Stephane Mallarme: A Reconsideration

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It seems curious that two wholly contradictory schools of poetry should have traced their origins back to one and the same man. Both the greatest Decadent theorist—Laforgue—and the greatest Symbolist—Mallarmé—considered themselves legitimate heirs of Baudelaire. And, indeed, they were equally justified in their claims. A great and complex poet like Baudelaire offers many points of departure for future writers; what seems unified in him by virtue of his artistic discipline may be decomposed into isolated strains by his followers. Thus the Decadents inherited and subsequently modified Baudelaire’s love for sensory detail, his nervous realism, and his confessional frankness, while the Symbolists fastened on his transcendentalism and his worship of “absolute” beauty, the refractions of which he had perceived throughout the phenomenal world.

Two main tendencies, then, stem from Baudelaire: one towards a further particularization of our sense perceptions, the other towards the evocation of “absolute” and hence supra-sensory beauty. The Symbolists showed little interest in Baudelaire’s sharp realistic detail and even less in the frankness of his confessions; in fact, both these traits made them feel slightly uneasy. Nor did they relish his constant pursuit of the bizarre and the strikingly novel. While Laforgue praised Baudelaire for combining the properties of “a cat, a Hindu, a Yankee, an Episcopalian and an alchemist,” Mallarmé emphasized the severe and solemn beauty of many Baudelairian pieces. It was this beauty he wanted to emulate; to him, as to Baudelaire at his best, poetry was a ceremonial or indeed a ritual. Mallarmé’s early sonnets are strongly reminiscent of his master in both cadence and imagery; but Baudelaire’s metallic ring is hushed, his images are chastened,
and the whole atmosphere breathes a calm which is wholly absent from the earlier poet.

Mallarmé's great enemy—cunningly evaded rather than defeated in open battle—was reality. To him reality meant strife, squalor, impurity; it also meant, metaphysically speaking, relativity. His art was a continuous approximation to the Absolute, to that realm where human aspirations are absorbed in the stillness of the ideal. All his life his mind circled around the problem of fatality and chance—that fascinating and insoluble problem—and his poetry is the greatest attempt in literary history to write lines in which there would be nothing fortuitous, nothing adventitious, nothing savoring of the heat and struggle of human existence. Thus a higher reality is posited—the reality of art—which is wholly autonomous and does not correspond to anything actual. This tendency finally results in an art without subject matter, turned back upon itself and deriving pleasure only from the beauty of its outline, as Narcissus did from his image in the river. All great art of the past had aimed at the transfiguration of actual life and actual experience; but, however complete the transsubstantiation, it started out by feeding on base and transitory matter. Mallarmé's fastidiousness felt offended at such a thought; he did not wish to be reminded of impurity, even indirectly. Besides, life was forever vague, amorphous, impossible to order or classify. He finally came to consider his own imaginative reality not only purer but also more tangible than the reality of actual life. There is more than mere irony in his famous statement: "I exhibit with dandyism my incompetence to anything other than the Absolute."

A poet who rejects life is apt to become either rigid and austere in his verse, or else strident and cynical. Mallarmé's rejection of life is of a different nature. It seems almost an impersonal act—so quiet is his gesture, so unemphatic the renunciation. It is precisely this clean division of life into an artistic and an unartistic part which precludes any violent conflict. Since reality and poetry are wholly isolated from each other, the former can make no demands on the latter, nor is the artist likely to hanker for that fullness of experience he has so irrevocably rejected. Paradoxically, their very isolation from each other vouchsafes a possible mediation between life and letters: they exclude each other materially, but personal contentment may become a lower step in a hierarchy whose highest step is assigned to the satisfactions of art.
This solution, however, Mallarmé was not able to achieve without a previous inner struggle. The fact that his poetry shows few traces of such a struggle should not lead us to believe that the victory was easily gained.

Having succeeded in isolating poetry from life, Mallarmé next turned his attention to a revaluation of poetic subject matter. In their own way the Decadent poets of the period were trying the same thing, that is, to obliterate the traditional distinction between "poetic" and "unpoetic" subjects. Yet it must be said that on the whole they failed to solve the problem. By trying not to be "poetic" in the conventional sense they became anti-poetic. Their fallacy consisted in the view that any traditional conception of poetic beauty is ipso facto suspect, and that all subjects are virtually of equal poetic value.

To Mallarmé, no theme is a priori "poetic"; but this does not imply that all themes are of equal potential value for the purposes of poetry. He is determined to develop all the potentialities of the theme he has selected for treatment; he knows, however, that each theme has a different poetic charge. Thus he may consider a bicycle gliding down the road a wholly legitimate theme, yet he is far from asserting that the potentialities of this theme are equal to the potentialities of, say, the hair of a beautiful woman. In other words, even though he banishes no subject from the realm of poetry, he is convinced that there is a hierarchy of themes, governed not so much by the traditional notions of "loftiness" and "triviality" as by the richness of their poetic implications. Roger Fry, in the preface to his Mallarmé translation, comments very pertinently on this aspect of the poet's method. "The poetical poet," he writes, "makes use of words and material already consecrated by poetry, and with this he ornaments and embroiders his own theme. Mallarmé's method is the opposite of this. His poetry is the unfolding of something implicit in the theme. By the contemplation of the theme he discovers new and unsuspected relations. He is not concerned that the theme itself, or the objects it comprises, should already have poetical quality, nor does he seek to find relations with other things already charged with emotion." The novelty of this attitude is perhaps not apparent at first sight, mainly because Mallarmé's themes as such do not greatly differ from those of his predecessors. True, some of his favorite subjects would have been con-

1 I am here referring to their general method. In the few instances where Corbière and Laforgue wrote great poetry it was by temporarily departing from the method.
sidered slight and trivial by most of the earlier poets; but the bulk of his work shows no radical departure from what the Parnassiens had deemed fit subject matter for poetry. The reason for this close correspondence lies in the fact that Mallarmé and the Parnassiens were unanimous in their cult of sensory beauty. However, Mallarmé delighted in wholly different aspects of that beauty; he was able to detect poetic potentialities where neither Gautier nor Baudelaire had been able to detect them. Thus his themes are traditional with a difference; as soon as we turn from them to his imagery and, especially, to his diction, we begin to realize the whole import of his innovations.

Mallarmé was the first French poet to use words consistently for their connotative rather than for their denotative value. Straight denotation was incompatible with the language of poetry, for poetry should not attempt to communicate rational experiences. For the latter purpose, prose was the proper vehicle; verse should carry with it the vagueness of dream and create in the reader a state of enchantment. Hence the numerous incantatory lines in Mallarmé, which, though not wholly without meaning, need the support of the context to be clearly apprehended. The famous exordium of Don du Poème:

Je t'apporte l'enfant d'une nuit d'Idumée!

is a good example. As we read on, it becomes increasingly clear that the poet here celebrates the birth of a poem—his "Herodias"; he has been working at it all night, and now dawn breaks and he beholds the finished product, "black, with wing bleeding, pale and unfeathered." It is, indeed, as unattractive to the eye as a newborn child; and the bewildered father entrusts it to the loving care of his wife—"O nursing mother . . . receive this horrible birth"—hoping that she may adopt it, and feed it like her own child.

Don du Poème is anything but a lucid piece; yet after having read the whole poem, we are more or less able to grasp the various oblique references and correspondences. The first line then becomes contextually clear—Salome is a princess of Idumean descent.2 Detached from its context, it remains wholly obscure. Now it is true that this latter trait is not at all peculiar to Mallarmé; no other poet, however, is

2 Mr. Denis Saurat's cabalistic interpretation of "La Nuit d'Idumée" (Nouvelle Revue Française, 1931, pp. 920 ff.) I find highly interesting but not compelling.
as rich as he in single lines which are obscure and, at the same time, linger in the memory by virtue of their strange evocative charm. ³

The whole poem is so characteristic of what may be called Mallarmé’s “middle period”—that is, the period between his early Baudelairean pieces and the late experimental sonnets—that I shall quote it in full and then analyze some of its structural features.

Je t’apporte l’enfant d’une nuit d’Idumée!
Noire, à l’aile saignante et pâle, déplumée,
Par le verre brulé d’aramates et d’or,
Par les carreaux glacés, hélas! mornes encor
L’aurore se jeta sur la lampe angélique,
Palmes! et quand elle a montré cette relique
A ce père essayant un sourire ennemi,
La solitude bleue et stérile a frémi.
O la berceuse, avec ta fille et l’innocence
De vos pieds froids, accueille une horrible naissance
Et ta voix rappelant viole et clavecin,
Avec le doigt fané presseras-tu le sein
Par qui coule en blancheur sibylline la femme
Pour les lèvres que l’air du vierge azur affame?

Perhaps the most striking feature of this piece—next to the perfect beauty of its movement—is the poet’s consistent use of circumlocutions. Hardly any of the objects he refers to are mentioned by name; and in the few instances where Mallarmé chooses direct expression, he secures the necessary air of unreality in different ways. Thus, in the line

L’aurore se jeta sur la lampe angélique

he dynamizes, through his choice of the verb jeta, a relationship which is ordinarily conceived in stationary terms. Similarly, the “frozen

³ Mr. Yvor Winters in his essay “The Extension and Reintegration of the Human Spirit through the Poetry mainly French and American since Poe and Baudelaire” (New Caravan, 1929) has an interesting passage on the point in question. After quoting J. Rivière’s praise of the Baudelaian line

“Le printemps adorable a perdu son odeur”

he proceeds: “And yet the weight that one feels in this line when one reads it in the poem—Le Goût du Néant—is in a considerable part lost in isolation, and this fact reveals at least one very important part of the secret of Baudelaire’s art. . . . Mallarmé, in his later work especially, tended more and more to isolate the arcana of expression (consider, for instance, the sonnet beginning Surgi de la croupe et du bon, the very first line of which, with nothing to follow, no meaning, no subject attached, is dynamic) through the choice of subjects that in themselves are trivial or bizarre or both.”

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panes" become less real through the additional epithet *mornes*, which transfers a state of mind to the sensory object; and his wife's voice is introduced not for its intrinsic quality but for its evocative charm, which reminds the poet of "viol and clavecin." As for the rest of the piece, each item is expressed in a wholly oblique manner; each word strains to leave the actual scene in order to catch an echo of something which is really *outside the compass of the poem*, even though it may conceivably associate with it and, by so doing, reinforce it.

Mallarmé's complex syntax, which abounds in inversions and appositions, supports the obliquity of his utterance to the highest possible degree. The involutions of his periods unfold slowly, coil after coil, and then come to a sudden and wholly unexpected stop. The movement of his line becomes even more sinuous on account of the free use Mallarmé makes of the *enjambement*. The co-ordination of these various traits leads to a kind of poetry in which the elements of reality are well-nigh obliterated. His images do not correspond to any sensory objects; his sentence structure bears no resemblance whatever to actual speech; and his words are chosen solely for their associative potency or, as Roger Fry puts it, for their *aura*. In the preface already quoted, Mr. Fry writes:

> If I am right in thinking that this cumulative effect of the auras of words is the essential quality of the poetic art, Mallarmé must be regarded as one of the poets who has studied it most intently and deliberately. It may, of course, be discovered that that conscious and deliberate focusing on the essence of art is not fortunate for the artist. It may be that the greatest art is not the purest, that the richest forms only emerge from a certain richness of content, however unimportant that content may be in the final result. But, these are questions which concern the psychology of artistic production, rather than the nature of aesthetic perception. Certainly no poet has set words with greater art in their surrounding, or given them by their setting a more sudden and unexpected evocative power.

Each new poem of Mallarmé is a further step towards that volatilization of content he strove for. His two longest and most ambitious poems—"Herodias" and "The Afternoon of a Faun"—still show a residuum of palpable sense and coherence; but, like his Faun, the poet evaporates more and more the sensual forms into an "empty, sonorous, monotonous line." In his later sonnets the atmosphere becomes so rarefied as to be unbreathable. Here all connecting links are finally
abandoned; the expression is no longer periphrastic but wholly elliptic. These pieces are, with few exceptions, intérieurs, which purport to deal with concrete inanimate objects; but, paradoxically, the more concrete the object Mallarmé paraphrases, the more allusive and enigmatic becomes his treatment of it.

Mallarmé's hate of contingency had made him averse to any kind of subjective poetry; that is, to a poetry which deals explicitly or symbolically with human experience. He consequently turned more and more towards the world of inanimate objects. Here, at last, was a world that consisted in itself, immutably and serenely, forever removed from the curse of growth and decay. At the same time, his skepticism with regard to any conscious handling of words increased steadily. Since he could not see any deeper correspondence between words and ideas, whether pre-established or sanctioned by convention, it was only natural that he should end by according complete supremacy to the poetic medium as such. His well-known statement: "L'oeuvre pure implique la disparition élocutoire du poète, qui cède l'initiative aux mots, par le heurt de leur inégalité mobilisés" is an excellent expression of that belief. Words are here regarded as sentient beings, which are perfectly capable of self-government; the role of the poet is reduced to that of a master of ceremonies, who corrects occasional false steps, adds the finishing touches, and watches carefully lest propriety be violated. Mr. Peter Quennell, in his essay on Mallarmé, characterizes the attitude very well:

He would have preferred if his poems could have had a spontaneous generation; he deplored the arrogance of the creator, the creator's bustling inefficiency and noise,—having always at his back the creator's shrilly enunciated desire for "self-expression," and taking refuge from it in a system which should, as far as possible, have excluded the human element, the element of personal hazard, substituting a grave obscurity which is the result of abstruse laws efficiently carried out, where at present there was the chaos of comprehensible observances light-heartedly abused.

Mallarmé's later poems, especially the sonnets, follow his precepts as closely as is humanly possible. He leaves, indeed, the "initiative to the words." Through lines whose otherwise impenetrable obscurity is at times lit up by a faint glimmer of meaning or else by an equally faint ironic smile, the poet follows the strange vagaries of his verbal images, in turn loosening and tightening the reins, and always intent on perfect
concinnity and propriety, on sobriety of feeling and metrical flawlessness. Here is an example—by no means the most extreme—of Mallarmé's later method. It is particularly interesting in that it still deals with human experience, but the experience has reached the point of evanescence.

M'introduire dans ton histoire
C'est en héros effarouché
S'il a du talon nu touché
Quelque gazon de territoire

A des glaciers attentatoire
Je ne sais le naïf péché
Que tu n'auras pas empeché
De rire très haut sa victoire

Dis si je ne suis pas joyeux
Tonnerre et rubis aux moyeux
De voir en l'air que ce feu troue

Avec des royaumes épars
Comme mourir pourpre la roue
Du seul vésperal de mes chars

And here is Roger Fry's literal English translation:

To get myself into your story
'Tis as a hero affrighted
Has his naked foot but touched
Some lawn of that territory

Violator of glaciers
I know no sin so naive be it
That you will not have prevented
From laughing's victory aloud

Say if I am not joyous
Thunder and rubies at the axles
To see in this fire-pierced air

Amid scattered realms
As though dying purple the wheel
Of my sole chariot of evening

Now this is obviously an erotic poem; beyond that, very little can be stated with assuredness. It may fairly be conjectured that the phrase
"to get myself into your story" refers to the "affrighted hero's" attempt to win the beloved woman; apparently he has had some partial success—hence the term "violator of glaciers," which would be incomprehensible otherwise—but his success is not only incomplete but also illicit. He has, in the words of Charles Mauron's commentary, "outstepped the permissible limits"; hence he cannot rejoice at his preliminary victories ("I know no sin so naive be it" ff.). The two quatrains are still held together by a tenuous thread of coherent meaning; the sestet, however, is likely to baffle the reader completely. Various explanations have been attempted, all equally ingenious and equally arbitrary. Mr. Mauron suggests that "the poet has not tasted all the fruits of his victory. Very well then, since no triumph is conceded, he will command one for himself, as poets can at the expense of their imagination. And it shall be a real triumph in the antique style, with a chariot, imperial purple, and scattered kingdoms all around."

For readers who might demur to this exegesis, Mr. Mauron has an alternative interpretation in store. "If one imagines," he says, "that the lovers go to a show of fireworks, the wheel becomes a set-piece with red lights and explosions at the centre, dying to purple on the circumference." Paul Valéry, on the other hand, suggests "a promenade in a carriage with wheels either actually red or merely reddened by the reflection of a setting sun." These conjectures could, of course, be continued *ad libitum*.

So much for the notional content of the poem. If we examine it in its technical aspects, we find Mallarmé's previous peculiarities multiplied. The imagery consists of a loose sequence of metaphors—"ils s'allument de reflets reciproques comme une virtuelle trainée de feux sur des piergeries"—; straight comparisons are carefully avoided. ("I erase the word *like* from the dictionary," Mallarmé once remarked to Edouard Dujardin.) These metaphors may be called *symbols*; but I consider the term *symbol* not quite appropriate in this case. Mallarmé's images merge into each other with astounding ease, whereas symbols are generally characterized by a certain specific weight and, also, by a certain consistency of application. Again we notice the poet's predilection for appositive phrases—"Violator of glaciers," "Thunder and rubies at the axles"—and for violent inversions—"To get myself into your story / 'Tis as a hero affrighted."

The short eight-syllable line reinforces the general suppleness and volatility; at the
same time a certain sensuous elegance of contour is preserved, which reminds us of the poet's earlier work.

Poems like this are saved from complete gratuitousness only by the poet's perfect taste. He does not exploit any of his verbal felicities; his images vanish as quickly as they appear, and the whole tone of his delivery is so subdued that at times it seems reduced to a whisper. In this respect, too, Mallarmé was wholly consistent with his theory.

To quote Mr. Quennell again: "'Me voici,' exclaims the modern writer, none the less shaking out between us the folds of his mysterious pudeur. It was Mallarmé, was it not, who taught him this air of proffering a solution when he wishes to propound an enigma;—from Mallarmé, among others, that he learned this deceptive air of extralucidity, this ambiguous clarity of his which is so much more impenetrable than any attempt at deliberate mystification;—Mallarmé who, before ever M. Jean Cocteau put it into words, formulated the principle of tact in audacity? 'Le tact dans l'audace c'est de savoir jusqu'au on peut aller trop loin.'” Now the question if and to what extent Mallarmé's enigmaticalness was deliberate is impossible to decide, since the poet never made an unequivocal statement regarding it. When asked about obscure passages in his poems, he used to exhibit a bland surprise which, no doubt, was a sign of irony rather than of any real conviction that readers tended to exaggerate his difficulty. As for his "ambiguous clarity," it results from the scant residuum of sense, which can still be found in the later sonnets. Consistent though he was in every other respect, Mallarmé seems to have been unwilling to bring this ultimate sacrifice demanded by his theory. He was apparently aware that to go farther in that direction would have meant to destroy something equally important to him: the connotative unity of the poem.

This minimum unity, as I should like to call it, is exemplified in the sonnet quoted above. The plane of reference consists of multiple layers, and each image, though fleeting, imparts its overtones to the following. Thus the implied whiteness of the "naked foot" is taken up by the glacier image; and the general quality of "red" is refracted throughout the sestet into three different nuances: the purple of the wheel, the rubies of the axle, and the fiery color of the air. Each stratum of expression is charged with a different potency; hence the appeal to our imagination will vary accordingly. The relative simplicity of a theme like the one in question does in no way detract
from the subtlety and diversity of this refraction. On the other hand, the less familiar the theme—and most of Mallarmé's later pieces deal with marginal and remote material—the less likely are we to grasp the various cross-correspondences. As Roger Fry puts it:

This desire to exhaust even in the most trivial themes the possible poetic relations explains at once Mallarmé's syntax and his so often resulting obscurity. For him it was essential to bring out all the cross-correspondences and interpenetrations of the verbal images. To do this it is often necessary to bring words into closer apposition than an ordinary statement would allow, or it may be necessary that a particular word should continue to vibrate as it were for a long time, until its vibrations be taken up by another word.

Mallarmé went as far as a poet can conceivably go both in the dislocation of syntax and in the allusiveness and ambiguity of statement. These traits make for poetic disintegration, but he was able—at least in a large portion of his work—to use them with impunity on account of his strict adherence to traditional meter. Had Mallarmé decided to try metrical experimentation, the whole danger of his method would have become apparent. As it is, he exhibits a rigorous classicism in all points of versification; and the steadily maintained equilibrium between this metrical orthodoxy and his revolutionary treatment of all verbal and syntactical aspects is one of the most fascinating features of Mallarmé's poetry. Indeed, no poet, whether French or otherwise, ever attempted to imitate his precarious balance; and it may be added that this is not the only point in which Mallarmé is inimitable. To emulate him successfully would require an equally impeccable craftsmanship combined with an equal contempt for reality and for human experience as poetic material: a combination which is highly improbable and, perhaps, unique. What influence Mallarmé exerted derives partly from his use of imagery, that is, the supersession of "transfigurative" imagery by an imagery which is scarcely reducible to the realm of sensory objects; partly from his general theory of poésie pure, which was based on Poe's sallies against eloquence, rhetoric, and didacticism. Both these influences have proved problematic, but Mallarmé's poetry abides as one of the most flawless achievements in literary history.