



*Judith Robinson-Valéry*  
(1933–2010)

## *Judith Robinson-Valéry* (1933–2010)



Judith Ogilvie Robinson-Valéry achieved international eminence as the foremost critic and editor of one of the great French poets and thinkers of the twentieth century, Paul Valéry; she was, for more than a decade, the leading proponent of foreign language studies in New South Wales; and, both in Europe and Australia, she was recognised as an exceptionally inspiring teacher. She spoke her mind in vibrant terms, brilliantly pursued and encouraged research, and enriched our reflections on the humanities. In her, we lose a scholar of major distinction.

She was born into a family that expected her to excel: Judith grew up in the privileged social and intellectual world of her father, Sir Harold White, the National and Commonwealth Parliamentary Librarian. After studies at Canberra High School, she went to the University of Sydney where she read English and French. Characteristically, she shone in both. She obtained the University Medal in French and proceeded to the Sorbonne where she took up research of a joint literary and philosophical nature on the writer Alain. Alain's reputation was high for his seminal teaching at the Lycée Henri IV and his far-ranging, widely influential essays. Four years later, in 1958, she published her first book under the title *Alain lecteur de Balzac et de Stendhal*, which showed her rare incisiveness. She had found a congenial author dedicated, like her, to the world of ideas; but Alain led her to a still more challenging and considerably more intense writer, Paul Valéry. The study of Valéry's work, above all of his notebooks of a unique interest, was to occupy her for the rest of her life.

In 1956 Judith married Dr Brian Robinson, an Australian radio-astronomer, and both she and he were elected to fellowships in Cambridge, she at Girton, he at Trinity. Finesse and geometry ... it was at this time that Valéry's enormous, hitherto unpublished *Cahiers* began to appear under the imprint of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS, 1957–1961). We recall the impact of these boldly austere twenty-nine grand volumes published in facsimile without commentary or notes. They had been the daily reflections and endlessly re-begun research of their

author, alongside his literary work, over a period of half a century. Yet far from being drafts of writings later to be published, they constitute an altogether coherent and wholly original attempt to articulate the nature of human thought – its mechanisms, possibilities, limits – by way of its own definitions. ‘My thoughts little by little were making their own language’, he said; again: ‘I could not bear not to begin at the beginning’. Judith’s book, *L’Analyse de l’esprit dans les Cahiers de Paul Valéry*, appearing as it did so promptly after the facsimile edition, was a landmark. It undertook for the first time to trace the relevance of mathematical and scientific models in Valéry’s intellectual system with reference to subjects such as time, memory, dream, poetry and ethics. ‘Relativity’, ‘entropy’ and ‘group-therapy’ were terms that he adopted, together with many others of similar provenances, and that he integrated into his ‘language-self’. It became clear that he was not a sorcerer’s apprentice playing with what he knew not, but a very sophisticated thinker in search of means, subtle and precise, to represent mental functions. But were these terms nothing but metaphors? Did not creative thought imply the deep, formal equations of science and mathematics? Rather than a naïve scientism, these metaphors denoted the apprehension of a latent unity.

Here, then, was the matter that Judith worked in her book and in scores of articles. Her commentaries sprang from her true excitement to advance step by step with Valéry’s ever-radical effort to make himself; and, drawing parallels with other epistemological and scientific inquiries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, she deepened her readings as she went. Thus, having been asked to edit the *Cahiers* for the distinguished Pléiade collection, she arranged a large anthology of their scattered, disordered notes into a set of main groups with an analytical index. Her two volumes, carried out with rigour, have been partly or wholly translated into several languages and, notably, the handsome five-volume English edition (2000–2010). Whereas the original facsimile edition was aimed understandably in the first place at Valéry scholars, the Pléiade drew on a wide readership, not the least of which is recorded in the proceedings of a conference held in 1982 at the University of Montpellier (*Fonctions de l’esprit: Treize savants redécouvrent Paul Valéry*). Judith had invited a dozen specialists from fields as different as haematology and theoretical physics to reflect on the relations between the *Cahiers* and various currents of contemporary research. It is a signal tribute to his continuing relevance and implicitness, it must be said, to Judith herself for the skill with which she led the debate.

Nevertheless the value of her research went beyond these publications and the discussions that they elicited, for she inspired a generation of younger scholars to delve further into the *Cahiers*. She gave, and continued to give, the example of tireless devotion to Valéry. A not dissimilar commitment became evident when, in 1963, at the early age of twenty-nine, she was appointed to the Foundation Chair of French at the University of New South Wales and thus became the first Australian woman to hold a full and permanent chair in an Australian university. It was a propitious moment to assume such responsibilities shortly after the Murray

Committee Report, which brought fresh institutional energies and a relative largesse. She put this opportunity to bountiful effect in the planning and administration of her department, first appointing a young and gifted staff that included Ross Chambers, Ross Steele, Véra Sauran and Sonia Marks.

This was the time when the traditional approach to teaching language through prose and translation exercises was being replaced by greater emphasis on the spoken language through practice in the then new language laboratories, and accompanied by study of contemporary life in the foreign country. Judith was an active proponent of these approaches in modernising the secondary school French syllabus and, together with her colleague Angus Martin from the University of Sydney, she wrote *France Today*, an introduction to contemporary life in France for teachers and students. At the university level, she recognised that it was essential to offer a linguistic training no less exigent than that of the more traditional departments while emphasising the regular use of spoken French in the classroom, language laboratory and multimedia room. At the same time, French literature was pursued in depth, and topics brought up to date with the introduction of the study of contemporary authors as well as of critical theory. But, above all, French became 'French studies' in a broad sense, embracing intellectual and cultural history and opening out onto a discourse across the humanities. Judith's immersion in literary, philosophical and scientific disciplines through her research had prepared her to address the syllabus in a fresh way, which coincided with the emergence of 'area studies' in England and the United States. This was heady stuff and, in the Sydney of the 1960s, it bore the impress, personality and excitement that Judith gave it.

Mention must also be made of the social influence she exercised both inside and outside the university. As a young woman professor, she had at that time many prejudices to overcome but she never let them hinder her lucid articulation of problems as she saw them. Trenchant in debate, she promoted the necessary place of women in higher education. Inevitably, she attracted attention ('Languages Professor a Woman!'). Her biographer Alastair Hurst, to whom I am indebted, has documented her speeches in support of women's equality as chronicled in the Sydney newspapers.<sup>1</sup> She told the Fort Street Girls' High School in 1964: 'Too few Australian women want to get out of their homes and develop their minds'. By her own achievements and her very eloquence, she spoke to them directly. It was also she, in her role as Head of the School of Western European Languages, who advanced the cause of German, Spanish and Russian studies, and introduced them at the University of New South Wales. 'She was a welcome force for change', a colleague recently said in understated terms.

Judith gave herself unstintingly to her university. She managed, however, always to maintain her research activities at the highest level, and it was during these Sydney years that, aided by her Research Assistant, Helen Colon, she completed her edition of the *Cahiers*. She had received, she said in her acknowledgements, an 'extremely generous subvention' from the Australian Research Grants Committee. Yet eleven

years after her appointment to her Chair, she resigned in order to return to France and, in 1976, married her second husband Claude Valéry, the writer's elder son. Now she held positions as visiting professor at Nanterre, the Sorbonne and Montpellier, before being named in 1982 to a directorship of research at the CNRS. Over the next twenty years she kept up the number, scope and pace of her publications, treating aspects of Valéry she had not previously broached in detail such as the poems, the theatre and diverse facets of medicine, philosophy, sociology; and she participated regularly, in masterly fashion, in international conferences. More than ever, she made Valéry her own, so that it is hardly possible today to touch on his work without referring to items of her bibliography. As the author of these lines and a Valéry enthusiast, I would wish to testify for my part to the exceptional nature of Judith's work. I celebrate the extraordinary intensity, originality and achievement of her research and of her teaching of the humanities.

Judith was only the second woman to be directly elected to the Australian Academy of the Humanities, in 1972. She received an honorary Doctorate of Letters in 1983 from the University of New South Wales and, in 2005, was awarded the Légion d'honneur. Handsome, smiling, always elegant, she was throughout her life a shining presence. She holds a very rare place among the scholars.

Later in life, Judith began writing poetry of an intellectual tenor exploring the serious issues of life. She was keen to have an anthology of her poetry published but unfortunately these plans did not come to fruition. In failing health Judith returned to Sydney in 2001, where she died in January 2010. She was predeceased by her husband Claude and by her first husband Brian and their son Anthony.

*James Lawler*

---

1 Alastair Hurst, 'A Tribute to Judith Robinson-Valéry', *Explorations*, 36 (June 2004), 3–12.