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**PAUL VALÉRY, CHUCK MILLER: AN IMAGINARY ENCOUNTER,
or TWO WAYS OF LOOKING AT POETRY**

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Études Montpelliéraines du Monde Anglophone

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Introduction

The circumstantial dimension of the present article should be made clear from the outset. It was initially written for a talk given in Olomouc, Czech Republic, in 2016 during my visit there within the scope of the Erasmus+ mobility scheme for teaching staff.

I should add that I am indebted to Josef Jařab for the topic from Palacký University Olomouc for the topic of this article. He was the one who mentioned that a talk partly devoted to Paul Valéry might be a good option when the time came for our first visit to Olomouc. Although I am a poetry specialist, I am not a Valéry scholar, so I had to think of ways of reconciling competence (my actual field is American poetry) and context.

Valéry's relatively modest poetic production includes two of the most famous pieces in twentieth-century French poetry: "The Graveyard by the Sea" ("Le Cimetière marin" in the French original) and "The Young Fate" ("La Jeune Parque"). It is, however, tempting to say that his fame equally relies equally on his theoretical writings on literature, and poetry in particular. He can legitimately be called a forerunner of what came to be known as French literary theory. *Tel Quel*, the avant-garde journal of the 1970s, – literally "As Such" – was named after a wish expressed by Valéry to see literature studied for its own sake, *comme telle*.

This led to the idea of getting my audience better acquainted with Paul Valéry via his views on poetry by looking at how they may apply to the work of an American poet. The one I chose to discuss is alive. He has written poems about what is now the Czech Republic. I happened upon Chuck Miller's work during a semester teaching at the University of Iowa and have been translating it and writing on it for the past three years. A trilingual (English, German and French) edition of a selection of his work, translated by Walter Gruenzweig from Dortmund University and myself, is to be published in 2018.

Two paths for poetry

Likely, the Mallarmé-inspired Paul Valéry (1871-1945) would not have taken to the work of Chuck Miller (b. 1939).¹ The author of twelve books, Miller was an original member of the

¹ In his essay "Remarks about Myself" ("Propos Me Concernant"), Valéry writes this: "Can I, in 1943, give to a few people far younger than I some notion of the effect produced on a certain young man in about 1891 by his sudden encounter with the poetry of Mallarmé? . . . From my first contact with his poems—whatever their initial effect of obscurity and complexity—I had no hesitation about the exceptional importance I was forced to admit they had for me. From that moment, all other poetry

Actualists, an Iowa City-based “informal group” (his words)² of writers which was started in 1973. The name seems to say it all: as a common noun, “actualist” is defined in the dictionary as synonymous with “realist,” “one who deals in hard facts.”³ This may account for Miller’s contrarian obstinacy in calling himself a “proletarian writer,” if only to oppose all the American writers whom he finds too “bourgeois,” by which he means: “too stiff, alien, formal, divorced, so self-important, arrogant, snotty, nasty.”⁴ Miller has been writing verse that feels as if it covers and uncovers whole chunks of the actual world rarely given visibility in American poetry, the Czech Republic being one of them.⁵ Rather than the “Last of the Beats” as a fellow-poet sometimes called him,⁶ he appears as the perfect forerunner of what has recently been named “the New Sincerity,” a point to which we will return in the concluding pages of this article.

Unlike Miller’s poems, Valéry’s writings on poetry reveal a constant striving to maximize the distance between poetic language and worldly matters, as well as an unbending inclination to abstraction. And yet, this disposition to aim at what Scottish poet Kenneth White once referred to as “the most difficult area,”⁷ is rooted in a Mediterranean sensualist’s mind and body.

No synthesis was sought after in this confrontation of two conflicting paths for poetry. Bringing institutions together was the point being pursued. Still, it is hoped that the conversation across time between the rebel poet and the celebrated author of “The Graveyard by the Sea” may appear as a contribution to the constant need of redefinition of the poetic genre.

Biographs

In “Mediterranean Inspirations” (“Inspirations Méditerranéennes,” 1934), Valéry wrote: “I begin with my beginning. I was born in a middling-sized seaport situated at the end of a bay

seemed to me reduced to awkward beginnings and pleasing fragments, preceded or followed by insignificant or prosaic passages. . . . I was as if bowled over intellectually by the sudden appearance on my horizon of these two extraordinary phenomena.” [The other one was Arthur Rimbaud.] Paul Valéry, “Remarks about Myself,” in *Moi*, trans. Marthiel Mathews and Jackson Mathews, vol. 15 of *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, ed. Jackson Mathews (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 325-326. Valéry’s most significant writings on Mallarmé are included in *Variété II* (1929) and *Variété III* (1936). They have been gathered together in *Leonardo Poe Mallarmé*, trans. Malcolm Cowley and James R. Lawler, vol. 8 of *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, ed. Jackson Mathews (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972). A useful characterization of Valéry’s poetry in connection with that of Mallarmé is found in the “Paul Valéry” entry of the *Gale Contextual Encyclopedia of World Literature*: the unmistakable influence of Mallarmé, it says, shows most clearly in the “highly formal, mannered musicality of Valéry’s verse.” Anne Marie Hacht and Dwayne D. Hayes, eds., *Gale Contextual Encyclopedia of World Literature* (Detroit: Gale Cengage Learning, 2008), 4:1602.

² Boris Gregorić, “Chuck Miller: The Poet of the Prairie,” interview with Chuck Miller, in *Parsecs to Go, Poems of Protest*, by Chuck Miller (Muscatine, IA: Prairie Rose Press, 2013), 263.

³ *Collins English Dictionary*, 12th ed., s.v. “actualist.”

⁴ Gregorić, “Chuck Miller,” 262.

⁵ In the context of this article, it appears relevant to mention that Morty Sklar, the co-editor and publisher of *The Actualist Anthology*, in which Chuck Miller’s work was represented, was in 1983 the first in the United States to publish Czechoslovakian poet Jaroslav Seifert, who was to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature the following year.

⁶ Merrill Gilfillan’s close friend, the late Ray DiPalma (1943-2016), was the first to tell me about this friendly labeling. (The three poets met at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in the late 1960s.)

⁷ See Kenneth White, *The Most Difficult Area* (London: Cape Goliard, 1968).

and at the foot of a hill, whose mass of rock juts out from the line of the shore.”⁸ Valéry’s birthplace suited his inclinations: “Such is the place of my origin, about which I will make the ingenuous remark that I was born in one of those places where I should have liked to be born.”⁹ He talks about “the order and ideal splendor” of his hometown’s harbor as “transfigured, by the architecture of the port, the contours of the shore, the perspective of the water, making a sort of stage set, where only one actor moves, sings, and sometimes dies: light!”¹⁰ The Mediterranean light was Paul Valéry’s vehicle to travel the road to abstraction that it was his inclination to follow. There is nothing rich or luxuriant about his poetry. It is exact and exacting. It stays away from Romanticism. It is bathed in the light of the Classics. The sun at its zenith is what fits his intellectual mood. This is from “The Graveyard by the Sea”:

This quiet roof, where dove-sails saunter by,
Between the pines, the tombs, throbs visibly.
Impartial noon patterns the sea in flame —

The brittle insect scrapes at the dry loam;
All is burnt up, used up, drawn up in air
To some ineffably rarefied solution . . .¹¹

By contrast, Chuck Miller’s poetry is rich in crepuscular light: the break of day or the twilight. A German or Scandinavian attuning to the variations of light in places where light is not taken for granted.¹²

i sit in calm ignorance
watching the tides of light
carry us to an unknown shore¹³

He grew up in Illinois and depicts it in his eponymous poem:

skirting the western edge along the rivers
through towns like Hardin
Kinderhook
Atlas Mozier
keeping my eye on the wheat and corn fields, soybeans
that grow in the floodplain
of the Mississippi
between the bluffs
that rear up suddenly on the Western Shore
and on the Illinois side

⁸ Paul Valéry, “Mediterranean Inspirations,” in *Moi*, 19.

⁹ Paul Valéry, “Mediterranean Inspirations,” 19.

¹⁰ Paul Valéry, “Mediterranean Inspirations,” 20.

¹¹ Paul Valéry, “The Graveyard by the Sea,” trans C. Day Lewis, in *Selected Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1950), 41.

¹² Miller’s familiarity with Scandinavian countries, languages, and authors is extensive. See his interview with Gregorić, “Chuck Miller,” 253-55. The titles of two of his books (*From Oslo—A Journey* and *Crossing the Kattegat*) and the subject matter of a few poems in those books are evidence of this close acquaintance with Nordic cultures.

¹³ Chuck Miller, “dawn,” in *Northern Fields: New & Selected Poems* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1994), 111.

drop back to a ridge of limestone
some miles in
this lip of land
like some bleak paradise
forgotten by nearly everyone
except for the people who live there
flashes on me gold and vermillion
yellow and brown¹⁴

Purity

Mallarmé's legacy, a major factor in Valéry's poetic itinerary, signifies a taste for purity in poetry. In Valéry's "Pure Poetry" ("Poésie Pure," 1928) we can read: "[T]he question arises of knowing whether one can manage to construct one of those works which may be pure of all nonpoetic elements."¹⁵ In "Remarks on Poetry" ("Propos sur la poésie," 1927) he adds that language must be cleansed of the daily rubble: it is, in his view, "the opposite of a precision instrument . . . the poet . . . must borrow means of statistical and anonymous origin to accomplish his aim of exalting and expressing the purest and most individual aspect of his personality."¹⁶ There is no interest in purity per se in Miller's oeuvre, no pursuit of pure forms, even if Allen Ginsberg's dictum "First thought, best thought"¹⁷ does not apply: the sheer number of poems Miller has devoted to the writing of poetry is proof enough of his extreme attention to the craft. However, the idea of achieving "freedom from foreign or inappropriate elements, careful correctness,"¹⁸ in life *or* in poetry sounds quite foreign to his way of thinking, as the following example will show. Miller often uses grammatical terms metaphorically.¹⁹ One of his best poems of the kind was inspired while learning the Czech language. It is entitled "as though he were speaking in some Slavic perfective":

as though he were speaking in some Slavic perfective
a spiritual Jehovah proclaiming "thy will be done"
but i walking down a flaming autumn street
realizing that i would live and die in the imperfective
even among the multi-hued leaves and mild autumn air
in the fragrant smokes of numerous leaf-burnings
(can you die in the imperfective?
are you forced once and for all into the absolute?
or does your karma keep trembling and struggling
through various incarnations?)

¹⁴ Chuck Miller, "Illinois," in *Crossing the Kattogat* (Madison, WI: Mica Press, 2001), 107.

¹⁵ Paul Valéry, "Pure Poetry: Notes for a Lecture," in *The Art of Poetry*, trans. Denise Folliot, vol. 7 of *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, ed. Jackson Mathews (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), 185.

¹⁶ Paul Valéry, "Remarks on Poetry," in *The Art of Poetry*, 201.

¹⁷ In a review of *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews, 1958-1996* by Allen Ginsberg, William Deresiewicz writes: "First thought, best thought" was his governing principle: no heed to the high-modernist idea of poem as patiently constructed artifact. . . ." William Deresiewicz, "First Thought, Best Thought," *New York Times*, April 8, 2001:

<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/01/04/08/reviews/010408deresit.html>. Ginsberg can be heard referring to it in an interview at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zàZzJ9ylz8Q>. He actually says that the phrase was worked out by Buddhist meditation master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche in a conversation with him.

¹⁸ *Random House Kernerman Webster's College Dictionary*, s.v. "purity."

¹⁹ See, for example, Miller's "my subjunctive loves," in *Parsecs to Go, Poems of Protest*, 26.

always in an ongoing process
 a movement toward

 is this
 some side of a great divide
 in which we most stranded on the lesser side
 and the few propelled by their singular qualities
 into the perfect completion
 where even to speak in the present
 is to leap already in the future
 as though to enter history by the front door
 and be immediately recognized
 and the vast perjority of us
 mere enclitics¹ depending on the preceding
 or post leading of multitudes
 or will we some in a hopefully present tense
 stand on our own in an existential infinitive
 in all our imperfecticities
 emblazon some approximate accomplishment
 nonetheless
 never the less
 none-the-less

¹enclitic: word connected to the preceding word, but not having an independent phonological status.²⁰

The contrast between perfective and imperfective aspects in Slavic languages is made the vehicle for a long-running metaphor. Its tenor is a questioning of predestination by birth or talent. The poem ends on a statement defending the worth of each and everyone bound to stay and live in the imperfective.²¹

Valéry's quest for purity entails drawing a watertight line between poetry and prose: "Walking, like prose, always has a definite object. It is an act directed *toward* some object that we aim to reach . . . Dancing [like poetry] is quite different . . . It goes nowhere. Or if it pursues anything it is only an ideal object, a state, a delight, the phantom of a flower, or some transport out of oneself, an extreme of life, a summit, a supreme point of being . . ." ²² Mallarmean loathing of the use of language for "universal reporting" ²³ would probably cause

²⁰ Chuck Miller, "as though he were speaking in some Slavic perfective," in *Crossing the Kattegat*, 107. The inclusion of a footnote to clarify the more technical term "enclitic" as a "word connected to the preceding word, but not having an independent phonological status" is a point that is addressed later in the article.

²¹ An email message from the author (of October 26, 2016) makes the point of the poem even clearer: "i wrote that after studying Polish, Czech, and Russian, and they all seemed to have some version of a perfect tense, and then an imperfect tense, and i cant remember too clearly, but it seemed in Russian maybe you made the future tense by using that Perfect tense, and thinking about the lives of some people, they were always in that Perfect tense, and the rest of us were in some kind of imperfect life, and how i had to admit that for me, life as we know it seemed always in that Imperfect mode, and so nonethe less [sic] i was for the people who had to live that imperfect life, and yet what did that leave us, never perhaps touching that higher perfect life bestowed on them by fate, or something or the other.....like wondering about the origin of class, or fate."

²² Valéry, "Remarks on Poetry," 206-7. Italics in the original.

²³ The phrase comes from Stéphane Mallarmé's "Crise de vers," a section in *Divagations (1898)*. An English translation of « *Crise de vers* » is given as an appendix in Rosemary Lloyd, *Mallarmé: The Poet and His Circle* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 227-34.

Valéry to regard Chuck Miller's poetry as insufficiently defending its specificity. The former Actualist is taking the risk of ridding poetry of its possibly unnecessary trappings: rhyme, identifiable meter or genre. The question is: can you succeed in discarding most of poetry's signature ornaments while staying away from prose? This aesthetic option is spelled out in a poem entitled "poetry readings: for Bukowski" written after Charles Bukowski's death:

the meaning and the clarity woven in
no backbeat to strengthen their words
hardly any rhyme to flash or drone
no meter for scaffolding
just the cross-stitching of strangenesses
a naked human voice cutting away or adding up²⁴

The two poets' diverging attitudes on the question of purity lead them to differ on the (in)compatibility of genres.

Poetry and autobiography

To Miller, poetry and autobiography need not be kept separate — quite the opposite in fact— and although he does not explicitly say so, truth is at stake, no less. An acute concern for reality as the necessary cornerstone of worthy writing shows both throughout Miller's work and in the two major interviews that he gave. In the one with Ken McCullough in 1985, when asked if he has "anything against the alchemy of making things up," Miller answers that he has "complicated feelings about it."²⁵ This is 1985, during the period which Brian McHale defines as "the peak phase of postmodernist culture,"²⁶ and therefore after trying "to read American fiction of the last twenty or thirty years," Miller has "the sense that it's mostly inauthentic, because it's too essentially made-up."²⁷ He adds: "Fiction, or imaginative prose, is legitimate," he says; "and yet it's got to be balanced by a sense of realism, and of one's own experience."²⁸ Disapprovingly recalling the "flak" initially aimed by critics at Kerouac "for honestly telling what he had experienced," Miller comments: "You get the feeling that somehow our culture doesn't want to confront our most crucial experiences, and it avoids them by having a literature that is make-believe."²⁹ That applied to poetry too. Writing a blurb for Miller's latest book to date twenty-eight years later, McCullough calls him "an old-fashioned seat-of-the -pants realist . . . , adhering unflinchingly to the truth of what he has found"³⁰ in all the countries where his travels took him.

On the other hand, one of Valéry's ways of looking at autobiography expresses just the opposite view. In "Spiritual Canticles" ("Cantiques spirituels," 1945) he wrote: "What I call

²⁴ Chuck Miller, "poetry readings/ for Bukowski" in *Parsecs to Go, Poems of Protest* (Muscatine, IA: Prairie Rose Press, 2013), 78.

²⁵ Ken McCullough, "Chuck Miller: A Poet Beneath Contempt: An interview, excerpted, by Ken McCullough," in *How in the Morning: Poems 1962-1988*, by Chuck Miller (Iowa City: Spirit That Moves Us Press, 1988), 75.

²⁶ Brian McHale, "Break, Period, Interregnum," in *Postmodern | Postwar — and After: Rethinking American Literature*, ed. Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, and Daniel Worden (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), 64.

²⁷ McCullough, "Chuck Miller," 75.

²⁸ McCullough, "Chuck Miller," 75.

²⁹ McCullough, "Chuck Miller," 75.

³⁰ Ken McCullough, back cover of *Parsecs to Go, Poems of Protest*, by Chuck Miller.

perfection eliminates the personality of the author.”³¹ Sincerity is immaterial, even irrelevant in poetry, as he pointed out in “Memoirs of a Poem” (“Fragments des mémoires d’un poème,” 1937):

Some there are who bring on a crisis, irritate a wound, or cherish their sufferings so as to write of them, and since the invention of “sincerity” as valid literary currency (which is rather surprising, where all is fiction), there is no fault, anomaly, or reserve which has not acquired its value: a confession is as good as an idea.

I shall now make my own confession and reveal my own anomaly. If this system of exposing one’s private affairs to the public is called *human*, I must declare myself essentially *inhuman*.³²

Valéry balks at broaching too personal topics when discussing poetry. He prefers to stick to the original Greek understanding of the poet as maker. In a piece he wrote about “The Graveyard by the Sea,” he states: “If I am questioned; if anyone wonders . . . what ‘I wanted to say’ in a certain poem, I reply that I did not *want to say* but *wanted to make*, and that it was the intention of *making* which *wanted* what I *said*”³³

Miller’s definition of the essence of the poetic is far less depersonalized. It concludes a poem, “when I began this funny journey,” that brings together autobiography, the question of purity and the issue of separation between prose and poetry.

when i began this funny journey
it was the pumping thuds
the heartbeat of prose
that i loved
the clear sonorous hoofbeats of meaning
.....

now i am beginning to love poems
eat them for breakfast
embrace them in my lonely bed
like lacey icing on cakes i eat them
an irish stew of the mutter sprach-ed world
venison of strangeness
they are my walking stick
my overcoat

the poets often don’t say so much
leaving things out
turning into beautiful earthly ghosts
they are continually passionately whispering in my ear

and more than this
perhaps i prefer taking drugs
and best of all is love

but i think it will be an old tipsy poet
in a great shabby overcoat
yellow decaying manuscripts trailing from his autumn pockets

³¹ Paul Valéry, “Spiritual Canticles,” in *The Art of Poetry*, 289.

³² Paul Valéry, “Memoirs of a Poem” in *The Art of Poetry*, 103. Italics in the original.

³³ Paul Valéry, “Concerning *Le Cimetière marin*,” in *The Art of Poetry*, 148. Italics in the original.

who will
some spectral midnight
come stumbling after me
and laying his palsied hand
upon my trembling arm,
say, ever so softly
poetry is a vast muttering
of what you always knew it would be about

mutter sprach: mother tongue³⁴

The image of poetry as “irish stew of the mutter-sprached world” and “venison of strangeness” praises the rich cross-fertilization taking place in poetic language and the passage from one genre to another is described as smoothly progressive: “now i am beginning to love poems.”

Chuck Miller and the “New Sincerity”

In his recent article entitled “The Rhetoric of the Rearguard? Sincerity in Innovative American Poetics,” Nicholas Manning delves into the history of “sincerity” as defined and claimed by poets and critics since the Romantics. Following a modernist tradition epitomized by Louis Zukofsky’s 1931 article “Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Works of Charles Reznikoff,” he clearly insists that we should regard the invocation of sincerity as a rhetorical device exclusively, and detach it from such naïve notions as truthfulness of expression or a perfect match between texts and ethical principles. (Valéry would probably have agreed.) What makes Manning’s contribution more valuable than a simple historical reminder is the question mark in its title. This punctuation mark signifies his acknowledgement that a pure and simple dismissal of the trivial understanding of “sincerity” is difficult to achieve in practice, which he brilliantly demonstrates in the course of the article. However enlightened about contemporary givens one may consider oneself to be, taking it, for example, for granted that there exists no such thing as

A transparent relationship between author and text . . . there is also, however, another reader who dwells within us, one who . . . like a child reading a fable . . . seeks to knowingly participate in an imagined horizon of poetic sense where nothing is obscure, where the sign is one with its world, where the self appears garbed in the raiments of a full ontological transparency—in brief, where poems are real . . .³⁵

Such clear intellectual “honesty” should be taken up one step further and lead to the recognition that, its obviously complex meaning notwithstanding, Zukofskyan sincerity, “that preoccupation with the accuracy of detail in writing,”³⁶ also implies a straightforwardly ethical and truthful approach to the world, of which the object and the word are synecdoches. Emmanuel Hocquard, a French poet long interested in Zukofsky’s work, preceded Manning in warning the reader that in the American poet’s meaning, “sincerity” should not be understood in its moral or psychological senses of good faith, frankness, and authenticity but rather as

³⁴ Chuck Miller, “when I began this funny journey” in *How in the Morning*, 7-8.

³⁵ Nicholas Manning, “The Rhetoric of the Rearguard? Sincerity in Innovative American Poetics,” *Transatlantica*, n° 1 (2016): <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/8133>.

³⁶ Louis Zukofsky, “Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff,” *Poetry* 37, n° 5 (1931): 280.

conveying an intellectual and ethical purpose devoid of self-complacency or of any intention to seduce the next person.³⁷

This may suggest that Manning's dichotomizing view of readers may still be too divisive. It does not allow for the possibility that Zukofsky's understanding of sincerity may not be exclusive of the trivial sense of the word, so that "the divide between the sincerity valued by what Charles Bernstein has called Mainstream Verse, and the anti-sincerity of the so-called innovative poetics"³⁸ may in fact be a continuum.

A recent publication from the University of Iowa Press includes an essay by Adam Kelly entitled "The New Sincerity." It assesses the meaning for literature of a phrase which has been around for two decades. A long quotation from David Foster Wallace's 1993 essay "E Pluribus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" is held by Kelly and others to encapsulate much of what "New Sincerity" is about:

The next real literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre principles. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic. Maybe that'll be the point, why they'll be the next rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk things. Risk disapproval. . . . The new rebels might be the ones willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "How banal." Accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Credulity. Willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law. Who knows.³⁹

Kelly comments: "In this way, fiction would become a conversation, the primary aim of which would be to make the reader and writer feel less lonely in the face of the contemporary world."⁴⁰

"New Sincerity" resists irony, that arch-postmodernist stance.

The reader ought now to be in a position to see why it makes sense to regard Chuck Miller, now in his seventies (with his first book published in 1966) as a proto-exponent of the "New Sincerity," or, alternatively, as a belated exponent of Zukofsky's strongly political and complex type of sincerity. In fact, Miller's writing spans the different understandings of "sincerity" described in the above lines. His poetry shows little taste for irony but no artistic naïveté either. Its accessibility results from a deft, if seemingly minimal intervention into demotic language. He would certainly not feel it below him to be thought of as meeting the Wordsworthian imperative that the poet must be "a man speaking to men,"⁴¹ or if, to take up David Foster Wallace's wording, it was said about his poetry: "the reader feels like someone is talking to him rather than striking a number of poses."⁴² The most striking thing when looking through the titles of Chuck Miller's poems over the years is how many of them are

³⁷ See Emmanuel Hocquard, "Sincérité," in *Tout le monde se ressemble : Une anthologie de poésie contemporaine* (Paris : P.O.L., 1995), 32-33.

³⁸ Manning, "The Rhetoric of the Rearguard." Anti-sincerity is, for Manning, "other," or "reflexive, Zukofskyan sincerity."

³⁹ David Foster Wallace, "E Pluribus Pluram : Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, n° 2 (1993): 192-93.

⁴⁰ Adam Kelly, "The New Sincerity," in *Postmodern | Postwar—And After: Rethinking American Literature*, 200.

⁴¹ William Wordsworth, preface to *Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems*, 3rd ed. (London: Longman and Rees, 1802), xxviii.

⁴² Laura Miller, interview with David Foster Wallace, *Salon*, March 9, 1996: https://www.salon.com/1996/03/09xallace_5/.

simply comprised of the preposition “for” followed by a first name. This idiosyncratic feature of Miller’s poetry reflects his profound love of, and sympathy for, his community: it is the community of those he has encountered over the course of a life of travels; primarily the community of friends and lovers, but also, more generally, the community of those American society or the forces of international capitalism relegate to the margins, leaving them out in the cold.

Chuck Miller’s Czech connection

The fragmented account of Chuck Miller’s life tells a story of wandering, partly a consequence of a prison sentence he served in the United States for drug possession and which barred him access to teaching jobs there. It is a story of free and not-so-free circulation across the continents. Coming after the end of the Cold War, his poetry contributes to putting whole parts of the world back on American poetry’s maps. What is now the Czech Republic is one of those places. In his 2005 interview with Boris Gregorić, Miller tells the story of an “invisible” Czech poet whom he clearly regards as a brother-in-arms. In spite of its literary merits, the work of Óndra Łysahorsky (the pen-name of Ervín Goj, born in 1905, in today’s Frýdek-Místek) enjoys very little exposure: “he lived in a kind of exile in his own land in a kind of ‘inner emigration’”⁴³ as a result of not complying with the Communist authorities’ demand that he stop writing in a language (Lachian) that “gave some credence to . . . old Polish claims” to a little part of Silesia on the Czech-Polish border: “He [too] was excluded from the normal employment he might have found as a teacher.⁴⁴ Even his pen-name enhances the exile poet’s Romantic aura. Miller explains: “Óndra was from a 17th century Robin Hood-like figure in Moravia. Ironically, he died in the year of the Velvet Revolution.”⁴⁵

Miller’s eulogizing of Lysohorsky’s work reads like a fragment of *ars poetica*: “He propounds the beauty of the Beskyds [Beskydy] region and the Ostrovitsza [Ostravice] River that runs down through it.” He has written a very beautiful poem that illustrates a principle I also believe in: get down to the most fundamental thing, the real thing, and if you can do that, then why worry about all the spray and foam of the rest?”⁴⁶ The poem in question makes a stand for courtyard trees, a variation on the theme of living in the imperfective. Although they don’t get as much light as the trees in the woods and “grow up somehow stunted . . . still they are trees and they have to live.”⁴⁷ The way Miller writes about nature provides similar evidence of brotherly feelings for all living creatures, in general: Iowan rivers are a significant element in his landscapes.⁴⁸

To revert to biographical data, Chuck Miller’s first-hand experience of what is now the Czech Republic goes back to the early 1990s when he taught in two schools (*základní školi*, or *základky* in Czech) in Trinec. In a recent e-mail he was saying how welcome he had felt there, despite the loneliness undoubtedly induced by his imperfect knowledge of the language. The few poems he wrote about those days all broach the topic of connection (or painful disconnection) and free circulation.

“Trinec, Czech Republic” features the poet addressing himself as he is walking back to his rooming house on a “wan late winter afternoon.” He is so lonely that, by the time he reaches his destination, he fancies himself a character in Washington Irving’s “Sleepy Hollow”: “the

⁴³ Gregorić, “Chuck Miller,” 268-269.

⁴⁴ Gregorić, “Chuck Miller,” 269.

⁴⁵ Gregorić, “Chuck Miller,” 269.

⁴⁶ Gregorić, “Chuck Miller,” 268.

⁴⁷ Gregorić, “Chuck Miller,” 268.

⁴⁸ See for example “Tree souls” and “river at dawn” in *Crossing the Kattegat*, 67, 65.

gate creaks strangely as you open it/ as though to indicate what a skeleton/ what an Ichabod Crane/ you have become/ . . . realizing how you must think it all out again/ stare into the darkness once more”⁴⁹. What has made him resolve to change the course of his life is what he

hear the water susurrating in the stream
awaken to the melting of the snow
and that transparent, intense, deep movement of fluidity
that will flow through you forever⁵⁰

The Czech language gives Miller his title for a short poem inspired by an unsuccessful attempt at getting a visa from the Russian embassy: it is called “Pozor,” which Miller translates, again in a footnote, as “danger, watch out (Czech)”:

life is mainly a blockade
sea-quarantines
check points
night border crossings
internments

we seek to enter
the heart of the country

“regret to inform you . . .
. . . given the prevailing conditions . . .
not at this time . . .
nor in the foreseeable future. . .”⁵¹

An identical wish for fluidity and unhampered movement is found in “breaking the ice,” a poem about Miller’s unsuccessful attempt to bicycle from Trinec across the Polish border after he rides into a succession of dead ends and meets with various forms of distrustful hostility. The day’s only moment of universal free circulation consists in a quick exchange of expletives (“the language of abuse being universal”) between the “solitary voyageur” (his words) and a local virago “spewing some territorial aggression.” “[C]olumns and scarves of smoke” over Trinec make the city look “as if it had been bombed.” The day’s frustrations at the borders combine with the intimations of environmental apocalypse to bring about the speaker’s final outcry, jointly targeting defenders of “ethnic stomping grounds” all over the world, as well as those “who stain and soil” the “wasted earth.”⁵²

Czech composer Antonín Dvořák is invoked as an inspiration to re-build bridges between countries and continents: in a poem of remembrance called “for Mrs. Jones,” Miller refers to Dvořák’s *New World Symphony* and the mention of his most famous work immediately conjures up in the poet nostalgia for vanished bridges:

i hear the muffled sounds of my radio
and can almost make out the music
“The New World Symphony”
and the memory emerges slowly

⁴⁹ Chuck Miller, “Trinec, Czech Republic,” in *Crossing the Kattegat*, 42.

⁵⁰ Whether the absence of a pronoun in front of “hear” makes the lines an invitation to “hear . . . that . . . deep movement of fluidity” or is a mere elliptical way of describing the speaker’s state of mind is indeterminate and does not matter.

⁵¹ Chuck Miller, “Pozor” in *Crossing the Kattegat*, 68.

⁵² “breaking the ice” in *Crossing the Kattegat*, 38-39.

as from the forests of another continent
before the plates shifted and some land bridge sunk into the sea⁵³

In this case, an amorous connection made up for the vanished land bridge:

Symphony from the New World #9
old Dvořák our kindred
sometimes we'd make the old motel in Olive Branch
shake with our love⁵⁴

Still, Miller's reference to Dvořák is especially meaningful coming from a writer based in Iowa, as Chuck Miller is, since the Czech composer spent three fruitful months in Spillville, a tiny north-east Iowa town in the summer of 1893.⁵⁵ The above poem, like Miller's poetic records of his time in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, rekindles that historical connection between Iowa, the Midwest in general (it too, a frequently overlooked territory, despite being a part of the United States) and Eastern Europe.

Before he sets out for Poland, the speaker in "breaking the ice" notes: "this time you have your Ausweis." the German word followed by a footnote reference giving its English translation, "passport." Miller's inclusion of foreign words in his poems always comes with footnotes providing some explanation in the form of a translation. The sense of these frequent inclusions varies but they always appear in Miller's poems as positive gestures of openness, not as elitist posturing. While they are certainly intended to convey the linguistic experience of defamiliarization since Miller's travels took him to places where linguistic communication was always a challenge, they primarily indicate interest in other cultures and the attending footnotes evidence a wish that access to the meaning of the poem should be given rather than barred. Concern for the free circulation of people extends to the free circulation of meaning.

Two other examples related to the Czech language, evidence this intention in Miller not to make the medium of poetry an obstacle to understanding. In "Lisboa," a piece about a blind accordion-player Miller chanced upon in the Portuguese capital, he presents the following lines:

you think of the Czechs as he lights into a rollicking one
one of their native songs—a bitter love ballad
something like ". . . you shit on my love
and have wasted my life"
the Americans stole it
changed it to
"roll out the barrel

⁵³ Chuck Miller, "for Mrs. Jones," in *Northern Fields*, 61.

⁵⁴ Chuck Miller, "for Mrs. Jones" in *Northern Fields*, 61. Italics in the original.

⁵⁵ "[A]fter a bruising and exhilarating year as the director of the National Conservatory in New York, the Czech composer craved the society of his countrymen. Dvořák's secretary, Josef Kovarik, convinced him that if he traveled not east across the ocean, but west to the rolling green hills of northeast Iowa, he would find the people he was looking for." Bernard Holland, "Dvorak's Spirit Returns to the Iowa He Loved," *New York Times*, August 9, 1993. <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/08/09/arts/dvorak-s-spirit-returns-to-the-iowa-he-loved.html>

we'll have a barrel of fun"⁵⁶

As with the poems previously quoted, the reader is not left in the dark for long: a footnote reference following Miller's description of the piece being played provides the necessary information: "'Sko Laska': 'Lost Love' (the name of this bitter Czech ballad)." Regardless of the inaccuracy in the title given, which is in fact "Škoda lásky," the inclusion of a note confirms Miller's wish to avoid unnecessary obscurity at all costs.⁵⁷ The second example is found in a poem about Iowa City's main graveyard, where many tombstones testify to the large community of Czech immigrants that arrived in the Midwest after the 1848 revolutions and around the turn of the twentieth century. Familiarity with a spectacular tomb bearing the statue of a black angel induced Miller to write a poem about it: after describing the statue in some detail, the speaker moves closer in order to read the inscriptions on the stone, finding out that it is the tomb of a "rodina feldterova"

. . . inexplicably with the feminine ending
husband died by 1911
but the wife Teresa no date for her
as though she had skipped the traces
some verse on the adjoining concrete broken-off tree
'like a bud just opening . . .', all you can read
on the other side something written in Czech
but although you have studied it in formal halls
you can't translate it and curse your ignorance⁵⁸

Here again, the poem has a note reference following "rodina feldterova": the note consists of a translation of the two words, "family of feldter." Even more interestingly, Miller includes himself here as a character experiencing the helplessness of one unable to read a foreign language, in this case Czech, although he should be able to, on account of classes that he took, and his feeling is one of anger. That is an experience he wants to spare his readers.

What is poetry?

Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot would riddle their poems with foreign words and leave them untranslated. Numerous proper nouns and cultural references likely to remain undecipherable and abstruse to a majority of readers were another signature feature of these high modernist's pedagogic agenda. Leaving aside the question of the aesthetic effectiveness of the gesture, repeating it would appear as a facile fog-making strategy. In keeping with the brief *ars poetica* included in the poem inscribed to Bukowski, intentional concealment of meaning was never the option chosen by Miller. Obscurity *per se* is not a poetic virtue.

There should always be something about a poem that makes it self-evidently poetry but it does not take evolving "a separate language,"⁵⁹ which T.S. Eliot, in his introduction to *The Art of Poetry* volume of Valéry's collected works, identifies as one of the French poet's mistaken

⁵⁶ Chuck Miller, "Lisboa" in *Crossing the Kattegat*, 28.

⁵⁷ While averse to borders, Miller is also opposed to the gospel of capitalist globalization and cultural colonization, which is obvious from calling the appropriation of the Czech song, composed by Jaromír Vejvoda in 1927, by Americans a theft trivializing its original meaning.

⁵⁸ Chuck Miller, "black angel" in *Parsecs to Go, Poems of Protest*, 87.

⁵⁹ T.S. Eliot, introduction to *The Art of Poetry*, by Paul Valéry, xvi.

pursuits. Where Valéry states: “the language of the gods should be as distinct as possible from the language of men, all means of differentiating it should be retained as long as they also conduce to harmony. I am a partisan of inversions,”⁶⁰ Eliot points out that “the farther the idiom, vocabulary, and syntax of poetry depart from those of prose, the more artificial the language of poetry will become,”⁶¹ and, unlike Valéry, he claims that “the *norm* for a poet’s language is the way his contemporaries talk. In assimilating poetry to music, Valéry has, . . . failed to insist upon its relation to speech.”⁶²

That is clearly not the case in Miller’s poem “free clinic,” which, quite typically of his work, blends narrative, speech and considerations:

the basement of a church
one fan slowly circling from the ceiling as in an old-time drug store
a shabby clientele of exposed flesh swelters on this July night
yet we rest easy with each other
some maybe knocked-up, or with the clap
a urinary-vaginal clog-up, or needing birth control
a constant parade of people to the john
with their paper cups to get their clean-catch in its free fall
a kid acts up, his ma dupes neither him nor us
with her ‘candied’ “come here i have something to tell you”
in a staccato of threatening whispers

“does your stream split?
do you dribble a little more?
when was the last time you were treated for venereal disease?”

.

the student pharmacist gives me my free prescription
and i go out into the sultry night
thinking of the vague anxiety in the women’s faces
and imagine all the people lying up in their rooms
sweating, trying to fuck, oozing
drinking too much, getting high, listening to their children cry
wondering where their next whatever is coming from⁶³

Here is no cosmeticized reality, no “language of the gods.” (From Rabelais to Miller’s homonym, Henry, the body always served as a test for sincerity.) What is achieved by the light-handed poetic touch is the impression that this is definitely *not* prose and that the demotic language (“the contemporary talk” to use Eliot’s words) was only slightly reworked by “cutting away or adding up” to arrive at the successful “cross-stitching of strangenesses”⁶⁴ that the text most certainly constitutes. Valéry’s intransigence on the irreconcilable natures of prose and poetry appears untenable.

⁶⁰ Paul Valéry, “Variations on the *Eclogues*,” in *The Art of Poetry*, 306.

⁶¹ Eliot, introduction to *The Art of Poetry*, xvi.

⁶² Eliot, introduction to *The Art of Poetry*, xvii.

⁶³ Chuck Miller, “free clinic,” in *Harvesters: Poems* (West Branch: Coffee House Press, 1984), n.p.

⁶⁴ Chuck Miller, “poetry readings / for Bukowski,” 78.

Meeting points

It seems necessary at this stage to ensure that the reader of this essay does not form the wrong impression about its author's intentions: they were never to cast Valéry as the "bad guy" in his story. Sète, Paul Valéry's birthplace, is a mere twenty miles from the university now bearing his name. He is therefore summoned into this conversation of poets as a friendly neighbor who, as it is universally acknowledged, has a thing or two worth hearing on the subject of poetry which would help locate Chuck Miller on the map of the genre. Moreover, it would actually be wrong to diametrically oppose a Mallarmean Valéry to a Bukowskian Miller. There is more common ground between them than might be expected.

Despite his pursuit of the abstract and his theorized distaste for the personal, Valéry was quite honest about his fascination with himself. Several of his writings are devoted to the myth of Narcissus. As T.S. Eliot noted, the testing and proving grounds of Valéry's exacting poetic agenda were more often than not his own poems and the way he composed them. Valéry goes so far as to write in "Poetry and Abstract Thought" ("Poésie et pensée abstraite," 1939): "there is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography."⁶⁵ Somewhat humorously, the editors of the Princeton edition chose *Moi* for a title of the fifteenth and final volume of Valéry's complete works. "I" is actually the centre of consciousness in Valéry's "The Graveyard by the Sea." It is featured in the poem, as in the following stanza where 'I' is in conversation with itself, showing awareness of its limitations:

Oh, for myself alone, mine, deep within
At the heart's quick, the poem's fount, between
The void and its pure issue, I beseech
The intimations of my secret power.
O bitter, dark, and echoing reservoir
Speaking of depths always beyond my reach.⁶⁶

The body is another topic the two poets frequently return to:

What pure toil goes to form
The manifold diamond of the elusive foam!
.....
Even as a fruit's absorbed in the enjoying,
Even as within the mouth its body dying
Changes into delight through dissolution,
So to my melted soul the heavens declare

All bounds transfigured into a boundless air,
And I breathe now my future's emanation.⁶⁷

In this excerpt from "The Graveyard by the Sea," the sight of the sparkling Mediterranean at noon inspires Valéry to compare it to the end-product of a diamond-cutter's work in which the gem was not formed of solid matter. A few lines later, it is a realization about the physical part of those lying in the graves that summons another image of abstraction when the speaker refers to his "future's emanation." These metaphors would seem to confirm a view of Valéry as a poet of the abstract. But what should be noted is that it is a sensuous succession of

⁶⁵ Paul Valéry, "Poetry and Abstract Thought" in *The Art of Poetry*, 58.

⁶⁶ Valéry, "The Graveyard by the Sea," 43.

⁶⁷ Valéry, "The Graveyard by the Sea," 41, 43.

images that leads to immateriality (“Even as a fruit's absorbed in the enjoying,/ Even as within the mouth its body dying/ Changes into delight through dissolution”).

A whole section of Valéry's “Mediterranean Inspirations” is devoted to swimming in the sea. He writes:

Here all the body spreads itself, draws itself in, understands itself, spends itself trying to exhaust all its possibilities. It touches *her*, embraces *her*; it goes mad with life and its own freedom of movement . . . My body becomes the immediate instrument of my mind, and yet the author of all its ideas. All is clarified for me . . . Excess of the real!
So, swim! Plunge your head into that wave rolling toward you, breaking over you and rolling you.⁶⁸

At least six poems of Miller's are dedicated to the exercising body.⁶⁹ In “Kant, Kyrgystan,” Chuck Miller is reminded of his father's job as a coach while “standing at the edge of a playground in Central Asia”:

suddenly comes to life, again teeming, populated in my imagining
by the poor Turkic-karakyrghyz and Illinoisians
mingling somehow in their youthful gymnastic vigours
feeling my father's spirit
when he was a young coach
walking among them, urging on, pointing out
lapses of technique and movement
giving guidance, cutting a perfect path, moulding,
speaking to them
making his way through the multitude of attempting athletes
a word here, a gesture there
aiding, calling to account
cutting through their flawed movements like a surgeon
lighting up their efforts⁷⁰

The precise description of the exercising body's movements is poetry transposed, projected into space. Line breaks are their written equivalent. The coach's “cutting through” the youngsters' “flawed movements” has much in common with a poet's editing his verbal material.⁷¹

Another image often used by Valéry to stress the difference between poetry and prose is the dancing body. In “A Poet's Notebook” (“Calepin d'un poète,” 1928) he wrote:

The passage from prose to verse, from speech to song, from walking to dancing. — A moment that is at once action and dream. The aim of the dance is not to transport me from one point to another; nor of pure verse, nor of song.⁷²

He returned to this comparison in “Poetry and Abstract Thought”:

⁶⁸ Valéry, “Mediterranean Inspirations,” 26-27. Italics in the original.

⁶⁹ See for example “swimming in the last of September” in *Northern Fields*, 40-41.

⁷⁰ Chuck Miller, “Kant, Kyrgystan” in *Crossing the Kattegat*, 75.

⁷¹ Miller, “poetry readings/ for Bukowski”, 78.

⁷² Paul Valéry, “A Poet's Notebook” in *The Art of Poetry*, 175-176.

Walking, like prose, has a definite aim . . . The dance is quite another matter. It is, of course, a system of actions; but of actions whose end is in themselves. It goes nowhere.⁷³

From Miller's perspective too, it is confirmed that poetry and dancing do indeed meet, as becomes evident from his poem "climbing down the embankment from the bridge":

climbing down the embankment from the bridge
river swollen to a swift pulse
under one of the abutments balanced on a flooded platform
a fisherman, his words have quick hue
it's as though for a few seconds we know each other

walking the other tracks along the flow
thinking of those times
of long silence when nothing came
and wrestle as you might
you couldn't find the words
or rather you couldn't see
reaching you grasped nothing
things moved in you—perhaps subtlety
as though to some conclusion
but you ended in a troubled mulling
or finding words that didn't stick
—like rotten planking ripped away
moments that seemed to predominate
over the others

Spring comes hard to Iowa
April—but a cold rain slants down the river
doing a short step on the ties; you see nature laid bare
the weather on a landscape in a way that doesn't lie
just what's there old pieces of hacked off iron
rusting to their final uselessness
squat weeds by track-side creeping
starting some slight momentum of growth
like some relieving bare bones of what we are
as though I were photographer, take it in
the droplets on the surface of such a hue of dirty-grey brown
greedily the perceptions come in quick quantum moments

and remember the crew of gandy dancers
we hired on with
the ten-pound sledge flashing on the spikes
prying up the ties with crowbars
baloney sandwiches on white bread for lunch
they lived in an old Pullman on a siding
some of them sweating out weeks of wine and muscatel
a few talked with broken accents
Poles and Yugoslavs with names like Masachek, Lubawitz

⁷³ Valéry, "Poetry and Abstract Thought" in *The Art of Poetry*, 70.

and thick muscled forearms that didn't come from drinking

what we salvaged from the experience
we can't quite say
yet know it's deep in our guts or brain
like a pulse or sense
a radical breakage with complacent unknowing
it lies waiting for a speechless grappling
from which a primitive value may be wrested

thinking of the old Serb
with bushy eyebrows and chiseled arms
who gandy-danced on a single rail
his worn legs moving as in a *drmea* from the old country
his shirt lifting in the summer breeze
fellow motleys shouting hoarse encouragement
and clapping hands as in a strip joint
his broken and generous immigrant's smile
telling us that we too, his students on the ten-pound sledge
might have our brief and flashing moments

drmea: native Serbian dance⁷⁴

The old Serb's gandy-dance that closes the poem after its many twists and turns catches the essence of poetry: it epitomizes that "flickering of the invisible," a felicitous phrase that comes from one of Miller's poems about chess-playing, the last theme in this rapid survey of the oblique encounters between Paul Valéry and Chuck Miller.

Pleading for the use of subtly linked stanzas in poetic composition as opposed to "free development, in which one ventures to throw in everything," Valéry says in "Fountains of Memory" ("Fontaines de mémoire," 1935) that "the poetic player can choose his game: some prefer roulette, others chess."⁷⁵ Valéry's preference goes to chess. He distrusts chance and spontaneity. To him, poetry worthy of the name is never the simple fruit of inspiration: "Certainly an emotion characterized by the spontaneous power of expression it arouses is of the essence of poetry. But the poet's task cannot consist in merely undergoing it."⁷⁶ The "natural marvels" brought by rushes of inspiration should be made to fit "the divine duration of [the poet's] harmonious life, in which all forms are composed and measured,"⁷⁷ in other words the rules of his/her inner game. Miller replies across the years, in his poem "A Night of Chess (for Mike)." Chess is no metaphor to him. A dedicated practitioner of the game, he has his own theory about chess and poetry:

why it's almost better than poetry, less pretense
nothing to show for it except the experience itself
and the sharp challenge humming inside you

In "the long quiet pauses," the chess player's experience will "on rare occasions" resemble the poet's: "a flickering of the invisible." Chess is no parlor game either:

⁷⁴ Chuck Miller, "climbing down the embankment from the bridge;" in *From Oslo — a journey* (Iowa City: Friends Press, 1988), n.p.

⁷⁵ Paul Valéry, "Fountains of Memory" in *The Art of Poetry*, 266.

⁷⁶ Valéry, "Remarks on Poetry," 215.

⁷⁷ Valéry, "Remarks on Poetry," 214, 215.

I think of the old Chinese men
bent over their own version
a crowd of silent onlookers gathered round
here and there along the roads and dusty byways
brothers of the long thought⁷⁸

Finally, Miller concurs with Valéry on the power of an Apollonian game to prompt Dionysian moments. The only difference between chess and poetry is that chess players are content with having nothing to show for their hard-earned moments of illumination, which Miller regards as an asset.

Conclusions

We have seen how much Paul Valéry's views on the art of poetry, as well as his own verse, differ from Chuck Miller's work on such essential points as the definition of the genre, its purity, and its relation to autobiography. But we also found that the initial confrontation of these two poets' widely-diverging aesthetics can gradually develop into what is closer to a comparison, even leading to the start of a mutual translation of their respective Weltanschauungs (concerning, for example, the place of bodily exercise in a poet's life). Trivial though the observation may be, could we venture to say that this is because "everything that rises must converge," to borrow the words of Flannery O'Connor?

Since acquaintance with Chuck Miller's work made us want to translate his poetry, we should logically conclude by turning to what Valéry had to say about the interlingual translation of poetry. He held radically pessimistic views on the subject. He writes in his "Solemn Address" ("Allocution solennelle," 1939):

Whereas the painter, the sculptor, and the musician may reach a foreign public, may be understood far beyond the boundaries of their own country, create an international work, a poet is never profoundly, intimately, and completely understood and felt but by his own people: he is inseparable from the speech of his nation."⁷⁹

However, in "An After-Dinner Speech" ("Discours au PEN Club," 1925) he regarded what he called "the love-making of impenetrable literatures" no less fruitful for that: "On the contrary, it is more fruitful than if we understood each other perfectly. Creative misunderstanding is at work, and the result is an endless progeny of unforeseen values. That is one of the wonderful consequences of imperfect understanding."⁸⁰ In "Remarks on Poetry," Valéry wrote about "that *sense of a universe* which is characteristic of poetry." For fear the reader might misinterpret his meaning and think he had defected to the realists, the grandmaster of poetry added:

I said: *sense of a universe*. I meant that the poetic state or emotion seems to me to consist in a dawning perception, a tendency toward perceiving a *world*, or complete system of relations, in which beings, things, events, and acts, although they may resemble, *each to each*, those which fill and form the tangible world . . . stand, however, in an indefinable, but wonderfully accurate, relationship to the modes and laws of our general sensibility. So the

⁷⁸ Chuck Miller, "A Night of Chess (for Mike)," in *Crossing the Kattegat*, 52-53.

⁷⁹ Paul Valéry, "A Solemn Address" in *The Art of Poetry*, 271.

⁸⁰ Paul Valéry, "An After-Dinner Speech" in *The Art of Poetry*, 276-277.

value of these well-known objects and beings is in some way altered . . . They become . . . *musicalized*, somehow commensurable, echoing each other.⁸¹

I hope to have suggested that Chuck Miller's poetry, with its hard "seat-of-the-pants" realism, also generates that feeling of a universe and not just in a geographical sense, with the Czech Republic a distinguished part of it.

The Iowa-based poet's response to our ongoing translation effort has been consistent with his habit of footnoting his own poems whenever he uses a foreign word. Unsurprisingly, given the international scope of his writing, he shows confidence that the translation of poetry is not an insurmountable task and that "imperfect understanding" between cultures can be limited to a significant extent.

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⁸¹ Valéry, "Remarks on Poetry," 198. Italics in the original.

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