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"Paul Valéry's Fantastic Consciousness: Nature and the Self"

Abstract:

How do we tell whether or not something is alive? How can we determine whether or not something is conscious? How can we tell whether something is human? These questions are central to understanding Paul Valéry's 1922 poem *Le Cimetière marin* (*The Graveyard by the Sea*). This presentation will attempt to re-read Paul Valéry's poem with a renewed focus on the biological implications of consciousness. Although this poem is often discussed as an example of Valéry's struggle with the paradoxes of consciousness, the connections between Valéry's representation of consciousness and his representations of biological life have not yet been explored. By contextualizing Valéry's representation of human consciousness within larger questions about animal consciousness and the metabolic processes that connect the living and the nonliving, I will show how Valéry diffuses the question of consciousness within a larger problem of how to represent life. Although he understands nature finally becoming conscious of itself within man, he also understands that human's self-consciousness always prevents man's total union with nature. Yet the poem constantly challenges the representation of the self and self-consciousness by emphasizing the self's connection to a sublime life force that connects all living things and continues beyond any one organism's life span.