

Monsieur Teste As Modern Parable

Kathryn M. Grossman

From the moment the reader approaches the *Monsieur Teste* cycle by Paul Valéry, he is inextricably caught up in the symbolist universe of name-giving. Even the name "M. Teste" is significant. Related etymologically to the Old French word for "head" and to the Latin word for "witness" and "testicle,"¹ the very name by which the author designates his central figure reveals his preoccupation with the interrelation between knowledge and creativity. In his preface to "La Soirée avec Monsieur Teste," Valéry states that M. Teste was born of the same "mal aigu de la précision" (II, 11)² that led him to abandon poetry and to regard all literary creation as requiring a certain "sacrifice de l'intellect" (*Ibid.*). If one considers this "mal aigu de la précision" to refer to the difficulties involved in both apprehending and communicating truth or beauty, it becomes clear that *Monsieur Teste* does more than merely expose these difficulties: insofar as it is a work of art it must of necessity also transcend them. Like so many French poets before him Valéry presents his reader here with a kind of *art poétique*. An examination of the cycle should therefore show in what ways it fulfills the conditions of artistic creation that it expounds or implies thematically.

To begin with, one might focus on Valéry's representation of M. Teste as Mind made man, as a being uniting in himself both the transcendent and the immanent. The obvious religious parallel, that of God incarnate, is not without similar epistemological and aesthetic implications. As an all-powerful being, the Christian God has been used traditionally as the symbol or prototype of the artist, like him creator *ex-nihilo*. But, through the introduction of evil and death into the world, God's creation threatened to escape not only his power, but also his knowledge: whereas he *knew* that man was limited and mortal, he could not know what it was *like* to be so. Hence the need for a Saviour, who would bring knowledge of God to man and of man to God.

The shift of the artist figure from God to God-man would seem to follow, therefore, in any writer experiencing difficulty in his

perceived task of translating some ideal into human terms. When that ideal concerns Truth in addition to Beauty, as in the case of the symbolist poets, the difficulty of the task becomes anguishing. We are familiar with Mallarmé's suffering before the blank page in his efforts to restore to language its initial necessity and purity.³ Valéry views the problem as basically twofold — first to seize, then to express, an original perception of the world.⁴ In other words, one must pass through the epistemological realm of knowledge and self-knowledge to get to the aesthetic. It is precisely with this process that both M. Teste, the superior mind, and *Monsieur Teste*, the literary work, are concerned.

Now, until recent years, the absolute range of this personage's mental powers remained undisputed,⁵ mainly because one tended to judge him through the eyes of other characters. In "La Soirée avec Monsieur Teste" (1896), for example, the narrator enthusiastically states that he believes the mind of M. Teste to be capable of controlling the whole field of knowledge, which is its proper content: "Comment ne pas s'abandonner à un être dont l'esprit paraissait transformer pour soi seul tout ce qui est, et qui *opérait* tout ce qui lui était proposé?" (II, 19). More than a quarter of a century later, Emilie Teste gives further witness to this extraordinary power in her "Lettre" (1924), where she describes herself as being completely "transparente" to and "sans mystère" (II, 32) for her spouse. Indeed, she goes so far as to equate her existence to that of man in the mind of God: "je puis dire que ma vie me présente à toute heure un modèle sensible de l'existence de l'homme dans la divine pensée. J'ai l'expérience personnelle d'être dans la sphère d'un être comme toutes âmes sont dans l'Être" (*Ibid.*). This show of zeal on her part, however ingenuous and even comic it may seem, merely echoes the narrator's more intellectual ardor when he says of his friend, "Il parlait, et on se sentait dans son idée, confondu avec les choses . . ." (II, 18).

What particularly impresses both secondary characters is the use M. Teste makes of words. Indicating his wife by what he wants of her, he calls her by such names as "Être," "Chose," and "Oasis" (II, 33). The narrator represents his language in greater detail:

Il parlait, et . . . on constatait qu'un grand nombre de mots étaient bannis de son discours. Ceux dont il se servait étaient parfois si curieusement tenus par sa voix ou éclairés par sa phrase que leur poids était altéré, leur valeur nouvelle. Parfois ils perdaient tout leur sens, ils paraissaient remplir uniquement une place vide dont le

terme destinataire était douteux encore ou imprévu par la langue. (II, 18-19)

Thus, M. Teste appears to his observers as an omniscient being, capable of grasping the innermost secrets and essences of all that surrounds him and of expressing them by the magic of the Word.⁶ They believe in his powers, but because he never actually does anything, the existence of those powers is really only an article of faith.

The fact is that, regardless of what others think of him, M. Teste remains fundamentally "inconn[u]" (II, 16), "un Sphinx" (II, 34), when viewed from without, that he purposely cultivates these qualities in order to stand undefined by anyone other than himself. Otherwise, he would risk no longer fulfilling the conditions for true genius laid down by the narrator at the very beginning, since "chaque esprit qu'on trouve puissant, commence par la faute qui le fait connaître" (II, 16). What, then, is M. Teste? To himself he is a knowing subject that seeks above all to know itself. In describing his friend's preoccupation with "l'art délicat de la durée" (II, 17), the narrator mentions that he often says, "*Maturare!*" (II, 18). This desire to become a closed system that has realized all its possibilities⁷ implies also some essential being at the center of the system that does not change. In his "Log-Book" (1925), M. Teste defines himself, in terms highly reminiscent of his wife's remarks on "l'Être," as "ce talent de la *transcendance*, . . . avec le sentiment d'être ce qui passe *immédiatement* d'une chose à l'autre, de traverser en quelque manière les plus divers ordres" (II, 44), as a whole world in which things "séparées dans *le leur*" come into contact (*Ibid.*). In a sense, then, M. Teste knows himself. He is "L'Homme de Verre": "je me *suis*, je me réponds, je me reflète et me répercute, je frémis à l'infini des miroirs — je suis de verre" (*Ibid.*).

Yet there is something troubling in all this. Although he knows that he *is*, and can follow and reflect (on) that sense of being, there remains a dichotomy between himself as knowing and himself as known because the knower never gets behind the mirrors. As he tells the narrator of "La Soirée," "Je suis étant et me voyant; me voyant me voir, et ainsi de suite" (II, 25). Thus does Valéry's preoccupation with the gulf separating *être* and *connaître* — a major theme of both *La Jeune Parque* and the *Cahiers*⁸ — manifest itself throughout the *Teste* cycle as well. His symbol of supreme intellect is condemned, in fact, to "follow" himself

endlessly, always a few steps behind the fleeting image he longs to embrace.

A number of the "Extraits du Log-Book" elaborate further on this theme. In one of the opening passages, for instance, M. Teste suggests the cause of his cognitive limitations: "Ce que je vois m'aveugle. Ce que j'entends m'assourdit. Ce en quoi je sais, cela me rend ignorant. J'ignore en tant et pour autant que je sais" (II, 38). Whether he turns his attention to himself or to other objects, his knowledge will always be "un nuage sur l'être" (*Ibid.*), an intense brightness that blinds rather than enlightens, because each perception can exist only at the expense of many others. The sphinx-like attitude he turns toward the world is therefore nothing more than a mask, a pose, behind which he conceals his basic impotence. It is important to note that this impotence is truly physical in origin. That is, it stems from his existence as a body as well as a mind, his consciousness depending on incomplete and always slightly stale information supplied by the senses. As Alain Rey points out: "Derrière son discours oral, le bruit de son corps, derrière son écriture, les gestes de sa grande main interdisent de le prendre pour un esprit."⁹ It is no coincidence that Valéry insists on this corporality from the very outset. M. Teste's tacit struggle in "La Soirée" to dominate mentally both his pain¹⁰ and his pleasure¹¹ underscores the sensual, vulnerable, and ultimately mortal side of the character.

Still, he does not lapse into despair, developing instead that particular mental faculty capable of filling in all the blanks, his imagination. As he confides further on in his "Log-Book":

C'est ce que je porte d'inconnu à moi-même qui me fait moi.

C'est ce que j'ai d'inhabile, d'incertain qui est bien moi-même.

Ma faiblesse, ma fragilité . . .

Les lacunes sont ma base de départ. Mon impuissance est mon origine.

Ma force sort de vous. Mon mouvement va de ma faiblesse à ma force.

Mon dénuement réel engendre une richesse imaginaire; et je suis cette symétrie; je suis l'acte qui annule mes désirs. (II, 40)

It is his consciousness of himself as essentially divided between being and knowing, unable to bridge the gap in reality, that gives rise, then, to M. Teste's creative powers. Just as Eros acts in Plato's *Symposium* to impel man toward the realm of the gods, so does M. Teste's imagination draw on his basic "dénuement" to project a richer condition. Even toward the close of his life, Valéry

was to adhere to this notion, as the entry of May 30, 1945, in his *Cahiers* (XXIX, 908-909) attests: "Plus fort que le vouloir vivre et que le pouvoir comprendre est donc ce sacré C[oeur] Il y a quelque chose en l'être qui est *créateur de valeurs* — et cela est tout-puissant — irrationnel — inexplicable, ne s'expliquant pas. Source d'énergie *séparée* mais qui peut se décharger *aussi bien pour que contre* la vie de l'individu."¹² Grounded in his all too human sensitivity, M. Teste's imagination mediates between mind and body, the known and the unknown, the transcendent and the immanent.

The fruits of his meditations are twofold. First, whereas he fails to reach, by an inner movement, the being that lies at the centre of a multitude of variations, he succeeds by his efforts in producing the energy necessary to proceed outward to encompass and hold together an entire system of thought. This apparently monolithic system is what so impresses the narrator and Teste's wife about him, unaware as they are that his science derives from the fiction of self and is studded with that of thought in general. Furthermore, Valéry's taciturn hero is moved to codify his mental experiences in the form of a journal, which like all enunciations presupposes an eventual audience. One entry, a "Poème (*traduit du langage Self*)", addresses his "Esprit" (II, 42):

*Tu te fais souvenir non d'autres, mais de toi.
Et tu deviens toujours plus semblable à nul autre.
Plus autrement le même, et plus même que moi.
O Mien — mais qui n'es pas encor tout à fait Moi!* (II, 43)

Thus, from M. Teste's initial impotence is born a poem about nothing other than the fact that he possesses his consciousness and its content without having been able to use it to possess himself. Paradoxically, impotence leads to creativity, to a desire to compensate inner failure by communicating it skillfully to others. As M. Teste expresses it, "Si nous savions, nous ne parlerions pas — nous ne penserions pas, nous ne nous parlerions pas" (II, 45). All discourse, whether to oneself or to others (note the double meaning of "se parler"), serves to span the radical discontinuity separating man from man and man from himself. If M. Teste's loneliness is symbolic of his inner alienation, by the same token his attempt to rethink both himself and the world represents the processes inherent in all human endeavors to know and to communicate.

From a thematic point of view, then, *Monsieur Teste* depicts

Valéry's own idea of the origin of creative activity, a conception that one can find at the very beginning, as well as the end, of his career. In "Narcisse parle," an early poem in the *Album de vers anciens* (1891-93), he shows that Narcissus' inability to seize his own image reflected in a stream prompts him to transpose his tears by modulating them on the flute:

Je t'adore, sous ces myrtes, ô l'incertaine
 Chair pour la solitude éclore tristement
 Qui se mire dans le miroir au bois dormant.

.....
 Evanouissez-vous, divinité troublée:
 Et toi, verse à la lune, humble flûte isolée,
 Une diversité de nos larmes d'argent. (I, 83)

This expression of ignorance, of incompleteness, appears as the ultimate means to life, since the realization of one's attempt to know oneself could lead only to a static state of being, to total satisfaction or quietude, that is, to death, whereas artistic creation is a generative process arising, like procreation, from a state of tension and unrest. It is for this reason that M. Teste writes in his "Log-Book" that, "s'il en fût une [pensée] *suprême en soi et par soi*, nous pourrions la trouver par réflexion ou par hasard; et étant trouvée, devrions mourir" (II, 37). Valéry, like M. Teste, rejects even "l'idée d'en finir" (II, 43): process and striving are all that count.

It remains to be seen in what ways *Monsieur Teste* reflects the attitudes embraced by its protagonist. In embodying his conception of art in prose form, Valéry encounters a major difficulty: how does one render a vision of impotence, of nothingness? how can language be inflected so as to communicate the unknowable? For impotence is far from the easiest of subjects to broach. If it were not aesthetically transformed, it would be as destructive of the happiness of the reader as handing him the forbidden fruit. Art can disturb; it must not bring despair. Only through creating something beautiful will the artist be able to illustrate the life-giving side of inner failure and unfulfillment.

At this point the significance of all the religious imagery surrounding M. Teste becomes clear. As the *Dieu caché* of Valéry's work, he must reveal himself to the reader, but not all of a piece. The religious analogy holds up when one considers Christ's speaking in parables in order to bring God's message of hope and love to man. These were the means by which he could translate the divine Word into terms that would be understood by the

simplest of men, while maintaining at a mystified distance the unbelieving. In his "Log-Book," M. Teste makes use of a kind of parable, "Le Riche d'Esprit," to tell of a complex man who has ceased to know himself. The man is M. Teste. His message is both exciting and terrifying:

. . . Dans sa tête où derrière les yeux fermés se passaient des rotations curieuses, — des changements si variés, si libres, et pourtant si limités, — des lumières comme celles que ferait une lampe portée par quelqu'un qui visiterait une maison dont on verrait les fenêtres dans la nuit, comme des fêtes éloignées, des foires de nuit; mais qui pourraient se changer en gares ou en sauvageries si l'on pouvait en approcher — ou en effrayants malheurs, — ou en vérités et révélations . . .

C'était comme le sanctuaire et le lupanar des possibilités. (*Ibid.*)

To the uninitiated, the meaning of this story would hardly be apparent. Dangling just out of the reader's grasp, it urges him to make the necessary effort to reach it. In "La Soirée," the narrator expresses great enthusiasm over the fact that his friend "ne disait jamais rien de *vague*" (II, 19), later adding that "l'incohérence d'un discours dépend de celui qui l'écoute" (II, 22). But whatever clarity of thought may exist in the "Log-Book" seems to the reader quite inaccessible because of its fragmented form and the difficulty of the language employed. What he is faced with really is a modern parable, one which is intelligible only to the diligent few, to the "Riches d'Esprit." These will perceive in it the epitome of the fragmented M. Teste working toward wholeness, as well as the reflection *en abîme* of the *Monsieur Teste* series in general, likewise difficult yet tempting by its striking imagery, its solemnity, and its intensity of tone. Valéry succeeds in the almost impossible task of attracting and holding the reader's attention while keeping his ultimate comprehension in abeyance. He whose efforts are rewarded will find the passage from ignorance and frustration to painful knowledge compensated, as for M. Teste, by the excitement of having attained a new level of awareness, where he can participate intimately in the creative process.

As has been seen, Valéry considers this process to consist essentially of a series of mediations between transcendent and immanent principles. In man, mind and body, knowing and being, are united in a single image of self by the imagination; in art, theory and practice find common ground in the *art poétique*. Christianity's view of its Saviour as the link between God and

man has bearing on Emilie Teste's "*Mystique sans Dieu*" (II, 34), who enunciates the enigma posed by the work *Monsieur Teste*. "*Quelques pensées*" shows M. Teste inventing a monologue by God that echoes his own epistemological and aesthetic concerns. Having created man, the speaker says:

je leur donnerai pour loi de me deviner, de me voir malgré leurs yeux,
et de me définir malgré leur raison.

Et je serai le prix de cette énigme. Je me ferai connaître à ceux qui
trouveront le rébus univers et qui mépriseront assez ces organes et
ces moyens que j'ai inventés pour conclure contre leur évidence et
contre leur pensée claire. (II, 72)

Some, like Emilie, would prefer to believe in God "que de le voir dans toute sa gloire" (II, 28). It is for the persistent reader that the ultimate revelation — and prize — are reserved.

*Beaver Campus
Pennsylvania State University*

FOOTNOTES

1. Cf. Alain Rey, "Monsieur Teste de haut en bas," in *Poétique*, No. 9, 1972, pp. 80-81.
2. Paul Valéry, *Monsieur Teste*, in *Oeuvres*, ed. Jean Hytier, II (Paris: Gallimard, 1960). Future references to the *Oeuvres*, including Vol. 1 (1957), will continue to be cited in the text.
3. Cf. Jean-Pierre Richard, *L'Univers imaginaire de Mallarmé* (Paris: Seuil, 1961), p. 535.
4. As Judith Robinson demonstrates in "Valéry's view of mental creativity," *Yale French Studies*, No. 44 (1970), pp. 3-18, this perception must, for the poet, precede any verbal mediation whatever if it is to be entirely uncontaminated.
5. See, for example, Agnes Ethel Mackay, *The Universal Self: A Study of Paul Valéry* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1961), p. 85, and C.A. Hackett, "Teste and *La Soirée avec Monsieur Teste*," *French Studies*, XXI, No. 2 (April 1967), 123.
6. Christine M. Crow, in "'Teste parle': the question of a potential artist in Valéry's *M. Teste*," *Yale French Studies*, No. 44 (1970), p. 167, sees in M. Teste's life a kind of "work of art" which the other characters "read" and from which they draw inspiration.
7. Cf. another formulation by Valéry of the same idea in "*Quelques pensées de Monsieur Teste*" (1946): "Je ne suis pas tourné du côté du monde. J'ai le visage vers le MUR. Pas un rien de la surface du mur qui me soit inconnu" (II, 72). The play on words gives rise to a striking image of interiority.
8. See W. N. Ince, in *Paul Valéry: Poetry and Abstract Thought* (Southampton: Camelot Press, 1973), pp. 11-12, and in "Etre, connaître et mysticisme du réel selon Valéry," *Entretiens sur Paul Valéry* (Paris: Mouton, 1968), pp. 206-14, respectively.

9. Rey, p. 85.
10. Cf. Léon Tauman, *Paul Valéry ou le Mal de l'Art* (Paris: Nizet, 1969), pp. 21-22: "M. Teste combat tout, excepté la douleur . . . C'est elle pourtant qui l'a engendré, formé et c'est pour la combattre qu'il a formé son esprit."
11. Jean Levailant, in "Teste," *Les critiques de notre temps et VALÉRY* (Paris: Garnier, 1971), p. 92, shows the imagery of the theatre scene to be that of an "érotisme qui ne veut pas se connaître."
12. Paul Valéry, *Cahiers*, ed. Judith Robinson, II (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 388.
13. Cf., in "Quelques pensées," a similar reflection: "Tu es plein de secrets que tu appelles Moi. Tu es voix de ton inconnu" (II, 71).