

INTRODUCTION

*Advice To Young Psychoanalysts: Read Mallarmé*

As Jean-Michel Rabaté recalls in ‘Lacan’s Return to Freud’,<sup>1</sup> in 1969 the French linguist Georges Mounin published an essay in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* entitled ‘Quelques traits du style de Jacques Lacan’.<sup>2</sup> Amidst scathing remarks about Lacan’s self-described “Gongorism”, his disastrous incomprehension of Saussure, and his idiosyncratic use of constructions like *de ce que* or *pour ce que* in place of the far more familiar *parce que*, Mounin suggested that Lacan’s linguistic peculiarities, like those of Mallarmé before him, arose from an infantile bilingualism. While Mounin was wrong about the linguistic ambiance of both the psychoanalyst’s and the poet’s childhoods, for many French thinkers of the last half-century the proximity between their respective styles has been too striking to ignore. Reflecting on his ambivalence towards the psychoanalyst’s literary imagination and scientific pretensions, Lacan’s own analyst Rudolph Loewenstein remarked that “when I read his works I can’t help thinking, ‘Words, words, words’. And yet I love and admire Mallarmé”.<sup>3</sup> In a perhaps more positive vein, Jean Bollack described Lacan’s translations of Heidegger as having drawn the German thinker’s work away from an etymologizing nationalism and towards “science, art, and language”, and thus as having “add[ed] a touch of Mallarmé”.<sup>4</sup> In his own attempt to account for their stylistic proximity, Vincent Kaufmann offers an impressive — yet far from complete — list of those who have compared Mallarmé and Lacan:

In her *Histoire de la psychanalyse en France*, Elisabeth Roudinesco recalls that in a dossier published by *L’Humanité* on the day after Lacan’s death, Jean-Pierre Léonardini — one of the contributors to this dossier — compared the style of Lacan to that of Mallarmé. He was certainly not the first to do so. In 1974 Shoshana Felman had brought the two *œuvres* together in a very feminine special edition of *L’Arc* devoted to Lacan. René Girard spoke in *La violence du sacré* of a ‘Mallarméan version of psychoanalysis’, and others had perhaps made similar remarks even earlier. More recently, the same

comparison has also been made by Alain Badiou, who sees in Mallarmé and Lacan the greatest formal dialecticians in French thought.<sup>5</sup>

Lacan himself referred infrequently to Mallarmé. His two most significant references are no doubt to be found in the *Ecrits*, where Lacan twice uses the poet's image of ordinary discourse as a coin "put into someone else's hand in silence"<sup>6</sup> to convey the difference between empty and full speech.<sup>7</sup> However, as Jean-Claude Milner remarks, Lacan not only composed unpublished sonnets in the style of Mallarmé,<sup>8</sup> he also took inspiration from the poet's designs for a literary ceremony — Mallarmé's infamous "Book" — when conceiving of *La cause freudienne*'s institutional structure.<sup>9</sup> More significantly still, Milner argues that Lacan "associate[d] Freud and Mallarmé under the heading of the signifier". Milner writes:

The modern reflection on language begins, it seems to me, with the following affirmation that we read in Meillet, who was a direct student of Saussure: the name *bird* does not designate the bird that is there, but the one who has taken flight. The signified consists in the absence of the signified thing. How can we not link these aphorisms to Mallarmé's flower, which is "absent from every bouquet"? Is this the same absence? If yes, then the condition of possibility of language as an object of a Galilean science, and the condition of possibility of language as a poetic material, are one and the same. I claim that the Lacanian notion of the *signifier* sums up this unicity.<sup>10</sup>

In tracking the history of Lacan's — or of Lacanians' — relation to Mallarmé, it is indeed the *signifier* that occupies pride of place. The most noteworthy attempt to bring Mallarmé and Lacan together, and indeed to do so, as Milner suggests, through an alliance between the science of structural linguistics and poetry, is to be found in work of the Telquellians, mostly through Julia Kristeva. Announcing *Tel Quel*'s program in *Les lettres françaises* in 1968, Philippe Sollers wrote that the journal would attempt to "go back before those effects that can be situated in the 1920's (Surrealism, Formalism, the extension of structural linguistics) in order to properly pinpoint a more radical reserve inscribed at the end of last century (Lautréamont, Mallarmé, Marx, Freud)".<sup>11</sup> As Kristeva argued exhaustively in *Séméiotiké* (1969) and *La révolution du langage poétique* (1974), Mallarmé was part of an avant-garde whose radical linguistic negativity presaged the Freudian discovery of the unconscious, understood in terms of Lacan's dictum that the unconscious was structured like a language.<sup>12</sup> This genealogy involved the passage from poetic insight to scientific foundation. Commenting in his 1965 essay 'Littérature et totalité' on Mallarmé's reply to Proust, 'The Mystery in Letters', Sollers put this points as follows:

Mallarmé writes: 'There must be something occult deep inside everyone, decidedly I believe in something opaque, a signification sealed and hidden, that inhabits the common man: for as soon as the masses throw themselves toward some trace that has its reality, for example, on a piece of paper, it's in the writing — not in oneself — that there is something obscure: they stir

crazily like a hurricane, jealous to attribute darkness to anything else, profusely, flagrantly'. Mallarmé adds: 'I prefer, faced with aggression, to retort that contemporaries don't know how to read'. For us, these remarks can be illuminated in a new light if we consider the findings of psychoanalysis, particularly the following, recent one: that the unconscious is structured like a language. The existence of this *signifier sealed and hidden*, which Mallarmé suspects in each person, has since, if I may say so, been scientifically proven.<sup>13</sup>

In the spirit of avant-garde one-upmanship, in 1974 Kristeva sought to show how Mallarmé offered resources not only for legitimating, but indeed for going beyond Lacan and the primacy he accorded the Law. In a long reading of 'Prose (pour des Esseintes)', for instance, she shows how the poem's phonic patterns disrupt its law-governed signifying unities. A sense of Kristeva's reading strategy can be gleaned from her commentary on the first stanza:

Hyperbole ! de ma mémoire  
Triomphalement ne sais-tu  
Te lever, aujourd'hui grimoire  
Dans un livre de fer vêtu

Kristeva firstly explores the semantic and articulatory overdetermination of the word "Hyperbole", which she claims is central to understanding the poem as a whole. For her, the semantic value of the word is "the negation of an authority",<sup>14</sup> a value she deduces, firstly, from the fact that one of its a-signifying parts, the "signifying differential"<sup>15</sup> [per], is a homophone of *père*, which is also linked phonically to the term "fer", an image of intransigent solidity, as well as to the term "ère" found in the syntagm "l'ère d'autorité" from the fourth stanza. Secondly, she claims that the signifying differential [bol] stands for "the seme for symbolic negation"<sup>16</sup> since it constitutes part of a term Mallarmé frequently uses to refer to negation, namely, *abolir* and its cognates. Finally, that the word "Hyperbole" involves a "glottal stop"<sup>17</sup> means that it expresses an "aggressivity",<sup>18</sup> which constitutes the articulatory accompaniment to the seme of negation. "Hyperbole" thus names the first movement of what Kristeva takes to be the poem's program: that "an irruption of the drives, a negativity, destroys the stases and the finitudes represented by the symbolic code of language".<sup>19</sup> Mallarmé's poetry instantiates and disrupts the Symbolic Law, relativizing Lacan's central concept by recourse to the feminine force of *la sémiotique*.

While *Tel Quel*'s references to Mallarmé and Lacan oscillated between using the psychoanalyst to clarify the poet, then using the poet to surpass the psychoanalyst, Jean-Claude Milner's 1978 book *For the Love of Language* employs Lacan's own concept of *lalangue* to conceive the difference between what structuralist and generativist linguistics can capture of language, on the one hand, and those language-effects that escape both of them, such as poetry, on the other.<sup>20</sup> Given language's proclivity for producing equivocity, all signifying activity is either in excess of what the subject means to say, or misses what the subject was aiming for. For Mil-

ner, this irreducible discrepancy gives rise to the dream of an Absolute language, of which Mallarmé offers a classic image: “Languages imperfect insofar as they are many; the absolute one is lacking”.<sup>21</sup> Yet as Milner recognizes, for Mallarmé verse is precisely that which “makes up for language’s deficiencies, as a superior supplement”<sup>22</sup> by overcoming the Chance encounter between sound and sense in the transmutational space of a verse.

Milner stages another encounter between Mallarmé and Lacan in his 1983 book *Les Noms indistincts*. Here, he claims *Un coup de dés* comes as close as any text can to simultaneously staging the registers of the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary (R, S, and I):

...in the dry crackle of the two dice, thrown one against the other, one bearing the figure of meaning and the other of sound; in the course of this instant — an instant without duration, but one that, for having taken place once, is such that nothing can make it so that it did not take place: hence the character of an eternal circumstance that, through the alliance of words, we can confer upon it — we will thus hear the encounter: of S, for it is a matter of numbers (figures of the dices’ faces, arithmetic of verse, network of syntax and lexicon), of I, for it is a matter of formed matter (cubes of dice, sonorities and significations of words), of R, finally, the idea of which is given by the cluster of stars, without properties, without any form other than an illusion, yet nevertheless countable as the *septuor* and nameable as the *Septentrion*.<sup>23</sup>

Milner has since prolonged his engagement with Mallarmé and Lacan in later works such as *L’Œuvre claire*, where the poet’s doctrine of contingency is shown to presage post-Popperian science in its insistence on the centrality of falsification.<sup>24</sup> His 2003 piece, ‘The Tell-Tale Constellations’, reprinted in this collection, extends this argument through an analysis of Mallarmé’s image of the constellation.

Published a year before Milner’s *Les noms indistincts*, Alain Badiou’s *Theory of the Subject* presents Lacan and Mallarmé, as Kaufmann pointed out above, as the “two great modern French dialecticians”.<sup>25</sup> We will leave a discussion of this work for our presentation of Badiou’s essay published here, ‘Is it Exact That All Thought Emits a Throw of Dice?’ Suffice to say that while Badiou has never engaged with Mallarmé and Lacan within the framework of a language-centred philosophy or science, the poet and psychoanalyst have long accompanied his thinking: they appear in close proximity, at once textual and conceptual, in pieces such as ‘Philosophy and Psychoanalysis’ from *Conditions*,<sup>26</sup> as well as in Badiou’s 1994-1995 seminar *Lacan: L’antiphilosophie 3*.<sup>27</sup>

In more recent years, critics have maintained the suggestive linkage between Mallarmé and Lacan. In *Mallarmé le livre: Etude psychanalytique* (2007),<sup>28</sup> Joseph Attié has offered the most committed and extensive Lacanian analysis of the poet’s *œuvre* to date, while in *Contre l’éternité: Ogawa, Mallarmé, Lacan* (2009),<sup>29</sup> Jean Alouch has examined the interlinked questions of hermeticism, language games and, most centrally, of one’s second death or disappearance, through a close engagement

with Leo Bersani's classic work *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé*. Perhaps the most promising angle of attack is to be found in Patrick Thériault's *Le (Dé)montage de la fiction: La révélation moderne de Mallarmé* (2010).<sup>30</sup> Thériault's point of departure is Mallarmé's admission in 'Music and Letters' that he is reluctant "to take apart impiously, in public, the fiction, and consequently the literary mechanism itself, in order to lay out the principle part or nothing".<sup>31</sup> For this radically modern poet, literature has no transcendental guarantee. However, not only does playing the literary game require an at least feigned investment in the *illusio* of its ontological grounding; it also brings with it a singular *jouissance*, which seems irresistibly to correlate with the existence of an Ideal. How can Mallarmé adapt himself to the pragmatic contradiction between belief and critical lucidity, which characterizes his position of enunciation? For Thériault, Mallarmé precedes Lacan in recognizing that the subject's desiring economy is structured by a *lack*: literature's "principal part or nothing", its "superior attraction" that is in fact a "void".<sup>32</sup> For both poet and psychoanalyst, understanding desire's "motor"<sup>33</sup> not as an *excess* but as a *lack* — one which, moreover, can never be filled — allows a first step towards an equal parts tragic and ludic acceptance of the ineradicable inexistence of the Ideal. But Thériault goes further, showing how their shared conception of desire and the Law can help explain Mallarmé and Lacan's infamously hermetic, indeed initiatory, mode of address. While both promise to lead the reader towards knowledge, whether it be of Literature or the Law, both of these knowledges are progressively revealed to be *nothing* — or *almost-nothings*.

Other contemporary approaches to Mallarmé and Lacan exist, and the points of comparison, real-historical entanglements, and distance-takings have hardly been exhaustively addressed by existing studies.<sup>34</sup> A work on Lacan's Mallarmé remains to be written.



This edition of *S: Journal for the Circle of Lacanian Ideology Critique*, however, seeks to advance and problematize the relation between Mallarmé and Lacan by translating a series of the best and most exciting scholars working on the poet today. Some of the names in the journal will no doubt be familiar to readers, while others have never before appeared in translation. In what follows, we will briefly outline each of the essays with an eye to situating them within the author's larger work.

One philosophical contemporary of *Tel Quel* who also maintained a close relationship with Mallarmé and Lacan is Alain Badiou, whose 1986 lecture 'Is it Exact That All Thought Emits a Throw of Dice?' is the first article in this edition.<sup>35</sup> To place the essay in its proper context, we first need to refer to Badiou's 1982 book *Theory of the Subject*. Two years after the publication of Kristeva's *La révolution du langage poétique*, and developed over five seminar sessions held between December 15, 1975, and February 8, 1976, Badiou provided his first and to date most extensive engagement with Mallarmé. In these seminars, later published as the second

chapter of *Theory of the Subject*, Badiou reads Mallarmé and Lacan as two equally brilliant exponents of the “structural dialectic”.<sup>36</sup> Both poet and psychoanalyst are supposed to have taken a step beyond structuralism by showing how the web of “weak differences” constituting any given structure is caused by an absent event, a vanishing upsurge of “strong difference” that henceforth insists in the structure, splitting each of its individual elements.<sup>37</sup> However, Mallarmé and Lacan still remain incorrigible conservatives who have to be surpassed if a truly revolutionary thought is to be constructed. In poems such as ‘A la nue accablante tu’ and the ‘Sonnet en -yx’, Badiou reads Mallarmé as having staged events that are made to disappear as soon as they appear, thus allowing “weak difference” to assert its primacy over “strong difference”.<sup>38</sup> By stark contrast, in ‘Is it Exact...?’ we witness Badiou taking an irreversible step towards treating Mallarmé as his “master”,<sup>39</sup> as he puts it in *Logics of Worlds*; a master from whom he has learned to think, rather than repress, the event. In fact, Badiou’s 1986 piece includes a long reading of *Un coup de dés* that will make up much of ‘Meditation Nineteen’ from his magnum opus *Being and Event* (1988), where Mallarmé is treated as the unsurpassable poet-thinker of the event. In anticipation of this reading, Badiou opens ‘Is it Exact...?’ by asking: how Mallarmé can present himself as a “man habituated to dream”, as he does in his 1889 homage to Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, yet also write in ‘Funeral Toast’ that “the pure poet’s humble, generous gesture / prohibits dreams, his function’s enemy”?<sup>40</sup> For Badiou, everything turns on the poet being habituated — in the sense of attuned to — “dream” in the form of the event, and not in the form of Romantic reverie or mystical communion. Badiou writes: “I will therefore hold that the real of which the Mallarméan text proposes the anticipation is never the unfolded figure of a spectacle. Mallarmé’s doctrine devotes poetry to the *event*, which is to say to the pure *there is* of occurrence” (18). Using a Lacanian terminology, he writes that Mallarmé’s “prohibition bearing upon imaginary totalization” — the Nature of the Romantics — “authorizes a symbolic subtraction, from which is fixed a point of the real” (19). In his extensive reading of *Un coup de dés*, Badiou thus shows how Mallarmé first circumscribes the “evental site” where an event will — perhaps — have taken place, before producing “an absolute symbol of the event” (25) in the form of the dice-throw, which the Master hesitates to perform before sinking beneath the waves. ‘Is it Exact...?’ thus constitutes a stunning reversal of *Theory of the Subject*, inaugurating Badiou’s mature thinking of the event, whose concept Mallarmé will have heroically provided for all philosophy to come.

While less well-known to Anglophone readers than Badiou, Jean-Claude Milner’s engagement with Mallarmé nevertheless extends from his first book to his most recent writings. ‘The Tell-Tale Constellations’, a 2003 piece first published in the journal *Elucidation*, finds its place within the second stage of his dialogue with the poet. In one of his early works, *For the Love of Language* (1978), Milner asks how it is possible that language can be the object of a science — linguistics — as well as of love, in the form of poetry. Here, he differentiates between the motivations of the linguist, who seeks to identify the universal rules governing the grammatical and



the ungrammatical, and the purists, who are fascinated by the power of language to break down these very rules. Milner's first examination of Mallarmé treats the poet as an exemplary purist. As he notes in a recent 2016 essay 'Mallarmé Perchance', which continues the thread of *For the Love of Language*, rather than strictly adhering to the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified legislated by Saussure, Mallarmé thinks that verse can alone create a total word whose signifier would in fact correspond to its signified — whose sound would be uniquely joined with its sense. This is Mallarmé's "promise":<sup>41</sup> that verse can create a word whose phonic qualities match with its signified content, thus making up for the internal deficiencies of language. Yet this is a promise unable to be kept, and defines Mallarmé as an exemplary purist.

Taking up the relations between linguistic science and poetry in the second stage of his engagement with the poet, 'The Tell-Tale Constellations' pits Mallarmé the purist against a thematic that has occupied Milner since *For the Love of Language*: the conditions that define post-Galilean science. Following the work of Alexandre Koyré — and, above all, Koyré's influence on Lacan — Milner locates a radical historical cut that took place with Galileo's unveiling of the infinite Universe, as opposed to the finite cosmos of the ancients. One of the defining features of this Universe is the role Galileo accorded mathematics. In the post-Galilean universe, mathematics underwrites the sensible regime thanks to what Milner calls the "mathematization of the empirical".<sup>42</sup> For the post-Galilean scientific subject, empirical reality is not defined by a sensible relation to the world or even by a situated agent operating in a spatio-temporal field. Instead, empirical reality is mapped and formalised by mathematical language. This, for Milner, results in the non-existence of the constellations in the post-Galilean Universe. As he opens 'The Tell-Tale Constellations': "Constellations do not exist; there only exist the stars that compose them. This is a lemma of modern science. It is also one of the differential traits that separates the *phusis* of the Ancients from post-Galilean Nature" (31). In other words, the Universe mapped by Galilean science takes stars that cannot be immediately perceived by the gaze as *more real* than the ideological, cosmological and contingent groupings of stars named the constellations: "Visible or not, the stars are real; precisely because they are visible, constellations are imaginary" (31).

In this article, Milner asks how Mallarmé responded to this "sacrifice demanded by science" (33). Rather than constructing an alternative, intrinsically poetic, Universe to the one presented by post-Galilean science, Mallarmé believes that "[v]erse and, more generally, Letters must constitute a limit to science" (34). In other words, Mallarmé uses the calculations of verse and his doctrine of Chance to render visible that which post-Galilean science deems invisible. His poetry, though, not only "bear[s] witness to this disappearance", it also draws upon the brilliance of the constellations to posit a "subtraction and exception" (34) to modern science — that is, an internal limit. This limit, crystallized by the image of the Constellation that *perhaps* appears at the close of *Un coup de dés*, signals Mallarmé's verdict on post-Galilean science: he "says no" to it, calling upon the numbers that comprise the cal-

culations of verse to critique the “hyper-scientific” modernity instituted by Galileo. Mallarmé’s singular use of language not only stands in distinction to the linguistic sciences, but, in ‘The Tell-Tale Constellations’, also to scientific modernity as such.

In his article on ‘Play, jouissance and *illusio* in Mallarmé and Bourdieu’, Patrick Thériault continues the work begun in his 2010 book *Le (Dé)montage de la Fiction*. There he had demonstrated a homology between Lacan’s apparently oracular discourse and the notoriously hermetic structure of Mallarmé’s own address. In his 2011 article, Thériault extends his engagement to Bourdieu’s reading of a key passage from Mallarmé’s ‘Music and Letters’. Arguing that Bourdieu mistakes Mallarmé’s relation to the “literary game” for an elitist cynic, Thériault shows how the poet was not only exemplarily conscious of the sociological determinants of his practice, as Bourdieu recognized, but also that he understood the libidinal dynamics of literature — something the sociologist failed to elaborate. In a striking anticipation of Lacan, Mallarmé describes how the practice of reading and enjoying literature is performed “[i]n light of a superior attraction like a void”; in light, that is, of an Ideal or transcendent object of belief, which is ultimately revealed to be a “nothingness”. As Mallarmé clarifies, the vacuity of this Ideal does not prevent the reader from being “lured on” (*Divagations*, 187) by it. Like Lacan after him, Mallarmé recognizes “the perennial or invincible nature of the Ideal, beyond all of the twists and turns of the history of thought” (47). More importantly still, both Frenchmen understand how the desiring economy of the subject can be structured by an *absent* object, whose inexistence in no way prevents it from acting as a libidinal “motor” (Mallarmé’s own term, *Divagations*, 187). For Thériault, against Bourdieu, this mode of *jouissance* cannot be identified purely and simply with cynicism. This is not only because it operates pre-reflexively. Rather, as Thériault shows through a reading of an early letter written to Mallarmé by his friend Eugène Lefébure, Mallarmé’s subjective position is best described as that of a “pervert”. At once duplicitous and mystifying, read through the structural position of the pervert, Mallarmé can be seen to orient himself towards the restricted domain of literary production in late-19<sup>th</sup> century France in a way that allowed him to be aware of, detached from, yet capable of manipulating its singularly complex codes.

With Thierry Roger and Jean-François Hamel’s articles, we turn from libidinal to political economy. In ‘Art and Anarchy in the Time of Symbolism’, Roger provides perhaps the most extensive and informed treatment to date of Mallarmé’s relation to anarchism.<sup>43</sup> As Roger recalls, this question preoccupied prominent modern critics like Julia Kristeva, whose book *La révolution du langage poétique* includes a long section on the objective solidarity between the poet’s artistic negativity and anarchist political praxis.<sup>44</sup> Yet by drawing on newspaper and journal articles, books of literary criticism as well as novels from fin-de-siècle France, Roger proves that the question of anarchism already exercised the minds of Mallarmé’s literary contemporaries — perhaps even more so than it did his 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde readers. But Roger does more than rectify the scholarly record.<sup>45</sup> His article also clarifies the complex process of metaphorical transfer, as well as mutual misun-



derstanding, that linked literature to anarchism in late-19<sup>th</sup> century France. Firstly, Roger maps the most obvious sites of conflict between anarchism and Symbolism. Despite what he describes as the “sincere, profound and durable engagement” (62) of writers like Mirbeau, Quillard, Lazare or Fénéon with the anarchist movement, from the start there existed an irreducible tension between Symbolism’s tendency towards the autonomization or absolutization of literature, not to mention its historical pessimism, and anarchism’s progressivism and obvious concern for *le fait social*. Even their shared distaste for commodity society could not durably synthesize the egalitarianism of one with the aristocratism of the other. A more promising terrain of agreement, however, could be found in the “cardinal notion of the individual” (66). Yet as Roger explains, while one form of individualism “attack[ed] institutions and authority, the other attack[ed] the people, universal suffrage and equality understood as egalitarianism” (67). But where is Mallarmé to be situated on this constantly shifting terrain? Roger proceeds first by assessing the poet’s own pronouncements on anarchism, before turning to the formal properties of his work. While Mallarmé showed a deep distrust of what were for him the factitious forms of justice found in the institutions of the Third Republic, he showed a consistent scepticism towards modes of anarchist praxis such as bombings. Instead, he praised both the intellectual virtues and enduring political efficacy of writing. Most significant, however, was his desire to go beyond — or rather before — all existing political ideologies to again institute, through poetry, an “articulation between the human and the cosmic” (73). Following Bertrand Marchal’s *La religion de Mallarmé*, Roger thus concludes that however radical his poetic innovations, Mallarmé’s was ultimately a quite traditional “Grand politics” that sought a social form and cosmological harmony; a politics, in other words, that “would no doubt horrify an anarchist nominalist like Stirner” (74), not to mention many of Mallarmé’s own anarchist admirers.

Jean-François Hamel’s article picks up where Roger’s historical inquiry leaves off, turning this time to the political reception of Mallarmé in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Drawing on his account of the initial stages of this reception, which he presents in exhaustive detail in his 2014 book *Camarade Mallarmé: Une politique de la lecture*,<sup>46</sup> Hamel offers a genealogy of the figure of ‘le camarade Mallarmé’, a paradoxical incarnation of the poet as a privileged point of reference for progressive and revolutionary thinkers, from Sartre to the Telquellians, Badiou to Rancière. Hamel’s research sheds light on contemporary readings of Mallarmé, in particular those of Badiou and Rancière, and allows us to see, as he puts it, the “two chains of memory” (99) that have structured Mallarmé’s recent reception. On the one hand, Hamel discerns a tendency to treat Mallarmé’s work “as a philosophical hieroglyph that demands to be deciphered” in order to discover within it “the ethical and political foundations of a community to come” (99). On the other hand, Hamel reveals how Mallarmé’s nationalization — or sacralization — in the context of the Occupation and the Liberation determined that his exigent poetics and posture of aristocratic isolation became associated with a principled opposition to “the collaborationist

gregariousness of universal reportage” (99), as Hamel memorably puts it. In the most extensive section of his article, Hamel demonstrates that it was the decisive influence of Valéry’s reading of Mallarmé — indeed of his reading of late-19<sup>th</sup> Symbolism more generally — that laid the foundations for this figure of ‘le camarade Mallarmé’. For Valéry, Mallarmé was at once an aesthetic and an ethical guide. For later writers such as Henri Mondor and Maurice Blanchot, Valéry’s reading thus permitted the poet’s very position within the “Ivory Tower” to become the condition of possibility for his political and ethical potency. Moreover, it made him a metonymy of all that was best in French culture. As Hamel remarks, there was nothing obvious about this, since “[i]n his lifetime, his poetry was described as Latin, Hebrew, Chinese” (96): that is, as anything but French. Hamel’s work thus suggests that Mallarmé’s uncompromising linguistic radicality — his formal inventiveness — has ultimately become indissociable from the ethical and political guidance that, in the guise of ‘le camarade Mallarmé’, he has provided to many French thinkers since.

Vincent Kaufmann is one such critic intimately familiar with the various incarnations of ‘le camarade Mallarmé’.<sup>47</sup> In his 2011 book *La faute à Mallarmé: L’aventure de la théorie littéraire*,<sup>48</sup> Kaufmann uses the poet — or, rather, those readings of the poet published in journals such as *Tel Quel* and *Change* — as a point of condensation for the aesthetic and political concerns of post-Sartrean French literary theory. Kaufmann defends the utopian energy and theoretical inventiveness of this period’s signature texts, all the while admitting that today it is “no doubt closed as a chapter in the history of literary criticism”.<sup>49</sup> In ‘Believe That it Was to be Very Beautiful’, by contrast, Kaufmann turns away from theory to a more traditional form of literary history, even if he qualifies his article as an “anti-philological tale”. He takes up the crucial question of Mallarmé’s relation to his two most important predecessors, Victor Hugo and Charles Baudelaire. Focusing on Baudelaire as the poet who first — and perhaps forever — “defigured” French poetry, to adapt a term from Barbara Johnson to whom Kaufmann’s essay is dedicated, he describes the paradoxical intergenerational dialectic linking Mallarmé to his forebears. Is it possible, he asks, to be the heir of a poet notorious for his own inability to fully assume his history, who squandered his inheritance and neglected the property he was bequeathed; a poet, moreover, who denied the very existence of a transcendent Other from whom symbolic authority could flow? As Kaufman shows, Mallarmé’s first treatment of Baudelaire in *Literary Symphony* is a model of self-deception. Instead of registering that his predecessor had broken — indeed “denounced” (Kaufmann’s term, 112) — the poetic contract between religion, community and lyrical subjectivity, in his 1865 text Mallarmé treats him as nothing less than the preeminent exponent of a “religion of letters” (107). Comparing *Literary Symphony* with its heavily-modified reprise in *Divagations*, titled *Long Ago, in the Margins of a Copy of Baudelaire* (1888), Kaufmann notes how in the intervening period Mallarmé erased from his text all of the marks of subjectivity. For Kaufmann, Mallarmé’s infamous *death as an author* is above all a mark of his relation to Baudelaire. In regards to the poet’s well-known

letter to Henri Cazalis, Kaufmann argues that it is no coincidence it was written at almost the exact same time as Baudelaire's death. "Whatever the real state of Mallarmé's health", he writes, "whatever role hypochondria played (but all of this is even more significant if it is a case of hypochondria), it is necessary to point out that at the moment of Baudelaire's death Mallarmé begins to be sick, to die — as if he were contaminated by Baudelaire's death" (110). This "contamination" consists in the fact that far from promulgating "a religion of letters", Mallarmé came to recognize that Baudelaire had in fact "denounce[d] a specific poetic contract signed by God, the (charitable) poet and meaning (the good), a contract which had had its glory days and its romantic predecessors, Hugo in particular" (111). But if symbolic transmission was now impossible, for the simple reason that after Baudelaire the Symbolic itself had been revealed to be radically inconsistent, how did Mallarmé take up the intergenerational thread of French poetry? How, Kaufmann asks, can one "come after a poetry infected by a pathology?" (112), a pathology of transmission? For Kaufmann, Mallarmé's *œuvre* cannot be understood unless his apparent reprise of the Hugolian gesture of creating a poetic ceremony to unite a Sundered community is seen as a knowingly *post*-Baudelairean project. After *Les Fleurs du mal*, there are no more subjects or communities; no more God or "people". However, there is language, and thus poetry, even if its existence is as precarious as the communities it can fleetingly form. After swallowing Baudelaire's "tutelary poison", Mallarmé thus undertook the impossible task of creating a community for whom the big Other is knowingly barred.

Claude Pérez's piece 'Mallarmé, Polecat-Ferret', is similarly concerned with questions of transmission and poetic history. This time, however, it is not Mallarmé who occupies the unenviable position of the troubled heir, but rather the contemporary French poet Dominique Fourcade, who is introduced to English readers for perhaps the first time in his otherwise long and celebrated career. As Pérez points out, Fourcade's relationship to Mallarmé is unique in the contemporary intellectual context. For not only is he a working poet and theoretician of poetry in his own right, he is also a critic — at times furious, forgiving, but always energetic — of the "obscure Sphinx of Tournon".<sup>50</sup> Central to Fourcade's approach is the gap he perceives between Mallarmé's "programmes" and the actual "poems" that result from them. While an extensive and star-studded list of philosophers have mined Mallarmé's prose works for insights, Fourcade's judgement of them is devastating: "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" (127). However, as Pérez also makes clear, Fourcade's severity with respect to Mallarmé is interwoven with a deep ambivalence about the influence the poet has had on French letters. Recounting an at turns hilarious and horrifying dream, Fourcade imagines himself "being handcuffed to Mallarmé" (123). But is Mallarmé the policeman who has captured Fourcade as punishment for his heresy, or is Fourcade the one detaining Mallarmé, thus protecting contemporary French poets and artists from his deleterious influence? For Pérez, the answer is

both. Moreover, he demonstrates that Mallarmé and Fourcade share more than the latter is perhaps willing to admit. Not only does the postmodern bric-à-brac cluttering Fourcade's poems recall Mallarmé's staging of the salon décor of his time, but in its formal dispersal Fourcade's poetry shows the author of *Est-ce que j'ai pu placer un mot?* owes an unpayable — and thus disavowed — debt to Mallarmé.

Channelling Fourcade, Pérez remarks that philosophers do little of what Fourcade exemplarily does, namely to ask whether Mallarmé's poems are successful *as poems*. For Larissa Drigo, by contrast, there is no bathetic gap between the poet's soaring pretensions and his actual achievements. Correlatively, there is no reason to give up on the project of treating Mallarmé's work "as a reservoir or generator of concepts" (128). In 'Folding and Unfolding the Infinite', Drigo sets herself the difficult task of explaining how with *Un coup de dés* Mallarmé produced a work whose singular "configuration of space-time [was] capable of presenting its own infinitude" (137). For Drigo the infinity operative in *Un coup de dés* is without doubt a potential infinity. Drawing on two of Borges' short stories, 'The Garden of Forking Paths' and 'The Aleph', stories which present in a contracted, finite form both temporal and spatial infinities — infinities capable of being unfolded in the successive manner proper to reading — Drigo explains how Mallarmé seeks to do something similar in the space-time of his final poem. "From Borges", Drigo writes, "we can conclude that to demonstrate the inexhaustible infinity of literature, the poem must provide the following: the presentation of a potentially infinite series of convergent, divergent, or parallel times that intersect or are unaware of one another; and the presentation, in a restricted space, of a multiplicity of infinite spaces" (137). In demonstrating how Mallarmé achieves this, Drigo's analysis focuses on the formal features of *Un coup de dés*. The different motifs of the poem, for instance, constitute so many convergent and divergent narrative trajectories for the reader to follow, while the singular use of the double page and its central fold is supposed to stage the fan-like structure of the poem: its contraction and potentially infinite dilation of space and time. If in his 'Observation relative to the poem', Mallarmé claimed to have replaced "regular sound patterns or verses" with "prismatic subdivisions of the Idea", then according to Drigo Mallarmé's "Idea" is infinitely divisible. For her, the figure of the siren, whose impatient scales make disintegrate the "rock / false manor / which imposed / a limit on infinity", is the ideal incarnation of *Un coup de dés* itself. Drigo thus implicitly provides a novel interpretation of Valéry's intuition upon seeing the proofs of *Un coup de dés* for the first time, when he asked: "Was I not present at an event of a universal order?"<sup>51</sup>

Closing our collection is Guillaume Artous-Bouvet's piece 'Of a Latent Prose'. Combining close attention to the syntactical intricacies of the texts with a philosophical sensibility, Artous-Bouvet leads us back to a typically Lacanian problem also addressed by Thériault: the relation between desire and knowledge. Beginning with a comparison of Badiou and Rancière's readings of the sonnet 'A la nue accablante tu', Artous-Bouvet demonstrates that by translating the sonnet into a prose discourse, both philosophers fail to distinguish between three very different forms of

prose that Mallarmé mobilizes. First, there is “the literal and linear prose” (151) that relates the successive hypothetical events of the sonnet. Next, there is the sonnet’s immanent meta-discursive voice, through which it speaks of what it (ideally) does or is doing. As Artous-Bouvet suggestively puts it, this is “the reflexive *consciousness* of the poem”, as opposed to its mere “*meaning*” (151). Finally, there are Mallarmé’s “external” (146) prose pieces, which include his infamous “critical poems”. On the basis of this triple distinction, Artous-Bouvet proceeds to a close reading of ‘Prose (pour des Esseintes)’, a poem whose perplexing title foregrounds the very problematic of the piece. For Artous-Bouvet, ‘Prose’ is indeed a work of prose insofar as it takes the form of a linear narrative, at least at some of its key junctures. Yet it is also a work of prose insofar as it “expresses its own operation”: that is, it both performs and proclaims it is performing poetry’s “new duty” (153) to “transpos[e] a fact of nature into its vibratory near-disappearance” (*Divagations*, 210), as Mallarmé famously put it in ‘Crisis of Verse’. However, in order to double its effective operation with a discourse on its very operation, Artous-Bouvet shows that the poem must stage within itself some irreducible moment of enunciation. Identifying three such moments in ‘Prose’, Artous-Bouvet notes that the second person pronoun “tu” present in the opening verses — “Hyperbole ! de ma mémoire / Triomphalement ne sais-tu / Te lever...” — mysteriously disappears and is replaced by the first person plural pronoun “nous”, most notably in the ninth and tenth verses: “Nous promentions notre visage / (Nous fûmes deux, je le maintiens)”. For Artous-Bouvet, the parenthesis that surrounds this tenth verse, along with the verse’s strikingly assertoric tone — not to mention the strangely singular form given to the noun “visage” in the verse that precedes it — all suggest that the unity-in-duality of the poet and his companion — of the poem and its contemplative meta-discourse — is actually of the order of desire, not of actuality. Through this reading, Artous-Bouvet thus seems to conclude that if Mallarmé wrote extensive “external” prose pieces, then it was precisely to suture the irreducible gap between desire and knowledge, which the poem exemplarily articulates.

#### Notes

1. Jean-Michel Rabaté, ‘Lacan’s Return to Freud’, in Jean-Michel Rabaté (ed.) *Cambridge Companion to Lacan* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 1-24.
2. Georges Mounin, ‘Quelques traits du style de Jacques Lacan’, *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, January 1 (1969), pp. 84-92.
3. Cited in Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan: An Outline of a Life and a History of a System of Thought*, trans. Barbara Bray (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1997), p. 87.
4. Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 228.
5. Vincent Kaufmann, ‘Les styles du livre: Mallarmé et Lacan’, *Dalhousie French Studies*, Vol. 25, ‘Mallarmé, Theorist of our Times’ (Fall-Winter, 1993), p. 57.
6. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*. Translated by Barbara Johnson, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 210.

7. See Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (New York: Norton, 2006), p. 251, p. 801. Page numbers refer to the original French pagination, reproduced in the English translation.
8. Jean-Claude Milner, 'I Believed I Owed Mallarmé the Truth', in Robert Boncardo, Christian R. Gelder, *Mallarmé: Rancière, Milner, Badiou* (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017) [forthcoming].
9. Jean-Claude Milner, *L'Œuvre claire: Lacan, la science, la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 1995), p. 160.
10. 'I Believed I Owed Mallarmé the Truth', *op. cit.*
11. Philippe Sollers, *Lettres françaises*, 30 October-5 November, 1968.
12. Kristeva, J., *Séméiotiké : Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Editions du Seuil, 1969), Kristeva, J., *La révolution du langage poétique : L'avant-garde à la fin du XIXème siècle : Mallarmé et Lautréamont* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1974).
13. Philippe Sollers, 'Littérature et totalité', *Logiques* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1968), p. 109.
14. *La révolution du langage poétique, op. cit.*, p. 243.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 211
16. *Ibid.*, p. 243.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 246.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 247.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 245.
20. Jean-Claude Milner, *For the Love of Language*, trans. Ann Banfield (London: The Mac-Millan Press, 1990).
21. *Divagations*, p. 205.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
23. Jean-Claude Milner, *Les Noms indistincts* (Paris: Verdier, 2007), p. 41.
24. *L'Œuvre claire*, p. 62.
25. Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. xl.
26. Alain Badiou, 'Philosophy and Psychoanalysis', in *Conditions* (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 201-202.
27. Alain Badiou, *Lacan: L'antiphilosophie 3, 1994-1995* (Paris: Fayard, 2013), pp. 21-22, p. 38.
28. Joseph Attié, *Mallarmé le livre: Etude psychanalytique* (Toulon: Editions du Losange, 2007).
29. Jean Allouch, *Contre l'éternité: Ogawa, Mallarmé, Lacan* (Paris: Epel, 2009).
30. Patrick Thériault, *Le (Dé)montage de la fiction: La révélation moderne de Mallarmé* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2010).
31. *Divagations*, p. 187.
32. *Ibid.*



33. Ibid.

34. See for example Aleksić Branko, 'L'acte poétique absolu de Mallarmé et de Lacan', *Topique* 4, No. 109, (2009), pp. 87-128.

35. This piece has previously appeared, along with the original, in *Hyperion: On the Future of Aesthetics*, 'On Mallarmé', Vol. IX, No. 3 (Winter 2015), pp. 44-63, pp. 64-786.

36. *Theory of the Subject*, pp. 54-55.

37. Ibid., p. 72.

38. Ibid., p. 88.

39. Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds. Being and Event 2* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 4 (translation modified).

40. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Funeral Toast', in *The Poems in Verse*, trans. Peter Manson (Oxford, OH: Miami University Press, 2011), p. 107.

41. Jean-Claude Milner, 'Mallarmé Perchance', trans. Liesl Yamaguchi, in *Hyperion: On the Future of Aesthetics*, Vol. IX, No. 3 (Winter, 2015), p. 87.

42. Jean-Claude Milner, *Introduction à une science du langage* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1989), p. 21.

43. Readers interested in this topic will no doubt also find Patrick McGuinness' even more recent work stimulating. See Patrick McGuinness, *Poetry and Radical Politics in fin de siècle France: From Anarchism to L'Action française* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

44. See in particular *La révolution du langage poétique*, p. 427.

45. Roger's extraordinary and unsurpassable work on the *Coup de dés*, numbering over 900 pages in length, is similarly at once a work of historical reconstruction and critical limit-marking. See Thierry Roger, *L'Archive du Coup de dés: Etude critique de la réception d'Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard de Stéphane Mallarmé (1897-2007)* (Paris: Garnier, 2010).

46. Jean-François Hamel, *Camarade Mallarmé: Une politique de la lecture* (Paris: Minuit, 2014).

47. See Kaufmann's *Poétique des groupes littéraires, avant-gardes 1920-1970* (Paris: PUF, 1997).

48. Vincent Kaufmann, *La faute à Mallarmé: L'aventure de la théorie littéraire* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2011).

49. Ibid., p. 15.

50. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Mallarmé: La lucidité et sa face d'ombre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), p. 92.

51. Paul Valéry, 'Le *Coup de dés*. Lettre au directeur des Marges', *Œuvres, I*, éd. J. Hytier (Paris, Gallimard, coll. 'Pléiade', 1957), p. 624.

ALAIN BADIOU

IS IT EXACT THAT ALL THOUGHT  
EMITS A THROW OF DICE?

*Translated by Robert Boncardo & Christian R. Gelder*

**W**e have, in this place, in this theatre, supported several times the textual representation of music.<sup>1</sup> This was the case not long ago — and I remember it fondly — with my own text, *L'Echarpe Rouge*.

What I am going to say here will be a matter of abstraction without music. There will be nothing more than a person speaking: to this day this has been the law of the *Conférences du Perroquet*.

In order to summon up the courage required to propose only a few ornaments, I will seek refuge behind the following thesis of Mallarmé, which is that someone who speaks can on their own become the equivalent of all that music provokes. Mallarmé said this in the following terms: “At the exact moment when music appears better suited than any rite to what is present in the masses, though latent and incomprehensible, it has been shown that there is nothing, in the inarticulation or anonymity of those cries, that jubilation, that pride, and those transports, that can not with equal magnificence — and, what is more, with that clarity that is our conscious knowledge — be rendered by that old and holy elocution; or the Word, when someone proffers it”.<sup>2</sup>

After all, Mallarmé said this, precisely, in a conference. In doing so he justified once and for all for us that his be *du Perroquet*. We will also declare it retroactively to be so, thereby submitting ourselves to a very high standard.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of February 1890, in Brussels, Mallarmé pronounced in effect a conference on Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. Villiers had died in August 1889. Between he and Mallarmé there had been a profound friendship, forged in the years 1865–1870. It was thus that in 1870, Villiers had come to see his friend in Avignon, where Mallarmé was exercising the noble profession of teaching English in a secondary college, as he did for his whole life. Among the travelling companions of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam was Judith Gauthier, the fanatical admirer of Wagner.

Villiers de l'Isle-Adam is one of the very few writers not to have fled Paris during the Commune. From him we have an accurate and calmly composed account of the Commune, which compensates for the sinister declarations of the petulant and spiteful property owners that Flaubert, the Goncourts, George Sand and Leconte de Lisle revealed themselves to be in the circumstances. Only Hugo, Rimbaud, perhaps Verlaine, and Villiers, rose above the moral debacle and the profound villainy shown at this moment of truth by writers who, masquerading as aesthetes, had taken part in the commercial depravity of the Second Empire. Villiers noted in particular the beauty of Communard Paris, the visible happiness of the passers-by, the feeling that the real inhabitants of the city finally walked its streets.

I would add that Jean Aubry's book, which is appropriately titled *Une amitié exemplaire: Villiers de l'Isle-Adam et Stéphane Mallarmé*, was published in 1941. Let us allow these dates and names to resonate with each other: 1870, the Commune, Wagner, Villiers, Mallarmé, 1941. This interweaving of the worst of history, of intellectual genius, of friendship — I believe that it quite clearly constitutes what we can call the temporal *site* of Mallarmé. He himself referred to it as follows:

We are witnessing, in this fin-de-siècle, not — as it was during the last one — upheavals, but, far from the public square: a disturbance of the veil in the temple, with significant folds, and, a little, its rending.<sup>3</sup>

Mallarmé, who died in 1898 at the age of 56, could not yet imagine that what the rending of the veil would reveal was the foundational couple of the butchery of 14–18 and the October Revolution; and that thus, as far as the “public square” was concerned, we would not be left wanting. His statement seems perfectly appropriate to our own site, but perhaps the veil, torn once again, will allow us to see, once again, what is completely unknown to us.

Mallarmé began his homage to Villiers as follows:

A man habituated to dream, comes here to speak of another, who is dead.<sup>4</sup>

*Habituated to dream...* It is a paradoxical definition, because, in the poem entitled ‘Funeral Toast’, which Mallarmé wrote in 1873 to celebrate Théophile Gauthier, he states as a poetic imperative the prohibition of dream. Thus:

It is the whole domain of our true grove  
that the pure poet's humble, generous gesture  
prohibits dreams, his function's enemy.<sup>5</sup>

Let it be said in passing that this poem sketches a different constellation. The collection in which it appears, namely *Le Tombeau de Théophile Gauthier*, includes a sort of passage of which the dead man, this Théophile Gauthier, who knew how to make himself loved by all, is the absent cause: the passage Hugo-Mallarmé. The collection in fact opens with a superb poem by Hugo, the one in which we find the following famous lines that Malraux would later use as a title:

What a wild noise these oaks cut down  
For Herakles' pyre are making in the dusk.<sup>6</sup>

Only the poem by Mallarmé reaches the heights of such an opening. Mallarmé had a powerful and conclusive image of Hugo:

Hugo, in his mysterious task, brought all prose, philosophy, eloquence, history down to verse, and, since he was verse personified, he confiscated, from whoever tried to think, or discourse, or narrate, almost the right to speak. A monument in the desert, surrounded by silence; in a crypt, the divinity of a majestic unconscious idea – that is, that the form we call verse is simply itself literature; that there is verse as soon as diction calls attention to itself, rhyme as soon as there is style. Verse, I think, respectfully, waited until the giant who had identified it with his tenacious and firm blacksmith's hand came to be missing, in order to, itself, break.<sup>7</sup>

The *passe* from Hugo to Mallarmé is that of the crisis of verse, which immediately opens onto the mystery in letters. What is the French language as a literary language, if verse fails? Mallarmé is the watchman of this question; a question that is still being posed today and in terms of which he, Mallarmé, remains an enigmatic anticipation.

The prohibition of dream is certainly a post-Hugolian directive. But how can he who designates in the dream "his function's enemy" present himself as a "man habituated to dream"?

We can shed some light on this question if we ask what *real* is at stake here, which it would be imperative to subtract from dream. It is essential to understand that, at the antipodes of the connection between dream and Nature, in which the Romantic vision had its origins, and which Baudelaire had only half disentangled, since he remained nostalgic for it, Mallarmé holds that, in the epoch of the reign of technology, and of the accomplishment of Cartesianism in its effective possession, Nature has ceased to be of value as a referent for poetic metaphor: "Nature has taken place; it can't be added to, except for cities or railroads or other inventions forming our material".<sup>8</sup>

I will therefore hold that the real of which the Mallarméan text proposes the anticipation is never the unfolded figure of a spectacle. Mallarmé's doctrine devotes poetry to the *event*, which is to say to the pure *there is* of occurrence. We have misunderstood the function of the negative in Mallarmé, since we believed we discerned in it a nihilist despair. Certainly – and I devoted a long development in my *Theory of the Subject* to this – we find in him a complete dialectic of procedures of absence. The intelligibility of the most minor of his poems supposes that we carefully distinguish three regimes of negation: *vanishing*, which has causal value, *annulment*, which has conceptual value, *foreclosure*, which has null value.

But this dialectic has only an operative value. It organises an experience in which, all factuality being subtracted, the pure essence of that-which-takes-place is cap-

tured. The Mallarméan question is not: what is being? His question is: what is it “to take place” [avoir lieu], what is it for something “to happen” [se produire]? Is there a being of that-which-takes-place insofar as it takes place? Of course, this question is very close to another, which has often been taken to be central and which is: what is it to disappear? But disappearance [disparaître] is here only the obliquity of appearance [paraître], when what is in play is appearance [l'apparaître].

Mallarmé summons us to think that the touchstone of meaning and of truth lies not in what gives or shows itself, but in that which is, in his words, “sprung from the croup and the flight”.<sup>9</sup> Can there be, and under what conditions, a thought of what “springs forth” [surgir], a rational nomination of that which can only be counted once, having neither insistence nor consistence? It is precisely to the *point* of the real that, for Mallarmé, literature is devoted. In this sense it suits him to unburden literature of dream [délester du rêve] and nonetheless to be habituated to it, for this pure point can be grasped only insofar as one undertakes within oneself to *prohibit* dream. It is here that the prohibition, whose material is the dream, commands the impossible, whose equivocation is the real.

In Lacan's terminology, we will say that a prohibition bearing upon imaginary totalization authorizes a symbolic subtraction, from which is fixed a point of the real.

This is why any poem by Mallarmé describes the place of an aleatory event, which we are required to interpret on the basis of its traces. Contrary to what is most often said, poetry is no longer submitted to action. This poetic universe is precisely the Hugolian *passe*, in the sense that it is the reverse of the Contemplations. The meaning, to my mind always univocal, of Mallarmé's text does not result from some symbolic substrate, or from a thematic obsession. In Mallarmé, there is no profound depth. Meaning results from the detection of that which has *taken place* [ce qui s'y est produit], in the text — from the eventual putting-into-play of that which, at the beginning, we have only the décor.

You know of the famous “hermeticism” of Mallarmé, which has led many literary exegetes to gloss, and to the all-too convenient doctrine of polysemy, by virtue of which a certain entitlement is given to arbitrary interpretations. This “hermeticism” should instead be thought in terms of the category of the enigma, in the sense of a detective novel. This empty salon, this vase of flowers, this eventail, this tombstone, this sombre and deserted sea, of what crime, of what catastrophe, of what major lack are they indicative? The greatest interpreter of Mallarmé, the Australian Gardner Davies, entitled one of his books *Mallarmé et le drame solaire*. It is the word “drama” [drame] taken from this title that holds the general value. The sunset is in effect an example of one of those defunct events, of that appearance-in-disappearance, of which it is necessary to reconstruct, in the heart of the night, the “will-have-taken-place.” But all the poems have a dramatic structure. If, at the beginning of the poem, you have an extremely condensed set of figures — a few objects — then it is according to the same law that determines that, in a detective novel, there can be no more than a few characters, indeed no more than ten, since

it is amongst the members of this finite group that *suspicion* has to circulate, and that beyond a certain number it becomes diffuse and insignificant. Mallarméan objects are essentially suspects who are suspected of having supported or hindered a radical action, an event that must be saved on the edge of forgetting. There must be a strictly circumscribed scene such that from the interpretant — from the reader — nothing is hidden. The descriptive protocol of the poem does not go beyond a system of clues such that a single hypothesis concerning what has taken place suffices to give it consistency. A sole deduction on the basis of this hypothesis must allow one to say how, having been abolished, the event will nevertheless fix itself in the décor, becoming thus the eternity of a “pure notion”. And there is no other pure notion than the pure “there is”.

This can also be said as follows: every law is a *law for suspects*. Poetry suspects being of not releasing the event it has put behind bars.

If poetry is an essential use of language, this is not because it is devoted to Presence, to the proximity of being; on the contrary, it is because it submits language to the maintenance of that which, being radically singular, pure action, would without it have fallen back into the nullity of the place. Poetry is the assumption of an undecidable: that of action itself, the action of the act, which we can only *know* has taken place by wagering on its truth.

Being is that to which knowledge is devoted, the event that from which a truth is woven.

An event does not take place just anywhere. There are what I will call *evental sites*, whose ontological structure is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the essentially paradoxical multiple of the event to occur there. This structure always involves the site lying *on the edge of the void*, in the sense that the terms that compose the site *qua* multiple-presentation are not themselves presented. An evental site is, in a global situation, a multiple which is counted-as-one on the condition that that which belongs to it is not. We can thus demonstrate that the factory is an evental site of modern politics, in the sense that, under the name of *enterprise*, it is presented, but without its workers being presented nor, truth be told, able to be presented. Except that, precisely, the interpretative intervention undertakes, on the basis of the event, to put into circulation a *name* for this un-presentable. The evental site thus conjoins the solidity of the one-multiple with the errancy of the void, which is fixed only in the dialectic of the event and the intervention. In substance: an intervention is that which makes a name from an unrepresented element of the site in order to qualify the event of which this site is the site. A poem by Mallarmé is a fictive intervention.

What did not elude Mallarmé was that the status of the workers has to do with the dialectic of the site, the event and the intervention. In the text titled ‘Conflict’ — and for which, at the point at which we find ourselves, is worth the entirety of *Germinal* by Zola — Mallarmé writes the following, making of the sleep of the rail-



road workers beneath his windows the emblem of a non-presentation, the sublation of which his thought must henceforth devote itself to:

Constellations begin to shine: I wish that, in the darkness that covers the blind herd, there could also be points of light, eternalizing a thought, despite the sealed eyes that never understood it — for the fact, for exactitude, for it to be said.<sup>10</sup>

Mallarmé, you see, shows that what is at stake is, precisely, that the invisibility of the workers, to which the thought of the intervention is exposed, can be *said*. And he concludes magnificently:

Keeping watch over these artisans of elementary tasks, I have occasion, beside a limpid, continuous river, to meditate on these symbols of the People — some robust intelligence bends their spines every day in order to extract, without the intermediary of wheat, the miracle of life which grounds presence: others in the past built aqueducts or cleared fields for some implement, wielded by the same Louis-Pierre, Martin, Poitou, or the Norman. When they are not asleep, they thus invoke one another according to their mothers or their provinces. But in fact their births fall into anonymity, and their mothers into the deep sleep that prostrates them, while the weight of centuries presses down on them, eternity reduced to social proportions.<sup>11</sup>

You see that the poet is the *watchman* of the invisibility of the workers.

You also see that it is the word “people” that is drawn from the void of the worker’s sleep, and which, by the intervention of the text, circulates henceforth under the injunction of an eternal value.

More generally, it is necessary to conceive of the poem as an intervention at the outskirts of an evental site, whose fiction it institutes. This intervention aims to detect the event whose name will break with and separate from the void. For this separation between the void and the one, between the site and the unrepresentable, the established order, that of reality, is perpetuated. Yet this separation is an injustice done to being. Poetry is truth since it proposes a reparative fiction for the injustice done to being. This injustice is that the event is prohibited from being.

With regard to this definition, *Un coup de Dés...* occupies a general position, insofar as what is at stake in it is the doctrine of the event as such and not its investment in such and such a figure.

I will first read you this text, conscious of thus inviting you to read it for yourself, written as it is for the eye rather than for the ear.

Mallarmé expressly anticipated that his absolute Book be read in public. He saw in these readings an operation at once political and spiritual, which would give the public the representation of that which this public — like the railroad workers from before — held within itself of the invisible. He imagined that this public would be

immense. His calculations predicted that, performance after performance, there would a minimum of 480000 participants, listeners or readers.

He conceived of this operation as a relation to the *crowd*, an essential term for Mallarmé. He said: "In this proof by the crowd through narrations or reciprocity, me, I am a simple reader carrying my copy."

The Book, having disappeared in the reading, became its central void. Mallarmé notes: "The Book, same and null, as central, angel."

To make, by reading Mallarmé's text, an angel pass by a detachment of the crowd, which this evening you constitute, is to be faithful to his wish.

I note that, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January and the 24<sup>th</sup> of February, Antoine Vitez and myself will, in this very place, set ourselves this same task, without any commemorative reference but by the sole and simple effect of our common admiration for this poetry and this prose, whose status in our language is properly unique.

If I now read *Un coup de Dés*, then it is as a text of thought, as the greatest theoretical text that exists on the conditions for thinking the event.

*A throw of dice will never*

*Even when launched in eternal circumstances, from the depths of a shipwreck,*

*Though it be/that the Abyss, blanched, spread, furious, beneath an incline  
desperately plane on a wing (its own) fallen back in advance from being unable  
to dress its flight, and covering the spurtings, cutting of the surges, most  
inwardly sums up the shadow buried in the deeps by this alternate sail, to the  
point of adapting to the wingspan its gaping maw like a shell of a ship, listing  
to starboard or larboard.*

*The Master, beyond ancient reckonings, the maneuver forgotten with the  
age, arisen/ — formerly he would grasp the helm —, inferring, from this  
conflagration at his feet from the unanimous horizon, that there is readied,  
tossed about, and mixed, in the hand that would clasp it as one shakes one's  
fist at a destiny and the winds, the unique Number which cannot be another  
(Spirit to cast it into the storm, to fold back the division and pass on, proudly),  
hesitates (corpse by the arm separated from the secret it withholds), rather  
than play, as a hoary maniac, the game in the name of the waves (one invades  
the head, flows in the submissive beard — shipwreck, this, pertaining, to man,  
without vessel, no matter/where vain)/ from ancient time not to open up the  
hand clenched beyond the useless head: legacy, amid disappearance, to someone  
ambiguous, the ulterior immemorial demon having, from nullified regions,  
induced the old man toward this supreme conjunction with probability. This  
one (his puerile shade caressed and polished and rendered and washed, made  
supple by the waves and removed from the hard bones lost among the timbers),  
born of a frolic, the sea through the ancestor, or the ancestor against the sea,  
tempting an idle chance.*

*(Nuptials from which the veil of illusion sprung up, their haunting, like the ghost of a gesture, will falter, will fall, madness).*

*Abolish*

*As if, an insinuation simple, in the silence, enrolled with irony, or the mystery hurled, howled, in some nearby whirlpool of hilarity and horror, flutters, about the abyss, without strewing it, or fleeing, and out of its cradles the virgin sign.*

*As if, solitary distraught feather, — unless a midnight toque encounters, or grazes it, and immobilizes on the crumpled velvet by a somber guffaw this rigid whiteness; ridiculous; in opposition to the sky, too much so not to mark in the slightest detail whoever, bitter prince of the reef, wears it (as an heroic headdress irresistible but contained by his small virile reason) in a lightning flash. Anxious, expiatory and pubescent, (mute laughter, that If)*

*The lucid and lordly crest of vertigo invisible on the brow scintillates, then shadows a delicate dark form standing upright, in its Siren twist, long enough to slap, with impatient terminal scales forked, a rock, false manor immediately evaporated into mist, which imposed a limit on infinity.*

*It was the number — born of the stars — ?*

*Were it to exist (other than as scattered dying hallucination)*

*Were it to begin and were it to cease (springing up as denied, and closed off when made manifest) at last through some thinly diffused emanation*

*Were it to be numbered*

*evidence of a totality however meagre*

*Were it to illumine*

*It would be, worse? no, more nor less, but as much indifferently,*

*Chance.*

*(Falls the feather, rhythmic suspension of disaster, to be buried in the original spray, whence formerly its delirium sprung up to a peak withered by the identical neutrality of the abyss).*

*Nothing, of the memorable crisis or might the event have been accomplished in view of all results null human, will have taken place (an ordinary elevation pours out absence), but the place — some splashing below of water as if to disperse the empty act, abruptly which, otherwise, by its falsehood would have founded perdition, in these latitudes, of indeterminate waves in which all reality dissolves;*

*Except, on high, perhaps, as far as place can fuse with the beyond (aside from the interest marked out to it in general by a certain obliquity through a certain declivity of fires), toward what must be the Septentrion as well as North, a*

*constellation, cold from forgetfulness and desuetude not so much, that it doesn't number, on some vacant and superior surface, the successive shock in the way of stars of a total account in the making;*

*Keeping vigil, doubting, rolling, shining and meditating, before coming to a halt at some terminus that sanctifies it.*

*All thought emits a Throw of Dice.*

*(Note: The text here reproduced is that from the reading, punctuated by my pauses)<sup>12</sup>*

In *Un coup de Dés*, the metaphor for the fact that any evental site is on the edge of the void is constructed from a deserted horizon hanging over a stormy sea. These are stripped back to the pure immanence of the nothing — of unpresentation — which Mallarmé names the “eternal circumstances” of action. The term by which Mallarmé always designates a multiple presented within the confines of un-presentation is the Abyss, which, in *Un coup de dés...* is “spread,” “blanched”, and refuses in advance any flight from itself, “the wing” of its own foam being “fallen back in advance from being unable to dress its flight.”

The paradox of an evental site is that it is identifiable only on the basis of what it does not present in the situation in which it itself is presented. It is only insofar as it makes-one the inexistent multiples in a situation that a multiple is on the edge of the void.

Mallarmé ingeniously presents this paradox by composing, on the basis of the site — the deserted Ocean — a *phantom* multiple that metaphorizes the inexistence of which the site is the presentation. In the scenic frame you have only the Abyss, indistinguishable sea and sky. But out of the “desperately plane incline” of the sky and the “gaping maw” of the waves, there is composed an image of a ship, of its sail and prow, revoked as soon as it is invoked, such that the desert of the site “most inwardly sums up ... a ship [batiment]” that does not exist, being only the figurative interiority of what the empty site indicates, with nothing more than its own resources, the probable absence. Thus the event will not only occur *in* the site, but will do so by summoning that which the site contains of the unrepresentable: the ship “buried in the deep,” whose abolished plenitude — since only the Ocean is presented — authorizes us to announce that action takes place “from the depth of a shipwreck.” For any event, in addition to being localized by its site, produces the ruin of the site *with respect to the situation*, since it retroactively names its interior void. The “shipwreck” singlehandedly gives us these allusive debris of which is composed, in the one of the site, the undecidable multiple of the event.

A fundamental characteristic of the event is that it is ultra-one, in the sense that it is itself the determining element of the multiple that it is. A revolution, a strike, a war, a significant artistic representation — each of these contain their own proper name. When Saint-Just declared, in 1794, that “the revolution is frozen,” he is certainly referring to a multiplicity of factors, fatigue, terroristic impotence, the

weight of the war and military personnel. But he refers to, as being immanent to these terms, and as the ultra-one of their multiple, the revolution itself, which also, insofar as it can be identified within the situation that it itself names, is in a position of self-belonging.

In Mallarmé's text, the name of the event, internal as it is to its being, will arrange itself on the basis of a debris from the phantom ship, this being a symbol of the fact that the site does not present its own terms. The debris is the captain of the shipwrecked ship, the "master," whose arm held high above the waves grips between its fingers the two dice that are to be cast upon the surface of the sea. In "the hand that would hold it" there "is readied tossed about and mixed [...] the unique Number which cannot be another."

That the gesture of throwing the dice is to be performed by the captain, which literally draws from the bare place the shipwreck of an inexistent ship — therefore from the disappearance of a nonbeing — indicates that the name of the event, its circulation on the surface of reality, can in effect only be drawn from the void that borders the evental site. Such is the function of all intervention: to decide that the event belongs to the situation, by drawing from the void which it borders, which is to say from unrepresented terms, the name under which the event will henceforth circulate and propagate its faithful consequences.

Why is the event, insofar as it occurs in the one of the site and on the basis of the "shipwrecked" multiples, which this one presents only in their result-one, a throw of the dice? What does this name signify? This gesture symbolizes the event in general, namely that which, as a pure contingency that cannot be inferred from the situation, is no less a fixed multiple, a number, which nothing can modify as soon as it has unfolded — "folded back the division" — the sides of its visible faces. A throw of dice conjoins the emblem of chance to that of necessity, to the erratic multiple of the event to the retroactive readability of the count. The event in question in *Un coup de Dés...* is therefore the production of an absolute symbol of the event. What is at stake in throwing the dice "from the depths of a shipwreck" is to make an event of the thought of the event.

The difficulty is as follows: an event is not itself a term of the situation for which it is an event. This multiple is an 'ultra-one', as I have said. Its essence determines that, by a special procedure that I will call the intervention, deciding the belonging of the event to the situation be decided. Considered as a simple multiple, with the recognizably paradoxical property of being self-belonging, the event is *undecidable*. It belongs to the place, or it does not: this undecidability being a matter of principle.

What results from this is that an event whose content is the eventality of the event (and such is the dice thrown "in eternal circumstances"), can only take the *form* of indecision. Since the master must produce the absolute event (the event that, Mallarmé says, will abolish chance, being the active and fully realized concept of the "there-is"), he must suspend the production from a hesitation that is itself absolute, thereby indicating that the event is a multiple that one can neither know nor see

if it belongs to the situation of its site. We shall never see the master throw the dice, for on the scene of action all we have access to is a hesitation as eternal as its circumstances: “The master [...] hesitates [...] rather than play as a hoary maniac the game in the name of the waves [...] not to open up the hand clenched beyond the useless head.” “To play the game,” or “to not open the hand”? In the first case, we miss the essence of the event, since we *decide* in anticipation that it will occur. Likewise for the second case, since “nothing will have taken place but the place.” Between the event annulled by the reality of its visible belonging to the situation and the event annulled by its total invisibility, the sole representable figure of the concept of the event is the *mise-en-scene* of its undecidability.

Moreover, the entirety of *Un coup de Dés...* organises a stupefying series of metaphorical transformations around the theme of the undecidable. From this raised arm, which – perhaps – holds the “secret” of the number, there unfolds, according to the technique that had already summoned the unrepresentability from the oceanic site by superimposing an image of a phantom vessel, a fan of analogies unfolds by which, little by little, the equivalence between the throwing and not throwing of dice is achieved – such is the metaphoric treatment of the *concept* of undecidability.

The “supreme conjunction with probability” that the old man, hesitating to throw the dice on the surface of the sea, represents, is firstly – and as an echo of the initial foam from which the sail of the drowned ship was woven – transformed into nuptial robes (the nuptials of the event and the situation), a frail fabric on the edge of vanishing, which “will falter, will fall”, blown apart by the nothingness of presentation in which unrepresentables of the site are dispersed.

Then this veil, at the moment of disappearing, becomes a “solitary feather,” which “flutters about the abyss.” What more beautiful image of the event, at once impalpable and crucial, than this white feather on the sea, of which we cannot reasonably decide if it will be “scattered” across the situation or whether it will “flee” it?

The feather, at the possible end of its errancy, adjusts itself to this marine pedestal as if to a velvet hat. Then, underneath this headgear where a *fixed* hesitation (“this rigid whiteness”) adjoins “the sombre guffaw” of the massivity of the place, who do we see arise but – miracle of the text – Hamlet himself, the “bitter prince of the reef”: that is, exemplarily, this subject of Theatre who can find no admissible reason for deciding if he should, or should not, and when, kill the murderer of his father.

The “lordly crest” of the Romantic headgear with which the Dane adorns himself throws off the last fires of evental undecidability – it “scintillates then shadows” – and in this shadow where once again everything risks being lost, a siren and a rock arise – poetic temptation of the gesture and massivity of the place – both of which will this time vanish. For the “impatient terminal scales” of the temptress serve only to make the rock, this “false manor,” “evaporate into mist,” which had claimed to impose “a limit on infinity.” Understand this: the undecidable equivalence of the gesture and the place has at this point been refined, on the scene of analogies, by such successive transformations, that a single supplementary image annihilates



the correlative image: the impatient gesture of the tail of a siren, which invites a throw of dice, cannot but make the limit to the infinity of indecision — that is to say the local visibility of the event — disappear and thus bring back the original site, which dismisses the two terms of the dilemma, for lack of having failed to establish a tenable asymmetry between them, on the basis of which a rational choice could have been stated. On no discernible rock of the situation is the mythological chance of an appeal disposed. This return to a prior stage is admirably stylized by the reappearance of an anterior image, that of the feather, which this time will be “buried in the original spray”, its “delirium” (the wager of being able to decide an absolute event), having risen up as high as it could, up to a “peak” from where, figuring the undecidable essence of the event, it falls back, “withered by identical neutrality of the abyss.” It will neither have been able to join the abyss (to throw the dice) nor flee it (to avoid the gesture), it will have exemplified the impossibility of a rational choice — of abolishing chance — and in this identical neutrality will have simply abolished itself.

Into this figurative development, Mallarmé inserts his abstract lesson, which is announced on the 8<sup>th</sup> sheet, between Hamlet and the siren, by a mysterious “If.” The 9<sup>th</sup> sheet breaks the suspense: “If [...] it was the number, it would be chance.” If the event were to deliver up the fixed finitude of the one-multiple that it is, it would not follow that we could have rationally decided its link to the situation.

The fixity of the event as a result, its count-for-one, is carefully detailed by Mallarmé: it would come into *existence* (“it would exist other than as a hallucination”); it would be held within its *limits* (“it would begin and it would cease”), having surged up in its very disappearance (“sprung up and denied”) and closed itself off in its appearance (“closed off when made manifest”), it would be multiple (“it would be numbered”); but it would have also been *counted for one* (“evidence of a totality however meagre”). In short, the event would be in the situation, it would have been presented. But this presentation would either swallow it up in the neutral regime of anonymous (“the identical neutrality of the abyss”), allowing its essence *qua* event to escape; or, having no perceptible link with this regime, the event would be “worse/no/more nor less/but as much indifferently/chance,” and consequently nothing there would not have been represented, via the event of the event, of the absolute notion of the “there is”.

Should we thus conclude, in nihilist fashion, that the “there is” is forever groundless [in-fondé], and that thought, devoting itself to structures and to essences, leaves outside of its scope the interruptive vitality of the event? Or even that the power of the place is such that, at the undecidable point of the outplace, reason vacillates and cedes ground to the irrational? This is what the 10<sup>th</sup> sheet, where it is stated that “nothing will have taken place but the place,” might have us believe. The “memorable crisis,” which the absolute event symbolized in the roll of the dice would have represented and which would have had the privilege of escaping from the logic of the result, would have accomplished itself “in view of all null human results”. This means: the ultra-one of the number would have transcended the human, all-too

human, law of the count-for-one, which demands that the multiple — because the one is not — can not exist, except as the result of structure. By the absoluteness of a gesture, a self-founding interruption would have fused together the aleatory and the count, chance would have affirmed and abolished itself in the ultra-one, “the stellar result,” of an event that encrypts the essence of the event. But no. “Some splashing below” on the sea’s surface, the pure site now devoid of any interiority, even phantasmatic, comes to “disperse the empty act.” Except, Mallarmé tells us, if by chance the absolute event had been able to occur, the “falsehood” of this act (a falsehood that is the fiction of a truth), would have provoked the ruin of the indifference of the place, “the perdition [...] of these indeterminate waves.” Since the event was not able to engender itself, it is necessary, it seems, to acknowledge that the “indeterminate waves” triumph over it, that the place is sovereign, that “nothing” is the true name of that which takes place, and that poetry, as language that seeks to eternally fix that which takes place, is indistinguishable from commercial uses of language in which names have for their vile office to make circulate imaginary links that support a prosperous and vain reality.

But this is not the last word. On the 11<sup>th</sup> sheet, which opens with the promise of an “except perhaps,” there is suddenly inscribed, at once outside of all possible calculation — and thus in a structure which is itself that of the event —, and as a synthesis of all that has preceded, the stellar double of the suspended throw of the dice: the Great Bear (the constellation “toward ... the Septentrion”), enumerating its seven stars and effecting “the successive shock in the way of stars of a total count in the making”. To the “nothing” of the preceding sheet there responds, in the outplace (“as far as place can fuse with the beyond”) the essential figure of number and thus the concept of the event. This event is precisely at once self-engendering [*advenue de lui-même*] (“keeping vigil / doubting / rolling / shining and meditating”) and a result, a stopping-point (“before coming to a halt / at some terminus that sanctifies it”).

How is this possible? To understand it what must be remembered is that at the end of the metamorphoses in which indecision was inscribed (the arm of the master, veil, feather, Hamlet, siren), we did not arrive at a non-gesture, but rather at the equivalence of gesture (throwing the dice) and non-gesture (not throwing). The feather that returns to the “original spray” was thus the purified symbol of the undecidable, not the renouncement of action. That “nothing” had taken place meant only that nothing decidable in the situation could figure the event as such. By giving precedence to the place over the idea that an event can be calculated to occur there, the poem accomplishes the essence of the event, which is precisely, from the point of view of the place, incalculable. The pure “there is” is simultaneously chance and number, multiple and ultra-one, such that the scenic presentation of its being delivers nothing but non-being because all existents demand the structured necessity of the one. As an unfounded, self-belonging multiple — indivisible signature of itself — the event can indicate itself only as being beyond the situation, even if it is necessary to wager that it has manifested itself there.

Also, with the courage that it takes to hold the gesture in its equivalence to the non-gesture, and the risk of abolition in the site, the reward is the supernumerary emergence of the constellation, which fixes in the sky of Ideas the ultra-one of the event.

Certainly, the Great Bear — this arbitrary number [chiffre], which is the sum of four and three, and therefore has nothing to do with the Parousia of a supreme count that would be symbolized, for example, by the double six — is “cold from forgetfulness and desuetude,” for the eventuality of the event is anything but a warm [chaleureuse] presence. Nevertheless, the constellation, “on some vacant and superior surface,” is subtractively equivalent to all the being of which the event is capable, and fixes as our task its interpretation, since it is impossible for us to will it.

Furthermore, the conclusion to this prodigious text, the most incisive that exists on the limpid seriousness of a conceptual drama, is a maxim I once gave a different version of in my *Theory of the Subject*. There, I said that ethics comes down to the imperative: “Decide from the point of the undecidable.” Mallarmé writes this as follows: “All thought emits a throw of dice.” Even if “a throw of the dice will never abolish chance,” we should not conclude with nihilism, with the uselessness of action, and even less with the managerial cult of reality and the fictive links it proliferates. For if the event is erratic, and if from the point of view of the situation it cannot be decided whether it exists or not, then we are entitled to wager, which is to say to legislate without law as to its existence. Since undecidability is a rational attribute of the event, the salvific guarantee of its non-being, no other form of vigilance is possible than confronting the event with the anxiety of hesitation and the courage of the outplace. One who wanders on the edge of evental sites, faithful to the vocation of intervening there in order to draw from the void a supernumerary name — some of you here will recognize yourselves in this figure. Mallarmé says to them that they are at once the feather, which “flutters about the abyss,” and the star, “on high, perhaps.”

#### Notes

1. Originally published in *Les conférences du Perroquet*, No. 5 (janvier, 1986) 3–20 and republished in this English version in *Hyperion: On the Future of Aesthetics*. Vol. IX, No. 3 (Winter, 2015). We would like to sincerely thank A.J. Bartlett, Justin Clemens and Sigi Jötkandt for their invaluable and generous suggestions on earlier versions of this translation. We are also grateful to Oliver Feltham, whose pioneering translation of *Being and Event* we closely consulted [TN].
2. Stéphane Mallarmé, “Villiers de L’Isle-Adam”, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 507. Translation from Rosemary Lloyd, *Mallarmé: The Poet and His Circle* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 225. Translation modified.
3. Stéphane Mallarmé, “Crisis of Verse”, *Divagations*, translated by Barbara Johnston (Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 201. Translation modified.
4. Stéphane Mallarmé, “Villiers de L’Isle-Adam”, *Œuvres complètes*, p. 481.

5. Stéphane Mallarmé, *The Poems in Verse*, translated by Peter Manson (Oxford, Ohio: Miami University Press, 2011), p. 107.
6. Victor Hugo, “For Théophile Gautier”, *Selected Poems of Victor Hugo: A Bilingual Edition*, translated by Blackmore, E.H., Blackmore, A. H. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 549.
7. Stéphane Mallarmé, “Crisis of Verse”, *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 201.
8. Stéphane Mallarmé., “Music and Letters”, *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 187. Translation modified.
9. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, tr. by Henry Weinfield (Berkley: University of California Press, 1994). p. 79.
10. Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘Conflict’, *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
11. Ibid.
12. Stéphane Mallarmé, *A Throw of the Dice*, *Collected Poems*, *op. cit.*, pp. 124–145. We have retained the form of Badiou’s presentation of the poem [TN].

JEAN-CLAUDE MILNER

THE TELL-TALE CONSTELLATIONS

*Translated by* Christian R. Gelder

Constellations do not exist; there only exist the stars that compose them.<sup>1</sup> This is a lemma of modern science. It is also one of the differential traits that separates the *phusis* of the Ancients from post-Galilean Nature.

That constellations exist follows from the privileged relationship *phusis* has to the gaze. For constellations allow themselves to be seen: in truth, they do nothing but this. A celestial body that no one sees cannot be said to not exist for astronomy today. This is the case for exoplanets. Planets exterior to our solar system escape the most powerful instruments; only calculation restores them and authorizes us to name each of them. However, a constellation no one sees would be a contradiction in terms; by the same token, no name would be assigned to it. An observer is required; he must be in possession of both sight and language; he is the man of Ovid, whose face is turned upwards. Constellations only exist for him and through him. Animals have no use for them, they who see the stars and sometimes use them as a guide. As for the gods who would see them and name them, these gods would be, in a strict sense, anthropomorphic; such were the ancient gods, such is not the Christian God. A new light presides over the birth of Christ — we can argue whether it was a comet or a nova, but it was certainly not a constellation, a recurrent and regular sign. There is a great difference between the Christ child and the child from Virgil's fourth Eclogue: *Jam redit et virgo...*

Man looks at the starry sky and persuades himself that they are assembled into figures. He names these figures. On the basis of myths and tales, Greek or not. Except that, within the dispositif of *phusis*, the *episteme* recognized constellations as objects worthy of it; Eratosthenes can relate the legendary birth of constellations (*Catasterismi*) without ceasing to be the astronomer we know. In the dispositif of modern science, there is nothing like this. Nature is not made for the gaze — it neither hides itself nor shows itself. Visible or not, the stars are real; precisely because they are visible, constellations are imaginary. The patterns they form are nothing other than a representation that a disoriented gaze gives itself in order to suspend, for an instant, an uncontrollable sideration. There is no calculable rule in

these figures, except the pregnancy of some beautiful form; there is no relation between the points that compose it, except the pattern itself; there is no nature, apart from a hazard [*aléa*] that knows no stochastic or statistical law. Nothing, except an avoidance of an indefinite pulverization of the starry sky and its effect of horror. Nothing, except the demand for surveying, which is the same as the demand for language [*langage*] (I do not say “language” [*langue*]): that the sky be no less surveyed than the earth and no less determined by language [*que le ciel ne soit pas moins arpenté que la terre et pas moins langagier*].

To dissipate the constellations in order to count only the stars, the planets or the galaxies, is a decisive gesture. Conserving them for means of practical orientation, such a transaction is deft, but changes nothing at the heart of things (the decision can be traced back, it seems, to Herschel). Taking the Polaris as real and the two Bears as imaginary amounts to affirming something that in no way goes without saying: it is not because something is seen that it must be taken into account; it is not because two things are seen with the same evidence that they must be accounted for in the same manner. The gaze that grasps the Polaris also grasps the Small Bear that includes it and the Great Bear that is next to it; however, this same gaze does not capture the same type of existence all at once. It must, then, be concluded that *phainomena* do not form a consistent class; thus they do not need to be preserved together, but each must be examined one by one, without excluding the possibility that only some are to be preserved and others forever dispelled; they need not be screened according to their qualities — the qualities of stars and the constellations are the same — but according to another screening, which knows nothing of qualities. Reciprocally, the human eye is not the ultimate place of science; it does not determine Nature, since Nature is not a spectacle. The celestial orbs, which no one sees and no one names (and which at best can be calculated), are more effective than the constellations that everybody sees and names.

The constellations disappeared along with knowledge that the greatest had taken to be crucial. A sacrificial gesture is thus accomplished. It is nevertheless constantly denied. The indistinctness of the denominations [*les noms indistincts*] sky, celestial vault, starry sky, and stars cast a convenient veil over this ambiguity. To take just one example, is the starry sky that Kant speaks of constellated or not? The difference is profound and brings with it the question of the moral law. If the moral law in me is the strict analogue of the constellations outside of me, then, like the constellations outside of me, the moral law is nothing more than a picture I fabricate for myself in order to find my way in the deserts of love or the ocean of passions. We willingly conclude that only the passions are real. However, if the moral law in me is the analogue of a star outside of me — say, once again, the Polaris — then it is a real, for which the constellations (various religions, moral perceptions, judicial codes) only provide a mnemonic aid. Enlightened Protestantism, like a Small Bear of morality, would give a meaning to the WASP fashion of having Teddy Bears. According to the first reading, Kant touches the real only by turning into Sade; according to the second, Kant touches the real without such an inversion. The prob-

lem is that, without doubt, Kant consists precisely in the impossibility of stopping the pendulum and that, in him, the real incessantly turns into the imaginary and vice-versa.

That the poets encountered this question should not surprise us. After all, poetry in its own memory is circumscribed by constellations — think of the Pleiades, from Sappho to du Bellay. But it was up to the poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century specifically to confront the sacrifice demanded by science; among these poets I will distinguish, following Jacques Roubaud, the poets of the sonnet. And among these poets of the sonnet, I will distinguish Mallarmé. I hold that in posing the question of the sonnet, of its laws, of their strict character (a character accentuated by Banville, as Roubaud shows), they all have, in fact, posed the question of science. More precisely, it was because they were solicited by the emergence of the science of Nature in its triumphant form that they perceived themselves as being solicited by poetic formalism. In its artificiality and in its rigor. Conversely, the poet who promoted not mathematized science but history as legend to the summit of possible knowledge was also the most indifferent to the sonnet: Victor Hugo.

The poets of the sonnet encounter number through science and through verse. Do the two paths join or not? This question traversed them all, but each replied to it differently. Sainte-Beuve, an auditor of Lamarck and an admirer of Claude Bernard and of Littré, chose science: poetry will not survive this choice. When Nerval spoke of the “constellated lute” [*luth constellé*], we can certainly understand “constellated” in many ways; but the simplest remains the most certain. It is a question of constellations, in mourning for the star (“my only star is dead” [*ma seule étoile est morte*]). The numbers of verse and of the sonnet grip him suddenly — between twelve and fourteen, the thirteenth — but so does the hatred for the numbers of science. Nerval fights them without mercy, redoubling the Universe with Another Universe, which is added to it and annuls it. For having returned to constellations, he had to return to the ancient knowledges and ancient gods. Swedenborg prevails forever over Newton.

Baudelaire was ignorant neither of Sainte-Beuve nor of Nerval. But he preferred Poe. With Poe, Baudelaire thought he had found at once the science of nature (*Eureka*) and the ideal of a poetic calculus (*The Philosophy of Composition*). There, he also found the conjunction of the constellation and the letter. In *Eureka*, Poe organizes the sky: “we may speak of our Sun as actually situated at that point of the Y where its three component lines unite; and, conceiving this letter to be of a certain solidity — of a certain thickness, very trivial in comparison with its length — we may even speak of our position as in the middle of this thickness.” In *The Murders of the Rue Morgue*, Dupin deals with the constellation of Orion according to the most recent developments of astronomy; only to quote, in the next instant, Ovid (*Fasti*, V, 536) and to comment on the substitution of one letter for another (changing Urion into Orion): *perdidit antiquum littera prima sonum*, “he has ruined the first sound with the old letter.” With Ovid, this is a euphemism; Urion is so-called since he is born from the urine of the gods. An unseemly episode, which the literal modification



has to hide. With Poe, nothing of this is evoked; it is rather, following Bacon's example, a matter of unifying the interrogation of Nature and cryptography.

To this harrowing simultaneity of solicitations, that of science and verse, Mallarmé conferred an expression at once systematic and dramatic. The decision of Nerval is explicitly condemned; confronted by a science that elects the Universe as its object and which accepts no limit to this Universe, it is futile to construct a counter-Universe: the dream, or memory, or madness. Moreover, the facts speak for themselves; it ends badly. By Chimeras (to which Mallarmé systematically opposed the Chimera in the singular) and by an unpleasant suicide: "go hang themselves from the street lamp, laughably"<sup>2</sup> is the last verse of *Le Guignon*. For those who want to avoid chimeras and ridicule, a differently radical decision is necessary. Verse and, more generally, Letters must constitute a limit to science; let us understand by this the science that dares to take as its object that which is without limits as such — what Mallarmé named in 1869 the "hyperscientific movement".<sup>3</sup> The fourteen verses of the sonnet, the twelve feet of the alexandrine, the twenty-four letters of the alphabet, give us access simultaneously to the question of Letters, which are both contingent and necessary, as to the question of nature as man has contemplated it immemorially (the rhythm of the seasons, the regularities of celestial phenomena), and to the question of modern Nature as the place of an unlimited science and technique. Mallarmé calls the Universe, insofar as it could be other than it is and insofar as it is as it is, Chance — at once the contingency of the relation of sound to sense, the contingency of the rules of verse and the contingency of the laws of Nature (the work of Emile Boutroux dates from 1874).

The three questions are then condensed into one: can and must poetry, understood as such, renounce constellations? We know Mallarmé's response: "Nature has taken place, we cannot add to it";<sup>4</sup> an Other world cannot be added to it — against Nerval again. To not add can also be called to "subtract" or to "except." To discover in the Universe an object that is subtracted or excepted from it is precisely the moment of the constellation: "Nothing / will have taken place / but the place /except / perhaps / a constellation".<sup>5</sup> Let us understand by this that nothing will have taken place except that which takes place, namely Nature, as the place of science and technique — except the exception that constitutes a limit to it. This is to be connected to: "Constellations begin to shine: [as] I wish that, in the darkness that covers the blind herd, there could also be points of light [...] despite the sealed eyes that never understood it"<sup>6</sup> ('as' = 'just like' ['comme' = 'tout comme']), as well as to: "One doesn't write, luminously, on a dark field; the alphabet of stars alone does that ..."<sup>7</sup>

Not only does poetry not renounce constellations, but it finds in them its intelligible response. On the condition at least that it recognizes their definitive obsolescence. Precisely because modern science sanctions their disappearance in the name of Nature, it is up to poetry to bear witness to this disappearance, to take note definitely of it so as to constitute it as subtraction and exception: "for the fact, for exactitude, for it to be said".<sup>8</sup> Only then can it oppose to the Universe a subsistence that is to the Universe what a reverse side is to the right side and as a limit

that is always already breached: “as far as place/ can fuse with the beyond”,<sup>9</sup> or as the topological projection of an infinite depth onto a surface; or as the transformation of a Universe with neither high nor low into a space with high and low: “some vacant and superior surface”.<sup>10</sup>

Speaking to English people marked by their belief (“England [...] cannot adopt a pure science, because of God”),<sup>11</sup> Mallarmé could not be more explicit. In *Music and Letters* (a conference given at Oxford and Cambridge in 1894), he describes someone who he calls the “civilised inhabitant of Eden”.<sup>12</sup> “A man can seem entirely oblivious [...] of the contemporary intellectual burden; in order to find out, according to something simple and primitive, for instance the symphonic equation proper to the seasons, a habit of ray and clouds...”. If furthermore “he has saved from the disaster a kind of reverence for the twenty-four letters as they have fixed themselves, through the miracle of infinity, in some existing language”, this man “possess [...] a doctrine as well as a country”.<sup>13</sup> This civilized inhabitant of Eden [*civilisé édennique*] (I conserve Mallarmé’s spelling), contemporary of science and technique, does not for all that cease to recognize, like Adam before the fall, the constellations: in other words, he does not cease to think in verse: “verse arranged like a spiritual zodiac” [*le vers agencé comme un spirituel zodiaque*].<sup>14</sup> In doing so, he maintains, at the heart of the Universe, the memory of what preceded modern science: the knowledge of the alternations and the constancies of the world.

Mallarmé could remember that, according to certain scholars, the word “season” comes from the Latin *statio*: the position of the Sun in each successive sign of the Zodiac; this etymology is invoked in Littré. It is generally rejected in favour of the origin *satio*, “sowing”, but the question is in no way resolved (see for example Guirand, *Le dictionnaire des étymologies obscures*). Mallarmé had in any case read Milton and was speaking to audience members who had read him; through him, he had formed an idea of Eden, such as the archangel Raphael described its completion to Adam at the twilight of the Sixth Day: “the earth, the air / Resounded, (thou remember’st, for thou heard’st) / The heav’ns and all the constellations rung / The planets in their stations list’ning stood”.<sup>15</sup> Readable in the celestial alphabet, Edenic knowledges are no less readable in the twenty-four letters of the language.

Note the insistence on the number twenty-four. The statement returns several times. My ignorance does not allow me to establish if some researcher has responded to the question: how does Mallarmé arrive at the number twenty-four? He was evidently thinking of the Greek alphabet, which allowed the Alexandrines to count the songs of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. But Mallarmé is speaking of French; now, the French alphabet of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had twenty-five letters; the “w” is thus not included in it, as it was deemed to be a foreign letter (Brachet and Dussouchet, *Grammaire Française*, 1888, pp. 34-5). Mallarmé, trained in the linguistics of his times knew this better than anyone. A conjecture: having excluded the “w”, like Brachet and Dussouchet, Mallarmé would have taken a supplementary step by excluding the “k” — a purely Greek or foreign letter (see what Littré says of this and, by contrast, the use Leconte de Lisle puts it to). It would be interesting to verify

if Mallarmé used “k” or “w” in the volume of his *Poésies* that was handwritten by him (setting aside proper names like Whistler or Wagner). An initial examination seems to prove that he did not. We could oppose to this the *Vers de Circonstance* (“Mademoiselle Wrotnowska”, *Les Loisirs de la poste*, CVII, or “kyrielle”, *ibid.*, CVIII). In the poems of his youth, which, precisely, he did not reprint in this volume, we find the verb “polker”, to dance the polka (*Contre un poète parisien*). Mallarmé or the hidden lipogram?

Whatever they may be, two letters are missing and their absence restores the right of the constellations. But these latter remain only as a trace, incessantly disappearing. The text of the *Coup de dés* bears witness to this once again: “toward / what must be / the Septentrion as well as North / A CONSTELLATION / cold from forgetfulness and desuetude”.<sup>16</sup> We should not understand this group of epithets as the particularization of a constellation that can be opposed to others that would be neither cold, forgotten, nor obsolete [*désuet*]. In the time of science, every constellation is as such obsolete and doomed to oblivion. The name itself is erased. “The Septentrion as well as North”, the second name crosses out the first. The Septentrion names a constellation: *Septem triones*, the seven oxen; thus the Latins called them the Great Bear and sometimes the Small Bear. Mallarmé, it is true, only ever mentions the first, while the star Polaris belongs to the second; this is because the Great Bear shines for the gaze, and Mallarmé only takes into account its brilliance (“Constellations begin to shine”).

As a (Germanic and no longer Latin) term, the North has nothing sidereal to it. In its objective signification, it emerges from a quite practical and perhaps perfectly earthly determination; Mallarmé, who mentions Jules Verne in *La Dernière Mode* in 1874, had perhaps read *Les Anglais au Pôle Nord* and *Le Désert de glace* (published with Hetzel in 1867 under the general title of *Voyages et aventures du Capitaine Hatteras*). Nonetheless, veering towards the magnetic pole, the needle of the compass knows nothing of either the Polaris or the Bears. Nor do the various lighthouses and beacons know anything more. Mallarmé only mentions them to rule them out: “aside from the interest / marked out to it / in general / by a certain obliquity through a certain declivity / of fires...”.<sup>17</sup>

In the time it takes to utter the monosyllable *North*, the constellation abolishes itself, as befits the era of modern science and technique. Yet towards the North, the moment after, such that a subject will find it, in exception to the Universe: “Cold from forgetfulness and desuetude”, certainly, but “not so much / that it doesn’t number / on some vacant and superior surface / the successive shock / in the way of stars / of a total count in the making”.<sup>18</sup> But why would the subject seek it? For one sole reason: the desire for a total count, supported by the Letters, twenty-four in total, not one more or less. The total count is what remains of the Book of yesteryear. This book makes possible, not everything that exists in the world (“everything in the world exists to end up as a book”,<sup>19</sup> Mallarmé wrote again in 1895; he ceased to believe this in 1897), but rather everything that does not exist there. Or that which exists so as to say that it does not.

Constellations do not exist in the Universe, but nevertheless they shine. Their brilliance makes their inexistence an existence. In a strict sense, this existence has to do only with their brilliance and begins with it; the words “constellations begin to shine” can now be interpreted completely. It is an absolute beginning. This existence, incessantly begun each night, says no to the Universe of science. It says no to Nature insofar as it is not *phusis*. The constellations constitute a limit to the infinite Universe and to Nature, instituted by this fact as figures of the Whole: “it cannot be added to.” Likewise, here below the sea constitutes a limit to what exists on earth: “from the Infinite constellations and the sea are separated, remaining reciprocal nothingness in their exteriority”.

How can we not think of Wittgenstein and of his definition of Mysticism: “the feeling of the World as a bounded whole” (*Tractatus*, 6.45)? Mallarmé’s decision calls, however, for another commentary. Leaving Nature in its place is to limit it by science. The science of which Renan said in 1890 that it is the future and which Mallarmé calls “hyperscientific”. In this strategy of the limit, he makes mathematics his ally: “We must study our mathematicians”.<sup>20</sup> The number as the limit of modern Nature and science is at once legitimate and possible on one condition: we must recall the genealogy of number. This genealogy brings us back to the constellations: “THE NUMBER/born of the stars”.<sup>21</sup> Not, therefore, mathematized science, but mathematics. Mathematics in exception to science. Now, the number insofar as it is recalled, is verse.

#### Notes

1. Originally appeared as Jean-Claude Milner, ‘Les Constellations Révélatrices’, *Elucidation*, Vol. 8-9 (2003), pp. 3-7. I would like to thank Professor Jean-Claude Milner for his generous comments, suggestions and correspondence regarding this translation.
2. Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘The Jinx’, *The Poems in Verse*. Translation and Notes by Peter Manson (Oxford, Ohio: Miami University Press, 2011), p. 17.
3. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Mallarmé in Prose* (New York: New Direction Books, 2001), p. 76.
4. Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘Music and Letters’, *Divagations*. Translated by Barbara Johnson (Cambridge/Massachusetts/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 187.
5. Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘A Throw of Dice’, *Collected Poems*. Translated and with a commentary by Henry Weinfield (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press), pp. 142-143.
6. Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘Conflict’, *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
7. Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘Restricted Action’, *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 216.
8. Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘Conflict’, *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
9. Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘A Throw of Dice’, *Collected Poems*, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
10. Ibid.

11. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Mallarmé in Prose*, *op. cit.*, p. 76.
12. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Music and Letters', *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 186.
13. Ibid.
14. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes I*, Édition présentée, établie et annotée par Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 1998) p. 624.
15. John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 164.
16. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'A Throw of Dice', *Collected Poems*, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
17. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'A Throw of Dice', *Collected Poems*, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
18. Ibid.
19. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'The Book as Spiritual Instrument', *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 226.
20. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Mallarmé in Prose*, *op. cit.*
21. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'A Throw of Dice', *Collected Poems*, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

PATRICK THÉRIAULT

IN UMBRA VOLUPTATIS LUSI

*Play, jouissance and illusio in Mallarmé and Bourdieu*

*Translated by Robert Boncardo*

*In umbra voluptatis lusi. I have played in the shadow of pleasures. This so simple passage is from Petronius. It should be translated all the more precisely still: I have played in the shadow of sexual jouissance.<sup>1</sup>*

It is not without a sense of boastfulness that Bourdieu, reflecting on his reading of Mallarmé, affirms that it is “likely to provoke shudders in the pious celebrants of the seraphic poet of absence, who have turned a blind eye to it”.<sup>2</sup> But nor is he without his reasons, for it is hard not to acknowledge that his reinterpretation of the passage from ‘Music and Letters’ on the “impious dismantling of fiction”<sup>3</sup> is a feat of arms: of such a highly frequented textual place, the sociologist effectively proposed a reading that will prove itself to be extremely fruitful insofar as it will reveal, to an unprecedented degree and in a hitherto unexpected light, the extraordinary critical insight of Mallarméan thought.<sup>4</sup> This is a thought that we rediscover with Bourdieu; a thought not jealously hidden in the intransitive folds of the text or dispersed like a vapour among the ideal peaks where successive generations of commentators have wanted it to accumulate, but perfectly and reflexively open to the comprehension of the social and institutional determinations of the literary artefact.

This interpretation will have proved to be doubly beneficial: on the one hand, with respect to the properly sociological enterprise of Bourdieu, where it seems to have been determinant at a key juncture in the articulation and conceptual refinement of the problematic of the *illusio*; on the other hand, with respect to literary studies, where in the last twenty years the power of social reflexivity possessed by the Mallarméan text it highlighted has inspired works that it is not an exaggeration to describe as revolutionary, or, better, as *truly* revolutionary, for the original appraisal they propose of the work and *persona* of Mallarmé break with the most widely-held

conceptions of literary history — without doing so, for all that, in a Telquellian manner, that is, in the name of, and in conformity with, the hermeneutical expectations of an ideology of generalized subversion.<sup>5</sup>

As illuminating as they are, the few pages that Bourdieu devotes to the “impious dismantling of fiction” pose certain problems. Not only are they of an extreme density, but they also attest to a reading that in some places is selective and biased in its argumentation and which, if it is not itself “blind” in turn to Mallarméan thought, has the effect of spiriting away one of its most original traits: namely, the recognition of *jouissance* as the fundamental motivation of the subjective relation to the literary artefact. There is good reason to believe that Bourdieu set out to methodically and critically “repress” this factor so as to ensure the primacy of social determinations and, incidentally, from a sociological point of view, the primacy of the latter with respect to the question of the investment of the writer in the literary game. As a result, he discounted a reality which, without being exclusively or above all of social significance, proves to be no less an effect of the symbolic order and, as such, to intimately inform the problematic of the *illusio*.<sup>6</sup> By delineating the principal articulations of his argumentation, I will seek here to render visible what he neglects in order not only to do justice to Mallarméan lucidity, but also, indirectly, to make explicit the idea of the libido in which Bourdieu himself would see, without for all that exploring its kinship, a twin notion to that of the *illusio*.<sup>7</sup>

### A necessary *illusio*

The section from *The Rules of Art* entitled ‘The impious dismantling of fiction’ can initially be read as a recognition of debt to Mallarmé. Bourdieu credits his reading or re-reading of a prose piece from the *Divagations* with a theoretical advance of the first importance — an advance that would have inflected in a novel direction his conception of the relation of the artist to the literary *illusio*:

As for becoming aware of the logic of the game as such, and of the *illusio* which is its bedrock, I long believed that this was somehow precluded, by definition, by the fact that this lucidity would turn the literary or artistic enterprise into a cynical mystification or a conscious trickery. This remained true until I came to read carefully a text by Mallarmé which expresses well, even if in a very obscure manner, both the objective truth of literature as a fiction founded on collective belief, and the right we have to salvage, in face of and against all kinds of objectification, literary pleasure.<sup>8</sup>

The text at the origin of this critical discovery is the section on the “impious dismantling of fiction”, which represents a culminating point in the argumentation of ‘Music and Letters’. An interesting fact to note, and which does not seem to be accidental, as we will confirm, is that Bourdieu does not cite two short paragraphs that precede this section and which nevertheless form part, for Mallarmé, of the



same textual unity. The segment of the text that Bourdieu restitutes and on which he focuses his analysis is limited to these lines:

We know, held captive by an absolute formula that, doubtless, only what is, is. But to wave aside, incontinently, under any pretext, the attraction of the lure, would testify to our illogic, denying the pleasure we want from it: for the *beyond* is its agent – and its motor, I would add, if I were not reluctant to take apart impiously, in public, the fiction, and consequently the literary mechanism itself, in order to lay out the principal part or nothing. But I admire how, by means of a trick, we project, to a great, forbidden, thunderous height, our conscious lack of what, up there, gleams.

What is this good for –

For a game.<sup>9</sup>

These few statements sum up the denunciation of the literary *illusio* by virtue of which Bourdieu could recognize in Mallarmé a precursor to his own enterprise of sociological demystification: in the terms of a mechanism that clashes with the organicist paradigm dear to the tradition of modern aesthetics, and which conforms to the essentialist presuppositions of the “speculative theory of Art”,<sup>10</sup> the poet here defines fiction as a social discourse destined to produce a belief in the Ideal, which itself responds to the metaphysical desire for a “beyond”, a “beyond” which constitutes its “motor”. By “dismantling” the “literary mechanism” and by laying out its “principal part or nothing”, he strips literature of its sacerdotal pomp and reveals it in its “objective truth” as a “trick”, a collective fiction without any transcendence other than that produced by its function and effect: namely, to evoke imaginarily and project illusorily, at “a great, forbidden, thunderous height” so as to compensate for the ontological “lack” of a world now disenchanted by the materialist fact according to which “only what is, is”.

It is easy to understand why Bourdieu, who was fond of assailing all forms of “social magic”, would have been seduced by this denunciation which, with an “impious” critical gesture, “wrecks the poetic sacral and the self-mystifying myth of the creation of a transcendent [...] object”,<sup>11</sup> just as he would have rejoiced in finding, in the apparatus for producing symbolic Value that Mallarmé associates with the illusory dimension of the literary “game”, a structural [*structurel*], indeed structural [*structural*], duplication of what he would have thematized – and for which he will henceforth be able to invoke an increased legitimacy – under the heading of the *illusio*.

But what seems to have interested Bourdieu the most is perhaps not so much the lucidity with which the poet “dismantles” the literary *illusio* and more so the care he takes, even while conceding its groundlessness, to save it. Indeed, for the sociologist, Mallarmé’s “reluctance” to “impiously dismantle, in public, the fiction”, proves to be highly significant: it convinces him that literary practice cannot forego an “enchanted relation to the game”<sup>12</sup> that conditions, and which is indistinguishable

from, the *illusio*. To the extent that it ends by “‘revering’, by another deliberate fiction, the authorless trickery which puts the fragile fetish outside the grasp of critical lucidity”,<sup>13</sup> Mallarmé’s attitude is instructive insofar as it betrays the principal importance of the *illusio* in literary practice. Even if he highlights the ethically debatable dimension of this dual, indeed duplicitous, attitude on the grounds that, precisely, it “prejudge[s] that only a few great initiates are capable of the heroic lucidity and the deliberate generosity which are necessary to confront in their truth the ‘legitimate impostures’”,<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu still sees here an incontestable proof of the theoretical pertinence and the practical necessity of the *illusio*, which he thereby raises to the rank of a necessary illusion. He seems particularly concerned to establish that the literary game can only derive its true “seriousness” from the collective and implicit belief in the transcendence of what is at stake in it. So much so, in fact, that the affirmation of the primordial status of the *illusio*, and thus of the fundamentally institutional anchorage of the literary artefact, imposes itself in the final analysis as one of the principal – if not *the* principal – heuristic gains of his re-reading of Mallarmé. The following passage, which is drawn from the concluding chapter of *The Rules of Art*, ‘Illusion and *illusio*’, invites us to think precisely this:

The ‘impious dismantling of fiction’ [...] leads to discovering, along with Mallarmé, that the *foundation of belief* (and of the delectation which, in the case of literary fiction, it procures), resides in the *illusio*, the adherence to the game as a game, the acceptance of the fundamental premise that the game, literary or scientific, is worth being played, being taken seriously. The literary *illusio*, that originating adherence to the literary game which grounds the belief in the *importance* or *interest* of literary fictions, is the precondition – almost always unperceived – of the aesthetic pleasure which is always, in part, the pleasure of playing the game, of participating in the fiction, of being in total accord with the premises of the game. It is also the precondition of the literary *illusion* and of the belief-effect (rather than the ‘reality-effect’) which the text can produce.<sup>15</sup>

On a first reading, the critical assessment that Bourdieu draws from his analysis of the “impious dismantling of fiction” is liable to lead us astray: logically speaking, the affirmation of the necessity of the *illusio*, which is what his analysis comes down to, cannot be derived from the observation of the very literary game played by the writer Mallarmé; it can only be motivated by what can be deduced from the choice of the poet to safeguard – to the detriment of critical intelligence but in the name of the symbolic, existential and metaphysical benefits that the non-reflexive investment in the game can still procure for *the other players* – the belief in the *illusio*. This is to say that this appraisal of Bourdieu’s ignores, or tacitly considers as an exception that confirms the rule, the very example of the lucid “player” that is Mallarmé – a “player” for whom the “rules of art” never pass unperceived and for whom literary practice, which he never abandoned, no longer expressly requires “total accord[ance] with the premises of the game”.

In fact, if Bourdieu can formulate this critical assessment, and if he can reaffirm with even more conviction that the *illusio* constitutes the necessary condition for the full symbolic and imaginary unfolding of literary activity, then it is only after having done his utmost, in his analysis of the section on “the impious dismantling of fiction”, to invalidate the motive that Mallarmé invokes, in the name of a quota of aesthetic *jouissance*, in order to justify and to guarantee investment in the literary game, above and beyond any critical denunciation or ontological deflation. Now, the rhetorical moves to which the sociologist has recourse in undermining this motive, namely by overdetermining certain aspects of the Mallarméan text and by omitting others, attest to an argumentative strategy of which the least that can be said is that it is biased and, on a number of counts, contentious. The hermeneutical pressure that his reading exerts in a sometimes tendentious manner on Mallarmé’s remarks is all the more regrettable since its effect is to flatten out one aspect of these remarks — namely, desire; an aspect which, if it obliges us to relativize the importance Bourdieu accords to the *illusio*, nonetheless confirms the fundamental grip the symbolic order has on the practice of literature. Furthermore, what the poet suggests about desire, as we will be able to see by making it explicit, resonates in a salutary way with the notion of a “sense of the game” that the sociologist puts forward, precisely — yet in a manner that is often unconvincing, or not convincing at all — so as to render explicit the very real function, as the cases of Mallarmé and Bourdieu themselves above all suggest, of certain social players who are nevertheless “lucid” with respect to the presuppositions of their respective games.

### The critical repression of desire

The argument for aesthetic *jouissance* comes after the statement of the “objective truth” of literature, in the context of the final paragraph of the section on the “impious dismantling of fiction”, which Bourdieu analyses in isolation:

In light of a superior attraction like a void, we have the right to be lured on by nothingness; [the game] is drawn out of us by the boredom of things if they are established as solid and preponderant — we frantically detach them and fill ourselves up with them, and also endow them with splendour, through vacant space, for as many solitary festivals as we wish.<sup>16</sup>

The literary “game” here presents the traits that define it in Mallarmé,<sup>17</sup> namely, that of a discourse capable of re-enchanting the brute and meaningless materiality of “things”, if not by covering them with a “veil of troubled thinking”,<sup>18</sup> as Nietzsche thought, then at least by infusing them with the right dose of mystery or “virtuality” necessary for filling in the ontological “vacuity” [*vacance*] and to dissipate the existential “ennui”. It is by virtue of a *jouissance* or an “ideal pleasure” [*réjouissance idéale*], to which this poetic sublimation of the real leads, that Mallarmé claims the “right” to save literary activity beyond the consciousness he has of the purely phantasmatic character of its imaginary productions.

Bourdieu devotes a good part of his argumentative effort to “dismantling” this “proof by pleasure”. For him, Mallarmé falls back on an *ad hoc* argument by making pleasure the “aesthetic equivalent of a *cogito*” that consists in the following affirmation:

...yes, literature exists, since I *rejoice* in it. But can one be completely satisfied with this proof by pleasure, *jouissance* (*aisthesis*), even if one understands that poetry gives itself meaning by giving a meaning, even if imaginary, to the world? And is not the pleasure aroused by the voluntarist fiction of “solitary festivities” doomed to appear as fictive, since it is clearly linked to the will to lose oneself in this game of words, to “pay oneself in the face currency of one’s dream”? The invocation of the famous phrase of Marcel Mauss is not as out of place as it seems. In effect, Mallarmé does not forget as his commentators do that, as he says at the beginning, the crisis is also ‘social’; he knows that the solitary and vaguely narcissistic pleasure that he wants to do everything to save is doomed to be perceived as an illusion if it is not rooted in the *illusio* [...] And he concludes that, to save this pleasure which we only take because we ‘want to take it’ as well as the Platonic illusion which is its ‘agent’, he has no other choice than to take the course of ‘revering’, by another deliberate fiction, the authorless trickery which puts the fragile fetish outside the grasp of critical lucidity.<sup>19</sup>

The voluntarism with which Bourdieu predicates Mallarmé’s relation has to the literary artefact — a relation Mallarmé would “do everything” to save through essentially “decisionist” [*décisoires*] acts — is surprising, both with respect to the text of ‘Music and Letters’ (in which it has no basis except in the segmented statements “the pleasure we want from it” and “solitary festivals”), as with the habitual preoccupations of the sociologist to the extent that these latter lead him to highlight, against the illusory pretensions of the subject to mastery, the social and thus largely unconscious and “unperceived” dimension of the motives that determine the adhesion of the subject to the *illusio* and to their investment in the literary game. But the function of this voluntarist overdetermination is obviously to show that the “truth” of the Mallarméan *cogito* is not at all evident, that it is “willed” and thus that this “proof by pleasure” is a mysticism, which is to say an appeal to something unconditioned (for instance, poetry that “give itself meaning” all by itself) that has, as such, little or no critical legitimacy. In this way Bourdieu claims to demonstrate that this “proof” also constitutes, just like the *illusio*, a “decisionist fiction”, the sole difference being — and the difference is capital — that this individualist type of denegation does not have sufficient force of conviction to make it credible and to durably support the investment of the majority of people in literary activity: for him, only the *illusio*, this “trick without an author” — a “trick” that, at the social level, consecrates literary discourse as one of the games that are “the most surrounded with prestige and mystery”<sup>20</sup> — possesses such a force.

If it is not without reason that Bourdieu is suspicious of “magical” explanations for aesthetic empiricism, in contrast his interpretation seems more to betray his own

will than to reveal the will of Mallarmé to “root” the literary artefact in the *illusio*. At the very least, he appears to be in a hurry to repress the aesthetic *jouissance* that Mallarmé invokes as a fundamental determination of the literary game and which the ensemble of his remarks, if we consider them attentively, identify as being a motivation which, without being confined to an exclusively individual register, seem to escape in part the conceptual parameters of the *illusio*. This repression seems all the more premeditated since Bourdieu neither quotes nor analyses the first two paragraphs of the section of the “impious dismantling of fiction” where this aspect is most decisively:

*Something else...* It seems as if the scattered quiverings of a page only wants either to defer or to hasten the possibility that something else.<sup>21</sup>

Even if it remains mysterious, the causality with which Mallarmé associates here the investment in literary activity — and, more precisely, the investment in *reading*, which is perhaps not exactly the same thing — is far from insignificant; the “secret disposition” to which this causality is assimilated, while it might resist in part both nominalisation and phenomenalisation, does not appear any less to exert on the subject an elementary and irrepressible action such that nothing “can satisfy [it]” [*ne doit satisfaire*]. It is under the pressure of this “disposition”, which simultaneously reveals a fundamental form of existential indisposition, that we are led to seek in literary activity “*something else*”: that is, that *other* thing that we cannot find in the order of the real and to which we are condemned, for this reason, to being “desperately” subjected to as an incessantly returning lack, just as the evidently circular structure of this paragraph suggests (“*Something else* [...] the possibility that something else”).<sup>22</sup> It is with respect to this *something else*, which seems to capture the essence or the universal form of the phantasm, that reading takes on the allure, the solemnity and the liturgical rhythm of a “practice” similar to that of a religion and destined to channel and sublimate, as the following paragraph makes explicit, the anxiety in the face of an ontological void by the evocation of a fictional “beyond”.

From this perspective, the “secret disposition” that Mallarmé evokes appears singularly close to what psychoanalysis will thematize under the heading of the “cause” or the “thing” of desire. In fact, it is even closer since the principal paragraph of the section on the “impious dismantling of fiction”, if read carefully, places this “disposition” under the auspices of a “literary mechanism” whose “principal part or nothing” proves to be explicitly indexed to a “lack”. It is not the smallest sign of the symbolic lucidity of the poet that he associates the primary “motor” of literary activity with the “nothing” of a desire conceived not as an excessive plenitude or as an excess of energy, but rather as a lack, which is to say as an economic and dynamic resource whose force of active negativity, comparable to a gust of wind, cannot be better described than by the following expression: “a superior attraction like a void”. To the extent that it proceeds, anchored as it is in desire, from this power of a “superior attraction”, the fiction “dismantled” in ‘Music and Letters’ denotes a construction of the symbolic order. However, prior to being a social montage, it presents itself as what should be called, without committing the sin

of anachronism and to do full justice to the critical lucidity of the poet, a drive montage [*un montage pulsionnel*].<sup>23</sup> Correlatively, before being a social production, the “*something else*” that fiction has for its role to project illusorily in the sky “to a great, forbidden, thunderous height” — and in this it is in perfect conformity with the elementary structure of the phantasm as an imaginary projection — this “*something else*” refers fundamentally to the production of desire. Besides, the entirety of the Mallarméan text suggests that the Idea, understood in the sense of the Platonic *eidos* or metaphysical “beyond”, is first of all, and primarily, an effect of desire, which is to say that in its most elementary sense it is translated into the luminous shimmer of a lack: “Glory of the long desire, Ideas”.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the two paragraphs that Bourdieu does not quote lead to a reconsideration of the entirety of this section by Mallarmé from a perspective in light of which this section reveals itself to be a veritable analytics of desire: that is, as an operation of “dismantling” that is not limited — yet even this would already be something very significant for an enterprise revealed to be sociological *avant la lettre* — to highlighting the conventional and institutional components of literature, the vain mystery of its social being, but which clarifies literature right up to the critical point of showing where its structural scaffolding seems no longer to obey anything other than the economy of desire — an economy that, in its *élan*, is itself revealed to be directed towards a *nothing* and fixed by an index of *reality* such that perhaps only the text of a theoretician of psychoanalysis like Jacques Lacan can give it an equally original figuration, without for all that ever being, no more here than anywhere else, originary. This new appraisal of the Mallarméan “dismantling”, by linking the “enchanted relation to the [literary] game” to the “cause” or the “thing” of desire, and thus to a form of *jouissance* that is less voluntarist than Bourdieu supposed, obliges us to reconsider certain modalities of the relation of the poet to the investment in literature and, in addition to these modalities, certain determining aspects of the problematic of the *illusio*.

*To believe or not to believe*

*For a brief instant he would believe, and turn instinctively to religion; then,  
after a moment's thought, his longing for faith would vanish, though he  
remained perplexed and uneasy.*<sup>25</sup>

Bourdieu very pertinently correlates the consciousness of the primacy of the symbolic exhibited by Mallarmé in ‘Music and Letters’ with the “crisis of verse” with which his name has more generally been associated.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, we can reproach the sociologist for not having taken the full measure of what the poet glimpsed through the broken mirror of representation — and which a more general consideration of his text would have us emphasize. For while it may stem from a “general lack of totalisation [or] of a totaliser”<sup>27</sup> at the ontological level, Mallarméan thought is not reducible to a materialist or an atheist position. It opens onto a more fundamental truth that touches, precisely, on the “thing” of desire: it effectively suggests that even when it is put into doubt the absolute retains, to use



an expression from the Heidegger's *Nietzsche* — an expression that translates very precisely the point of view taken by the poet — a “force of awakening and of elevation”.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the Mallarméan text would have us think of this “force” as an unsurpassable human reality by signifying in passing the perennial or invincible nature of the Ideal, beyond all of the twists and turns of the history of thought — an invincibility we can translate in metaphorical terms, taking up an image that has become emblematic of late modernity, as the survival of the gods in the very consciousness of their absence. In fact, the different hypostases of transcendence appear here from the same perspective in which they will appear in the work of Georges Bataille, such as, notably, the eternalization of the gods by a language that interminably speaks and denounces them and which suspends their existence on the inchoate logic of desire. The “antiphon to plaintiff hymns” that the character of the Nurse sings of in the ‘Old overture of *Hérodiade*’ offers a striking image of this logic: since the sky towards which she raises her eyes and from which she falls fatally is “hidden”, nothing of this “antiphony” can henceforth be heard except the empty resonance of the song with which it has finished by fusing with and of which only the rhythmic power can be felt — a power that, in a manner as irrepressible as it is irrational, is marked by desire.<sup>29</sup>

As such, the critical “knowledge” to which the Mallarméan text gives us access reveals itself to be decisive at a level other than that of any regional knowledge (sociological knowledge, for example), even if, properly speaking, it encompasses no truth: what it makes appear is the desire of the subject *qua* an obligatory — *desperate* — relation to the “beyond”: This relation is a transcendental or quasi-transcendental relation insofar as it still involves universality, even if it does so in the absence of universals. It is a theological or quasi-theological relation insofar as it still involves faith, if only in a purely formal manner that substitutes the “*something else*” for God.

This inchoate logic of desire allows us to explain how a subject like Mallarmé is still drawn to treat literary activity with “seriousness”, all the while knowing that it not only constitutes a game but a “mad game”;<sup>30</sup> it allows us to better understand the motivations, which are less willed than suffered, by which he “launch[es] [himself] madly [*forcément*]”, which is to say, etymologically, “outside of meaning, [*hors de sens*] into Dream, despite [his] knowledge that Dream has no existence”<sup>31</sup> and to enjoy [*jouir*] in good conscience the illusions of literature. Mallarmé himself proposed a very eloquent representation of such a subject, that is, of a desiring subject conscious of the determinations that desire exerts upon him, when he wrote in the form of what appears to be a faithful self-portrait<sup>32</sup> that “[his] entire admiration goes straight to the great, inconsolable Seer, the obstinate seeker after a mystery he knows does not exist, and which he’ll pursue, eternally, for that very reason, with the bereavement of his lucid despair, for that mystery *would have been* Truth!”<sup>33</sup> It is striking to note that, if it presents itself as a “knowledge” of the inexistence of “Truth”, the lucidity that characterizes Mallarmé’s “great Magician” does not exclude its “pursuit”. On the contrary, it even seems to define this reflexive subject as



a subject conscious of his non-mastery, which is to say as a being who knows himself to be irresistibly submitted to the “superior attraction” that the Idea *qua* lack induces. This is why the cognitive or existential gain to which it attests is tainted with a “despair” and the practical form that it takes is expressed by reference to “mourning”, which determines in the subject an attitude that we could conceive — to take up the expression that Barthes employed to qualify the Freudian *fort-da* — as an “active practice of absence”.<sup>34</sup>

By taking account of desire and the economy of *jouissance*, by revealing a logic sub-jacent to that of the social game, we are thus lead to re-evaluate the subjective relation to the Ideal that Mallarmé describes in ‘Music and Letters’, specifically with respect to literary activity. This prevents us from thinking about this relation in exclusive terms, that is, in terms of a complete pre- or non-reflexive adhesion, or, inversely, in terms of a complete critical distancing: to the extent that the Ideal is, first of all, and primarily, a phantasmatic production of desire, it effectively follows that we can never say that we are done with it — except, precisely, if we are duping ourselves. The “superior attraction” that it exerts on the subject, whether this be in the form of a metaphysical “beyond” or of a Value invested with social prestige with which Bourdieu associates the *illusio*, appears as a determination that we can, at best, recognize but from which we cannot extract ourselves except in a posture of bad faith. This is to say that lucidity, such as we find it in the critical point of view adopted by Mallarmé, cannot be confused with a rationalism that would claim to have been done with faith. On the contrary, this lucidity is characterized, rather, by the affirmation, if not of the predominance of faith over critical consciousness, then at least of the indissolubility of their relation. It is in this sense that it is also a demand for a certain “right” to the *jouissance* of the literary game — that it is the assumption of a passion which inclines the subject towards a “desperate” pleasure and as such offers itself as a modern form of *amor fati*.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, if it is judicious to interpret the relation of the writer to the Ideal on analogy with religious belief, as Bourdieu does, it is on the express condition that we make it clear that literary faith, like faith in God, is infected with doubt. Even a summary consideration of the phenomenon of faith, and all the more so of faith during modernity, cannot not know of the doubt that often strains it and to which, after all, it accommodates itself quite well. By analogy, the very voluntaristic appeals of certain actors of the contemporary literary world, who enjoin us to refound literature in a “myth” or in some other form of belief in a transcendence of which they themselves concede the facticity, are not as contradictory as they may seem:<sup>36</sup> the faith in the literary fiction that animates them and whose renewal, consolidation and extension at the social level they hope for, is not so different, at root, from the form of belief the Ancients had in their myths, who at once both believed and did not believe in them.<sup>37</sup> In fact, such appeals seem to confirm that the “coexistence in the same mind of contradictory truths”, some of which participate in myth and others in rationality, is a “universal fact”.<sup>38</sup>

Recognizing the “universality” of this fact is not simply to highlight what the man of reason or rationalism depicted by the metaphysical tradition owes to the desiring subject; it also allows us to understand, at a more particular level, in what sense the relation to the Ideal of a player as equivocal as Mallarmé, “*homo totus ambiguus*”,<sup>39</sup> escapes the accusation of cynicism. In fact, if it is true that the cynic sins by naivety insofar as he misrecognizes the power of illusions by characteristically claiming for himself the moral superiority of knowing that the game is vain and proceeds from no Truth,<sup>40</sup> it seems even more difficult to associate the poet with this posture: as we have seen, the entire critical originality of Mallarmé seems on the contrary to reside in the extremely lucid manner by which he underscores the pragmatic “reality” of illusion by taking into account the truth-effects or reality-effects produced by lack. This is manifestly why the critic Pascal Durand, who has analyzed in detail the general disposition of the poet with respect to the *nomos* of Letters and has described it as a “*reflexive adhesion*” for which there exists “no other example in the history of poetry and literature”,<sup>41</sup> does not go so far as to describe him as a cynic. Nevertheless, the question imposes itself of knowing whether it is sufficient at the conceptual level to explain the profound motivation and the hidden logic of this disposition, as Durand<sup>42</sup> does and as Bourdieu’s argumentation implicitly invites us to do, by invoking the poorly-defined principle — a principle that, if it is definable at all, is itself somewhat “magical” — of a “sense of the game”, that is, of the very thing that “removes the need for cynicism”.<sup>43</sup> In fact, the “secret disposition” to which Mallarmé himself alludes seems to respond in a more satisfying manner to this question, even if it too entails a degree of indetermination: by inviting us to think of the investment in literary activity by reference to a libidinal fact “in the name of which” *it* [ça] continues to read and to write, against or in exteriority to all good critical sense, this disposition recommends itself *a fortiori* to the metalanguage of the analysis of desire, proving itself by that fact to being susceptible to profiting from the resources of theorization available to this metalanguage. This “secret disposition” recommends itself all the most insistently since by considering in a more general sense the text and the person of Mallarmé from a psychoanalytic perspective allows us to specify their nature as being directed in the somewhat deviant direction of a disposition towards a *jouissance* that would be... “perverse”.

### The mystification in letters

For Bourdieu, the “repugnance” to which the poet confesses in proceeding to the “impious dismantling in public of fiction” follows from his more general will to “kee[p] secret the ‘literary mechanism’ — or not [to] revea[l] it except in the most strictly shrouded form”. It is by this double and somewhat obscurantist attitude, worthy of one of the “great initiates”,<sup>44</sup> that Mallarmé dissociates literary *jouissance* from critical consciousness and thus preserves the integrity of the former from the potentially dysphoric effects of the latter. As surprising as it might appear

on a first reading, insofar as it reprises the disparaging remarks that a good number of his contemporaries made about Mallarmé, namely those of mystagogy and charlatanism,<sup>45</sup> this interpretation is not unfounded: in fact, if we consider the care that the poet himself takes in his work to organize, through the skilfully arranged pyrotechnics of his “lampbearer” poetics, these “fireworks” from which there is supposed to blossom forth phenomenally the “ideal pleasure” and which bring aesthetic *jouissance* to a climax, we can suppose that he was fearful of compromising the power of fascination and the luminous magnificence of this spectacle by doubling it with a critical perspective — a perspective susceptible of introducing in an untimely manner the “cumbersomeness of a near or concrete reminder”<sup>46</sup> of human-all-too-human reality and of its “substructures”.<sup>47</sup>

But again, the position Mallarmé adopts to “keep the secret” does not appear to aim only at protecting the *jouissance* proper to the literary game; it also seems, and perhaps above all, to *participate* in it: certain indications in the text and the Mallarméan *ethos* lead us, in fact, to think that this disposition towards the creation of mystery is not only determined by circumstances but that it refers more broadly to a definitive aspect of the game the poet plays with the symbol and the literary institution and which, by this very fact, is symptomatic of the specific type of *jouissance* that he draws from it. Following this hypothesis, the consciousness he has of the artificiality of literature would constitute, in the manner of a constraint that it is necessary to circumvent to the extent that it threatens the pleasure of all those who do not have the moral stature or the “sense of the game” necessary for “confront[ing] in their truth [...] ‘legitimate impostures’”, as Bourdieu supposes, the motif of a game and of a *jouissance* that flourishes around a mystery and which seems directed against the *outsiders* represented, in the imaginary of this esoterism, by “non-initiated” readers.

This hypothesis appears all the more credible since it is well before the period in which he accedes to a consciousness of the institutional reality of literature — a period that we can plausibly associate with the great critical prose pieces of the *Divagations*, namely the years 1880-1890 — that Mallarmé manifests, in his relation to the game, a certain duplicitous attitude that, incidentally, is marked, in his mode of *jouissance*, by something of a perverse inflection. We can inform ourselves of this in the light of facts and documents that go right back to the first years of his literary career. One of them proves to be particularly illuminating: a letter that Lefébure sends to Mallarmé in the month of May 1867 in response to another letter that has been lost to us. This document provides a privileged perspective on the basis of which we can clarify the nature of desire at work in the poet. What it has the advantage of highlighting, beyond the lineaments of the poetics that he is then in the process of elaborating, is the “secret disposition” of Mallarmé or, to be more precise, the disposition for the secret that seems to preside over his libidinal and institutional investment in literary activity. Lefébure writes:

I have sufficiently well understood your poetic theory of Mystery, which is very true, and confirmed by history. Up to the present, every time man

has glimpsed the truth, that is, the logical constitution of the universal, he has rejected it in horror and has turned towards infinite illusion and, as Baudelaire says, has perhaps only invented heaven and hell so as to escape the Nevermore of Lucretius and Spinoza. It is thus that I understand the end, or, as you say, the arrow of modern poetry, of the steeple of the romantic cathedral, of which you would be the rooster, since you place yourself on high. But an infinite sadness comes over me in thinking about this: at such an elevation, who, with the exception perhaps of yourself and of the angels who do not exist, could gently caress your feather while murmuring: O you beautiful rooster! Furthermore, I fear that people will not dishabituate themselves swiftly of enigmas for which they know the answer, and the impossibility of a religion, in the face of the terrible light which shines forth from the Sciences, seems to me to be one of the great misfortunes of humanity.<sup>48</sup>

While rich in metaphysical considerations, marked as they are by the spirit of the time, Lefébure's remarks also reflect quite concrete aesthetic preoccupations: they allow us to understand that, under the heading of a "poetic theory of Mystery", Mallarmé proves himself to desire the creation of a symbolic art that would exploit the resources of enigma so as to create or recreate the effect of transcendence dissipated by the "terrible light which shines forth from the Sciences". But what is more significant is that Lefébure also gestures towards the dose not only of mystery but of mystification that enters into such an enterprise: not without ridicule, the correspondent denounces the spiritual "elevation" the poet claims for himself and who is thereby guilty of wanting to extract himself from humanity and to raise himself up to the top of the "steeple of a romantic cathedral" and to convert himself into a purveyor of enigmas — that is, in sum, to adopt the position of the "subject supposed to know". Moreover, in the dispatch to his letter, Lefébure sums up well the nature of this symbolic posture by addressing his salutations to "[his] dear rooster/sphinx": while the figure of the rooster says everything about what Mallarmé's desired position entails with respect to pride and presumption, that of the sphinx says everything it implies of mystification. We can thus observe what Lefébure recognizes — so as to condemn it — what this theory has in common with what Bourdieu reveals — so as to condemn it as well — with regard to the symbolic posture that takes the form of a critical imposture and with which he associates Mallarmé by comparing him to a "great initiate": with more than a century between them, the two men highlight the duplicity that the game of the poet entails.

Evidently, Mallarmé disregarded the criticisms of his friend and made a career, at least partially, from the desire that expresses itself through this "poetic theory of Mystery", it being the case that the majority of his mature works can be read as so many enigmas and games of veils in which it is the "Nothing" (of language, of representation, of being) that seems to be so meticulously half-said, evoked, suggested, in short signified selectively to the "proper listeners", who are also the proper readers. Without even needing to return to the esoteric slogans and the

virulently anti-democratic complaints of an essay like “Artistic heresies”,<sup>49</sup> where the young poet axiomatically pronounced that “man can be a democratic, while the artist doubles himself and must remain an aristocrat”,<sup>50</sup> it is necessary to recognize that the ensemble of Mallarmé’s work is determined in an obscure manner by a somewhat perverse desire to create secrets and, correlatively, to discriminate.<sup>51</sup> To the well-attested will of the poet to play the game of literature there thus appears to be attached a more occult desire, but one no less pregnant in its effects, for playing on others. It is this desire that seems to play itself out once again, and thus to find a certain source of satisfaction, in the troubled critical context of the “impious dismantling of fiction”, whose declaration or equivocal denunciation of “fiction” cannot consequently be linked only — nor indeed primarily — to the structural obligation the poet would have to reinforce the collective belief in the *illusio*.

That the disposition towards duplicity, which is conditioned by this desire, does not belong exclusively to Mallarmé; that it also defines the symbolic posture of Baudelaire and that with the latter it no doubt imposes itself more generally as one of the definitional traits of the *ethos* of the modern writer — all this does not relativize its critical importance. In fact, everything leads us to believe that it is because he was able to profit from this disposition in a way that conformed with the implicit norms and expectations of the literary field that Mallarmé acquired within this field a preeminent status: that is, his literary success owes much to the lucid — albeit not, of course, completely conscious — manner with which he dialectically moulded his desire according to the exigencies and the specific configuration of the symbolic aristocracy to which the field of restricted production of the time can be assimilated, this field being, as we know, a very select and competitive milieu where the faculty of duplicating oneself and deceiving one’s peers and readers seems not only to be a skill but also an express condition of the logic of distinction that is its foundation. The above-cited letter of Lefébure has the distinct advantage of signifying this work of libidinal investment and of ideological conformity, in short of the assimilation of a literary *habitus*, by illuminating the site of production of an aesthetic thought no doubt still uncertain and groping but no less resolved to constitute itself as a work which, by drawing on the resources of mystery, already promises to respect — by the very fact of pointing to it — the “invisible barrier”<sup>52</sup> that the literary field erects and thanks to which it supports and sustains itself “aristocratically” in the social universe. In this sense, the case of Mallarmé offers an eloquent example of the work of “negotiation between the drives and institutions”<sup>53</sup> that Bourdieu called — but without having given it all the critical attention it deserved, it seems — the “work of socialization of the libido”; a work “which transforms the drives into specific interests, interests that are socially constituted and exist only in relation to a social space at the heart of which certain things are important and

others indifferent, and for socialized agents who are constituted in such a way that they make differences that correspond to objective differences in this space”.<sup>54</sup>

### Envoi

By inscribing the “beyond” of ‘Music and Letters’ in the framework of an illusion of a social nature associated with the *illusio*, Bourdieu contributed to highlighting one of the most original implications of the Mallarméan recognition of the symbolic order. His interpretation has given visibility to what appears today to have constituted one of the best kept secrets of the Mallarméan text: the social “truth” of literature as an institutional mechanism for the production of symbolic value, which is to say as a fiduciary organisation not only homologous to a specular and speculative game like that of finance, but also, more generally, which is emblematic of the ensemble of games composing the social universe, or of what the poet called for this very reason the “domain of Fiction”.<sup>55</sup>

All the same, we can regret that the sociologist ignored that which, in the section on the “impious dismantling of literature”, reveals itself to also have its origins in the symbolic without for all that directly linking up with the social, namely the economy of *jouissance*. The re-reading that I have proposed of this section invites us to link the “beyond” produced and constitutively sought out by literary activity not primarily to the causality and the social phenomenality of the *illusio*, but to the causality of desire: after this re-examination, it is as a phantasmatic production, and thus by reference to an investment and to a “game” of a libidinal order, that this “beyond” imposes itself as the alpha and omega of this “mad game of writing”. This is why, with Mallarmé, we can truly say of this game that we “draw [it] out of us” in the manner of a “reality” that belongs to the intimate and paradoxical alterity of our *inner self*; and this is also why, in part against Bourdieu, we have to concede that this game is not so much willed as *desired*, that is, conditioned by this “secret disposition” which insists sensibly in the subject but consists, properly speaking, in nothing. It is precisely, this “nothing” that ‘Music and Letters’, in accordance with psychoanalytic theory, defines as the driving force of the economy of lack.

If it is true, as Bourdieu himself affirms, that the notion of the libido is synonymous with that of the *illusio*, it is in the sense in which a text like that of Mallarmé subordinates it to the investment in the literary artefact. But it is also comes at a price, as I hope to have shown, of revising certain fundamental aspects of the problematic of the *illusio*, in particular the nature of the pre-reflexive adhesion or the critical distanciation that the *illusio* inspires in the subject. No doubt the rhetorical orientation of the Bourdieusian interpretation of the “impious dismantling of fiction”, with everything it entails of omissions and points of overdetermination, betrays, beyond its well-known suspicion with respect to psychoanalysis, the lack of will on the part of the sociologist to open this field of questions. Still, while predicting a successful future for “socioanalysis”, Bourdieu seems to have delegated to others



the task of conjugating the study of the drives with that of the institution, just as he highlighted the epistemic necessity of such an articulation.

### Notes

1. Pascal Quignard, *Les Ombres errantes. Dernier royaume*, Vol. 1, Paris, Gallimard 'Folio', 2002, p. 16. Republished with the kind permission of *Fabula*. Patrick Thériault, 'In umbra voluptatis lusi', *ConTEXTES* [Online], 9, 2011, URL <http://contextes.revues.org/4791>
2. Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 6, n. 3.
3. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Music and Letters', in *Divagations* (Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 187 (*modified trans.*).
4. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). Bourdieu also published this section in the form of an article: 'Le démontage impie de la fiction: l'esthétique négative de Stéphane Mallarmé', in *Literature, Culture and Society in the Modern Age*, under the direction of Edward J. Brown, Stanford, Department of Slavic Languages and Literature, 'Stanford Slavic Studies' (1991), pp. 145-150.
5. Pascal Durand is the principal artisan of this new appraisal (cf. his recent work, which synthesizes, articulates and enriches numerous contributions on the subject: *Mallarmé. Du sens des formes au sens des formalités*, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 'Liber', 2008). Without being directly inspired by Bourdieusian sociology, the works of Vincent Kaufmann (*L'Equivoque épistolaire*, Paris, Minuit, 'Critique', 1990 and *Le Livre et ses addresses (Mallarmé, Ponge, Valéry, Blanchot)* (Paris, Méridien Klincksieck, 1986), or those works, which are freer at the formal level, of Daniel Oster, *La Gloire* (Paris, P.O.L, 1997 and *L'Individu littéraire* (Paris, PUF, 'Ecriture', 1997) are also characterized by their attempt to draw out the element of sociality implicated in the Mallarméan text, by being at least equally attentive to its gesture of enunciation [*geste d'énonciation*] as to its enunciation [*énoncé*].
6. For a critical summary of the history and of the theorization of the problematic of the *illusio*, see Paul Costey, 'L'illusio chez Pierre Bourdieu. Les (mes)usages d'une notion et son application au cas des universitaires', *Tracés, Revue de Sciences humaines*, No. 8, L'illusion, avril 2005, online since January 20 2009. <http://traces.revues.org/index2133.html>.
7. Pierre Bourdieu, *Raisons pratiques. Sur la théorie de l'action*, Paris, 'Points/Essais' (1995), p. 153.
8. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 274.
9. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Music and Letters' in *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 187. Bourdieu does not cite the end of this section by Mallarmé that continues on from these paragraphs, but he takes them into account elsewhere in his analysis.
10. See Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *L'Art de l'âge moderne. L'esthétique et la philosophie de l'art du XVIIIe siècle à nos jours* (Paris, Gallimard, 'NRF/Essais', 1992).
11. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, *op. cit.*, p. 275.
12. Pierre Bourdieu, *Raisons pratiques*, *op. cit.*, p. 151.



13. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, *op. cit.*, p. 276.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 277.
15. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, *op. cit.*, pp. 333-334.
16. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Music and Letters' in *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 187. Following the statement "...in light of a superior attraction", Mallarmé refers us to a note: "This point of view is no less pyrotechnical than metaphysical, but a fireworks show, at the level and by the example of thought, bursts out with ideal pleasure", *Ibid.*, p. 197.
17. See Eric Benoît, 'Le monde virtuel des *Poésies* de Mallarmé: une poétique de la "fiction"', in *Romantisme. Les Poésies de Stéphane Mallarmé. 'Une rose dans les ténèbres'. Actes du colloque d'aggrégation des 22 et 23 janvier 1999*, sous la direction de José-Luis Diaz (Paris, SEDES, 'Société des études romantiques', 1999), pp. 163-170.
18. Cited by Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *L'Art de l'âge moderne*, *op. cit.*, p. 283.
19. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, *op. cit.*, p. 276.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 277.
21. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Music and Letters' in *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 187.
22. Note that Mallarmé thematizes this circular character of reading in the context of another critical section: "To read — That practice — To lean, according to the page, on the blank, whose innocence inaugurates it, forgetting even the title that would speak too loud: and when, in a hinge, the most minor and disseminated, chance is conquered word by word, unfailingly the blank returns, gratuitous earlier but certain now, concluding that there is nothing beyond it and authenticating the silence", Stéphane Mallarmé, 'The Mystery in Letters', in *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 236.
23. Elsewhere Jacques Lacan uses the expression "montage"/"démontage de la pulsion", *Le Séminaire. Les Quatre Concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, Livre XI (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 'Points/Essais', 1973), p. 181.
24. Stéphane Mallarmé, *The Poems in Verse*. Translation and Notes by Peter Manson (Ohio: Miami University Press, 2012), p. 113.
25. Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature* (London: Penguin Books, 1959), p. 86.
26. Bourdieu insists on this point: "Breaking with musical *mimesis*, still very near to myth or rites, poetry leaves the natural order so as to situate itself, consciously, in the intrinsically human order of convention, of the "arbitrariness of the sign", as Saussure will say, of 'human artifice', as Mallarmé says", Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, *op. cit.*, p. 275.
27. Pierre Campion, *Mallarmé. Poésie et philosophie* (Paris, PUF, 'Philosophies', 1994), p. 115.
28. Cited by Eric Benoît in *De la Crise du sens à la quête du sens: Mallarmé, Bernanos, Jabès*, Paris, Cerf, 'Cerf littérature', 2001, p. 13.
29. Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, t. I, *op. cit.*, pp. 137-139.
30. Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, t. II, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
31. In its totality, the passage is as follows: "Yes, *I know*, we are merely empty forms of matter, but we are indeed sublime in having invented God and our soul. So sublime, my friend,

that I want to gaze upon matter, fully conscious that it exists, and yet launching itself madly into Dream, despite its knowledge that Dream has no existence, extolling the Soul and all the divine impressions of that kind which have collected within us from the beginning of time and proclaiming, in the face of the Void which is truth, these glorious lies!”, Stéphane Mallarmé, *Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 60.

32. See Bertrand Marchal in the preface to Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance complète (1862-1871), suivi de Lettres sur la poésie (1872-1898)* (Paris, Gallimard, ‘Folio/Classique’, 1995), p. 15.

33. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé*, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

34. Roland Barthes, *Fragments d’un discours amoureux* (Paris, Seuil, ‘Tel Quel’, 1977), p. 21.

35. The final tercet of *Salut* formulates in a certain sense the maxim of this *amor fati*: “Solitude, reef, star/ to whatever this is that was worth/ the white disquiet of our cloth”, Stéphane Mallarmé, *The Poems in Verse*, *op. cit.*, p. 9. The preceding strophes of this sonnet-epigraph suggest the lucid “maintenance” of a poet who knows how to keep a good distance from the poetic illusion so as to enjoy [*jouir*] his “lovely drunkenness” without being drowned disastrously in the “Nothing” of a radical alterity associated, as it happens, with the sea [*mer-mère*] in which “far away, a siren troupe/ is drowned, and mainly bottoms up”, *Ibid.* See the exhaustive interpretation I have proposed of this poem in *Le (dé)montage de la Fiction: la révélation moderne de Mallarmé* (Paris, Honoré Champion, ‘Romantisme et modernité’, 2010), pp. 31-112.

36. Thus, in an interview the writer Richard Millet recently deplored the fact that “literature is no longer sufficiently powerful and no longer engenders literary myths, or myths of the writer. It’s over! [...] There are no mythical figures, no more myths”. The question the interview posed to the writer, following this complaint, highlights well the performative contradiction such a “disenchantment” seems to lead back to: “If I understand you to the letter, how can you continue to write?”. ‘Richard Millet, interview avec Jacques-Pierre Amette’, in *Le Nouveau réactionnaire*. URL: <http://www.nouveau-reac.org/textes/richard-millet-interview-avec-jacques-pierre-amette>.

37. Paul Veyne, *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes ?* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, ‘Points/Essais’, 1983), p. 94. See also p. 32 and p. 148.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

39. Roger Dragonetti, *Le Fantôme dans le kiosque. Mallarmé et l’esthétique du quotidien*, Paris, Seuil, ‘Couleur des idées’, 1992, p. 17.

40. I am here drawing on remarks by Slavoj Žižek: “The position of the cynic is that he alone holds some piece of terrible, unvarnished wisdom. The paradigmatic cynic tells you privately, in a confidential low-key voice: ‘But don’t you get it that it is all really about (money/power/sex), that all high principles and values are just empty phrases which count for nothing?’ What the cynics don’t see is their own naivety, the naivety of their cynical wisdom that ignores the power of illusions”, ‘Why Cynics Are Wrong. The sublime shock of Obama’s victory’, *These Times*, 13 November 2008. URL: [http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/4039/why\\_cynics\\_are\\_wrong](http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/4039/why_cynics_are_wrong).

41. Pascal Durand, *Du sens des formes au sens des formalités*, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

42. Ibid., p. 15.

43. Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

44. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

45. One can agree with Bourdieu's judgement only if one concedes his conception of readability *qua* the adequation between an objective code of reading and the artistic competence of the reader (see Jacques Dubois, *L'Institution de la littérature*, préface de Jean-Pierre Bertrand, Bruxelles, Labor, 'Espace Nord', 2005, pp. 182-184). Note that this judgement considerably relativizes the recognition of debt that the sociologist formulates with respect to the poet in the first lines of his analysis. In this, he is perhaps not entirely disinterested at the institutional level: by recognizing this debt, Bourdieu gives the impression of completing the critical gesture that Mallarmé had been content to sketch out for a minority of his readers. In fact, next to this poet who remains a mystifier, the sociologist adopts the ameliorating posture of the "impious" democratic divulger of the truth: "Faced with the pharisaical denunciations of my 'denunciations', I have often regretted not having followed the example of Mallarmé, who, refusing to 'perform, in public, the impious dismantling of the fiction and consequently of the literary mechanism, to display the principal part or nothing', chose to save the fiction, and the collective belief in the game, by enunciating this seminal nothingness only in the mode of denegation. But I could not be satisfied with the answer he provided the question whether one should utter publicly the constitutive mechanisms of social games that are as shrouded in prestige and mystery as those of art, literature, science, law or philosophy..." Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

46. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

47. Ibid., p. 195.

48. Cited in Mallarmé (Stéphane), *Correspondance (1862-1871)*, vol. I (Paris, Gallimard, 1959), p. 250, note 2.

49. *Hérésies artistiques. L'Art pour tous* (published in 1862), in *Œuvres complètes*, t. II, *op. cit.*, pp. 360-364.

50. Ibid., p. 362.

51. On this point Jankélévitch remarks that the secret "brings together in the very act by which it separates", that it "only says no to one in order to say yes to another" and that it can thus be compared to a "great jealous love that loves *against* someone and which has a need for refusal, for distinctions, for contrast", Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L'Ironie* (Paris, Flammarion, 'Nouvelle Bibliothèque scientifique', 1964), p. 53.

52. Pierre Bourdieu, cited by par Jacques Dubois, dans *op. cit.*, p. 180.

53. Pierre Bourdieu, in 'Avant-propos dialogué avec Pierre Bourdieu', from Jacques de Maître, *L'Autobiographie d'un paranoïaque* (Paris, Anthropos, « Psychanalyse », 1994), p. IX.

54. Pierre Bourdieu, *Raisons pratiques*, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

55. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, t. II, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

THIERRY ROGER

ART AND ANARCHY IN THE TIME OF  
SYMBOLISM

*Mallarmé and His Literary Group*

*Translated by Robert Boncardo*

*The best literature is a form of propaganda by the deed.*

*Pierre Quillard, 'L'Anarchie par la littérature', Les Entretiens politiques et littéraires, April 1892*

*There is no need to be an anarchist as long as one can write.*

*Mallarmé, according to Henri de Régnier, Cahiers inédits*

As Jacques Rancière recalls in *The Politics of the Poets*, there are two principal ways of conceiving the relation between literary and public affairs.<sup>1</sup> At the ideological level, in the broadest and most neutral sense of the term, we could concern ourselves with the *politics of the writer* by describing their opinions and their activities within society. In a manner at once more semiological and more philosophical, we could also seek to define what a *politics of writing* could be.<sup>2</sup> In this case, it would be a matter of showing how an aesthetics can be a politics; how “literature does politics as literature”.<sup>3</sup> It is within this framework that Rancière situates himself with respect to his concept of the “distribution of the sensible”, a concept elaborated in the wake of Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. For the author of *Proletarian Nights*, aesthetics is not a theory of art but a thought of the configuration of the sensible that institutes a community. Now, what must be emphasized here is that this conception of a community of sense seems to come, in part, from a certain reading of Mallarmé, an author Rancière has a particular fondness for and to whom he has devoted articles<sup>4</sup> as well as a short but dense monograph: *The Politics of the Siren* (1996). Indeed, there is without a doubt a thought of the community in Mallarmé. Let us stress, first of all, that this has only recently been acknowledged by critics; moreover, it remains poorly disseminated in the public sphere, though it marks an important point of

renewal in Mallarmé studies. This image of a new Mallarmé, freed from the paradigm of intransitivity and self-referentiality, marks a significant rupture with the idealist and aestheticist reading of Thibaudet, as well as with Valéry's reformulation of the Master's poetics, which had a staunchly formalist and rationalist bent. It also breaks with Sartre's reading, which made Mallarmé the great solipsistic poet who had severed literature from the instrumental language without which no engagement was possible. Finally, this re-inscription of the poet's work in its historical period updates a long-dominant post-structuralist discourse that was tributary to Blanchot's catastrophist reading and the indeterminist approaches born with "deconstruction". Thus, a "political Mallarmé" emerged during the *Tel Quel* years — years which were also those of *Change* and "la pensée 68". At this point, the assessment made in 1957 by Jacques Schérer begins to no longer be pertinent: "Mallarmé's attitude towards society remains to be studied".<sup>5</sup> As is well known, in a time that has too hastily been defined as that of the linguistic turn, with Sollers, Kristeva, Faye, but also with Barthes or Straub, interpretations of Mallarmé's work followed a revolutionary paradigm. For the first time in the history of Mallarmé's reception, the political texts from the *Divagations* were cited.<sup>6</sup> The Roland Barthes of the *Leçon*, identifying the "literary" with a "language exterior to power", sums up quite well the spirit of the reading of this time: "'To change language', that Mallarméan expression, is a concomitant of 'To change the world', that Marxian one'. There is a political reception of Mallarmé, of those who have followed him and who follow him still".<sup>7</sup> During the 1980's, this thesis of the existence of a thought of the community proper to Mallarmé will then be deepened and presented in a less ideological and more philological manner in the works of Bertrand Marchal, which are centred on an unprecedentedly close reading of the *Divagations*, along with the exhumation of the "alimentary work" that was *Les Dieux antiques*. Rancière and Marchal, while agreeing on the question of utopia, do not for all that propose an identical reading. The dream of an ideal society sketched by the author of 'The Court' and 'Confrontation' raises a certain number of sensitive questions: what kind of thought of living-together can be read in the *Divagations*? What are the precise contours of this community? Is it a matter of a new aristocracy at the heart of democracy? What place does this communitarian thought accord to the sacred? What, precisely, would the role of the Poet be once he has been placed back within the walls of the City?<sup>8</sup>

For Marchal, who makes of the author of 'Catholicism' and *Les Dieux antiques* a contemporary of *The Ancient City* by Fustel de Coulanges, this vision of the community is above all a "religion". Poetry must contribute to the edification — on critical, fictive and self-reflexive foundations — of the new superstructures of society. By contrast, in the eyes of Rancière, who opposes Mallarmé to Feuerbach<sup>9</sup> so as to align him with Marx,<sup>10</sup> this chimerical vision of the common remains a politics tied to the exposure of the infrastructures of society. But in both cases, Mallarmé, who is no longer to be situated in a history of pure literature but in the history of the great social utopias, is a man of the future — a future that is in the first case reli-

gious, and in the second political. For the Bourdieu of *The Rules of Art*, the author of the *Divagations* is perceived, for reasons of his “obscurity”, as a partial or elitist agent of a veritable critique of culture, and is less a utopian than a sociologist.<sup>11</sup> The Mallarméan project of the “impious dismantling” of fiction would thus anticipate the mission of the sociologist, understood as the unveiling of the mechanisms of the *illusio*, which ground the literary as well as the social game.<sup>12</sup> Finally, we can identify a fourth main reading, which would see in this poetry a radical contestation of institutionalized politics: that is, a “literary anarchism” close to a nihilism. This was Sartre’s thesis, who saw in the work — as in the entire being — of Mallarmé, a “terrorism of politeness”<sup>13</sup> inseparable from a “sad mystification”.<sup>14</sup> This was also — in a quite different mode, of course — Kristeva’s thesis, who made Mallarmé a “prudent writer-anarchist”.<sup>15</sup> It is this fourth thesis that I would like to re-examine here, by returning to the complex links between the literary and libertarian milieus during what Jean Maitron has called “the era of the bombings [*l’ère des attentats*]”.<sup>16</sup> Before going into depth, let us be clear that the study of the relations between literature and anarchy have been enriched by numerous works since the pioneering article of Jacques Monférier,<sup>17</sup> to which we nevertheless are indebted.

The first observation it is worthwhile making is that the anarchist *reception* [*écoute*] of Mallarmé does not date from the “*Tel Quel* years”. It is precisely contemporaneous with the time of those bombers who terrorized a France that had been “ravacholized” [*ravacholisée*] from top to bottom. In fact, Gustave Lanson, who, in contrast to Brunetière or Lemaître, agreed to read Mallarmé and to comment on him at some length, published, in *La Revue universitaire* on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July, 1893,<sup>18</sup> one year after the bombings of Ravachol and a few months before that of Auguste Vaillant, an enthralling article, irrespective of its value judgements, which aimed to establish a parallel between political subversion and linguistic subversion. After stating — and not without some irony — that “what makes the work of Monsieur Mallarmé interesting is that it is not understood”, the academician establishes two points of contact between political and linguistic subversion by drawing on a phrase that was then in the process of becoming famous and which was to be found in the recent publication of *Vers et Prose* (1893): “the pure work implies the elocutionary disappearance of the poet, who cedes the initiative to words”. At the *theological* level, what Lanson describes as a quest for a literary absolute recalls a form of quietism. Through a passive poetry that takes place outside of all intellect and will, Mallarmé repeats and transposes Madame Guyon and Fénelon. He reduces language to its purely sensible dimension, making the word a sonorous and no longer an intelligible sign, while the poetic consciousness is transformed into a simple “recording apparatus”.<sup>19</sup> This leads to a “spontaneous organization of words that occurs well below the level of consciousness”.<sup>20</sup> Mallarmé would thus seek to establish an immediate and unimpeded relation between the Ego and the infinite, thus awakening a heterodoxy proper to a mystical perspective. However, at the sociological level, this literary absolute is an anarchism. This time, Mallarmé repeats and transposes Max Stirner. It is interesting to highlight the fact that it is precisely this thinker

who is evoked here, and not Proudhon, Bakunin or Kropotkin. Lanson draws on an article by Jean Thorel published in the edition of April 15, 1893 of *La Revue Bleue*.<sup>21</sup> In fact, in a fragmentary, allusive manner, the author of *The Ego and His Own* (1844) had just been discovered by French readers. His magnum opus will only be translated by Henri Lasvignes in 1900, a publication followed by Victor Bash's pioneering study, *L'Individualisme anarchiste: Max Stirner*, published in 1904. This, then, is the earliest moment of the French reception of Stirner, which follows shortly after the contemporaneous reception of Nietzsche.<sup>22</sup> From this perspective, the poet of the "Penultimate is dead" succeeds in "blowing up" the "intellectual institutions"<sup>23</sup> bequeathed by society, namely the lexicon, semantics and logic. He concludes:

Mallarmé is a literary anarchist [...] his art is the literary equivalent of anarchy [...] his doctrine represents the final stage at which aesthetic individualism can blossom, just as anarchy is the extreme end that social individualism can attain. There is nothing more sociable in us than our intelligence, and through our ideas all of us are in one, and one of us is in all.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, with his violently anti-discursive poetry, Mallarmé broke the contract of communication, and by breaking this verbal contract he broke the social contract. There is no longer any community since there is no longer any common measure, but only a singular speech cut off from common language. A quite similar analysis of the Mallarmé case will be found amongst anti-Romantic thinkers of the Right, above all Maurras at the moment of the poet's death. In any case, Lanson sees in Mallarméan poetry, and in a dazzling form, a veritable politics of writing, and not a politics of the writer: "let me not be accused of having said that Monsieur Mallarmé is complicit with Ravachol, and that his work has inspired layers of dynamite".<sup>25</sup> What should be made of this idea of Mallarmé the literary anarchist?

Of course, such a precisely dated and situated reading relies upon two implicit, indeed unthought, ideas: a certain idea of anarchism, equated here with the thought of Stirner, which is brandished as an interpretative grill in the very midst of the era of bombings; and a certain idea, frozen in 1893, of Mallarmé's work. Mallarmé, who is here discussed on the basis of the anthology *Vers et Prose* as well as the 1887 photo-lithographic edition of the *Poésies*,<sup>26</sup> is not the author of the ten 'Variations on a Subject' given to *La Revue Blanche* (1895), nor the author of 'Music and Letters' (1894-1895), these being the "critical poems" in which he will, precisely, clarify his "politics" so as, perhaps, to respond in part to this Lansonian attack.<sup>27</sup>

This raises a series of question. With respect to politics, can we speak of *literary anarchism* without indulging in an abusive analogy? Is it possible to be an anarchist in literature and in politics? Can we speak of an "anarchist aesthetics", to take up the title of a study by André Reszler, published in 1973? Can anarchist literature be anything other than a militant or didactic literature, and thus tributary to traditional artistic forms? Can "modernism" be defined as the successful aesthetic transfiguration of the political failure of the anarchist movement? Of course, anarchism does not necessarily mean aesthetic modernity, or avant-gardism.<sup>28</sup> Then



there is another bundle of problems: how should Mallarmé be situated with respect to certain *Mardistes* like Fénéon, Vielé-Griffin, Mauclair, Bernard Lazare, Octave Mirbeau and Pierre Quillard, all of whom publicly and explicitly took up the cause of anarchy?

Let us begin by recalling that, if one dives into the periodicals and the journals of the 1890's, the link between the libertarian and literary milieus constitutes an undeniable fact of the time. Thus, recalling for the readers of *La Plume* the history of anarchism in a special edition of May 1st 1893, Emile Joannès notes: "1893: a prodigious extension of the anarchist movement since the acts of Ravachol. *Les intellectuels sont à l'idée*".<sup>29</sup> On September 1st 1892<sup>30</sup> the same journal published the opinions of a number of writers on anarchy: Zola, Coppée, Barrès, Maeterlinck, Scholl, but also Mallarmé (we will come back to this). It would also be necessary to highlight a key moment in this convergence between anarchism and symbolism, namely the entrance of Elisée Reclus in July 1892 into Vielé-Griffin and Paul Adam's journal, *Les Entretiens Politiques et Littéraires*, a journal that published Bakunin, Proudhon, Stirner, but also reflections on free verse. In this journal the militant geographer published a text addressed to "the comradely editors", to whom he pays tribute as follows: "you throw out all of the dogmas with all of the formulas and prosody".<sup>31</sup> It has since been a commonplace of the majority of histories of Symbolism to mention this ideological proximity between the different apostles of freedom: "free verse" and "free theatre" rhyme with "free association". In his *Histoire de la littérature* from 1936, Thibaudet defined Symbolism as an "artistic Blanquism".<sup>32</sup> How should we interpret this politico-aesthetic encounter? Is "literary anarchism" anything other than a category used in reports from Police Headquarters at a time when the man of letters is under close surveillance?<sup>33</sup> At any rate, it will be necessary to carefully distinguish between this formula and its purely polemic avatar, in the sense of dilettantism, that is, an "anarchy of taste", an absence of any criteria for evaluating the new literature. This latter is the prevailing meaning given to anarchism by Anatole Baju (*L'Anarchie littéraire*, Vanier, 1892),<sup>34</sup> or Charles Recolin (*L'Anarchie littéraire*, Perrin, 1898), a defender of Brunetière and Doumic.

### The Misunderstandings

If we synthesize contemporary scholarship, two dominant ideas emerge: a superficial encounter; and a fundamental discrepancy. Let us begin with this.

According to the first, this apparent convergence would mask a deep misunderstanding, or at the very least a superficial and short-term agreement. With the exception of some personalities who demonstrated a sincere, profound and durable engagement, such as Mirbeau, Quillard, Lazare or Fénéon, the majority of young Symbolists swiftly left the movement. This was the case with Paul Adam, Camille Mauclair, Francis Vielé-Griffin and Adolphe Retté, who turned towards nationalism, militarism, *L'Action Française*, and even the ivory tower, as soon as anarchism,

following the enforcement of the so-called “villainous” laws”, changed political strategy and oriented itself towards unionism. Thus “literary anarchism” means an anarchism of the men of letters or of the salon; an “infatuation” situated at the intersection of dandyism, snobbism and dilettantism. Mauclair, reflecting on his anarchist past, waxes ironical: “I imagined an anarchism that was aristocratic and yet a friend of the people [...] We were anarchists because it had an allure, a romanticism, because this attitude suited our situation as scorned writers”.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, another renegade, Retté, in his *Promenades subversives* from 1896, stigmatizes “the fashion of calling oneself a rebel” that is inseparable from all of the “backtrackings of the bourgeois caste”.<sup>36</sup> In fact, we can only highlight two principal points of divergence between the two sides. Symbolism, which essentially developed against a backdrop of pre-Raphaelism, is characterized by a forgetting of the social question. It was, if we subscribe to Valéry’s analysis for instance, a displacement of the literary towards mysticism and occultism. In contrast to the numerous avant-garde manifestos of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, what was at stake in Moréas’ manifesto was nothing but literature. Furthermore, a discrepancy appears at the level of the philosophy of history. Symbolist thought, which in this case is a twilight thought permeated by Schopenhaurism, is characterized by a pessimism close to nihilism. On the contrary, anarchist thought, which is progressive and which aimed during its constructive stage at social regeneration, affirms itself as the thought of a dawn. Thus *La Plume* publishes in 1893 *Chants lyriques pour le monde à venir* by Jean Carrère, a poet who celebrates the rise of the “Great Morning” and the death of the darkened world,<sup>37</sup> once the bloody test of the “Great Evening” has been surmounted. We are here at the opposite end of the spectrum from theories of decadence, complacency and morbidity.

Denouncing this anarchist posture *cum* imposture is a commonplace of the time, as much on the left as on the right of the politico-literary spectrum. Fashionable anarchism, an obvious target of satire, will become a character in the novel *Les Trois Villes* by Zola. In *Paris* (1898), the very aristocratic princess of Harth will make the anarchist cause her latest plaything. Likewise, her accomplice in petty gossip, Hyacinthe, the son of the very rich Duvillards and a parody of the young “fin-de-siècle” man, will say: “But sir, it seems to me that in these times of degradation and universal ignominy, a man of some distinction cannot but be anarchist”.<sup>38</sup> In Léon Daudet we find — but from a completely different perspective — a virulent denunciation of this artificial anarchism, incarnated by the hollow men the novelist calls the “kamtchatka” or the “primitives”.<sup>39</sup> Of course, such a misalliance is attacked by certain militant anarchists themselves. The social origin of writers is treated with irony. Pierre Kropotkin, in *La Conquête du pain* from 1892, judges that the modern artist remains too bourgeois. For anti-intellectual reasons, writers are treated with suspicion. Thus the Italian anarchist group the *Intransigeants*, founded by Pini and Parmeggiani, partisans of “individualist reprisals”, held that “whoever signs a book or a journal article cannot be an anarchist”.<sup>40</sup> However, it is necessary to highlight the fact that anarchism, as a multifaceted movement, remains a nebula with poorly

defined contours and, like all movements, is traversed by internal tensions. An important distinction must be made between the anti-intellectual group of Père Peinard and Emile Pouget and Jean Grave's group *La Révolte*, Grave being a militant who edited a journal equipped with a "literary supplement" that published Prince Kropotkin and the Reclus brothers. Nevertheless, in these columns we also find polemical tracts against writers, as well as the expression of a form of hatred for "literature". Emile Renoult, in 'Gendelettres', an article from 1891, proclaims loud and clear that "literature is not revolutionary" it is nothing but a "sham".<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, aesthetic arguments that reduce all "literature" to ideas of verbal obscurity, of elitism or of formalism, are frequently advanced. In fact, in conformity with Proudhon's theory of art, the majority of anarchists take social art as their model. Jean Grave, in the chapter 'Anarchy and Art' from his 1895 book *La Société future*, attacks autonomous artistic practices that are cut off from the people. The same Jean Grave, reporting on Mallarmé's *Divagations* in 1897 for *Les Temps nouveaux*, judges that the poet wrote his sentences in English before translating them into French... Here it is necessary to recall a little-known point, namely that this era of bombings also saw a resurgence of the debate, inherited from Romanticism, between the tenants of "social art" and the tenants of "art for art's sake". This dual categorization is still at work at this date, as evidenced by the foundation in 1891 of the journal *L'Art social*. In a programmatic text, Gabriel de La Salle argues that "socialist poets do not have to busy themselves with the exterior form they are to give their work".<sup>42</sup> As for Symbolist and decadent writers, they are representatives of "arts of bourgeois decadence".<sup>43</sup> Let us add, however, that such a vision remains the subject of debate even within literary anarchist milieus: what would, it is asked, a properly anarchist art be? Pierre Quillard denounces didactic deviations; Bernard Lazare takes aim at formalistic deviations; and Camille Pissaro decides without deciding in a letter to Mirbeau on September 30<sup>th</sup> 1892: "all the arts are anarchist when they are beautiful and good!".<sup>44</sup> Before the beginning of the Dreyfus Affair, the debates show us that in France these "anarchist years" play a determining role in the birth of the figure of the "intellectual". We witness here a "general repetition" of the Affair, to take up a formula of Christophe Charle.<sup>45</sup>

### A Vague Terrain of Agreement

As a counterpoint to this failed encounter between anarchy and literature, which requires us to distinguish clearly between sympathy and militancy, the existence of a certain number of more or less general points of contact have been noted, all of which can be grouped around the following axis: a certain spirit of revolt. In fact, as Bertrand Marchal notes, the Symbolist youth "willingly claim for themselves a form of intellectual anarchy that satisfies, by proxy, a contempt for society".<sup>46</sup>

At the ideological level, these two milieus share the same hatred of capitalist society and the same refusal of bourgeois thought and morality — grievances to which

there can be added a condemnation of the commodification of literature. But this remains quite vague. On the side of the Symbolists, the texts of the anarchist theoreticians seem to be little known. Amongst the writers, but not including Paul Adam, touched as he was by the crash of the Union Générale, we encounter no true knowledge of economic issues, nor of the complex problem of the distribution of wealth, which underwrites debates around collectivism, corporatism and federalism. Maeterlinck, who declared himself to be “completely ignorant of sociology” and who claimed nothing more than the “right to silence”<sup>47</sup> on this subject, represents well the general tendency. At the socio-literary level, the anarchist temptation becomes the new name of the artistic liberalism of 1890. To be an anarchist means to claim the freedom of art, the independence of the artist and a “pure art”, that is, an art that is autonomous with respect to justice, morality and the economy. Thus, Lucien Muhlfeld writes: “there is the tradition, the tradition which recommends to the literary avant-garde that they adopt the most left-leaning opposition of the romantics who welcomed the novelty of 1848”.<sup>48</sup> Finally, at the aesthetic level, there exist the “barbarous nuptials”,<sup>49</sup> which take place more on the terrain of images than of ideas, between the fin-de-siècle spirit and anarchist thought, through the emergence of an “imaginary in crisis” more than an “anarchist imaginary”.<sup>50</sup> Thus anarchist-like literature develops an imaginary of catastrophe, that “eternal black poetry” of which Zola speaks in an interview on anarchy published in *Le Figaro* on April 25 1892. The end of the century rhymes with the end of the world, the bomber bringing with him the exterminating angel through a common fascination with murder or sacrifice. Anarchism is coupled with decadentism, this latter being a legacy of the 1880’s when links were established between Anatole Baju and Louise Michel, rather than with Symbolism. Furthermore, there is an evident interest amongst certain novelists for the novelistic form of the anarchist, which offers multiple narrative possibilities.<sup>51</sup> But this means leaving Symbolism, which for the most part turned its back on the narrative novel by poeticizing it,<sup>52</sup> to turn towards naturalism and its margins, even if there are obvious exchanges between the different movements. On the side of the Symbolist milieus, an anarchist spirit can be felt in fairy tales (Bernard Lazard), Scandinavian (Ibsen, Strindberg) or German theatre (Hauptmann), which had only recently been introduced, or the mystery novel (Mauclair). If there is a work that thematizes these complex relations between art and anarchy, it is without doubt *Le Soleil des morts* — a novel on Symbolism and not a Symbolist novel — which, like *Paris* by Zola, appeared in 1898, two works that it would be suggestive to compare. Mallarmé’s disciple, who took his distance from the Master, shows the impossible union between Symbolism and anarchism on the basis of the broad opposition between (pure) art and action, which is allegorized via Calixte Armel and Claude Pallat, both of whom are “excommunicated prophets”.<sup>53</sup> The narrator writes: “the intellectual isolation preached by the poet required the absolute individualism of the anarchist; between them there was a world, but they only had to make a movement in order to join hands”.<sup>54</sup> At the end of the story, regeneration in the form of the riot fails, while the shadow of Armel is buried, “laid low in the mud by the livid Dawn”.<sup>55</sup> For Mauclair at this time, anarchism

constitutes the underside of Symbolism, its negative. He portrays two extremisms, both destined to encounter an impasse, both dismissed, and both made gangrenous by the decomposition of the elite as of the crowd: there will be no Great Morning and the only solar light will come, perhaps, from posthumous glory. Yet the entire novel is founded upon the oscillations of the hero, De Neuze, torn as he is between these two postulations. Later on, in *Servitude et grandeur littéraires*, as we have seen above, Maclair will return to the desire to reconcile the irreconcilable: “I imagined an anarchism that was aristocratic and yet a friend of the people”.<sup>56</sup> Let us add that this novel has no doubt played a far from negligible role in the emergence of an image of Mallarmé as a paradoxical anarchist, tempted not by direct action but by a “white anarchy, or an anarchy by abstention”.<sup>57</sup>

As we will now see, it is the cardinal notion of the individual that for a moment allowed this dream a union between revolts.

### The Question of Individualism: From Agreement to Disagreement

If the Symbolists willingly subscribe to the anarchist cause, it is because they perceive it as a radical individualism that supports their vision of society. But misunderstandings again arise as soon as we try to define this fin-de-siècle individualism. This individualism is, first of all, as is well known, an “idealism” in a sense that Gourmont, a reader of Schopenhauer, gave it: that is, a subjectivism, indeed a perspectivism. The author of *Sixtine* explains this to Jules Huret in 1891. The true name of this new literature is “idealism” and not “symbolism”: “so many thinking brains, so many diverse worlds, and when we wish to represent them, so many different arts [...] therefore, again, an unlimited freedom in the domain of artistic creation, literary anarchy”.<sup>58</sup> Gourmont will return incessantly to this idea. A little later, in *La Revue blanche*, he takes up the equation again:

... Symbolism, cleansed of the extravagances that shortsighted weaklings have given it, is translated literarily by the word Liberty, and for those who are violent, by the word Anarchy, [...] Idealism signifies the free and personal development of the intellectual individual in the intellectual domain; Symbolism could (indeed should) be considered by us as the free and personal development of the aesthetic individual in the aesthetic domain.<sup>59</sup>

Likewise, in the same epoch, Vielé-Griffin puts forward a “literary anarchy for which [he] has fought” and whose ideal is “the freedom of the individual in the expression of his very individuality: poetry”.<sup>60</sup> From an identical yet this time theatrical perspective, Victor Barrucand, a collaborator of *L'Endehors*, applauds the author of *A Doll's House*: “Ibsen is a unvarnished champion of individual independence; it is in this sense that he is an anarchist, and with him the intellectual elite of the time — of our time”.<sup>61</sup> Conversely, and in a convergent manner, Mirbeau will define political anarchism as the “reconquest of the individual”, or “the freedom of the individual's development in a normal and harmonious direction”.<sup>62</sup> Thus when

re-situated in its time, the thesis that Lanson applied to Mallarmé, and which we presented above, does nothing but reformulate the positions of certain Symbolists, above all Gourmont, so as to denounce them.

Moreover, Symbolist individualism undeniably hides an aristocratism. It constitutes the corollary of the hatred of a “leveling socialism”<sup>63</sup> that we encounter in the writings of Mauguier, Mirbeau or Retté at a time when the majority of writers subscribe to the theory of the artist as a “superior man”. Sometimes, this hatred is such that *bourgeoisisme* will be preferred to communism, egotism to the evangels of “saint Marx”.<sup>64</sup> Thus Mirbeau, at the time of the Fénéon affair, wonders if the man of letters is an “anarchist”; he responds in the negative by invoking the absence of propagandistic activities, then adds: “certainly, he must come up with some aristocratic and free philosophy of society”.<sup>65</sup> We encounter the same attitude in Tailhade, who mixes cynicism, dandyism and elitism: “I take from anarchism on the one hand what amuses me, and on the other what favours my intellectual egotism. The whole aristocratic part of it pleases me”.<sup>66</sup> Adolphe Retté also multiplies similar affirmations: “The duty of poets is to affirm the aristocracy of the idea, the only legitimate artistocracy, for Artists are the Aristos [*car les Aristes sont les Aristes*]”.<sup>67</sup>

Such an exaltation of artistic and political individualism leads to serious confusions and misunderstandings between libertarian individualism, anti-state and properly anarchist libertarianism on the one hand, and an aristocratic, anti-democratic and anti-modern, indeed reactionary, individualism on the other. One attacks institutions and authority, while the other attacks the people, universal suffrage and equality understood as egalitarianism. One is auroral, while the other is crepuscular. The true-false encounter between anarchism and Symbolism takes place on this ambiguous terrain. This is the reason such radically opposed readings of the cult of the Ego of Barrès will be proposed — a cult that will be anarchist for certain Symbolists, but which, for militant anarchist intellectuals, will be, in the best of cases, nothing but a refined egotism. In the same way, the question of anarchy will encounter that of the initial reception of Nietzsche, as Edouard Schuré’s long study, published in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1895, suggests.<sup>68</sup> Now, this libertarian individualism, as Georges Palante points out in 1907 in *Anarchisme et individualisme*, is nothing but the first moment of anarchist thought, which itself is founded upon an altruistic principle oriented towards social harmony, solidarity, and reciprocal help dear to Kropotkin, and which seeks to promote free association: “Freedom of all through agreement between all”,<sup>69</sup> Sébastien Faure proclaims in *L’encyclopédie anarchiste*. The symmetry between the two special editions of the journal *La Plume* at this time should be highlighted. The edition of May 1st 1893 is devoted to “anarchy”, while the edition of 15<sup>th</sup> June 1894 studies “aristocratism”. Thus could be clarified to some degree Jean Maitron’s thesis according to which the influence of Stirner’s thought was “insignificant” for the intellectual development of anarchism in France, in contrast to that of Proudhon, which was “permanent and profound”.<sup>70</sup> For Jean Thorel, tribute was to be paid to Stirner as the veritable father of anarchism: Bakunin had “borrowed a lot”<sup>71</sup> from him. In any case, this



long promotion of artistic individualism, itself an inheritance of the conquests of militant romanticism, constitutes a fertile ground which, as a counterpoint to the development of socialism, will make possible the effortless adoption of Stirner in France at this time, as is true for Nietzsche as well. Let us end with Jean Grave: the individual had interested the anarchist “well before the bourgeois men of letters had discovered Nietzsche and Stirner”.<sup>72</sup>

### Mallarmé the Anarchist?

From our perspective, it is this question of individualism, which up to now has been insufficiently taken into account,<sup>73</sup> that allows us, if not to decide the debate concerning Mallarmé, then at least to properly envisage it. All of Mallarmé’s equivocations over aristocracy and democracy, individual and community, literature and politics, modernity and anti-modernity, can be summed up in the following lines from John Payne, addressed to Mallarmé in October 1886:

I am sending you a short article from the newspaper *The Globe* that deals with you: it will amuse you, as it amused me. It must have been very amusing to have heard Louise Michel speak of literature. You are right: she must have taken the decadents to be anarchists. You see, you villain, the misunderstandings to which you expose yourself by feigning, through pure love of paradox, to be a Republican and a Striker, you who are a refined, even aristocratic, Conservative, hating from the bottom of your delicate soul this dirty kitchen of smoke and willful obscurantism that is named (*lucus a non lucendo*) Liberalism.<sup>74</sup>

The question remains delicate, and we can agree with Antoine Compagnon when he says that it constitutes a “large dossier”.<sup>75</sup> Two radical theses seem to us to be inadmissible. On the one hand, we cannot subscribe to the approach of Caroline Granier, who hastily excludes the author of the *Divagations* from her field of reflection on the basis of a rather banal Mallarméan vulgate (that of intransitivity and autotelism), which has been undermined since the works of Bertrand Marchal. The anarchist ideal, she writes, is situated “at the opposite end of what seems to be Mallarmé’s project: life neither begins nor ends except in the book”.<sup>76</sup> She makes the claim, without demonstration, that his “public opinions are in no way proximate to anarchism”.<sup>77</sup> The historian adds that if the poet subscribed to the literary journal *La Révolte*, then this was only because of its “high literary quality”.<sup>78</sup> On the other hand, given the positions adopted by the poet, to which we will return, we cannot be satisfied with a pure and simple identification of Mallarmé with the phenomenon, if not the cause, of anarchism, such as critics from Julia Kristeva<sup>79</sup> to Pascal Durand<sup>80</sup> have done. Must we for all that subscribe to the idea formulated by Antoine Compagnon according to which “Mallarmé played with anarchy, in any case with the word, and it was a risky and provocative game”?<sup>81</sup> For our part, it seems to us that it is not a question of a game, or of an undecidable “between-two”



dear to Compagnon, but rather of displacement. The same goes for anarchy as for aristocracy: “I fear that I have displaced the question”,<sup>82</sup> we read in the 1895 version of ‘The Court’. In fact, Mallarmé displaced all of the polemical concepts of his time, whether they be literary (“verse”, “music”, “Fiction”, “Idea”, “Theatre”, etc.) or sociological (“divinity”, “society”, “the Crowd”, etc.). This is what we would now like to show by distinguishing between two levels of analysis: the intention of the author, to the degree that we can reconstitute it, and the intention of the reader, which is tied to the effect produced by the text.

**Intentio auctoris: correspondence, responses to inquiries, speeches and “critical poems”**

Let us attempt to group together here the explicit – and notorious – Mallarméan references to anarchy, by treating them in a chronological manner, which implies making a distinction between prepublications in journals and the collection *Divagations* from 1897. We will see that it is quite imprecise to write, as Eisenzweig does, that in Mallarmé we find nothing but a “constant, obstinate and recurrent silence”<sup>83</sup> on anarchism.

Everything “begins”<sup>84</sup> in February 1892, a little before the “veritable epidemic of terror”<sup>85</sup> that was unleashed in Paris, and not long before the first bombing by Ravachol, with Mallarmé being solicited by the journal *La Plume* via Paterne Berrichon to comment upon current anarchist affairs. The poet receives the following letter: “...we would be pleased to know your opinion on the ideas that Kropotkin, Elisée Reclus, Oscar Wilde, Camille Pissarro, Grave, etc., will develop in this edition; ideas with which, moreover, you are familiar”.<sup>86</sup> Mallarmé responds as follows:

When I hold in my hands the edition of *La Plume*, which I congratulate you for having placed into the hands of Kropotkin, Elisée Reclus, Oscar Wilde, Camille Pissarro, Grave and others, I will read, admire and sympathize with it; but before? and do not ask me to deal in the space of a note a subject on which, to get a word in, one would need all of the special authority of these saints and martyrs.<sup>87</sup>

The editors of this correspondence make the following comment; “a very awkward letter; we understand Mallarmé’s refusal”.<sup>88</sup> And in fact, lacking a clear position, the journal will only publish this response in the rubric ‘Letters on anarchy’ on September 1st 1892; nothing from Mallarmé will appear in the special edition of May 1st 1893. But it is at the moment of the banquet of February 15<sup>th</sup> 1893 of this same journal that the poet will declaim his ‘Toast’, rebaptized ‘Salut’ for the *Poésies*. At the same time, during the Panama scandal and the trial of de Lesseps, Mallarmé publishes, in February 1893 a text in the *National Observer*, a first version of the “critical poem” ‘Gold’ from the *Divagations*. We read in these lines, which are, as always, sinuous and which will be tightened further still in 1897, no doubt because of their too-circumstantial anchorage, the following:

The salons have conversed correctly. Many hands, in some sense anarchist, of otherwise conventional people, holding back their élan from fear of appearing to protest against the arrest only just read out, shake in a dignified, spontaneous, grave manner the hand of the condemned, as if nothing had happened, effacing the trace of the slanderous litigation: they have signified something unconscious and supreme. Judges, pronounce: to us, a tribute paid by the imprudent, and to give pain back to them, no; at least, some intimate and superior consequences.<sup>89</sup>

Even if it would be necessary to refer to the whole of this text, it seems that here Mallarmé is attacking a Republican, indeed a human-all-too-human form of justice, which has no real efficacy: “do not lose from view that the function of Justice is a fiction, for the sole fact that it does not give out money”.<sup>90</sup> Lesseps, “a statue laid low”,<sup>91</sup> seems here to be defended by Mallarmé, and the undermining of the official, which is to say fictive, judgement, has an “anarchist” twist.

Jean Grave’s *La Société mourante et l’Anarchie* appears during the summer of 1893, a book prefaced by Mirbeau and which will earn its author a conviction in 1894 during the *Procès des Trente*.<sup>92</sup> Mallarmé received a copy of the book, but the poet’s response has been lost. A letter from the director of *La Révolte* from July 5<sup>th</sup> thanks the poet for his “clear appraisal”<sup>93</sup> of the book, without saying anything more; what he says immediately after bears on the publication of a summary in *La Révolte* of Villiers’ *Nouveaux Contes cruels*.

There then occurs Vaillant’s bombing of the Chamber of Deputies on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1893. The journalist Paul Brulat, profiting from the presence of writers groups together at a banquet of *La Plume*, obtains the following opinion from the poet, which will be published the day after in *Le Journal*: “I know of no other bomb, than a book”.<sup>94</sup> As is well known, Mallarmé will, moreover, be concerned with the political trajectory of Félix Fénéon, in whose favour he will testify after the Foyot restaurant bombing in April 1894.<sup>95</sup> Mallarmé’s defence will consist in insisting on the gentle character of this man of letters, as well as on the “pure” dimension of his intellectual and strictly artistic preoccupations. Fénéon was acquitted, and we can suppose today that “Mallarmé obviously did not know, like the court, that Fénéon was in fact the author of the bombing”.<sup>96</sup> Let us add that at the moment of the arrest of the suspect, Mallarmé, in a response to a journalist, judged that “for Fénéon there is nothing more dynamite-like than his articles”,<sup>97</sup> a formula that alludes directly to the famous line just cited. Finally, the most precise and developed stance taken by Mallarmé is to be found in ‘Music and Letters’, the conference given in April 1894 in the context of an anarchist effervescence:

The opposite insult stutters forth from the newspapers, for lack of audacity; this leaves a barely articulated suspicion: Why the reticence? The devices, whose explosion lights up parliament with a summary illumination, but pitifully disfigures the curious bystanders, would interest me, because of the light — with the brevity of its instruction, which allows the legislator

to claim internal incomprehension; but I'm against adding bullets and nails to the bombs. Like an opinion; and to blame all the damage only on the fact that there are writers, a little out of the spotlight, who believe, or not, in free verse, captivates me, especially by its ingenuity.<sup>98</sup>

Mallarmé ironizes over the amalgamation the press have created between terrorist anarchism and free verse, all the while condemning the murderous violence, as Zola did too, as well as the inefficacy of the method. In a very precise manner, these judgements recall the theses defended by a close companion of Mallarmé, Pierre Quillard,<sup>99</sup> two years earlier in *Les Entretiens politiques et littéraires*:

It must be admitted that the explosion of some bombs of dynamite strikes vulgar minds with terror. Yet this surprised panic hardly lasts the time necessary to furnish a pretext for the reprisals carried out by the police and judiciary [...]. On the contrary, the destructive power of a poem cannot be dispersed in one go: it is permanent and its deflagration is certain and continuous; Shakespeare or Aeschylus prepare as infallibly as the boldest of our anarchist comrades the collapse of the old world.<sup>100</sup>

But this is a double-edged argument; it can also be used to call for and justify censorship. Thus during the trial of Jean Grave, the public Minister declares: "the accused today is a book [...] this book is an explosive; we must strike it as if it were a bomb".<sup>101</sup>

We also encounter this commitment to the book and to a revolt that would endure by virtue of the efficacious ideality of thought in a statement made by Mallarmé and reported by Régnier in his *Cahiers* in May 1894:

At Mallarmé's place. He is surprised that the youth today are anarchists, that they have a taste for vulgar protests, for this condescendence to brutal means on the part of people who have at their disposition superior means for protest like the book. He adds that there is no reason to be an anarchist, as long as one allows oneself to write, and, to whomsoever objects to such restrictive laws, he responds that to know how to write is to know how to say anything despite everything, and that tyranny requires the only interesting things, namely allusion and periphrasis.<sup>102</sup>

Let us cite lastly a final testimonial, drawn once again from Régnier's very precious notes, dated April 1894: "there is only one man who has the right to be an anarchist, me, the poet, for I alone make a product that society does not want, in exchange for which it does not give me enough to live on".<sup>103</sup>

What can we conclude from this? If the Master of the Rue de Rome "was surrounded by anarchy between 1893 and 1893",<sup>104</sup> the interpretation of his position remains difficult. Mallarmé, in his response to Berrichon, certainly uses hyperbolic praise to characterize the theoreticians of anarchy ("these saints and these martyrs"), but above all he admits in an indirect manner that he has not read them, and calls upon his responsibility as a writer: namely, to judge the works as individual pieces and

to be able to reflect before responding. Furthermore, as Caroline Granier suggests, his relations with Jean Grave, given the letters we have, seem to be of a far more literary than political nature, even if it is necessary to not overly separate these two domains. Let us be clear that Mallarmé did not sign the letter of defence of the author of *La Société mourante*, and that, in distinction to Mirbeau, Elisée Reclus or Paul Adam, he was not a witness at his trial.

Faithful to his ideal of “restricted action”, as Régnier’s testimonial confirms, Mallarmé foregoes militant activism and limits the engagement of the writer, who is a man with only a pen in hand, to the book-form: “Your act is always applied to paper”.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, following the analyses of Bertrand Marchal, if Mallarmé certainly manifests an interest for the bomb, it is insofar as his poetic gaze carries out a double reduction: on the one hand, of light reduced to ideality, and on the other, of an unveiling reduced to a coming-to-consciousness.<sup>106</sup> From protestation to revelation. Mallarmé displaces anarchism by metaphorizing it, that is, by spiritualizing it, without for all that defusing it, no doubt. It is not a matter of “mining”<sup>107</sup> the foundations of the City, but of illuminating the repressed resource of being-together: namely, language. Thus, in the Mallarméan imaginary, such as it is formulated in precise terms in ‘Music and Letters’, the festival is substituted for a bombing, pyrotechnics for dynamite. As for the circumstantial Mallarméan image of the book-bomb, we believe it should not be accorded too much importance. Mallarmé does not say that the book is a bomb: he responds to the question: “what do you think of bombs?” by displacing it onto the terrain of literary forms. For the author of ‘Restricted Action’, the book is above all a “spiritual instrument”, an essential formula and not an explosives device. This leads us to adopt the other, less historical, point of view on this question.

#### **Intentio Lectoris: The Case Of *A Coup De Dés***

Would Mallarmé be, as Lanson was the first to argue, an anarchist in and through language? It appears that the best realization of this anarchist idea would be the *Coup de dés*, as has recently been argued: “it is here, in any case, that in Mallarmé the bomb of the text explodes in full light”,<sup>108</sup> Pascal Durand wrote in 1999, seeing in the spacialized poem of 1897, which contains the word “deflagration”, a veritable “typographical explosion”. This is to link up with all of the avant-gardist and modernist readings of the poem, from Tzara to Barthes<sup>109</sup> and Kristeva. Such an interpretation overdetermines the visible aspects of the text and the surface that strikes the retina at the expense of the readable aspects and its intellectual layering, while by contrast the poet presented his text as a “precise spiritual staging” that layers the “prismatic subdivisions of the idea”.<sup>110</sup> Let us not confuse a prism with a bomb, nor hierarchy with anarchy. On a number of counts, the *Coup de dés*, as poem-score and poem-stamp, presents itself in terms of depth as a constructed crystal, certainly a mobile and spaced one, much more than as a fire, whether explosive or implosive. This structural text, which is more like Cézanne than the Cubists or the Futurists,

and which produces a relational and constructive poetics, aims to link up, via reading, terms (the star-word) with relations between terms (the text-constellation), or indeed the points of the face of a die with the total figure. Furthermore, as a poem of “spacing” and not of pulverization, it arises from a poetics of play and a logic of the “fold” in which, as always in Mallarmé, syntax remains a “pivot”.

### Between “Grand Politics”, cosmopolitanism and the Politics of Silence

The Mallarméan “displacement” of the anarchist question seems to us to be concentrated in the following formula from ‘Music and Letters’, which we have purposefully kept until the end and which has been little commented on up until this point, even if it seems decisive for attempting to clarify this situation: “A government, in order to have value, will mirror that of the universe. Which is it? Monarchical? Anarchical? ... All conjectures are welcome”.<sup>111</sup> This declaration directly echoes the response given by the poet to the inquiry undertaken in 1893 by the journal *L’Ermitage* regarding “the best condition of social good”. Confronting, with the words of Henri Mazel, a “free and spontaneous organisation” with a “disciplined and methodical organisation”, Mallarmé arrives at the following conclusion: “social theories, almost opposed to one another, are equivalent”.<sup>112</sup> Thus, the poet sends back to back libertarianism and social authoritarianism, as if there were no stable and definitive social state but rather processes which can transform into their contrary. Likewise, the end of ‘Music and Letters’ renders identical, in order to go beyond them, voting and rioting, universal suffrage and direct social confrontation.<sup>113</sup>

Thus, for Mallarmé, as Marchal emphasizes, the social question seems essential while the question of politics remains contingent.<sup>114</sup> The whole of Mallarmé’s project could be summed up in this question: how can the social link be re-established, given that the political link, which is exclusively horizontal, cannot suffice and that we must take into account, vertically, the “sky instinct in each of us”?<sup>115</sup> The author of the *Grands faits divers* would thus aim at a sort of ‘Grand politics’ that would be capable, as in the ideal journalism of ‘An Interrupted Spectacle’, of “recount[ing] events from the particular perspective of dreams”.<sup>116</sup> As a result, from the perspective of this permanent displacement, it is no longer possible to think politics using the categories of real politics. It is thus that we can understand the following epigraph from the first version of ‘The Court’: “for alienating the Nations [*pour s’aliéner des patries*]”.<sup>117</sup> Mallarmé is neither engaged nor disengaged; his “critical poetry” would only have delimited this space at a distance that allows us to think.<sup>118</sup> Anarchy remains one of the modalities of the actualization of a real politics, while Mallarmé aims to link up again with the articulation between the human and the cosmic, which existed in other epistemes. The government and the terrestrial City and that of the Cosmos must once again be thought in a specular manner; life in common must be organized by this “Law, seated in all transparency, naked and marvelous”.<sup>119</sup> Mallarmé retains the idea of “Law” with a capital letter, just as he conserves the idea of the “Nation” [*patrie*] with, once again, a capital letter, and just

as he remains faithful to the concept of the State and of taxation with his Project for a “Fonds littéraire”.<sup>120</sup> Such traditionalism would no doubt horrify an anarchist nominalist like Stirner. Finally, if the social relation is a “fiction” that arises from Belles-Lettres, we arrive at a certain overturning of Platonism. The *res publica* rests on an essentially literary essence, the *res litteraria*, and the Mallarméan republic must be governed by the Poet-King. Such would be the lesson of ‘Safeguard’: the true guardian of the city is the writer, the scribe, the man of letters. The Revolution would come from an ideal Académie française, and would be an invisible revolution. With Mallarmé, very far from the noise and fury of bombings, it is necessary to lend one’s ears and one’s mind to a “Grand politics” of silence, and to wait.

### Notes

1. Reprinted with the kind permission of *Fabula*. Thierry Roger, ‘Art et anarchie à l’époque symboliste : Mallarmé et son groupe littéraire’, *Fabula / Les Colloques*, De l’absolu littéraire à la rélégation: le poète hors les murs, URL <http://www.fabula.org/colloques/document2443.php>
2. It is a matter of account for “the belonging of the very concept of poet to the conceptualization of politics as a disposition of human action and of the human community anterior to any and all constitution”, Jacques Rancière, ‘Préface’, *La Politique des poètes*, dir. Jacques Rancière, (Paris: Albin Michel, 1992), p. 9.
3. Jacques Rancière, *Politique de la littérature* (Paris: Galilée, 2007), p. 11.
4. See in particular ‘La rime et le conflit. La politique du poème’, *Mallarmé ou l’obscurité lumineuse*, dir. Bertrand Marchal and Jean-Luc Steinmetz, (Paris: Hermann, 1999), p. 115-141.
5. Jacques Schérer, *Le ‘Livre’ de Mallarmé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 108.
6. For an approach at once descriptive and critical of this ‘Mallarmisme’ from the years of French structuralism, we take the liberty of referring to our own work: Thierry Roger, *L’Archive du Coup de dés. Etude critique de la réception de Un Coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard de Mallarmé (1897-2007)*, (Paris: Classiques Garnier 2010).
7. Roland Barthes, ‘Inaugural Lecture, Collège de France’, in *A Barthes Reader* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 466.
8. Two other works of very different nature and tone, but which deal with the same question, should be mentioned here and should be situated in the lineage of Bertrand Marchal’s reading, which made both of them possible. On the one hand, there is Antoine Compagnon’s pleasantly titled article ‘La place des Fêtes: Mallarmé et la Troisième République des Lettres’ (in *Mallarmé ou l’obscurité lumineuse*, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-86), which offers a panoramic view of the eminently ambivalent relations Mallarmé had with the Republic by evoking the significant positions of the poet at different critical moments of this period. Let us note that for Compagnon, who dismisses both Sartre and Kristeva, all the while demonstrating his skepticism with respect to Rancière’s interpretation, Mallarmé was neither reactionary, nor revolutionary, nor a “good democrat”, nor a “workerist”. He adds, however: “nothing allows us to decide whether he was anti-democratic” (p. 75). On the other hand, Ludwig Lehnen, in *Mallarmé et Stefan George. Politique de la poésie à l’époque du symbolisme*, (Paris: PUPS), 2010, sets out to criticize in a systematic manner the concept



of “fiction”, such as it was put forward by Bertrand Marchal. This book, which is in part influenced by the German critic of Mallarmé, Kurt Wais, wages war against a reading judged to be too “negativist” or too “ludic” and highlights the clearly anti-modern – and in particular anti-democratic – orientation of Mallarméan thought.

9. ‘Mallarmé’s “humanizing” of religion thus runs counter to the dominant tendency of the century’, Jacques Rancière, *Mallarmé: The Politics of the Siren* (London/New York: Continuum), 2011, p. 59. For Rancière, in fact, the Mallarméan gesture would not consist in folding the divine back onto the human, but rather in unfolding in a “chimerical” mode that which is divine in the human, all within the framework of a “religion of artifice” (ibidem.) But in this essay, the passage from the religious to the political, or the articulation of the two, remains quite vague.

10. Ibid., p. 64.

11. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l’art* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1998), pp. 450-455.

12. For a discussion and for what is in part a Lacanian reorientation of the Bourdieusian use of Mallarmé, see Patrick Thériault, *Le (dé)montage de la Fiction : la révélation moderne de Mallarmé* (Paris: Champion, 2010), in particular pp. 7-29.

13. Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘Mallarmé’, *Mallarmé. La lucidité et sa face d’ombre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), p. 151.

14. ‘There is, in Mallarmé, a sad hoaxer’, Ibid., p. 165.

15. Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1985), p. 428.

16. Jean Maitron, *Le Mouvement anarchiste en France. 1. Des origines à 1914* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 206.

17. Jacques Monfrier, ‘Symbolisme et anarchie’, RHLF, April-June 1965. In fact, it would be necessary from hereon to mention the following works: Pierre Aubery, ‘L’anarchisme des littérateurs au temps du symbolisme’, *Le Mouvement social*, October-December 1969, pp. 21-24; Julia Kristeva, ‘L’anarchisme politique ou autre’, *La Révolution du langage poétique*, pp. 421-420; Joan Ungersma Halperin, *Félix Fénéon. Art et anarchie dans le Paris Fin-de-siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991); Philippe Oriol, ‘Des sympathies anarchistes de quelques littérateurs’, *Ravachol. Un saint nous est né ! textes établis et rassemblés par Philippe Oriol* (Paris: L’Équipement de la pensée, 1992), pp. 99-112; David Weir, *Anarchy and Culture: The Aesthetic Politics of Modernism*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); Alain Pessin, Patrice Terrone (dir.), *Littérature et anarchie* (Toulouse: Presse Universitaires du Murail, 1998); ‘Anarchisme et création littéraire’, RHLF, May-June, 1999; Uri Eisenzweig, *Fictions de l’anarchisme* (Paris: Bourgois, 2001); Philippe Oriol, ‘Vive l’anarchie ! Vive le vers libre !’, *Bernard Lazare* (Paris: Stock, 2003), pp. 93-118; Jean-Pierre Lecercle, *Littérature, Anarchies*, (Paris: Editions Place d’arme, 2007); Caroline Granier, *Les Briseurs de formules. Les écrivains anarchistes en France à la fin du 19ème siècle* (Villiers-Cotterêts: Ressouvenances, 2008); Eduardo Febles, *Explosive Narratives. Terrorism and Anarchy in the works of Emile Zola* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2001). Let us add the recent essay by Guliette Sapiro on the *La Responsabilité de l’écrivain* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2011), which is surpassed by the information given by Jean Maitron on the question of anarchism under the Third Republic.

18. See Gustave Lanson, ‘La poésie contemporaine. M. Stéphane Mallarmé’ (1893), *Stéphane Mallarmé, coll. ‘Mémoire de la critique’*, (Paris: PUPS), pp. 269-278.



19. Ibid., p. 275.

20. Ibidem.

21. Jean Thorel, 'Les pères de l'anarchisme. Bakounine, Stirner, Nietzsche', *La Revue bleue*, April 15 1893, pp. 449-454.

22. We should also highlight the important article by Théodore Randal, the pseudonym of the famous Germanist Charles Andler (1866-1933), 'Le livre libérateur', published in September 1892 in *Les Entretiens politiques et littéraires*. Stirner's text is presented as "the most complete manual of anarchism that is possible" (p. 128). *La Revue bleue* also commented in the person of Jean Throel on Stirner's work by comparing it with that of Bakunin, as well as with Nietzsche, ('Les pères de l'anarchisme', April 15 1893, pp. 449-454). Furthermore, the edition of *La Plume* devoted to anarchism on May 1 1893, titled 'Historique des faits' and curated by Emile Joannès, mentions the name of Stirner amongst the list of the theoreticians of the moment (p. 213). Let us add that Henri Albert, who moreover was the translator of Nietzsche, published the full translation of the introduction to *The Ego and His Own* ('All Things are Nothing to Me') in May 1894 in the *Mercure de France* (No., 53, pp. 28-31). He accompanies the text with the following note, which takes into account the displacement of the horizon of expectation: "Le livre qu'on quitte monarque' appeared just a half century ago. Let us say provisionally that that which now seems to be pure anarchism was not then considered as anything other than a work of the extreme left of Hegelian philosophy... The title of this chapter is also that of a very well known poem from Goethe" (p. 28).

23. Gustave Lanson, 'La poésie contemporaine. M. Stéphane Mallarmé' (1893), art. cit., p. 276.

24. Ibid., p. 277.

25. Ibidem.

26. In particular, Lanson comments in particular in the direction of radical idealism, the ex libris of Félicien Rops (Ibid., pp. 274-275)

27. Antoine Compagnon sees here, for instance, and without doubt correctly, a 'ripost' to Lanson. 'La place des Fêtes: Mallarmé et la Troisième République des Lettres', art. cit., p. 62.

28. On these questions, see in particular David Weir, *Anarchy and Culture*, op. cit., and Wolfgang Asholt, 'Entre esthétique anarchiste et esthétique d'avant-garde: Félix Fénéon et les formes brèves', RHLF, May-June 1999, pp. 499-513.

29. Emile Joannès, 'Historique des faits', art. cit., p. 214.

30. See the 'Lettres sur l'anarchie', *La Plume*, September 1 1892, p. 377.

31. Emile Reclus, 'Aux compagnons rédacteurs', *Les Entretiens politiques et littéraires*, July 1892, p. 3.

32. Albert Thibaudet, *Histoire de la littérature* (1936), CNRS éditions, 2007, p. 513.

33. Jean-Pierre Lecercle, *Littérature, Anarchies*, op. cit., p. 53.

34. It would nevertheless be necessary to cite here the paragraph devoted to the 'Anarchists': 'Those who preach the right to existence and the laziness by all means are the Anarchists. The majority are disgruntled bourgeois who have more bitterness to quell

than convictions to argue for. They demand Liberty, which is to say the right to oppress in turn. Excessively individualist, they do not want to admit that the egalitarian society of tomorrow is a machine where everything will be ruled by the movements of a clock. Up to now they have made more noise with dynamite cartridges than with their literary works. The best known are: Louise Michel, Kropotkin, Sébastien Faure, Charles Malato, Paternie Berrichon, Henri Cholin, Octave Mirbeau, Élisée Reclus, Pouget, Veidaux, Émile Gautier, Chincholle, Ernest Gégout, Alexandre Tisserand, Lucien Mühlfeld, André Gide, Zo d'Axa, Guillaume Le Rouge, Alain Desveaux, La Purge, chansonnier plein de verve, Michel Zévaco, Hamon'.

35. Camille Mauclair, *Servitude et grandeur littéraires*, Ollendorf, 1922, p. 115.

36. Cited by Jean-Pierre Lecercle, *Littérature, Anarchies*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

37. *La Plume* May 1 1893, p. 208.

38. Emile Zola, *Paris*, Jean Noiray (ed.), Gallimard, 2002, p. 78.

39. For more details, see Denis Pernot, 'Léon Daudet et le roman de l'anarchiste', RHLF, May-June 1999, pp. 423-437.

40. Cited by Jean Maitron, *Le Mouvement anarchiste en France, Tome 1*, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

41. *La Révolte*, December 5-11 1891.

42. Gabriel de la Salle, 'Prises d'armes', *L'Art social*, November 1891, p. 3.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

44. On this eternal question of the means and ends of art from the 1890's, see Caroline Granier, *Les Briseurs de formules*, *op. cit.*

45. Christophe Charle, *Naissance des 'intellectuels' (1880-1900)* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1990), p. 129.

46. Bertrand Marchal, *La Religion de Mallarmé* (Paris: José Corti, 1988), pp. 368-369.

47. 'Lettres sur l'anarchie', *art. cit.*, p. 377.

48. Lucien Mühlfeld, 'Des sympathies anarchistes de quelques littérateurs', *L'Endehors*, July 27 1892.

49. We take this formula from Pierre Glaudes, at the same time as referring to his very rich clarification of the subject: "Noces barbares": les écrivains de la Belle-Epoque et l'anarchisme', in *Littérature et Anarchie*, *op. cit.*, pp. 171-189.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

51. On this question, see in particular Uri Eisenzweig, *Fictions de l'anarchisme*, *op. cit.*, and Eduardo Febles, *Explosive Narratives. Terrorism and Anarchy in the works of Emile Zola*, *op. cit.*

52. See the anthology by Guy Ducrey and its rich critical commentary, *Romans fin-de-siècle* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1999).

53. Camille Mauclair, *Le Soleil des Morts* (1898), in *Romans fin-de-siècle*, *op. cit.*, p. 950.

54. *Ibidem*.

55. Ibid., p. 1026.
56. Bertrand Marchal, *La Religion de Mallarmé*, *op. cit.*, p. 369.
57. Bertrand Marchal, *La Religion de Mallarmé*, *op. cit.*, p. 369.
58. Rémy de Gourmont, responses to Jules Huret, *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire* (1891), Daniel Grojnovski (ed.), 1999, p. 166.
59. Rémy de Gourmont, 'Le Symbolisme', *La Revue blanche*, June 25 1892, pp. 322-323.
60. Francis Vielé-Griffin, 'Réflexions sur l'art des vers', *Les Entretiens politiques et littéraires*, May 1892.
61. Victor Barracund, 'Un ennemi du peuple', *L'Endehors*, July 10 1892.
62. Octave Mirbeau, 'Preface' to Jean Grave, *La Société mourante et l'anarchie*, 1894, cited by Louis Deschamps, *La Plume* January 1 1894, p. 1.
63. Edouard Schuré, 'L'individualisme et l'anarchie en littérature. Frierich Nietzsche et sa philosophie', *Revue des Deux Mondes*, August 15 1895, p. 766.
64. A. Veidaux, 'Philosophe de l'anarchie', *La Plume*, May 1 1893, p. 192.
65. Octave Mirbeau, 'Potius!', *Le Journal*, May 7 1894, cited in P. Michel and Jean-François Nivet (eds.), *Combats littéraires*, L'Age d'Homme, 2006, p. 385.
66. 'M. Laurent Tailhade et l'anarchie', *Le Gaulois*, April 6, 1894.
67. A. Retté, 'L'art et l'anarchie', *La Plume* February 1 1893.
68. Edouard Schuré, 'L'individualisme et l'anarchie en littérature. Friedrich Nietzsche et sa philosophie', *art. cit.*, pp. 775-805.
69. S. Faure, *La Douleur universelle* (Antony: Editions Tops, 2009), p. 165.
70. Jean Maitron, *Le Mouvement anarchiste en France. Tome 1*, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
71. Jean Thorel, 'Les pères de l'anarchisme', *art. cit.*, p. 451.
72. Jean Grave, *Mémoires d'un anarchiste*, (Paris: Editions du Sextant, 2009), p. 356.
73. Since Julia Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language*, critics have seldom explored this question in a direct and extensive manner. Let us highlight the follow works, which deal with it at greater or lesser length: Bertrand Marchal, *La Religion de Mallarmé*, *op. cit.*, pp. 368-370; A. C. Aubert, 'Mallarmé et la bombe de Zola', *Romantisme*, No. 87, Spring 1995, pp. 69-74; Antoine Compagnon, 'La place des Fêtes: Mallarmé et la Troisième République des Lettres', *art. cit.*, pp. 59-66; Pascal Durand "La Destruction fut ma Béatrice". Mallarmé ou l'implosion poétique', *RHLE*, May-June 1999, pp. 373-389; Uri Eisenzweig, 'Poétique de la bombe', *Fictions de l'anarchisme*, *op. cit.*, pp. 188-205; Jean-Pierre Lecercle, *Littérature, Anarchies*, *op. cit.*, *passim*; Patrick MacGuinness, 'Mallarmé and the Poetics of Explosion', *MLN*, September 2009, pp. 797-824.
74. Henri Mondor, *Vie de Mallarmé*, Gallimard, 1941, p. 492.
75. Antoine Compagnon, 'La place des Fêtes: Mallarmé et la Troisième République des Lettres', *art. cit.*, p. 59.
76. Caroline Granier, *Les Briseurs de formules*, *op. cit.*, p. 379.

77. Ibid., p. 14.

78. Ibid., p. 38.

79. Kristeva, in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, all the while aligning Mallarmé with political anarchy, insists on the radical divergence that exists between the formally conservative tracts of the militants and the always-already transgressive poems, whose form consecrates the primacy of the 'semiotic' over the 'symbolic', independently of the political opinions of its author.

80. Pascal Durand judges first of all that, because of his sense for forms and formalities, as well as his anti-individualist aesthetics of the impersonal and his distance-taking with respect to prose-based anarchy, "nothing can lead us *a priori* to see in Mallarmé an anarchist" (p. 374). Yet he continues by pointing out the "incendiary declarations" (p. 376) from the time of the Tournon crisis and of his poems published in the *Parnasse contemporain*, and by recalling the virulence of a poet railing against a certain bourgeois materialism. The academician then insists on what he calls Mallarmé's "calm, and for this reason quite worrying, violence" (p. 379), a violence which attacks thematism and, above all, language in its referential function ('meaning-and-having-to-say [le vouloir-devoir dire]'" p. 379). Durand reprises here Lanson's thesis by radicalizing via the reading of *La Musique et les Lettres* proposed by Bourdieu in *Les Règles de l'art*. It is the "impious dismantling of Fiction" – "propaganda by theoretical deed" (p. 386) – that would make of him an anarchist *par excellence*. Let us clarify that the distinction from the time between individualist anarchism and socialist anarchism is not taken into account, just as the notion of anarchy is not questioned historically.

81. Antoine Compagnon, 'La place des Fêtes : Mallarmé et la Troisième République des Lettres', art. cit., p. 65.

82. OC, tome II, p. 325.

83. Uri Eisenzweig, *Fictions de l'anarchisme*, op. cit., p. 194.

84. Of course, there cannot be a pure beginning: we could go infinitely, with privileged stopping points at the time of the Commune or in the years of Baudelaire's formation...

85. Jean Maitron, *Le Mouvement anarchiste en France, Tome 1*, op. cit., p. 212.

86. P. Berrichon, letter to Mallarmé, February 11 1892, Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance*, Henri Mondor and L. J. Austin (eds.), t. VI, p. 201.

87. Mallarmé, letter to P. Berrichon 16 February 1892, Ibid., pp. 44-45.

88. Ibid., p. 44.

89. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Faits divers', The National Observer, February 25 1893, OC, t. II, p. 312.

90. Ibid., p. 311.

91. Ibidem.

92. See Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance*, Henri Mondor, L. J. Austin (eds.), 1981, Vol. VI, p. 201.

93. Ibid., p. 115.

94. OC, t. II, p. 660. Bertrand Marchal, citing and clarifying the account of this episode such as it is given in the book of souvenirs by Brulat (*Lumières et grandes ombres*, 1930), we learn from the manuscript version of this note that Mallarmé corrected a first formulation of his response, which was: 'I know of no other bomb, than a beautiful book', OC, t. II, p. 1723.
95. For more clarifications, see Bertrand Marchal's note in OC, t. II, p. 1741.
96. Ibidem. The "obviously" here might seem excessive, given the information available to us. It should be read in conjunction with the following formula from *La Religion de Mallarmé*, which proclaims, with respect to the journalistic equation between free versists and posers of bombs: "here is Mallarmé, who is above suspicion, suspected of being complicit with propaganda by the deed" (p. 368); or in conjunction with the other formula that waxes ironic about the "complacency" of the Symbolist milieus with respect to anarchy. Now, as we have seen above, it is the Symbolists themselves – Vielé-Griffin, Gourmont in particular – who build bridges between these different forms of freedom and revolt, without devolving, of course, into an apology for terrorism. On the other hand, dandyism does not explain everything: there were indeed militant engagements. In other words, Marchal, like Caroline Granier, but for different reasons, decides a little too hastily, in our view, the answer to this question.
97. *Le Soir*, April 27 1894, OC, t. II, p. 709.
98. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, op. cit., pp. 192-193. This text, an extract from the conference, will be published in 1897 in *Divagations* in the series 'Grands faits divers' under the title 'Accusation'.
99. If Maclair is to be believed, the author of *La Fille aux mains coupées*, who would be a future Dreyfusard, was a frequent attendee of the Mardis. Camille Maclair, *Mallarmé chez lui*, (Paris: Grasset, 1935), p. 45.
100. Pascal Quillard, 'L'Anarchie par la littérature', *Les Entretiens politiques et littéraires*, April 1892, p. 150.
101. Cited by Uri Eisenzweig, *Fictions de l'anarchisme*, op. cit., p. 197.
102. Cited by Antoine Compagnon, 'La place des Fêtes: Mallarmé et la Troisième République des Lettres', art. cit., p. 60.
103. Henri de Régnier, *Cahiers inédits*, Pygmalion, 2002, p. 385.
104. Antoine Compagnon, 'La place des Fêtes: Mallarmé et la Troisième République des Lettres', art. cit., p. 60.
105. OC, t. II, p. 215.
106. See Bertrand Marchal, *La Religion de Mallarmé*, op. cit., p. 382-383.
107. 'Mine those substructures, when obscurity invades your perspective; no! – string up some lanterns, in order to see', Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, op. cit., p. 195.
108. Pascal Durand "La Destruction fut ma Béatrice", Mallarmé ou l'implosion poétique', art. cit., p. 381.
109. Pascal Durand subscribes to the analyses from *Degré zéro de l'écriture* relative to the Mallarméan 'destruction' of language.

110. OC, t. I, p. 391.

111. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

112. OC, t. II, p. 660.

113. Ibid., p. 74. With respect to the question of Mallarmé's political opinion properly speaking, which is difficult to determine, we refer to Antoine Compagnon's clarificatory remarks, Antoine Compagnon, 'La place des Fêtes: Mallarmé et la Troisième République des Lettres', *art. cit.*, as well as to the works of Bertrand Marchal.

114. Bertrand Marchal, *La Religion de Mallarmé*, *op. cit.*, p. 378.

115. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

116. Ibid., p. 23.

117. OC, t. II, p. 325.

118. Bertrand Marchal, 'Poésie et droit de cité', *Mallarmé 1842-1898. Un destin d'écriture* (Paris: Gallimard/RMN, 1998), p. 38. Placed back within the framework of the religious, linguistic and mythographic thought of his time, Mallarmé's politics, according to the author of *La Religion de Mallarmé*, moves towards anthropology and a thought of 'symbolic forms'.

119. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

120. See Antoine Compagnon, 'La place des Fêtes : Mallarmé et la Troisième République des Lettres', *art. cit.*, pp. 80-86.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HAMEL

TOWARDS THE ORIGINS OF  
'COMRADE MALLARMÉ'

*The Invention of a Politics of Reading*

Translated by Robert Boncardo

*Un coup de dés! Ding, jamais, ding, ding, un coup, ding, de dés, ding, n'abo,  
ding, ding, lira, ding, ding, l'hasard. Ding!*

— Jean-Paul Sartre, *Le Sursis*

From the point of view of cultural history, Mallarmé was more a contemporary of the 20<sup>th</sup> century than of his own century.<sup>1</sup> Through the representations cobbled together by memory and plundered by readers, the poet has known posthumous lives that neither recourse to official registries, which record his dates of birth and death, nor the return to the body of work that bears his signature, can banish. One of these relics — and not the least of them — presents him in the role of “comrade Mallarmé”, to reprise the title of an article by Jean-Pierre Faye published in the communist newspaper *L'Humanité* on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 1969.<sup>2</sup> A few years later, having been appointed to the prestigious chair of semiology at the Collège de France, Roland Barthes, hijacking a famous declaration of André Breton, will in turn side with the author of *Un coup de dés*: “‘To change language’, that Mallarméan expression, is a concomitant of ‘To change the world’, that Marxian one. There is a political reception of Mallarmé, of those who have followed him and who follow him still”.<sup>3</sup> This figure of memory, in the guise of which Mallarmé is a revolutionary poet, is not the sole property of the avant-gardes of the 1960's. It incessantly reappears across the course of an interpretative tradition that crystallizes towards the end of the Second World War and prolongs itself right up to the present day. The first moment of this tradition, which can be called *existentialist*, groups together at the turn of the 1940's and 50's the interventions of Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Blanchot and Roland Barthes, who set out to inscribe the negativity of Mallarméan language in the adventures of the dialectic. The second moment, which can be described as *textualist*, groups together the interpretations



produced during the 1960's and 70's, notably in the pages of the journals *Tel Quel* and *Change*, and which refer to Mallarmé as the founder of a semantic materialism reconciling Marx and Saussure. The third and final moment, which we will call the *fin-de-siècle* moment, notably assembles former Althusserians like Alain Badiou, Jean-Claude Milner and Jacques Rancière, for whom Mallarmé represents a figure of political endurance in times marked by the retreat of revolutionary passion. For half a century, these critics, theoreticians and philosophers, despite deep disagreements regarding the interpretation of his poetry and prose, adopt the same politics of reading whose strategy consists, via an art of deliberate anachronism, in wrenching Mallarmé's work out from his time in order to clarify the debates of their own time and to affirm literature as a discourse of resistance to power. However, prior to these rival interpretations and in order for Mallarmé to become "comrade Mallarmé", it was first necessary that his work be *nationalized*, that is, inscribed in the French literary pantheon, then *politicized* by the mediators of his work, both writers and critics, who undertook to actualise the signification of his poems and prose works according to the exigencies of their present. This operation of nationalization and politicization, which had long been prohibited by the stranglehold of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* on the memory of Mallarmé, begins during the interwar years and comes to a close at the beginning of the 1940's, when France is subjected to the Vichy regime and the Nazi occupation. It is this prehistory of "comrade Mallarmé" that I would like to reconstitute here.

#### "Mallarmé, professeur de morale": allegory and philology

Against the interminable disavowals of literary history, it is salutary to recall that the historicity of a work can neither be reduced to a date ('Action', a prose poem published in *La Revue Blanche* on February 1, 1895, before becoming part of the collection *Divagations* two years later under the title 'Restricted Action'), nor to an epoch (the Third Republic), nor to an aesthetic movement (in this instance, Symbolism). No text that is accorded any cultural authority (and this is the case for juridical, religious or literary texts) can be reduced to the moment at which it was written, printed and disseminated. Before and after its production, it is inscribed in a stratified memory, both plural and mobile, which incessantly transforms its meaning. Upstream we find the memory crystallized by the text, a memory at once individual and collective, affective and conceptual, linguistic and discursive, which comes to the text from its author and from their time, but also from the vast repertoire of forms and discourses. This memory, deposited black on white, makes the text an anachronistic object, at once of its time and of many other times, moulded like a fossil by the heterogeneous strata of the past. Downstream there is added the memory mobilized to their advantage by each new reader, displacing the exterior contours of the text and recomposing its internal architecture. Indeed, everyone orients themselves in the labyrinth of signs by drawing on the present that surrounds them no less than on the past that inhabits them, summoning at the same

time the library acquired since their birth and the collective history they inherit. Everyone deciphers texts in the light of collective representations that they have interiorized little by little and which orient their ways of speaking and doing. As such, the historicity of a work is composed equally of different strata of the past sedimented in it and of successive interpretations — interpretations which, in the course of its circulation in social space, have progressively displaced its meaning and transformed its value. A text does not exist *sub specie aeternitatis*: it is transformed as soon as it is read and for as long as it is read.<sup>4</sup>

Depending on the fate they reserve for the historicity of inherited texts, scientific practices of reading oscillate between two opposing poles: philology and allegory.<sup>5</sup> Where philology immerses the work in the context of its appearance in order to re-constitute its meaning as closely as possible to its origin, seeking thereby to banish all interference between the past and the present, allegory appropriates the work by attributing a new signification to it, one which is irreducible to the intention of the author and their historical situation. Literary history is philological, at least when it aims, following the wishes of Gustave Lanson, to “know the works of the past in the past, and as past”.<sup>6</sup> But the works of the past are also the objects of allegorical interpretations, which draw out their meaning as a function of the present, indeed of the future, to the point of imprinting the image of the present onto the souvenirs of yesteryear. The very same Lanson recognized that “each generation reads itself into Descartes and into Rousseau, makes a Descartes and a Rousseau in its own image and for its own needs”.<sup>7</sup> Philology and allegory nevertheless imply distinct strategies of time: where philology takes the form of history by placing the past and the present *side by side*, allegory takes the form of memory by placing one *in* the other; where philology separates the past text from the present of its reading, allegory provokes an encounter between these distant times.<sup>8</sup> Although they are *de jure* distinct, these gestures of reading are *de facto* being endlessly entangled with one another. Philology takes hold of works that have been allegorized by the tradition so as to re-establish their historical signification and rectify interpretations it judges to be anachronistic. For its part, allegory finds in the results of philology the prerequisite knowledge for its own actualization of the texts of the past, which it thereby inscribes in the cultural memory. Reflecting on the circularity of the old and the new at the heart of these gestures of reading, Antoine Compagnon rightly remarked that “a work that stops being allegorized is a dead work”.<sup>9</sup> But no doubt there exists no such thing as a living work, unless it is of the most ephemeral editorial actuality. We only ever encounter dead texts condensing a frozen memory — texts which, for lack of being read, are forgotten — and surviving texts whose slippage towards their own forgetting is suspended by allegorical readings that expose them to the breath of the present. Mallarmé’s posthumous lives are so many relics of his work that interlace disjoint times, his texts having been allegorized and actualized in the light of epochs that were no longer his own.

In September 1943, in a mimeographed edition of *Les Lettres Françaises*, the clandestine organ of the *Comité national des écrivains*, between testimonials on the ca-

pitulation of Mussolini's Italy and the horrors perpetrated by Nazi Germany, there slips a short article entitled 'Mallarmé, professeur de morale'. This text defends the Symbolist poet in a polemic that had been raging for three years in the literary milieu and to which a critic from *Le Figaro*, André Rousseaux, had given the name "la querelle des mauvais maîtres".<sup>10</sup> The polemic concerns the responsibility of literature for the French debacle of 1940. In this search for the ideological causes of the defeat, the most renowned writers of the interwar years, notably those from *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, are accused of having corrupted the youth. In *La Gerbe*, a collaborationist newspaper, Camille Mauclair — a former disciple of Mallarmé whose anarchist convictions had long given way to a xenophobic nationalism — virulently prosecutes the case. Determined to eradicate the "literature of the vanquished" that infests the cultural milieu, the author of *Métèques contre l'art vivant* condemns, from amongst the innumerable faults of contemporary literature, the bolshevism and the homosexuality of André Gide, the catholic perversions of François Mauriac, and the disincarnate nihilism of Paul Valéry: "While on the other side of the Rhine a fanaticized youth gave up the seductions and the disorders of individualism and immolated itself in a collective ideal, our literary tenors were destroying national cohesion as they pleased with a mentality of the vanquished".<sup>11</sup> In *Candide*, the mouthpiece of young Maurassians like Lucien Rebatet and Robert Brasillach, Thierry Maulnier, who belonged to the editorial team of *L'Action Française*, offers a moderate version of this "trial of the intelligence": he reproaches the literature of the interwar years not for having exerted a nefarious influence, but for having cut itself off from the life of the nation and for having abdicated its intellectual magisterium in conformity with "the doctrine of the 'ivory tower'".<sup>12</sup> Transposing into the literary field the moral order advocated by Marshal Pétain, this quarrel constitutes the prelude to the debate on the responsibility of the writer that will play itself out in the wake of the Liberation at the other end of the political chessboard. But for the moment, the anonymous article in *Les Lettres Françaises* seeks to defend the memory of a reputedly hermetic poet who was the master of Gide and Valéry a half-century earlier:

Lately and with great gusto, Mallarmé has been attacked as the "champion of the ivory tower", as the "teacher whose entire 'life' was spent between the four walls of a secondary school and of a staffroom", not to mention the descriptors "canker" and "the origin of our woes". It is very significant that in this time of brazen debasement — in which there proliferates more than ever writers who have sold their pens, and in which so many of our great men (whose lives, presented as exemplary, used to serve as illustrations for books of morals) are seen as ripe for becoming the logos of the Casino-State when it puts to work the machinery of the National Lottery — it is, no doubt, in tune with this period of official demoralisation that representatives of the *youth* end up reproaching a poet for having been too "pure" and for having refused for his entire life to make any concession to the desire for success no more than to the need for money. If Mallarmé were only this negative

figure of a man who refused all compromise and chose to teach English in a secondary school rather than see the finest products of his thought be transformed into a commodity; if Mallarmé were only this man, this apparent *petit-bourgeois* at first sight, anonymous but exempt from any stain, then he would have the right to our complete respect. Certain of the most elementary virtues — of which not so long ago we hardly thought that a day would come when it would be important to praise them — certain discrete virtues such as a minimum of probity in the conduct of life and the exercise of the intelligence, the taste for completed work, the disdain for ambition and a constant fidelity to what is held to be the truth are today so stifled — despite the superficial moralism with which the official phraseology is marked — that we do not hesitate to characterize as “aestheticism” the attitude of a poet for whom it was quite simply repugnant to corrupt oneself and for whom the practice of the above-mentioned virtues was only to be expected, just like those very general rules of *savoir vivre* that people of all classes apply without even thinking about it since they are the ABC of all moral conduct in our civilized societies. Nobody would deny that Mallarmé is a poet who it is difficult to approach. Yet we should think that, if he is so abrupt, then it is because he has succeeded in what few poets could pride themselves on having done: creating for himself a language perfectly adequate to its object, a language that seeks less to describe or recount than to set off certain movements of the spirit. That we also think of the absolute integrity he showed throughout this enterprise — an enterprise that required not only the highest inventive power, but the efforts of an entire life. At this time in which, for the needs of propaganda, so many men — men who are not content to live on their knees — pass off at face value the most fallacious remarks, the lesson of professor Mallarmé can only be of profit to us.<sup>13</sup>

This appropriation of Mallarmé, which makes him a resistant *avant la lettre*, or at least a model for writers hostile to the Vichy regime and the Nazi occupier, is not without precedent. One year earlier, alongside poems by François Mauriac and Louis Aragon, for the centenary of his birth Pierre Senghès' journal *Poésie* 42 had opened its pages to a previously unpublished sonnet by Mallarmé, accompanied by a brief presentation from his biographer, Henri Mondor, and a study by the Genevan critic Marcel Raymond.<sup>14</sup> André Gide had also participated in the celebrations by publishing ‘Saint Mallarmé l'ésotérique’ in the series of his *Interviews imaginaires*, published by *Le Figaro* in unoccupied France. The author of *Retour de l'URSS* found in the poet an “extraordinary example of disinterest” that inspired one “to raise oneself above the miserable condition of common and mediocre humanity”.<sup>15</sup> He might as well have said that, in *la querelle des mauvais maîtres*, Mallarmé was defending from beyond the grave “the honour of poets”, as per the title of the anthology published by *Les Editions de Minuit*. Now, the author of ‘Mallarmé, professeur de morale’ is Michel Leiris, a former collaborator of *La Révolution surréaliste*, and the director, alongside Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois, of the Collège de sociologie,

as well as a soon-to-be member of the editorial board of *Les Temps modernes*.<sup>16</sup> As his diary indicates, Leiris decides from January 1941 to suspend until further notice all publications so as to mark his opposition to the political conjuncture: “The essential signification that I attach to my poetic activity is that of a *refusal*”. He disapproves of “this veritable sickness of ‘men of letters’ who cannot conceive of the possibility of being silent and for whom no longer publishing is equivalent to a kind of annihilation”.<sup>17</sup> The banning of *L’Afrique fantôme* in November 1941 strengthens his convictions: “I can only be delighted with this decision, which, objectively, situates me”.<sup>18</sup> In his eyes, Mallarmé’s exemplarity has to do, precisely, with the fact that he never compromised his literary exigencies with the approbation of the public or the favours of power: his grandeur lies in his obstinate power of refusal.

In one of the first non-clandestine editions of *Les Lettres Françaises* in October 1944, Leiris will prolong these reflections. Under the title ‘Ce que parler veut dire’, the author of *L’Âge d’homme* and *Haut Mal* invites the writers of his time to draw lessons from the trial undergone by language during the black years. Literature cannot continue as if the War had not taken place and, above all, as if language had not been perverted by military propaganda, anonymous denunciations, confessions extorted under torture — the surveillance and censure of an authoritarian regime.

During the four years of oppression that have just ended, language underwent the most difficult of ordeals. As if it were a matter, apparently, of attacking man there where his very humanity makes itself most manifest, bloody outrages have been inflicted on this faculty that man has for exteriorizing his thoughts by voice or by writing. [...] At the same time as language seemed to be undermined by a very pernicious sickness, or to be collapsing into the negativity of silence, we had never known with greater clarity *what speaking means*, everything that the exercise of discourse involves and what mortal and immediate consequences the simple act of formulating a thought can have. In the light of such an experience, writers, technicians of language, appear as the bearers of a privileged art due to the fact that language, which is his instrument, is not only the means of constituting an imaginary world but is indeed a means of acting, to the degree that it is through it that we communicate with others and are therefore capable of influencing their actions. No doubt, it has always been evident to some that the use of a tool that produces such serious effects as language requires an extreme rigour from whomsoever would implement it. But the four years that have passed should make explode in front of everyone’s eyes what a litigious duty the writer — that is, the man whose profession is to speak — takes on, to what compromises he can be led by the sole fact of treating his art as if it only had no other significance than a literary one, and what are, as a consequence, the moral exigencies to which it seems desirable to see him submit himself. As a man of language, the writer must also be a *man of his word*.<sup>19</sup>

In more than one respect, Leiris' remarks are close to the Sartrean doctrine of engaged literature, which also undertakes to conserve "the austere virtues of the Republic of Silence and of Night".<sup>20</sup> The two writers do indeed share the conviction that post-War literature must participate in the purification of language, but one confers this moral mission on prose, the other on poetry. In his presentation of *Les Temps modernes*, Sartre will oppose the irresponsibility of poets who enjoy "forging trinkets of sonorous inanity".<sup>21</sup> In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature ?*, he will condemn poets who "refuse to use language" and who, following Mallarmé, take refuge in an "icy silence".<sup>22</sup> When Sartre claims that only prose can guarantee communication between free men, Leiris believes on the contrary that it is the task of poetry to give a purer meaning to the words of the tribe. In November 1945, disappointed by the editorial line of *Les Temps modernes*, Leiris will note in his diary: "an abyss separates me from Sartre and the Beaver on the subject of poetry".<sup>23</sup> The disagreement is easily explained: the responsibility of the writer, according to Sartre, concerns free men as subjects of democracy, while literary engagement as Leiris understands it is rightly a politics of speech, which requires rigour and probity with respect to language more so than to speaking beings. According to Leiris, to refuse common language and to subtract oneself from the imperatives of common speech constitutes an act of resistance: engagement also consists in knowing how to be silent.

This interpretation of Mallarmé is allegorical in the etymological sense of the word: in the light of a new conjuncture, Leiris makes the poet say something *other* than what his readers from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century thought they had read in his texts. Half a century after his death, his defense of a pure art, radically distinct from universal reportage, signals according to Leiris a literary resistance to the ideological instrumentalization of language. The attribution of a political actuality to Mallarmé's poetry under the German boot supposes a work of memory — a work that, in rhetorical terms, falls under the trope of prosopopoeia. By calling on the poet in the political struggles of the present, Leiris makes him speak from beyond the grave, drawing from him a lesson capable of illuminating a state of affairs and legitimating actions to be undertaken in an epoch that is no longer his. The politics of reading inaugurated by Leiris does not appear *ex nihilo*. If it breaks with the majority of previous appropriations of Mallarmé and notably with those of *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, which made the poet an ardent defender of a pure art who was resolutely "on strike before society", demanding of writers that they disassociate "literary opinions" and "political beliefs",<sup>24</sup> it builds on the ethical interpretation of his poetry proposed by Paul Valéry during the interwar years and on the nationalization of his work to which the interventions of Henri Mondor and Maurice Blanchot bear witness at the beginning of the German Occupation.

#### From pure poetry to the politics of the spirit: Paul Valéry

The testimonials and reflections of Paul Valéry, which appeared scattered between the newspapers and journals of the interwar years and were assembled in the post-



humorous collection *Écrits divers sur Stéphane Mallarmé*, establish the conditions of readability of Mallarmé's work and determine its passage to posterity. Valéry's notoriety, elected as he was to the Académie française in 1925 and to the Collège de France in 1937, is not without an impact upon the man he recognized as his master. Now, during the interwar years, Valéry held that Mallarmé's teaching was not only literary, but ethical. This is, moreover, the lesson of *Existence du symbolisme*, which was published as a booklet in 1938 and takes an amused look at the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Symbolism, which Valéry explains is the fruit of a retrospective illusion. According to the man who many considered to be "the most direct and profound inheritor of Mallarméan thought",<sup>25</sup> nothing like Symbolism existed in the eyes of the principal actors of the movement, despite the publication in 1886 of Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, René Ghil's *Traité du Verbe* and of Jean Moréas' 'Literary Manifesto' in *Le Figaro*. Paradoxically, it is the commemoration of Symbolism that invents the past whose memory it claims to celebrate.

The men who lived in the Middle Ages did not suspect that they were medieval and those of the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> Century did not have engraved on their calling cards, "Messers So-and-So, of the Renaissance". The same is true of the Symbolists. That is what they are called today, not what they were. These few remarks might help us to recognize what we are doing at this moment: we are engaged in constructing Symbolism, as other have constructed a vast number of intellectual entities, which, if they have not achieved a bodily presence, have never lacked for definitions, since everyone was at liberty to present a definition of his choice. We are constructing Symbolism; we are announcing its birth today at the happy age of fifty, thus permitting it to dispense with the fumbling steps of childhood, the disorders and doubts of adolescence, the problems and anxieties of early manhood. It is being born with its fortune made — perhaps, alas, after its death. Yes, to celebrate this fiftieth birthday in 1936 is to create an entity which will always be the Symbolism of fifty years before; and the creation depends not at all on the existence in 1886 of something then called Symbolism. Nothing written, nothing remembered by survivors, existed under that name at the assigned date. It is marvellous to think that we are celebrating, as existent fifty years ago, something absent from the universe of fifty years ago. I am happy and honored to take part in the generation of a myth, in broad daylight.<sup>26</sup>

If we do not know that Symbolism is a conventional appellation attributed *a posteriori* to a movement of literary history, we risk placing our faith in a being of fiction that exists nowhere except in the memory of posterity. The anachronism of this commemoration is accompanied by a second paradox that Valéry amuses himself in insisting on. From an aesthetic point of view, Valéry emphasizes that nothing united Symbolist writers if not a shared refusal of classicism, of Romanticism and of realism: they remained "generally divided on almost all the questions of art".<sup>27</sup> When they formed a common front, it was to oppose their detractors, who addressed the same "charges" to all of them: obscurity, preciousness, sterility.<sup>28</sup>



No literary program brought them together and no artistic ideal inspired their adhesion: they shared nothing other than the vindictiveness of their contemporaries. As such, the fiftieth anniversary of Symbolism concerns “an event of aesthetic history that cannot be defined by aesthetic considerations”.<sup>29</sup> The Symbolist nebula constituted above all an ethical community, essentially defined by its power of negation. More than a literary credo, it is a posture of rupture with respect to the world, taking the form of an ascetic ideal, which gathered the Symbolists together: “As dissimilar as they were to one another, they recognized themselves to be identically separated from the other writers and artists of their time. No matter how much they differed, opposing one another sometimes so violently that they hurled insults, excommunications, and even challenges on the field of honour, they continued to agree on one point, which, as I said, was foreign to aesthetics. *They agreed in a common determination to reject the appeal to a majority*: they disdained to conquer the public at large”.<sup>30</sup> Similar affirmations are already to be found, a decade prior, in the ‘Letter on Mallarmé’, published by *La Revue de Paris*, which underscores that “harsh literary work manifests itself by *refusals*”, and that “*it is at this point that literature joins up with the ethical domain*”.<sup>31</sup> It is this attitude, which implies “a sort of revolution in the realm of values”,<sup>32</sup> that must be commemorated. In the middle of contemporary chaos, it is imperative to pay homage to these beings of exception who remained faithful, in spite of everything, to the ethic of refusal:

In any case the great disorder of human affairs, so much accentuated since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, could scarcely have failed to demonstrate the utter impossibility of this attempt to create a separate culture, to preserve taste and refinement, to stand aloof from publicity, from the course of statistical values, and from the agitation that increasingly jumbles together all the elements of life. [...] How can we dedicate ourselves to long elaborations, how waste our time on theories and subtle distinctions, when events and manners hurry us as they do, when our days are divided between futility and anxiety, and when leisure, an assured livelihood, and the freedom to dream and meditate have become as rare as gold? These are the circumstances that confer its present value on Symbolism, besides enhancing the value of its past — that make it, in short, a *symbol*. The conditions for the development of talents in depth, in subtlety, in perfection, in exquisite power, have disappeared. Everything is opposed to the possibility of an independent life of art. The complaints that poets uttered sixty years ago seem to us purely rhetorical as compared with the lamentations that would be forced from poets today, if they did not feel that it would be useless to groan in the midst of universal hubbub, the tumultuous noise of machines and arms, the cries of the crowd, and the crudely imposing harangues of those who regard the crowd as a beast to be tamed or a herd of cattle to be driven. I shall therefore conclude by observing that ‘Symbolism’ is henceforth the symbol that names the intellectual qualities and conditions most opposed to those which reign, and even govern, today. The Ivory Tower never seemed so high.<sup>33</sup>

If the souvenir of Symbolism is pure invention, it should nevertheless be used judiciously for the reason of its possible impact upon the future: “The *past*, more or less fantastical or more or less organized after the fact, acts on the future with a power comparable to that of the present itself”,<sup>34</sup> Valéry recalls in the foreword to *Regards sur le monde actuel*. And, conscious of taking part in the generation of a myth, Valéry hastens to associate it with the diagnosis of a *crisis of the spirit* he had pronounced in the aftermath of the Great War. The critical phase being traversed by the West is made manifest, according to the author of *La Jeune Parque*, by an acceleration of history, which provokes in the intellectuals a sense of powerlessness when faced with a world plunged into violence. For traditional knowledge, which is becoming fragmented, there are substituted cloistered specializations often marked by a short-term pragmatism. Finally, the generalized devaluation of the labour of the mind in the name of technical efficacy and profit threatens to destroy the very idea of culture. These are some signs of “the agony of the European soul”.<sup>35</sup> It is precisely in the name of the survival of Western civilization and of its highest values that Valéry undertakes to project Symbolist asceticism into the ethical domain. He perceives in the regime of artistic singularity that Symbolism manifests — a regime to which the name of Mallarmé remains attached for him — the final hope for a regime of community that he defines in terms of a *politics of the spirit*, a veritable spiritual power capable of resisting through its force of refusal the demagoguery of temporal powers. In this, the politics of the spirit brings together the two systems of value which, from the Dreyfus Affair to the Second World War, structure France politically: with the nationalist right, Valéry shares a sentiment of decadence, which expresses itself by a defensive ideology founded on unity, hierarchy and authority; from the political left, he borrows, despite his anti-Dreyfusard positions, an ethics that aims at the universal founded on the exercise of reason.<sup>36</sup> From the perspective of this politics of the spirit, the symbolists incarnate less a literary movement than a prophetic grouping that preserves, with a view to a future, the ardent and the imaginary rigour on which Europe had been built. Their ivory tower represents what the City of God was for Augustine: the last rampart against the invasion of the barbarians.

Jean Paulhan rightly remarks in his book *Les Fleurs de Tarbes* that “Paul Valéry expects from Letters what a philosopher would no longer dare hope for from philosophy”.<sup>37</sup> This faith in the ethical power of literature links back up with the heritage of the German Romantics, who undertook at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to substitute poetry for philosophy in order to respond to the spiritual and political crisis of their time. A famous text, no doubt written by Schelling under the influence, perhaps, of Hölderlin, but which was found amongst the papers of Hegel, held that poetry “becomes again in the end what it was in the beginning — *teacher of the human race*”, since “the highest act of reason, by which it embraces all ideas, is an aesthetic act”.<sup>38</sup> It is precisely this scenario that Valéry adopts in a conference on ‘Stéphane Mallarmé’ in 1933 in order to explain the intellectual origins of Symbolism:

Forty years ago, we were at a critical point of literary evolution. The hour of Mallarmé's influence had sounded. The young people of my generation refused almost everything that the intellectual horizon of the epoch offered to them. They kept themselves apart from Parnassianism, naturalism and, moreover, from any tendency limited to a procedure. They were seeking — and it is here we find the singular trait of this moment — not only an art, an orientation of their art towards a new perfection, but more, a veritable *direction*, which I dare not call *moral* for it was not at all a *moral* matter in the ordinary sense of the word. It must not be forgotten that in this epoch there was talk at once of the failure of science and the failure of philosophy. Some followed the doctrines of Kant, which had demolished all metaphysics; the others reproached science for not having kept the promises that it hadn't made. In this state, and for lack of a faith that could satisfy them, it seemed to some that the kind of certainty they placed in an ideal of beauty was the only ideal in which they could find any peace.<sup>39</sup>

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Symbolism lent over the cadaver of philosophy and, following the German Romantics, gave itself the mission of taking up again the flame of metaphysics that Kant had snuffed out.<sup>40</sup> Faithful to the beliefs of his youth up until the 1930's, Valéry attributes to poetry the task of substituting itself for Kantian rationality. In his eyes, pure poetry, stripped of all material reality, constitutes a "purely ideal state", "a fiction deduced from observation" whose function is to "guide us in the very difficult and very important study of the diverse and multi-form relations of language with the effects it has on men".<sup>41</sup> As Valéry conceives it, pure poetry thus serves as a *regulative idea* for the practice and study of literature: in sum, it is a matter of "the tendency towards the limit of an art, a limit impossible to reach by the means of language, but the idea and the desire of which are essential to all poetic enterprises".<sup>42</sup> Exactly as in Kant, whoever believes themselves to be able to attest to the phenomenal presence of regulative ideas is the victim of a *transcendental illusion*. Just as the ideas of God, of the Cosmos and of the Ego, subtracted as they are from the judgements of pure reason, are necessary for the exercise of practical reason, pure poetry, which is necessary to the exercise of poetry, represents an asymptotic finality that determines the possibility of every poem and yet has no empirical existence. Pure poetry acts as the regulatory principle that maintains the ideality of thought in troubled times. Literature, when it bends itself towards the regulative idea of pure poetry — this being, according to Thibaudet, "the problem of Mallarmé, just as we say the theorem of Pythagoras"<sup>43</sup> — makes itself the guardian of practical reason in the place of a now obsolete metaphysical philosophy. The speculative theory of art inherited from German Romanticism finds in Valéry an influential mediator, who succeeds in adapting it to the literary context of the interwar years.

This slippage from poetic reason to practical reason is the occasion for a scene that has since become legendary. To justify his opposition to the scenic interpretation of *Un coup de dés*, which a few months prior a theatre troupe had prepared, Valéry

breaks for the first time his silence on Mallarmé in February 1920 and publicly offers up some of his memories in the journal *Les Marges*.<sup>44</sup> In this text, of which the *NRF* immediately published some extracts, Valéry presents himself as “the first man who had seen this extraordinary work” and recalls with emotion that he had perceived in it “a spiritual tempest raging from page to page all the way to the extremities of thought”: “Was I not present at an event of a universal order, and was this not, in its own way, the ideal spectacle of the Creation of Language being presented to me on this table, in this instant, by this so audacious being, this so simple, so sweet a man, so naturally noble and charming?”<sup>45</sup> In Spring 1897, he consults the corrected proofs of the poem and admires, without completely understanding, its vertiginous typographical dispositif. That evening, at the moment of leaving Mallarmé to return from Valvins to Paris, Valéry feels the world of the book and the book of the world transform themselves one into the other, the textual constellations of *Un coup de dés* superimposing themselves on the infinity of the celestial vault.

The evening of the same day, as he accompanied me to my train, the infinite July firmament enclosing all things in a sparkling cluster of other worlds, and as we went, dark smokers amidst the Serpent, the Swan, the Eagle, the Lyre, it seemed to me that *now* I was taken into the very text of the silent universe: a text made entirely of clarity and of enigmas; as tragic, as indifferent as one could wish; which speaks and does not speak; a tissue of multiple meanings; which brings together order and disorder; which proclaims a God just as powerfully as it denies one; which contains in its unimaginable entirety all epochs, each one associated with a distant celestial body; which recalled the most decisive, most evident and uncontested successes of men, the fulfilment of their predictions, — right up to the seventh decimal; and which crushes this conscious animal, the sagacious contemplator, under the uselessness of this triumph... We walked. In the hollow of such a night, between the remarks we exchanged, I thought of the marvelous attempt: what a model, what teaching above! Where Kant, rather naïvely perhaps, believed he saw the Moral Law, Mallarmé undoubtedly saw the Imperative of a poetry, a Poetic. This radiant dispersion; these pale and ardent bushes; these almost spiritual seeds, distinct and simultaneous; the immense interrogation proffered by this silence charged with so much life and so much death; all this, a glory by itself, a strange totality made of reality and contradictory ideals, should it not have suggested to someone the supreme temptation to *reproduce its effect!*

— He has tried, I thought, *at last to raise a page to the power of the starry sky!*<sup>46</sup>

In the conclusion to his *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant associates the contemplation of the nocturnal sky with the universality of ethical judgement: “Two things fill the mind with an ever new and increasing admiration, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: *the starry heavens above be and the moral law within me*”.<sup>47</sup> Their vision, the philosopher continued, brings me back to the consciousness

of my existence and to the value of my intelligence. In the disorders of the modern world, when violence seems to be imposing itself as law, contingency putting an end to the reign of necessity and the volatility of opinion dethroning the rigour of thought, Valéry judges that it is the proper of poetry rather than of philosophy to offer the image of a rediscovered cosmic unity. The sublime spectacle that *Un coup de dés* offers him seems in an instant to effect the transition from the sensible to the intelligible, from the material to the spiritual, from the contingent to the necessary, from the finite to the infinite. The proofs of Mallarmé's poem do not impose upon Valéry a simple aesthetic experience, but reveal to him the spiritual destination of man, that is, his capacity to raise himself above animality by the recognition of the absolute. At the same time as the sentiment of the infinity of worlds and the universality of reason, pure poetry, substituting itself for a moribund philosophy, transmits a wisdom that reminds man of his moral force and supports him in his resistance to the withering away of intellectual values and the erosion of a shared culture. This is "the sacred legacy of the memory, the manuscripts, the glory of Mallarmé".<sup>48</sup> The revelation of the ethical implications of "poetry that had deliberately separated itself",<sup>49</sup> that is, of an autonomous literature subtracted from the laws of the market as from the prose of universal reportage, constitutes Valéry's contribution to the political interpretations of Mallarmé, which will multiply in the second half of the century. Asked about the relations between literature and politics, Valéry moreover remarked: "It happens that, unbeknownst to itself, the Ivory Tower emits powerful waves".<sup>50</sup>

#### Mallarmé in 1940: Henri Mondor and Maurice Blanchot

In the years preceding the centenary of his birth, which will be celebrated despite the German Occupation, the times when "the name Mallarmé was basically a sign for a cenacle to be placed in a museum of curiosities"<sup>51</sup> seem far behind. From 1937, an academy bears his name, whose founders, who count amongst their ranks Paul Valéry, hope that it will be for poetry what the Goncourt Academy is for prose. For a decade, the testimonials of former disciples have multiplied, including Jean Royère's *Mallarmé*, Camille Mauclair's *Mallarmé chez lui*, and Edouard Dujardin's *Mallarmé par un des siens*.<sup>52</sup> In his study *De Baudelaire au surréalisme*, Marcel Raymond demonstrated his influence on contemporary poetry.<sup>53</sup> Thirty years after Thibaudet's monograph, new exegeses appear, such as *L'Œuvre poétique de Stéphane Mallarmé* by Emilie Noulet and *Mallarmé l'obscur* by Charles Mauron.<sup>54</sup> The consecration of Mallarmé, underway since the beginning of the 1930's, would nevertheless not have been the same without the devotion of doctor Henri Mondor. In 1941, less than a year after the defeat of the French troops, the first volume of his *Vie de Mallarmé* is published by Gallimard. Punctuated by large extracts of correspondence and previously unpublished versions of poems and prose works, his biography is a summa from which Mallarmé criticism will draw for decades to come. The NRF immediately praises this "rich and passionate biography, which allows us to bet-

ter know and, as a consequence, better love one of the Princes of the French spirit, whose work will not cease to grow in importance and influence".<sup>55</sup> In the *Figaro*, the book is recognized as "the work that commands all of the others on the shelf of Mallarmé studies".<sup>56</sup> Twenty years later, after thirty re-editions of the biography, it will still be said of Mondor that he was the first "to give Mallarmé a real life, a biography and a face",<sup>57</sup> as if, in an inverse filiation, the biographer had given an incarnate form to a ghost who up to then had remained in Limbo. One year after the Liberation of Paris, in 1945, Mallarmé accedes finally to the prestigious 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade'. In their introduction, its editors, Henri Mondor and Georges Jean-Aubry, offer an observation about the time: "Preserved at once from the impudence of popularity and from all equivocal or noisy amplification, the glory of Stéphane Mallarmé is one of the purest. It shines at the greatest heights and more and more so".<sup>58</sup> His installation in the patrimonial collection of Gallimard, whose consecrating role is equivalent to that of the series 'Grands écrivains de la France' published by Hachette in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is the culminating point for the transformation of Mallarmé into a monument of French literature.<sup>59</sup> "His glory is now that of a classic author",<sup>60</sup> Maurice Blanchot claims.

From 1940, Mallarmé figures in the pantheon of the great men of the country. This, at least, is what the foreword to *Vie de Mallarmé* would have us believe, where Mondor identifies the historical catastrophe with the occasion at which the "poet of the ivory tower" revealed himself to him as the sanctuary of the national memory and the guardian of French identity:

On June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1940, when we saw the German regiments occupy Paris, some of the men who had remained from of a sense attachment to the city, by duty, or by a sedentary humour, went off in search of some opium from which they could expect an attenuation of their sorrow. We chose to study an existence that nobody had yet set out to recount and in which one finds, so as to reconcile oneself with life and with certain French prestiges, some extraordinary virtues. For twenty years, from bookstore to bookstore, from occasion to occasion, from chance to surprise, we had gathered manuscripts, letters, relics. Little by little, their reunion brought back to life the unpretentious adventure of a poet of the ivory tower.<sup>61</sup>

As if this allusion to the German invasion did not suffice, Mondor inscribes on the spine of the two volumes of his biography: "Paris 15<sup>th</sup> June 1940-15<sup>th</sup> December 1940".<sup>62</sup> The day after the arrival of Nazi troops and three days before General de Gaulle's appeal, the writing of the first volume of *Vie de Mallarmé* had begun; before its end, Mondor will have been the witness to the installation of the Vichy regime and its politics of collaboration with the German occupier. Everything happens as if the biographer, in these dark times, had found in Mallarmé a portion of Free France. Mondor responds to the military debacle inflicted by Germany by turning to "certain French prestiges" incarnated by a poet who was nevertheless withdrawn in his own life from any political engagement. For the biographer does not cease to affirm that Mallarmé, contrary to Victor Hugo, refused the submission of literature



to politics: he kept himself “far from the proletarian or megalomaniacal ardour of those utilitarian uses of poetry and of the beautiful”.<sup>63</sup> Likewise, he assures us that Mallarmé, during the Franco-Prussian War, conserved an “elevated attitude” and commented very little on the events: “the contingencies, the opinions, the rivalries, remained foreign to him. He turned his gaze and his enthusiasms over and above the everyday and the human”.<sup>64</sup> Commenting on the prose poem ‘Conflict’, in which Mallarmé, confronted by drunken workers who upset his retreat, wonders if he will give in to “a boxing match which would illustrate, on the lawn, the class struggle”, Mondor passes over the social question in silence in order to appreciate only the talent of “a comic author of a taste and sparkle of which literature, in France, does not present us with many other examples”.<sup>65</sup> The foundational paradox of political readings of Mallarmé, already present in Valéry, traverses Mondor’s biography: the poet withdraws into an ivory tower from which he forever defends the kingdom of art for art’s sake; yet this retreat, which keeps him at a distance from the conflicts and struggles of his time, circumscribes a place of resistance from which the injustices of the time can be opposed. Thus the poet becomes a *symbol*, no longer of a European spirit, as he was for Valéry, but of a national identity threatened by the violence of the second worldwide conflict. He incarnates what Charles de Gaulle will soon define as “a certain idea of France”.<sup>66</sup>

The *Frenchness* of Mallarmé nevertheless did not go without saying. His work had for a long time been decried as a transgression of the genius of the language. In his lifetime, his poetry was described as Latin, Hebrew, Chinese, the difficulty of his syntax being associated with the transcription of a foreign language. In 1875, Georges Mayrant noted: “Previously, Boileau attacked Ronsard: *Whose French muse speaks Greek and Latin*. As for Monsieur Mallarmé, he has found the means of speaking American in French”.<sup>67</sup> In 1989, Gide recognized that this “*a prioristic* and, as a consequence, uniquely French and Cartesian literature” borrowed a Latinate syntax “to the point that certain passages from *The Afternoon of a Faun* could give us a poetic emotion very similar to that which we seek in Virgil’s *Eclogues*”.<sup>68</sup> In 1912, Albert Thibaudet had left the question in suspense: “It will be necessary to determine to what degree the work of Mallarmé was or was not French”.<sup>69</sup> Now, in 1941, there is no longer any doubt that Mallarmé and his work belong to the national memory and can henceforth signify, by metonymy, the French identity.<sup>70</sup> The nationalization of Mallarmé that occurs in the black years perfectly illustrates the two political functions of cultural memory. On the one hand, the canonization of works is the instrument of an *integration* inasmuch as it ensures that a community has a store of memory around which it can assemble itself through the recognition of a shared identity: Mallarmé recalls what France is at the moment of defeat, before the dilemma of collaboration and resistance imposes itself. On the other hand, it is the instrument of a *distinction* inasmuch as it undergirds the differentiation of one community with respect to its rivals: Mallarmé reminds us that the French are not the Germans and that the fascist ideology is foreign to them. Once it is inscribed in a shared memory, the work of Mallarmé no longer bears witness only to the Second



Empire and the Third Republic: it offers itself up to allegorical interpretations well beyond its time. His poetry, raised to the level of maxims and proverbs, enables one to state the conflicts and the struggles of the present, to reflect on the most burning actualities, and to discern the lines of fracture and legitimize political actions. It is thus that the authority of Mallarmé becomes that of a “professor of morals”, as per the title of Michel Leiris’ article in the clandestine *Les Lettres Françaises*.

Amongst the most influential actors in the nationalization of Mallarmé is Maurice Blanchot, a collaborator with diverse newspapers and journals of the far right during the 1930’s, who abandons political journalism at the beginning of the Occupation so as to devote himself to literary criticism.<sup>71</sup> On April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1941, in the first ‘Chronicle of intellectual life’, which he writes for the *Journal des Débats*, a daily Vichyist newspaper, the memory of Mallarmé is associated once again with the shock of the defeat. Before evoking *Vie de Mallarmé*, Blanchot highlights the comfort that literature brings to the French, wounded and censored as they are by the recent course of events:

Those scarred people who cannot express the feelings that disturb them retreat into reading. In particular, they seek in books, and even in difficult ones, an explanation of what they are. They turn with passion towards problems of which they had no idea. They thus think they are taking the measure of the mediocrities of their time, and they defend as they can their intellectual honour. There is more desperate pride than desire for amusement in such an attitude. It is a matter of abolishing time by considering human affairs in testimonials that cannot be effaced.<sup>72</sup>

Turning back to the editorial news of the last months, Blanchot reviews some “well-made, honestly composed books, which bear witness only to a certain fidelity to a certain mediocre tradition”, before stopping, without any more enthusiasm, at tales of war, which “are too close to our own time to not participate in its enigmas”. Certain works nevertheless merit being meditated upon “because they themselves have their own value and that they shed some serious light on the period we are living through”.<sup>73</sup> Among these works is the biography of Mallarmé, which Blanchot claims will help his compatriots find “an explanation of what they are”:

The works that have received the most attention are works of intellectual and literary history. One cannot think too much of the work that Henri Mondor has just devoted to Stéphane Mallarmé: *Vie de Mallarmé* (Gallimard). It is the fruit of a long labour, and it is a happy labour. Doctor Mondor has gathered together admirable texts that clarify with an extraordinary light the destiny of this prince of the spirit. He has succeeded, thanks to patient work on a very large number of letters, in drawing words and even the confidences of the most silent of writers, the most unvarnished and the most capable of intellectual prudence. He has restituted the history of a man whose entire existence was in his work, itself close to nothingness by its very immensity. He has shown it in its simplicity and in its pride. Today, it represents for the

mind a simple yet agreeable revenge to contemplate a man who in complete and obscure solitude knew how to dominate the world by the exercise of a power of absolute expression.<sup>74</sup>

Following Mondor, Blanchot believes that France's wounded pride can console itself in the life of Mallarmé: after the trauma of defeat, the destiny of the poet appears as "a simple yet agreeable revenge". Some weeks later, Blanchot reprises his argument. On May 26<sup>th</sup>, he notes the contribution of Paul Valéry to *La France et la civilisation contemporaine*, a collective work published by Flammarion. Valéry was interrogating "the spiritual work of France" and explained that the identity of the nation could not be circumscribed for lack of being able to "define or to create a BEING, an AUTHOR, who would be called FRANCE and who, in the course of a career of a thousand years, would have published this quantity of monuments, of precious works of all kinds, of expressions of intelligence or knowledge, which we consider our capital of pride and tradition".<sup>75</sup> Now, Blanchot takes up this anthropomorphic fiction to argue that "the French spirit" never manifests itself as powerfully as it does in poetry. Reprising a formula from the portrait of Mallarmé that the biography of Mondor had inspired in him, he explains that French poetry, "from Maurice Scève to Paul Eluard", has known how "with a curious happiness to associate the concern for dominating the universe of with a concern for submitting oneself via this very domination to the real universe".<sup>76</sup> And if it is true that the French spirit distinguishes itself by a poetic language that, far from reducing itself to an ornamental passion, exerts its power over the order of beings, of things and of the world, it is the work of Mallarmé which incarnates this language with the greatest force and purity.

There are certainly very few literatures in which a poet, without the slightest delirium, by the simple effect of a rigorous meditation on forms, has been able to envisage the writing of a book that was the veritable equivalent of the absolute. This ambition, the torment and the glory of Stéphane Mallarmé, purifies French letters of many of the mediocrities that the vanity of writers brings to them. When we think of the author of *Un coup de dés*, we say to ourselves that literary pride, so characteristic of our spirit, is a phenomenon of which we need not to be ashamed since there is in our literature some texts which have demanded and which, to a certain degree, have succeeded in taking the place of universal creation.<sup>77</sup>

The nationalization of Mallarmé, as exemplified by Blanchot, borrows from two distinct regimes for the construction of grandeur. The first, which is Romantic in inspiration, considers works as monuments that bear witness to the permanence and specificity of the national genius. The second, firmly rooted in classicism, sings the praises of the universality of works, which belong *de facto* to the patrimony of humanity.<sup>78</sup> According to the commentaries of Mondor and Blanchot, the work of Mallarmé is French because it is universal and, inversely, it is universal because it is French. This paradox, which is common to the critical discourse of the time, is manifest also in Thierry Maulnier's *Introduction à la poésie française*, which argues

that, with respect to European poetries, the characteristic trait of French poetry is a concern for purity that strips it of all picturesque subject matter and all patriotic rhetoric, so as to raise it to the level of a clear consciousness of the art of language: "the homeland of French poetry is less France than literature".<sup>79</sup> In order to incarnate the genius of France, the writer does not have to illustrate the national legend nor win the appreciation of his contemporaries: following Mallarmé, it suffices for him to meditate, at a distance from the contingencies of his time, on the secret of a poetry capable of dominating the world by the sole power of language. In an article in *Les Temps Modernes* entitled 'The Nationalisation of Literature', Sartre underscores with irony the compensatory function that literature has taken on amongst a number of writers and critics humiliated by defeat, such as Mondor and Blanchot: "In their hearts, they do not stop wishing that France will become again the country of Turenne and of Bonaparte, but in the interim they fall back on Rimbaud or Valéry. Literature becomes in their eyes an activity of substitution".<sup>80</sup>

As Bergson remarked, there exists in all memory "dominant memories on which other memories lean on as supporting points".<sup>81</sup> In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the political memory of Mallarmé will be integrated into two chains of memory, which the interpretations of Valéry, Mondor and Blanchot allow us to identify. On the one hand, the exegeses that will be proposed of Mallarmé by allegorical interpretations will be inscribed in the lineage of the speculative aesthetics of German Romanticism, which favour the appropriation of practical reason by poetic reason. They will consider the work of Mallarmé as a philosophical hieroglyph that demands to be deciphered and whose interpretations clarify not only the fractures of the present but also the promise of emancipation. In so doing, they will recuperate the principle of Valéry's politics of the spirit: Mallarmé's work, folded in on its regulatory idea and raised to its maximal autonomy, will impose itself as an historical power that sketches the ethical and political foundations of a community to come. This Romantic politics will impose itself from Maurice Blanchot to Jacques Rancière, passing by Philippe Sollers and the avant-garde of the journal *Tel Quel*. On the other hand, Mallarmé's posthumous destiny will for a long time bear the traces of the climate of deep identitarian uncertainty and intense ideological polarization that surrounded his entry into the pantheon of great French writers. The nationalization of his work under the Occupation will contribute to Mallarmé becoming associated with the memory of the Resistance, in conformity with the myth of a France that had risen up against the German invader. Thus, when, at the Collège de France, Roland Barthes will evoke a "political reception of Mallarmé", it will be after having affirmed that language is "neither reactionary nor progressive" but "quite simply fascist" due to the fact that it engenders at once "servility and power".<sup>82</sup> Mallarmé's restricted action will be conceived of as a contestatory engagement, which subtracts itself from the collaborationist gregariousness of universal reportage so as to better oppose itself to the ideological discourses through which an inherently conservative and authoritarian power is reproduced. This contestatory politics will become manifest once again at the close of the century in the readings of Alain

Badiou and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. It is thus at the meeting point between a philosophical tradition that sacralizes the historical power of literature and a political mythology that conceives the engagement of literature on the model of a resistance to power that there appears, more than a century after the death of the poet, the allegorical readings of “comrade Mallarmé”.

### Notes

1. This article is an abridged version of the chapter ‘L’invention d’une politique de la lecture’, in *Camarade Mallarmé. Une politique de la lecture* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2014), pp. 19-63.
2. Jean-Pierre Faye, ‘Le Camarade “Mallarmé”’, *L’Humanité*, September 12, 1969, p. 9.
3. Roland Barthes, ‘Inaugural Lecture, Collège de France’, in *A Barthes Reader* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 466.
4. Michel de Certeau, ‘Lire: un braconnage’, *L’Invention du quotidien. I. Arts de faire* (Paris, Gallimard, 1990), pp. 239-255; Jean-Marie Goulemot, ‘La lecture comme production de sens’, in eds. Roger Chartier, *Pratiques de lecture* (Paris: Payot, 2003), pp. 119-130; Michel Charles, *Introduction à l’étude des textes* (Paris: Seuil, 1995); Pierre Bayard, *Enquête sur Hamlet. Le Dialogue de sourds* (Paris: Minuit, 2002).
5. Antoine Compagnon, ‘Allégorie et philologie’, in eds. Anna Dolfi and Carla Locatelli, *Retorica e interpretazione* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1994), pp. 191-202.
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10. André Rousseaux, ‘C’est la faute à Voltaire ou la querelle des mauvais maîtres’, *Le Figaro*, September 8, 1940. On this polemic, see Wolfgang Babilas, ‘La querelle des mauvais maîtres’, *La Littérature française sous l’Occupation* (Reims: Presses universitaires de Reims, 1989), pp. 197-226; Gisèle Sapiro, *La Guerre des écrivains. 1940-1953* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), pp. 161-207.
11. Camille Mauclair, ‘Pour l’assainissement littéraire’, *La Gerbe*, no. 26, January 2, 1941.
12. Thierry Maulnier, ‘Les “intellectuels” sont-ils responsables du désastre ?’, *Candide*, No. 899, June 4, 1941.
13. ‘Mallarmé, professeur de morale’, *Les Lettres Françaises*, No. 9, September 1943.
14. Henri Mondor, ‘Un sonnet inédit de Mallarmé’; Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘Sonnet’; Marcel Raymond, ‘Mallarmé’, *Poésie* 42, No. 9, May-June 1942, pp. 63-70.
15. André Gide, ‘Saint Mallarmé l’ésotérique’, *Le Figaro*, March 14, 1942; *Essais critiques*, ed. P. Masson (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), pp. 367-372.

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25. Camille Mauclair, *Mallarmé chez lui* (Paris: Grasset, 1935) p. 29.
26. Paul Valéry, 'Existence du Symbolisme', [1938], *Œuvres I*, ed. J. Hytier (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 688.
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28. *Ibid.*, p. 704.
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30. *Ibid.*, p. 690. Valéry's emphasis.
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32. Paul Valéry, 'L'Existence du Symbolisme', [1938], *Œuvres I, op. cit.*, p. 691.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 705.
34. Paul Valéry, 'Avant-propos', "Regards sur le monde actuel", *Œuvres II*, ed. J. Hytier (Paris: Gallimard, 1960) p. 917.
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37. Jean Paulhan, *Les Fleurs de Tarbes ou la Terreur dans les Lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), p. 29.

38. Ernst Behler, 'The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism', in *Philosophy of German Idealism: Ficthe, Jacobi and Schelling* (London/New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 162 (*Translation modified*).
39. Paul Valéry, "Stéphane Mallarmé," *Œuvres I, op. cit.*, p. 674.
40. Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *L'Art de l'âge moderne. L'esthétique et la philosophie de l'art du XVIIIème siècle à nos jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992). In 1891, Jean Thorel had already highlighted "the striking resemblance" between German Romanticism and French Symbolism and had underscored the fact that "in such a manner of conceiving poetry, art, philosophy and religion end quickly by being confused": 'Les romantiques allemands et les symbolistes français', *Entretiens politiques et littéraires*, vol. III, no. 18, September 1891, p. 1457.
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42. Paul Valéry, 'Discours sur Henri Bremond', *Œuvres, I, op. cit.*, p. 766.
43. Albert Thibaudet, 'Etats généraux', *Nouvelle Revue Française*, no. 160, January 1927, p. 105.
44. On this episode see Thierry Roger, *L'Archive du Coup de dés. Etude critique de la réception d'Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard de Stéphane Mallarmé (1897-2007)* (Paris: Gariner, 2010), pp. 182-198.
45. Paul Valéry, "Le *Coup de dés*. Lettre au directeur des *Marges*," *Œuvres, I, op. cit.*, p. 624.
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47. Emmanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 133.
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49. Paul Valéry, "Stéphane Mallarmé," in *Collected Works of Paul Valéry, Volume 8: Leonardo, Poe, Mallarmé, op. cit.*, p. 675.
50. Paul Valéry, "Réponse à une enquête (sur la chose littéraire et la chose pratique)," *Œuvres I, op. cit.*, p. 1149.
51. Albert Thibaudet, "Epilogue à la poésie de Stéphane Mallarmé," *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, "Hommage à Stéphane Mallarmé," no. 158, November 1, 1926, p. 553.
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55. André Rolland de Renéville, "Vie de Mallarmé, by Henri Mondor," *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, no. 326, April 1, 1941, p. 635.
56. André Rousseaux, "Mallarmé 1942," *Le Figaro*, March 14, 1942.

57. Jean-Pierre Richard, *L'Univers imaginaire de Mallarmé* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1961), p. 13.
58. Henri Mondor and Georges Jean-Aubry, 'Introduction' in Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, eds. H. Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. IX.
59. Alain Viala, 'Qu'est-ce qu'un classique?', *Bulletin des Bibliothèques de France*, vol. 37, no. 1, 1992, pp. 6-15; Jacques Dubois, 'Le Sacre des écrivains', in *La Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. Travail éditorial et valeur littéraire*, eds. Joëlle Gleize and Philippe Roussin (Paris: Editions des archives contemporaines, 2009), pp. 67-73.
60. Maurice Blanchot, "The Myth of Mallarmé," in *The Work of Fire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 27.
61. Henri Mondor, *Vie de Mallarmé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 7.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 318.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 305.
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67. Georges Mayrant, 'Revue du jour', *Le Gaulois*, June 9, 1975. Reprinted in Bertrand Marchal, *Mallarmé* (Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne, 1998), p. 88.
68. André Gide, "Stéphane Mallarmé," *L'Ermitage*, October 1898. Reprinted in *Essais critiques, op. cit.*, p. 831.
69. Albert Thibaudet, *La Poésie de Stéphane Mallarmé. Etude littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), p. 19.
70. Some years later, Jacques Schérer will moreover refuse any English influence on the poet and will minimize the importance of the Latinisms in his "literary expression". Jacques Schérer, 'L'influence anglaise', 'L'influence latine', *L'Expression littéraire dans l'œuvre de Mallarmé* (Paris: Nizet, 1947), pp. 19-33 and pp. 33-36.
71. On the political interpretations that Blanchot proposes of the work and the experience of analysis, I take the liberty of referring to the second chapter of my book ('Le terroriste de la dialectique', *Camarade Mallarmé, op. cit.*, pp. 64-106) and to my contribution to the recent *Cahier de l'Herne: 'Mallarmé pour comprendre le siècle'*, in *Maurice Blanchot*, eds. Eric Hoppentot and Dominique Rabaté (Paris: L'Herne, 2014) pp. 255-260.
72. Maurice Blanchot, 'Chronique de la vie intellectuelle', *Journal des Débats*, April 16 1941. Reprinted in *Chroniques littéraires du Journal des Débats*, ed. Ch. Bident (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), p. 11.
73. *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.
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75. Paul Valéry, "Pensée et art français," [1941], *Œuvres II, op. cit.*, p. 1047.



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77. Ibid.
78. Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La Création des identités nationales. Europe XVIIIème-XXème siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1999); 'Communautés imaginées et littératures', *Romantisme*, no. 143, 2009, pp. 61-68.
79. Thierry Maulnier, *Introduction à la poésie française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1939), p. 36.
80. Jean-Paul Sartre, 'La nationalisation de la littérature', *Les Temps modernes*, no. 2, November 1945; *Situations II*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.
81. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Dover, 2004), p. 223.
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VINCENT KAUFMANN

BELIEVE THAT IT WAS TO BE VERY BEAUTIFUL  
(MALLARMÉ AND BAUDELAIRE)

*An anti-philological tale*

*Translated by Robert Boncardo*

*In memory of Barbara Johnson*

How did Mallarmé read Baudelaire? What does he owe him? In what sense is he his heir, as it is often acknowledged he is? We will attempt to respond to these complex and multifaceted questions, which bring into relation two veritable continents of French literature, by setting out once again from *Literary Symphony*, a sort of “critical poem” *avant la lettre*, published in 1865 and devoted to Gauthier, Baudelaire and Banville, all three of whom were admired by the young Mallarmé. In the Pléiade edition of 1945, *Literary Symphony* figures under the rubric “Proses de jeunesse”. In the new edition curated by Bertrand Marchal (2003), it is integrated into the dossier of *Divagations*. However, the latter postdates *Literary Symphony* by more than twenty years. Marchal’s choice is nevertheless justified by the fact that a part of this text — the part on Baudelaire, precisely — is reprised in the *Divagations* (*Long Ago, in the Margins of a Copy of Baudelaire*).<sup>1</sup> By its rigour, Bertrand Marchal’s critical edition is a model of the genre. The fact remains that this specific choice constitutes an anomaly, or at least an exception, since all the other pieces from the dossier of *Divagations* are contemporaneous with it. Should *Literary Symphony* have been included or not in the dossier from *Divagations*, for the reason of its partial republication? Whatever the case may be, Marchal’s decision should not make us forget that besides some extensively reworked motifs, the texts from 1865 and 1888 have very little in common.

What has changed? What is striking is first of all the difference in size between the two texts. *Long Ago, in the Margins of a Copy of Baudelaire* is, in accordance with the Mallarméan “style” of the 80’s and 90’s, a sort of condensation of the first. A certain number of terms and images return, but with the syntactical shortcuts typical of

*später* Mallarmé. Where in 1865 he wrote: “No sooner have I opened my Baudelaire than I am drawn into a stunning landscape that strikes my eyes as if created by some marvellous opiate”, we now read: “A landscape haunts like opium” (D 49 — *modified trans.*). The example can be generalized: from one version to the other, all of the markers of enunciation and, therefore — as impersonality demands — all of the markers of subjectivity have notably disappeared, except in the first sentence of the text to which we will return. Baudelaire is still there, in a vision combining a livid sky, leafless trees, gloomy pools, a sunset, tears, Satan, crime and remorse. There are still figures, things to see, and perhaps it is still the same vision, even if everything happens as if there were no longer anybody there to see it.

No more subjective positioning: by the same stroke, the young and admiring Mallarmé of 1865 is nowhere to be found. No longer is it Baudelaire and I (Baudelaire for me, my Baudelaire, etc.), but Baudelaire such as into himself at last, which is to say without me in order to sustain him. I am no longer there to claim an inheritance. In 1888, there is no longer “my Baudelaire” (OC, 282), no more “I dip with delight into the dear pages of *The Flowers of Evil*” (OC, 282). The text from 1865, by contrast, is that of a young and admiring poet, apparently fated to impotence by this very admiration, as per a well-known topos that Mallarmé revives, no doubt in an ironic way given the grandiloquence (though it is possible that irony is part of this very topos).<sup>2</sup> It functions as a declaration of filiation (as we would say a customs or a tax declaration), as a search, if not for paternity, then at least for a *homeland* [*patrie*], a rare term, to say the least, under Mallarmé’s pen and one which occurs, precisely, in the section devoted to Baudelaire:

What, then, is the homeland?

I closed the book and the eyes, and I seek the homeland. Before me there arises the apparition of a learned poet who points to it for me in a hymn that comes forth mystically like a lily. The rhythm of this song resembles the rose window of a cathedral: amongst the ornamentation of the ancient stone, smiling in a seraphic lapis-lazuli which seems to be a prayer emerging from their blue eyes rather than from our vulgar azure, white angels sing like a host their ecstasy accompanied by harps imitating their wings [...] — and I can look no higher than their theological virtues, such is their holiness ineffable; but I hear ring out these words in an eternal fashion: *O filii et filiae* (OC II, 283).

Would Baudelaire thus take the place of the *homeland* for Mallarmé? In any case, the means of accessing this homeland are themselves very Baudelairean, since it is reached by closing the book and the eyes, which is to say by giving oneself over to the force of the imagination, so central in Baudelaire. And if reading Baudelaire does not give us access to any homeland, not even to an exclusively imaginary homeland, then it at least compensates for the possible absence of a homeland by substituting for it a place whose connotations are clearly religious. The Baudelaire-homeland is an “old church” at the same time as being the song of the angels that

invite us to gather there. It brings about an effect of communion, of invitation and thus of belonging (*O filii et filiae*). If we set out again from a question as essential to Mallarmé as that of the “religion of letters”, which his entire œuvre confronts, in particular by reposing in every possible way the question of the *place* proper to a religion of letters,<sup>3</sup> we can thus say that, in 1865, nothing permits us to doubt the fact that Mallarmé believes in the possibility of salvation or redemption by literature, with eyes closed to the world, and that in 1865 this salvation passes by way of a relation of admiration for — as well as an appropriation of — Baudelaire. In sum, the latter is the exponent of Mallarmé’s belief in a “religion of letters”. This does not mean, of course, that Baudelaire himself can be identified, above all in 1865, with such a religion, since for a number of years he had ceaselessly deconstructed its idealist presuppositions; we will return to this. But Mallarmé perhaps does not yet know this, or at least is not ready to acknowledge it. For the time being, he follows Baudelaire *with his eyes closed* — and this blindness is, to my mind, at the centre of the complex relation between Mallarmé and Baudelaire and constitutes one of the keys for comprehending, if not the ambivalence, then at least the considerable discretion, which commentators have often remarked upon, of the young poet in relation to his senior.

All of this is amputated from the reprise of 1888. Nothing here evokes any admiration, any belief in salvation, any mystical communion, any angels. The invocation of the homeland has disappeared and has been replaced by a question bearing upon the sky, confirming *a posteriori* the religious implications of the interrogation of 1865 concerning the homeland — that is, the proper place of the poetic. But unlike the question posed in 1865, that of 1888 remains without a response and is combined with a vision of nightmare and of exile:

Or is this torrent of tears lit up by the fireworks of that artificer Satan  
moving behind the scenes? Night only prolongs crime, remorse, and Death.  
Therefore you veil your face in sobs, less because of this nightmare than  
because of the fragments of attempts to go free implied in any exile; what,  
oh, what is the Sky? (D 49)

Is this simply to say that, between 1865 and 1888, Mallarmé lost faith and renounced a certain religion of literature of which Baudelaire would have been the representative? That it was necessary for him to detach himself from Baudelaire and cease to be his admiring son in order to become Mallarmé? Must we frame this scene in Oedipal terms, or in terms of an “anxiety of influence”, as Harold Bloom would no doubt suggest,<sup>4</sup> an anxiety explicitly visible at the beginning of *Literary Symphony* and more generally in the excessively laudatory tone of this text?<sup>5</sup> This is one possible avenue of inquiry: the evidence for it is not lacking, nor indeed are the discrete admissions of Mallarmé himself, who wrote in 1867 to his friend Henri Cazalis: “Dierx’s book is a beautiful development of Leconte de l’Isle. Will he separate himself from him as I have from Baudelaire?”<sup>6</sup> Indisputably, for Mallarmé, Baudelaire had been a master from whom it was necessary to detach himself. And he was all the more so since he remained a mute master who Mallarmé never knew and from

whom he never obtained anything more than an approving silence following a reading of 'Les Fenêtres' and 'L'Azur',<sup>7</sup> and later a remark on *Le Phénomène futur* in *La Belgique déshabillée*.<sup>8</sup>

It is equally possible to assess Mallarmé's ambivalence by taking a detour past Poe, of whom he wrote in 1864: "All the same, the further on I go, the more I will be faithful to these exacting ideas that my great master Edgar Poe has bequeathed me".<sup>9</sup> From one master to another: Poe is perhaps all the more respectable since he allows Mallarmé to avoid recognizing his other master, Baudelaire, who is nevertheless the first to translate these "exacting ideas". The relation of Mallarmé to Poe, who he will also go on to translate, is a relation of re-appropriation that occasionally involves the disavowal of what his knowledge of Poe owed to the translations (or the appropriations) of Poe by Baudelaire. Taking into account the admiration he claims he has for the one and the other, it is all the same surprising to read in a letter to Lefébure, written in 1865 at the moment Baudelaire's translation of *Tales of the grotesque and arabesque* appeared: "I have no money with which to buy the grotesque or serious tales, and moreover I am not currently reading".<sup>10</sup> It is true that two years later recognition is apparently in the offing, since he writes to Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, who asks him for translations of poems by Poe for a journal: "You will have in one of the first editions some poems by Poe that I will work on: I accept this task as a legacy from Baudelaire".<sup>11</sup> But in the meantime Baudelaire has died, and we know that it is always easier to be the inheritor of a dead man than a living one.

Other evidence would no doubt confirm the hypothesis of an anxiety of influence that Mallarmé had to overcome. But is this not a too simple and too obvious hypothesis, which, in the final analysis, does not explain much at all? In any case, it does not allow us to explain the transformation-reprisal of *Literary Symphony* twenty years later, nor indeed the *Tomb of Charles Baudelaire*, which dates from 1893. If Mallarmé detaches himself from Baudelaire in the 60's, it is also clear that he *returns* to him and that the texts from 1888 and 1893 have the value of a recognition of debt that, moreover, has not been entirely paid back in the text from 1888 and which continues to haunt it: "Muse of impotence, who dries up the sources of rhythm and forces me to reread; opposed to inebriants, *I give you the intoxication that comes from others*" (D 49). Here, in the first sentence, is the only "I" still present in the text, and it is not for nothing that it is an "I" who is there precisely to offer up "the intoxication that comes from others".<sup>12</sup>

From what intoxication or alienation is Mallarmé seeking to disentangle himself? What remains for him to render unto Baudelaire in 1888 or in 1893 and which could not have been recognized or declared in 1865? It is to this question that we must attempt to respond, at least if we hypothesize that Mallarmé's relation to Baudelaire cannot be summed up in what would after all be a relatively banal history of a necessary detachment, beyond which something new would come to be; that is, if we depart from the principle that Baudelaire is still *at work in* (in the work of) Mallarmé, whatever the quite systematic silence of the latter from 1867 onwards — the date of the death of his prestigious predecessor.



In the spring of 1866, Baudelaire is struck down in Namur after an attack that leaves him hemiplegic and above all aphasic. Mallarmé evokes these facts and the sadness that they provoke in him in a letter to Cazalis, which is famous for other reasons. Indeed, this famous letter is the one in which Mallarmé recounts his discovery of nothingness:

Unfortunately, in hollowing out verse like this, I have encountered two chasms, and they make me despair. One is Nothingness, which I came to without knowing about Buddhism and I am still too distressed to believe even in my poetry and to return to the work that this crushing thought has made me abandon. Yes *I know*, we are just pointless forms of matter, and yet thoroughly sublime ones for having invented God and our soul.<sup>13</sup>

There is thus a coincidence between Baudelaire's aphasia, who had before this been silent on the subject of Mallarmé's first poems, and the discovery of nothingness, of which we could say, taking into account this letter and everything that we know of Mallarmé's trajectory and of his relation to religion, that it also corresponds to the abandonment of the belief the situation of the lyrical poet is steeped in: I have hollowed out verse and, at the bottom of this hollow, there is nothing, there is no salvation to hope for. At the very moment Baudelaire is condemned to silence, Mallarmé ceases to believe not so much in God, since he never believed in him, but in poetry; or, more precisely, no doubt — for as such the formula does not mean much — in the redemptive function of poetry, in the possibility of salvation through poetry. The Baudelairean position involves mourning for the world, a renunciation of the world (Baudelaire writes with his eyes closed), a position of exile by turns glorious and cursed and which, despite everything, it is up to poetry to *redeem*, as Leo Bersani has shown.<sup>14</sup> To this mourning for the world to which he is initially faithful in an almost dogmatic fashion, more Baudelairean than Baudelaire himself,<sup>15</sup> Mallarmé now adds the mourning for poetry itself. Salvation is thus precisely confused with shipwreck.<sup>16</sup>

It is not that he ceases to write, even if there is indeed in Mallarmé's trajectory a period of almost twenty years, between 1867 and 1885, to be brief, in the course of which he writes remarkably little (a few articles, some fragments of *Igitur*, 'L'Après-midi d'un faune', *La Dernière Mode*, *Les Mots anglais*, that's about all). The discovery of nothingness, contemporaneous with Baudelaire's aphasia, will almost have made him aphasic as well. But above all he does not write, and will no longer write, in the same manner. If he still has, at least provisionally, one foot on the side of nothingness to be hollowed out (with *Hérodiade* then *Igitur*), the other tends more and more towards the *circumstantial*: not towards the insignificant, far from it, but towards a form of writing as if lightened of the load of the pathos of transmission, a formal writing, at once play and ritual, an effect of, or the foam of, the mourning for belief as such.<sup>17</sup> The despairing Mallarmé has ceded place to a histrion, a clown

who sometimes plays at the Faun. And it is necessary to wonder whether it is possible to be the inheritor of a clown or a Faun, or what such a heritage would consist in, especially if this clown simultaneously and perpetually touts a sublime total book — a null heritage, mere drafts that he recommends his inheritors burn.

From nothingness to the ironic assumption of the “nothing” — such would be Mallarmé’s trajectory since Baudelaire’s aphasia. Or since the death of his older sibling, for we cannot resist noting here another coincidence. Mallarmé’s biography is in fact placed under the sign of two great intellectual adventures, if we can call them that: the first, as we have seen, consists in exploring nothingness at the moment Baudelaire becomes aphasic. The second immediately follows: an effect of the first, it is evoked one year later, that is, almost precisely at the moment of Baudelaire’s death. This is the famous experience of impersonality, recounted in a letter to Cazalis, of which it is necessary to recall the following points, which appear essential:

I have just had a terrifying year: my thought has thought itself and has arrived at a pure conception. Everything my entire being suffered as an aftereffect during this long agony is indescribable, but fortunately I died completely, and the most impure region where my Spirit may venture is Eternity [...]

I am now at that point, after a supreme synthesis, of slowly gaining strength — incapable, you see, of distracting myself. But how much more so I was a few months ago, first of all in my terrible struggle with that old and wicked plumage, now crushed, fortunately, God.

This tells you that I am now no longer a person, no longer the Stéphane you have known — but a means by which the spiritual Universe can see and unfold itself through what was once me.<sup>18</sup>

Baudelaire dies, but Mallarmé, in his own way, also becomes impersonal, a pure aptitude of spirit reflecting on itself. There is in the Mallarméan experience of nothingness and impersonality something like an *imitation* of Baudelaire’s death, and I take as proof of this the fact that the other “abyss” that Mallarmé encounters while hollowing out verse is the “void of his chest”, a sickness which there is every reason to believe will lead to his death thirty years later. Whatever the real state of Mallarmé’s health, whatever role hypochondria played (but all of this is even more significant if it is a case of hypochondria), it is necessary to point out that at the moment of Baudelaire’s death Mallarmé begins to be sick, to die — as if he were contaminated by Baudelaire’s death.

To be convinced of Baudelaire’s implication in the Mallarméan “adventure”, for all of this to not appear as a mere coincidence, it is necessary to redefine the central issue of Mallarmé’s strange intellectual adventure, the only one he would have known. Having followed the different declarations from Mallarmé cited above, we can now summarize them in the following way. In striking down God, that “old and wicked plumage”, which is to say by experiencing the absence of any form of



transcendence — “God is dead” is certainly all the rage at the time — Mallarmé is simultaneously confronted with *his own disappearance*, with his own becoming-impersonal. “We are nothing but vain forms of matter — and yet thoroughly sublime ones for having invented God and our soul”, he writes to Cazalis. In order to escape nothingness, we have invented not only God but also our soul, that is, our existence as a *subject*. Take away God and there is no longer any subject that holds. The Other must die, but so must the subject. I am a subject only insofar as there exists a transcendental Other who assures me that I can be a subject, an Other I can *rely on*. What remains, then, if the Other is absent? Nothing, or more precisely language, words to which the poet must “cede the initiative”, within or beyond a problematic of meaning that ultimately corresponds, as all readers of Mallarmé know by experience, with an effect of *belief*. Meaning does nothing more than *gleam*, it comes to the reader henceforth in the form of a question, indeed of an enigma — of an “is this really it?”

A cascade of disappearances: God, the subject, meaning.<sup>19</sup> Mallarmé’s poetics come down in their entirety to the unbinding — the deconstruction, as we used to say — of this trinity, which is obviously not without a relation to *the* trinity, and from which it is impossible to dissociate the very constitution of 19<sup>th</sup> century lyrical poetry. We can thus minimally define the latter as the expression — or the song — of a subject.<sup>20</sup> It is this question that determines that the “coincidences” of 1866 and 1867 are not, precisely, mere coincidences. The crisis that Mallarmé lives through in the course of these years is very much a crisis of the “subject” of poetry, that is, of a cultural construction that is taking on water from all sides, which is sinking at the moment of Baudelaire’s death, who had made it *his* question. The question of the subject, or more precisely its questioning, its permanent state of crisis: in the history of poetry, Baudelaire represents the crisis of poetry, a crisis that has since never ended; he represents a systematic indictment of everything that, in the course of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, sanctioned the convergence of the poetic and the theological in the lyrical.

Let us recall some of the procedures or figures through which the Baudelairean crisis passes. On the side of God, these are almost too obvious: blasphemy, of course, the denial (of Saint Peter, for example), the choice of perversion and voluptuousness, of evil, of Satan. Amidst the perfume of a corpse. On the side of a subject we can note exile, identification with those who are marginalized and with those who are excluded from society — an identification whose real counterpart will be the famous trial lost in 1857 — but also the self-destitution, the overturning of (poetic) charity to become violence. If I had to characterize with a single term the Baudelairean operation carried out on the poetic tradition, I would readily resort to that of *denunciation*, as we speak of a sin or a crime, but also of a contract: Baudelaire denounces a specific poetic contract signed by God, the (charitable) poet and meaning (the good), a contract which has had its glory days and its romantic predecessors, Hugo in particular.

These themes are central, particularly in *Les Tableaux parisiens*, which were added to *The Flowers of Evil* after cuts prompted by the trial of 1857, and then of course in *le Spleen de Paris*. The following examples could be developed (and certain of them already have). *Assommons les pauvres*, *Le Gâteau*, *Les Yeux des Pauvres*, or also *Le Mauvais Vitrier* — all of these critique the motifs of charity, of love for one's neighbour, the veritable stock in trade of Romanticism, and unveil or denounce the latter as both violent and hypocritical.<sup>21</sup> *La Corde* is at once a denunciation of a relation of violence (between the painter and his model) hidden behind another denunciation, that of the illusions of maternal love.<sup>22</sup> Numerous texts from *Tableaux parisiens* expose the mechanism of identification with the others as being a surplus-value created by the poet, who thus poses as a charitable swindler: this operation is "theorized" in *Les Foules* and radicalized in *La Solitude*, which it is possible to read as a denunciation of the fundamental Christian "contract", which demands that the other be similar to my fellowman, my brother, my neighbour. *Perte d'auréole* refers almost explicitly to the loss of the aura (of the poet) dear to Walter Benjamin. *Le Galant Tireur* overthrows the woman as muse and thus as a mediator of the divine. As for texts (in prose) like *L'Invitation au voyage* and *Un Hémisphère dans une chevelure*, Barbara Johnson has shown that they are based upon an operation of a *defiguration* (and thus of a destitution) of poetics that Baudelaire carried out, starting with his texts in verse.<sup>23</sup>

Upon the death of Baudelaire, Lefébure writes to Mallarmé "that genius is a magnificent sickness and that one can die from it".<sup>24</sup> Mallarmé could certainly have subscribed to such a statement, above all if the genius of Baudelaire consisted in the destitution of the subject, in denouncing and sacrificing it, before transmitting this problematic to him. Mallarmé also dies, in his way, from Baudelaire's genius. He begins to truly become Mallarmé ("no longer the Stéphane that you knew") at the point where Baudelaire ceases to be Baudelaire, where the adventure of lyricism ends in its own renunciation. From the aphasia of one to the "Nothing, this foam, virgin verse" of the other: the whole question is, in a word, to know how poetry is possible after the Baudelairean denunciation; how to come after a poetry infected by a pathology; how to be cured of it. It is not insignificant that in *Long Ago, in the Margins of a Copy of Baudelaire*, it is a question of opium and of "the intoxication that comes from others": Baudelaire is toxic, and this ultimately leaves one outside, "in the sinister fragments of all exile" (OC II, 110). How is it possible to come after this? Almost thirty years ago Baudelaire died, and yet his shadow is itself a poison:

Celle son ombre même un poison tutélaire  
Toujours à respirer si nous en périssons (OC I, 39)

[being his Shade a tutelary poison  
we breathe in deeply though we die of it]<sup>25</sup>

Until the end, until the 'Tomb of Charles Baudelaire' written in 1893, Mallarmé will therefore have remained faithful to the Baudelairean poison, to what is toxic in his lesson. Until the end, this is what he will have chosen to remember: the poison,

actualised also in the figure of the prostitute, so emblematic of a Baudelaire associated with “the horribly dribbling / sepulchral sewer-mouth loosening mud and rubies”,<sup>26</sup> and who chose the mud of the real against poetic charity; a figure now as if snuffed out since it had been too well illumined (by the modern illumination of gas) and destined to be nothing more than a shadow caused by the very absence of shadow. Baudelaire: a shadow, a *revenant*, perhaps, and for this precise reason always toxic. We cannot separate ourselves from revenants.



God, myself, the good: the denunciation of this little *ménage à trois* on which the position of his lyrical seniors was based also leads Baudelaire to disqualify all forms of *community*. The Other is no longer my fellowman and even less a brother, if not by *hypocrisy*. His œuvre is anti-communitarian, it is written in mourning for the hopes which were his at the moment of the 1848 revolution: mourning for the people, mourning for an active community, the disavowal of Saint Peter. At the political as at the literary level, 1848 would have truly marked the end of an epoch.<sup>27</sup> Fraternity has become “fraternal prostitution”<sup>28</sup> and universal communion is the privilege of the solitary walker slipping in almost as a voyeur amongst the crowd. In this context we could also evoke the question of dandyism, which is at the very least the index of a desire for absolute *singularisation*<sup>29</sup> just as much as it is a renunciation of the great tasks of transmission that the preceding generation had assigned itself (summarized by Bénichou under the term of *prophétisme*).

At this level, whose religious connotations are manifest, it is tempting, even if it is too simplistic, to describe things in terms of a dialectic, with Hugo — the contrary of the dandy — in the role of the thesis, Baudelaire in that of the antithesis and Mallarmé in that of the synthesis, with the following particularity: namely, that in strictly historical terms the thesis (Hugo) extends his reign beyond the antithesis (Baudelaire). In any case, we can remark that if Mallarméan “silence” and impersonality coincide with the disappearance of Baudelaire, he is back in business at the death of Victor Hugo (1885), as if he had to wait, as Barbara Johnson has observed, for he who was “verse personified” (OC II, 205) to also die in order for there to emerge the possibility of an alternative to Baudelairean solitude, which is to say of a new form of community destined also to be translated into a new poetical form — precisely that or those invented by the later Mallarmé.

It is necessary to reaffirm, in order to avoid any misunderstanding concerning the Mallarméan “religion” of literature, that this community is destined to remain *virtual*. It has nothing to do either with a return to the people of 1848, to its prophets or its self-proclaimed spokespeople, or with the different versions of romantic socialism or a socialist romanticism that constituted its backdrop. Mallarmé perfectly understood the lesson: there is no possible return to a configuration anterior to the Baudelairean denunciation. How, then, or with what, can a community be made when one is Mallarmé, someone so familiar with nothingness, unbelief

and the death of God? How can impersonality and community be conjugated? Of what is a community made if there are no subjects to constitute it? There remains language, given to and shared by all; there remain the twenty-four letters of the (French) alphabet and their infinite combinations, which lead, according to Mallarmé, to the Book, to a total book attempted by all, albeit unwittingly.<sup>30</sup> Beyond the Baudelairean destruction, there is community, there is meaning. These are almost the same thing since there is only meaning if meaning is transmissible, shared, if it exists for more than one, if there is language. There is some community, even if it is unaware of itself, even if it remains *reserved*, secret, virtual, and as a result perfectly compatible with Mallarmé's discreet anarchism, with his indifference at turns amused and contemptuous with respect to any social link, which he considered fundamentally as a fiction (an illusion, a belief).<sup>31</sup>

From this viewpoint, almost the entirety of Mallarmé's œuvre would have to be reread, or at least the quasi-totality of the texts from *Divagations*, in which the conditions of possibility for a community founded on a poetic (rather than a musical, theatrical or religious) ritual are made explicit. This cannot be envisaged here and I will content myself with one or two particularly relevant examples with respect to the inversion of Baudelaire's position. To texts like *Assommons les pauvres*, *Les Yeux des Pauvres*, etc., which denounce the identification of the poet with the poor (with the people, the proletariat, etc.), Mallarmé responds with texts like 'Conflict' and 'Confrontation'. In both cases, it is a question of encounters between the poet and proletarians, and in both cases this encounter remains virtual, impossible to express, mute, whether the workers are "upright", as in the first example, or sleeping like a "blind herd" after their working day, as in the second example:

My look pressed limpidly on his confirms, for the humble believer in these riches, a certain deference, oh! how a mute handshake makes itself felt — since the best that happens between two people always escapes them as interlocutors (*Confrontation*, D 278).

Constellations begin to shine: I wish that, in the darkness that covers the blind herd, there could also be points of light, eternalizing a thought, despite the sealed eyes that never understood it — for the fact, for exactitude, for it to be said (D 46).<sup>32</sup>

The best — the common thought — escapes the interlocutors, and by the same stroke the community escapes them. It is the role of poetry to provide despite everything a place for this community, or more precisely to designate such a place, to avow its existence, not in order to effect a return to religion, to belief and to identification, but "for the fact, for exactitude, for it to be said". This expression links up with the famous "I imagine, following an unextractable and no doubt writerly prejudice, that nothing will remain without being proffered" (D 209-210). Thus is programmed the reversal of an entire problematic — a romantic problematic, even if it continues to resonate until Sartre and beyond — of transmission and of the "engagement" of the writer. In order for there to be engagement, there must be a subject, com-

munication, and even an Other — God, the people, the proletariat, etc. — in whose name the poet speaks: a tradition or, if one prefers, an inheritance that Mallarmé declines, not with a Baudelairean passion for sacrifice, but by commenting on it in its entirety with an ironic “we can always pretend”. Let us insist upon the following point: the Mallarméan reversal of the Hugolian position is not thinkable without the preliminary traversal of Baudelairean negativity. It is because he integrated, indeed swallowed, Baudelaire melancholically that Mallarmé is finally ready, in 1885, to untie himself from Hugo, as well as from any form of “engaged”<sup>33</sup> literature. As if to finally do “justice” to the poet who, as a lost child, died too soon, twenty years before his senior (Hugo), over whom he will only triumph posthumously.



It is in ‘Crisis of Verse’, one of his most decisive texts, that Mallarmé evokes Hugo, for reasons that are only indirectly linked to what we have just seen. Here it is a question of verse, of the difference between verse and prose, and therefore of the identity of the poetic, which is said to have broken at the death of Hugo, the veritable incarnation of poetry, at least in France:

Verse, I think, respectfully waited until the giant who identified it with his tenacious and firm blacksmith’s hand came to be missing, in order to, itself, break. All of language, measured by meter, recovering therein its vitality, escapes, broken down into thousands of simple elements (D 202).

With Hugo gone, verse “breaks” and free verse comes to be. But we know that Mallarmé never practiced free verse, that for him it was not the central issue, even if he pays tribute to its advent, notably in ‘Crisis of Verse’. What is truly at stake is specified in the response to an inquiry by Jules Huret on literary evolution:

Verse is everywhere in language where there is rhythm, everywhere, except in posters and on the fourth page of newspapers. In the genre called prose, there are verses, sometimes admirable ones, of all rhythms. But in truth, there is no prose: there is the alphabet and then more or less tight verses: more or less diffuse. Every time there is an effort towards style, there is versification (OC II, 698).

Mallarmé displaces the debate. The question is not that of knowing whether the small transgressions of the alexandrine by the adepts of free verse are tolerable or not. They are, of course; it is not Mallarmé who should be asked to bring order to this crisis of verse. But his position consists above all in accentuating and in radicalizing this crisis so as to transform it into a crisis of the *identity of poetry*, which is only timidly announced by free verse. By affirming that “verse is everywhere in language where there is rhythm”, Mallarmé makes impossible any simple identification of poetry, any assignation of a form to poetry, whether it be institutional or not. Verse is everywhere in language, and by the same stroke it is nowhere, or more precisely it is nowhere for *certain*. There is verse in prose, even in newspapers, and

inversely perhaps not all alexandrines are real verses. It is a question of the eyes, of the ear, and for whoever has neither one nor the other, of *belief*, but there is now no more official form susceptible to support it. The crisis of the identity of the poetic is also, ultimately, a crisis of the belief in poetry.<sup>34</sup>

“Verse is everywhere in language”: it is not only a question of a theoretical affirmation, but also of one of the keys allowing us to understand the diversity of literary “genres” practiced by Mallarmé from 1885 — a diversity prophesied, incidentally, by the very important stage of *La Dernière Mode* (1874): poems in verse, but also in prose, as well as the “critical poems” that make up the *Divagations*, the very numerous circumstantial texts (*Dons*, *Loisirs de la Poste*, *Eventails*, *Tombeaux*, etc.), of which a certain number count amongst the most difficult of Mallarmé’s texts, articles, conferences, reports, translations, without forgetting the *Coup de dés*, or the never-published fragments of the “Book”. In a discrete but systematic fashion, Mallarmé anticipates the great undermining of official artistic forms by the avant-gardes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>35</sup> This is an often unremarked paradox: he who has for a long time been made the champion of a “pure” conception of poetry, which would arise only from what he himself qualified as “essential speech”, is also he who would have done the most to *shuffle the cards*, to subvert the identity of poetry, notably by producing multiple supposedly minor writings. Yes, there no doubt exists an “essential speech” in Mallarmé, but clever is he who can say where to find it, since it is true that the essential endlessly takes on the allure of the circumstantial.

Just as there is at the heart of Mallarmé’s poetics an operation of the suspension of meaning, we can also speak in his case of a *disidentification* of the poetic — or, to use a less barbarous term and to render homage to Barbara Johnson, a *defiguration* of poetic language.<sup>36</sup> This leads us back once more to Baudelaire, since what is most essential in Barbara Johnson’s book is devoted to him, and for good reason. For the great defigurator, he who opened the path of disidentification followed by Mallarmé, is precisely Baudelaire and in particular the Baudelaire of the *Spleen de Paris*, whose denunciation of the “lyrical” contract thus finds its equivalent at the level of form. As a literary form — and this is also the entire point of a form in lockstep with modernity — *Le Spleen de Paris* implies a destitution, a loss of poetry’s aura (or halo); or, to propose a more barbarous term, a prosaification of poetry, perceptible notably in the prose version of the poems from the *Flowers of Evil* (*Invitation au Voyage*, *la Chevelure*). Numerous critics, who are unconditional adepts of the *Flowers of Evil*, have not failed to reproach these texts for their unpoetic, or, to speak frankly, prosaic character: Baudelaire is no longer what he was; he is no longer at his height. It is thus that the entire critical operation carried out by Baudelaire on the lyrical configuration is often occulted, indeed repressed, in favour of a Baudelaire who incarnates “true” poetry — a bitter or ironic victory over Hugo. As for Mallarmé, it is not only certain that he perceived perfectly well the scope of the Baudelairean defiguration, but also that his own strategy, above all in his “critical poems”, engages with that of Baudelaire. From *Spleen de Paris* to *Divagations*, there plays out the entirety of the *critical* adventure of French poetry, that is, of what is



also just as much a reversal of its religious underpinnings. Later on, this will not always be well understood. There are often inheritances that are lost.<sup>37</sup>



Let us begin again, one last time, at a more biographical level. The Baudelairean heritage is toxic: less than any other, Baudelaire was never at home, he could never have been; he was perpetually in forward flight so as to escape his debts, both symbolic and financial.<sup>38</sup> Note his problems with property, from his endlessly abandoned hotel rooms to the maternal house at Honfleur, which was in the process of collapsing. After him, how can one occupy a place, how can one inherit from Baudelaire, from he who swallowed and spent his inheritance in a few months, who destroyed himself as an heir before being placed under supervision by the “family counsel” for the rest of his days? Baudelaire’s œuvre is written in the guilt and jubilation of an inheritance refused, squandered. It is also this destruction, an accident of transmission that, in a word, he transmits to Mallarmé, intoxicated as he is from his youth onwards; but time will be needed in order for him to realize it, or to bring this inheritance to fruition. This is what happens with the inheritances of revenants: they incubate for a certain time.

In any case, the predispositions are not lacking in Mallarmé. Recall here that everything in his world is made in order that families and inheritances collapse. His mother disappears when he is five years old, his father remarries and loses interest in him, entrusts him to his grand-parents, who send him to boarding school. At age fifteen he loses Maria, his child, his sister, and at age thirty he loses his son Anatole. Geneviève, his daughter, remains, and she devotes herself almost exclusively to her father and will never herself have children: a definitively interrupted descendance, a short circuit. Certainly, none of this is truly uncommon in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it must be admitted that in order to inherit or to transmit a heritage, we haven’t gotten off to a good start. In short, there is nothing surprising if we find, at the other end, at the moment where the chasm of his chest becomes a spasm and grips his entire body, those words hastily scribbled by a Mallarmé close to death, words addressed to his wife and his daughter and which concern notably the fragments of his famous *Book*, the impossible total book that he did not cease to tout: “The terrible spasm of asphyxiation suffered just now can recur during the night and prevail over me. Thus do not be surprised that I think of the demi-centennial heap of notes, which will become only a great embarrassment to you; because not a page therein can be of use. I alone could draw from it what it contains... I would have done had the final absconded years not betrayed me. Burn, therefore: there is no literary heritage there, my poor children. Do not even submit it to anyone for appraisal; and forbid all inquisitiveness and friendly meddling. Say that nothing there would be distinguished, it is true anyway, and, you, my poor prostrates, the only beings in the world capable at this point of respecting an entire life of a sincere artist, believe that it was to be very beautiful”.



Believe that it was to be very beautiful. Because it was not? Because they were worth nothing, those fragments of the *Book* published formerly by Jacques Scherer, which have fascinated generations of researchers? But what precisely were they searching for? Was it only time that he lacked to leave a total work, an absolute heritage in the face of which one could only submit for all eternity? We could consider, as many have done, that here there was an inheritance that would finally give their full meaning to now-completed works. Or on the contrary we can think that absence of an inheritance left by Mallarmé retrospectively destines his published works to the same uncertainty: are they fragments of nothing, or of something? Are they beautiful? Would they have been beautiful? Believe it, or not.

### Notes

1. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*. Translated by Barbara Johnson (Cambridge/Massachusetts/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007) p. 49 (D). All the citations from Mallarmé will refer to this edition, unless noted otherwise. *Volumes on My Divan* does not appear in the edition of 1945, Henri Mondor, ed., (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1945). Let us also note that in 1888, Mallarmé is correcting the proofs of a new edition of the ensemble of *Literary Symphony*, which will be abandoned as such in favour, one might say, of *Long Ago, in the Margins of a Copy of Baudelaire*. Banville and Gautier are thus scrapped.
2. See in particular the preamble to *Literary Symphony*, which evokes the three “masters”: “Modern muse of Impotence, who has long prohibited me the familiar treasure of Rhythms, and who condemns me (pleasant torture) to do nothing more than reread — until the days where you will have enveloped me in your irremediable net, ennui, and everything will then be finished — the inaccessible masters whose beauty makes me despair; my enemy and yet my enchantress of malicious potions and melancholy drunkenness, I dedicate to you, as a taunt or — I know it — as a token of love, these few lines of my life written during clement hours during which you will not have inspired in me a hatred of creation and a sterile love of nothingness’ (OC II, 281). Let us also note that numerous commentators of *Literary Symphony* have not failed to point out the imitative, indeed plagiaristic, character of this text: in 1865 — and this is the other side of “impotence” — the relation of Mallarmé to Baudelaire is still a relation of appropriation, even if it is not reducible to it.
3. Recall that Mallarmé’s œuvre is indissociable from a problematic of *place*, and thus of staging or performance, which determines its value as a (potentially) religious ritual. See on this point Mary Shaw, *Performance in the Texts of Mallarmé. The Passage from Art to Ritual* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993). See also Diana Schiau-Botea’s recent doctoral thesis *Le texte et le lieu du spectacle de La Plume au Mur. Stéphane Mallarmé parmi les avant-gardes*, thèse de doctorat (Rutgers University — Paris III) (2010); and of course Bertrand Marchal, *La Religion de Mallarmé: poésie, mythologie et religion* (Paris: Corti, 1985).
4. *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry* (New York/Oxford: 1973, Oxford University Press).
5. The excessive nature of the praise, and thus its fundamental ambivalence, is more evident still in the parts of *Literary Symphony* devoted to Banville and Gautier who, in any

case, play a less important role than Baudelaire in the history of the ‘influences’ undergone by Mallarmé. In terms of influence, an essential difference seems to reside in the fact that from the point that Mallarmé truly becomes Mallarmé — in the second half of the 1860s precisely — the works of Banville and Gauthier will cease to be at work in Mallarmé, in contrast to Baudelaire, whose heritage is in some sense infinite and never-ending.

6. *Correspondance. Lettres sur la poésie*, éd. Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 1995) coll. ‘Folio’, p. 346.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 177. To be precise, it would be necessary to speak of a *reported* silence: the reading in fact took place in the salon of Baudelaire’s cousin, without Mallarmé being there.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 286.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 246.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 368.

12. On the basis of the thesis of ambivalence, we can also note the fact that Mallarmé refused to preside over a banquet that *La Plume* organized in 1893 in memory of Baudelaire, before announcing, almost at the last moment, as if he were ravished by the idea, that he would all the same write a text for this circumstance: *Le Tombeau de Charles Baudelaire*, a poem which we know has left many readers and commentators perplexed, as if it were not fully-formed, or as if there were something in the relation of Mallarmé to Baudelaire that was not clear.

13. *Correspondance. Lettres sur la poésie*, *op.cit.*, p. 297.

14. *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, Mas: Harvard University Press 1990), pp. 63-86.

15. In 1863, Mallarmé writes the following to Cazalis in criticism of the “simplicities” of Emmanuel Des Essarts: “He confuses too often the Ideal with the Real. The stupidity of a modern was to write that ‘Action was not the sister of Dream’ — Emmanuel is one of those who regrets this” (*Correspondance. Lettres sur la poésie*, *op. cit.*, p. 143). The modern poet evoked here is Baudelaire, who expresses this regret in *Le Reniement de Saint-Pierre* with respect to the “betrayal” of Christ by God. In other words: Mallarmé does not follow Baudelaire at the point where he criticizes God on the basis of a position of identification with a Christ who is come to *save the world* and who has been betrayed. Radical melancholy, which is assumed as such, with neither renunciation nor revolt being possible: Mallarmé will always be resolutely on the side of what he calls ‘restricted action’, which is to say theatre.

16. It is not necessary to venture very far into Mallarmé’s work to realize this, since the poem placed as an introduction to *Poésies*, entitled *Salut*, opens with an evocation of a shipwreck: “Rien, cette écume, vierge vers / A ne désigner que la coupe/ telle loin se noie une troupe / de sirènes maintes à l’envers” (OC, I, 4). On this poem, see the exhaustive reading by Lucette Finas, in *Le Bruit d’Iris*, Paris, 1979, Librairie des Méridiens-Klincksieck, p. 44-48. The *Salut* dossier benefits by being completed by the poem *À la nue accablante tu* (see equally Vincent Kaufmann, *op. cit.*, p. 103-109), the two poems taken together constitute what inspired Jacques Rancière in choosing the title of his important book on Mallarmé: *La Politique de la sirène* (Paris: Hachette, 1996).

17. See Vincent Kaufmann, *Le Livre et ses adresses*, *op.cit.*; Marian Zwerling Sugano, *The Poetics of the Occasion. Mallarmé and the Poetry of Circumstance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).
18. *Correspondance. Lettres sur la poésie*, *op.cit.*, pp. 342-343.
19. Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1974).
20. On the religious foundations of lyrical poetry in France, see the unsurpassable works of Paul Bénichou: *Le Sacre de l'écrivain* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1973); *Le Temps des prophètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977); *L'Ecole du désenchantement*, (Paris, Gallimard, 1992); *Selon Mallarmé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).
21. Jérôme Thélot, *Violence et poésie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).
22. Pierre Pachet, *Le premier venu. Essai sur la politique baudelairienne* (Paris: 1976, Denoël).
23. *Défigurations du langage poétique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980).
24. Mallarmé, *Correspondance. Lettres sur la poésie*, *op.cit.*, p. 299.
25. Mallarmé, *The Poems in Verse. Translation and Notes by Peter Manson* (Ohio: Miami University Press, 2012) p. 171.
26. *Ibid.*
27. See Dolf Oehler, *Le Spleen contre l'oubli. Baudelaire, Flaubert, Heine, Herzen* (Paris: Éditions Payot & Rivages, 1988) Payot; as well as Ross Chambers, *Mélancolie et opposition: les débuts du modernisme en France* (Paris: José Corti, 1987).
28. *La Solitude, Oeuvres Complètes*, éd. Le Dantec et Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1961) p. 264.
29. Roger Kempf, *Dandies* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1977).
30. In *Music and Letters*, it is precisely language which now appears as the place of the poetic, as the equivalent of what Mallarmé used to think of in terms of the homeland. The alphabet provides the poet, "our civilized inhabitant of Eden", with "a doctrine as well as a country" (D 186).
31. See also Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica Ficta (Figures de Wagner)* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1991). The analyses of Lacoue-Labarthe, which bears in particular upon the relation of Baudelaire and Mallarmé to Wagner, an unsurpassable exponent at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century of a problematic of the community "produced" by art (or by art returning to religion), confirm the hypothesis affirmed here, namely that the passage from Baudelaire to Mallarmé plays out the question of the abandonment of the subject in favour of a virtual form of community, a hypothesis with which both Jacques Rancière (*La Politique de la Sirène*, *op. cit.*) and Alain Badiou (*Théorie du sujet* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1982), p. 116, *sq*) agree.
32. On *Conflit*, see also Vincent Kaufmann, 'De l'interlocution à l'adresse (la réception selon Mallarmé)', *Poétique* 46, 1981, pp. 171-182.
33. Engaged literature, about which it cannot be repeated enough that was not invented by Sartre, constitutes notably the target of Mallarmé in *L'Action restreinte* (OC II, 214-218).

34. In other terms, the responses to the question “what is poetry?” will always arise, from our historical point of view, which is at once post-Baudelairean and post-Mallarméan, from an effect of belief. Poetry is everything that we believe it is, its “particularity is to escape ontological categories”. Daniel Oster has shown this in *Passages de Zénon*, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1983).

35. This point is documented in a convincing fashion by Diana Schiau-Botea, *Le texte et le lieu du spectacle de La Plume au Mur. Stéphane Mallarmé parmi les avant-gardes*, *op. cit.*

36. *Op. cit.*

37. I am thinking here notably of the Surrealist movement, which would have represented in the history of French poetry a restoration of the rights of the subject and of expression. There is nothing surprising if this restoration occurs via (1) a relative indifference to the Baudelaire of the *Spleen de Paris*; (2) an even more obvious indifference to Mallarmé, who the Surrealists don’t quite know what to do with; (3) an immense misunderstanding of the two other great post-Baudelairean “disfigurers” of French poetry, namely Rimbaud and Ducasse-Lautréamont, to whom the Surrealists will give a mythical dimension by forcefully re-injecting, one is tempted to say, some subjectivity into them<sup>3</sup>, a lyrical consistency, neither of which are at stake in Rimbaud or in Lautréamont.

38. Vincent Kaufmann, *L’Equivoque épistolaire* (Paris: Minuit, 1990), p.55 *sq.*

CLAUDE PÉREZ

MALLARMÉ, POLECAT-FERRET<sup>1</sup>

*(Dominique Fourcade For and Against Mallarmé)*

*Translated by Robert Boncardo*

**L**e *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.<sup>2</sup>

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 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>: 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 Meillassoux) 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,  
Apaissé de l’éden 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].<sup>3</sup>

“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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 mono-type* (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.

LARISSA DRIGO

FOLDING AND UNFOLDING THE INFINITE

*Space-time relations in Mallarmé's Un Coup de dés*

Introduction

From the point of view of its form, *Un coup de dés* has been analyzed from many different perspectives. Kristeva<sup>1</sup> analyzes its syntactic procedures; Scherer<sup>2</sup> presents a grammatical description of Mallarmé's language; Meschonnic<sup>3</sup> focuses on orality; Murat<sup>4</sup> on verse; the study undertaken by Greer Cohn<sup>5</sup> deals with the poem as a unity, its rhythm and its place in Mallarmé's *œuvre*, while, at the same time performing an analysis of the syntax, the vocabulary, the form, and the themes, including the meaning of each letter. The most recent analysis comes from Quentin Meillassoux,<sup>6</sup> who finds in the poem a code that would explain the manner by which Mallarmé inserted chance into his creation.<sup>7</sup> But there remains a point still unexplored by commentators: how does Mallarmé think or formalize, inside his poem, the relationship between chance and the infinite?

In the drafts of *Igitur* we discover that chance always performs its own idea, indicating that the throw of dice is defined precisely as that which allows the infinite to be: "This was to take place in the combinations of the Infinite face to face with the Absolute".<sup>8</sup> In this work, we will analyze and describe how the infinite was formalized in *Un coup de dés*. We will begin with the formal innovations that the poet himself highlighted in the preface of his work, such as the double page and the division of motifs.

The evolution of the formal and spatial resources employed by Mallarmé — the blanks inserted on the page are concrete spaces that provide the narrative with its space but which also move, process or present the spacing of *Un coup de dés* as mobile — illustrate a path whereby the unique space of poetry, the space of the page, is used more and more to become a fundamental element of its formal constitution. If poetry takes place, it is because it is capable of making space a condition of its eventual possibility; that is, space is not a simple given, but an element that pro-

duces stories, a condition that allows poetry to take place, that produces qualitative transformations, that make it possible for something to happen. In short, it makes History as it makes a story.

The same can be asserted about time. *Un coup de dés* takes place in “eternal circumstances” since if a specific time had been appointed, the poem would lose its general, universal, and cosmological ambition. To be the poetic explication of the Earth the poem must be capable of seizing “the relation, between *times*, rare or multiple” and thus “expanding, simplifying the world”.<sup>9</sup> In eternal circumstances, time is always multiple and composed of divergent series. It is thus capable of providing the conditions of all possible experience or making the possibilities of experience infinite. It is also rare since each story, each small event in each person’s life, takes place in a singular combination of multiple times. The rare time, however, is not the time of particular experience: what is rare is that time presents itself not as one, but as multiple — as infinite. Rare is the time of an event that contains inexhaustible possibilities in a unique instant.

For a poem to take place inside “the combinations of the Infinite face to face with the Absolute” it must be able to identify the eternal and minimal conditions of all possible experience, of any possible event; and thus from these minimal conditions discover the “unholy” formula that makes the production of the infinite in the Book possible. In other words, the infinite can be disclosed in a form because this form is constructed through an elaboration of multiple spatio-temporal relations intended to contain (potentially) endless experiential possibilities.

### Where does time start? Where does space end?

Before unearthing this letter, I had wondered how a book could be infinite. The only way I could surmise was that it be a cyclical, or a circular volume. A volume whose last page would be identical to the first, so that one might go on indefinitely.<sup>10</sup>

This eminently Mallarméan question guides the adventure of Borges’ story ‘The Garden of Forking Paths’. But upon discovering the manuscript of Ts’ui Pen, the Narrator sees himself confronted with another way of making an infinite book.

In the manuscript of the novel the Narrator reads: “I leave to several futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths”. Faced with this affirmation we could think of Mallarmé’s assertion in the preface of *Un coup de dés*: “today or at least without presuming upon the future that will emerge from this — nothing or perhaps what merely verges on art”.<sup>11</sup> The Narrator continues these speculations by telling us that the phrase “several futures (not all)” suggests an image of a forking in time, rather than in space. A complete rereading of the story confirms this theory. In all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the virtually-impossible-to-disentangle work of Ts’ui Pen, the char-

acter chooses — simultaneously — all of them. He thereby creates several futures, several times, which themselves proliferate and fork.<sup>12</sup> It is thus as if all the possible futures of his art were somehow prefigured or present in the work at the time of its completion.

The Garden of Forking Paths is a huge riddle, or parable, whose subject is time; that secret purpose forbids Ts'ui Pen the merest mention of its name. To always omit one word, to employ awkward metaphors and obvious circumlocutions, is perhaps the most emphatic way of calling attention to that word. It is at any rate, the tortuous path chosen by the devious Ts'ui Pen at each and every one of the turnings of his inexhaustible novel. I have compared hundreds of manuscripts, I have corrected the errors introduced through the negligence of copyists, I have reached a hypothesis for the plan of that chaos, I have reestablished, or believe I've reestablished, its fundamental order — I have translated the entire work; and I know that not once does the word 'time' appear. The explanation is obvious: The Garden of Forking Paths is an incomplete, but not false, image of the universe as conceived by Ts'ui Pen. Unlike Newton and Schopenhauer, your ancestor did not believe in a uniform and absolute time; he believed in an infinite series of times, a growing, dizzying web of divergent, convergent, and parallel times. That fabric of times that approach one another, fork, are snipped off, or are simply unknown for centuries, contains all possibilities. In most of those times, we do not exist; in some, you exist but I do not; in others, I do and you do not; in others still, we both do. In this one, which the favoring hand of chance has dealt me, you have come to my home; in another, when you come through my garden you find me dead; in another, I say these same words, but I am an error, a ghost.<sup>13</sup>

It is first with irony that the Narrator seeks to explain what might yet be difficult, strange and distant to the reader. He quotes Schopenhauer and Newton as if the reader were familiar with these authors and could recognize the obvious nature of the explanation. But after explaining that time is composed of multiple sets that intersect or remain unaware of each other, Borges, in bringing science and philosophy to life in their concrete dimension, mentions familiar examples which any reader could identify with; placing the player in a time series, he challenges them by introducing a relation of complicity: "you came to my house". These divergent time series can cross or lose each other; when a character meets another, these encounters or misfortunes are what make stories take place. Actually, the multiple temporal series — convergent or divergent, parallel or intersecting at a point in space — are responsible for all the possibilities of events, meetings and misfortunes. Chance places us in the same space-time, while another is where the narrator dies, and yet another rattles space and time themselves, and turns the narrator into a ghost. Thus, every story requires a minimal condition to start, a chance that causes a spatio-temporal meeting.

If a time composed of convergent or divergent infinite series is a condition that makes literature infinite and inexhaustible, what can we say about space? Where does it start? Can it be also infinite? If a book can cause multiple time series to meet, it must be able to contract space — and thus contain all points of the universe. This is what Borges described in another story ‘The Aleph’:

Under the step, toward the right, I saw a small iridescent sphere of almost unbearable brightness. At first, I thought it was spinning; then I realized that the movement was an illusion produced by the dizzying spectacles inside it. The Aleph was probably two or three centimeters in diameter, but universal space was contained inside it, with no diminution in size. Each thing (the glass surface of a mirror, let us say) was infinite things, because I could clearly see it from every point in the cosmos.<sup>14</sup>

The Aleph is a small circumference of two to three centimeters from where the character observes all the points of cosmic space. And as in ‘The Garden of Forking Paths’, Borges’ examples are both imaginary and real, or very familiar:

I saw the populous sea, saw dawn and dusk, saw the multitudes of the Americas, saw a silvery spider-web at the center of a black pyramid, saw a broken labyrinth (it was London), saw endless eyes, all very close, studying themselves in me as though in a mirror, saw all the mirrors on the planet (and none of them reflecting me), saw in a rear courtyard on Calle Soler the same tiles I’d seen twenty years before in the entry way of a house in Fray Bentos, saw clusters of grapes, snow, tobacco, veins of metal, water vapor, saw convex equatorial deserts and their every grain of sand.<sup>15</sup>

The Aleph is viewed from all points and from the Aleph one sees the entire Earth, and from the Earth the Aleph, and in the Aleph again the Earth. The character of the text, before starting its description, announces that what he has seen was produced simultaneously, but its description will be successive because language itself is successive.

What if the form of a poem could contract space and time such that an infinity of possibilities could, as in the Aleph, fit in a restricted and limited space? If ‘The Garden of Forking Paths’ provides us with a description of a temporal infinity, here Borges manipulates a spatial infinity. An infinite space is not a boundless space (for this reason the first text is not about space but time) but a space restricted and yet capable of containing all points in the universe, capable of expanding itself, successively, just like language.

The first conception of the infinite, which is Aristotle’s, or that of common sense, is that what is infinite takes an infinite time to be travelled. But there are other ways of designing the infinite inside a book. And this manner is not exclusively the cyclic book that never ends. Here Borges describes two: two infinities constituted out of space and time. Borges shows us that if space and time are the minimal conditions of all possible experience, a multiple and infinite space-time assures us

the certainty of the infinity of experience; that is, of an infinite number of possible stories to be told.

Literature, just like any possible experience, has its source in a temporal series and in a particular space; that is, it is sufficient that two people occupy determined spaces or determined temporal series for a story to take place. The question is how poetry can present its own infinitude through a *mise en forme* of space and time. So, the question of elaborating a presentation of the infinite concerns what configuration of space-time is capable of presenting its own infinitude. What would the configuration of a poem be, such that it could demonstrate the infinite nature of space-time and the endless possibilities of literature? From Borges, we can conclude that to demonstrate the inexhaustible infinity of literature, the poem must provide the following: the presentation of a potentially infinite series of convergent, divergent, or parallel times that intersect or are unaware of one another; and the presentation, in a restricted space, of a multiplicity of infinite spaces, as if we could observe the infinite space of the Cosmos from all points of the Universe.

#### A Form in the Image of a Starlit Sky

In the preface to his poem, Mallarmé lists its innovations: the spatialization of reading, the “prismatic subdivisions of the Idea”, the double page, and the designs created by its typography. These are the elements that will radically transform the format of the Book: “without presuming upon the future that will emerge from this — nothing or perhaps what merely verges on art — let us openly acknowledge the attempt participates, in a way that could not be foreseen, in a number of pursuits that are dear to our time: free verse and the prose poem”.<sup>16</sup> The phrase “in a way that could not be foreseen” sufficiently indicates that the poem is as innovative as the prose poem and free verse but that it cannot be confused with either of them.<sup>17</sup>

It begins with a transformation of the space of the page, causing the breakup of verse. This highly visual design of the poem is referred to as the “prismatic subdivisions of the Idea”; it replaces verse with the configuration of this new form.

The paper intervenes each time an image, of its own accord, ceases or withdraws, excepting the succession of others; and, as it is not a question, as it usually is, of regular sound patterns or verses but rather of prismatic subdivisions of the Idea.<sup>18</sup>

The “prismatic subdivisions of the Idea” are organized into several motifs according to the print; the images slide into and out of the scene (the sheet of paper); they emerge from the main sentence and revolve around it as a constellation.

The motifs are divided into:

Primary motif: “A THROW OF DICE/WILL NEVER/ABOLISH/CHANCE”;

First secondary motif : EVEN WHEN LAUNCHED IN ETERNAL/CIRCUMSTANCES/FROM THE DEPTHS OF A SHIPWRECK (P. 3) / “THOUGH IT BE” (P. 4)/ “THE MASTER” (P. 5)/ “WERE IT TO EXIST/WERE IT TO BEGIN AND WERE IT TO CEASE/WERE IT TO BE NUMBERED/WERE TO ILLUMINE” (P. 10)/ “NOTHING/WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE/BUT THE PLACE” (P. 11) “EXCEPT/PERHAPS/A CONSTELLATION” (P. 12).

Second secondary motif : “AS IF” (P. 7) “IT WAS THE NUMBER/IT WOULD (P. 10)

Adjacent motif (P. 7) : “AS IF/AS IF”, which has several ramifications.

The two secondary motifs have in turn their own adjacent motifs. The fourth and fifth double page develop a hypothesis introduced by the term “SOIT” [*THOUGH IT BE*], “that/the Abyss [...]”. The 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> pages develop a prismatic subdivision of the first secondary motif, describing the hesitancy of the master. The 11<sup>th</sup> page develops another prismatic subdivision of the first motif, NOTHING/WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE/BUT THE PLACE: “of the memorable crisis [...]”. The 12<sup>th</sup> page develops a final prismatic subdivision of the first secondary motif “A CONSTELLATION”: “on high/PERHAPS [...]”.

The second secondary motif has its adjacent motif, or its development, on the 10<sup>th</sup> page: “Born of the stars [...] / worse / no / more nor less / but as much indifferently”.

The secondary motifs bend the main motif. Then they divide and unfold in turn. Adjacent motifs develop and bend the secondary motifs. Thus Mallarmé creates several temporal and spatial layers. The typography of the letters perfectly illustrates this division; the poem develops from larger letters towards smaller ones. The smaller letters occupy the middle of the poem, and thus are the deepest layer of the text, the fold or centre around which the poem-constellation revolves.

Each letter, with its special typography, is the distinct twinkle of words-stars. Each letter marks a distinct spatio-temporal series. The poem is then crossed by several layers, textures and intensities. Each typeface marks both a temporal and a spatial series (Mallarmé distinguishes between different phrases that occupy spaces determined within the development of the poem); one texture, as it folds and unfolds or divides the motifs; an intensity (a tone, marked by the size of the letters); and a “brightness” (a “flicker” marked by normal letters in bold or italic characters), indicating the distinct importance of motifs.

These divisions provide a depth, both *temporal* and *spatial*. They realize a temporal and spatial distension and contraction. First, the division of the motifs distend time, as the double page enlarges the space of the page. Then, in one single page, several times that were spread across the pages are then mixed, juxtaposed, and cross themselves. The main motif forms a sentence, its reading has a time, but this sentence is cut and crossed by many other motifs throughout the poem. And this operation is repeated with regards to the secondary and adjacent motifs. It is as if each motif corresponds to a spatio-temporal series, like a verse, placed on a straight



line. But from the moment the motifs spatialize and mix, the “prismatic subdivisions of the Idea” contract to fit into a smaller space, presenting them in a swoop on a single page. Thus each page (with the exception of the episode of the “solitary distraught feather” where letters are smaller, indicating the “depth” or deepest layer of the poem) is crossed by multiple time series.

There is therefore a first movement of development of motifs through division. Motifs are unfolded and elongated in several phases. There are multiple temporal series that nevertheless do not converge but diverge since secondary and adjacent motifs contradict the assertion of the title phrase, which affirms that a throw of dice will never abolish chance, while the motifs speculate on this possibility. Thus at the very moment these multiple sets, these temporal series, mix on the same page they converge producing distinct effects; this convergence contracts space-time, presenting it as divided and multiplied on the same page in a confined space. By dividing the poem into motifs, Mallarmé created multiple configurations of space-time. Time and space are divided before being prolonged or distended along the pages. On the one hand, the divisions of the motifs develop or distend time, like a camera whose frame-rate has been slowed. On the other hand, these motifs are mixed, as if the time which had been dilated had contracted again. Each turned page reproduces and resumes the same movement, as if each were the performance of the whole poem, of a poem that had turned itself around itself like a whirlpool. Through the divisions of the motifs juxtaposed on the same page, on several occasions, Mallarmé makes the poem the act of extending and simplifying the world through these multiple or rare space-time configurations.

In ‘The Book as Spiritual Instrument’, Mallarmé suggests that the role of the poet is precisely to transform literature in its objective form, the book: “The folds will perpetuate a mark, intact, inviting one to open or close the page, according to the master”.<sup>19</sup> Knowing that the poem tells the story of the sinking master who wants to vanquish chance, the question would be whether on the formal or visual level, the motifs are also ordered so as to vanquish chance. If in narrative terms chance arises from its own negation, or from the impossibility of its being denied, the poem visually performs the condition that makes possible the appearance of chance, from the unique number, which in fact is not *a* number because it is infinite. On the narrative level, this condition is fulfilled when the siren, this fictional being, dissolves the bounds of the infinite and opens the space of the poem to the appearance of the number. In formal visual terms, chance arises when literature develops and creates a space without frontiers. These operations are accomplished through the spacing of the page and the double page. In the passage from one side to another of the double page, the “siren episode” illustrates this movement of expansion of poetic space and the multiplication of time:

<i>in its Siren twist</i>	<i>long enough</i>
	<i>to slap</i>
<i>with impatient terminal scales</i>	<i>forked</i>

Chance is conquered by the master who orders the folding and unfolding of the motifs for each page, but chance is present here too insofar as it establishes the relationship between the series and allows the combination and the meeting of the motifs. To the extent that the presentation of the poem is that of its infinite power, chance does nothing but multiply this power, since any act — any event in literature — takes place thanks to a basic condition: the qualitative power of space-time. In this passage, time forks, just as it does in Borges' text, in a movement that can be compared to the twist of a siren or a page being turned. And time bifurcates *through* the double page. It is for this reason that in literature "nothing / will have taken place / but the place". Literature is the place where no chance is vain and all chance is chance defeated because it necessarily leaves open a space for the other possibilities of literature — and thereby expands the real. All chance is a hypothesis that, similarly to those in the poem, makes a story.

In these circumstances, chance is no longer the other of reason, nor is it what prevents and blocks the poetic faculty. Chance is therefore the engine of another logic — a poetic, creative logic — that transforms the poem into a constellation, an image of the Universe. The division of the motifs will create the conditions for chance to be the engine of a concept that is "in formation" and presented in its limitless power. The count or the thought moves in such a manner that it is "keeping vigil / doubting / rolling / shining and meditating". Its form is that of the poem, oscillating, rotating or even doubting, and achieving a "count", a constellation that is the infinite series of its own possibilities, its multiple subsequent envelopings: the folding and unfolding of chance.

### The Ballet of Words-Stars: To fold and to unfold

In Mallarmé's reflections on The Book in *Divagations*, as well as in the manuscript for The Book, we find several clues that will guide us in the analysis of the fold. The fold allows the book to establish relations and it is from these relations that the book can compose an Idea, which completely escapes the universal story. Folding — which is more than a contribution to the creation of the poem's rhythm and more than what distinguishes the book from the newspaper (where each column presents a distinct fact), but instead a "religious index" — contains a secret: "Folding is, in relation to the large printed sheet, a sign, quasi-religious: that does not strike so much as its compression, in thickness, offering the miniscule tomb, surely, of the soul".<sup>20</sup>

We can then identify "religious index" or the sacred with what makes the book unique, namely the ability to lock up, unfold and develop an Idea. The fold joins a recurrent metaphor in the poetry of Mallarmé, that of the "hymen", the betrothal mentioned in *Un coup de dés*, the union between the words and the present concept in *Épouser la notion*. In the book, the fold is the "religious" index of a union between

the world and the Book; a union that sees the very possibility of the transposition of the world *to* the Book.

The fold works like a veil, each turned page breaks with inviolability, with the virginity of the book, as black ink breaks with the whiteness of the page. Each turned page is an unveiling, a revelation, a discovery, an event. It is by reflecting on the fold that Mallarmé describes how literature could renew itself by transforming the format of the book:

“Can there be any end to this; and in a moment I am going to satisfy the curiosity in every detail, for the work, preferably on its own, should provide an example. Why — a burst of grandeur, of thought or of emotion, eminent, a sentence pursued in large letters, one line per page, in a graduated arrangement — wouldn’t this keep the reader in suspense throughout the whole book, appealing to this power of enthusiasm — all around, minor clusters, of secondary importance, explicatory or derivative — an array of flourishes”.<sup>21</sup>

This description, so close to how the motifs of *Un coup de dés* function, indicates that Mallarmé thought the poem to be like a book. This therefore justifies our hypothesis that the reflections on the book, as well as the manuscripts of *The Book*, can also be reflections on the *mise en page* and format of the poem.

The manuscripts of *The Book* suggest that the assembly and disassembly of the pages, the planning or the constitution of a book, correspond to an operation that can be identified as a dramatization of the poem: the passage from the idea into its realization and practical presentation, a theatre; or, as in *Igitur*, the passage from the Idea to the act — existence. Writing is therefore turning an Idea into a book, operating concretely on the format of the book or from the format of the book itself — transforming it and thus changing literature. Mallarmé speculates on the formal opportunities offered to literature by the height, thickness, and width of the book, but also on its “position” — standing or lying down — on a table or other support:

the ratio is in the thickness  
 the height indicates the number of lines 18  
 width — their fragmented length 12  
 the thickness of the jet of their addition — be from 1 to 2/3  
 or if the height is reduced to 12, everything happens between the width  
 and the thickness and the deduction of the number of lines indicates the  
 number of volumes in which one is resolved  
 top edge gilt  
 where 5 (or 6?) superposed lying volumes = the height of one standing —  
 and the ensemble of all volumes standing = the block produced by the same  
 number of vol. lying, the block.<sup>22</sup>

Mallarmé multiplies possibilities or assumptions of motifs and unfolds them in their development. This development is not historical but rather intellectual or hypothetical; therefore it relates to possibilities as such. That is, the format of the book

allows the expansion of formal possibilities, of future possibilities, possibilities of transformation and the renewal of literature.

Thus the title phrase or the predominant motif and the secondary motif develop; in turn, the leading motif and adjacent motifs develop the secondary motifs. A spiral is created, folding and unfolding itself throughout the reading. The size of the letters and typography contribute to determining the operative movement of expanding space-time. Each motif is superimposed on another, thereby creating various temporal series and diverse spaces that generate several temporal and spatial layers. It multiplies the space-time because the motifs are folded and unfolded according to the format of the book. Multiple layers are developed and unfolded throughout the reading; the movement that turns the pages is therefore the act of unfolding the motifs, which extends and distends time and space. From another place a turned page folds or refolds motifs one on each other, creating a block, the book, which is the folding of these motifs, or a temporal and spatial contraction. The book would thus contain multiple temporal and spatial series. Its own format is the “quasi religious” index of this possibility: the ability of multiplying, encrypting and making space-time series infinite at once, and at the same time contains them all, folded or virtual, in a limited space, in the space of a single book.

The book, like a fan, folds and unfolds. Thus two space-time axes are created simply by the format of the book, in its width and depth, its verticality and horizontality. The motifs are therefore the reflection of a book’s format and its disposition. If a book by itself already offers two different configurations of space-time, then the motif’s division multiplies these possibilities. It allows the division of the motifs to expand space-time as it contracts: the presentation on the page of a variety of motifs belong to distinct time series. The double page is, then, the distention of space-time:

and the book is to this reader pure block — transparent — he reads in,  
guesses it — knows in advance — showing where it is — what should be —  
or end

connection — relations.<sup>23</sup>

And again,

the back of one — that becomes front

— The front of the other — that becomes back.<sup>24</sup>

In the same way that the poem is like a spiral that unfolds, Mallarmé conceived that the pages should “turn” in a manner that results in recto becoming verso and verso, recto. The vision of the whole poem would permit the vision of multiple temporal and spatial layers, replicating once again the operation of the motifs, which in turn reproduce the folding operation. Reading, by activating this mechanism, breaks with the inviolability of the book, which for Mallarmé means taking possession of this sacred object in order to transform literature. But this transformation is

still based on that of the book. Literature is therefore literally based on the concrete elements that constitute a book, its object, product or support. And the book, since it condenses all the power of combinations of space-time, englobes the world. Thus if any book were to enclose multitudes of “combinations of the Infinite with respect to the Absolute”, there would no limits capable of determining precisely what literature is capable of.

### Conclusion

*Un coup de dés* is a constellation, “a total count in formation”. It is created from multiple temporal series that the poem crosses with other series in a space unfolded to allow precisely the most possible encounters between times. Expanding the space of encounters between multiple temporal series, the poem increases the possibilities of literature itself (this does not mean, however, that it multiplies the possibilities of reading or meanings because everything happens at a formal level). Chance will no longer be what prevents poetry from being; rather, it will be the single source of its renewal. Transforming chance into a new logic — a creation of opportunities and a source of novelty — is possible only because literature creates the conditions under which chance can make a story. These eternal conditions concern space and time, the minimal conditions of all experience, sensible givens that make all stories possible — in a book as well as in reality. Space and time are no longer units of measure. They no longer quantify movement (which is no longer a simple spatial displacement). They are the source and condition of any event. The poem may, as an aleph, contract and present in a limited space an infinite number of possible worlds because it plays on the conditions of these worlds. In these circumstances, each meeting is an event, an event triggered by chance. It is always chance that makes a temporal series cross another temporal series. It is always chance that performs its own Idea and that turns this Idea into a story by allowing it to unfold.

By altering the *mise en page* of the poem, with various temporal series, expanded and contracted across a double page, Mallarmé touched on a fundamental point that concerns the conditions of all possible experience: namely, space and time. All story and all narrative, each event or different fact, requires a determined space-time configuration as its minimal condition. If a specific time and a precise space provide the conditions for any fact, a potentially infinite space-time provides the conditions for the eternal return of movement or of change. It contains, in a limited space, that is, the pages of the poem, *all* the possibilities of stories, *all* possible forms of life, *all* the points of Universe. The poem is the reflection of the starlit sky: the “Orphic explanation of Earth”. Space-time is presented in its pure state, in its state of pure power. Any book is, in this way, a block of space-time, a summary of the endless possibilities of literature. Everything exists to produce a book, because the Book, while limited, can contain multiple worlds. Under these circumstances, where space-time relations are multiple, chance is an infinite source of novelty — and thus of stories. The Mallarméan siren neither deceives, nor seduces, nor causes

perdition. For some its act is absurd, pure madness, and yet, despite the sobriety and the seriousness of the realists, the siren, this fictional being is capable of making evaporate into mist any rock “which imposed / a limit on infinity”.

### Notes

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9. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Music and Letters' in *Divagations*, Translated by Barbara Johnston (Cambridge/Massachusetts/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 187 (*modified trans.*).
10. Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 67.
11. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, translated by Henry Weinfield (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1994), p. 122.
12. Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, *op. cit.*, pp. 285-286.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-123.
17. This hypothesis of reading can be reinforced by the affirmation to be found in the unpublished draft of the preface. In this excerpt the poet affirms that the *poem* is “a poem conceived and then executed according to habits in fact completely different from others which defy our tradition” [*conçu puis exécuté selon des habitudes en vérité tout à fait différentes d'autres qui défraient notre tradition*].
18. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
19. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

20. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 227.

22. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes, I*, Bertrand Marchal (ed.) (Paris: Gallimard 1998), p. 559.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 561.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 576.



GUILLAUME ARTOUS-BOUVET

OF A LATENT PROSE

*Two Philosophical Readings*

*Translated by Robert Boncardo and Christian R. Gelder*

Two almost contemporaneous studies perform strikingly similar gestures with respect to Mallarmé: the first is the opening part of the chapter “Mallarmé’s Method: Subtraction and Isolation”, from Alain Badiou’s *Conditions* (1992); the second is “The Foam of the Poem”, the first section of Jacques Rancière’s *Mallarmé: The Politics of the Siren* (1996).

Badiou and Rancière examine the same poem (“À la nue accablante tu”, an octosyllabic sonnet published for the first time in 1894); both appeal to different passages of “external” Mallarméan prose to account for the problem posed by this difficult text; finally, both propose a prose translation of the following fourteen verses, which we transcribe here below:<sup>1</sup>

À la nue accablante tu  
Basse de basalte et de laves  
À même les échos esclaves  
Par une trompe sans vertu  
  
Quel sépulcral naufrage (tu  
Le sais, écume, mais y baves)  
Suprême une entre les épaves  
Abolit le mât dévêtu  
  
Ou cela que furibond faute  
De quelque perdition haute  
Tout l’abîme vain éployé  
  
Dans le si blanc cheveu qui  
traîne  
Avarement aura noyé  
Le flanc enfant d’une sirène

Struck dumb at the cloud-base  
lowering basalt and lava  
on top of enslaved echoes  
by a worthless horn  
  
what sepulchral shipwreck (you  
know it, foam, but just drivel)  
supreme among flotsam  
stripped the mast bare, then  
annulled it  
  
or the one that, mad for the want  
of some fine distress  
the abyss spread uselessly  
  
in a single bright white hair  
will have drowned like a miser  
the flank of a siren child.<sup>2</sup>

To open his reading, Alain Badiou calls on “Music and Letters”, then on “The Mystery in Letters”, from which he extracts two quotations, which we reproduce here in the order they are given:

1. “It is a stilled, melodic encipherment, of the combination of the motifs that compose a logic, with our fibres”.<sup>3</sup>
2. “What pivot, in these contrasts, am I assuming for intelligibility? We need a guarantee. — Syntax —.”<sup>4</sup>

From the first quotation, Badiou infers that Mallarmé’s “logic” — that is, as he suggests, his *method* — constitutes precisely what the poem conceals; or, to be absolutely precise, Badiou infers that “the poem, as an exercise of thought, subtracts [...] the thought of this thought” (*i.e.* as we will see, its own contemplative meta-discourse). From the second, he concludes — perhaps more modestly — that from the perspective of its philosophical appropriation, the versified poem necessitates an effort of “translation’, which is only a sort of flattening-out, or punctuation, of its syntactical becoming”.<sup>5</sup>

As for Rancière, if he too quotes from “Music and Letters”, then he also appeals to the “Observation relative to the poem” that precedes the 1897 edition of *Un Coup de dés jamais n’abolira le Hasard*:

1. “The total arabesque, which ties them together, has dizzying leaps into known fears”.<sup>6</sup>
2. “Everything that occurs is foreshortened and, as it were, hypothetical; narrative is avoided”.<sup>7</sup>

Rancière draws on the first quotation to point out that the difficulty of the Mallarméan poem arises neither from the attempt to express an “indefinable state of mind” (a state thus inexpressible in a clear language) nor from its will to unfold a “polysemic game”<sup>8</sup> (that is, to open an indefinite horizon of significations, as per the law of the variability of a structure). In Mallarmé’s meta-language, the form of the poem is said to be that of an “arabesque”, which is therefore neither that of an inexpressible affect, nor that of unlimited semantic possibilities. In its rigor, the arabesque “has its own number and logic”, which determine the way in which it makes meaning: here again we find the Badiouian idea of a logic immanent to the poem, yet subtracted from immediate readability by its discontinuous and evasive figuration.

The second citation allows Rancière to characterize the way in which the complications of the arabesque subvert the ordinary regime of narrative signification: it does not give rise to a “history” (*i.e.* to the diegetic content of a narrative), but to a “virtuality of history”; to the “choice between the hypotheses” that the arabesque proposes.

If we now take up the ensemble of these propositions, we will perceive that they articulate three theses whose concatenation constitutes a system and makes pos-

sible, in both of the cases that demand our attention here, the same gesture of philosophical reading:

1. The poem is distinct from “discourse”, understood as a surface of readability.
2. This distinction is not however an exclusive opposition: we can say of the poem that it conceals a discourse immanent to its own operation. However, as we will see, this discourse is a *double* discourse.
3. What is at stake in the philosophical gesture is, therefore — at least initially — the revelation of this discourse, which will appear in broad daylight in the form of a *translated* prose, such as we find in the text from *Conditions*. Here, as Badiou indicates, “the poem is withdrawn from poetry” and “rendered in its latent prose” (*ibid.*):

What shipwreck, then, has engulfed even the mast and torn sails that were the last remnants of a ship? On the ocean we see the foam, which is the trace of this disaster, and which knows about it but says nothing. The ship’s horn, which might have alerted us, could not make itself heard; it was powerless to do so on this low sky and sombre sea, which, the colour of volcanic rock, imprisoned the possible echo of a distress call.<sup>9</sup>

Rancière puts the same dual hypotheses in a different way:

A pivot of the preserved intelligibility of the poem, the foam alone knows what it conceals. First hypothesis: it is the witness of a major drama, the trace of a ‘sepulchral shipwreck’ which swallowed up a ship to its last — the ‘supreme one’ — bit of wreckage, the mast. Or else — second hypothesis — its agitation attests only to the frolics of a fictional sea being, a siren.<sup>10</sup>

One and the same alternative is thus supposed to account for the question that the poem poses. Namely: has this shipwreck, of which the sonnet carries (interrogatively) the trace, swallowed a ship or, derisively, a siren, a creature doubly evanescent (having no factual existence, on the one hand, and, on the other, able to be “drowned” only figuratively, being a child of the water). In Bertrand Marchal’s notes to the Pléiade edition, this is put in an even simpler manner as follows: “is the foam the sign of a shipwreck, or does it betray the drowning of a siren?”<sup>11</sup>

The term *hypothesis* thus marks the possibility of a reading: not in the sense of the indefinite opening of interpretation, but in that of a liminal “configuration” of signification, which is said to hesitate between (at least) two possibilities (the ship or the siren). The hypothesis signifies the suspension of any and all theses, in the

expectation of a hermeneutical decision. This can be re-stated as follows: verse is the hypothesis of a prose, which remains latent in it.

### Prose and prose

These readings, whose essential aspects we have just reproduced, suppose that the versified poem contains (“subtracts”, in Badiouian terms) a latent and non-problematic prose, where there would be presented in clear language the alternative we have just pointed out.

Now, at the same time as they ensure the revelation of the prose latent in the poem, these philosophical commentaries assign a specific function to the two tercets, a function that goes beyond that of the simple presentation of the second alternative: namely, that of the paradoxical drowning of the siren. In effect, they suggest that this second hypothesis gives rise to a “modification”, or a meta-discursive modalization, of the first: somehow the siren would *repeat* the ship and would re-describe it as a fiction. Thus, as Badiou writes, “the introduction of the siren in fact presumes a second negation *that is not of the same type as the first*”.<sup>12</sup> This second negation, he clarifies, “*cancels out the vanishing [of the ship] itself*”.<sup>13</sup> It is therefore not a matter of two symmetrical negations (the disappearance of the ship *or* of the siren). In the second case, we are dealing with *a negation of a negation*: the hypothesis of the siren *supposes* in effect that the shipwreck (*i.e.* the negation of the ship) has not taken place — and it is precisely the “prosaic” linearity of the poem that gives the second negation this status, a negation which intervenes *after* the first. To formulate this in another way, this signifies that *the second negation bears upon the first*, or that the evanescence of the siren re-describes the sinking of the ship. Rancière phrases this in terms of an “opposition between a grand drama [the shipwreck] and a light pantomime”<sup>14</sup>: the mention of the siren would mark, properly speaking, the reflexive moment of the poem where its discourse declares itself as fiction.

At this point we find ourselves confronted by two interpretations that do not precisely overlap: in the first, the general meaning of the poem is the alternative. The hypothesis signifies here that the reader has a choice between two possibilities, that of the destruction of a ship, on the one hand, or that of the disappearance of a siren, on the other. In the second interpretation, the dimension of the alternative is this time complicated by the idea that the second possibility (the siren) *itself* functions as a commentary on the first, since it intervenes following a strictly consecutive order.

Perhaps, it might be said, these are two different levels of reading: the interpretation that recognizes in the tercets a meta-discourse would be less literal, and, as a consequence, more adventurous than the interpretation that is content to postulate the existence of a global alternative structure. But in this case, it seems to us, too little attention is paid to the syntax, and notably to the following two crucial articulations: the first, in the opening of the text, places the entirety of the sonnet

under the sign of a direct interrogation (“*Quel sépulchral naufrage*”), which the (relative) absence of punctuation in effect conceals (there are no quotation marks, nor are there any question marks). Let us remark in passing that this is an interrogation that does not bear upon the existence of the event, but which, in conformity with the first meaning of the interrogative adjective (which issues directly from the Latin *qualis*), concerns its quality or “nature”. *There is definitely, therefore, a shipwreck*, of which the poem interrogates the particular essence via a question directly addressed to the reader.

The second, in the first verse of the tercets, gives to the word *cela* a decisive ambiguity: *cela*, in effect, can be understood as the past participle of the verb *celer* (“to conceal”), which allows us to read the poem in the way Bertrand Marchal does in *Lecture de Mallarmé* according to the following paraphrase: “What sepulchral shipwreck [...] abolishes the stripped mast or concealed [*cela* = *cacha*] that the abyss drowned the childlike flank of a siren?”<sup>15</sup> But *cela* can also be read as a demonstrative pronoun that in a cataphoric manner refers to the contents of the two tercets; from this would follow a construction of the following type: “What shipwreck abolishes the mast or the fact [*le fait*] that the abyss drowned the childlike flank of a siren?” From this perspective, the shipwreck abolishes *the very fact* that a siren was drowned: as we can see, this does not change the meaning that is to be given to the poem. Yet something strange remains: that the “shipwreck” remains the agent of the abolition *in both cases*, that is, even if there had been no shipwreck of the ship but only the playful disappearance of a siren. This is allowed by the expanded meaning of “destruction, complete ruin”, but on the contrary is prohibited by the strict meaning of “the loss of a ship” [*perte d’une navire*] (from the Latin *naufragium*, *navis*, “vessel” [*nef*] and *frangere*, “to break” [*briser*]).

It is thus that this hesitation, which confers a very particular importance on the term *cela*, opens — if we stick with the demonstrative — onto a slightly different reading of the text, which would henceforth be organized into two successive questions: “what shipwreck abolishes the mast?”, on the one hand; “or [is it only that] the abyss drowned a siren?”, on the other. From this perspective, no doubt more difficult to sustain from the point of view of the manifest syntax, two questions appear to be linked, and the second no longer depends on the first. This is the reading proposed by Luigi de Nardis, who sees the first verse as a dislocated present perfect [*passé composé disloqué*] with an inversion of the subject: “the crushing cloud has hushed what sepulchral shipwreck abolishes the mast or that the abyss will have drowned a siren”<sup>16</sup> [*la nue accablante a tu quel sépulchral naufrage abolit le mât ou cela que l’abîme aura noyé une sirène*].

These two sites of semantic intensity allow us to clarify what we are seeking to express when we describe Mallarmé as a “syntactic” poet [*poète syntaxier*]: here, syntax — as is demonstrated by the quasi-dialogic articulation introduced by the syntagm *cela que*, as well as by the interrogative dimension suggested by the adjective *quel* — cannot be reduced to an articulatory mechanism that links the different elements of the text to each other, according to a complex of relations, or, to use an

expression from Mallarmé himself, a “reciprocity of flames”.<sup>17</sup> Syntax also refers to the sphere of enunciation, that is, to the way in which a discourse relates to its “origin”, which is to say to the place of its production, as well as to its end, that is, to the place of its reception. But enunciation, in turn, does not only concern the relations between the text and its outside: it also determines the possibility of an internal dialogism that is manifested here, spectacularly, in the articulation “ou cela que”, opening a second path [*voie*] or voice [*voix*] in the poem — to which can be added the fact that the question itself (“quel naufrage”) can be grasped as an instance of interlocution internal to the sonnet. It is the lack of punctuation that tends here to conceal what could be an instance of a discrete polyphony, structuring the poem at its foundation. Only the parenthesis makes a phenomenon of address visible: the apostrophe to the foam, custodian trace of a knowledge (“tu le sais, écume”) that is withheld.

Thus there is prose and prose, to borrow the subtitle of *L'Hexaméron* (1990): literal and linear prose — “flattened out” prose, as Badiou very quite rightly says, prose which is content to punctuate the dual hypotheses — must not be confused with the dialogical prose according to which the second part of the sonnet “glosses” the first. The term *prose* thus appears as tributary to two distinct significations: prose is at once the *meaning* of the poem concealed by verse (what the poem says); but prose is also the reflexive *consciousness* of the poem, suggested this time by the dialogical articulation between quatrains and tercets (what the poem says of its saying).

### Verse and Prose

Everything therefore happens as if the Mallarméan poem, thanks to its reflexive or critical virtues, had managed to interiorize its own “prose”, that is its own meta-discourse. This interiorization makes a reconstruction founded on its linear “meaning” insufficient, but requires us to grasp in the text the elements of an internal meta-discourse, which itself depends on an irreducible enunciative *mise en scene* (i.e. here, of a dialogism). Hence the methodical hesitation we have identified in these two great readers, Badiou and Rancière: if they constitute the prose as the “idea of verse” (Philippe Beck) — that is, as that which philosophy, addressing itself to the poem, will be able to seize for itself — in reality they indistinguish *two*, indeed *three* *proses*. The “literal” [*littérale*] prose, or the *said* [*le dit*] of the poem; the exterior prose, deported to prefaces or diverse divagations (whose precise relation to verse remains, moreover, to be clarified); the latent prose, that is, the prose *internal* to the poem, but in the special sense of the dialogic configuration we have just evoked.

*Prose*, dedicated to des Esseintes (1885), a long octosyllabic poem of which we here reproduce the first seven stanzas, testifies in a spectacular manner to the ambivalence of what Mallarmé names *prose*:

Hyperbole ! de ma mémoire Triomphalement ne sais-tu Te lever, aujourd'hui grimoire Dans un livre de fer vêtu :	Hyperbole! can you not rise In triumph from my memory, A modern magic spell devise As from an ironbound grammar:
Car j'installe, par la science, L'hymne des cœurs spirituels En l'œuvre de ma patience, Atlas, herbiers et rituels.	For I inaugurate through science The hymn of all hearts spiritual In the labor of my patience, Atlas, herbal, ritual.
Nous promenions notre visage (Nous fûmes deux, je le maintiens) Sur maints charmes de paysage, Ô sœur, y comparant les tiens.	Our wandering eyes took in the forms (For we were two, as I divine) Of the landscape's myriad charms, O sister, likening them to thine.
L'ère d'autorité se trouble Lorsque, sans nul motif, on dit De ce midi que notre double Inconscience approfondit	The age of certainty wears thin When, without reason, it is stated Of this southland which our twin Unconsciousness has penetrated.
Que, sol des cent iris, son site Ils savent s'il a bien été, Ne porte pas de nom que cite L'or de la trompette d'Été. Oui, dans une île que l'air charge De vue et non de visions Toute fleur s'étalait plus large Sans que nous en devisions.	That, soil of an iris bed, its site, They know if it was really born: It bears no name that one could cite, Sounded by Summer's golden horn. Yes, on an isle the air had charged Not with visions but with sight, The flowers displayed themselves enlarged Without our ever mentioning it.
Telles, immenses, que chacune Ordinairement se para D'un lucide contour, lacune, Qui des jardins la sépara.	And so immense, each burgeoning shape, It was habitually adorned In such a clear outline that a gap Between it and the gardens formed. <sup>18</sup>

This poem can be called a "prose" poem in two respects: first, formally, since its syntax permits an almost linear prosaic reconstruction. This is the case in the first two stanzas, which we can reproduce as such:

**Hyperbole de ma mémoire**, [aujourd'hui grimoire], **ne sais-tu te lever** [triomphalement] **dans un livre de fer vêtu ? Car j'installe, par la science, l'hymne des cœurs spirituels** [en l'œuvre de ma patience : atlas, herbiers et rituels].

[**Hyperbole from my memory**, [today a grammar], **can you not rise** [in triumph] **from an ironbound book? For I inaugurate through science the hymn of all hearts spiritual** [in the labor of my patience: atlas, herbal, ritual]



And in the fourth and fifth stanzas:

L'ère d'autorité se trouble lorsque, [sans nul motif], on dit de ce midi [que notre double inconscience approfondit] que, [sol des cent iris], son site [(ils savent s'il a bien été)] ne porte pas de nom [que cite l'or de la trompette d'Été].

The age of certainty wears thin, [without reason], it is stated of this south-land [which our twin unconsciousness has penetrated] that, [soil of a hundred irises], its site [(they know if it was really born)] bears no name [sounded by Summer's golden horn].

Next, it is a "prose" poem since this poem first of all expresses its own operation: as proof of this, take the initial invocation, the mention of the "installation" of a hymn, the parenthetical incision of the tenth verse referring to the moment of enunciation. Other proofs are possible. It is indeed a matter, as Bertrand Marchal points out, of the expression of poetry's "new duty", that of the "naturalist" (in a specific sense here) transposition of a poetically-grasped real. Notably, this is the meaning of the sixth stanza: "Oui dans une île que l'air charge / De vue et non de visions / Toute fleur s'étalait plus large / Sans que nous en devisions". But, as can be easily remarked, the poem cannot "say what it does" (*i.e.* constitute itself as its own meta-discourse) except on the condition that it unfolds a dialogical articulation of which there are, here, numerous examples — examples that, moreover, overlap quite extensively with those we have just cited under the heading of a poetic reflexivity. Let us give three such examples: the address to the memorial hyperbole, which presupposes the second person pronoun ("Hyperbole ! de ma mémoire / Triomphalement ne sais-tu / Te lever"); the enunciative gathering of the *nous*, to which we will have to return ("Nous promenions notre visage / ("Nous fûmes deux, je le maintiens")); finally, this suspended (and as if self-predicative) affirmation, which opens with the *Oui* and seeks its closure in the repeated mention of a first person plural ("Oui, dans une île que l'air charge / De vue et non de visions / Toute fleur s'étalait plus large / Sans que nous en devisions").

"Prose" thus supposes a *tu* (placed here, as in the 1894 sonnet, at the end of the verse), which, in some sense, finds itself concealed by the hypothesis of a *nous* that itself is nowhere to be found. The same goes for these two crucial verses: "Nous promenions notre visage / (Nous fûmes deux, je le maintiens)". As the parenthesis suffices to indicate, the symmetry is misleading: the second *nous* does not repeat the first in an anaphoric linearity: this second occurrence of the pronoun, coloured as it is by a parenthetical shading, opens onto the abyss of a desired dialogism. This is because the assertoric dimension of the sequence, in its very redoubling ("je le maintiens" being read as a modalizing and, consequently, a reflexive incision), must be taken for what it is: the index of an uncertainty touching upon the very thing that is the object of the narrative (the existence or, at least, the possibility of a couple). In this regard, it is not insignificant that the first verse contents itself with an agreement in the singular for the term *visage*, which, at first glance, can

lead us to believe that the *nous* is a *nous* of modesty or majesty applying to a single individual. Thus, the diction of this *nous* is only accomplished here, paradoxically, through the absence of a “tu”, and through the reserve of a parenthesis that subtracts, in some sense, the “couple” from the very body of the poem (according to the clause of the *Faune*: “Couple, adieu ; je vais voir l’ombre que tu devins”).

In both cases, the cut of verse confirms, in a striking manner, the importance of this enunciative marking. In the 1894 sonnet, the (necessary) rhyme in *tu* determines the following series: *tu* (past participle) / *sans vertu* / *tu* (personal pronoun, but which, through the play of rhyme, implies a pure repetition of the first *tu* through equivocation, whereby the shipwreck in turn would appear as *hushed* [*tu*]) / *dévêtu*. In the 1885 “Prose”, *vêtu* is reprised by *tu* (personal pronoun). Thus in both cases, the second person personal pronoun is summoned, in its single syllable, to guarantee the rhythmic sequence.

But this summoning — which, by its dialogical virtue, *opens up* the poem to a secondary prose — occurs only through the subversion of the knowledge that is combined there: indeed, in each occurrence, the *tu* is the subject of the verb *savoir* (“tu / Le sais”; “ne sais-tu / Te lever”); but in the first, a radical enjambment diffracts the two elements of the verbal group; in the second, the indicative is strongly modalized through the interrogative turn that inverts the subject (and authorizes the rhyme), and the infinitive object complement that gives the verbal group its meaning is transported to the next verse. We will therefore say that, if verse does indeed interiorize, through its dialogic disposition, a reflexive prose (or, put differently, the commencement of an internal dialogue, in which the poem interrogates itself as to its own operation), it diffracts its intelligibility by the work undertaken by its formal rules. Reflexive prose thus finds itself at once assigned to its place *and* dislocated by the strict cut of verse, such that it remains incomplete and discontinuous.

Only an “external” prose, then, can come to redeem, through the unfolding of hypotheses implied by the text, the interruption of verse. And if there is indeed a resistance of poetry to prose, it is not, it seems to us, through the apophatic subtraction of meaning and of its sayability, but through the articulatory subreption that, in the poem itself, relates the discourse to a meta-discourse immanent to its operation.

#### Notes

1. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes* I (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1998) henceforth OC I, p. 44.
2. Stéphane Mallarmé, *The Poems in Verse. Translated by Peter Manson* (Ohio: Miami University Press, 2011), p. 193.
3. Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘Music and Letters’, in *Divagations*. Translated by Barbara Johnson (Cambridge/Massachusetts/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 188.

4. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'About the Book', in *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
5. For all this, see Alain Badiou, *Conditions* (London/New York: Continuum, 2008), p. 49 (Translation modified).
6. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Music and Letters', in *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 188. This sequence is separated by only a single phrase from the quotation proposed by Badiou.
7. Stéphane Mallarmé, *A Throw of Dice*, Trans. Weinfield, *Collected Poems* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1994), p. 122.
8. For all this, see Jacques Rancière, *Mallarmé: The Politics of the Siren* (London/New York: Continuum, 2011), p. 2.
9. Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
10. Jacques Rancière, *Mallarmé: The Politics of the Siren*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
11. *OC I*, p. 1205.
12. Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
13. *Ibid.* (Translation modified).
14. Jacques Rancière, *Mallarmé: The Politics of the Siren*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
15. Bertrand Marchal, *Lecture de Mallarmé*, (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1985), p. 251.
16. See *ibid.*, p. 252.
17. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'The Mystery in Letters', in *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 235.
18. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Prose, *for des Esseintes*', Trans. Weinfield, *Collected Poems*, *op. cit.*, pp. 46-47.

WILL GREENSHIELDS

RELATIONALITY, MATERIALITY AND THE REAL  
IN LACAN'S BORROMEAN KNOT

*Everyone knows the famous aphorism that closes [Wittgenstein's] Tractatus logico-philosophicus: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." If the real is unsymbolizable, it is ultimately that about which one cannot speak; therefore, one must be silent. But remaining silent always implies as well, and this is still Wittgenstein's perspective, the duty to indicate, to point. You must show that about which you must remain silent. I imagine the late Lacan as someone who continues to point his finger at an unsayable real. Except that, in the end, we can no longer know what this gesture indicates and truly implies.*

*Alain Badiou<sup>1</sup>*

*What is important is the Borromean knot and that for the sake of which we accede to the real it represents to us.*

*Jacques Lacan<sup>2</sup>*

While numerous invaluable studies detailing the place and effect of the Lacanian real in diverse domains such as ethics, politics and art have appeared in recent years, relatively little attention has been paid to what Lacan proudly referred to as his "geometry of the real".<sup>3</sup> In the rare instances that the principle figure of this geometry — the Borromean knot — is discussed it is usually treated in one of two ways. In the first approach, it is banalised by being deployed as little more than a glorified Venn diagram that efficiently summarises the theoretical developments that emerged in Lacan's seminars of the 1970s. In doing so, one skips a step; exploring the theoretical developments contemporary with the appearance of the knot in Lacan's work without asking why the knot was, for Lacan, the *only* viable support for such developments in the first place. In the second approach, any effort to understand the knot is foregone when preference is given to what Luke Thurston has referred to as its "legendary penumbra" — that is, the "predominant image of the knot as the em-

blem of a *terra incognita* of dark, abstruse speculation, the incomprehensible grand finale of Lacanian theory".<sup>4</sup>

If we accept Badiou's observation, which serves as our first epigraph, how can we overcome a critical paralysis that risks equating this final "gesture" with a vague mysticism without doing the very same thing that makes baffled paralysis look like the only suitable attitude — without, in other words, transforming the act of showing the real into an articulation of knowledge? If Lacan spent a considerable portion of his final seminars pointing at the knot as a "writing [that] supports a real",<sup>5</sup> how best can "we accede to the real it represents to us"? Why is the knot the best possible support of the real and how might an appreciation of the real's integral role in a nodal structure help us to better understand this most vital and elusive of Lacan's concepts? In what follows I hope to demonstrate that, far from being either an inscrutable enigma or a handy map of Lacanian jargon, the knot is instead a topology established and particularised by a relatively simple spatio-temporal logic and that its chief purpose is the formalisation of the structural paradoxes that qualitatively define the psychoanalytic subject. Studying this topological architecture also enables one to better understand the relation between Lacan's three categories (the real, the symbolic and the imaginary). This is not a structure in which the symbolic dominates, producing a linguistic idealism (which Badiou refers to as "idealinguistry"<sup>6</sup>), but one in which the categories acquire a materiality by virtue of the absence of hierarchy in their Borromean relation.

### Giving a Bit of Real

The Borromean knot represented the final phase of Lacan's effort to produce a psychoanalytic topology — a project that explicitly began in 1953 with his first reference to a torus or "ring" which was accompanied by the provocative contention that such a reference constituted "*more than a metaphor* — it manifests a *structure*".<sup>7</sup> A non-metaphorical writing of the structure of the psychoanalytic subject: the appeal of topology hinged on the possibility of this being realised. It would take almost two decades for three tori to be organised into a Borromean knot — the fundamental property of which is that since no two of its rings are directly linked it requires a third to hang together (see Fig. 1).

Now, while this might be a diverting *amusette* which we might derive a little pleasure from drawing or constructing for ourselves, it hardly seems sufficiently substantial to support the years of obsessive study and explication devoted to it by Lacan and a small band of mathematicians. And as for the suggestion that this figure is not metaphorical or that it has an important contribution to make to psychoanalysis — well, this is surely the height of ridiculousness.

For many of Lacan's readers, his use of topology is simply a step too far. David Metzger perfectly captures the pragmatic mindset of those who "suggest that we can do without some such thing as a Lacanian topology. 'Remember the phallus?'

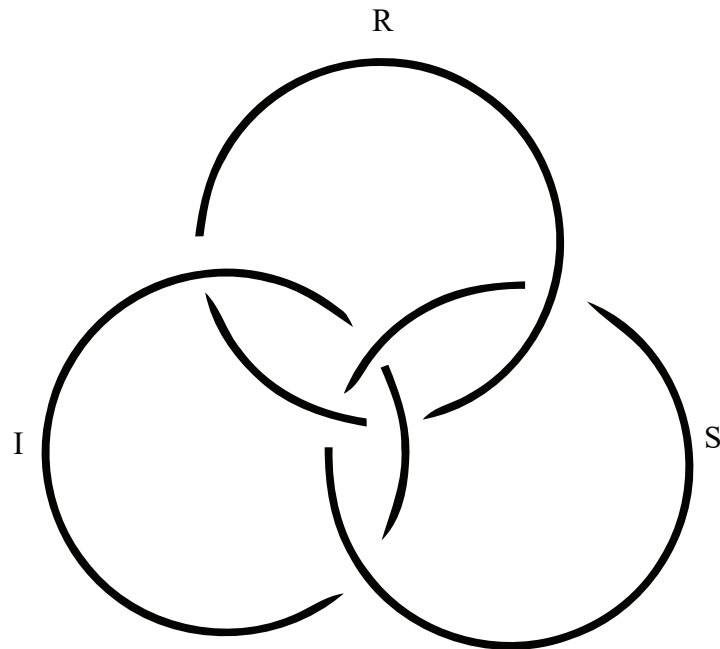


Fig. 1

they tell us. ‘We had a difficult enough time explaining that away. Why bother talking about something that is sure to discourage people from reading (about) this important thinker?’”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, why bother? It is a reputation from which Lacan’s topologisation of psychoanalysis has never quite managed to extricate itself: the impression of utter superfluity, an unnecessary extra layer of self-indulgent difficulty that has come to represent the worst excesses of Lacanian obscurity. And yet, there is, throughout Lacan’s work, the frequently asserted declaration of topology’s non-trivial and self-evident relevance to psychoanalysis — its supreme precision cutting through the obscurantism that language, no matter how concise, invariably generates — which critics find as, if not more, off-putting. How could it possibly be appropriate to point to a tangle of rings, as Lacan did, and say not only that this peculiar weave is the most suitable support of the psychoanalytic subject but — further scandalising those who expect a little more post-structuralism inspired hand-wringing when it comes to the stability of representation from their continental thinkers — also straightforwardly assert that such a depiction is not a metaphor, image or model?<sup>9</sup>

A significant part of the responsibility for the Borromean knot’s popular reputation as a wholly regrettable bit of psychoanalytic esoterica lies with Élisabeth Roudinesco’s characterisation of Lacan’s fascination with the knot as a “search for the absolute”<sup>10</sup> — a reference to Balzac’s *La Recherche de l’Absolu*, the tale of a man

(Balthazar Claës) who haemorrhages a substantial fortune and spurns his family during the course of an obsessive hunt for the alchemical absolute. If, however, this particularly wretched chapter in Balzac's vast *Comédie humaine* testifies to the folly of utterly committing oneself to a realisation of the desire for absolute knowledge or knowledge of the absolute, Lacan was keen to impress upon his readers and listeners — who had either reverentially, or, in the case of Derrida, critically, regarded him as the “purveyor of truth”<sup>11</sup> — that his nodal writings would not be a curative panacea that provided all the answers: “The desire for knowledge [*connaître*] encounters obstacles. As an embodiment of this obstacle I have invented the knot”.<sup>12</sup> The function of the knot is clearly established here: far from amounting to a grand synthesis and completion of psychoanalytic theory, it is instead deployed as the non-signifying support of that which cannot be theorised.

In an illuminating dialogue with Badiou, Roudinesco suggests an alternative literary doppelgänger for Lacan: *Oedipus at Colonus*.<sup>13</sup> Towards the end of his life Lacan was indeed enacting an extraordinary dissolution; disbanding his school and the theoretical foundations of his thought as his physical incapacity grew increasingly pronounced and the periods of muteness became more prolonged. If the union of these two literary figures seems incongruous — Claës suffers because he does not know enough, Oedipus suffers because he knows too much — and yet oddly appropriate, this says much about the difficulty of assessing the significance of this last phase of Lacan's thought in terms of its contribution to knowledge. According to Roudinesco, the act of dissolution, for all its earnest authenticity, constituted not just a dereliction of theory but also a dereliction of duty which left the future of Lacanian psychoanalysis in a perilous state: “Unlike Freud, Lacan leaves nothing as a legacy. He undoes what he built by knitting his knots and his pieces of string. And this is why Lacan's heritage is in danger, more so than that of Freud: the psychoanalysts of the first Lacanian circle received nothing as a legacy, they received the dissolution”.<sup>14</sup> However, it's worth remembering that Freud's “heritage” was endangered precisely because he had left a legacy; his successors inherited a direction, an institution and a body of knowledge that they set about embalming. We should ask why it was that Lacan referred to the knot in order to escape Freud's fate.

While Roudinesco's effort to mythologise Lacan, to see in him the shuffling gait of an aged Oedipus or the mad ambition of a deranged alchemist, to say that we have seen his like before, — to declare, as Freud did, that we can understand *Hamlet* and, indeed, every other troubled soul, because we have seen *Oedipus Rex* — is certainly a start, her reluctance to regard his preoccupation with the knot as anything other than a case study in melancholic senility or a vainglorious search for the absolute, threatens to reverse the passage “from myth to structure”<sup>15</sup> to which Lacan devoted himself.

Lacan's late conceptual and institutional dissolution was not a purely destructive act; there was a productive and hopeful aspect to it: “my only excuse for telling you something today is that it is going to be *meaningful*. In exchange for this I will not achieve what I want. What I want is to *give you a bit of real*”.<sup>16</sup> This *gift* would



surpass the Freudian *legacy* because “Freud himself produced only things that were *meaningful*”.<sup>17</sup> It was with the knot that Lacan would achieve his aim of giving “a bit of real.”

If the knot of Lacan's dissolved school (the *École freudienne de Paris*) had been unravelled,<sup>18</sup> it is apt, then, that the knot should appear again, retied, in Lacan's ‘Overture to the First International Encounter of the Freudian Field’. At this first annual gathering of the newly minted *École de la Cause freudienne* at Caracas in 1980, Lacan helpfully offered to summarise “the debate I've been keeping up with Freud”:

My three are not the same as [Freud's id, superego and ego]. My three are the real, the symbolic and the imaginary. I came to situate them by means of a topology... The Borromean knot highlights *the function of the at-least-three*. This is the one that ties in the other two that are not tied to each other.

I gave [*donné*] that to my pupils. I gave it them so that they might find their way in their practice. But do they find their way any better than with the topography Freud *passed down* [*léguée*] to his?<sup>19</sup>

Bearing in mind Lacan's expressed desire “to *give* [*donner*] you a bit of real”, it is worth taking careful note of his language here. Freud's knowledge (of which the static topography of the id, superego and ego is a pertinent representative) is bequeathed (“*léguée*”) as part of a scriptural will or legacy guaranteed by the Other. A gift is something quite different; it has no legal or institutional foundation. The knot itself reflects this absence of law and decree: put simply, it is the structural result of the fact that, for the subject-as-knot, the Other is incomplete. It is in taking this lack in the Other as his primary reference point that the analyst finds his way in his practice. The most obvious consequence of Lacan's presentation of the structural relation between *his* “three” (the real, the symbolic and the imaginary, or, as they will be known for the remainder of this paper, R, S and I) as equivalent to the structural relation between a Borromean knot's three rings is that there is no hierarchical order as there was in Lacan's earlier work where S (the Other), through the Name-of-the-Father's *legacy*, dominated R and I (“idealinguistry”). For the constitution of the knot, each ring fulfils a strictly equivalent structural function — the “function of the at-least-three.” There can be no one or two-ringed knot, no linear count from an original one: “In the sequence of whole numbers, 1 and 2 are detached — something [i.e. R, S, I and the relation between them] begins at three”.<sup>20</sup>

As figure 2 makes clear, no one ring acts as the enveloping, final frame containing the other rings just as no one ring has the privilege of being the first term. In the knot, there are no closed sets or contained elements (see Fig. 2).

This absence of order, as the consequence of the “function of at-least-three” that is inherent to the Borromean knot's structure, is in marked distinction to Freud's second topography, the vertical organisation of which Lacan held partly responsible for ego psychology.

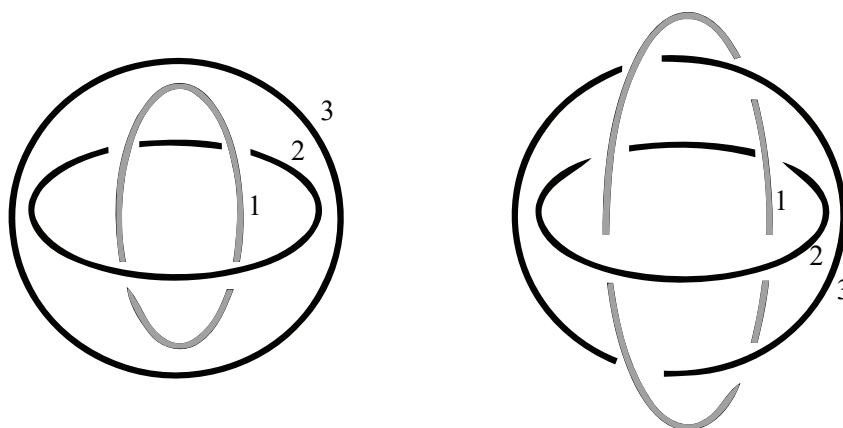


Fig. 2

Trapped at the bottom, “the *Es* [Id] is not sufficiently emphasized by the way it is presented”.<sup>21</sup> This topography’s influence in the development of ego psychology was partly due to interpretative error but this potential for error is, Lacan argues, endemic to topographical representation itself: “it is the exemplary fate of diagrams — insofar as they are geometrical, that is — to lend themselves to intuitions based on ego-like errors”.<sup>22</sup> After this implicit hierarchy the second “ego-like error” encouraged by the topography is the naive intuition of a clearly defined interior and exterior. Freud has created a “geometry of the sack” that “is supposed to *contain...* the drives”<sup>23</sup> and is kitted out with the ego’s “acoust” or “cap of hearing” which Lacan, in reference to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century inventor of sound recording devices, sardonically labels “a black box of some contraption worthy of [Étienne-Jules] Marey”.<sup>24</sup> Rather than being contained by the body, the drives are linked to bodily orifices and perhaps nowhere is the continuity between the body’s interiority and exteriority more disquietingly asserted than in the spoken and speaking being’s experience of a voice, as the object of the oral drive, that both invades the holed body from the outside and escapes from the inside. If Lacan’s pupils are to “find their way in their practice” “better” with the topology given to them “than with the topography Freud passed down to his”, it will be precisely because it challenges the misguided egoic assumptions to which Freud’s topography is so amenable. Lacan’s “three” and Freud’s “three” are distinguished not just by terminology and concept but by *place*. We will examine the structural importance of the knot’s holes later — for now, let us see how a “bit of real”, as that which the Other cannot assimilate, is written by the knot as a result of the “function of the at-least-three.”

If the Borromean knot is a “writing [that] supports a real”, how does it do so beyond our simply appending the letter ‘R’ to one of its rings? How is it that R can be beyond S and I without being an ineffable absolute or *ding an sich* residing outside

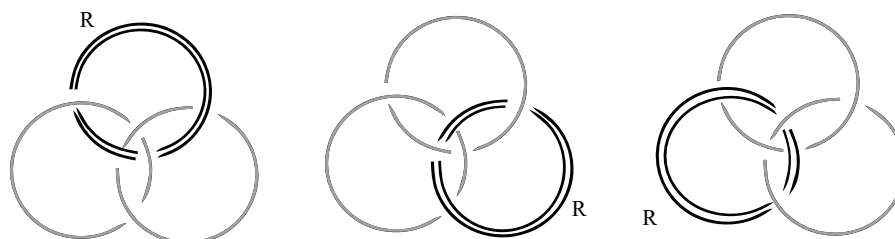


Fig. 3

subjective structure? The knot does not resolve this structural paradox but instead embodies it, showing us how, if “the real is not, as such, linked to anything”<sup>25</sup> in terms of a symbolic chain, it is nonetheless knotted. In this peculiar structure, each ring is both separate and bound (see Fig. 3).

Rather than existing as an assimilated part of imaginary-symbolic reality, the real, to use the Heideggerian term Lacan favoured, *ex-sists* as an atheistic Beyond. It is at once a non-recuperable illegibility and an effective presence, both immanent and inaccessible: while the subject cannot grasp it, he cannot straightforwardly expel it either. While the ring of R *ex-sists* to the others (it is, of course, legitimate to attribute the function of *ex-sistence* to any of the rings), it is also necessary for the knot to hold together and be whole — to, in other words, *consist* (which is the function of I). It is, in other words, both integral and impossible to integrate. Throughout *Seminar XXII* and *Seminar XXIII*, Lacan presents R, S, and I not in terms of letters secondarily affixed to the knot but as structural qualities that, together, *are the knot*. The knot does not serve as an analogical map for R, S and I, but instead *is* R, S and I. Since each of the rings *ex-sist* to the others, each ring is real and, furthermore, since it is *impossible*, thanks to this structuration of parts, that the knot’s minimum be anything other than it is, “[t]he real that is at stake, is the knot in its entirety.”<sup>26</sup> Since each of the knot’s elements are circles that comprise a consistent unity that hold together through a consistency imparted by the other two circles in a collective structural accord, both its parts and whole are also imaginary. Since each of the rings organise a hole and it is on the basis of this incompleteness that the knot is formed, the function of the symbolic (which we will focus on shortly) is equally present and effective.

As *ex-sistence*, R can only be experienced in relation to S and I. For example, if the third ring (we can ascribe to each ring the position of ‘third’) *ex-sists* to the two others by not being directly linked, it is nevertheless necessary for the knot’s consistence, which, in turn, is what grants the third ring its *ex-sistence* (as opposed to the virtual non-existence of an unattached theological real that floats off into the ether). This amounts to what Lacan called “a new imaginary”<sup>27</sup> — a consist-

ency that, rather than being founded (or feigned) through the jettisoning of the ex-sistence that is the real and the hole that is introduced by the symbolic (the ideal of the ego psychologist's "conflict-free sphere"<sup>28</sup>) is instead *derived from* ex-sistence and the hole.

What "begins at three" is not just the concept of R but the *place* of R. It is only the presence of the two other rings that gives R its ex-sistence as an immanent impasse in representation, an anomaly exposing a model's incompleteness (more on this below), rather than an always absent thing-in-itself: "The mode in which one round of thread ex-sists to another is that with which I displace the by itself unsolvable question of objectivity. Objectivity thus displaced seems less silly than the noumena".<sup>29</sup> Two positions are argued against here:

1. The scientific position which, with its systematising models, "has recourse... to the imaginary to give oneself an idea of the real".<sup>30</sup> In scientific reasoning a model functions by allowing one "to *foresee* what would be the results... of the functioning of the real".<sup>31</sup> Science is concerned with identifying laws or what Lacan referred to as "knowledge in the real": the scientific real seems to know what it must do; it *works*. Forces and matter obey certain laws. The psychoanalytic real is precisely that which *does not work*; this "real... must be said to be without law".<sup>32</sup> Its emergence is unforeseeable and its functioning is inexplicable. The knot, in which the real *ex-sists* as that which is both inassimilable and ineradicable, will not serve as a generalisable model since such "models", insofar as they are only said to work when anomalies have been eradicated (when, in other words, there are no results of a repeatable experiment that cannot be explained or predicted by the model), "recur to the pure imaginary. Knots recur to the real".<sup>33</sup> Lacan poses his topological entanglement as antithetical to the spherical envelopment of R by I: "What I put forward in my Borromean knot of the imaginary, the symbolic and the real, led me to distinguish these three spheres and then, afterwards, re-knot them"<sup>34</sup> in a fashion that makes them both distinct (as ex-sistence, consistence and the hole) and structurally interdependent. The necessary condition of this knotting — which poses the categories as neither completely separate (the pure real or *ding an sich*) nor reducible to the other ("idea of the real") — is that each of the "three spheres" are *holed* (as rings). Each ring is indirectly knotted to the other *by virtue of this incompleteness*. Lacan subtly shifts from a negation of a connection to a positivised negative: while it is true to say that the real "the real is not, as such, linked to anything [*c'est de ne se relier à rien*]," this does not mean that it is simply separate; it is instead quite literally "linked to nothing [*c'est de se relier à rien*]"<sup>35</sup> — the nothing that each ring contours. The rings are not three Ones, three self-sufficient and stable spheres, but three rings ex-sisting and consisting as One *that derive their specificity of function and effect*

from an interaction with the other categories at the point at which they are incomplete: "The imagination of consistence immediately extends to the impossibility of rupture, but it is in this that rupture can always be the real... as impossible, which is no less compatible with the said imagination, and even constitutes it".<sup>36</sup> In the knot, ex-sistence and consistence are not simply separate or dichotomous but are instead structurally interdependent because each are experienced by the subject in their relation to the other (i.e. a rupture ruins consistency, a false consistency masks ruptures).

2. The philosophical (or, more precisely, Kantian) position according to which we can have no "idea of the real" — that, once distinguished (as phenomena and noumena), the "spheres" cannot be re-knotted. What the Borromean knot shows, not as a representation or model but in its logic of *topos* (the qualitative and non-metaphorical structure that makes it 'Borromean'), is that if we cannot have a totalising "idea of the real" this does not mean that the real is ineffable but rather that *it exists as this failure*. The noumenal real stands alone as a spherical totality, tautologically defined by itself. The psychoanalytic 'real is *not all*':<sup>37</sup> it is as holed and in 'bits' that it interacts with the other rings. "Language... make[s] a *hole* in the real"<sup>38</sup> by introducing difference and lack: the logic of the differential signifier means that no signifying system can be complete. S cuts a hole in R, knotting itself with R not by means of a direct concatenation but by striking it into *ex-sistence*. This is not to suggest that R pre-exists S but that R only comes to ex-sist when S is introduced. As Lacan puts it in *Seminar XI*, "the cry does not stand out against a background of silence, but on the contrary makes the silence emerge as silence".<sup>39</sup> Once the cry (S) and silence (R) have simultaneously emerged, neither can exist purely and independent. In the words of Samuel Beckett, what results is a mutual incompetence, "the inability to speak, the inability to be silent".<sup>40</sup> There is, in both S and R, a hole — the inability to speak (to produce univocal and completed meaning) and the inability to be silent (to access a virginal, lackless, pre-discursive real) — that is the structural condition of their knotting. The real that discourse affects is not made non-existent by representation (this is not a matter of the letter straightforwardly killing the spirit) and nor is it brought into existence by representation (the revealed truth of Biblical testimony). It is as a consequence of the signifier that something does not work in R and *it is as that which does not work that R emerges*: "what Freud discovered about what he called sexuality makes a hole in the real".<sup>41</sup> There is no sexual relationship, no faultless union between the subject and a totalised Other, because desire cannot be immaculately communicated and, in any case, the desired ontological unity and wholeness is, for the subject (as that which one signifier represents

for another signifier), impossible. It is as this malfunctioning that R is encountered by S and I and it is to the hole that S creates that it is *indirectly* knotted.

The psychoanalyst has a non-religious, non-scientific and non-philosophical access to the real: “we can only get hold of bits of real”,<sup>42</sup> the bits that emerge in its interaction with S and I. It was in order to support this not-all real — a real that is both holed and ex-sistent — that Lacan wrote the knot: “my knot is... uniquely that by which the real is introduced as such”.<sup>43</sup> R could not be introduced through language (S) or through an image or model (I): such attempts supposed a real that could be represented or domesticated. However, the question of the real’s structural *place* cannot be resolved by separating it from S and I. As Lacan admits, his teaching “implies a notion of the real which we must distinguish from the symbolic and the imaginary. The only trouble is that in this process the real is given meaning, whereas in fact the real is founded to the extent that there is no meaning”.<sup>44</sup> Just as the source of a signifier’s meaning lies not in itself but in its differential relation to other signifiers, so too is the real “given meaning” when it is defined purely by its distinction to the other categories. In contradistinction to this conferral of meaning through binary relations, the knot, as “that by which the real is introduced as such”, poses a structure in which R is both a necessary component alongside I and S (with ex-sistence, consistence and the hole all being integral and interdependent qualities) and irreducible to I and S.

Here, Lacan anticipates the dialectical critique to which his conceptualisation of the real is treated by Fredric Jameson:

[T]he moment we recognize a boundary or a limit, we are already beyond it — calling something a limit is a way of transcending that limit towards a *plane* on which the “limit” itself is little more than a category and no longer a genuine boundary. So it is that anything identified as the unassimilable gets assimilated by virtue of this very act of identification.... [I]s not the very fact of naming all this the real a first move towards domesticating it and finding it a place within symbolization?<sup>45</sup>

Once it has been thought of as a distinguished or excluded element, the real is no longer genuinely unthinkable since it is defined by its distinction. The knot’s real is subject to neither inclusion nor exclusion (which, through a quick dialectical procedure, can be made equivalent to a certain form of inclusion) but instead *ex-sists*. While it does not have “a place *within* symbolization” it is nonetheless *maladroitly knotted to* symbolization — knotted by means of hole within itself and within symbolization. When confronted with a real that is both integral to structure and irreducible to structure’s other two components, Jameson’s binary terms (i.e. “assimilated” and “unassimilable”) are no longer appropriate. It was precisely in order to avoid Jameson’s *idea of the real* as a “limit” that can be recognised and localised on a geometric “plane” that Lacan turned to topology. A plane is two-dimensional: a *binary logic* operates when closed lines are inscribed on the plane as a limit or

frame. We can distinguish between what is inside and outside the line-as-limit but this limit and, indeed, the exteriority that it produces, become only elements in a wider set (i.e. the plane itself). We might imagine that the third category lies beyond the plane itself and that to access it we would only have to tumble off the edge, suffering the fate that awaited ancient explorers journeying to the edge of a flat earth, but this would be to adopt another misconception that Lacan sought to avoid — that of a massive envelopment of S and I by R as the great outdoors. What makes the knot the *only* adequate support of the psychoanalytic real *qua ex-sistence* is that its lines allow what Lacan referred to as a “trinitary logic”<sup>46</sup> to function. In other words, the particular way in which the knot is written in three dimensions, the Borromean fashion in which its lines intertwine, accomplishes what the two-dimensional plane cannot by supporting all three of the dimensions (without incorporating one into the other or excluding one) that comprise the psychoanalytic subject.

The knot does not partake in the binary logic that characterises the spatial intuition beloved by the ego (i.e. the binary opposition between interior and exterior) and which runs through language itself (i.e. R is “given meaning” by being defined as that which is not S or I). “Language” — and, indeed, the two-dimensional plane upon which Jameson bases his argument — “is always *flattened out*”.<sup>47</sup> It reduces the three dimensions of RSI to two dimensions — a dualism, dichotomy, dialectic or metaphoric substitution that confers meaning — “and that indeed is why my twisted business of the imaginary, the symbolic and the real, with the fact that the symbolic”, or any other category, “is what goes above what is above and which passes beneath what is beneath,... [has] value”:<sup>48</sup>

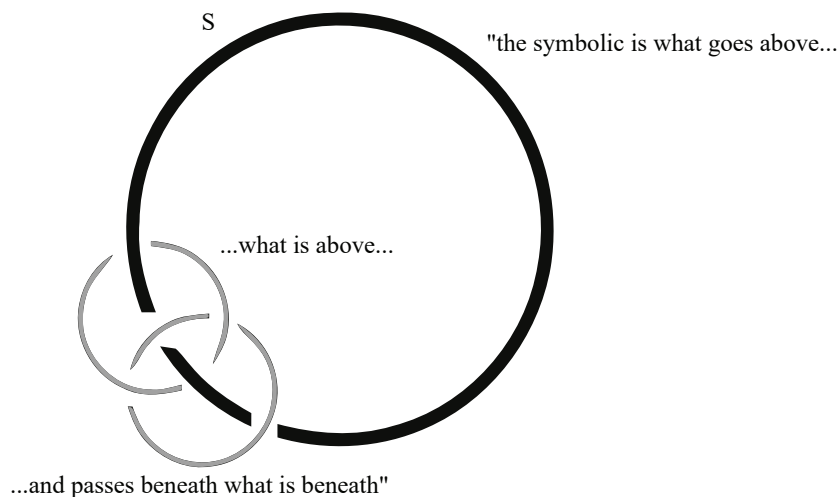


Fig. 4



It is this “twisted business” of the Borromean knot that allows a real to be written that is irreducible to the options offered by a binary opposition. This real *ex-sists* as both included and excluded because the knot in which the “function of the at-least-three” is operative cannot be flattened. Its lines cannot be inscribed on a two-dimensional plane. As we can see from Figure 2, the coherent space of linear envelopment in which one line contains another is always ruined by an *ex-sistent* third that “goes above what is above and... passes beneath what is beneath”. There is, in this topology, no limit as such.

If Lacan managed to renew the scandal of Freud's *articulation* (“what he *called* sexuality...”) by *topologising* it (“...makes a hole in the real”) — by, that is, presenting Freud's naming of the incurable as an incompleteness *upon which the formation of structure depends* — his nodal writing also allowed him to reinvigorate some of his own formulae such as “*il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*.” Even this drastic expression was to be disowned because the “bit of real” that it was supposed to carry as the expression of an impossibility was at risk of being betrayed by the binary logic of language: “I am trying to give you a bit of real, concerning... the human species. And I say to you that there is no sexual relation. But it's embroidery... because I take part in ‘yes or no’.”<sup>49</sup> Embroidery is decorative, thread passes *directly* through fabric's holes in order to produce a coherent image. Reference to the knot, whose rings do not link directly but instead disjunctively turn around one another by means of a third (love's overlapping of two lacks does not make a directly linked chain), allowed Lacan to make a subtle shift from stating that the sexual relationship does not exist and that this non-existence is written by his logic of sexualisation<sup>50</sup> to *there ex-sists a sexual non-relationship that is written by the knot*: “A topology is what permits us to grasp how elements that are not knotted two by two can nonetheless make a knot... It is in this that the term sexual non-rapport can be supported in a sayable fashion.”<sup>51</sup> It is not that the relationship is non-existent (this would partake in the binary of “yes or no” that could be subjected to a dialectical procedure) but that it *ex-sists* as impossible and this is why it troubles us.<sup>52</sup>

If we might be tempted to vaguely refer to the real (of sexuality) as an obscurity we should, argues Lacan in a distinctively Borromean formulation, be aware that the word, “obscure”, is “only a metaphor... because if we had a bit of real, we would know that the light is no more obscure than the shadows, and vice versa”.<sup>53</sup> This statement jars with our expectations: we anticipate the dull profundity of an amateur poet or dialectician — that shadows are no more obscure than light — and instead find that the sense has been given a further disorientating twist. This dissolution of the linguistic binary beyond mere reversal, such that the couple (light and shadow) no longer exist solely through their capacity to signify but also come to exist through their failure to make sense, is induced by the intrusion of a third dimension (“if we had a bit of real...”). R, as that which cannot be adequately conceptualised as an obscurity, a beyond or a limit, *ex-sists* through its effects on S and I; its emergence ruptures the imaginary consistency of symbolic reality, constituting it *as holed* at the moment of knotting.

Towards the end of his life Lacan frequently spoke of psychoanalysis in less than favourable terms. His principle concern was that if R is considered to be absolutely distinct from S then it is difficult to see how the latter (in which, and with which, the psychoanalyst works) can in the course of analysis affect the former. How, if R is *beyond* discourse, can the analyst effectively operate? With respect to this problem, how might the knot help analysts “find their way in their practice”? In a talk given in 1977, Lacan sounded his most provocatively pessimistic note:

The real is in extreme *opposition* to our practice. It is... a *limit* idea of what has no sense. Sense is what we operate with in our practice... The real is this *vanishing point*... Our practice is a swindle [*escroquerie*], *at least considered beginning from the moment we start from this vanishing point*.<sup>54</sup>

This is a naive, pre-Borromean real, thought in terms of a dichotomy (“opposition”), a geometric boundary (“limit”) or an interminably deferred finality (“vanishing point”). Lacan’s final sentence is vital: it is only when the real is thought of in these terms that psychoanalysis begins to look like a swindle. He had, in the previous month’s seminar, announced in a deceptively forthright fashion that “[a]nything that is not founded on matter is a fraud [*escroquerie*]” before allaying fears that he was readying a late career move into neuroscience by adding that if “people want to identify [the real] with *la matière*” then the latter should be written as “*l’âme à tiers*”.<sup>55</sup> The homophonic resonances of this untranslatable neologism combine the *transcendence* of the soul (*l’âme*) and *matter* (*matière*) by means of a third reference that is threeness itself (*tiers*). If, in his earlier work, Lacan had endeavoured to articulate why a practice devoted to I at the expense of S was a fraud (ego psychology) before arguing that a practice devoted to S at the expense of R would be interminable and ineffective, he now argued that it should be founded on R as “*l’âme à tiers*.” How exactly does this Borromean materialism come to be written?

### La matière as l’âme à tiers

In an effort to avoid a naive materialism or a substantivist ontology, Lacan had in earlier works equated the existence of the barred subject with the activity of fading. Its appearance as a spoken or speaking being was simultaneous with its disappearance behind the articulated signifier. The dynamic that characterises the signifying chain is that of “incessant sliding [*glissement*]”.<sup>56</sup> Thanks to the bar that separates the signifier from the signified that slides under it (S/s), signification is fluid and unstable. Such is the fate of the subject as that which one signifier represents for another signifier. At this point in Lacan’s work, *jouissance*, as that which is prohibited by the effect of S on R, was unequivocally excluded from the castrated subject’s *topos* because R was considered to be beyond S. There was no place in the chain’s endless metonymic *glissement* for anything so substantial and indivisible as the absolute *jouissance* of an ontological unity that is supposed (wrongly, because it never existed in the first place) to have been lost following the accession to sym-

bolic subjectivity. However, by *Seminar XX* Lacan was able to declare that “[s]tructure... demonstrates nothing if not that it is of the same text as *jouissance*, insofar as, in marking by what distance *jouissance* misses — the *jouissance* that would be in question if ‘that were it’ — structure does not presuppose merely the *jouissance* that would be it, it also props up another”.<sup>57</sup> There is, in other words, another mode of *jouissance* accessible to the subject that is not that of an ideal (re)union with the non-barred (m)Other. This *jouissance* is supported by the *knot* — a structure in which *both* S and R function — rather than the *chain*.

Invoking the very same declaration from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* that Badiou cites in our epigraph, Lacan first unveiled the knot as a topologisation of the following aphorism’s grammatical structure (with each ring corresponding to a verb): “I *demand* that/ you *refuse* what/ I am *offering* you/ because: it is not *that* [ça].... It is very precisely... what one cannot speak about that is at stake... [when I say] it is not that”.<sup>58</sup> Lacan’s aphorism twice relays between “I” and “you” before abruptly concluding that nothing final and definitive can come of the communion between two desirous subjects. The “bit of real” at stake here is the object *a* — the impossible-to-grasp element that, while always lacking from any signifying structure, acts as the object-cause of desire, compelling the desirous subject to subsist in and utilise the signifying structure (to speak and be spoken of) in a hopeless effort to restore ontological unity and wholeness. Whatever the subject does manage to ask for and receive is always “not that.” The *jouissance* he receives from a particular commodity or partner is inevitably less than “the *jouissance* that would be in question if ‘that were it’”.

While Lacan’s Borromean aphorism (“I demand that...”) might at first appear to be a no more than a theatrical reiteration of the impossibility of obtaining the object *a*, thereby re-confirming its straightforward exclusion from S, he instead contends that this aphorism is a “knot” — rather than a chain — “of meaning” from which “the object arises”.<sup>59</sup> Rather than being non-existent or strictly absent from the construction, the object and “the *jouissance* that would be in question if ‘that were it’” are instead negatively denoted as that which has been missed. It is a positivised absence or a nothing that counts as something because “[w]e are confronted with it” *as missed* “at every instant of our existence”.<sup>60</sup> The object has a certain “nubility”,<sup>61</sup> its absence is ubiquitous and it is as that which can be found nowhere that it asserts itself everywhere. What Lacan is attempting to present is a “system of nowhere [*nulle part*]” because while accession to subjectivity means that “*jouissance* is excluded [and] the circle is closed”, this “exclusion of *jouissance* is only stated from the system itself”.<sup>62</sup> It is *as missed* that *jouissance* — “the *jouissance* that would be in question if ‘that were it’” — is experienced. If the object were simply non-existent or beyond language it wouldn’t bother us; instead, it ex-sists as that which is missed by language. Refusing to align himself with Wittgenstein’s asceticism, Lacan states that this aphorism “is carefully designed to have an effect”<sup>63</sup> — an effect that goes beyond the production of meaning, an effect that exceeds the sum

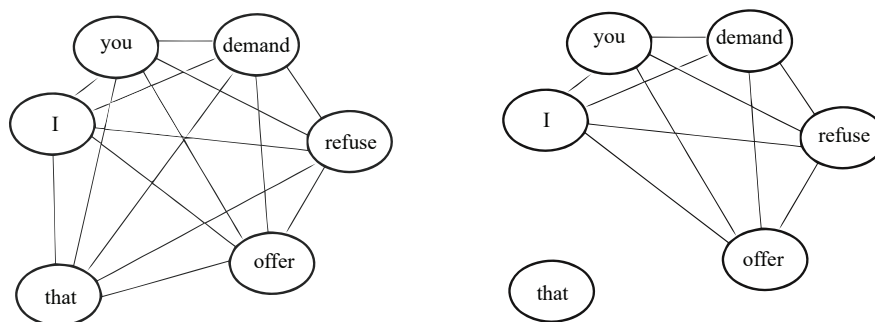


Fig. 5

of the aphorism's constituent parts. How exactly does that which cannot be verbalised "arise" from a knot of verbs?

Lacan experiments with several *flat* diagrams — that is, lines that could be inscribed on a *plane* — in an effort to schematise the 'place' of the object as neither definitively excluded by the aphorism's knotted chain nor incorporated as another ring (see Fig. 5).

The above figure shows the object dropping out of the aphorism's matrix of verbs and pronouns. It does not, however, sufficiently testify to the paradoxical way in which the object is both the *structural ground* of Lacan's aphorism — it quite literally being this aphorism's object, the 'something' that this aphorism is about, the motivation for Lacan to demand that we refuse what he is offering — and, through its absence, the *structural hole*. Lacan patiently demonstrates how, if we assume the object's absolute absence or non-existence, the three-verbed/ ringed construction collapses because it becomes under-motivated and nonsensical. With the "it is not that" erased, there would be no reason for Lacan to demand that you refuse what he is offering. Furthermore, if the negatively denoted object is the necessary support of this construction, the latter is also the necessary support of the former: if we remove any one of the verbs/ rings, "that" becomes completely non-existent because the construction supporting it collapses (e.g. why would Lacan demand that you refuse if he had not made an offer?). The object does not pre-exist the statement; it is not simply the thing or spirit that the letter kills. It is instead, as missed, an *effect* of the knotting of verbs just as these same verbs derive their meaning effect from this object since it is what "justifies a demand such as to refuse what I am offering you."<sup>65</sup>

The failure of various schemas to adequately inscribe a structure in which the object is neither completely absent nor an assimilated part of the chain provided an apposite prelude to Lacan's first presentation of the Borromean knot — a structure in which the knotting of three components and the creation of a central void neces-

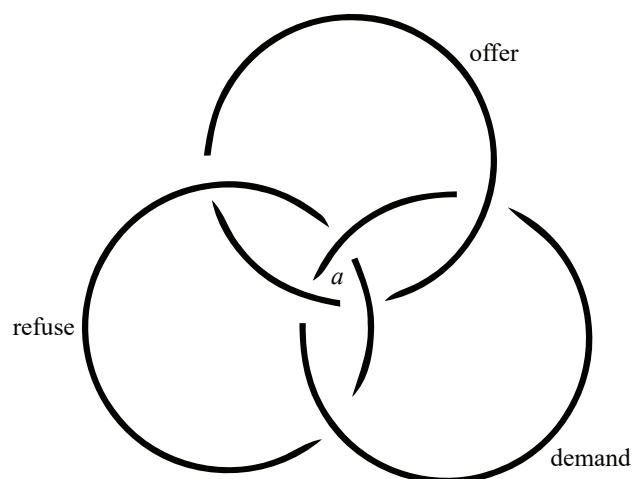


Fig. 6

sarily occur simultaneously. It is in this hole — that is both beyond the materiality of the knot and integral to it — that Lacan places the object *a* (see Fig. 6).

Lacan contends that whereas the chain's metonymic *glissement* can only displace the object, the knot *wedges* it, with this “wedging” constituting “the initial phenomenon of a topology”.<sup>66</sup> The “lines” are knotted in such a fashion that they “realise the essence of the Borromean knot... determining, gripping, a point”:<sup>67</sup> the object *a*. Lacan's apparent reliance here on the lexicon of Euclidean geometry (i.e. lines and points) is not to be taken seriously. Indeed, he had devoted considerable time in seminars pre-dating the arrival of the knot to arguing why this geometry is unsuited to the task of formalising the psychoanalytic subject. Both the geometric point and line are mathematical *ideas*, objects of imagination and speculation. The line has just one dimension while the point, created at the intersection of two lines, has zero dimensions since it derives its ideic ‘existence’ entirely from the presence of other forms such as the line. While the ego is captivated by the notion that it occupies the central point towards which lines converge, the divided subject is not a unitary point localisable by means of geometric coordinates. The challenge that the knot's lines were called to answer was that of situating and “wedging” an irreducible ‘place’ that is not a point.

Not all holes are created equal and “if”, Lacan told his long-suffering audience, “I made you do so much topology... it was precisely to suggest that the function of the hole is not univocal”: we might, for example, ask “[w]ithin a circle inscribed on a plane, what is the hole?”<sup>68</sup> Such a circle, as a one-dimensional line inscribed on a two-dimensional plane, would be incapable of producing a hole worthy of

the name since it would have no depth and, therefore, no edge. Furthermore, we must remember that Lacan is referring to a topology, not a geometry: the former is concerned not with measurable quantity but with axiomatic qualitative relations, thereby “mak[ing] *meaning* (=quantity) dependent on *structure* (=quality)”.<sup>69</sup> This rubber geometry can entertain continuous deformation (expansion or contraction without cutting or suturing) to its quantitative form without its qualitative structure being altered. For example, rings the size of a galaxy or a bagel are topologically indistinguishable: the specific topology in question (i.e. an unbroken, material contouring of a hole) remains unchanged. Because it cannot actually contain a hole, a circular line inscribed on a plane can be reduced to a dimensionless point. Because there is no obstacle, such as a hole, that would impede this contraction, the one-dimensional circle is homotopy equivalent to the point.<sup>70</sup>

What is required, to cite the title of the twenty-third session of *Seminar X*, is “a circle that is irreducible to a point”:

It's a matter of knowing how a hole can be filled, how it can close up. It can be represented as a shrinking circle. Even though any old circle drawn on the *plane* can shrink down to nothing more than a point, a vanishing limit point, and then disappear altogether, this is not the case on the surface of the torus... *Structures exist that do not entail the hole being filled in.*<sup>71</sup>

One might adjust Lacan's final statement: structures exist *because* the hole cannot be filled in. Originally, he referred to the torus in order to formalise the subject's lack in terms of a topological irreducibility. The circle of demand, oriented around the torus's tubular hole, and the circle of desire, oriented around the torus's central hole that stretches out around and beyond the torus itself,<sup>72</sup> cannot be closed (that is, homotopically reduced) and it is in this impossibility of closure that the “Freudian *cogito*” as a lacking or holed “*desidero*”<sup>73</sup> ex-sists. Significantly, it is impossible to

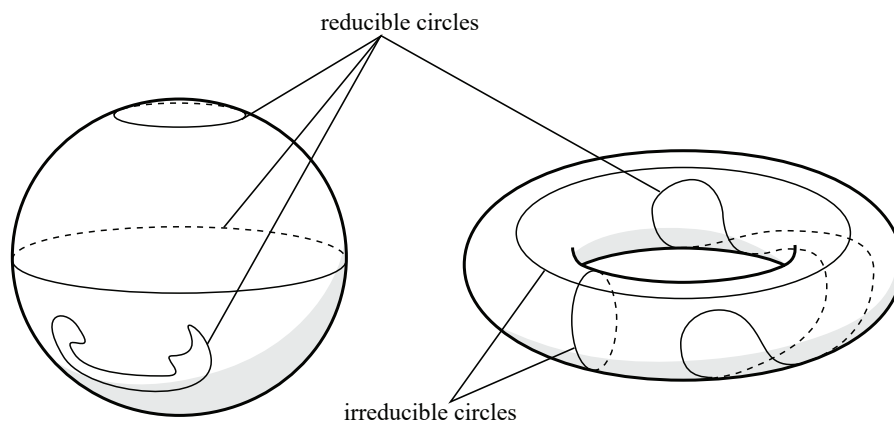


Fig. 7

inscribe an irreducible circle on a sphere — a topology that Lacan associates with egoic self-apprehension and imaginary cosmology (see Fig. 7).<sup>74</sup>

Recalling that Lacan defined the real as the impossible, this impossibility of closure was the real of the torus and it was as an irreducible hole that the torus became the key component of Lacan's Borromean architecture: "The torus", unlike the geometric line, "is not a puff of air... it has all the resistance of something *real*".<sup>75</sup> If a toric circle cannot be reduced to a point, if the hole that it circumscribes cannot be resolved, then a knot composed of three tori cannot be dissolved through a *quantitative* reduction. The *qualitative* knot, in other words, *resists*: "In this... geometry of weaving (which has nothing to do with Greek geometry, which is made of nothing but abstractions), what I try to articulate is a geometry that resists".<sup>76</sup> Here, however, we should recall the *primary* real of the knot from which the real resistance of its whole and parts is *secondarily* derived: it is *impossible* that the knot be made with anything less than three rings. This is the "function of the at-least-three". Without three rings, there is no knot and no resistance. The rings of R, S and I only subsist through their effect on one another, their *resistance* to one another:

In its '*sistence*' outside of the imaginary and the symbolic, [the real] knocks up against them, its play is something precisely in the order of limitation; the two others, from the moment when it is tied into a Borromean knot with them, offer it resistance. In other words, the real only has *ex-sistence*... in its encounter with the limits of the symbolic and the imaginary.<sup>77</sup>

The consequence of this mutual resistance is that no one ring can dominate the others and no one ring can absent itself from the structure of which the others are a part. The "function of at-least-three" is pertinent to both Lacan's categories and the rings that formalise their structural relation. The categories are not experienced by the subject in isolation. Similarly, in the Borromean architecture, a circle only becomes a torus when it is knotted to another two tori that resist it. If "[t]his geometry is not imaginary" but "a geometry of the real, of rings of string",<sup>78</sup> the real at stake here is not simply that of the rings themselves, inasmuch as they are 'real things' that possess an irreducible materiality that lines do not, but what the materiality *conferred by nodality* (*la matière* as '*l'âme à tiers*') makes *impossible*. The ring's resistant materiality does not precede nodality; it is the latter that constitutes the former. Similarly, the categories do not pre-exist one another but only function in their interaction with one another (as *ex-sistence*, *consistence* and the hole).

Suppose we observe this logic (according to which materiality is a consequence of nodality) and attempt to draw the first component of this "geometry of the real". This would be a single circle, an immaterial, one-dimensional line reducible to a point. Having no *ex-sistence* or hole, this imaginary figure is liable to vanish. Suppose we now draw a second circle that sits atop the first. While we would be forced to include a break in one of the lines in order to show how the second line passes over it, thereby inferring three-dimensional depth, there is no reason for our circles to be where they are, there is nothing *resisting* their movement and preventing



them from becoming circles in solitude. Now suppose that we produce a writing in which the “function of the at-least-three” is operative. Since three is the minimum, we do not go one, two, three but instead begin with a Borromean triunity. Suddenly, our feeble circles have been lent body, *not in and of themselves but through their topological entanglement*: they knock against each other, each providing material resistance to the other's movement. Furthermore, the holes that they materially wedge *as a consequence of this resistance are now irreducible*, having previously completely failed to manifest themselves in the flat circles. “[T]he real”, in both its guises as an ex-sistent ring and the impossibility of closure, “only begins at number three”.<sup>79</sup>

This Borromean materialism also provides the most apposite formalisation of the “body” as that which “only enters into the analytic perspective inasmuch as it makes an orifice, and is knotted to some symbolic or real”.<sup>80</sup> As neither a point nor an enclosed sphere with a clearly defined interior and exterior (unlike Freud's topography), the psychoanalytic body's qualitative structural feature is the hole (of the mouth, anus, eye or ear) that derives *jouissance* from an object that covers over the real lack in S to which this body is knotted. In Lacan's terminology the material “ring of string” became the visceral “gut-torus”<sup>81</sup> but, once again, this was not an appeal to an unvarnished nature that exists beyond or prior to discourse: the “gut-torus” — essentially defined by the hole that is *both the consequence and the condition of its being knotted* — “is not a body all alone. If not for the symbolic, and the *ex-sistence* of the real, the body would have no aesthetic at all, because there would be no gut-torus. The gut-torus... is made from this non-existent relation between the symbolic and the real”.<sup>82</sup> The non-rapport between S and R is most keenly felt following the event that serves as the *desidero*'s ‘cause’ — the traumatic missed encounter with *das Ding*, that is, the real lack in the Other that manifests itself in the Other's desire. This encounter is always missed, thereby retaining its traumatic quality, precisely because the real that it presents cannot be made legible or articulable (i.e. the envelopment of R by S). The body that “is made from this non-existent relation” between S and R is not the body that the ego — constituted when the infant jubilantly experiences a mastery over a consistent and coherent body during the Mirror Stage — imagines itself to have.

Let us take, for example, the invocatory drive mentioned in our discussion of Freud's topography above: “If the desire of the subject is founded on the desire of the Other... [t]he voice is... the instrument in which there is manifested the desire of the Other”.<sup>83</sup> When *topos* and *logos* combine, with the latter introducing an incomprehensible *ex-sistence* that it cannot subsequently expunge, the space of the body is not that of a self-contained bubble: the corporeal “*parlêtre*” suffers from topological “extimacy” as a voice escapes his interiority, exceeding conscious ownership, and another, radically foreign voice conditions his desire. The body does not pre-exist this encounter; *it is instead constituted (as holed) by being knotted to the indirectly linked S and R*. The irreducible hole is both the means by which the “gut-torus” is knotted and that which is constituted by the knotting. To put it another

way, a voice invades the ear but it is only then that the body is experienced as *holed* and as a *jouissant* substance. With the formation of the consistent knot, the ideal of imaginary consistence is replaced by a “[m]aterial [that] presents itself to us as *corps-sistance*”,<sup>84</sup> a consistence founded on a corporeal hole.

Contrary to what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy have argued,<sup>85</sup> Lacan's identification of a hole at the heart of structure does not mean that he merely repeated negative theology or ontology. Instead, the hole is what enables ex-sistence to be knotted and, in turn, it is the ex-sistent presence of the third ring that enables the hole to subsist. Rather than having to choose between the options afforded by a *binary* logic—that is, the dichotomy between imaginary consistency and the symbolic hole, an egoic ontology and a negative ontology—“the function of the at-least-three” holes is to support an existence that is evenly distributed across consistency, the hole and *ex-sistence*. Topologically speaking, the positivity of the knot materialises in simultaneity with the negativity of the hole: the knot is tied by means of the hole but the hole is only constituted when the knot is tied.

What is particularly striking about the knot's mutual interdependence of mutually exclusive categories is that, despite lacking a final framing ring or limit (there is no dominant, binding category that envelops the others [see figure 2]), it does not spiral off into a post-structuralist ‘bad’ infinity since it can, without its ex-sistence or constitutive emptiness being compromised, be written or made as a consistent whole that can be contained on a page or held in one's hands. If the knot enables Lacan to once again distinguish psychoanalytic subjectivity from philosophical ontology (insofar as “my little knot intervenes” in any Aristotelian “chatter” that treats existence as an instantiation of a universal by showing that “existence is of its nature ex-sistence”<sup>86</sup> and thus irreducible to the symbolic-imaginary constellations into which syllogistic shifts from the general to the particular attempt to force existence) it also allows him to settle his accounts with Derrida.

Because it is a “writing [that] supports a real” the knot “changes the meaning of writing” — the writing that “Derrida has emphasised, namely the result of what could be termed a precipitation of the signifier”.<sup>87</sup> While Derrida challenges the apparent solidity of binary oppositions by reading the inherent and permanent vacillation of *différance*, he maintains that access to a third-dimensional *hors-texte* can only occur in a delusional, positive sense (immaculate capture of the referent) or negatively, through a deconstructive performance for which the extra-discursive target is always “to come.” Regarding this precipitous *archi-écriture*, Lacan claims that he preceded Derrida by writing the signifier as “S” in his re-vamping of the Saussurean sign (by, that is, disjoining signifier from signified: S/s) in “The Instance of the Letter”.<sup>88</sup> By contrast, the nodal “writing in question comes from somewhere other than the signifier”.<sup>89</sup> The knot is somehow firmer than the signifier without fixing a signified or posing a transcendental master-signifier that would artificially halt the signifier's slippage. The material resistance that each of the knot's rings offer to one another, the “wedging” of an object that the chain's “*glissement*” can only displace, the fact that the knot's writing involves not only the hole created by the

signifier but also consistence and *ex-sistence* — none of these features or effects of the knot are the result of a philosophical naivety that Derrida might balk at. They are instead the result of the knot's "trinitary logic", its qualitative "function of the at-least-three".

### Concluding Remarks

Let us recall here Badiou's characterisation of the "late Lacan as someone who continues to point his finger at an unsayable real" with the hope that we are now more certain about the basis for, and legitimacy of, such a gesture. If the Borromean knot is a "writing [that] supports a real", it does not do so by being the best possible imagistic representation of the real or by doing away with representation altogether, offering itself as the noumenal real beyond structure. It instead "supports a real" by means of a non-metaphorical set of spatio-temporal relations that are both particular to the knot and *are* the knot: "The knot", *insofar as it is Borromean*, insofar as it is a structure established by the "function of the at-least-three", "is the *only* support conceivable for a *relation* between something and something else [i.e. the categories R, S and I or the subject and object *a*]. *If on the one hand the knot is abstract, it must at the same time be conceived as concrete*".<sup>90</sup> To borrow a deprecatory term deployed by the new materialists, we might think of this as a Borromean "correlationism" that operates in concert with a Borromean materialism. At stake, then, is a logic particular to the Borromean knot in which relationality and materiality are interdependent: each mutually guaranties the other.

The rings, in accordance with an inalienable (topo)logic, "knock up against" each other, with each offering the other resistance, in such a fashion that an irreducible hole is wedged and the relation between subject and object is established. These two relations "between something and something else" — that is, the relation between subject and object and the relation between the categories *qua* rings that *are* the subject — are structurally interdependent. It is important to note that the relation between the categories is a relation between structural qualities or functions (i.e. *ex-sistence*, consistence and the hole). Therefore, it is not that the knot secondarily inscribes connective relations between previously isolated qualities but that the qualities are what allow for relations — relations that are written the moment the knot is written. For example, without the hole there would be no means for the knot to consist or for its 'third' ring to *ex-sist*. If the knot did not consist, if its *tori* became individual *circles*, then the holes would not be established *as irreducible* and, once again, there would be no means of supporting the real *qua ex-sistence*.

While we have not even begun to explore the diverse forms, qualities and aspects that make up what Lacan called "the dossier of this Borromean knot"<sup>91</sup> — such as the infinite line, the trefoil, the orientation of the knot, the function of the fourth term (*qua* symptom), the three modes of *jouissance* that the knot wedges (i.e.  $J\bar{A}$ ,  $J\Phi$  and *sens*), etc.<sup>92</sup> — it is hoped that the reader is convinced that if we are to better

appreciate Lacan's "gift" of "a bit of real" then it is time to place alongside his more notorious definitions of the real (as, for example, the impossible or that which always returns to the same place) the following aphorism: "The real is characterised by being knotted".<sup>93</sup>

### Notes

1. Alain Badiou and Élisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan, Past and Present: A Dialogue*, trans. Jason E. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), pp. 54-55.
2. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar Book XX: Encore, 1972-1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998), p. 133.
3. Jacques Lacan, 'Yale University: Lecture on the Body', trans. Adrian Price and Russell Grigg in Jacques-Alain Miller and Maire Jaanus (eds), *Culture/ Clinic 1: Applied Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 6. For examples of such work see Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), Yannis Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant and Lacan* (London: Verso, 2001).
4. Luke Thurston, 'Ineluctable Nodalities: On the Borromean Knot' in Dany Nobus (ed.), *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Other Press, 1998), p. 139. It should be stated that this is Thurston's characterisation of a stance rather than a stance that he himself adopts.
5. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar Book XXII: RSI, 1974-1975*, text established by Jacques-Alain Miller, unpublished trans. Jack W. Stone *et al*, p. 9. Jack W. Stone's translations are available at: <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=286> [Date accessed 10 September 2015].
6. Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Borsteels (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 188.
7. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), p. 263. Unless otherwise stated, all italics are my own.
8. David Metzger, 'Interpretation and Topological Structure' in Ellie Ragland and Dragan Milanovic (eds), *Lacan: Topologically Speaking* (New York: Other Press, 2004), p. 134.
9. For example: 'What makes a knot is not imaginary, not a representation... The knot is not a model; it is a support. It is not reality; it is the real.' Lacan, *Seminar XXII*, p. 58.
10. See Élisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan: Outline of a Life, History of a System of Thought*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 351-411.
11. See Jacques Derrida, 'The Purveyor of Truth', trans. Alan Bass in John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (eds), *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press), pp. 173-212.
12. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar Book XXIII: The Sinthome, 1975-1976*, text established by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Luke Thurston, appendix to Luke Thurston, *Writing the Symptom: Lacan's Joycean Knot* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Kent, 1997), p. 133.
13. Badiou and Roudinesco, *Lacan, Past and Present*, p. 36.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

15. See Jacques Lacan, *Seminar Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis, 1969-1970*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 1998), pp. 118-132.
16. Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, p. 169.
17. Ibid., p. 174.
18. 'The problem is revealed as such, at having a solution: which is a *dis* — a dissolution... That it be enough for one to go away for all to be free is, according to my Borromean knot, true of each, but must be so of myself in my *École*.' Jacques Lacan, *Television/ A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, ed. Joan Copjec, trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, Jeffrey Mehlman and Annette Michelson (New York: Norton, 1990), p. 129.
19. Jacques Lacan 'Overture to the First International Encounter of the Freudian Field, Caracas, 12 July 1980', trans. Adrian Price in *Hurly-Burly* 6 (London: NLS, 2011), p. 18.
20. Lacan, *Seminar XXII*, p. 5. For an alternative and illuminating discussion of "Borromean Numericity" see: Duane Rousselle, 'Numbers and Things: A Contribution to Number Theory within Psychoanalytic Theory' in *S: Journal of the Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique* 8 (2015), pp. 141-172.
21. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), p. 137.
22. Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 560.
23. Lacan, *Seminar XXII*, p. 3.
24. Lacan, 'Overture', p. 18.
25. Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, p. 171.
26. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar Book XXIV: l'insu que sait de l'une-bévue s'aile à mourre, 1976-1977*, trans. Cormac Gallagher from unedited French manuscripts, p. 88.  
<http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/insu-Seminar-XXIV-Final-Sessions-1-12-1976-1977.pdf> [Date accessed 1 February 2015]
27. Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, p. 170.
28. Lacan, *Television*, p. 109.
29. Lacan, *Seminar XXII*, p. 46.
30. Lacan, *Seminar XXIV*, p. 4.
31. Ibid.
32. Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, p. 179.
33. Lacan, *Seminar XXII*, p. 48.
34. Lacan, *Seminar XXIV*, p. 4
35. Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, p. 171.
36. Ibid., p. 133.
37. Lacan, *Seminar XXII*, p. 58.

38. Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, p. 132.
39. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1964*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 26.
40. Samuel Beckett, *Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnameable* (London: Calder Publications Ltd., 1994), p. 400.
41. Jacques Lacan 'Spring Awakening', trans. Silvia Rodriguez in *Analysis 6* (Melbourne: Centre for Psychoanalytic Research, 1995), p. 33.
42. Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, p. 171.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
45. Fredric Jameson, 'Lacan and the Dialectic: A Fragment' in Slavoj Žižek (ed.), *Lacan: The Silent Partners* (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 391-392.
46. Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, p. 169.
47. Lacan, *Seminar XXIV*, p. 44.
48. *Ibid.*
49. Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, p. 171.
50. See Lacan, *Seminar XX*, p. 78.
51. Lacan, *Seminar XXII*, pp. 56-57.
52. For a more detailed discussion of the sexual non-relationship and the Borromean knot see Guy le Gaufey, 'The Scholion: A Misuse of Metaphor', trans. Cormac Gallagher in *The Letter 47* (Dublin: 2011), pp. 67-83.
53. Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, p. 171.
54. Jacques Lacan, 'Remarks on Hysteria', unpublished trans. Jack W. Stone, p. 1.
55. Lacan, *Seminar XXIV*, p. 45.
56. Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 419.
57. Lacan, *Seminar XX*, pp. 111-112.
58. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar Book XIX : ...ou pire, 1971-1972*, trans. Cormac Gallagher from unedited French manuscripts (London: Karnac, n.d.), session 5, p. 9.
59. *Ibid.*
60. *Ibid.*
61. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar Book XVI: From an other to the Other, 1968-1969*, trans. Cormac Gallagher from unedited French manuscripts (London: Karnac, n.d.), session 21, p. 1.
62. *Ibid.*
63. Lacan, *Seminar XX*, p. 111.

64. This is my adaptation of a figure that can be found in: Jacques Lacan, *Seminar Book XIX : ...ou pire, 1971-1972*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2011), p. 88.
65. Lacan, *Seminar XIX*, session 5, p. 9.
66. Lacan, *Seminar XX*, p. 132.
67. Lacan, *Seminar XXII*, p. 6.
68. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar Book X: Anxiety, 1962-1963*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Adrian Price (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), p. 132.
69. Alexandre Leupin, *Lacan Today: Psychoanalysis, Science, Religion* (New York: Other Press, 2004), p. 24.
70. "In general, two closed paths in a set are compared by verifying if they can be reduced to the same geometric object in the set. A circular path on a surface can be reduced to any given point of the same surface by moving the centre to the given point. The same is true for a spherical path in a solid... In more general cases, however, holes and gaps can be obstructions to the transformations described above." Margherita Barile, 'Homotopy Type', from 'Mathworld — A Wolfram Web Resource', created by Eric W. Weisstein. <http://mathworld.wolfram.com/HomotopyType.html> [Date accessed 3 December 2015].
71. Lacan, *Seminar X*, p. 133.
72. For a more detailed exposition of this point see Joël Dor, *The Epistemological Status of Lacan's Mathemes* in David Pettigrew and François Raffoul (eds), *Disseminating Lacan* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), pp. 109-121.
73. Lacan, *Seminar XI*, p. 154.
74. Figure adapted from 'Cycles on a 2-sphere', by Steelpillow — Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=46361437> & 'Cycles on a torus', by Steelpillow — Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=46361438>. Retrieved June 5th, 2016.
75. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar Book IX: Identification, 1961-1962*, trans. Cormac Gallagher from unedited French manuscripts (London: Karnac, n.d.), session 12, p. 13.
76. Lacan, 'Remarks on Hysteria', p. 2.
77. Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, p. 138.
78. Lacan, 'Lecture on the Body', p. 6.
79. Lacan, *Seminar XXII*, p. 48.
80. Ibid., p. 68.
81. Ibid., p. 46.
82. Ibid., pp. 47-48.
83. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar Book XIII: The Object of Psychoanalysis, 1965-1966*, trans. Cormac Gallagher from unedited French manuscripts (London: Karnac, n.d.), session 20, p. 10.
84. Lacan, *Seminar XXIV*, p. 49.



85. Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Title of the Letter: A Reading of Lacan*, trans. Francois Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 126-127.
86. Lacan, *Seminar XXII*, p. 18.
87. Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, p. 180.
88. Ibid.
89. Ibid., p. 181.
90. Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, p. 133.
91. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XXV, The Moment to Conclude, 1977-1978*, trans. Cormac Gallagher from unedited French manuscripts, session 1, p. 4. <http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Book-25-The-Moment-to-Conclude.pdf> [Date accessed 5 February 2016]
92. I intend to provide a full account in my forthcoming book-length study of Lacan's topology: *Writing the Structures of the Subject: Lacan and Topology*.
93. Lacan, *Seminar XXII*, p. 57.

ARKA CHATTOPADHYAY

READING BECKETT, LACAN AND THE VOICE

*Ventriloquism of the Literary Object*

Voices in Beckett and Lacan: The Unstoppable Murmur

In *The Analyst's Ear and the Critic's Eye*, Benjamin and Thomas Ogden give a vital agency to voice as a hook between psychoanalysis and literature:

[...] one of the ways that a piece of literary criticism is psychoanalytic derives from its particular way of hearing and writing about literary voice. *This way of hearing and writing has its origins, we believe, in how practicing psychoanalysts are attuned to the patient's voice, and their own, in a way that is unique to the practice of psychoanalysis.* (8; emphasis in the original)

In *Beckett, Lacan and the Voice* (2016), Llewellyn Brown has done precisely what the two Ogdens describe as a “particular way of hearing and writing about literary voice” by reading the Beckettian voice through Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan, unlike Freud, extensively theorizes the voice as an object, adding it (along with the gaze) to the Freudian repertoire of the oral and the anal objects. Lacanian voice is thus a conceptual category, apart from what it does in the analytic process where two speech-acts intercut one another. In the clinic, the analysand speaks (and *writes* through speech) with his voice and the analyst intervenes by cutting into the logic of his speech with his own voice. Psychoanalysis is thus a practice in hearing from both ends. The analyst gives a hearing to the analysand (this hearing is as important as interpretation) and the analysand hears both the analyst's voice and increasingly, his own, while speaking. The first chapter of Bruce Fink's *Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique* (2007) is devoted to listening. He prescribes a hearing with “free floating attention” that can defer understanding in its penchant for presupposition and pay attention to not only what is said (*dit*) but the act of saying (*dire*) itself (11). If there is an invocatory dimension to psychoanalysis as a practice of speaking, the voice has a more significant role in Lacan's thinking as an object-cause of desire and a phenomenon that comes from the field of the Other.

For Lacan, “language is not vocalization” (274) and we cannot reduce voice to language. The voice as Real does not reside in what is said (*dit*) but marks the saying (*dire*) that *ex-sists qua* the said in the (f)act of speech and hence the famous formula of ‘L’étourdit’: “That one might be saying remains forgotten behind what is said in what is heard (*Qu’on dise reste oublié derrière ce qui se dit dans ce qui s’entend*)” (32; 33). In the twentieth chapter of his tenth seminar, *Anxiety*, Lacan dwells on the anatomy of the acoustic apparatus to show how the voice resonates in the void of the ear which is a complex of tubular resonators. The voice is differentiated from speech in this ability to resonate in the void which for Lacan represents the void of the Other or the barred Other — “the void of its lack of guarantee” (276). Lacan reflects: “The voice responds to what is said, but it cannot answer for it. In other words, for it to respond, we must incorporate the voice as the otherness of what is said” (275). According to Lacan, the voice is not “assimilated” but only “incorporated” (277) and this incorporation must acknowledge voice’s alterity as an object when the subject identifies with it. The voice resists the Symbolic and by responding to the *said* with the *saying*, as it resonates in the Other’s void, it *incarnates* the Real as an immanent and inexpressible beyond of language. As Brown reflects, “the voice comes to the fore when, in human experience, language fails to signify” (36).

Fink holds that psychoanalysis works against the narcissism of listening as “our usual way of listening overlooks or rejects the Otherness of the Other” (2). In Beckettian terms, usual listening is little more than what *Worstward Ho* (1983) calls “leas-tening”. Psychoanalytic listening, on the other hand, is about acknowledging the unconscious as the discourse of the Other where saying (*dire*) resonates with an invocatory dimension as it circulates between the subject and the linguistic field of the Other. To return to Llewellyn Brown’s book here is to address the question how Samuel Beckett’s multi-medial literature listens to the Other’s voice as well as the voice as Other. Beckett is an apt writer to study literary invocation because Beckettian writing, as *How It Is* (1961) underlines, is an inscription of the voice. It acknowledges a problematic distance from the subject through the regime of quotation: “I say it as I hear it” (3).

In *Beckett, Lacan and the Voice*, Brown has written the most definitive book so far on Beckett and Lacan in both Beckett Studies and Lacanian literary criticism. I do not say this simply because there is not a wealth of existing critical material in this network of relations. I say this because Brown has convincingly taken Lacan out of his poststructuralist stereotype as a thinker of the “linguistic turn” by concentrating on the radical final phase of his teaching where the Symbolic unconscious is redefined from the Real, i.e. the impossible *qua* symbolization. As the Lacan of *Seminars XX* and *XXI* says, language is nothing but “knowledge’s hare-brained lucubration (*élucubration*) about language [*lalangue*]” (139) and there is no other definition of the signifier than what makes a hole in the Real (15.4.1975, 157). For later-Lacan, “language does not exist” except for the *multiple material supports* of *lalangue* (a neologistic *letter* combining “la” with “langue” and thus equivocating

at the *invocatory* level with “the tongue”) (*Seminar XXV*, 15.11.1977).<sup>1</sup> This shift in the late-teachings from the semantic solidity of language to the invocatory and corporeal material of *lalangue* is homologous with the shift from pleasure to *jouissance* as the Real affect of tormenting enjoyment. It is this later-Lacan of the Real, who shines through Brown’s book and Beckett’s works give a challenging drift to these complex thoughts, not as a field of application but as an analogous zone of rethinking and subversion: “In Beckett’s work, the subject consistently encounters the symbolic as grafted onto a real: it regularly entails a dimension that is unbearable and untameable” (Brown, 102).

*Beckett, Lacan and the Voice* is the inaugural monograph in *ibidem*’s series, *Samuel Beckett in Company*. Paul Stewart, the series-editor, writes in the preface that it intends to examine interdisciplinary relational possibilities around Beckett’s work, putting his *oeuvre* in new theoretical and historical contexts. As he points out, relation or rather the lack of it, is a key term in Beckett’s own thinking, as evidenced in his famous *Three Dialogues with George Duthuit* (1949) as well as the early correspondence with Duthuit on an aesthetic of non-relation. Jean-Michel Rabaté, who has also written the foreword to Brown’s book, has reflected elsewhere: “Beckett leads us to a paradoxical ethics of non-relation [...] paradoxical because the relation with the Other is founded on a non-relation” (142). As we shall see, this complex non-relation between the subject and the Other is key to Brown’s Lacanian reading insofar as the Lacanian Real is founded on sexual non-relation which punches a hole into linguistic meaning.

Before getting into Brown’s argument, let me make a detour through perhaps the earliest evocation of the literary voice in Beckett’s first published novel *Murphy* (1938). Brown focuses on the novel’s ending as an exorcisation of the Imaginary when Murphy cannot imagine his dearest ones, moments before his death. But he does not dwell on the voice’s generative moment as it emerges in relation to the *present absence* of the Other in the psychotic Mr Endon and his unseeing eyes. This moment is crucial for encoding the voice as an *inscription of self-hearing* which works in tandem with an Other who is *both there and yet does not exist*, not to mention the gaze, interacting with the voice. At the end of a thorough inspection of Mr Endon’s eyes in which Murphy’s gaze captures the details of the Other’s eyes like a magnifier, he finally sees himself reflected in Endon’s eyes as a “horribly reduced, obscured and distorted” image (149). When he sees himself “stigmatised in those eyes that did not see him”, this empty gaze returns from the field of the Other as the Other’s unseeing eye mirrors the subject’s image back to him. This scopic dimension is immediately supplemented with the voice: “Murphy heard words demanding so strongly to be spoken that he spoke them, right into Mr. Endon’s face” (149-150).

I would argue that this moment depicts the Beckettian voice as an act of self-hearing where the subject is alienated into an Other through the voice which creates a breach between what he hears and successively inscribes through his speech. But this is not an autistic act of self-hearing as the voice emerges in the logic of interpellation where Murphy is making an effort to connect with Endon who is an

*absent presence* in the scopic field. His eyes do not acknowledge Murphy's presence but only reflect his image back to him. The letter thus arrives at its destination as the message comes back to the speaker in an inverted form, from the field of the Other. The alterity of the voice is couched in this Real contradiction that the *Other is there and yet does not exist*. Beckett highlights this invocatory alterity by using quotation marks for the voice which Murphy hears, being spoken to him and then speaks in turn to the non-responsive Other:

"the last at last seen of him  
himself unseen by him  
and of himself"

A rest.

"The last Mr. Murphy saw of Mr. Endon was Mr. Murphy unseen by Mr. Endon. This was also the last Murphy saw of Murphy."

A rest.

"The relation between Mr. Murphy and Mr. Endon could not have been better summed up than by the former's sorrow at seeing himself in the latter's immunity from seeing anything but himself."

(150)

Not only does the voice concern the gaze and its absence here but it also comes up with a strange coda of relationality, founded on non-relation. In our critical recounting of Brown's argument, we will return to this non-relational relationality.

### **Brown's Reading of Invocation: Does the Other Exist?**

If Beckett's work is replete with the contingency of the Other's promised arrival, in the famous *Godot* (1953) or the late radio-play *Ghost Trio* (1975) where the Other does not arrive, there are also moments of haunting where the Other is conjured, e.g. ... *but the clouds...* (1976), not to mention the cases where the Other arrives, as in the "visit" in *Malone Dies* (1956), the writing operation in *How It Is* and so on. The Beckettian paradox of *non-relational relation* does not consist only in the non-existence of the Other; it is also about the Other's *persistence* in non-existence. This marks an antinomy, drawing on the impossibility of the Real. In *Fizzles* (1976), Beckett juxtaposes the possibility of encountering the Other with the absolute impossibility of such an encounter and the resultant interminability of solitude. In the second fizzle, Horn comes, always at night and reads out a set of notes about the protagonist to him (a prefiguration of the 1980 play *Ohio Impromptu*). These visits relieve the solitude of the protagonist, confined to a closed space. He has not seen his specular image in years and for the last five or six years no one else has seen him. The first-person narrator wards off the possibility that these brief nocturnal sessions with Horn are hallucinatory: "It is in outer space, not to be confused with the other, that

such images develop” (230). In the end, these visits enable him to get up on his feet and move about in the room.

As opposed to this enabling presence of the Other, ‘Fizzles 5’ establishes a stark logic of non-relation as it describes a closed geometrical space without the slightest possibility of encountering the Other, though there is company. The “arena” is “room for millions” in both stasis and motion and yet the track that follows the ditch, on a higher level does not allow any encounter. The last two lines, describing this track, resonate with non-relation: “Just wide enough for one. On it no two ever meet” (237). Though Brown is sensitive to this antinomy of the Other’s presence *and* non-existence, on occasions he seems to read the non-existence of the Other as absence. Perhaps the problematic could have been pursued through later-Lacan’s Borromean logic where a relation of two can only be posited from the third and hence non-relation founds relation. Brown acknowledges throughout that the *singularity* of the subject is a result of his *internally excluded* division from voice as *object a*, which also founds his non-relation with the Other. But in the absence of the Borromean logic, what does not crystalize is that the Lacanian non-existence of the Other is not so much the absence of the Other as it is the Real impossibility of establishing a relation with the Other. As we have it in Beckett’s *Quad*, the geometrical space and corporeal movement as inscription are organised in such a way that in spite of coming perilously close to one another, the four walkers can never touch the Other. For each, *even when the Other is there, the Other does not exist*. We can say the same about *Play*.

*Beckett, Lacan and the Voice* is divided into four long chapters, apart from a substantial introduction and a brief conclusion. Brown sets up the theoretical framework in the introductory chapter by emphasizing the voice in Beckett’s canon and establishing it as a complex field of study, before narrowing down his approach to the Lacanian voice. Tracing the voice from its function in grammar as well as its various literary evocations from Bakhtin’s “polyphony” to Blanchot’s voice of the neuter, Brown shows great skill in relating all this back to Beckett at every possible juncture, which keeps the reader focused. He suggests that Lacan’s resistance to making language into a “complete and totalising system” keeps the space open for “invention”. This is where literature functions as an invocation to the “insurmountable hole” of language (15). Brown also works his way through Beckett Studies, using the readings of Steven Connor and Shane Weller on issues like Beckett’s complex relation to language and figuration of alterity. Brown rightly points out the limited poststructuralist use of Lacan in Beckett Studies but what is somewhat missing in this account is an excursus through Derridean voice, to stake out the claims in a sharper way. Though the book includes passing references to Derrida, especially the Derrida-Lacan divide on “trace” and “letter”, what is lacking is an account of Derrida’s critique of the voice in what he calls “phonologism” (69; 80; 90)<sup>2</sup> and how it is different from Lacanian voice. A brief discussion of Derrida’s *Voice and Phenomenon* (1967) where he deconstructs Husserl’s privileging of voice over writing could have been helpful here. What Derrida calls the “body” or “corpse” of

the word, in its “inert sonority”, which is then animated by the voice’s signification (70), could have been contrasted with the Lacanian synchronization of voice with *lalangue* as a *detritus* of language or what Jacques-Alain Miller calls “the word prior to its grammatical and lexico-graphic systematization” (Miller, 38).

Brown’s understanding of the Lacanian voice as a “deficiency of meaning” (23) opens it towards the Real. It finds a homology in his definition of the voice as “one form of *jouissance*, by means of which the subject gives his existence consistency” as he faces the unnameable of language (30). *Jouissance* is a key term in Brown’s argument. He sees it as a positive solidification of the subject in later-Lacan. *Jouissance* of the Real pushes language into its a-signifying corporeality (*lalangue*). For Brown, the Beckettian horizon of subjective singularity is this *lalangue*, marked by the voice as it breaks with linguistic sense. He mobilizes later-Lacan, for whom “the signifier founds the Real as its own exterior” (45) and the voice is a vehicle for the signifier’s grafting on the *ex-sisting* Real. If drive is an echo of *saying* on the body, as Brown extracts from the first session of *Seminar XXIII*, the voice becomes the privileged drive-object here. In the same session, Lacan underlines the unstopability of the ear as an orifice to ground the insistence of the voice (I, 10). There is a tension here in Brown’s argument between the voice as Real (51) and the imperative vociferation of the superego (39; 55), which would be inclined towards the Symbolic.<sup>3</sup> If the voice, seen as torture in *The Unnamable* (1953) and *How It Is* is held within the function of the superego, it problematizes invocatory identification, where the voice eventually marks the absolute singularity of the subject. These different incarnations of the voice could have been shown in *How It Is* where it moves from the transcendental Other (an ear above in the zone of light) to an immanent Other, “extimate” to the subject who finally takes responsibility for it though it can only be “incorporated” and not “assimilated”, as the persisting machinery of quotations suggests at the end.

Though the argument has this tension between the Symbolic and Real aspects of the voice, it is productive because it allows us to ask the question whether there is a Real dimension of the Other insofar as *he is there and yet does not exist*. It is impossible to follow this thread in this review essay but I will nevertheless mark Lacan’s brief discussion of the Real Other in the Borromean knot in *Seminar XXII*: “if there is a real Other, it is nowhere else than in the knot itself and that is why there is no Other of the Other” (18.3.1975). As I have said above, the Borromean knot structurally inscribes relation only through non-relation and the third which keeps the One and the Other together can never produce a couple in the strict sense as the relation remains mediated and non-relational. In the same passage from *Seminar XXII*, Lacan also formulates that to identify with the Real of the Real Other is to obtain the *name-of-the-father*. As Brown goes at length to show how this patronymic fails in Beckett and the signifying chain cannot be quilted, he could have qualified this Real dimension of the Other to consolidate the Real voice. It would have also initiated a fascinating inquiry into the Real of the superego function.<sup>4</sup>



Chapter I, 'The Voice and Its Structure' begins by charting the trajectory from the *name-of-the-father's* linguistic buffering of the "unbearable nature of the voice" by creating a quilting point through to the failure of this paternal metaphor in Beckett, which exposes the intolerable rustle of the dead voice. Though Brown's reading hinges on this absence of the paternal *point de capiton* which foregrounds the menacing voice, to his credit, he avoids the diagnostic reductionism of a psychotic characterization of Beckettian subjectivity. He evokes the Real in the "not all" (*pas-tout*) and uses this logic to open up the "unlimited" dimension in Beckett's texts. The "not-all" of the Real is coterminous with the absence of the Other to quilt the discourse of the subject and this lack makes it unending, as in *The Unnamable*. Brown reads Beckett's recurrent stress on the "unborn" aspect of the subject as a deprivation of "any symbolic link to an Other (75) or again: "the Beckettian Other is fundamentally absent, one who does not exist, according to the structure that Lacan expresses in the axiom: '[...] there is no Other of the Other'" (96). This leads Brown to declare that the Beckettian subject "is completely alone, without any Other" (98). The non-relation between the subject and his great Others (the absent patronymic and the "impassive mother") establishes the argument and the Real status of the voice is underscored in this lack of relation (101). The problem with this reading of "absolute solitude" in Beckett is that it does not sufficiently emphasize the other side of solitude as a coexistent company. As Brown rightly observes, when Lacan theorizes the barred or lacking Other, the lack in the Other stems from the fact that "there is no Other of the Other". But Lacan does not say, *there is no Other* (as he says about the sexual relation). He says, *the Other does not exist*. As indicated above, I would read the Lacanian axiom as the antinomy of marking a Real Other: *there is an Other who does not exist for the subject*.

This logic finds culmination in Lacan's final work where he introduces the Borromean knot as a *writing* of the three orders: Real-Symbolic-Imaginary. The efficacy of this knot, in its minimally triadic form, is different from the regular chain in which the first ring links the second and the second links the third. The Borromean knot as a Real inscription is founded on *non-relation* insofar as all three rings are *singular*, i.e. there is no one-to-one relation. This singularity is irreducible to solitude. Moreover, they are knotted in a *singular* way insofar as cutting any one releases the other two and there is no differentiating among the three, except colouring. Each one can be the third that knots the other two in this *equivalent* structure. Lacan shows in *Seminars XXII* and *XXIII* that there are three *modes* in the knot: the Imaginary as *consistence*, the Real as *ex-sistence* and the Symbolic as *hole* (18.2.1975; 16.12.1975). The Real is founded on the non-relation with the Other as there is no dyadic relation without the mediation of the third but the knot also has an Imaginary consistence as the third inscribes a non-relational relation. A reading of Beckett through this Borromean logic would have inscribed the Real antinomy of solitude and company, where both are unverifiable. This is how Lacan reads the Real logic of contradiction in *Seminar XXI* (19.2.1974).<sup>5</sup> Brown's reading of subjective singularity as solitude (331; 333) means that the interpretation cannot accommo-

date textual traces like the return of the Roman Capitals as a sign of company in the voice's final declaration of solitude in *How It Is* or the complication of the final word "Alone" in *Company*, which is undecidably located between second and third-person passages as a one-word, one-sentence paragraph. If we ignore the punctuation, "Alone" becomes the final word of a sentence, written in the second-person: "And you as you always were." (42) This indicates how the voice remains a trace of company in solitude.

Lacanian solitude is not opposed to the multiple of company. In *Seminar XX*, Lacan insists that the formula "There is such a thing as One" must be read as "there's one all alone" (67) and this is the "swarming" solitude of any number of Ones who are non-related to the Others, as clarified by the brackets in Lacan's little schema:  $S_1 (S_1 (S_1 (S_1 \rightarrow S_2)))$  (143). If the lack of guarantee in the Other is a truth that emerges in Beckett, the Beckettian non-relation does not mean that the Other is absent. In *How It Is*, the crawlers' gift of forgetting ensures that every inscription on the body, as an index of the encounter, marks it as the first. Every encounter with the Other is *unary* ["each time the first" (118)] and in spite of an endless series of encounters, it cannot found a relation insofar as the One never becomes the Two of addition. We do not have a 1-2-3 but only a 1-1-1. And yet at the end, when the narrator denies the presence of crawlers in the mud as "all balls" (127), his speech is still invaded by the Roman Capitals, inscribed on his body by his Bom. As he declares his solitude at the level of the signifier's content (*said*), its *invocatory* body (*saying*) suggests an irreducible antinomy by marking the presence of the Other as Real. It is not that Brown is entirely oblivious to this antinomy. He is aware that in *How It Is*, there is an "effort to produce the presence of an Other who, fundamentally, proves to be absent and who, as a result, may exist — at least for the duration of the performance — as *divided*, as a subject" (155) or again: "Beckett's aesthetics of indeterminacy [...] according to which the nonexistence of the Other is posited simultaneously with the idea of his existence" (315). But as he does not engage with later-Lacan's Borromean logic or the Real dimension of the Other, the argument weighs little too heavily on singularity as solitude and non-existence as absence.

In the second chapter 'Disjunction of Pronouns', Brown approaches the voice through the split between the subject of enunciation and the subject of reference as he explores the Beckettian narrator's refusal to use the first-person-pronoun. While this approach is not unique and poststructuralist Beckett critics like Carla Locatelli and Daniel Katz have broached the topic,<sup>6</sup> Brown's reading of *Not I* breaks new ground by connecting the shifting pronouns with the material dimension of language and corporeal drives. He reflects that "the invasion by the voice is inseparable from this evacuation of the unified body" (125) in the blabbering lips, projected from the unfathomable dark in Beckett's play. The voice marks "the impact of the signifier on the body" as an effect of *jouissance*. Billie Whitelaw's experiences as the actress playing Mouth compliment this convincingly new interpretation of tormenting *jouissance* in Beckett. The reading of *Company* in this chapter highlights the important paradox that the voice of torture is also a form of company and the

production of the “I” has the function of silencing the voice, which the text resists (143). The ritual of Othering the self through discourse in *A Piece of Monologue* develops the argument about addressing the Other who does not exist. The third chapter explores “topological forms” of the voice by focusing on the two operations of *continuity* and *interruption* in the Beckettian text. The body becomes crucial in this argument as Brown shows the Beckettian subject’s response to the torture of the voice through acts of “physical inscription” such as May’s pacing in *Footfalls*. The reading of *Eh Joe* reiterates the connection between voice and *jouissance* by showing how Joe enjoys the process of self-flagellation through the voice of the superego. The argument is pinned on *jouissance* as an emissary of death-drive and inter-penetrates the “image” and the “voice”, not only at the level of the televisual medium but also on the plane of scopic drive.

The Lacanian understanding of interruption as a feature of the signifier that both causes and limits *jouissance* speaks to Beckett’s emphasis on the halting knock in *Ohio Impromptu* or the disturbing chime in *Footfalls*. Instead of applying one onto another, Brown creates a dialogue between the two where the Beckettian text speaks back to Lacan: “interruptions thus situate the subject outside the possible: at a point where signifiers border on the irreconcilable” (200). The moving body producing a writing through motility in Beckett, is for Brown, an “attempt to become one’s own other” (224) in plays like *Rockaby* and *Footfalls* as the subject *invents* responses to the non-existence of the Other. Brown focalizes the Beckettian attention towards *making an image* as a way of “lodging himself in relation to his other” (226) because “the imaginary register can designate the place it has abandoned” and “offers a barrier to the *real*” (227). The intricately detailed reading of the radio-play *Rough for Radio II* is remarkable for locating the image in the absence of the visual frame. The “reading voice”, positing the non-existent Other by becoming one’s own other is a high-point in Brown’s reading. Though there is no undervaluing that corporeal inscription and imaginary crystallization are Beckettian subject’s ways of coping with the Real voice of torment; as Brown does not evoke the Real Other, the argument risks falling back on the Imaginary other. We are thus left wondering whether the Beckettian subject becoming his own other is a *small other* (the Lacanian specular image in the mirror) or a *big Other*.

If the self-othering produces the image as the empty locus of the other, it may take away from the cutting edge of the Real in later-Lacan and end up suggesting that Beckett eventually screens the Real with the Imaginary. This makes him look like a less radical author *qua* the Real than what he is. One could show how Beckett approaches the Real as mathematical impasses of formalisation and texts like *Worstward Ho* are driven by a *jouissance* of worsening which takes the Symbolic to the breaking-point of the Real where the three pins and one pinhole fix the “bounds of boundless void” (103) as minimal notches of Lacanian material writing.<sup>7</sup> This problem reflects back on the absence of the Borromean structure in Brown’s argument. Had he engaged with the Borromean inscription of the three registers, it could have been shown (as Lacan does in *Seminar XXII* and *XXIII*) how *all three rings of the knot*

*participate* in the Imaginary as consistence, the Real as existence and the Symbolic as hole. It would have spliced the Symbolic big Other with the Imaginary small other (not to mention the Real Other). This way, the throwback to the Imaginary would not have toned down Beckett's radical engagement with the Real, which makes him such an important writer from the later-Lacanian perspective.

The fourth and final chapter, also the longest, raises the question of technology to show the alterity of the voice *qua* language. The tape-recorder in *Krapp's Last Tape* is one such technological filter of the recorded voice. If we follow Brown's reading of the play, death is the name of the Other that awaits Krapp in the future and he "rejects life" by "accepting to be a vehicle for the voice of the Other" (252). If this is another way the Beckettian subject shows the *jouissance* of death-drive, the question returns whether we should see the Other of death as Real, Symbolic or Imaginary. The argument that the radio voice has more otherness because it is shorn of a corresponding image (260) drives home what Brown calls the "abolition of the imaginary" (257) or again: "the voice destroys the imaginary envelope" (265). But this point creates friction with the aforementioned "protective" function of the image. A qualification about these two different purchases on the image would have been helpful. Brown is illuminating on the function of the "sound editor" as "a way of dealing with the failure to become a subject" (281), which gives primacy to voice as a technological object. He counters the critique that thinkers like Lacan reduce technology to subjectivity by showing throughout this chapter how voice emerges as the Real object of technology. Brown furnishes elaborate readings of neglected plays like *Cascando*, *Rough for Radio I* and *Words and Music*. These are important additions to Beckett Studies. Due to the intricate textual nature of these brilliant readings, it is not possible to go into their details and we can only follow, as we have, the contours of the broad argument. The book deserves a careful reading for these interpretations alone and it would be interesting to see how the readings in the final chapter interact with Ulrika Maude's readings of technology and the body in Beckett, which surprisingly does not get a more substantial working through.<sup>8</sup>

Brown arrives at "voice as writing" (315) from the transcription of music in *Rough for Radio I* and *Cascando* and pursues the thread by going back to the trilogy of novels: *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*. He traces this writing at the level of the "unary trait" and the readings continue to invest in the Real voice as the *unlimited* of not-all (*pas-tout*) in Beckett. However, *not-all* as the *limit* of the Symbolic remains underdeveloped. Brown shows how the Beckettian subject tackles the unlimited Real of the voice by containing it through the "limited whole" of the "discursive structure" (377). The argument about containment as a phallic fixing (380-82) again risks de-radicalizing the Real. A Borromean acknowledgment of *equivalence* of the three registers would have counterbalanced the risk. The 'conclusion' provides some necessary rounding off about the voice, being heard where nomination "fails to exhaustively express the subject's being" (385) and the effect of technology, being "to radically deny or exclude the subject, thus extending the impact of the voice" (388). The function of the sound-editor as a *reader* of the voice is a key clarification:

“the sound director testifies to the impossibility of achieving a true mediation between the register of meaning, and the voice devoid of meaning. Only the work of creation can deal with this breach on a material level” (389).

To conclude, *Beckett, Lacan and the Voice*, notwithstanding the theoretical tensions symptomatic of a truly rigorous reading, offers the first convincing Lacanian interpretation of Beckett. The handling of Beckett’s bilingual *oeuvre* with the combination of the best of both French and English readings of Lacan and Beckett gives it an impressive sweep. It is also a landmark study for extending the Lacanian category of the voice into the literary domain. The voice forces the question of subject in literature with the alterity of the ventriloquised literary object. In reading this thoroughly researched and lucidly composed book, the reader will feel both pleasure and *jouissance* but the latter is checked in great economy. In the spirit of Brown’s Lacanian equivocation between “enjoy (*jouis*)” and “I hear (*j’ouis*)”, let us enjoy what we have here and what this here makes us hear.

#### Notes

1. In this passage from *Seminar XXV*, Lacan connects his formula that there is no meta-language with the non-existence of language and the presence of *lalangue* as a bare being of language or shall we say, the body of language. The fact that there is no metalanguage connects to the formulation that there is no Other of the Other and therefore the Other does not exist or is barred. We will see how this formulation about the Other’s non-existence is the kernel of Brown’s Lacanian reading of Beckett.
2. Brown hints at this difference between Derridean and Lacanian voice only once through Dolar (171) but does not develop this thread.
3. On 24<sup>th</sup> November 1975, in conversation with the Yale University students, Lacan states this most explicitly: “Freud’s *Id* is the real. The symbolic, from which the superego arises, has to do with the hole.”
4. Brown mentions Mladen Dolar’s point that the superego can be seen as the Other of the Other (336). This claim may have an interesting dialogue with the Borromean triadic structure where the third as the Real (the Other of the Other) knots the One with the Other.
5. Lacan reflects: “what constitutes the Real, is that through logic, something happens, which demonstrates, not that *p* and *non-p* are both false, but that neither one nor the other can in any way be logically verified” (19.2.1974).
6. See Carla Locatelli’s book *Unwording the World: Samuel Beckett’s Prose Works after the Nobel Prize* and Daniel Katz’s book *Saying I No More: Subjectivity and Consciousness in the prose of Samuel Beckett*.
7. I pursue some of these threads of Lacanian writing in my article “Lacan and Beckett: Acts of Writing between Literature and Psychoanalysis.” in the forthcoming 2017 SBTA issue of *Samuel Beckett and Extensions of the Mind*.
8. See Ulrika Maude’s book *Beckett, Technology and the Body*. For example, Maude’s discussion of skin as the conjunction of the inside and the outside of the body could be related to Lacan’s Möbian logic.

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