CONTENTS

PART III. *WOMEN AND POLITICS*

PART IV. *THE IDEA OF EUROPE*

PART V. *THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS*

PART VI. *THE FAR EAST*

PART VII. *FRANCE*

PART VIII. *THE SECOND WORLD WAR*

APPENDIX I: *EARLY TEXTS*

APPENDIX II: *ON HISTORY*

APPENDIX III:

VALÉRY'S ROLE IN THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

Foreword

[1931]

THIS little collection* is dedicated above all to those persons who have no system and belong to no party and are therefore still free to doubt whatever is doubtful and to maintain what is not.

In any case, these are merely occasional studies. Some date from 1895, some from the recent past, some from the present. They have this characteristic in common—that they are essays, in the truest sense of the word. In them will be found little more than the intention of clarifying a few ideas that might really be called *political* if that fine word, so attractive and exciting to the mind, did not arouse great scruples and great repugnance in the mind of this author. He has wished merely to make a little clearer to himself the notions that he has received from others or that, like others, he has formed for himself—notions that everyone uses for thinking about human groups, their relations and difficulties with one another.

The effort to clarify such matters is assuredly not the business of those men who practice or mix in them. This book is the work of an amateur.

* This foreword was written for the first edition of *Regards sur le monde actuel* (1931), a much smaller collection than the present one.—J. M.

I do not know why the action by Japan against China and that of the United States against Spain, which followed the first quite closely, made a great impression on me at the time.* They were only limited conflicts in which forces of only moderate importance were engaged; and for myself I had no reason to be interested in such far-off things, since nothing in my ordinary occupations and concerns disposed me to be aware of them. And yet I felt these distinct events not as accidents or limited phenomena but as symptoms or premises, as significant facts whose meaning far exceeded their intrinsic importance and apparent scope. One was the first act of power by an Asiatic nation remodeled and equipped on European lines; the other was the first act of power against a European nation by a nation derived and, as it were, developed from Europe.

A shock that reaches us from an unforeseen quarter can give us a sudden, novel sensation of the existence of our body as an unknown quantity; we had been unaware of some part of what we were, and suddenly this brutal sensation makes us realize, by an aftereffect, the unsuspected size and shape of the field of our existence. Thus that indirect blow in the Far East and this direct blow in the West Indies made me dimly perceive something in myself that could be affected and troubled by such events. I found I was "sensitized" to situations that affected a kind of virtual idea of Europe which until then I had not known I held.

It had never occurred to me that *Europe* really existed. This name was to me no more than a geographical expression. It is only by chance that we are reminded of the permanent circumstances of our life; we perceive them only at the mo-

* 1895 and 1898. [P.V.]

ment when they suddenly alter. I shall take occasion later to show to what extent our unawareness of the simplest and most constant conditions of our existence and our judgments makes our conception of history so crude, our politics so inane and sometimes so naïve in its calculations. This unawareness leads even very great men to conceive schemes by imitation and to appraise them likewise, according to conventions whose inadequacy they do not realize.

In those days I had leisure to delve into the gaps in my mind. I began trying to develop my sense, my innate idea, of Europe. I called upon the little that I knew. I asked myself questions. I went back for a glance at certain books.

I imagined that it was necessary to study history and even to dig deeply into it in order to form a right idea of the present day. I knew that every mind preoccupied with the future of peoples was brought up on it. But for myself I could see in it only a *horrible confusion*. Under the heading of European history I found merely a collection of separate and parallel chronicles, tangled together at certain points. No *method* seemed to have anticipated the choice of "facts," decided upon their importance, or clearly determined the aim to be pursued. I noticed an incredible number of implicit hypotheses and ill-defined entities.

Since the subject of history is *the sum of those events or conditions which in the past may have come to the notice of some witness*, the methods of selecting, classifying, and expressing the facts that happen to have been preserved are not imposed on us by the nature of things. They ought to result from explicit analysis and decisions; but in practice they always give way to habits and traditional ways of thinking or speaking, whose accidental or arbitrary character we are unaware of. Never-

theless, we know that in all branches of knowledge decisive progress is made only at the moment when special notions, drawn from precise consideration of the objects of knowledge themselves and exactly fitted to connect that observation with the operations of thought and the latter with our powers of action, take the place of ordinary language—which is simply a means of crude approximation provided by education and usage. That vital moment when precise and specialized definitions and conventions replace meanings that are confused and statistical in origin has not yet arrived for history.

In fine, those books in which I sought the means to appreciate the curious effect on me of a few items of news, offered me a mere confusion of images, symbols, and theories from which I could deduce whatever I wanted, but not what I needed. Summing up my impressions, I said to myself that one kind of history aims at nothing more than painting a few scenes for us, on the understanding that such pictures are necessarily located in the "past." This convention has from the beginning produced very fine books; and among these there is no occasion to distinguish (since it is merely a matter of the pleasure or stimulus they provide) between those of real witnesses and those of imaginary witnesses. Such works are sometimes of an irresistible *truth*; they are like those portraits whose subjects have been dust for centuries and which still make us exclaim at the likeness. Nothing in the instantaneous effect on the reader enables him to distinguish, on the score of authenticity, between the tableaux of Tacitus, Michelet, Shakespeare, Saint-Simon, or Balzac. These men may all be considered creators, or all reporters, as you choose. The magic of the art of writing transports us in imagination into whatever epoch it pleases. That is why every gradation exists between pure story and pure history: historical fiction,

fictional biography, etc. Moreover, we know that in history itself the supernatural sometimes appears. The personality of the reader is then directly brought into play, for it is his opinion that will admit or reject certain facts, decide what is history and what is not.

Another kind of history is composed of treatises so well constructed and reasoned, so sagacious, so rich in profound judgments on man and the evolution of affairs that we cannot imagine that things could have begun and developed in any other way.

Such works are marvels of the intellect. Some of them are surpassed by nothing else in literature or philosophy; but we must remember that the sentiments and colors with which the first kind charm and amuse us, and the admirable causality with which the second persuade us, come essentially from the talents of the writer and the critical resistance of the reader.

We might simply enjoy these fine fruits of the art of history, with no objection to their use, if politics were not wholly influenced by them. The *past*, being more or less imagined, or more or less organized after the event, acts on the future with a power comparable to that of the present itself. Sentiments and ambitions arise from memories of reading, from memories of memories, far more than they result from actual perceptions and data. What is truly characteristic of history is that it plays a part in history itself. The idea of the past takes on meaning and constitutes a value only for the man who has a passion for the future. The future, by definition, has no image. History provides us with the means to imagine it. History draws up for the imagination a table of situations and catastrophes, a gallery of ancestors, a formulary of acts, expressions, attitudes, and decisions, and presents them to our

changeableness and uncertainty, to help us *to become*. When men or assemblies, faced with pressing or embarrassing circumstances, find themselves constrained to act, they do not in their deliberations consider the actual state of affairs *as something that has never occurred before*, but rather they consult their imaginary memories. Obeying a kind of law of *least action*, unwilling to create—that is, to answer the originality of the situation by invention—their hesitant thought tends toward automatism; it looks for precedents, yields to the spirit of history, which bids it first of all to *remember*, even when the case is an entirely new one. History feeds on history.

It is probable that Louis XVI would not have perished on the scaffold without the precedent of Charles I; that Bonaparte, if he had not meditated on the transformation of the Roman Republic into an empire founded on military power, would not have made himself emperor. He was passionately fond of reading history. All his life he dreamed of Hannibal, Caesar, Alexander, and Frederick the Great; and this man, born to create, who found himself in a position to reconstruct Europe politically—the climate of opinion being ready for it after three centuries of discovery and a revolutionary upheaval—lost himself among the perspectives of the past and the mirages of dead grandeur. The moment he ceased to astonish, he began to decline. He ruined himself by coming to resemble his adversaries, adoring their idols, imitating with all his might the thing that was their weakness, and substituting for his own direct vision of things the illusory décor of a policy based on history.

At the Congress of Berlin, Bismarck, dominated by the spirit of history which he mistook for the spirit of reality, would consider nothing but Europe, took no interest in

Africa, and used his genius and the prestige that made him master of the moment, solely to engage the Powers in colonial interests that would set them against each other, keep them rivals jealously divided, without foreseeing that the hour was at hand when Germany would ardently covet what she had provoked the other nations to share among themselves, thus allying them against herself who had come too late. He thought indeed of the morrow, but not of a morrow that had never before occurred.

Hand in hand with this overemphasis on someone else's more or less exact, more or less significant recollections, goes an absence or insufficiency of method in the choice, classification, and appraisal of the things recorded. In particular, history seems to take no account of the scale of the phenomena it presents. It fails to mention the relations that must necessarily exist between shape and size, in the events or situations it reports. And yet numbers and sizes are essential elements of description. It does not bother about problems of *similitude*. This is one of the reasons why the political use of history is so fallacious. What was possible within the space of an ancient city is no longer so within the dimensions of a great nation; what was true in the Europe of 1870 is no longer so when interests and connections extend over the whole earth. The very notions that we use for thinking and speaking of political objects, notions that have remained unchanged in spite of the prodigious change in the number and scope of relationships, have, without our noticing it, become deceptive or inapplicable. The word *people*, for example, had a precise meaning when it was possible to assemble *all* the citizens of a city about a mound, or in the Champ de Mars. But the increase in numbers, the passage from thousands to millions, has made

of this word a monstrous term whose meaning depends on the sentence in which it occurs. Sometimes it describes the indistinct whole, never present anywhere; sometimes the majority as opposed to the limited number of richer or more cultivated individuals. . . .

The same observations apply to the passage of time. Nothing is easier than to point out in history books the omission of remarkable phenomena that have occurred so slowly as to be imperceptible. They escape the historian, since no document mentions them expressly. They could be perceived and noted only by means of a pre-established system of prior questions and definitions, which so far has never been conceived. An event that takes place over a century does not figure in any document or any collection of memoirs. For example, the immense and singular role of the city of Paris in the life of France after the Revolution. Or the discovery of electricity and the conquest of the earth by its different uses. The latter events, unequaled in human history, appear in it, when they do, less prominent than some other affair more *scenic*, more in conformity (this especially) with what traditional history customarily reports. In Napoleon's time electricity had about the same importance as Christianity at the time of Tiberius. It is gradually becoming obvious that this general *energizing* of the world is more pregnant with consequences, more capable of transforming life in the immediate future than all the "political" events from the time of Ampère to the present day.

It can be seen from these remarks how far our historical thought is dominated by unconscious traditions and conventions, how little it has been influenced by the universal revision and reorganization of every sphere of knowledge in

modern times. Historical criticism has, of course, made great progress; but its role has been generally confined to discussing facts and establishing their probability; it is not interested in their quality. It accepts them and in its turn expresses them in conventional terms which, themselves, involve a whole tradition of concepts; and these introduce into history the basic disorder that comes from an endless number of observers or points of view. Every chapter of history contains a certain amount of subjective data and "arbitrary constants." The result is that the historian's problem is undefined once he goes beyond establishing or contesting the existence of some fact that may have come to the notice of some witness. The notion of an *event*, which is fundamental, seems not to have been reconsidered and re-thought as it should be, and this explains how relationships of the first importance have never been mentioned, or have not been sufficiently emphasized, as I shall show in a moment. Whereas in the natural sciences the accumulated experimentation of three hundred years has refashioned our way of seeing and has substituted for the observation and simple classification of objects whole systems of specially elaborated notions, yet in the historico-political field we are still at the stage of passive consideration and unsystematic observation. The same individual who in physics or biology uses forms of thought as accurate as precision instruments, thinks in politics by means of ambiguous terms, variable notions, illusory metaphors. The image of the world that takes shape and operates in political minds of various types and degrees is far from a satisfactory and methodical representation of the present.

Despairing of history, I began to think of the strange situation in which nearly all of us find ourselves—mere persons of

good faith and good will, involved from birth in an inextricable politico-historical drama. Not one of us, by means of what he can observe in the sphere of his own experience, can put together and reconstruct the law of the political universe in which he finds himself. Even those who are best educated and best situated must think, as they recall what they know and compare it with what they see, that their knowledge only obscures the immediate political problem, which consists after all *in determining the relations of one man with the mass of men he does not know*. Anyone who is honest with himself and dislikes speculating on subjects that are not rationally related to his own experience, can hardly open his newspaper without plunging into a disorderly metaphysical world. What he reads, what he hears, curiously transcends what he observes or might observe. The sum of his impressions would be: *No politics without myths.*

So having closed all those books written in a language whose rules were obviously vague even for those who used it, I opened an atlas and abstractedly turned the pages of this portrait album of the world. I looked and pondered. First on the degree of accuracy of the maps I had before my eyes. I found in doing so a simple example of what, sixty years ago, was called *progress*. An old portolano, a map of the seventeenth century, and one of today: these three, I thought, clearly show its stages. . . .

A child's eye opens first on a chaos of lights and shadows, it turns and gets its bearings from moment to moment within a group of unequal intensities of light; and as yet there is nothing in common between the regions of light and the other sensations of his body. Meanwhile, the small movements of his body furnish him with a quite different mixture

of impressions: he touches, pulls, presses; and within him is gradually formed a total awareness of his own shape. This knowledge is formulated out of distinct successive moments of sensation; the edifice of relationship and expectation is a product of contrasts and sequences. Sight, touch, and act are co-ordinated in a sort of multiple entry table, which is the tangible world, and finally—a capital *event*—it turns out that a certain system of correspondences is necessary and sufficient for a uniform adjustment of all the visual sensations to all the sensations of the skin and muscles. In the meantime, the child's *powers* are increasing and reality takes the form of an equilibrium in which the various sense impressions and the consequences of movement harmonize.

The human race has done precisely as the living child does when he wakens and develops in surroundings whose properties and extent he gradually explores and assembles by successive tries and connections. The species slowly and irregularly has come to recognize the shape of the earth's surface, has visited and depicted its parts more accurately, guessed at and verified its closed convexity, found and summed up the laws of its movement, discovered, appraised, exploited the resources and usable reserves of that thin layer in which all life is contained. . . .

Increased clarity and precision, and increased power: these are the essential facts of the history of modern times; and I consider them essential because they tend to modify man himself, and because the modification of life in its means of preservation, dissemination, and communication seems to me the criterion of importance that determines what facts are to be retained and pondered. This consideration transforms our judgments on history and politics, and reveals the gaps and disproportions, the arbitrary inclusions and omissions in them.

At this point in my reflections it appeared to me that the whole adventure of man up to our time should be divided into two very different phases, the first being comparable to that period of haphazard groping, of putting out and withdrawing feelers in formless surroundings, of bedazzlement, of sorties into the illimitable, which is the history of the child in the chaos of his first experiences. But then a certain order sets in; a new era begins. Actions in finite, well-determined, clearly delimited, abundantly and powerfully linked surroundings do not have the same characteristics or the same consequences as they had in a formless and undefined world.

It must be observed, however, that the two periods cannot be clearly distinguished in facts themselves. One fraction of mankind is already living in the second, while the rest still moves in the first. This disparity is the cause of a notable part of present-day complications.

Considering the whole of my epoch, then, and with the foregoing observations in mind, I tried to identify those circumstances which were the simplest and most general and at the same time were new.

What struck me at once was a considerable event, a fact of major importance, whose very importance, obviousness, and novelty, or rather singularity, had made it imperceptible to us, its contemporaries.

Every habitable part of the earth, in our time, has been discovered, surveyed, and divided up among nations. The era of unoccupied lands, open territories, places that belong to no one, hence the era of free expansion, has ended. There is no rock that does not bear a flag; there are no more blanks on the map; no region out of the reach of customs officials and the

law; no tribe whose affairs do not fill some dossier and thus, under the evil spell of the written word, become the business of various well-meaning bureaucrats in their distant offices. *The age of the finite world has begun*. The general census of resources, the gathering of statistics on manpower, the development of media of communication are all under way. What could be more remarkable, more significant than taking the inventory, parceling out and linking together every part of the globe? The effects are already immense. An entirely new, excessive, and immediate interdependence between regions and events is the already perceptible consequence of this great fact. Henceforth we must see all political phenomena in the light of this new situation in the world; every one of them occurs either in obedience or in resistance to the effects of this definitive limitation and ever closer mutual dependence of human actions. The habits, ambitions, and loyalties formed in the course of earlier history do not cease to exist—but being insensibly transferred into quite differently constructed surroundings, they there lose their meaning and become causes of error and fruitless striving.

The total reconnaissance of the field of human life being now complete, the period of prospecting is giving way to a period of co-ordination. The parts of a finite, known world necessarily become more and more interlinked.

Hitherto, all politics gambled on the *isolation of events*. History was made up of events that could be *localized*. Any disturbance had, at one point on the globe as it were, a boundless medium in which to reverberate; its effects were nil at a sufficient distance; everything went on in Tokyo as though Berlin were at infinity. It was therefore possible—it was even reasonable—to predict, to calculate, and to act. There was

room in the world for one or several great policies well planned and carried out.

That time is coming to an end. Henceforward every action will be re-echoed by many unforeseen interests on all sides; it will produce a chain of immediate events—confused reverberations in a closed space. The *effects of effects*, which were formerly imperceptible or negligible in relation to the length of a human life and to the radius of action of any human power, are now felt almost instantly at any distance; they return immediately to their causes, and only die away in the unpredictable. The expectations of the predictor are always disappointed, and that in a matter of months or a very few years.

In a few weeks, the most remote circumstances can change friend into foe, foe into ally, victory into defeat. No economic reasoning is possible. The greatest experts are wrong; paradox reigns.

There is no prudence, wisdom, or genius that is not quickly baffled by such complexity, for there is no more duration, continuity, or recognizable causality in this universe of multiple relations and contacts. Prudence, wisdom, and genius can be identified only by a series of successes; once accident and disorder are predominant, an expert or inspired game is in no way different from a game of chance; the finest gifts miscarry.

Hence the new politics are to the old what the short-term calculations of a stock market gambler—the nervous spurts of speculation on the floor of the exchange, the sudden fluctuations and reverses, the uncertain profits and losses—are to the old patriarchal economy, the slow, careful accumulation of a patrimony. . . . The long-pursued schemes and profound thought of a Machiavelli or a Richelieu would today have no more reliability and value than a "stock market tip."

This limited world, with the numerous and still multiplying links that hold it together, is also a world that is every day more highly equipped. Europe founded science, which has transformed life and vastly increased the power of those who possess it. But by its very nature science is essentially transmissible; it is necessarily reducible to universal methods and formulas. The means it affords to some, all can acquire.

But more than that, those means increase production, and not in quantity alone. To the traditional objects of commerce a host of new objects are added, and desire and need of them are spread by contagion or imitation. Soon the less advanced peoples are forced to acquire the knowledge necessary to appreciate and buy these new things, among which are the newest weapons. And the use of weapons against them, of course, drives them to procure weapons for themselves. They have no trouble in doing so; others fight to furnish them this equipment, and vie for the privilege of lending them the money to pay for it.

So the artificial imbalance of power on which European predominance has been based for three hundred years is tending rapidly to vanish. And another imbalance based on crude statistical characteristics tends to reappear.

Asia is about four times larger than Europe. The size of the American continent is slightly less than that of Asia. The population of China alone is at least equal to Europe's; Japan's is greater than Germany's.

Now, *local* European politics, dominating *general* European policy and making it absurd, has led rival Europeans to export the methods and the machines that made Europe supreme in the world. Europeans have competed for profit in awakening, instructing, and arming vast peoples who, before, were imprisoned in their traditions and asked nothing better than to remain so.

Just as the dissemination of culture among a people gradually makes the preservation of caste impossible, and as the possibility that commerce and industry can quickly make anyone rich has turned every kind of stable social hierarchy into an outworn illusion—so will it be with superiority based on technical power.

We shall eventually realize that there has been nothing more stupid in all history than European rivalry in matters of politics and economics, when compared, combined, and confronted with European unity and collaboration in matters of science. While the efforts of the best brains in Europe were amassing an immense capital of usable knowledge, the naïve tradition of a policy based on history, a policy of covetousness and ulterior motives, was being pursued; and the spirit of *Little Europe*, by a kind of treachery, handed over to the very people it meant to dominate, the methods and instruments of power. The competition for concessions or loans, for the purpose of sending out machines or experts, of establishing schools or arsenals—a competition that is nothing but the export far and wide of Western dissensions—is inevitably bringing about Europe's return to that secondary rank to which she is destined by her size, a rank from which the labors and internal exchanges of her intellect had lifted her. Europe will prove not to have had the politics worthy of her thought.

It is useless to imagine that violent events, gigantic wars, invasions *à la* Temuchin will be the result of our childish and disorderly behavior. All we need do is imagine the worst. Consider for a moment what will become of Europe when her own efforts have given to Asia two dozen Creusots or Essens, Manchesters or Roubaix, when steel, silk, paper,

chemical products, fabrics, ceramics, and the rest are produced there in overwhelming quantities, at unbeatable prices, by the soberest and most numerous population in the world, its increase further favored by our introducing the practice of hygiene.

Such were my very simple reflections, with my atlas before me, when the two conflicts I mentioned and the requirements of a little study I was asked to make, at that time, of the methodical development of Germany, led me to these questions.

The great events that have since occurred have not caused me to modify these basic ideas, derived from quite simple and almost purely quantitative observations. "The Crisis of the Mind," which I wrote just after the peace, is hardly more than a development of these thoughts, which had come to me more than twenty years before. The immediate result of the Great War was what it was bound to be: it but accentuated and hastened the decadence of Europe. The simultaneous weakening of all her greatest nations; the glaring internal contradictions of principle; the despairing recourse of both sides to non-Europeans, very much like the recourse to foreigners during civil wars; the destruction of one another's prestige by Western nations in their war of propaganda; not to mention the accelerated spread of military methods and means, or the extermination of the elite: such were the consequences, for Europe's position in the world, of a crisis long prepared by so many illusions, and leaving behind it so many problems, puzzles, and fears—a situation more precarious, with minds more disturbed and the future darker than in 1913. In those days there was a balance of power in Europe; but today's peace can be thought of only as a kind of balance of weakness, necessarily more unstable.

INDEX

[The letter *n* refers not to footnotes, but to those notes on the text which appear on pp. 572–611; e.g., "252*n*" will be found on p. 592.]