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Author(s): Paul Valéry and Jan Schreiber

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PAUL VALÉRY

Sketch of a Serpent

—*Translated by Jan Schreiber*

Deep in the tree the breeze
Rocks the viper I wear;
A smile pierced by a fang
Shining with appetite
Infects the Garden air.
My emerald triangle
Darts out its double tongue . . .
A beast, yes—but acute,
Whose venom, although vile,
Leaves the wise hemlock dumb.

Sweet days are ripening.
Tremble, mortals—I'm strong
When my insatiate yawn
Stretches to snap a spring.
The azure splendors stir
The reptile hiding me
In brute simplicity.
Come, sluggish human swarm,
I am erect and warm,
Tuned to necessity!

Sun, sun . . . bedazzling fault
And mask of death—ah, Sun—
Beneath a blue-gold vault
Where waves of flowers run:
Proudest conspirator
And highest of my snares,
You by opaque delights
See that men shall not see
That all creation blights
Non-being's purity.

Great Sun, who rouse all being
And temper it with fire,

Who close it with a sleep
 Painted with bright deceit;
 Poser of phantom scenes
 That make the soul's obscure
 Presence at once seem plain,
 I've always liked the lie
 You give the absolute,
 Prince of the shades of flame!

Pour me your savage heat:
 Caught in cold lassitude
 I dream of tragedy
 Subtly enlaced like me.
 This sweet place that saw flesh
 Fall and couple is dear!
 My fury ripens here.
 I nourish it and grow
 Alert, and through my coils
 My meditations flow.

O Vanity! First Cause!
 He who reigns in heaven
 With words made out of light
 Opened the universe
 Bored by his pure tableau,
 God became He who mars
 His own perfection. Hence
 He saw his Principle
 Dispersed in consequence,
 His Unity in stars.

Heaven his error, time
 His ruin. Brute abyss
 Gapes! What primal fall gleams
 In place of nothingness!
 But the first breath of his Word
 Was ME! The grandest star
 The mad creator spoke.
 I am! I shall be! I

Light up his waning sky
With the Seducer's fire!

Bright object of my hate
Whom I loved with abandon,
Who owed dominion over
Gehenna to this lover,
Look deeply in my shade:
Your tragic image there,
The pride of my dark mirror,
So tortured you, the air
You breathed upon the clay
Was your sigh of despair.

In vain you shaped from mud
Your infant artifacts
Who offer day-long praise
To your triumphant acts.
Once shaped, once breathed, with hisses
Master Snake addresses
Your pretty votaries:
Hello there, new arrivals!
You people are bare naked,
You blessèd, pallid beasts!

Made in that loathed image!
I hate you as I hate
The Name that could create
All these flawed prodigies.
I'm He who modifies;
I retouch trusting hearts
With sure, mysterious sense.
We'll change these flaccid works,
These slippery garden snakes,
To reptiles of revenge!

My vast intelligence
Plucks in the souls of men
A vengeful instrument

Assembled by your hands.
Father, hid by the immense
Bright chamber of the sky
From all things but incense,
Still you are troubled by
The abundance of my charms
Raising distant alarms.

I come, go, glide, and plunge
Into the simple heart.
What breast could be so hard
As to resist a dream?
Stranger, do I not seem
The happiness that dawns
When your soul loves itself?
Just so I am at base
The inimitable taste
You find in your own mouth.

Eve, long ago, I once
Surprised in her first thoughts,
Her lips parted to spirits
Born of the nodding rose.
I found her perfect, bare
Thighs bright as gold, whom man
Nor sunlight could abash,
All offered to the air—
The soul still stupid, still
Held at the door of flesh.

O mass of blessedness,
So beautiful, fit prize
For the attentiveness
Of spirits far more wise;
They hover at your lips
Drawn by your gentle sighs.
The purest suffer worst,
The hardest are most hurt—
And I—you stir my heart
From whom the vampires rise!

Yes! From my leafy lair,
A reptile with a bird's
Bliss, while my babbled words
Wove you a net of ploys,
I drank you, heedless beauty.
Calm, clear, your charms so heavy—
How my furtive eye toys
With your bright burning hair,
Your enigmatic nape
That hints your moving shape!

Present like an odor,
The scent of an idea
Whose insidious depth
One never quite discerns!
I disturbed you, candor,
Weakly determined flesh,
And still you did not weave
Fearfully into splendor.
Yet I shall have you—even
Now your color turns!

(Superb simplicity
Commands its own renown.
Its seeming clarity,
Its bliss, stupidity
And pride defend the town.
Let's try to bring it down,
And by this rarest art
Solicit the pure heart.
This is my strength, my wit;
I'm end and means of it!)

Now, out of sparkling drivel
Weave the delicate systems
Where gentle Eve, the sluggard,
Will meet with some vague hazard.
Beneath that silken snare
Watch her skin tremble there,

The prey disquieted.
There is no finer lace,
No surer hidden thread,
Than my quick shuttles trace.

Gild, tongue! Gild tales for her
As soft as you can find!
Allusions, subtleties,
And chiselled silences—
All to disturb her mind.
Flatter and coax her till
She's lost in my designs,
Brought meek to streams that spill
From heaven's precipice
Into the blue abyss!

O language without peer!
What spirit I've poured in
The downy labyrinth
Of that amazing ear!
And nothing's lost, I know.
What strikes the suspended soul
Tells—as long as my words,
Bees in the petal's fold
Probing the heart's rich hoard,
Cleave to the ear of gold.

“Nothing's less sure,” I breathed,
“Than God's pronouncement, Eve.
Live knowledge must exceed
The enormity of this fruit.
Ignore the old Absolute
Who cursed the smallest bite.
But should your mouth conceive
A thirst that longs to receive
This half-withheld delight—
All time's dissolved here, Eve!”

She drank my little words

That built a curious house.
 Her eye would leave an angel
 To come back to my boughs.
 This most dissembling beast
 Who laughs at you for being
 So hard—O great with evil!—
 Is but a voice in the green.
 But Eve beneath the tree
 Listened gravely to me.

“Soul,” I said, “gentle land
 Of all forbidden bliss,
 Feel the sinuous love
 I’ve robbed the Father of?
 Essence of heaven I have
 For honey-sweet designs
 Delicately aligned.
 Take this fruit—stretch your arm.
 He made that pretty hand
 To pluck the things you wish.”

An eyelid struck the silence—
 But breath swelled the dark breast
 That the Tree’s shade possessed.
 The other shone like a pistil.
 —*Hiss, hiss!* it sang to me,
 And I felt energy
 Run through my whip. The thrill
 In every cumbering coil
 Vibrated from the beryl
 Of my crest out toward peril!

Genius!—Impatient wait!
 At last the time is come
 When steps to Enlightenment
 Spring from those naked feet.
 Marble aspires, and gold
 Is poised; the pedestals
 Of shade and amber tremble . . .
 To spill consent, the urn

Slowly begins to stumble,
Who seemed so taciturn.

Delighting in temptation,
Yield to the lures you see.
Let thirst for transformation
Ring the Forbidden Tree
Round with a chain of poses.
Come without coming! Step
Vaguely, heavy with roses.
Dear body, dance and forget!
Here pleasure's sole decree
Justifies what will be.

O foolish to indulge
This sterile dalliance:
To see the long back quake
In disobedience . . .
On yielding up its essence
Of wisdom and illusions,
The mighty Tree of Knowledge,
Disheveled in its visions,
Shook its great trunk that streams
Sunward, and sucks on dreams.

Great Tree, all Heaven's shade,
Compelling Tree of trees,
Who search the marble's flaw
For nectars rare as these,
You in whose labyrinths
The intertwining shades
Hurry to lose themselves
In endless sapphire days,
Sweet ruin, breath of love,
Or predestined dove,

O singer, hidden drinker
Among the deepest gems,
Cradling the reptile dreamer
Who sang Eve into dreams,

Great Being, whom visions stir,
Who yet, to see still more,
Grow, straining at the tip,
You whose hard limbs unfold
In leaves of purest gold,
Whose webbed roots delve the pit,

Press back the infinite
Marked by your rising crest,
And know yourself to be
All knowledge, grave to nest!
But this old amateur
Of chess, in the torpor
Of dry sun, starts to writhe
Along your branch; his glare
Shakes loose the fruits of death,
Disorder, and despair.

Good serpent, rocked in blue,
I hiss, but gently now,
Offering to God's grandeur
The triumph of my sadness.
I am repaid by seeing
Huge hopes of bitter fruit
Madden the heirs of flesh.
Their thirst exalts toward Being
The strange and absolute
Power of Nothingness.