind;  
Into the flowers that gift of life has passed.  
Where are the dead? -- their homely turns of speech,  
The personal grace, the soul informing each?  
Grubs thread their way where tears were once composed.

The bird-sharp cries of girls whom love is teasing,  
The eyes, the teeth, the eyelids moistly closing,  
The pretty breast that gambles with the flame,  
The crimson blood shining when lips are yielded,  
The last gift, and the fingers that would shield it --  
All go to earth, go back into the game.

And you, great soul, is there yet hope in you  
To find some dream without the lying hue  
That gold or wave offers to fleshly eyes?  
Will you be singing still when you're thin air?  
All perishes. A thing of flesh and pore  
Am I. Divine impatience also dies.

Lean immortality, all crêpe and gold,  
Laurelled consoler frightening to behold,  
Death is a womb, a mother's breast, you feign  
The fine illusion, oh the pious trick!

Who does not know them, and is not made sick  
That empty skull, that everlasting grin?

Ancestors deep down there, O derelict heads  
Whom such a weight of spaded earth o'erspreads,  
Who are the earth, in whom our steps are lost,  
The real flesh-eater, worm unanswerable  
Is not for you that sleep under the table:  
Life is his meat, and I am still his host.

'Love,' shall we call him? 'Hatred of self,' maybe?  
His secret tooth is so intimate with me  
That any name would suit him well enough,  
Enough that he can see, will, daydream, touch --  
My flesh delights him, even upon my couch  
I live but as a morsel of his life.

Zeno, Zeno, cruel philosopher Zeno,  
Have you then pierced me with your feathered arrow  
That hums and flies, yet does not fly! The sounding  
Shaft gives me life, the arrow kills. Oh, sun! --  
Oh, what a tortoise-shadow to outrun  
My soul, Achilles' giant stride left standing!

No, no! Arise! The future years unfold.  
Shatter, O body, meditation's mould!  
And, O my breast, drink in the wind's reviving!  
A freshness, exhalation of the sea,  
Restores my soul . . . Salt-breathing potency!  
Let's run at the waves and be hurled back to living!

Yes, mighty sea with such wild frenzies gifted  
(The panther skin and the rent chlamys), sifted  
All over with sun-images that glisten,  
Creature supreme, drunk on your own blue flesh,  
Who in a tumult like the deepest hush  
Bite at your sequin-glittering tail -- yes, listen!

The wind is rising! . . . We must try to live!  
The huge air opens and shuts my book: the wave  
Dares to explode out of the rocks in reeking  
Spray. Fly away, my sun-bewildered pages!

Break, waves! Break up with your rejoicing surges  
This quiet roof where sails like doves were pecking.

### Original French Text

Le cimetière marin

Translation by C. Day Lewis

The French text and English translation side by side

Ce toit tranquille, où marchent des colombes,  
Entre les pins palpite, entre les tombes;  
Midi le juste y compose de feux  
La mer, la mer, toujours recommencée  
O récompense après une pensée  
Qu'un long regard sur le calme des dieux!

Quel pur travail de fins éclairs consume  
Maint diamant d'imperceptible écume,  
Et quelle paix semble se concevoir!  
Quand sur l'abîme un soleil se repose,  
Ouvrages purs d'une éternelle cause,  
Le temps scintille et le songe est savoir.

Stable trésor, temple simple à Minerve,  
Masse de calme, et visible réserve,  
Eau sourcilleuse, Oeil qui gardes en toi  
Tant de sommeil sous une voile de flamme,  
O mon silence! . . . Édifice dans l'ame,  
Mais comble d'or aux mille tuiles, Toit!

Temple du Temps, qu'un seul soupir résume,  
À ce point pur je monte et m'accoutume,  
Tout entouré de mon regard marin;  
Et comme aux dieux mon offrande suprême,  
La scintillation sereine sème  
Sur l'altitude un dédain souverain.

Comme le fruit se fond en jouissance,  
Comme en délice il change son absence  
Dans une bouche où sa forme se meurt,  
Je hume ici ma future fumée,

Et le ciel chante à l'âme consumée  
Le changement des rives en rumeur.

Beau ciel, vrai ciel, regarde-moi qui change!  
Après tant d'orgueil, après tant d'étrange  
Oisiveté, mais pleine de pouvoir,  
Je m'abandonne à ce brillant espace,  
Sur les maisons des morts mon ombre passe  
Qui m'apprivoise à son frêle mouvoir.

L'âme exposée aux torches du solstice,  
Je te soutiens, admirable justice  
De la lumière aux armes sans pitié!  
Je te tends pure à ta place première,  
Regarde-toi! . . . Mais rendre la lumière  
Suppose d'ombre une morne moitié.

O pour moi seul, à moi seul, en moi-même,  
Auprès d'un cœur, aux sources du poème,  
Entre le vide et l'événement pur,  
J'attends l'écho de ma grandeur interne,  
Amère, sombre, et sonore citerne,  
Sonnant dans l'âme un creux toujours futur!

Sais-tu, fausse captive des feuillages,  
Golfe mangeur de ces maigres grillages,  
Sur mes yeux clos, secrets éblouissants,  
Quel corps me traîne à sa fin paresseuse,  
Quel front l'attire à cette terre osseuse?  
Une étincelle y pense à mes absents.

Fermé, sacré, plein d'un feu sans matière,  
Fragment terrestre offert à la lumière,  
Ce lieu me plaît, dominé de flambeaux,  
Composé d'or, de pierre et d'arbres sombres,  
Où tant de marbre est tremblant sur tant d'ombres;  
La mer fidèle y dort sur mes tombeaux!

Chienne splendide, écarte l'idolâtre!  
Quand solitaire au sourire de pâte,  
Je pais longtemps, moutons mystérieux,  
Le blanc troupeau de mes tranquilles tombes,

Éloignes-en les prudentes colombes,  
Les songes vains, les anges curieux!

Ici venu, l'avenir est paresse.  
L'insecte net gratte la sécheresse;  
Tout est brûlé, défait, reçu dans l'air  
A je ne sais quelle sévère essence . . .  
La vie est vaste, étant ivre d'absence,  
Et l'amertume est douce, et l'esprit clair.

Les morts cachés sont bien dans cette terre  
Qui les réchauffe et sèche leur mystère.  
Midi là-haut, Midi sans mouvement  
En soi se pense et convient à soi-même  
Tête complète et parfait diadème,  
Je suis en toi le secret changement.

Tu n'as que moi pour contenir tes craintes!  
Mes repentirs, mes doutes, mes contraintes  
Sont le défaut de ton grand diamant! . . .  
Mais dans leur nuit toute lourde de marbres,  
Un peuple vague aux racines des arbres  
A pris déjà ton parti lentement.

Ils ont fondu dans une absence épaisse,  
L'argile rouge a bu la blanche espèce,  
Le don de vivre a passé dans les fleurs!  
Où sont des morts les phrases familières,  
L'art personnel, les âmes singulières?  
La larve file où se formaient les pleurs.

Les cris aigus des filles chatouillées,  
Les yeux, les dents, les paupières mouillées,  
Le sein charmant qui joue avec le feu,  
Le sang qui brille aux lèvres qui se rendent,  
Les derniers dons, les doigts qui les défendent,  
Tout va sous terre et rentre dans le jeu!

Et vous, grande âme, espérez-vous un songe  
Qui n'aura plus ces couleurs de mensonge  
Qu'aux yeux de chair l'onde et l'or font ici?  
Chanterez-vous quand serez vaporeuse?

Allez! Tout fuit! Ma présence est poreuse,  
La sainte impatience meurt aussi!

Maigre immortalité noire et dorée,  
Consolatrice affreusement laurée,  
Qui de la mort fais un sein maternel,  
Le beau mensonge et la pieuse ruse!  
Qui ne connaît, et qui ne les refuse,  
Ce crâne vide et ce rire éternel!

Pères profonds, têtes inhabitées,  
Qui sous le poids de tant de pelletées,  
Êtes la terre et confondez nos pas,  
Le vrai rongeur, le ver irréfutable  
N'est point pour vous qui dormez sous la table,  
Il vit de vie, il ne me quitte pas!

Amour, peut-être, ou de moi-même haine?  
Sa dent secrète est de moi si prochaine  
Que tous les noms lui peuvent convenir!  
Qu'importe! Il voit, il veut, il songe, il touche!  
Ma chair lui plaît, et jusque sur ma couche,  
À ce vivant je vis d'appartenir!

Zénon! Cruel Zénon! Zénon d'Élée!  
M'as-tu percé de cette flèche ailée  
Qui vibre, vole, et qui ne vole pas!  
Le son m'enfante et la flèche me tue!  
Ah! le soleil . . . Quelle ombre de tortue  
Pour l'âme, Achille immobile à grands pas!

Non, non! . . . Debout! Dans l'ère successive!  
Brisez, mon corps, cette forme pensive!  
Buvez, mon sein, la naissance du vent!  
Une fraîcheur, de la mer exhalée,  
Me rend mon âme . . . O puissance salée!  
Courons à l'onde en rejaillir vivant.

Oui! grande mer de delires douée,  
Peau de panthère et chlamyde trouée,  
De mille et mille idoles du soleil,  
Hydre absolue, ivre de ta chair bleue,

Qui te remords l'étincelante queue  
Dans un tumulte au silence pareil

Le vent se lève! . . . il faut tenter de vivre!  
L'air immense ouvre et referme mon livre,  
La vague en poudre ose jaillir des rocs!  
Envolez-vous, pages tout éblouies!  
Rompez, vagues! Rompez d'eaux rejouies  
Ce toit tranquille où picoraient des focs!

Paul Valery

# The Steps

Your steps, children of my silence,  
Holily, slowly placed,  
Towards the bed of my vigilance  
Proceed dumb and frozen.

Nobody pure, divine shade,  
That they are soft, your steps selected!  
Gods!... all the gifts which I guess  
Come to me on these naked feet!

If, of your advanced lips,  
You prepare to alleviate it,  
An inhabitant of my thoughts  
The food of a kiss,

Does not hasten this tender act,  
To be soft and not to be not?  
Because I lived to await you,  
And my heart was only your steps.

Paul Valery