

L'envers de Mallarmé

Derrida says: "Mallarmé reads."¹ And he *means* it: Mallarmé's answer to Platonic *mimesis* is said to be the establishing, for each of his texts, of a heritage of cribbing—of *intertextuality*, I suppose—that stretches back to the dawn of philological-historical time, and then somehow even further past it. The text itself is finite but from it—"a double that doubles no simple"²—the intertext radiates out unboundedly; and, crucially, the way Mallarmé would interact with the texts that he alludes to is by *reading* them, not writing them. More generally, if there is to be anything significant to the text outside what is actually written,³ then the author's mode of interaction with the text cannot be that of the writer, not homogeneously.

This is, I think, a crucial point: for there is something lacking in the readerly interaction with the work, some responsibility abnegated. What the reader encounters is always already present-at-hand, just as what the visitor to an art-gallery encounters is present-at-hand, just as any artifact the archaeologist encounters is present-at-hand: for the artifact to be an artifact, it must have entirely renounced its tool-nature, its capacity to stand in a position relative to its user that is not that of an object relative to its subject. Insofar as I am writing a text, I am dealing with something that, while certainly perfectly individuated, is known to be unfinished, unpresentable as-is: something explicitly fragmentary. Insofar as I am reading a text, I am forced to contend with the fact that what I have in front of me is both *material*—that is, presented as a unity—and *all*: forced to contend with its physicality and its finitude, its *being*. Forced to contend, more than that, with the fact that it simply *cannot be any better than it is*: there are bits of Geoffrey Hill (I select the closest English language analogue of Mallarmé), albeit not many, that are painfully weak: there are more bits of him that seem ideologically misguided, somehow, that seem to have missed the point or not realized there was even potential for a point to be made. Ultimately, there are still unsolved problems in this world, problems that are eating away at my existence, and it is the fault of each text I encounter that it has not solved these problems—that it has not puzzled out everything there is to puzzle out, that it hasn't offered us a world entirely detached from this one, better than this one, unfallen unlike this one, upon which to seize.

It is this offering-up of an unfallen world that is what is radical in precisely the most detached and aesthetically conservative of the Symbolist poems: those of Mallarmé, Valéry, the early Stefan George, even perhaps those of essentially ignored figures like Moréas; the plays of Maeterlinck and the play of Villiers at that. And it is this offering-up which seems studiously ignored, not only in Derrida, but in most contemporary readings of the Symbolists and conservative Modernists: Meillassoux and Badiou jump to mind. Attention is instead lavished on that one of Mallarmé's poems which might be said to display the most technicity—*Un coup de dés...*—which is most a product of modernity (and by *modernity* I do mean industrial agriculture, the hydrogen bomb, the gas chambers, so forth; to me, all of this is inextricably linked with an overidentification of form with content, a letting form determine content, a not letting the content breathe) and least a rebellion against it, and to his other poems to the degree to which they can be

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (Routledge, 1992), 177.

² Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 157.

³ Perhaps even excluding by this what is *copied* without intention to allude, which seeks not to open out onto the world of the vehicle-text, but to declare itself the real vehicle-text, to cut the copied text off from its origin and assimilate it—I am thinking of Bachmann's quoting in *Malina* of Blackwood's "The Willows," though arguably one might read the quoting of the Upanishads in "The Waste Land" in this way.

coopted into this scheme: the late theory-poems of *Divagations* first, then the other theoretical works and the drafts, then the less theoretical of the prose poems, then the verse from least to most "decadent," inaccessible. I have not encountered a reading of *Hérodiade* or *The Afternoon of a Faun* or even "Ses purs ongles..." unconditioned by readings, implicit or explicit, of works higher up the pecking order, so to speak, with one exception: Valéry himself, who understands Mallarmé's experiments in *pur son* to be ultimately *in service of sense*.⁴ Should the poet lay tight enough restrictions upon herself, and be skilled enough to cope with such, she will find herself not laying down the sense with which she is familiar—*common sense*, so to speak—but an unfamiliar sense, a sense from elsewhere.

What does Derrida make of the most Symbolist of Mallarmé's poetry? In "Mallarmé," he is mining it for sonority and polysemy; in "The First Session," he adds the problematic of mimetic intertextuality, which certainly is also exemplified in these difficult poems—they are, after all, part of a *tradition*, if only because Mallarmé had to learn to write from study of some selection of poets—but which does not matter particularly much to interpretation of them, given the following Mallarméan dictum: *write impersonally, self-effacingly*. "In the final result there must be no sign of the making, there must only be the thing made."⁵ I have already pointed out that, while the effect of sonority for the reader might well be the determination of the sorts of concept-axes Derrida works with,⁶ for the writer, as Valéry attests, it is something else entirely: it is a compositional-linguistic asceticism no different in essence from the asceticism which the mystic relies upon to invite the God who is elsewhere onto her body or into her mind. Then polysemy: the indicative moments are the duality of *hymen*,⁷ the polyvalence of certain pronouns,⁸ and the tickling-to-death in which Pierrot engages, the convulsing-to-death which Columbine suffers.⁹ To what ends may polysemy be played?

Irony, most destructively: that *hymen* may mean consummation of marriage means that every usage of the word to mean *virginity* is something of a bad joke. No morality can be had if that status which is to be held as moral constantly undermines itself: one need only consider the breakdown in the Christian moral system that has ensued in the millennia after the introduction of the notion of the *chaste marriage*; sex, licentiousness is held to be immoral, but instead of this logically being extended to a condemnation of procreation (as it was by some early heretic sects: the Marcionites, the Encratites...), the latter is instead proclaimed moral, following received opinion and bending to worldly exigencies, and an exception in the former regime is proclaimed. This is to say: polysemy (in this case the polysemy of the word *chaste*) undermines words, makes us doubt them—more importantly, makes them doubt themselves. With this doubt, with this irony, "hath no man a house of good stone":¹⁰ in this conception, one cannot rely on compromised words like *hymen* to be the substance out of which an unfallen world is pieced together.

But one need not read *hymen* in such a pseudo-Hegelian way: the word need not indicate the unity of its two definitions, might instead present itself as interface between them or skin sheltering one from the other. *Hymen*, then, as the first night specifically, the coming to it and moving, bereft, onward: suffice it to

⁴ See Paul Valéry, *The Art of Poetry*, trans. Denise Folliot (Princeton University Press, 1985), 12ff.

⁵ Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (William Heinemann, 1899), 133.

⁶ See e.g. Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 122.

⁷ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 114.

⁸ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 117.

⁹ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 149.

¹⁰ Ezra Pound, "Canto XLV" in *The Cantos* (Faber and Faber, 2023), 229.

say that there is a wealth of seemingly antinomic emotion and thought lying there for the describing, and only a word so targeted as this one, so antinomic as this one, can get at those antinomies. And this seems to be that toward which Mallarmé really wishes to wield his words: notice that, in "Mimique," the "hymen (out of which flows Dream)" is "*between* desire and fulfilment [my emphasis]," not simultaneously engaging in desire and fulfilment nor any such thing.¹¹ Mallarmé, to put it pithily but rather obscurely, is a thinker of the metonym, not the metaphor. And with this other reading, one is finally free to understand Mallarmé's syntactic experiments as not toward *undecidability*¹² but toward a decisive precision that is simply absent from language as we speak it, as we use it in the everyday.

One comes to a similar point in thinking the scene from Pierrot. The *easy way out*, so to speak, would be to freely metaphorically identify convulsion and death, laughter and death, orgasm and death: *la petite mort*, they call it. And so death is weakened by its identification with that which is pleasurable; the former becomes something to be pursued willingly (or avoided if one wishes to renounce): something which is *a choice for one*. I believe it more proper to think this sort of scene in its singularity: in *no other case than this one* can death be a thing of pleasure; and therefore the particular pathos of the Pierrot-Columbine mime is kept secure, whetted.

As for pronouns with unclear antecedents... it might be said that I side with Yvor Winters here, for whom this practice is no more than an obscurantism, a technicity; no more than weakness of the poet.¹³ *Le Maître*, sadly, did not quite get everything right. (I would argue that, in *Un coup de dés...*, as against the entire rest of his oeuvre, he got essentially nothing right; but that is another paper.)

There is an infamous line from the twenty-something Mallarmé's letters, in which he noted the presence of exactly "one charming woman" in the area—the rest being no more than "cows."¹⁴ I think it is precisely this casual and bitter misanthropy which the Derridean account of Mallarmé—and with it most contemporary accounts of Mallarmé—to its peril overlooks. The speaker of *Hérodiade* is in a sense the New Mallarméan Woman, just as the workers in *How The Steel Was Tempered* were really the New Soviet Men; for an unfallen world, more than anything else, needs unfallen people—and the writer himself is certainly fallen—to populate it, to build it. And it is the sense, not the sound, of *Hérodiade* to which Mallarmé turned for his creating, his dictating; I believe we ought to follow him.

¹¹ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 130.

¹² As posited e.g. at Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 114.

¹³ See e.g. the foreword to Yvor Winters, *Maule's Curse* (New Directions, 1938).

¹⁴ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé*, trans. Rosemary Lloyd (University of Chicago Press, 1988), 36-7.