

## COMMENT

THE death of Valéry has removed one of the elixirs of western civilisation. While our full tribute and estimate is being prepared, it is worth while recalling a last interview with him in January of this year. Valéry then seemed somewhat old and tired but mentally entirely alive. He talked very fast and in the back of his throat with a kind of raucous purring which I found very difficult to follow. He was immensely distinguished, inevitably the *cher maître*. He talked to me about England and described a visit to Meredith at Box Hill which had been arranged for him by Henry Harland. Wearing a top hat he advanced along the platform to greet Meredith, also wearing a top hat, who fell forward flat on his face, picked himself up and came forward without a word, as if such a prostration was the most natural thing in the world. He went on to talk of that London of the Yellow Book, of the introductions to it which Mallarmé gave him, of the reproaches he used to receive for his idleness, 'for I was at that time very idle though I hope I have made up a little for it since'—he then moved on immediately to his present English friends, Mr. T. S. Eliot and Mr. John Hayward. I was able to give him news of them and also to tell him about Day Lewis' magnificent translation of the *Cimetière Marin*. Here he related, with feline savagery, an incident at one of his last lectures at the *Collège de France*. A young man had come up to him and said that he had once greatly admired that poem, but that now since he realized that it was not '*la littérature engagée*' he could not enjoy it any more. '*La littérature engagée*'—the phrase seemed to rattle from the back of his palate—'what rubbish! There were always moments in the history of civilizations when literature seemed to have responsibilities—perhaps this was one of them—but they soon blew over,' and as he spoke one felt that all the authority of the nineteenth century was behind the remark. As always when meeting these great writers whom for years one has loved and admired there was a sense of inadequacy, for how can one communicate to a small mocking figure across a tea-table the glory of the wake which the passage of the great vessel of his work has left for over twenty years across the ocean of European thought. A friend of his told me that he seemed now to make fun of everything—except perhaps woman—for his tone would sometimes hold a certain reverence when he spoke of her. *Tout est magie dans les rapports entre homme*

*et femme*. Certainly his *Mauvaises Pensées* (the most original of his last books) is a devastating and ferocious panorama of human wisdom—a nihilist's breviary. It is nice to know that he lived to appreciate John Hayward's translation of *Mon Faust* in HORIZON (the fragment seems to me to hold the quintessence of the serene exaltation of pagan old age) and that his fears lest the rendering of *tu* and *vous*—a transition which he felt was very important in the text and which he was afraid would not easily be conveyed in English—were groundless—yes, it is nice, it is reassuring to know such things, yet in the light of that dazzling intelligence which is now for ever extinguished—except in his books—it is completely unimportant. It is the living presence of such giants for which Europe, bewildered and self-brutalising, is now crying out.

\* \* \*

In England we still retain one or two of our luminaries of civilization. One is Mr. Logan Pearsall Smith who celebrated his eightieth birthday on 18 October. To my mind, quite apart from what he says, he writes English better than anyone now living, and it is to his collected essays, *Reperusals*, and to his autobiography that I turn, rather than to the almost over-fastuous *Trivia*, to be reminded of the modulations of which our vocabulary is capable. He has defined literature as 'the art of making people real to themselves by words', as 'that useless ornament and flower', as St.-Beuve described it. 'That delicate superfluity of life, which is the most precious and least perishable of all things on this perishable earth'—and that is a definition that will do to go on with. How prophetic is his description of the November ritual at Altamura, the secular monastery whose existence he imagined as long ago as 1898!

'Brief, however, as life may be, the pleasures of life are still more fleeting; and in November the Altamurans, following the course of human experience, turn from the poor earth and its joys, to those forces that make for the mockery and derision of human hopes, and the destruction of human existence—the decay of religions and civilizations, the prosperity of the wicked, and all the sinister aspects of creation—ill-boding stars, eclipses, wars, plagues, earthquakes and inundations.

'The Saints of this month are the great Pessimists, and Cynics and Suicides, the heathen Gods which were Devils, Moloch, Hammon, Chemosh, Typhon, Peor and the Baalim.'

LOUIS MACNEICE  
WESTERN LANDSCAPE

In doggerel and stout let me honour this country  
Though the air is so soft that it smudges the words  
And herds of great clouds find the gaps in the fences  
Of chance preconceptions and foam-quoits on rock-points  
At once hit and miss, hit and miss.  
So the kiss of the past is narcotic, the ocean  
Lollingly lullingly over-insidiously  
Over and under crossing the eyes  
And docking the queues of the teetotum consciousness  
Proves and disproves what it wants.  
For the western climate is Lethe,  
The smoky taste of cooking on turf is lotus,  
There is affirmation and abnegation together  
From the broken bog with its veins of amber water,  
From the distant headland, a sphinx's fist, that barely grips the sea,  
From the taut-necked donkey's neurotic-asthmatic-erotic  
    lamenting,  
From the heron in trance and in half-mourning,  
From the mitred mountain weeping shale.

O grail of emerald passing light  
And hanging smell of sweetest hay  
And grain of sea and loom of wind  
Weavily laughingly leavily weepingly—  
Webs that will last and will not.

But what  
Is the hold upon, the affinity with  
Ourselves of such a light and line,  
How do we find continuance  
Of our too human skeins of wish  
In this inhuman effluence?  
O relevance of cloud and rock—  
If such could be our permanence!  
The flock of mountain sheep belong  
To tumbled screes, to tumbling seas  
The ribboned wrack, and moor to mist;