

CLAUDE PÉREZ

MALLARMÉ, POLECAT-FERRET¹

(Dominique Fourcade For and Against Mallarmé)

Translated by Robert Boncardo

Le *sujet monotype* is a book by Dominique Fourcade, published by POL in 1997. It could be called a poem, or an ensemble, assembly, or gathering of poems. Dominique Fourcade is himself a poet; indeed, he is one of the most remarkable poets writing in France today, and one of the most well-regarded. He is also one of the leading contemporary connoisseurs of Matisse and Simon Hantaï, of whose work he organized the recent and sumptuous exhibition at the Centre Pompidou; and he is equally familiar with the works of a David Smith or a Pierre Buraglio, among others, all the while being very attentive to what is occurring in the field of contemporary dance.

He was born in 1938; he is 78. In *Le sujet monotype* (which is now about twenty-years old), there is much talk of Degas and reference is also made, fleetingly, to Mallarmé. On page 64, we read:

Exactitude is not purity and purity is a dirty trick: as a news wire this has been a long time coming, but that's because Mallarmé chose the wrong word, an enormous conceptual error.²

The objection bears upon a “concept”, but neither the tone nor the lexicon are those of a typical academic commentary. This difference will be all the more perceptible if I clarify that the chapter (or poem?) in which the quoted sentence is inserted has for its title: “Enormous conceptual error, stupid fuck!”

The insult that appears here (and which gives the title, why not say it, its movement and its brio), this “stupid fuck” which, like the exclamation mark that follows it, is not used again in the text, is not addressed directly, or immediately, to Mallarmé. It is formulated in such a manner that it somehow covers more or less the addressee, whose identity must be sought further on in the text. The insult, however, obviously touches Mallarmé. It touches him all the more since such insults are not typical of Fourcade, who has nothing of the blasphemer about him, and who is not, as

others are, a poet with a loudspeaker whose profession is to “make noise”. And in any case, here is something that stuns and detonates in the midst of the unanimous praise under which Mallarmé is today buried, from high school classes to the amphitheatres of the Sorbonne to international philosophers. I will come back to the concept (purity); in this poem, Fourcade does not give us any more details about it.

Four years later, in 2001, a new book was published: *Est-ce que j’peux placer un mot ?* Amongst others, Fourcade here deals with Manet and — once again — with Mallarmé. At a little more length, this time. He deals with Mallarmé in particular in a chapter entitled “Everything Happens”, where vibrant praise for the painter is counterbalanced by an often harsh, indeed very harsh, critique of Mallarmé: “Mallarmé the deaf”, it is written, for example; Mallarmé who “in deplorable monophony, stuck up, in place of the poem, the program of the poem and of its desires” (EJPPM 68).

The reader who learns of this objection — a cardinal objection in Fourcade’s argumentation — has furthermore not forgotten a certain nightmare, of which he has read an account a few pages prior:

I was being handcuffed to Mallarmé, who smelt awful, he set about punching me, biting me, and while doing so he turned into a ferret who hurt me so badly I had to crush his head with my heel, and he screeched out like a polecat, yes, that’s it, a ferret screeching like a polecat, it made me vomit for days (EJPPM 61).

Dream for a moment on this image of a French poet — of French poetry? — *handcuffed* to Mallarmé; about these metaphors and animal metamorphoses. A ferret is (according to an etymological dictionary) a “little thief”; figuratively, “a cunning person who slips in somewhere and rummages about everywhere” (*Trésor de la langue française*). The polecat is what used to be called in French a *bête puante* — a “skunk”. There exist polecat-ferret hybrids [*des furets putoisés*] resulting from the interbreeding of these two likeable creatures. Mallarmé is a polecat-ferret.

Of course, Fourcade also writes: “I speak thus of Mallarmé, taking advantage of the fact that he has his back turned; if his gaze were to meet mine, I would be too afraid”. We could see here (as in the light tinge of irony that colours the account of the nightmare) a certain form of attenuation. But perhaps also a certain form of aggravation: Mallarmé the super-ego of French poetry; a paternal figure; the father who, from beyond the grave and more than a century after his death, continues to intimidate not only such-and-such a poet, but the poet corporation in its entirety.

Poetry/painting

French poetry today (more generally, French literature and all the arts practiced in France) is caught up in the general movement of globalization, which carries the epoch off with it and of which one of the effects is to relativize the old prevalence

of national traditions. And of course, the part of this tradition that not long ago was still — and which perhaps remains still today — the most familiar and the most *active* is exposed more than any other to this planetary wind. A critic from the 1970's could plausibly write that the greatest part of French poetry of the time was of a Symbolist persuasion. He would no longer write that today, a number of French poets having gone off to seek alternative models just about everywhere: amongst the Greek, Latin or French *minores*, amongst the Provençals, in Japan, amongst the “primitives”, very often in the United States, amongst the poets of American modernity, etc.

The United States are particularly present in Fourcade's books, and particularly present in his life as well. An entire section of *Le sujet monotype* is entitled ‘Amérique’. American art (Pollock, David Smith in particular), American criticism (Clement Greenberg is often cited) and also American poetry are very present, and in the most explicit manner. But if it is a matter of modern poetics (by this we mean a poetics for our time, a poetics capable of taking over from the Symbolist or post-Symbolist poetics on which French poetry has lived for too long), if it is a question of this, then Fourcade's continuous movement is to seek his principles not in the work of such-and-such a poet, but amongst the painters, and precisely amongst the great French painters of the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th: Manet, Degas, Cézanne, Matisse, to name the most important of them. Fourcade, seeking alternative models from those of French Symbolism, carries out a displacement that is less geographical than, if I may put it this way, generic: “painters, from Manet to Cézanne, have thought and created the modern in a more ample and fluid fashion, more advanced and more accomplished, than the writers of those times” (EJPPM, 59).

Writers, collective, but it is permitted to think that this collective essentially encompasses and dissimulates one name: that of Mallarmé. The two other poets of the modernist Trinity, Rimbaud and Lautréamont, are seldom cited at this point, even if there are very clearly *passages* from Rimbaud in *sans lasso et sans flash*, for example (and he is not treated with the same severity as Mallarmé — far from it). This distinction further accentuates the importance of Mallarmé, at the very moment he is the target of this assault or *raid*.

A poet to be killed

Let us return to the book from 2001: *Est-ce que j'peux placer un mot ?* and to its chapter ‘Everything Happens’ where the account of the nightmare is found. The title of the chapter is a quotation: it refers to a phrase written by Manet on a phylactery printed in the top left-hand corner of his writing paper, notably of the paper of a letter (let us say, rather, a note) addressed by him in 1874 to his “dear friend” Stéphane Mallarmé.

Fourcade — and this is precisely what he recounts when starting his chapter — discovers, or rediscovers, this note thanks to an exhibition in Paris devoted to Mallarmé (the exhibition organized at the Musée d'Orsay in 1998 for the centenary of the Master's death). The note is brief and banal, but the account of its discovery is sharply dramatized:

Second visit to the Mallarmé exhibition. I have a meeting with Olivier Cadiot. I am on time, but Olivier, who is early, walks around while waiting for me in the first room. Straightaway he shows me the note from Manet thanking Mallarmé for his support after the refusal of two paintings by the jury of the 1874 Salon — “Have you seen this?” [...] “No, this!” he says while pointing to the heading of Manet's writing paper. Stupefaction — I read the phrase: “Everything happens”. How could such magic have escaped me? (58)

Stupefaction; magic... How are we to understand the intensity with which Fourcade charges this — after all quite modest — adventure? The reason is that *Everything Happens* is not only a motto. *Everything Happens* is here the formula of a poetics, and not only the formula of Manet's poetics. It is necessary to give a meaning to the presence in this affair of Olivier Cadiot, another remarkable French poet who, incidentally, is published by the same editor as Fourcade. What is reported on page 58 and the following pages of *Est-ce que j'peux placer un mot ?* is not the personal adventure of a poet fortuitously discovering, thanks to an exhibition, a formula that would synthesize *his* poetics. The formula does not synthesize the poetics of Fourcade alone, nor for that matter that of a certain contemporary French poetry (for example, that which is published by POL). It summarizes and groups together the poetics of modernity in its entirety, both pictorial and literary, no less, whether French or American. Fourcade quotes Proust (p. 61); then “Dickinson, Stein, Oppen”, that is, three American poetics; and a little further on Cézanne.

Around 1870 Manet would therefore have printed on his writing paper the two-word formula of what would become the French, American — and global — modernity of the following century.

It will of course be necessary to attempt to understand what these two words signify, the meaning that Fourcade gives them; but before that, two remarks, or rather one remark in two parts: on the one hand, this modern poetics is that (or is given as that) which Mallarmé was not able to find, what he lacked, or again that poetics which at once goes against and takes over from Mallarmé, offering an alternative to the Mallarméan domination; on the other hand, and this cannot be considered as incidental, it is thanks to a Mallarmé exhibition (an exhibition, it is true, which commemorates the anniversary *of the death* of Mallarmé) that Fourcade, alerted by Cadiot, stumbles upon the formula of the anti-Mallarméan poetics which is, or which would be, that of modernity.

Mallarmé is at once necessary and unbearable; a poet to be killed (all the great poets are to be killed) and a point of reference that we definitely cannot do without.

“Tell him off”

We have just read the account of the *second* visit to the exhibition. But the Mallarmé nightmare was, Fourcade narrates, two nights after having finished a text that recounted the first visit.

This first account (or narrativised essay) was published in the form of an article in 2000 (one year before *Est-ce que j’peux placer un mot?*) in the *Cahiers de la Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet*, under the title “L’exposition Mallarmé, pendant et depuis”; it made up, along with two other studies (those of Yves Peyré and Pierre Lartigue), what the contents page of the journal called a “homage”. On the basis of its title alone, we could suspect a circumstantial piece of writing, a rather secondary piece, if not a trivial one. This is not what its author would have us think: it is, he says, “one of the most serious texts of my life, I finally dared to say that in Mallarmé’s poem — to whom I owe everything, but it was necessary to tear myself away from him — everything does not happen” (EJPPM, 61).

This relatively brief article, of 5 or 6 pages — in the guise of an exhibition review, or which takes this exhibition as a pretext (and the anniversary that it celebrates) — takes stock of Mallarmé today, of the relation Fourcade himself — and, beyond Fourcade, artistic modernity in its entirety, whether poetic or pictorial, the “great art” of modernity — has today with the poet of the ‘Sonnet en -xy’ and the *Divagations*. An ambivalent, oxymoronic relation, as has already been indicated (“fear of no longer loving him enough”, “fear of still loving him too much”, EM, 153; “he irritates and disappoints”, “he surprises, he moves”; “I remain strangled by admiration and blame”, *ibid.* 156), a relation on which Fourcade’s text also confers a high intensity by pulling strongly, as is typical of him and as we have just witnessed, on the string of affects.

The first tensor is that of the power and the resistance it requires. The relation Fourcade-Mallarmé not only has to do with the virtues (or the faults) of the poetry and the poetics of the second; it is also or above all defined by the situation of power, indeed of monopoly, which is (which is perhaps?) still his today: the power of an author who “has put his stamp on French poetry” and “under the influence” of whom we find “a century of writing”. This summary is debatable, yet it has the virtues (the energy) and the faults of summaries: Apollinaire, Breton, Michaux, Ponge, Char (who Fourcade knows especially well, and with whom he was very close right up to the beginning of the 1970’s), did they all really write “under the influence” of Mallarmé? Closer to us, Réda, Bonnefoy, Roubaud... are they so Mallarméan? As for their younger siblings, Hocquard, Cadot, do they not look towards the Black Mountains or to the rue de Fleurus (where Gertrude Stein lived), rather than to the rue de Rome?

But let's move on. Fourcade is not writing a story; he is pointing towards a *power of intimidation*. Power is not the act: we have known this for a little more than 2000 years. It is not because power does not always and everywhere actualize itself that we have the right to deem it to be illusion or nonsense. And the prestigious crown of philosophical commentaries (Badiou, Rancière, Milner, more recently Meillasoux) that have been amassed, and which today are still being amassed, on the Mallarméan front — this crown (of which, incidentally, Fourcade says nothing) cannot fail to maintain and to revive this power of intimidation today; to reinforce the paternal statue highlighted above. Mallarmé said of Hugo that he was “verse in person”; of Mallarmé we could say that he has become, in the eyes of successive generations, “literature in person”. His œuvre has become (has been thought of as) the quintessence or the concentrate of the literary. It is necessary to recall moreover that 1998 was not only the year of the exhibition; it was also the year when the first volume of the new *Pléiade*, composed by Bertrand Marchal, was published. Fourcade does not speak of it; as a lover of painting, he prefers to take the opportunity of an exhibition to celebrate this anniversary in his own way. And not least to “tell Mallarmé off” under cover of this “homage”.

Amor nescit reverentiam

To exonerate oneself from the unanimous praise, from embalming by means of respect: “love, does not know respect”, Claudel once grumbled.

Fourcade does not offer a funeral oration. On the contrary, he sets out to take off “the wrapping from the mummy” (EM, 156). It is to this pressing task that some jottings, which are marked by an irreverent humour, are devoted. Thus, when he remarks on the “adolescent” or “trivial” humour of Mallarmé; or when he hypothesizes that a friend (Daniel Oster) who “knew Mallarmé in an incomparably acute fashion” but who refuses to come to the exhibition had perhaps, from that moment, “broken with Mallarmé” (ibid.). Just as the presence of Cadot de-particularizes, de-individualizes the sideration in front of the phrase “Everything Happens”, the name of Oster and the mention of his (possible) rupture with a formerly admired poet sketches out a movement that extends these reservations beyond the *taste* of any individual; it overflows pure idiosyncrasy.

Mallarmé (Fourcade says) excels in conceiving of programs. He is an outstanding programmer, with the “head of a researcher with practically unlimited theoretical capacities”; his “commandments” (*commandments*, we note the word) “open onto modern poetics”; (EM, 156). But if the programme is grandiose, the poem, often, disappoints: “There is an abyss between the great programmatic moments — unverifiable experiences, capital experiences, as stimulating as possible — and the very constrained mechanics of a number of poems” (ibid. 156-7). The outlines that he draws are “irrelevant” to “any poem that he produced”. The conclusion is cut-

ting: “The watercolours of Cézanne realize the Mallarméan poem. Mallarmé does not. Mallarmé never did” (ibid. 157).

The example specially chosen as a demonstration is that of the poem to Gautier, the *Toast funèbre* of 1873. Fourcade judges it severely: this poem, he says, is “conventional in its structure as in its thematics, so constrained in its rhymes”. “Enormously fatiguing phantasms”, “a very constricted mechanism, very cultic” (156-7).

It is rare today for a poet (a poet who doubles as a theoretician, which is to say as a programmer) to apply such a treatment to Mallarmé. Everybody *explains* Mallarmé, or strives to; and it happens – and not rarely – that judgements are pronounced on his politics, on his “vision of the world”, on what is called his “philosophy”. But how many are concerned to judge his poems *as poems?* to make a judgement about their poetic virtues, what Fourcade does not fear to call their *beauty?* Who would dare to? Of course, it will be said: by what right can we judge? Fourcade would respond: by the right of today.

His profession is not that of an antiquarian. His approach is not that of an historian, nor is it (as is now said), “philological”. His intention is not to link up, across time and despite the barriers and the difficulties that syntax and growing distances multiply, with a thought that would be secret and would need to be elucidated. Mallarmé’s project, its achievements, do not offer themselves up as enigmas but rather – as paradoxical as the word might appear – as evidences, at once sensible and intellectual.

Against the grain of what the majority do, Fourcade *does not interpret*, or hardly. He does not first of all seek one or many significations: he listens to the rhythms, the rhymes, he appreciates what he calls the “mechanics” of the poem, what could be called its *gait* (if the poem were a horse). It is a thing that the philosophers, their heads so full of concepts, do little of, and professors not always. Fourcade treats the poem as a poem, not as a cryptogram, not as a reservoir or generator of concepts, and not as a mine for philosophemes. It is not a question of knowing what Mallarmé “thought” about such or such a subject, nor whether or not he affirmed or refused the autonomy of literature, nor what he professed (he who, as one of his disciples said, “had much of the professor to him”) about language, death or revolution: but rather whether his work – his works – can here and now serve those who have the same profession as him; if they can be prototypes; if they can help a poet of *this time* to “invent the means of invention”, as the works of Manet, Degas, Cézanne (says Fourcade) can; if it is possible today to write not *like* Mallarmé, of course, but *starting from* Mallarmé...

Poem, programme

Reading the poem to Gautier, Fourcade compares it to the letter of intention that Mallarmé sent to Catulle Mendès in 1872, at the moment when the poem was still a

project. Fourcade judges the four programmatic lines “breath-taking”, “very superior to the poem that they herald”. He quotes them:

I want to sing, probably in couplets, of one of Gautier’s glorious qualities:

The mysterious gift of seeing with the eyes.

(Remove: mysterious). I will sing of the *Seer* who, placed in this world, looked at it, something that is not done.

Fourcade applauds in particular the parenthesis: “Remove: mysterious”. He applauds Mallarmé for being aware of how this word (one of those Mallarmé was fond of, one he ceaselessly uses) “prompts complacency” (EM 158). Just like *virginal*, or *azure* (just like *purity*), *mystery* is a *blind*, *impermeable*, or *deaf* word (recall: “Mallarmé the deaf”). These are words, Fourcade says, which “aspire” and “lead astray”, “which share nothing” and which “exasperate” (ibid. 159).

Then he reads ‘Toast funèbre’:

Le Maître, par un œil profond, a, sur ses pas,
 Apaisé de l’édén l’inquiète merveille
 Dont le frisson final, dans sa voix seule, éveille
 Pour la Rose et le Lys le mystère d’un nom.

[The Master, by a piercing eye, has, on his travels
 appeased the unquiet marvel that is Eden:
 its final shiver, in his voice alone, awakens
 for the Rose and Lily the mystery of a name].³

“Alas, the word is there”: Mallarmé does not do what he says.

But this *mystery* that returns, despite the programme, despite the erasure noted in the programme, is not the sole objection, nor even the principal one. The letter (the programme) said: “I will sing of the *Seer* who, placed in this world, looked at it, something that is not done”. Now, here, once again, the poem betrays the programme: “Mallarmé did not look at the world, he looked at the poem, and he more or less took it for the world” (ibid. 157). “The world remains to be discovered after Mallarmé”.

If Austin and Mondor are to be believed, this programme is not really the programme of Mallarmé; it would rather be that of Mendès who, in the context of a collective homage to Gautier in which the *Toast Funèbre* was to be inserted, had (maliciously?) engaged Mallarmé to celebrate the dead man as a poet for whom “the exterior world existed”. No matter. Fourcade takes this programme and puts it into relation with Manet’s motto. *Look at the world* and *Everything Happens*, two versions of a same programme. *Everything happens*: this means: the world happens. The world bursts forth. It is necessary that it burst forth (this is an axiology) onto the canvas, into the poem. It is a matter of writing not a “pure poetry” or a poetry of the “pure notion”, but *a poetry of the event*. “To be in contact with the real”, “to

be present to the present”: such is the poetic, ethical and political imperative that Fourcade undertakes to put to work after Manet (Fourcade, like Mallarmé, writes programmes; and it is for this, of course, that the question is so pressing: his own poems also have a promise to keep).

What happens?

What *happens* in the poems of Fourcade is (for example) a quantity of objects, of materials, of *names* from today. Names with which we are contemporary: Kevlar, a spinnaker, a baby-changing table, a Leica, a V8 felt pen, a G-string, an ice-cream maker... (There used to be readers of Mallarmé, and not the least of them, who observed that his poems, and all of his works, were full of the “stuffy and stifling” furniture of the Victorian era: lamps, mirrors, curtains, watches, gas ceiling lamps... Does one set of furniture replace the other? Likewise, the clarity in Fourcade’s manner, his taste for luminous colour, could we not think that these have the same relation to our today that the sombre manner of Mallarmé had with his own and which has become our day-before-yesterday? Between the *tenebroso* of Mallarmé’s poems and the apartments of the end of the 19th century, is this not the relation that we can suppose exists between the poems of Fourcade and our own apartments inundated with light and bright with colours – these colours: “honey grey”, “taxi yellow”, “*blue olive*”, “Naples yellow”, “lemony blue”, which are also amongst the true delights of the Fourcade’s books...)?

What also happens in his poems is Michelle Obama, France Inter, Danielle Darrieux, Roland Garros, the supporters of Juventus, the Nikkei index (which is plummeting). There are also, mixed in with songs, and making up the “impurity” of the poem, essays or fragments of essays, articles, studies, prefaces. Quite a lot of English, a little German, Italian sometimes, many varieties of French. A war, or several (Iraq, Algeria). Sometimes even photos: the reproduction of pictures from the press (the famous picture of an American woman soldier holding a leash attached to an Iraqi prisoner in Abu-Ghraib is reproduced in colour on the last page of *en laisse*) or that of a famous illustrated canvas (*Pink Writing* by Simon Hantaï, reproduced on the first page of *sans lasso et sans flash*).

“Nothing that cannot be incorporated into the poem”; “make the book with anything at all” (SM, 125). From this it does not follow that the book is made in any way at all, for: “Everything is evasive and yet there is no escape, we are between four tight – very tight – angles” (ibid., p. 15).

The rejection of “purity” is obviously in solidarity with the rejection of the politics that this word claimed (or claims) to cover. In solidarity too with a certain conception of the unity of the work, of its coherence, which is a dispersed, disseminated coherence, which de-centres the poem, changes the poetic *room* (the *stanza*) into a sponge, a cloud, into Sporades, into a milky way... To find “*a form that accommodates the mess*”, as Beckett put it. It is the end of the “fabulous tradition, that of the

poem centred in the middle of the page, and of the intention of the poem centred in the middle of the text, with subject, beginning and end” (CD, 43).

Here, it would be easy to assert that Mallarmé, the Mallarmé of *Divagations* (perhaps of all the books by Mallarmé that Fourcade brushes up against) and most clearly that of the *Coup de dés* (which Fourcade hardly mentions) is precisely he who, in France, invented the model, or the counter-model, of the de-centred, fragmented poem, of the poem that is, precisely, no longer fitted with the frame of the page.

It would also be necessary to clarify that, despite what has just been said about the world and of the “everything” that must “happen”, Fourcade (who, like Mallarmé, writes a high-culture poetry, a learned poetry — learned to the point that it is on guard against “high culture”) cannot pass uniformly for a proponent of the “disautonomisation” of the poem, of the return of the subject and of reference, he who writes for example: “I have never written a single line on any other subject than that of the subject of writing” (SLSF, 25); “and the rest of the world, everything that is not painted, not written, is fictive” (ibid. 40). He who also writes: “the subject is murderous the discipline consists in staying as close as possible to the subject’ (SM).

I will not seek to reduce these difficulties, for example by invoking a fragment from *Sujet monotype*:

on veut toujours que je me justifie
je ne m'explique pas, je ne puis m'expliquer sur rien (SM 36)

[I am always asked to justify myself
I do not explain myself, I cannot explain anything].

This does not correspond precisely to the experience of the reader, who sees clearly that Fourcade, if he does not “justify” himself, nevertheless often “explains himself” in his poems. And this is why I prefer to finish by citing a fragment from a text that is not by Fourcade, but that Fourcade cites at length on page 34 of *sans lasso et sans flash*. It is a text by Heidegger, an extract from *Mein bisheriger Weg*, “My path so far” (Fourcade has thought to take up this title for one of his books soon to be published).

The German philosopher, reflecting in these pages on his relation, not with Mallarmé, but with Christianity, characterises the latter as “that which must be overcome without for all that being laid low” [*ce qui doit être surmonté sans pour autant être mis à bas*].

That which must be overcome without for all that being laid low — could it possibly be said any better? What remains is to inquire into the coincidence — is it a coincidence? — that places the name of Mallarmé precisely in the position that was assigned before him to religion.

Notes

1. Translator's note: in French, as Perez notes further on, a "furet putoisé" names a cross between a ferret and a polecat, typically known as a polecat-ferret hybrid. In French, to "crier comme un putois" means to shout one's head off.
2. The works of Dominique Fourcade which will be cited are the following: *Le sujet monotype* (Paris: POL, 1997) (SM); *Est-ce que j'peux placer un mot ?* (Paris, POL, 2001) (EJPPM); *sans lasso et sans flash*, (Paris, POL, 2005) (SLSF); *Citizen Do*, (Paris: POL, 2008) (CD); 'L'exposition Mallarmé, pendant et depuis', *Cahiers de la bibliothèque Jacques Doucet*, No. 3-4 (2000) (EM).
3. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Funeral Toast', *The Poems in Verse. Translation and Notes by Peter Manson* (Oxford, Ohio: Miami University Press, 2011), p. 107.