

Book Review

Essais sur Mallarmé: Lloyd James Austin edited by Malcolm Bowie. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995. 298 pp. \$79.95

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Surprisingly, this book represents the first compilation of Austin's nineteen essays on Mallarmé written in French. Spanning a period of forty years, these essays originally appeared in a diverse assortment of periodicals and volumes. The earliest essay was written in 1951 and the latest in 1991, but the overwhelming majority were published in France in the 1950's and 60's. Although not arranged accordingly, they can be roughly divided into three categories: those which are biographical in nature, those which analyze specific poems, and those which discuss scholarly works on Mallarmé by Austin and other academics.

Many of these essays are devoted to elucidating Mallarmé's influences and friendships. In "Mallarmé disciple de Baudelaire," for instance, Austin discusses Baudelaire's profound and lasting effect on the young Mallarmé. Closely examining eleven poems published in *Le Parnasse contemporain* in 1866, Austin cites specific examples of Baudelaire's presence in the young poet's work. Austin also succeeds in revealing the seeds of a new phase of expression inherent in these early poems which mark Mallarmé's eventual evolution from Baudelarian disciple to master in his own right. It is an evolution witnessed by the progression of Mallarmé's quest for pure Beauty to his search for the impersonal. More recent research, however, has focused on textual evidence which indicates that Mallarmé's debt to Beaudelaire was much greater and longer lived. Yves Bonnefoy, Henri Misihonnic, Barbara Johnson, and Dominique Fisher, for example, have written at length about Mallarmé's debt to Beaudelaire's conception of the prose poem and rhythm.

Little critical attention has been given to Hegel's influence on Mallarmé, which Austin discusses at length in "Mallarmé et le rêve du 'Livre.'"

Citing excerpts from letters to and from Eugène Lefébure and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Austin carefully constructs his argument that Mallarmé was greatly influenced by Hegel's dialectic. However, Hegel's notion of the absolute in relation to Mallarmé's notion of the Livre is not made explicit. Austin says, for instance, that Mallarmé "...avait vu, d'après Hegel, que l'histoire du monde était celle de l'évolution de l'Esprit vers une ultime prise de conscience de soi" and that Mallarmé "...en conclut que le but même de l'Univers était le Livre qui résumerait cette évolution, qui exprimerait cette prise de conscience suprême" (84). However, if one situates Mallarmé's work in *la modernité*, the end of the absolute is implicit. The *oeuvre* no longer has meaning: it is the very materiality of language that makes the poem a work of art. In other words, for Mallarmé, "La poésie se fait avec des mots."

In Chapter 3, Austin discusses the critique that Mallarmé makes of Richard Wagner in his sonnet *Hommage*. Austin's study of Mallarmé and Wagner is important in that it distinguishes the difference between the two artists' notion of the *Mythe*. Mallarmé reproaches Wagner's promotion of Germanic myths, since for Mallarmé, the Myth's value is to be found in its impersonality. Here, however, Austin neglects to mention Frederick Nietzsche's remarkable influence on Mallarmé. It is indeed interesting to note that Mallarmé makes the same critique of Wagner as does Nietzsche in regard to the hero, to music, and to the *mise en scene*.

For those scholars interested in biographical information, these essays offer a wealth of material on Mallarmé's life. From his friendships with poets such as Verlaine to his patronage of artists such as Berthe Morisot, Manet, and Redon, Mallarmé's correspondence asserts his fierce dedication to all the arts.

Admittedly, the essays which have fared the worst over time are those which systematically analyze poems such as "L'Après-midi d'un faune," "Le Pitre chatié," "Prose pour des Esseintes," and "Cantique de saint Jean." Austin painstakingly discusses these poems line by line, and even offers the reader versions predating the penultimate one. What is regrettably absent, however, is any consideration of Mallarmé's unprecedented use of spatial imagery and syntax in his treatment of the prose poem. When referring to Mallarmé's desire to *nommer un objet pour le nier afin que seul l'Idée en demeure*, Austin neglects to discuss how, in Mallarmé's hand, the word is transformed from a linguistic entity to a textual one. Barbara Johnson would later exploit this very notion through her discussion of Mallarmé's use of *syntaxe-pivot*.

Some of the best moments in the book are those when Austin juxtaposes Mallarmé's poems with his correspondence. It is when Mallarmé is allowed to speak for himself that his poetry seems the most accessible. So daunting a task was Austin's assembling and documenting what has become the definitive edition of the *Correspondances* that he devotes two chapters to discussing the work involved in its completion.

Those students of Mallarmé who are interested in establishing a solid background in earlier scholarly research and criticism will not be disappointed by this collection. Indeed, Austin's essays would be especially useful to undergraduates encountering Mallarmé's work for the first time. However, those anticipating a more contemporary critical approach would be wise to pursue more recent research.

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