

# PRISMS

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VALÉRY PROUST MUSEUM

In memory of Hermann von Grab

The German word, 'museal' [*museumlike*], has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are like the family sepulchres of works of art. They testify to the neutralization of culture. Art treasures are hoarded in them, and their market value leaves no room for the pleasure of looking at them. Nevertheless, that pleasure is dependent on the existence of museums. Anyone who does not have his own collection (and the great private collections are becoming rare) can, for the most part, become familiar with painting and sculpture only in museums. When discontent with museums is strong enough to provoke the attempt to exhibit paintings in their original surroundings or in ones similar, in baroque or rococo castles, for instance, the result is even more distressing than when the works are wrenched from their original surroundings and then brought together. Sensibility wreaks even more havoc with art than does the hodge-podge of collections. With music the situation is analogous. The programmes of large concert societies, generally retrospective in orientation, have continually more in common with museums, while Mozart performed by candlelight is degraded to a costume piece. In efforts to retrieve music from the remoteness of the performance and put it into the immediate context of life there is not only something ineffectual but also a tinge of industriously regressive spite. When some well-intentioned person advised Mahler to darken the hall during the concert for the sake of the mood, the composer rightly replied that a performance at which one didn't forget about the surroundings was worthless. Such problems reveal something of the fatal situation of what is called 'the cultural tradition'. Once tradition is no longer animated by a comprehensive, substantial force but has to be conjured up by means of citations because 'It's important to have tradition', then whatever happens to be left of it is dissolved into a means to an end. An exhibition

of applied art only makes a mockery of what it pretends to conserve. Anyone who thinks that art can be reproduced in its original form through an act of the will is trapped in hopeless romanticism. Modernizing the past does it much violence and little good. But to renounce radically the possibility of experiencing the traditional would be to capitulate to barbarism out of devotion to culture. That the world is out of joint is shown everywhere in the fact that however a problem is solved, the solution is false.

One cannot be content, however, with the general recognition of a negative situation. An intellectual dispute like the one on museums must be fought out with specific arguments. Here two extraordinary documents are available, for the two authentic French poets of the last generation have expressed themselves on the question of the museum. Their positions are diametrically opposed, but the statements are not directed polemically against each other, nor in fact does either betray any acquaintance of the other. In a contribution to a volume of essays dedicated to Proust, Valéry emphasized that he was not very familiar with Proust's novels. Valéry's remarks on museums are entitled 'Le problème des musées' and appear in the volume of essays *Pièces sur l'art*. The passage from Proust occurs in the third volume of *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*.

Valéry's appeal is obviously directed against the confusing overabundance of the Louvre. He is not, he writes, overly fond of museums. The more marvellous the treasures which are preserved in them, the more all delight disappears. The word Valéry uses, 'délices', is one of those which are utterly untranslatable. 'Delicacies' sounds too journalistic, 'joys', too heavy and Wagnerian. 'Delights' is perhaps closest to what is intended, but none of these words expresses the faint reminiscence of feudal pleasure that has been associated with *l'art pour l'art* since Villiers de l'Isle Adam. The only echo of it in German is the 'deliziös' ['delicious'] of the *Rosenkavalier*. In any case, in the Louvre the seignorial Valéry feels himself constrained from the first by the authoritarian gesture that takes away his cane and by the 'No Smoking' sign. Cold confusion, he says, reigns among the sculptures, a tumult of frozen creatures each of which demands the non-existence of the others, disorder strangely organized. Standing among the pictures offered for contemplation, Valéry mockingly observes that one is seized by a sacred awe; conversation is louder than in church, softer than in real life. One does not know why one has come—in search of culture or enjoyment, in fulfilment of an obligation, in obedience to a convention. Fatigue and barbarism converge. Neither a hedonistic nor a rationalistic

civilization could have constructed a house of such disparities. Dead visions are entombed there.

The ear, Valéry argues, which is further removed from music than the eye is from painting and can therefore harbour illusions, is better off—no one can ask it to listen to ten orchestras at once. Furthermore, the mind is certainly not capable of performing all possible operations simultaneously. Only the mobile eye is forced to apprehend in the same moment a portrait and a seascape, a kitchen and a triumphal march, or, worst of all, styles of painting completely incompatible with one another. The more beautiful a picture is, the more it is distinct from all others; it becomes a rare object, unique. This picture, one sometimes says, kills the ones around it. If this is forgotten, Valéry warns, the heritage of art will be destroyed. Just as man loses his abilities through an excess of technical aids, so an excess of riches impoverishes him.

Valéry's argumentation bears the stamp of cultural conservatism. He certainly did not concern himself with the critique of political economy. It is therefore all the more astounding that the aesthetic nerves which register false wealth should react so precisely to the fact of over-accumulation. When he speaks of the accumulation of excessive and therefore unusable capital, Valéry uses metaphorically an expression literally valid for the economy. Whether artists produce or rich people die, whatever happens is good for the museums. Like casinos, they cannot lose, and that is their curse. For people become hopelessly lost in the galleries, isolated in the midst of so much art. The only other possible reaction to this situation is the one which Valéry sees as the general, ominous result of any and all progress in the domination of material—increasing superficiality. Art becomes a matter of education and information; Venus becomes a document. Education defeats art. Nietzsche argues along very similar lines in his *Untimely Meditation*, 'On the Use and Abuse of History for Life'. The shock of the museum brings Valéry to historical-philosophical insight into the perishing of art works; there, he says, we put the art of the past to death.

Even afterwards, in the street, Valéry cannot free himself from the magnificent chaos of the museum (a metaphor, one could say, for the anarchical production of commodities in fully developed bourgeois society), and he searches for the basis of his malaise. Painting and sculpture, the demon of knowledge tells him, are like abandoned children. 'Their mother is dead, their mother, architecture. While she lived, she gave them their place, their definition. The freedom to wander was forbidden them. They had their place,

their clearly defined lighting, their materials. Proper relations prevailed between them. While she was alive, they knew what they wanted. Farewell, the thought says to me, I will go no further.' With this romantic gesture, Valéry's reflection ceases. By breaking it off, he avoids the otherwise inevitable conclusion of the radical cultural conservative: the renunciation of culture out of loyalty to it.

Proust's view of the museum is woven most skilfully into the fabric of the *Recherche du temps perdu*. Only there can its meaning be interpreted. Proust's reflections, which represent a return to the techniques of the pre-Flaubertian novel, are never mere observations on the material represented. They are bound up with it through subterranean associations and hence fall, like the narrative itself, within the great aesthetic continuum of his inner dialogue. In speaking of his trip to the sea resort Balbec, Proust remarks on the caesura which voyages make in the course of life by 'leading us from one name to another name'. The caesuras are particularly manifest in railway stations, 'these utterly peculiar places . . . which, so to speak, are not part of the town and yet contain the essence of its personality as clearly as they bear its name on their signs'. Like everything surveyed by Proust's memory, which seems to drain the intention out of its objects, the stations become historical archetypes and, as the archetypes of departure, tragic ones. Of the glass dome of the Gare St.-Lazare he writes: 'Over a sprawling city it stretched its wide, wasted heaven full of ominous dramas. Certain skies of Mantegna or Veronese are as modern, almost Parisian—under such a vaulting sky only terrible and solemn things can happen, the departure of a train or the raising of the cross.'

The associative transition to the museum is left implicit in the novel; it is the picture of that station painted by Claude Monet, whom Proust loved passionately, which now hangs in the collection of the *Jeu de Paume*. Briefly, Proust compares the station to a museum. Both stand outside the framework of conventional pragmatic activity, and, one might add, both are bearers of a death symbolism. In the case of the station, it is the ancient symbolism of the voyage; in that of the museum, the symbolism associated with the work of art—'l'univers nouveau et périssable', the new and fragile cosmos the artist has created. Like Valéry, Proust returns again and again to the mortality of artifacts. What seems eternal, he says at another point, contains within itself the impulse of its own destruction. The decisive lines on the museum are contained in Proust's physiognomy of the station. 'But in all areas our age is obsessed with the desire to bring things before our eyes in

their natural surroundings and thus to suppress what is essential—the mental event that raised them out of those surroundings. Today one "shows" a picture amidst furniture, small art objects, and curtains "of the epoch", in a trivial decorative display produced by the hitherto ignorant lady of the house after having spent her days in archives and libraries. But the masterpiece observed during dinner no longer produces in us the exhilarating happiness that can be had only in a museum, where the rooms, in their sober abstinence from all decorative detail, symbolize the inner spaces into which the artist withdraws to create the work.'

It is possible to compare Proust's thesis with Valéry's because they share the presupposition that works of art should be enjoyed. Valéry speaks of 'délices', Proust of 'joie enivrante', exhilarating joy. Nothing is more characteristic than that presupposition of the distance not merely between the present generation and the previous one but also between the German and the French attitudes towards art. As early as the writing of *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, the expression *Kunstgenuss* [aesthetic pleasure] must have sounded as touchingly philistine in German as a Wilhelm Busch rhyme. This aesthetic pleasure, furthermore, in which Valéry and Proust have as much faith as in a revered mother, has always been a questionable matter. For anyone who is close to works of art, they are no more objects of delight than is his own breathing. Rather, he lives among them like a modern inhabitant of a medieval town who replies with a peremptory 'yes, yes', when a visitor remarks on the beauty of the buildings, but who knows every corner and portal. But it is only when the distance necessary for enjoyment to be possible is established between the observer and works of art that the question of their continuing vitality can arise. It would probably never occur to anyone who was at home with art and not a mere visitor. But since they both continually reflect upon their own work as well as produce it, Valéry and Proust are certain of the pleasure their works provide those on the outside. They agree even to the point of recognizing something of the mortal enmity which exists among works and which accompanies the pleasure of competition. Far from recoiling before it, however, Proust affirms this enmity as though he were as German as Charlus affects to be. For him, competition among works is the test of truth. Schools, he writes at one point in *Sodom and Gomorrah*, devour each other like micro-organisms and insure through their struggle the survival of life. This dialectical attitude, which transcends fixation on the individual as such, brings Proust into conflict with Valéry, the *artiste*. It makes

his perverse tolerance of museums possible, whereas for Valéry the duration of the individual work is the crucial problem.

The criterion of duration is the here and now, the present moment. For Valéry art is lost when it has relinquished its place in the immediacy of life, in its functional context; for him the ultimate question is that of the possible use of the work of art. The craftsman in him, fashions poems with that precision of contour which embodies attention to the surroundings, has become infinitely sensitive to the place of the work of art, including its intellectual setting, as though the painter's feeling for perspective were intensified in him to a feeling for the perspective of reality, in which it becomes possible for the work to have depth. His artistic standpoint is that of immediacy, but driven to the most audacious consequences. He follows the principle of art for art's sake to the verge of its negation. He makes the pure work of art the object of absolute, unwavering contemplation, but he scrutinizes it so long and so intensely that he comes to see that the object of such pure contemplation must wither and degenerate to commercialized decoration, robbed of the dignity in which both its *raison d'être* and Valéry's consist. The pure work is threatened by reification and neutralization. This is the recognition that overwhelms him in the museum. He discovers that the only pure works, the only works that can sustain serious observation, are the impure ones which do not exhaust themselves in that observation but point beyond, towards a social context. And since, with the incorruptibility of the great rationalist, Valéry must recognize that this stage of art is irrevocably past, there is nothing left for the anti-rationalist and Bergsonian in him but to mourn for works as they turn into relics.

Proust, the novelist, virtually begins where Valéry, the poet, stopped—with the afterlife of works of art. For Proust's primary relationship to art is the precise opposite of that of the expert and producer. He is first of all an admiring consumer, an amateur, inclined to that effusive and for artists highly suspect awe before works that characterizes only those separated from them as though by an abyss. One could almost say that his genius consisted not least of all in assuming this attitude (which is also that of the man who conducts himself as a spectator even in life) so completely and accurately that it became a new type of productivity, and the power of inner and outer contemplation, thus intensified, turned into recollection, involuntary memory. The amateur is incomparably more comfortable in the museum than is the expert. Valéry feels himself at home in the studio; Proust strolls through an exhibition. There is something exterritorial about his relation to art,

and many of his false judgments, as in questions of music, display traces of the dilettante to the end (what, for instance, has the conciliatory kitsch of his friend, Reynaldo Hahn, to do with Proust's novel, where each sentence puts an established attitude out of business with remorseless gentleness). But he moulded this weakness into an instrument of strength as only Kafka could. However naïve his enthusiastic judgements of individual works of art, especially those of the Italian Renaissance, may sound in comparison to Valéry's, he was far less naïve in his relation to art as such. To speak of naïveté in an artist like Valéry, in whom the process of artistic production is so indissolubly merged with reflection upon the process, may sound like a provocation. But he was in fact naïve in having no doubts about the category of the work of art as such. He took it for granted, and the force of his thought, his historical-philosophical energy, increased as a result. The category becomes the criterion in terms of which Valéry can see changes in the internal structure of works of art and in the way they are experienced. Proust, however, is entirely free of the unconditional fetishism of the artist who makes the things himself. For him works of art are from the outset something more than their specific aesthetic qualities. They are part of the life of the person who observes them; they become an element of his consciousness. He thus perceives a level in them very different from that of the formal laws of the work. It is a level set free only by the historical development of the work, a level which has as its premise the death of the living intention of the work. Proust's naïveté is a second naïveté. At every stage of consciousness a new and broader immediacy arises. Whereas Valéry's conservative belief in culture as a pure thing in itself affords incisive criticism of a culture which tends by its very historical nature to destroy everything self-subsistent, Proust's most characteristic mode of perception, his extraordinary sensitivity to changes in modes of experience, has as its paradoxical result the ability to perceive history as landscape. He adores museums as though they were God's true creation, which in Proust's metaphysics is never complete but always occurring anew in each concrete experience, each original artistic intuition. In his marvelling eye he has preserved something out of childhood; Valéry, by contrast, speaks of art like an adult. If Valéry understands something of the power of history over the production and apperception of art, Proust knows that even within works of art themselves history rules like a process of disintegration. 'Ce qu'on appelle la postérité, c'est la postérité de l'oeuvre' might well be translated as, 'What is

called posterity is the afterlife of the work.' In the artifact's capacity for disintegration Proust sees its similarity to natural beauty. He recognizes the physiognomy of decomposing things as that of their second life. Because nothing has substance for him but what has already been mediated by memory, his love dwells on the second life, the one which is already over, rather than on the first. For Proust's aestheticism the question of aesthetic quality is of secondary concern. In a famous passage he glorified inferior music for the sake of the listener's memories, which are preserved with far more fidelity and force in an old popular song than in the self-sufficiency of a work by Beethoven. The saturnine gaze of memory penetrates the veil of culture. Once they are no longer isolated as domains of the objective mind but are drawn into the stream of subjectivity, distinctions between levels of culture lose the pathetic quality that Valéry's heresies constantly accord them. Valéry takes offence at the chaotic aspect of the museum because it distorts the works' expressive realization; for Proust this chaos assumes tragic character. For him it is only the death of the work of art in the museum which brings it to life. When severed from the living order in which it functioned, according to him, its true spontaneity is released—its uniqueness, its 'name', that which makes the great works of culture more than culture. Proust's attitude preserves, in adventurously sophisticated form, the saying from Ottilie's journal in Goethe's *Elective Affinities*: 'Everything perfect of its kind must go beyond its kind,' a highly unclassical thought which does art the honour of relativizing it.

Yet anyone who is not satisfied with intellectual history alone must face the question: Who is right, the critic of the museum or its defender? For Valéry the museum is a place of barbarism. His conviction of the sanctity of culture (which he shares with Mallarmé) underlies this judgement. Since this religion of spleen provokes so much opposition, including objections with a simplistic social orientation, it is important to affirm its moment of truth. Only what exists for its own sake, without regard to those it is supposed to please, can fulfil its human end. Few things have contributed so greatly to dehumanization as has the universal human belief that products of the mind are justified only in so far as they exist for men—the belief itself bears witness to the dominance of manipulative rationality. Valéry was able to show the objective character, the immanent coherence of the work in contrast to the contingency of the subject with such incomparable authority because he gained his insight through the subjective experience of the discipline of the artist's work. In this he was unquestionably superior to Proust; incorrupt-

ible, he had greater resistance. In contrast, the primacy Proust assigns the flux of experience and his refusal to tolerate anything fixed and determinate have a sinister aspect—conformity, the ready adjustment to changing situations which he shares with Bergson. Proust's work contains passages on art which approach in unbridled subjectivism the philistine attitude that turns the work into a battery of projective tests. In contrast, Valéry occasionally complains—and hardly without irony—that there are no tests which can determine the quality of a poem. Proust says in the second volume of *Le temps retrouvé* that the work is a kind of optical instrument offered to the reader in order that he makes self-discoveries perhaps not otherwise possible. Proust's arguments in favour of museums also have as their point of reference not the thing itself but the observing subject. It is not coincidental that it is something subjective, the abrupt act of production in which the work becomes something different from reality, that Proust considers to be preserved in the work's afterlife in the museum. For him, the moment of production is reflected in the same isolation of the work that Valéry considers its stigma. Proust, in his unfettered subjectivism, is untrue to objectifications of the spirit, but it is only this subjectivism that enables him to break through the immanence of culture.

In the litigation implicitly pending between them, neither Proust nor Valéry is right, nor could a middle-of-the-road reconciliation be arranged. The conflict between them points up in a most penetrating way a conflict in the matter itself, and each takes the part of one moment in the truth which lies in the unfolding of contradiction. The fetishism of the object and the subject's infatuation with itself find their correctives in each other. Each position passes over into the other. Valéry becomes aware of the intrinsic being of the work through unremitting self-reflection, and, inversely, Proust's subjectivism looks to art for the ideal, the salvation of the living. In opposition to culture and through culture, he represents negativity, criticism, the spontaneous act that is not content with mere existence. Thus he does justice to works of art, which can be called art only by virtue of the fact that they embody the quintessence of this spontaneity. Proust holds on to culture for the sake of objective happiness, whereas Valéry's loyalty to the objective demands of the work forces him to give up culture for lost. And just as both represent contradictory moments of the truth, so both, the two most knowledgeable men to have written about art in recent times, have their limits, without which, in fact, their knowledge would not have been possible. Quite obviously Valéry agrees with his teacher,

Mallarmé in finding, as he wrote in his essay. 'The Triumph of Manet', that existence and things are here only to be devoured by art, that the world exists to produce a beautiful book and finds its fulfilment in an absolute poem. He also saw clearly the escape to which *poésie pure* aspired. 'Nothing leads so surely to complete barbarism', another of his essays begins, 'as complete absorption in what is purely spiritual'. And his own attitude, the elevation of art to idolatry, did in fact contribute to the process of reification and dilapidation which, according to Valéry's accusation, art undergoes in museums. For it is only in the museum, where paintings are offered for contemplation as ends in themselves, that they become as absolute as Valéry desired, and he shrinks back in terror from the realization of his dream. Proust knows the cure for this. In a sense works of art return home when they become elements of the observer's subjective stream of consciousness. Thus they renounce their cultic prerogative and are freed of the usurpatory aspect that characterized them in the heroic aesthetics of Impressionism. But by the same token Proust overestimates the act of freedom in art, as would an amateur. Often, almost in the manner of a psychiatrist, he understands the work all too much as a reproduction of the internal life of the person who had the good fortune and the misfortune to produce it or enjoy it. He fails to take full account of the fact that even in the very moment of its conception the work confronts its author and its audience as something objective, something which makes demands in terms of its own inner structure and its own logic. Like artists' lives, their works appear 'free' only when seen from the outside. The work is neither a reflection of the soul nor the embodiment of a Platonic Idea. It is not pure Being but rather a 'force field' between subject and object. The objective necessity of which Valéry speaks is realized only through the act of subjective spontaneity which Proust makes the sole repository of all meaning and happiness.

It is not merely because the protestations of culture against barbarism go unheard that Valéry's campaign against museums has a quixotic aspect—hopeless protests are nevertheless necessary. But Valéry is a bit too ingenuous in his suspicion that museums alone are responsible for what is done to paintings. Even if they hung in their old places in the castles of the aristocrats (with whom Proust is in any case more concerned than is Valéry), they would be museum pieces without museums. What eats away at the life of the art work is also its own life. If Valéry's coquettish allegory compares painting and sculpture to children who have lost their mother, one must remember that in myths the heroes, who re-

present the emancipation of the human from fate, always lost their mothers. Works of art can fully embody the *promesse du bonheur* only when they have been uprooted from their native soil and have set out along the path to their own destruction. Proust recognized this. The procedure which today relegates every work of art to the museum, even Picasso's most recent sculpture, is irreversible. It is not solely reprehensible, however, for it presages a situation in which art, having completed its estrangement from human ends, returns, in Novalis' words, to life. One senses something of this in Proust's novel, where physiognomies of paintings and people glide into one another almost without a break and memory traces of experiences fuse with those of musical passages. In one of the most explicit passages in the work, the description of falling asleep on the first page of *Du côté de chez Swann*, the narrator says, 'It seemed to me that I was the thing the book was about: a church, a quartet, the rivalry between Francis the First and Charles the Fifth.' This is the reconciliation of that split which Valéry so irreconcilably laments. The chaos of cultural goods fades into the bliss of the child whose body feels itself at one with the nimbus of distance.

The museums will not be shut, nor would it even be desirable to shut them. The natural-history collections of the spirit have actually transformed works of art into the hieroglyphics of history and brought them a new content while the old one shrivelled up. No conception of pure art, borrowed from the past and yet inadequate to it, can be offered to offset this fact. No one knew this better than Valéry, who broke off his reflections because of it. Yet museums certainly emphatically demand something of the observer, just as every work of art does. For the *flâneur*, in whose shadow Proust walked, is also a thing of the past, and it is no longer possible to stroll through museums letting oneself be delighted here and there. The only relation to art that can be sanctioned in a reality that stands under the constant threat of catastrophe is one that treats works of art with the same deadly seriousness that characterizes the world today. The evil Valéry diagnoses can be avoided only by one who leaves his naïveté outside along with his cane and his umbrella, who knows exactly what he wants, picks out two or three paintings, and concentrates on them as fixedly as if they really were idols. Some museums are helpful in this respect. In addition to light and air they have adopted the principle of selection that Valéry declared to be the guiding one of his school and that he missed in museums. In the *Jeu de Paume*, where the Gare St.-Lazare now hangs, Proust's Elstir and Valéry's Degas live peacefully near each other in discrete separation.