
Commemorating Mallarmé

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- 1 Mallarmé haunts the art of the twentieth century: he gleams even in his absence; he is present beyond the vanguards, he who remained attached to the classical conceptions of the work as an instrument for the conquest of the Absolute, and who “deconstructed” this conception in a total art which is simultaneously a critique, an aesthetic, and a philosophy of abolition or negativity. Rereading Mallarmé’s texts on art (and the very clear preface by Michel Draguet), and reading the two remarkable volumes which these lines illustrate, means asking oneself this question: Why, beyond all its metamorphoses and in all its divergent directions, is contemporary art still Mallarmean, even though Mallarmé himself said: “my work is an impasse?” The answer lies no doubt in the multiple facets of his œuvre, which folds and unfolds like a fan or like the flower that Jean Starobinski describes in the catalogue of the musée d’Orsay, revealing all its fissures and contradictions. Here I shall rapidly display, “fold by fold,” some of the aspects whose multiplicity, gaps, and proximity, explain the staying power of Mallarmé.
- 2 The first fold of Mallarmé’s work joins art and criticism. For the poet, since the death of Victor Hugo, the distinction between prose and verse is no longer pertinent. There are only two opposed uses of language: the instrumental and communicational (or “numerate,” as Mallarmé said), which destines language to “universal reporting,” and the poetic use which “paints not the thing but the effect it produces” and which becomes entirely suggestive. For the first time with Mallarmé, an always suggestive prose is poetic,

poetry is criticism, and criticism is poetry. Reflexivity is thus the fundamental fold that makes the work into an “allegory of itself,” and criticism into a poem.

- 3 The second fold is that of art and aesthetics, for as Mallarmé says, “everything is summed up in Aesthetics and Political Economy.”¹ His is an intellectualized art, engendering its own aesthetics, conceived as a speculative theory of art. This speculative theory, imbued with Hegel² and Schopenhauer³, makes the work into a “spiritual instrument” and a metaphysical⁴ instrument as well. At the same time, and here we definitely encounter the fold, this philosophy is not the “underlying world” of poetry and criticism, nor the latter its allegorical veil. The philosophy is found in the unfolding of poetic language itself.
- 4 In its turn, it is fissured within itself, because it is at once a philosophy of the absolute and of objects (all the way down to clothing styles), of events in the world (plays, mime performances, dance, on which Mallarmé wrote critical articles; news events and events of everyday life). For Mallarmé, the absolute offers itself directly in things and can be “deciphered everywhere” to the extent that it is never a transcendental principle taking the form of a god (a “divine numerator”), or of a Platonic Idea (a “supreme mold”): it is the absolute of language, which by speaking the world replaces it and abolishes it so that only language games (throws of the dice) remain, games “with the twenty-four letters.” Mallarmé’s philosophy is one of language (he had begun a thesis in linguistics); in this philosophy, signification refers only to its own materiality. For him, idealism is at once mysticism, materialism and pure empiricism, and logic. Poetry is “silent ciphering, with all our fibers, of the motifs that compose a logic.” Whereby the poem is at once body and thought, “mental goods.” And therefore it is at once a visual work, a score, and music (Mallarmé was fascinated by Wagner); it is a “choreography of the mind.”⁵ All the arts and all things are condensed in this game of poetry. It is a “superior” game, Mallarmé holds, because the thinking that emits a throw of the dice is never guaranteed by any higher principle. As in the work of Nietzsche, his exact contemporary, “God is dead,” and all are representations are therefore but fictions referring back only to ourselves, images replacing the world and revealing the double power to abolish the world and to abolish themselves amidst “pulsations,” “vibrations,” and “emanations,” at once temporal and spatial.
- 5 What could be more fascinating for our twentieth century (for Duchamp, Boulez, Motherwell...) than this thinking of negation and suspension⁶ whose central motif is the crisis? For it has been clearly shown that the “crisis of verse” that Mallarmé announces in the text of the same name does not only manifest the crisis of literature which began with Flaubert and his project to create a “book about nothing.” It is also the social crisis of modern individualism, as well as the political crisis which began in 1789 and led to the bombs thrown by the anarchists against the parliament building in 1894. But Mallarmé goes further, for it is not only the representation of the nation which is targeted. What is in peril, announces Mallarmé (the contemporary of the nascent disciplines of sociology, psychology, and psychoanalysis), is the very concept of representation with all its presuppositions: that of an *author*, master of his thoughts (for Mallarmean poetry produces the “elocutionary disappearance of the poet”), that of *imitation* (which for Mallarmé is only the abolition of what is imitated), that of the *spectator* (who is overthrown by a necessarily obscure œuvre, seen, read, and heard “with all our fibers”), that of *creation* (“Nature has taken place, we will add nothing more”), and finally that of the *work of art*, which is at once totalized and disseminated, becoming a “center of

vibratory suspension” referring only to itself – for “nothing will have taken place but the place.”

- 6 These are the reasons which make us Mallarmeans, we who live in times of crises, of “divagations”: we who live in an *interregnum*.
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NOTES

1. “La Musique et les lettres”, in *Œuvres complètes*, Paris : Bibliothèque de la pléiade, 1945, p. 656.
2. See for exemple Hyppolite, Jean. “Le Coup de dés de Mallarmé et le message” in *Figures de la pensée philosophique*, Paris : PUF, (Quadrige tome 2), p. 877 and following, and Marquet, J. F. “Mallarmé, la mise en scène de l’Idée” in *Miroirs de l’identité*, Paris : Hermann, 1996, p. 133 and following.
3. See for example Audi, Paul. *La Tentative de Mallarmé*, Paris : PUF, 1997.
4. We know the famous « Ma Pensée s’est pensée, et est arrivée à une Conception Pure » from the 14th May 1867 letter.
5. See Rancière, Jacques. *Mallarmé*, Paris : Hachette 1996.
6. See Delègue, Yves. *Mallarmé, le suspens*, Strasbourg : Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 1997.