

GUILLAUME ARTOUS-BOUVET

OF A LATENT PROSE

Two Philosophical Readings

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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:¹

À la nue accablante tu	Struck dumb at the cloud-base
Basse de basalte et de laves	lowering basalt and lava
À même les échos esclaves	on top of enslaved echoes
Par une trompe sans vertu	by a worthless horn
Quel sépulcral naufrage (tu	what sepulchral shipwreck (you
Le sais, écume, mais y baves)	know it, foam, but just drivel)
Suprême une entre les épaves	supreme among flotsam
Abolit le mât dévêtu	stripped the mast bare, then
	annulled it
Ou cela que furibond faute	or the one that, mad for the want
De quelque perdition haute	of some fine distress
Tout l’abîme vain éployé	the abyss spread uselessly
Dans le si blanc cheveu qui	in a single bright white hair
traîne	will have drowned like a miser
Avarement aura noyé	the flank of a siren child. ²
Le flanc enfant d’une sirène	

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”.³
2. “What pivot, in these contrasts, am I assuming for intelligibility? We need a guarantee. — Syntax —.”⁴

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”.⁵

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”.⁶
2. “Everything that occurs is foreshortened and, as it were, hypothetical; narrative is avoided”.⁷

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”⁸ (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.⁹

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.¹⁰

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?”¹¹

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*”.¹² This second negation, he clarifies, “*cancel[s] out the vanishing [of the ship] itself*”.¹³ 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”¹⁴: 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?”¹⁵ 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”¹⁶ [*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”.¹⁷ 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 grammarly:
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. ¹⁸

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 grammarly], **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.