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The Mystery of the Moderns: The Historical Location of Mallarmé's Poetics

The term "modern poetry" implies historical assumptions demanding a reflection that would be distinct in principle from the actual study of the field. At first sight, "modern poetry" would appear to be a literary-historical period category, or at least a classification with the same general function as a period (such as "twentieth-century poetry"), but less definition. The use of the term generally implies a descriptive concept formulated along the model of other such categories and classifications: thus, modern poetry is understood to be characterized by features such as semantic obscurity, formal experimentation, or anti-idealist or pessimistic content (to name only a selection of commonly cited qualities). The use of such categories and classifications—or at least their typical and un-reflexive use—suggests that literature is a durable phenomenon that is merely modified in certain of its dominant aspects over time, such as its preferred genres and subject matter, its distinctive style and diction, or the choice of privileged models from the literary past. It could be argued, however, that such a conception of literary history as a process of variation on the basis of an underlying permanence minimizes and even contradicts the consciousness of rupture and fundamental historical transformation that the word "modern" can also be used to designate.[1] This sense of the word is clearly active in intellectual history when terms such as "modern science" or "the modern state" are used in order to signal the historical originality of these phenomena, which is considered to be qualitatively different

[1] Frederic Jameson discusses the ambivalence of the term *modern* as a historical concept, signifying both a period and a break: "to feel our own moment as a whole new period is not exactly the same as focussing on the dramatic way in which its originality is set off against the immediate past"; see *A Singular Modernity* (New York: Verso, 2002), 21. The choice, Jameson writes, "cannot be justified by the nature of the historical material or evidence, since it organizes all such material and evidence in the first place" (24). To say this does not mean that the historian can simply choose the one or the other option at will, of course: the decision to read modernity as a "break" depends on precisely the subjective aspect, the sense that the genesis of the present state of things can be traced to the appearance of what is determined as modern.

from the ordinary change in forms and procedures to be expected over time in any practice or institution. Such an understanding of the modern as a break with the past and a new origin has different presuppositions than a periodizing historical account because it implicates the subject within the historical field named. Where period-concepts are objective and finite (defined in terms of a beginning and an end), the term "modern", in its philosophical-historical sense, is a subjective and "infinite" category. To speak of modern science or modern political thought (for example) is to specify what these things are *for us*; therefore, such a discourse also includes a moment of self-understanding, a sense of who "we" are (which is infinite in the sense that it always remains further to be determined).

Through a study of Mallarmé's work, I will seek here to justify an understanding of modern poetry within such a projection. Although not "modernist" in a programmatic way, Mallarmé presents the literary tendencies of his time as marking a turning point. In the "Crisis of Verse", he writes that his time has been marked by "an absolute illumination" in poetic thought.[2] Again, in an incomplete text written around the same time, he writes: "The last fifteen or twenty years have been marked directly and intensely by one of the principal literary illuminations in all the ages, and they form a period in this regard".[3] As I will show here, this reflection is linked to an historical consciousness of modernity that is epochal rather than cultural or aesthetic. For Mallarmé, the theological and political dimensions of modernity create the situation within which poetry now appears and has its meaning: moreover, the possibility of occupying this new situation—of an "authentic earthly dwelling", as he writes in "Richard Wagner: Revery of a French Poet"—is at stake in its manifestation.[4]

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[2] Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations: The Author's 1897 Arrangement; Together with "Music and Letters"*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 209. Due to the density of the texts and the need to make the point of my analysis clear, the passages cited from *Divagations* here will often be re-translated, sometimes simplifying Mallarmé's syntax a little. Page references, however, will be to Johnson's translation, followed by the reference to the original text, as given in Stéphane Mallarmé, *Igitur Divagations Un Coup de Dès* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), here 249.

[3] Mallarmé, "Fragments et Notes", in *Igitur*, 387. This text is not included in the Johnson's edition.

[4] Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 109; Mallarmé, *Igitur*, 171.

The major complication for locating Mallarmé within the historical-theoretical problematic of modernity lies with his use of motifs and vocabulary taken from religion. This problem is not confined to his work: the ambivalence between a commitment to the acquisitions of modern thought and an attraction to elements of religious thought is surely one of the key topics for a historical understanding of modern poetry. In tracing the contrasting attitudes adopted by Mallarmé in this regard, one can perceive the alternatives confronted by poetry when it seeks to redefine itself in face of the historical conditions of modernity; in this respect, the study of his work may open the way for reflection on how modern poetry more generally responds to the same givens.

I begin by considering one of Mallarmé's early poems, "The Windows" (1866). At this point in his career, Mallarmé's use of religious metaphors and structures of thought is similar to that of other writers in his immediate literary environment and falls into a recognizable historical tendency. Studying the poem "The Windows" will provide a point of comparison to assess what is specific to his subsequent re-deployment of such material.

In the first stanza of "The Windows", a moribund hospital patient, in despair at his bed-ridden existence, drags himself to the window of his hospital room. In a fever of desire for the "azure blue", he kisses the window-pane, and is rewarded with a vision of beauty; the sunset seen through the window transforms into golden ships, gliding on a river of purple light. In the second part of the poem, this patient becomes the metaphor of the poet's own life; he is revolted by the life of the man who wallows in material comfort (which is himself), and who obstinately pursues material well-being (this "ordure") to offer it to the mother of his children; and so, like the hospital patient, he flees to the "windows" of art and mysticism:

> Je fuis et je m'accroche à toutes les croisées
> D'où l'on tourne l'épaule à la vie, et, béni,
> Dans leur verre, lavé d'éternelles rosées
> Que dore le matin chaste de l'Infini
>
> Je me mire et me vois ange! et je meurs, et j'aime
> —Que la vitre soit l'art, soit la mysticité

> A renaître, portant mon rêve en diadème,
> Au ciel antérieur où fleurit la Beauté!
>
> [I flee and I hold myself close to all the windows
> From which one turns one's back on life, and blessed
> In their glass, steeped in eternal dew
> Gilded by the chaste morning of the Infinite
>
> I look at myself, and I see an angel! And I die, and I love
> —The window can be art, or mysticism—
> To be re-born, wearing my dream as a diadem,
> In the anterior sky, where Beauty flowers!][5]

The attitude expressed in the poem bears the traits of world-rejection, characteristic of the religions of transcendence. The world in which the poet lives is "here-below". The shocking and unpoetic elements of the poem, such as the naturalistic observation of the saliva that the patient's kiss smears on the window or the characterization of material happiness as "ordure", signal the radical distance separating the everyday world from the experience of art. The poet "turns his back on life"; art is a form of mystic contemplation, a window on to "Beauty", "the Azure", or the "anterior sky" (the sky anterior to the fall of the soul into the material world, Bénichou suggests in his exegesis of this poem).[6]

This association of art with mysticism is characteristic of what Bertrand Marchal describes as "the symbolist discourse"—a set of ideas extending beyond Symbolism in the narrower sense of a definite literary school, through which an intensified valuation is given to art and literature in the later nineteenth century:

> One of the most constant traits of symbolist rhetoric is to present the movement as a protest of the spirit or of the soul against contemporary

[5] Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, trans. Henry Weinfield (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 11. The original is given following Weinfield's edition, and the translation is closely based on his version. At points, however, I have revised the translation in the direction of greater literalness, since it is here a question of exegesis and commentary, rather than producing a poetic version.

[6] Paul Bénichou, *Selon Mallarmé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 60.

> materialism […] The essential function of the word symbolism is to recall that reality is not reducible to the crude reality of naturalist discourse, and thus to suggest a real beyond the real.

This suggestion, Marchal goes on to underline, is more a matter of a vocabulary and atmosphere than any definite religious content. Nonetheless,

> it remains that in the last 15 years of the century, the convergence or the confusion of aestheticism and mysticism produces a veritable religion of art, which takes the place of traditional belief for those who seek the ideal and the absolute without a belief in God. Valéry speaks of the sense that a religion was emerging, of which poetic emotion was the essence.[7]

"The Windows" illustrates the association of poetry and art with mysticism or with an otherworldly ideal, described by Marchal. While the poem makes no definite reference to theistic belief, it imagines and dramatizes poetry in terms of polarities (the finite and the infinite, this world and the beyond) which are taken over from Platonism and Christianity.

As a result, the idea of poetry propagated by Mallarmé and the symbolist current has at times been seen as a reactive phenomenon in relation to the critical and secular tendency of modern thought. [8] Here, by contrast, I will indicate how Mallarmé's work, more than any other, shows the limits of such an interpretation, and justifies the use of the term "modern poetry" in its historical

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[7] Bertrand Marchal, *Lire le Symbolisme* (Paris: Dunod, 1993), 6-7.

[8] One path for such an understanding is indicated by Paul Bénichou's studies of Romantic and post-Romantic poetry in France. Bénichou argues that Romanticism is characterized above all by a new claim for the "spiritual authority" of the poet, whereby the poet takes over the privileges and the claims that had been traditionally attributed to the clergy. Romantic poets, he shows, imagine themselves in the role of the seer or the spiritual leader in order to contest the authority won by philosophers and men of letters in the Enlightenment. For Bénichou, the fundamental tenets of this vision of poetry persist in a modified and more pessimistic form in post-Romantic writers such as Baudelaire and Mallarmé. The consecration of the poet, he writes, is "the soul of modern poetry". Paul Bénichou, *The Consecration of the Writer, 1750-1830,* trans. Mark K. Jensen. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 133. In his last book, *Selon Mallarmé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), Bénichou proposes an interpretation of Mallarmé within this historical framework.

sense, rather than merely as a designation for a certain set of stylistic changes: Mallarmé's work holds a special interest in the context of "the symbolist discourse", since, from the latter half of the 1860s onward, it passes through an internal transformation in the course of which the dramatization of poetry in a language of mystery and revelation appears within an intellectual attitude taking its starting point from the renunciation of any kind of religious or metaphysical beyond.

To introduce this shift, I turn to the poem "When the Shadow", which illustrates thematically a stance which is tacitly present throughout Mallarmé's later poetry. This poem was first published in 1883, although it is often supposed to have been composed much earlier, since the thought of the poem is very close to some of the letters of 1866-1867, in which Mallarmé tells his correspondents of his anguished reflections on the Nothing and his difficult victory over religious belief:[9]

> Quand l'ombre menaça de la fatale loi
> Tel vieux Rêve, désir et mal de mes vertèbres,
> Affligé de périr sous les plafonds funèbres
> Il a ployé son aile indubitable en moi.
>
> Luxe, ô salle d'ébène où, pour séduire un roi
> Se tordent dans leur mort des guirlandes célèbres,
> Vous n'êtes qu'un orgueil menti par les ténèbres
> Aux yeux du solitaire ébloui de sa foi.
>
> Oui, je sais qu'au lointain de cette nuit, la Terre
> Jette d'un grand éclat l'insolite mystère,
> Sous les siècles hideux qui l'obscurcissent moins.
>
> L'espace à soi pareil qu'il s'accroisse ou se nie
> Roule dans cet ennui des feux vils pour témoins
> Que s'est d'un astre en fête allumé le génie.

[9] See chapters 3 and (especially) 4 of Stéphane Mallarmé, *Selected Letters*, trans. Rosemary Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 41-104.

[When the shadow menaced with its fatal law
That ancient Dream, desire and pain of my vertebrae,
Afflicted at perishing under the sombre ceiling
Folded its indubitable wing in me.

Luxury, o hall of ebony, where, in order to seduce a king
The famous garlands writhe in their death-throes
You are only a vain lie composed by the night
In the eyes of the solitary, dazzled by his faith.

Yes I know that the Earth, far from this night
Projects with great radiance the unprecedented mystery
Obscured ever less by the hideous centuries.

Space, always equal to itself, whether it expands or contracts
In its boredom, rolls these vile fires around for witnesses
That the genius has been kindled by a festive star.][10]

The "fatal law" of the "shadow" that threatens the Dream is the imminent mortality of all conceptions of God, the soul, and divine order—the end of religion and metaphysics, considered as one continuous aspiration of humanity, up until the present.[11] The poet feels this Dream fading in his "vertebrae": the implication is that the metaphysical impulse is deeply instilled in him, passed down to him by the race. For this reason, he becomes the inheritor of its legacy: "afflicted" by mortality, the dream folds its "wing" within him.

In the second stanza, the poet addresses the night sky, "the sombre ceiling" under which the Dream is destined to perish. The constellations ("the celebrated garlands") are nothing but a lie, he declares; the divine order that humans have

[10] Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, 66. Again, this is a more literal version of the poem, informed by Weinfeld's translation.

[11] This interpretation is strongly suggested by a letter from the period of his crisis, in which Mallarmé announces a future work, the theme of which is to be the "sublimity" of humanity, as it "throws itself furiously into the Dream [*le Rêve*] that it knows is not, singing the Soul and all such divine impressions that have accumulated in us since the first ages". Stéphane Mallarmé, *Selected Letters*, 60.

always imagined them to symbolize is only an illusion. But this refusal of divine truth is only the preliminary to a new affirmation. The "solitary dazzled by his faith" knows that in the endless extent of time and space—in its midst and yet also far from it (*au lointain de cette nuit*)—the Earth is radiant with its "mystery", celebrating (*en fête*) the "genius" that has lit up there.

The theme of the poem seems close to the humanism of Ludwig Feuerbach, who calls for modern humanity to reclaim the attributes that it has historically projected out of itself upon God. It may be, however, that the earth shines out in the midst of the empty night, not because it is the birthplace of humanity, but more specifically because it is named and transformed by poetry.[12] Hence, it is the speaker *as poet* in whom the dream "folds its wing". The "solitary dazzled by his faith" would therefore represent the solitary reader before the "mystery" of poetry. The metaphors here ("faith" and "mystery") are evidently taken from Christianity. But the text also rules out ambiguities which are left open in the Romantic and the symbolist use of religious figuration to re-imagine the role of poetry and the poet. There can be no comparison here between art and mysticism, no vision beyond the world, as in "The Windows": nor is there any suggestion of poetry as the medium to discover secret correspondences in the visible world (as in Baudelaire) or an esoteric spirituality (as in some forms of the "symbolist discourse" described by Marchal). The imminent demise of the Dream is acknowledged without reserve, and the symbolic suggestion of cosmic order in the constellations is emphatically rejected. The "mystery" of the poem cannot in any way then be understood as an attenuated or modified re-constitution of the content of religious discourse: on the contrary, the implication is that the poem is only perceived as mystery on condition of the extinction of all the forms of the "ancient Dream" that have accompanied humanity through the centuries.

Turning now to two texts from *Divagations*, I would like to show how the "epochal" historical perspective announced in this poem communicates with a consciousness of a social and cultural transition. The first text to be considered here—"Richard Wagner: Reverie of a French Poet"—was published in 1885 in the *Revue wagnérienne*, a journal founded by Mallarmé's friend, Edouard

[12] The task of the poet as naming the earth is the theme of the poem "Funereal Toast" (1873).

Dujardin. It is the first of a sequence of prose writings on literature and culture that would eventually be collected in *Divagations* (1897). The beginning of the text appears to evoke "When the Shadow": this sonnet, as mentioned, had been published only two years earlier, and it may be that a conscious reference to the sonnet was intended for Mallarmé's circle of readers:

> A contemporary French poet, excluded, for various reasons, from any participation in the official celebrations of beauty, retains from his practical task—the mysterious refinement of verse for solitary Festivals—a taste for reflecting on the sovereign pomp of Poetry, such as it could not exist concurrently with the flux of banality, carried by the arts in a false semblance of civilization—Ceremonies of a day which lives, unconscious, in the heart of the crowd: almost a Cult![13]

The poet prepares his verse in view of "solitary Festivals"—in view of a reader like the "solitary" of the sonnet, then, one for whom the reading of poetry replaces the religious ceremonies of the past. The echo of the poem can give us an orientation towards an understanding of the future cult of the poem envisaged here, an idea which occupies a number of Mallarmé's prose texts. The revelation of the mystery of poetry to the poet, who knows that the Dream is over, leads him to imagine that poetry could be instituted as a public rite, which would serve a function analogous to a religious cult for the inhabitants of an age without transcendence or immortality. This celebration, however, has to be located in a distant future, when poetry will no longer be excluded from "false semblance of civilization" that prevails at the present time.

Although Mallarmé here casts aside the culture of his day in a sweeping rejection, his writings actually give much attention to its manifestations. In many of the texts of *Divagations*, observations on the construction and the effect of a theatrical work, a concert, or a publication serve as a vehicle for Mallarmé's own verbal performance. These essays often enter into some detail in evoking the piece, mixing praise and criticism, much in the style of any other review. They differ

[13] Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 107; Mallarmé, *Igitur*, 168. In what follows, we will be closely following the movement of "Richard Wagner: Reverie of a French Poet", and since the text is relatively short, page references will not be given for each separate citation.

from the familiar models of aesthetic criticism, however, not only by their formidable difficulty, but also in that they open a prospect onto "the magical concept of the Work" ("Crisis of Verse")—a work that is incompatible with present-day conditions, but which is not mere speculation since it can be at least glimpsed in some of the art of the present, and also since, as he assures us here, it exists as a desire, "unconscious in the heart of the crowd". In "Sketched at the Theatre", Mallarmé deplores the popular theatre of his time, not for its quality, which he begrudgingly acknowledges, but because it is scarcely theatre at all, in the sense that he envisages it. The "official art"—the public spectacles, the artistic salons—he writes, is a "simulacrum, suited for the immediate need". The very fact that such a need exists, however, that the "vain hunger" of the crowd makes it jubilant if it perceives any "crude imagery of its divinity", points to the greater role that theatre and spectacle are called upon to play, beyond their present degraded form.[14]

At the end of the text, Mallarmé depicts his own aesthetic thought as the ascent of a mountain. Wagner's musical theatre is located at a mid-point on this climb; it provides a temporary respite, he says, from his "too lucid obsession with the menacing peak of the absolute". This literary absolute is not a purely ideal construction, set at an impossible distance from a banal commercial culture. It is modern and thus consciously historical in the sense that it can only be imagined once one has apprehended what is specific and new to the modern age. Moreover, Mallarmé considers it to be already nascent as a latent possibility in the art of the day. Precisely for this reason, if the poet is not yet able to formulate "the peak of the absolute" in theoretical propositions, he is able to approach it by the critical assessment of what is new and what is conventional in the art of his contemporaries.

Mallarmé's consciousness of participating in a moment of transition is apparent in the rhetoric of his criticism, which sets a new vision of art against what he sees as anachronistic practices. Wagner's work is praised as a decisive break with the existing theatre: the latter is out of date (*caduc*), Mallarmé writes, because it expects its audience to simply believe in "the existence of the character and the adventure, to believe simply, nothing more". For "the Modern" (that is to say, the

[14] Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 123; Mallarmé, *Igitur*, 184-5.

modern spectator), however, such a belief is precisely what the performance has to bring about:

> The Modern disdains imagining; an expert in making use of the arts, he expects that each art leads him to the point at which a special power of illusion shines forth [*éclate*], and then he consents.

The theatre will not become modern, then, simply by dramatizing contemporary life and topics. On the contrary, the fault of the theatre of the day, in Mallarmé's eyes, is that it is all too contemporary, placing on the stage individuals no different than the spectators—as if its aim were to convince the spectators that nothing apart from themselves exists.[15] Wagner's art breaks with this model, first and foremost in that it brings music into the theatre. This innovation is essential, Mallarmé suggests, because it gives priority to the performance over the fiction, as a pre-existing composition. Theatre had to remain "authoritarian and naïve", as long it was merely the performance of the script. But music, this "new resource of evocation", transforms the "despotic" attitude of the performance that is based in the written text. The new relationship of theatre and its public is evoked here in terms that mirror the shift in the political system: in place of the "despotic" imposition of the text-based theatre (corresponding to the rule of the monarchy), there is now a participatory art (corresponding to the sovereignty of the people), in which the audience freely gives its consent to the illusion:

> It was inevitable that the Theatre before Music was grounded in a simple, naïve, but authoritarian concept, not having at its disposal the new evocative resource […] Its type of play-acting remains inherent to the past, or to what the popular spectacle repudiates, because of that same intellectual despotism; the crowd wants, in accordance with the suggestion of the arts, to remain in charge of its beliefs. The simple addition of music changes everything, annihilating the older theatre in its principle. It is as strictly allegorical, now, that the scenic act, empty and abstract in itself, impersonal, needs to employ the living infusion that is given by Music, in order that it comes to life convincingly.

[15] Mallarmé, "Genre or the Moderns", in *Divagations,* 142-3; Mallarmé, *Igitur*, 205.

In this context, terms such as "abstract", "impersonal", and even "empty" signal, not remoteness, but the open potential of an allegory, which needs to be brought to life by the music (music is "vitalizing", *vivifiant*).

For Mallarmé, Wagner's work does not, however, fully realize the new possibility that it brings into view. While he expresses his admiration for Wagner's work, Mallarmé suggests that he has adapted the truly original impulses of his music (what is "vierge*"* and "occulte*"* in his scores) to the theatrical tradition that is now in decline. His work combines "personal drama and ideal music", two things that, by their nature, are profoundly incompatible—and he has only "juxtaposed" these powers. It is a "harmonious compromise", but it has been imposed from outside, by the force of the composer's will: the drama has not been transformed from within. The result is magnificent, it can be acknowledged: but the "principle" that is instituted with the addition of music to the stage is lost from sight. (Mallarmé writes: "son principe même, à la Musique, échappe": the meaning of the passage is clearer, if more unwieldy, in the original version of the essay, as published in the *Revue wagnérienne*, where Mallarmé writes: "le principe même de la présence de la Musique échappe").

In speaking of an advance beyond the "older" theatre or in questioning the compatibility of drama and music in Wagner's theatre, Mallarmé's criticism seems primarily concerned with developments that are internal to the aesthetic sphere. The reference to the expectations of the modern spectator, on the other hand, indicates the wider historical frame of reference. This latter dimension of the reflection reappears as Mallarmé turns to the national and cultic pretensions of Wagner's work. The material of Wagner's drama is taken from the legends of Germany. The effect is to re-create something like the Greek theatre: once again, a people is invited to "the spectacle of its origins, on stage":

> Everything bathes again in the primitive stream; but does not arrive at the source.
>
> If the French spirit, strictly imaginative and abstract, thus poetic, is to shine out [*jette un éclat*], it will not be thus: it rejects Legend, in accord with Art in its integrity, which is invention. It will keep none of these crude and enormous anecdotes from days gone past, aware of the anachronism this would bring into a theatrical representation […] Has the century or our

> country, which exalts it, dissolved the Myths through the power of thought, only to recreate them?

The great accomplishment of the age, and pre-eminently of the French nation, is the dissolution of "the Myths"—by which is meant primarily, not mythology, in the sense of legends, but the positive contents of religion and metaphysics, all the past forms of the "Dream". Beyond the national characteristic—the opposition between French lucidity and the misty visions of German legend—what is at stake here is the relation between theatre and spectacle (or more generally, "Art"), on the one hand, and the critical spirit of the modern age, on the other. The critical and secular thought of the age dictates the conditions for the renovation of the theatre; if there is to be a renewal, it cannot re-commence from the "primitive spring" (i.e. from the model of the Greeks, the beginning of the theatrical tradition) but must begin, more originally, from the re-activation of the "source"—from the original possibility of theatre in humanity, in advance of its historical forms.

This demand for a return to the source has already been voiced in similar formulations earlier in the text: what Mallarmé objects to in Wagner is that his work does not issue from the "literary principle"; it does not realize "the initial intention" of musical art. In this aspiration, one can recognize a characteristic aspiration opened up by the modern destruction of the authority of metaphysics and religion. In his study of the Enlightenment, Ernst Cassirer writes that the thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries "opposes the power of convention, tradition and authority in all the fields of knowledge. But it does not consider this opposition as merely a work of negation and destruction; it considers rather that it is removing the rubble of the ages in order to make visible the solid foundations of the structure of knowledge".[16] Mallarmé's concern is with religion and culture rather than with epistemology, but the critical process follows the same logic in his thought; the liberation from religious and mythic beliefs makes it possible for modern humanity to re-claim the artistic possibility at its source.

The paragraph that follows, which is the most difficult in the text, evokes a theatrical spectacle that would accomplish this reappropriation. "Art in its

[16] Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. F. Koelln and J. Pettegrove (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1952), 234.

integrity" can have no recourse to legends, "these enormous crude anecdotes", as Mallarmé refers to them. If there is to be a narrative element in the theatre to come, it can only be the archetypal myth, "the Fable, virginal of all known place, time and persons". Wagner's use of legendary material for dramatic content perpetuates the "despotic" authority of script-based fiction, since it relies on characters and adventures which are given entirely in advance. In the theatrical event that Mallarmé envisages, all particularization of place, time, and person is eliminated. The action consists in the presentation of a "Type", who is not named in advance, in order that "surprise emanates". The "Figure that is no-one" appears upon the stage in a space that represents no actual location, but is constituted by the gaze of the audience; and comes to life (*s'éveille*) at the culmination of the sequence of attitudes that it takes, corresponding to the rhythm of "the symphony". The crowd witnesses in awe as the Type is brought to life by the stage and by music. This event is referred to as "the appearance of the God". What is meant is not the manifestation of any positive deity, however, but the crowd's own "multiple aspect".[17] The music that animates the Type only "synthesizes the delicacies and the magnificences, immortal, innate, that are present, unknown to them, in the silent assembly of the public".

This theatrical spectacle is designated by Mallarmé as "the Mystery": it is a celebration of the belonging together of man and "his authentic earthly dwelling". The reappearance of the term shows the continuity with the thought of the sonnet "When the Shadow".The modern age, if one acquiesces to its critical ethos, creates the conditions for a recognition of poetry (or theatre) as "mystery". For the time

[17] The schema of the thought here is very close to Feuerbach, and may derive from his work. For Feuerbach, the human greatness that has been projected into the historical figures of the divine is specifically that which is proper to the collective, to the "generic being" (*Gattungswesen*): it corresponds to the collective recognition of justice and wisdom. In Mallarmé, too, what we see in the "Type" is "our multiple aspect" (*notre aspect multiple*), and the staging of the Mystery is the condition for the reign of "Justice" (Mallarmé, "Richard Wagner", in *Divagations*, 111-12; Mallarmé, *Igitur*, 174-5). Jacques Rancière notes Mallarmé's proximity to Feuerbach, and argues that this impulse in Mallarmé should be understood as part of a more general historical thinking of the possibility of communal experience, beyond the new secular order, which organizes the collective through rational and utilitarian principles. See Jacques Rancière, *Mallarmé: la politique du sirene* (Paris: Hachette, 1996), especially chapter 3. On these themes, see also the invaluable studies of Bertrand Marchal, *La Religion de Mallarmé* (Paris: Corti, 1988), which Rancière's analysis follows on many points.

being, this revelation is only available to the solitary poet, who holds himself at a distance from his own culture; but he knows that the conditions are there for poetry to take over the "religious" function of gathering together, which is precisely what is absent in civil society, in which the collective is only experienced as the crowd, that is, as an aggregate of isolated individuals.

Mallarmé suggests, then, that the acquisitions of intellectual modernity make possible a new apprehension of poetry that also contradicts or at least qualifies the consequences of these acquisitions, at least such as they have been understood up until his time. This same line of thought lies behind his promulgation of a notion of modern poetry on the basis of the work of his contemporaries (and, more discreetly, with reference to his own work). We will consider this discourse now by examining "Music and Letters" (1894). This text, like the closely related "Crisis of Verse", takes its point of departure from the experimentation of contemporary poets with traditional verse structure. The taste to hear poetry in lines that, in the past, would have appeared mere faults, Mallarmé judges to be "very modern"—although he also expresses his "intense opinion", that such innovations do not signify "the effacement of anything beautiful from the past", and that the traditional forms will be still be required on "solemn occasions" [18]This would appear to be a conciliatory stance; and yet Mallarmé consistently depicts the literary transformations of his time as a radical upheaval, comparable to the political revolutions of the preceding century. The interest of the debate on free verse, for Mallarmé, is not ultimately located in the competing claims of tradition and novelty, but in the sense of a fundamental transformation in the understanding of the poetic, which is at first expressed in the form of the literary tendencies of the time:

> In the upheavals, all to the credit of the recent generation, the act of writing scrutinized itself to its origin. This questioning went very far, at least on one point, I will formulate it—namely, if there is any need for writing. […]

[18] "Crisis of Verse", *Divagations*, 205; *Igitur*, 244.

> Does something such as Letters exist? Other than as the refinement (such was the convention in the classical epochs) in the direction of a more polished expression of notions from every domain.[19]

By dismantling the conventions by which verse is defined, the "recent generation" poses the critical question of whether there is any need for writing (*s'il y a lieu d'écrire*), if poetic language is anything other than an artificially refined expression of "notions from every domain" that could also be communicated in ordinary prose. As in the text on Wagner, literary modernity is represented, not just as a rejection of the past, but as a movement towards an "origin" or a "principle" that has been closed off by the force of tradition.

In returning to this origin, one would renew contact with what poetry *has always* been. For just this reason, the rhetoric of Mallarmé can be often conservative. In the prose-text "Solemnity", he writes that no genuine poem can be written except in "obeying the ancient genius of verse"; and he goes on to speak of the "occult and eternal source" upon which the poet (Théodore de Banville) draws.[20] But the source of poetry is no longer understood in the same way that it was in the tradition: poetry does not have its origin in "enthusiasm or lyric delirium": the "juxtaposition of words alone" leads "the scattered elements of beauty" to converge, "ordering themselves according to their real, essential value". As in many of Mallarmé's prose texts, the formal aspects of verse are understood as an arrangement or juxtaposition, which works a complete transformation (sometimes qualified as magical) on the words of everyday communication.[21] This transformation (here called "the sole dialectic of Verse") has the effect of a miraculous bringing to life, similar to the imagined spectacle in the essay in

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[19] Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 184-5; Mallarmé, *Igitur*, 352-3. My analysis here follows the movement of "Music and Letters", and since the text is brief, further page references will not be given. For the most part, I paraphrase Mallarmé's text, since the complexity of the syntax makes straightforward translation and quotation difficult to follow. The translation follows Johnson's texts with some emendations. Some passages are so densely written that translation is necessarily also interpretation, more than is usually the case; these passages are cited in French as well as English.

[20] Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 166; Mallarmé, *Igitur*, 233-4.

[21] See "Magic", for example, or the final section of "The Crisis of Verse" (both in Mallarmé, *Divagations*).

Wagner: "thus emerges from itself the principle, that is nothing other than—Verse!" The poem thus has a spectacular aspect, fully equivalent to the theatre: "What a spectacle: the world is there: a book, in our hands, if it pronounces some august idea, takes the place of all the theatres, not in causing them to be forgotten, but by imperiously recalling them, on the contrary" (*Quelle représentation! le monde y tient; un livre, dans notre main, s'il énonce quelque idée auguste, supplée à tous les théâtres, non par l'oubli qu'il en cause mais les rappelant impérieusement, au contraire*).[22] This sense of the poetic work as the creation of a world (or of the illusion of a world) is stated even more strikingly in "Music and Letters". A few lines after the passage cited above, in answer to the question as to whether "something such as Letters exists", Mallarmé writes: "Yes, that literature exists, alone, excluding everything else" (*à l'exclusion de tout*).

These affirmations, I would like to suggest, take on their meaning in relation to the ontology specific to the modern age. "Everything [else]" (*tout*) here signifies everything *as it shows itself to this age*—the modern interpretation of what is as such, in its totality. The modern ontology is encapsulated in an "absolute formula" a little later in the text: "We know, captive to an absolute formula, that nothing is except what is". The formula stipulates that what "we [moderns] know" is an integral immanence: there is no beyond of beings, there is nothing except what is. The written page, however, Mallarmé continues, holds itself an anticipation and impatience for "something else" (*autre chose*)—something other than everything that is. By definition, then, we have to recognize that reading is a "desperate practice"; and that writing is a deception, a fraud (*un leurre*, *une supercherie*). It is possible "to impiously dismantle the fiction, and hence the literary mechanism, and thus exhibit the principle component, nothing". And yet all the same, one cannot simply rest content with a demystification of this "beyond" (*cet au-délà*) conjured up by the written page, since this would be "to deny the pleasure that we want to take".

We (moderns) want to take this pleasure, Mallarmé writes, because of the "boredom" caused by things when they establish themselves as "solid and preponderant". The monotony of ontological identity lies behind the boredom that Mallarmé associates with the regimes of modern life: with the city, the newspaper,

[22] Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 166-8; Mallarmé, *Igitur*, 233-5.

the bank, with all that remains self-evident, literal, factual (cf. "The Mystery in Letters", "Gold", and "Bucolic", among other texts). When the profane world establishes itself as the sole horizon of life, writing (*l'écriture*) appears in a new light, since it allows a "superior attraction, like that of a void", to detach things from their solidity, and to re-place them within the "vacant space"—the space opened up by their absence, which is also, one can assume, the space of the page.[23] In this space, things acquire a splendour that is not entirely their own, shining forth at a "prohibited elevation": that is to say, they now occupy the position of transcendence that is denied to us. In poetry, the passage concludes, we have the resources for "festivals, of our own choosing, solitary". It is important to note that the subject here is plural; this solitude cannot, then, be that of the isolated reader of poetry (as at the beginning of the text on Wagner): it would be a shared solitude, the solitude of the community whose festivals celebrate only its own existence, and not that of any deity supposed to be called among us by them.

The passage that follows allows one to situate this image of poetry in relation to fundamental philosophical distinctions. The paragraph begins in affirming that the givenness of nature marks a definitive limit for us. "Nature takes place, we cannot add to it", Mallarmé declares, adding that this situation is not altered by technological innovations, such as cities and railways:

> Tout l'acte disponible, à jamais et seulement, reste de saisir les rapports, entre temps, rares ou multipliés; d'après quelque état intérieur et que l'on veuille à son gré étendre, simplifier le monde.
>
> [The one available act, forever and alone, is to understand the relations, in the meantime, few or many: according to some interior state that one wishes to extend, in order to simplify the world.]

The dimension of human possibility (*tout l'acte disponible*) is limited to the relations *between* things, that which remains once we have abstracted things from

[23] See the discussion of this text in Maurice Blanchot, "The Myth of Mallarmé" in *La Part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), 35-48.

their too solid reality, from their identity with themselves (that is, from what they simply *are*):

> A l'égal de créer: la notion d'un objet, échappant, qui fait défaut. Semblable occupation suffit, comparer les aspects et leur nombre tel qu'il frôle notre négligence: y éveillant, pour décor, l'ambiguïté de quelques figures belles, aux intersections. La totale arabesque, qui les relie, a de vertigineuses sautes en un effroi que reconnue; et d'anxieux accords.
>
> [Equal to creating: the notion of an object, evasive, absent. Some such occupation suffices, to compare aspects and count their number as it touches our negligence: arousing like a décor, the ambiguity of a few beautiful figures, at the intersections. The total arabesque, which ties them together, has dizzying leaps in its fear that it may be recognized; and anxious accords.]

To apprehend these relations is equivalent to an act of creation: it brings into being "the notion of an object, evasive, absent". The "notion of an object" here signifies something that is only suggested, only notionally present. With the perception of the relations between things, as they become signs for each other, there comes into view what Mallarmé calls "the total arabesque". This arabesque is a "Chimera", something which does not exist (*qui fait défaut*). But it is also evasive (*échappant*), even in its chimerical reality: it twists and turns, like the mythical beast, in order to avoid being seen once and for all, since if it were definitely present, it would become something that merely is, like everything else.

> Chiffration mélodique tue, de ces motifs qui composent une logique, avec nos fibres. Quelle agonie, aussi, qu'agite la Chimère versant par ses blessures d'or l'évidence de tout l'être pareil, nulle torsion vaincue ne fausse ni ne transgresse l'omniprésente Ligne espacée de tout point à tout autre pour instituer l'Idée […]
>
> [It is a stilled, melodic encipherment, of the combinations of the motifs that compose a logic, with our very fibres. Whatever agony, also, the Chimera suffers, pouring out of its golden wounds the evidence of all being the

> same, no untwisted curve has falsified or transgressed the omnipresent Line spaced from every point to the every other in order to instate the Idea…]

The outcome remains suspended, the accomplishment of the poem at once negated and affirmed. The Chimera is bleeding through its golden wounds at "the evidence of all being the same" (*l'évidence de tout l'être pareil*), that is to say, the law of immanence, which excludes it: but these "agonies" do not spoil or transgress "the omnipresent Line spaced from every point to every other, in order to instate the idea".

Again for Mallarmé, the poetic possibility evoked here can be glimpsed, at least as an intuition, in the production of his contemporaries. One can see the signs, he suggests, in the convergence of music and letters, which is taking place from both directions at once, with the addition of music to literature (Wagner), and with the free verse movement, by which poetry seeks to come closer to music. The separation of music and literature, as two entirely distinct arts, was only temporary: it supervened upon their original unity (*le cas premier*) to which the arts are now returning. This convergence unfolds in two directions at once, corresponding to the collective and the individual dimensions of the phenomenon. When music transforms and renovates the theatre, the crowd can be present, without knowing it, at "the spectacle of its own greatness". For the individual, "who requires lucidity", writing deploys its musicality in the space of the book. The book is "explicative and familiar", since it unfolds at the disposition of the reader and allows for a sustained intellectual possession, one that is not confined, unlike the musical-theatrical spectacle, to the linear time of the performance.[24]

In music and poetry, then, we have the "reciprocal means of the Mystery", the two faces of the "one phenomenon", "the Idea". In "Music and Letters", the "idea" is named as "the musicality of all things" (*la musicalité de tout*); in the "Crisis of Verse", it is called "the totality of relations between all things, Music" (*l'ensemble*

[24] My reading is limited to the first half of the text, which is one of the most concentrated statements of Mallarmé's poetic thought. There is a quite pronounced break at the point that we have now reached, and then in a second development (beginning "Now that I can breathe free"; Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 190; Mallarmé, *Igitur*, 359), regretting that he has given way to "lecturing", Mallarmé's reflection turns to contemporary cultural and political questions (e.g. Max Nordau's *Degeneration*, an anarchist attack in Paris).

des rapports existant dans tout, la Musique); and in "The Book, Spiritual Instrument", "the hymn, harmony and joy […] of the relations between all things".[25] What is most striking in these statements is the insistence on totality: "the total arabesque", "the ensemble of relations between all things", "the musicality of the whole". In a number of essays in *La Part du feu*, Maurice Blanchot argues that the beyond in Mallarmé is not to be understood as another region, above the world, but precisely the world as a whole.[26] The poem has its marvellous, revelatory character because its rhythmic and integrative totality contrasts with the aggregate of individual entities that simply are, and which are duly registered by the "imperturbable primary plane" of the language of commerce, journalism, and every-day life ("The Mystery in Letters"). This perception of the whole authenticates poetry as something other than the engraving of what is known in other domains. The "totality of the relations existing between all things" is not an objectivity available to knowledge: it is present only as "the sinuous and mobile variations of the Idea" (represented by the twisting and turning of the Chimera) in the poem. If this can be named, not simply as a mirage (as it is at times), that is, as a fascinating illusion created by art, but also as a Mystery, it is because, in perceiving the "musicality of the whole", at the same time, we perceive and know ourselves, with no less astonishment, as something other than what we had resigned ourselves to being. Thus, as we have seen in the text on Wagner, what the public admire in the spectacle is the divinity that is latent within them. A similar suggestion appears in a number of other texts. The perception of the Chimera, in "Music and Letters" is a "silent melodic figuration" which makes up "a logic with our fibres": in poetry and theatre, we have the prospect of perceiving the "divinity that is only oneself" (*la Divinité qui n'est que soi*; "Catholicism") or 'the pure of ourselves' *(le pur de nous-mêmes*; "Solemnity").[27]

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[25] Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 185, 210, 227; Mallarmé, *Igitur*, 353, 250, 267.

[26] Blanchot, *La Part du feu*, 37-42, 69-71, 319-20.

[27] It is this self that is represented by the "Type" (the "Figure that is no one" in the text on Wagner) in Mallarmé's theatre of the future. The self that participates in the musicality of the whole, and that is revealed in poetry, is often referred to be Mallarmé as "Soi" (sometimes in opposition to the everyday self, who is named as "un tel"). For an excellent analysis of this key theme, see Peter Dayan, *Mallarmé's Divine Transposition: Real and Apparent Sources of Literary Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

Each of the texts that we have studied dramatizes the encounter with the poetry in a mood of astonishment or wonder: the solitary is "dazzled" at the light of earth in the midst of the night (in "When the Shadow…"); the crowd stands in awe at the appearance of the "Type" (in "Richard Wagner"); the reader of poetry discovers the spectacle of the Idea projected above "at a prohibited elevation" (in "Music and Letters"). This astonishment is the mark of an *initial* perception; poetry appears for what it is, for the first time, in our time—and in appearing before us, it allows us to see ourselves for what we are. This perception is the basis for the idea, pursued throughout Mallarmé's prose, that poetry could be the principle of a theatrical spectacle that would serve a function analogous to the religious ceremonies of the past for modern humanity. The Moderns need to understand themselves from their poetry, Mallarmé is suggesting, not from their science of nature or their secular political principles. The formulation is sufficiently general to consider to what extent other poets arrive at the same position, by the paths proper to them: modern poetry, in this sense, would be not only the poetry that responds to the advent of the modern age, but also that which imagines poetry as part of this advent, as the point from which its further consequences are to unfold.