

repetition. It is this sort of assertion that makes Valéry such good copy for pedagogues. His maxims find their place easily in undergraduate studies. At moments his intellectualism and *hauteur* can be unbearable: when he says he would prefer a second-rate literary work in which he had the sense that the creator was conscious at every instant of what he was doing to a work of genius, apparently inspired by some divine descent, for instance; or when he closes the curtain on a brilliant starlit night, “bored” by the interference of “rhetoric” associated with the sight.

Once Valéry descends from his preferred height - *en considérant les choses d'assez haut* - he is compelling on a host of subtle distinctions: how we humans are possessed of a surplus of sensations and potentialities, most of which we do not require for the job in hand; how we hear, but shut out interfering noise; and how it is the artistic act, by now a conscious act and not merely a production of the sensibility, that uses these interferences. Equally, this time downstream of the *fait artistique*, he distinguishes what Titian (a rare proper name) could transmit - the craft of Venetian painting - but not his personal art, nor his “predominant passion”. Marx describes Valéry as a phenomenologist, and at his best he is a formidable one. His enquiry centres on what he calls “CEM” in the *Cahiers (corps esprit monde)* - human experience, starting from the body, filtered by the mind, then applied to the world.

Let us take one example in detail, the admirable tenth lesson. Here Valéry sets out by reminding his audience that he is not yet dealing with actual works, but with “les productions spontanées” of the sensibility that precede the artistic act, and argues that even at this stage language is already at work. Language, he says, is what enables us to escape from the stream of “sensibilité pure” such as we undergo it in dreams. Language becomes an “interrupter” - a “moderator”, a “corrector” - and he more or less equates it with consciousness, in the sense of that which enables us to recall, interpret and understand a dream on waking. He goes on to claim that no art

that is apparently independent of language - painting, music, architecture - could be achieved without its maker first possessing language. Any “intelligible structure” we owe to language, through which we can process the chaos of information received every instant on the sensory level. Valéry then returns to poetry, a particular use of language, and wonders whether the same principle of conscious selection might operate when we consider, as the poet does, language as a material or a medium - is it possible to separate out those words, those phrases, that seem “poetic”, that seem pleasurable as sound and thereby make up an unbroken continuum, or *poésie pure*? He closes by remarking that it is impossible to construct a text using nothing but elements of *poésie pure*, because “language is not made for that”: it is “a practical thing”, essential to human communication and exchange. He then proceeds to explain the way in which poetry, by insisting on phonic, rhythmic and other textural qualities, is in fact “un abus du langage”: unlike language in normal communication, it does not “disappear into meaning”. The phrase “please may I have a glass of water” vanishes once its message has been received.

For all its abstraction the *Cours de Poétique* remains a poignantly human document. This is especially the case in the second volume, in which the “pressure of external events” impacts on Valéry’s lectures, in terms of both form and content. He lectured on at the Collège, despite the occupation of Paris, and despite illness; he lectured on, through to the liberation of the city in August 1944 and for another eight months after that. This in itself is extraordinary. That a frail, elderly man should lecture on the practical uselessness of art during the Nazi oppression is moving. While composing *La Jeune Parque* during the First World War, Valéry had reflected that it perhaps served some good that a man should spend a day meditating on the place of a comma in a line of poetry while murderous mayhem was going on at Verdun. Something similar happened to him in the Second World War, though by then he was a seventy-year-old public intellectual.

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The creator
has no more
to do with the
finished work
than the owner
of a cow has
to do with
the actions
of the cow

It can be considered an act of resistance, a way of demonstrating that his lectures were an aspect of civilization that we were fighting to preserve.

In some of the later lectures here it is a welcome relief to see our lecturer shed the white lab coat and address some questions of culture, politics and society - of the application of mind and art to the world. As the war ended Valéry was called on to speak for the nation, on the figure of Voltaire or on the responsibility of the writer. At the start of the first *leçon* after the Liberation he drops the impersonality of the lecturer and recounts an anecdote. A few months before the Liberation, as he had arrived in front of the Collège, a German officer had stopped him and asked him whether the building was a museum. “I told him that it was a school. ‘And what do they teach in this school?’ he asked. ‘Monsieur, I said, it would take me too long to explain. I shall say just this: it is a house in which speech is free. It was created expressly for that purpose, and by a king’. He looked astonished, saluted, and went on his way.”

William Marx is right to stress the significance of the *Cours*. It represents an “anthropology of the mind” and is indeed a “monument of twentieth-century thought”. It is worth remembering that these books are not the work Valéry intended. He feared that the straight transcription of an oral lecture would be too diffuse, and instead envisaged “a small volume, as compact and precise as possible”, before admitting that such a thing was not easy to produce. Nor does the *Cours* supplant the two-volume *Pléiade* of the *Cahiers* (or the five volumes in English translation under the general editorship of Brian Stimpson). Yet, for all of its abstraction, one of the great beauties of this published *Cours* lies in the elegance of Valéry’s style: it has the lucidity of a writer intent that his reader should follow the argument. In this it is quite different to the jargonizing that can make late Heidegger, or passages in Lacan, such a rebarbative read. Like Proust and Freud, Valéry has his own marvellous clarity. ■

Beyond victimhood

An account of childhood abuse that became a Goncourt contender

NATASHA LEHRER

TRISTE TIGRE
NEIGE SINNO

288pp. Éditions P.O.L. €20.

NEIGE SINNO was born in an Alpine village to hippie parents who were barely more than children themselves. Her birth was written up in the local newspaper of a community that seemed pleasantly surprised that a pair of outsiders would choose to make it their home. Her name - “neige” means snow - and her start in life almost recall a fairy tale, yet Sinno’s struggle for self-realization exceeds such simple framing.

After her parents’ relationship ended her mother married a man who was to abuse and rape Neige from the age of about seven to her mid-teens. *Triste Tigre* - the title inspired by Blake’s poem *The Tyger* - is a forensic exploration of how to speak about the unspeakable and how to define the domain of the unspeakable. This includes what was done to Sinno, what that did to her, how it fashioned the person she became and who the person was who did this to her. She analyses language, literature, the penal code, the “interminable interpretation” of facts. She describes the rapist, the child she was, the person she is, what happened when she told her mother and, years later, her daughter. The book trembles with uncertainty as she circles the events, trying to pin down meaning

and describe substance. The rape is “congealed in my brain, always there, always the same form, a form in which sensations of hyperreality jostle with those of unreality”.

In 2000 Sinno goes to the police, specifically - she insists - to protect her younger siblings, two of whom are her stepfather’s biological children. She begs her mother to leave her stepfather, but it takes her a year to do so, afraid of finding herself homeless with her three children. After a trial he is sentenced to nine years in prison.

Reading and writing is how Sinno makes sense of the world, but she wonders nonetheless what her purpose is in writing this book: “I’m worried that the only thing that will happen to me with this book is I’ll be invited on radio programmes about incest and be asked to summarise what I said in even simpler language than that of the book, so that distracted and jaded listeners won’t have to bother to read it”. The opposite has happened. Sinno was one of four authors shortlisted for the Prix Goncourt, France’s most prestigious literary award. (She lost out to Jean-Baptiste Andrea, who won for his *Veiller sur elle*.) The Goncourt is given to a work of “imaginative prose”, in practice almost always fiction. *Triste Tigre* is not a work of fiction, but it is partly about the uses of fiction, as well as its limitations. “Fiction is what interests me more than anything”, writes Sinno. “My father taught me to read, not him ... But it was he [my stepfather] who made me understand the duplicity of language and of silence. It is from that deep understanding, that hate, that I write.”

Neige Sinno

Triste tigre

**NEIGE
SINNO**

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This is also a book about reading. Interwoven through Sinno’s crystalline prose is a *bricolage* of texts that range from *Lolita* to works by Virginia Woolf, Christine Angot, William Blake, Annie Ernaux, Guadalupe Nettel and others. Sinno rejects the idea of literature as therapy: “I wanted to dream that the kingdom of literature would welcome me like yet another orphan who found refuge there, but it turns out that even through art it is impossible to defeat despair. Literature didn’t save me. I am not saved”. Yet language has offered some kind of salvation: it has given Sinno the word to name what happened to her. The word *viol* (rape) appears frequently. Every time she writes it, it is as if she has found a way of looking her rapist straight in the eye. “For a long time, I couldn’t say the word rape. Which is contradictory, for it also freed me.”

France has produced a whole library of books, fiction and nonfiction, about incest and paedophilia. These used to be written by men, to titillate. More recently they have been written by women, not only as a form of revenge, but also as a way to transcend victim status (see Nelly Kaprielian-Self, *TLS*, October 6, 2023). Neige Sinno, recalling a publisher who rejected the book on the grounds that he only published “literature”, wonders why fiction should be the only way to explore the unspeakable. For her autobiography is “another weapon to affront the unthinkable, a knife to dissect the world, an aesthetic and political choice that underlines the union of form and content”. *Triste Tigre*, poetic, steely, brave and extraordinarily moving, is the proof. ■