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Yale French Studies, No. 4, Literature and Ideas (1949), 63-66.

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Yale French Studies
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Bergson and Symbolism

Must we look for the foundations of symbolism in Bergson's philosophy, as it is now customary to declare? Monsieur E. Fiser would have us believe so, in his book on the *Symbole littéraire*; nevertheless, his study, substantial and serious, also provides us with reasons for questioning the value of these parallels. It is clear that only with indifferent success can this critic discover, in Baudelaire or Mallarmé, the Bergsonian themes for which spirituality is essentially the past contracted within a present that harbors this past in its entirety. That innocency of profound existence, that mobility of the self which disappears in a shadowy intimacy, all the pure reality whose onsurge no metaphor can represent and which, for Bergson, is the essence of duration, corresponds only through quite external analogies with the ideal spectacle that Mallarmé's poetic achievement presents to contemplation. If we could be satisfied with a phrase or two, we might say that the inapprehensible nothing, the "no" born from expectancy, doubt and absence, the silent thunder which reverberates amidst images dissolving one into another and which heralds, in the works of Mallarmé, a fascinating "breaking point," is separated by an abyss from Bergsonian philosophy and is meaningful only in a vertigo wherein anguish reduces itself to exhaustion and unceasingly triumphs over ravishment. Similarly with Baudelaire, if again superficial phrases were acceptable, it might be seen that the dream does not express the purity of a self plunged in duration, but proclaims the radiation of a magical consciousness that comes into contact with the essence of the world. The myth is not a means for turning toward oneself and finding oneself in the form of pure time, it is the expression of the exhausting and impossible march to that point where the universe and the heart desiring it seem to become one. "In certain almost supernatural states of the soul," said Baudelaire, "profundity is revealed entirely in the spectacle, however commonplace it may be, spread out before one's eyes. The spectacle becomes the Symbol of profundity." Is it advisable to translate such texts, as of course can be done, into the terminology of Bergsonian philosophy? This sort of game, which denies poetry, also denies Bergsonism, so intent on respecting the purity and originality of the primordial intuition.

Nor do we consider that Bergson's views on language can represent exactly the Symbolists' attitude with regard to words. It is not even sure that

the poetic labor may not be made incomprehensible by an attempt to fit it in with Bergson's remarks. In a sense, the philosophy of the *Immediate Data of Consciousness* did not consist of a criticism of language in general, a criticism doubtless as old as speech; rather did it show why, and under what conditions, language became an unreliable instrument. Furthermore, it gave back to speech, after having discredited it as a means of expressing the interior life, the power to suggest melodic duration, to make this indirectly available for the non-participant. Why do words, incapable of expressing meta-intellectual truths, become apt, in new arrangements, to facilitate the approach to and even provoke the intuiting of these truths? This difficulty has often been stressed. It manifests in striking fashion the mixture of mistrust and faith, of suspicion and friendship which characterizes the relations between the Bergsonian mind and language. Bergson, in short, was imbued with an extreme distrust of words and an extreme confidence in poetry. It is not his criticism of language which makes possible and illuminates the existence of a symbolic art, but his profound feeling for art which furnishes him with the proofs of the validity and excellence of language, considered as the new system of a spell.

Bergson, nonetheless, while strongly aware of the poet's powers, continues to be uneasily vigilant when confronted by words, which are in a constant process of crystallization and are weighed down by our intellectual and practical habits. It is natural for him to pronounce a negative eulogy of creative language, and he shows how it manages to avoid betrayal of the profound vision by remaining foreign to it, by turning around it in a series of disparate images, by delineating in an enchanted whirl the contours of that figure whose absence it lights up. No word possesses such spellbinding force that it can strip consciousness of its veils. All one can ask of the adroit flow of words is a frank avowal that not one of them, even for a moment, can appear as the equivalent of intuition and unite with this lightning flash in the invocation it addresses to it. This attitude of tempered antipathy has nothing in common with Baudelaire's attitude. As for Mallarmé, what is more essentially contrary to his thought? Against his horror of clichés, of oratorical forms, of prosaic logic must be set his passion for words, his "twenty-four-letter piety," his intimacy with all forms of expression, from the word, a jewel flower, an isolated flame that burns far off, to the line of poetry, "mot suprême, parfait, vaste, natif," "mot neuf et comme incantatoire." If this word is of course not destined to convey, free from all pretext, the thought of an object or the significance of a state of soul, it has

MAURICE BLANCHOT

nevertheless a value other than that of its pure sonority, and the trust Mallarmé puts in it is the trust in a jewel lit by its sparkle, in a center of suspense from which radiates a musical significance, in a figure which revolves and is undone in the allusion it reveals. "The childishness of literature up to now," he said, in reply to Jules Huret's inquiry, "has been to believe, for example, that choosing a certain number of precious stones and putting their names on paper, even very skillfully, was to *make* precious stones. That is not so. Since poetry consists in creating, one must take certain states in the human soul, gleams of a purity so absolute that that, in reality, well sung and properly illuminated, constitutes man's jewels: where there is symbol, there is creation, and the word 'poetry' acquires its meaning here: it is, in short, the only possible human creation." And Mallarmé will also declare, in a supreme homage to the word: "I imagine, with the ineradicable doubtless writer's prejudice, that nothing will endure unless it be voiced."

One might also note that Paul Valéry conceives of the relations between language and thought in a way which sets him immeasurably apart from Bergson. To the extent that for him a literary work always appears to be a forgery, and that "in language subjected to rhythm, measure, rhyme and alliteration, endeavor is confronted by conditions utterly foreign to the matrix of thought," he sees in poetic labors the means of breaking with the spontaneous mind and of achieving a particular beauty which can be compared with no other. The writer, through his corrections, his fresh starts, the deliberate obstinacy of his refusals, far from coming closer to his original intention, as Bergson stated, moves away from the authentic vision, and the nature of language assures him of a fresh enchantment, based on a number of necessary mistakes and misunderstandings. Thus, in the case of Paul Valéry, there is a trust in language which is trust, not in a system of expression, capable of a faithful correspondence with thought, but in the special properties of form, in its own original inductive effects, in its potency which fits it to organize, and to construct the marvel of, the poem. That is an ambition altogether at variance with Bergsonism. Paul Valéry supposes—and on this postulate surrealism grew—that if ever language coincides with the original thought, it is at the point of departure, when the mind surrenders itself to the immediate, to the crude monster which it then is for itself. But he adds that the writer fulfills his mission only when he replaces this untouched spontaneity by the endeavors of the most acutely conscious labor. Spontaneous language is perhaps the language which best explains the formlessness of the interior life, but the language which matters for

Yale French Studies

the artist is that of utmost consciousness, and there is nothing the mind more keenly despises than unreflecting spontaneity, the image of its own accidents and chance encounters. And this, from a certain viewpoint, is the antithesis of Bergsonian philosophy.*

(Translated by Joel A. Hunt)

FRANCE'S FOREMOST critic, *Maurice Blanchot* has entitled his latest collection of essays *La Part du feu*. Also published in 1949 are his *Lautréamont et Sade*, and a "récit," *L'Arrêt de mort*.

* For permission to print this article we wish to thank, not only Monsieur Blanchot, but also Literary Masterpieces, Inc., of 437 Fifth Avenue, New York, representatives in the U.S. of the Librairie Gallimard.