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MALLARMÉ AND THE UPROOTING OF VISION

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In the mid 1880's, and at the invitation of his friend Edouard Dujardin, Mallarmé agreed to write a series of monthly articles for *La Revue indépendante*, all devoted to the theatre culture of Paris. In the space of two years, he produced the articles which were subsequently re-edited and republished under the title of "Crayonné au théâtre," and collected in *Divagations*. As a way of entering into the topic of Mallarmé and the uprooting of vision, I'd like to quote from those articles a passage which features a striking image of the poet Théophile Gautier. The piece is entitled "Le Genre ou Des Modernes." Mallarmé writes:

Mis devant le triomphe immédiat et forcené du monstre ou Médiocrité qui parada au lieu divin, j'aime Gautier appliquant à son regard las la noire jumelle comme une volontaire cécité et "C'est un art si grossier... si abject," exprimait-il, devant le rideau ; mais comme il ne lui appartenait point, à cause d'un dégoût, d'annuler chez soi des prérogatives de voyant, ce fut encore, ironique, la sentence : "Il ne devrait y avoir qu'un vaudeville – on ferait quelque changements de temps en temps."¹

Mallarmé suggests that should we replace Vaudeville with "Mystère," we might then have a theatre culture worth attending. In what follows, I want to address this notion of "Mystère" and determine its relation to the image of Gautier going out to the theatre only to blind himself with the use of "une noire jumelle," a pair of opera glasses with black lenses. The problem exposed in Mallarmé's portrait is the problem of vision when, as with the blinded Gautier, there remains no object for beholding and yet the task is "to see": to make due with the given when the given is virtually nothing. This injunction to see is directly equated with what Mallarmé, in the quote above, calls *les prérogatives de voyant*. Gautier's gesture is more than a show of dissatisfaction with the mediocrity of contemporary theatre. The conditions of blindness and the consequent loss of object or loss of reference will become, in Mallarmé, the conditions for a form of seeing—even a form of cognition—which he associates with *la voyance*. My goal here is to delineate this relation between vision and seeing, between *la vision et la voyance*, in order to support the following claim: Mallarmé's modernism is just the demand "to see" when the conditions for so doing make it impossible. *La voyance* will not lead to a form of transcendent beholding; Mallarmé's poetry is not religious, prophetic, oracular. *La voyance* is rather just the open receptiveness of the poet which, in the absence of a determinate object, makes itself palpable as an openness, as a heightened albeit indeterminate form of attentiveness. The relation that this form of attentiveness entertains with the world is simply the relation between the poet (or the beholder) and what he calls "le mystère."

The relation between vision and poetry is of course most palpable in a poem like *Un coup de dés*, where the activity of the reading eye becomes conspicuous precisely

because the customary linearity of poetic verse is no longer operative. The activity of the eye becomes a conscious activity when confronted with a possible moment of bifurcation, with a moment when it is not clear how to make the transition from one verse to another. Relatedly, in his writings on *le livre*, Mallarmé envisions a form of reading that would no longer depend on “le va-et-vient successif incessant du regard, une ligne finie, à la suivante pour recommencer” (226). I would suggest that this moment of uprootedness, this non-synchronicity between vision and object, and, even more literally, this defeat of linear reading, is also present in Mallarmé’s classical sonnets. For even when the grooves or the circuits of vision are laid down in the form of classical verse, Mallarmé still manages to disturb the reading eye in order to call attention to the grain of vision, to its persistence as a kind of empty form—or empty activity—which has yet to constitute an object for itself.

Consider the poem “A la nue accablante,”² a late sonnet in octosyllabic verse, first published in 1894-5.³ When reconstructed as a narrative, the poem speaks of a thin layer of foam (*écume* is Mallarmé’s word) which, floating on rough waters, beneath a set of oppressive clouds, serves as the sign of a recently accomplished event. According to a first hypothesis, a shipwreck has just occurred and the foam is the last trace of its disappearance; according to a second hypothesis, a siren has just vanished into the water, and the remaining hair-like trace of foam is the only sign of *her* disappearance.

On this purely thematic level, “A la nue accablante” stages an act of vision when the conditions for vision are meager at best. A thin layer of foam solicits the poet’s attention and he is quick to imagine a pair of alternatives: a shipwreck or a fleeing siren. Now, this distinction between two, qualitatively different orders of existence merits further reflection. Shipwrecks and sirens are well known elements of Mallarmé’s imaginary, but the siren here attests to the strictly *fictional* rapport which the poet entertains—and must entertain—with the empty seascape. A fantastical creature, the siren answers less to the stormy setting of “A la nue accablante,” than she reveals—much like a sign or a trace herself – the simple power of the imagination. She is not a legitimate empirical inference (she is not, in other words, an act of reason), but a cipher of mind’s capacity for generating meaning, even imagining it. Something like *Fiction*, in short, is the only possible answer to a serious quandary, which is as follows: the lingering foam, the foam which first solicits the poet, may constitute the sign of an event... or it may just be foam. The world, in other words, is potentially silent with respect to its own intelligibility: foam may just be what it is, and may thus defeat any hope that it signify something else. To be sure, the imagination need not pay heed to the sheer materiality of things. It can generate meaning where meaning is lacking, but more powerfully, and such is where Mallarmé’s poem leads us, the imagination can answer to *the mere possibility of meaning*. It can oscillate—and indeed must oscillate—between the foam as foam and foam as the promise of meaning. Put differently, before the imagination imagines something in particular, before it answers to clues and solves the crime, before it suggests either a shipwreck or a siren, it must first respond to the conditions for its own imagining. And these conditions are irreducibly ambiguous—or more simply, ambiguity as such: “perhaps,” says the foam, “perhaps something happened, perhaps it did not.” Such are the conditions of ignorance which affect the poet most intimately, and which he cannot help but betray. What do I mean by betray? I mean simply the inevitable invention of a siren,

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for example, when one would have rather named the unnamable ambiguity that solicits the siren in the first place.

At this point, I am attributing to Mallarmé a concern with two distinct ways of reading, or of engaging, his poetry. Mallarmé seeks to isolate, in one's initial encounter with his work, that point of ambiguity that first triggers the activities of mind rather than dissolve it with a definitive solution. Already, his oscillation between shipwreck and siren attests to the fact that he is answering to a question whose force will not diminish once a possible solution has been given. He can at best offer an ironic solution, that is, a solution which owns up to its insufficiency, but which also attests to something profound about the human imagination: of all human faculties, it is the most receptive to the world, our most original form of engagement with it. Why might that be and how does this affect our reading practices?

As I suggested, the central ambiguity that first solicits the poet in "A la nue accablante" concerns not so much the oscillation between shipwreck and siren as it does the status of the trace that inspires shipwreck-siren alternative. I also suggested that the foam may serve as a sign and thus serve as the bearer of some form of ideality (some form of sense or meaning), or it may just be foam and thus purely material. But this tension between ideality and materiality, when isolated in its purity, gets to the heart of Mallarmé's work. For his relentless interrogation of language is precisely an interrogation of the two sides of language: ideality and materiality. When he speaks of foam, it is safe to say that he is speaking simply of language. He is as interested in the intimation of meaning (or in the possibility of meaning) as he is in the definitive meaning of his poems—and I tend to agree with those who consider the meaning of Mallarmé's poems to be more or less determinable. After all, most commentators of "A la nue accablante" begin with the poem's meaning and then return to investigate its difficulties in light of its meaning, as I am doing here as well.⁴ But this relentless search for meaning, like the very postulation of a siren that was here and then disappeared, obscures the initial impetus that prompts the search. And Mallarmé's work is nothing if not an attempt to alert us to this initial promise that is bound up in the tension between materiality and ideality.

In "A la nue accablante," there is one word in particular which bears the weight of this tension, at least for the first time reader. "Tu," as employed in the first verse, is the past participle of "taire." The first difficulty one encounters is how to make sense of this word. It is isolated at the end of verse one (*A la nue accablante tu*) and is not grammatically or semantically "picked up," as it were, by the following phrase in verse two (*Basse de basalte et de lave*). In fact, we will not learn of the substantive which it qualifies until verse five, "quel naufrage." This passage of ignorance—literally, the time of reading from verse one to verse five—must not be overlooked in favor of the poem's final meaning. What is concentrated in the first quatrain is simply the experience of a signifying element that has yet to attain significance. The word "tu" is not unlike the foam itself, making palpable the promise of meaning in its withholding of any single meaning in particular. This withholding, in fact, explains why Mallarmé's use of the word is particularly brilliant and particularly ironic. For, of all the words made difficult in this poem, it is precisely the word "silenced", *tu*, which wants to speak, which wants to pass from its initial indeterminacy to a clear meaning. The initial non-synchronicity between reading and meaning (a non-synchronicity which parallels the relation between the poet's vision of the landscape and *its* indeterminate meaning) isolates and sustains the

tension between materiality and ideality, a tension that is eventually overcome when we determine the poem's significance. The silenced "tu" strains proleptically towards other elements in the poem in order to achieve some form of semantic fulfillment; eventually, it does so. But the famous "difficulty" of Mallarmé's poetry is just the effort to draw our attention to that experience of meaningfulness that is concentrated in the deferred determination of a single meaning in particular. The rush to meaning or to comprehension (which is impossible to repress, and which Mallarmé clearly invites us to pursue) may yet overlook the wondrous experience of something ordered but which has yet to order itself for us; that preliminary experience of something meaningful but which has yet to deliver on its promise.

In short, the poem enacts at the level of reading what it cannot accomplish at the level of meaning. What does this mean? If the act of reading is marked by a disjunction or non-synchronicity between word and meaning, if it is entangled in other words in that moment of ambiguity when the tension between materiality and ideality has yet to resolve itself, then reading is properly a disorienting experience in Mallarmé. This experience of disorientation, however, is also revelatory of humanity's profound capacity for ordering the world. The disorientation brought on by the act of reading alone piques—and thus isolates in its purity—something like the organizing capacity of the human mind, or what he also calls (very suggestively) "[la] pure faculté de jugement" (161). This experience of disorientation is far from crippling; one can say that it is orientational insofar as it orients our faculties towards the world without determining them. It follows that the task of the poet is to solicit in his reader "une... objectivité des jeux de l'âme" (179), where the concept of *play* (les *jeux* de l'âme) is indicative of the mind's capacity for engaging in a kind of non-determinative form of apprehension, that is to say, a form of comprehension that awakens solely to the intimation of meaning, and whose operation Mallarmé characterizes as "le suspens d'un acte inachevé" (167). In order for this kind of engagement to occur, the poet must construct "un milieu, pur, de fiction" (179), a pure space of fiction which would isolate and thus reveal what Mallarmé calls "l'irréductibilité de nos instincts" (188); "notre nudité spirituelle" (163); or even more strongly: "la divinité présente à l'esprit de l'homme" (160). In a related passage, one with clear anthropological and even political implications, he writes: "Le Poète...éveille, par l'écrit, l'ordonnateur de fêtes en chacun" (197).⁵

How do these thoughts relate to the uprooting of vision? The image of Gautier, and the allegorized account of vision which attends to it, will prove useful here; as will the earlier passage that touched upon the possibility of a non-linear form of reading. Mallarmé, in the demands that he makes upon the reading eye, is attempting to alter all relations between subject and object that are potentially exhaustive or complete. He is not seeking to dissolve the relation, merely seeking to highlight an initial moment of play that precedes any such determinate or adequate relation. One is asked to see without seeing an object in particular. Put differently, the space of fiction in Mallarmé (particularly, in a work such as *Un coup de dés*, but also in a sonnet like "A la nue accablante") is constructed with a view to prolonging the activity of vision without, however, collapsing that activity into a rapport of comprehension. At the very least, he seeks to defer the act of comprehension in order to highlight a more original form of engagement with the poetic work—one in which, as we saw, the ordering faculties of the mind are set into motion and isolated as such. The difficult verbal arrangements of Mallarmé's poetry are

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meant, in their capacity for exploiting any possible distance between word and meaning, to sustain the act of reading in order “to see divinely.” I will turn in a moment to the relevant passage, but will first insist that, in order to see divinely, vision must be washed clean of any object in particular and the eye must be reduced to “un limpide coup d’œil” (180); or “[une] vue qui éclaterait avec pureté” (165). Only an eye that is set free from stable appearances can apprehend *les relations entre tout*. The following passage is found in Mallarmé’s writings on *Le livre*.

L’hymne, harmonie et joie, comme pur ensemble groupé dans quelque circonstance fulgurante des relations entre tout. L’homme chargé de voir divinement, en raison que le lien, à volonté, limpide, n’a d’expression qu’au parallélisme, devant son regard, de feuillets. (224)

The divinity of humanity is revealed in its capacity to grasp the relations that govern the world, perhaps the universe, relations that are only visible (or which come to visibility) in the shuffled or turning pages of a book. Only “une circonstance fulgurante”, only a fleeting event, can relieve the eye from its particular tasks in order to engage it in a rapport (*un lien*) with the world that is voluntarily limpid or clear (*limpide*). Consequently: to have a feeling for mere order, for meaningfulness in the absence of a single determinate meaning (or, in a related thought, to see when seeing in the ordinary sense has become impossible) such is the task, according to Mallarmé, of seeing divinely.

A passage from *Le mystère dans les lettres* captures these thoughts quite beautifully, and I will close with a brief commentary of this passage. It is relevant to my purposes precisely because Mallarmé speaks here of words as analogous to the shuffling pages of a book, and describes them at the moment when the tension between materiality and ideality is the very heart of poetic experience.

Les mots, d’eux-mêmes, s’exaltent à mainte facette reconnue la plus rare ou valant pour l’esprit, centre de suspens vibratoire; qui les perçoit indépendamment de la suite ordinaire, projetés, en parois de grotte, tant que dure leur mobilité ou principe, étant ce qui ne se dit pas du discours: prompts tous, avant extinction, à une réciprocité de feux distante ou présentée de biais comme contingence. (233)

We can retain several important thoughts from this passage. First, the poet’s words are to be read as an image “projected upon a cave wall” and, further, they are to be read “independently of their ordinary (or normal) sequence.” In their arrangement, words are to amount to a visual experience and thereby signify in a way that is not purely discursive. A reciprocal “exaltation” between words is to give rise to a many-faceted shimmering that proves itself to be “valid” or commensurable with the human mind, which Mallarmé refers to here as the “center, or the locus, of a vibratory suspense.” The poem thus lights up as a linguistic event whose intelligibility is of a different order than that of ordinary discourse, and this distinction is capital. For what the poet would like “to say” of the universe, he can only “show” it, make it apparent to vision (or to the reading eye). It is not a vision that presents an object, but rather the relations of intelligibility which obtain between things—just as they obtain, independently of a single meaning,

between words. Language, once divested of its task to signify immediately, presents itself most originally as the medium of pure presentation.

Notes

¹ “Les Genre ou Des Modernes,” *Crayonné au théâtre*, in Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes II* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2003) 179-180. All subsequent references to Mallarmé’s theoretical writings will be made within the body of the text.

² *À la nue accablante tu...*

À la nue accablante tu
Basse de basalte et de laves
À même les échos esclaves
Par une trompe sans vertu

Quel sépulcral naufrage (tu
Le sais, écume, mais y baves)
Suprême une entre les épaves
Abolit le mât dévêtu

Ou cela que furibond faute
De quelque perdition haute
Tout l’abîme vain éployé

Dans le si blanc cheveu qui traîne
Avarement aura noyé
Le flanc enfant d’une sirène.

³ “À la nue accablante tu,” *Poésies*, in Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes I* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1998) 44.

⁴ Let me highlight three works in particular that have been helpful in reading Mallarmé: Paul Bénichou, *Selon Mallarmé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996); Bertrand Marchal, *Lecture de Mallarmé* (Paris: José Corti, 1985); and Gardner Davies, *Mallarmé et la couche suffisante d’intelligibilité* (Paris: José Corti, 1988).

⁵ Bertrand Marchal’s excellent book, *La Religion de Mallarmé*, (Paris: José Corti, 1988) is the most penetrating account of the relation between poetry and religion, politics, and anthropology in Mallarmé. Works by Stanguennec and Rancière similarly pursue the relation between poetry and politics. Written less from a literary critical point of view, and more from a philosophical angle, they are accordingly more daring, more speculative in their conclusions. See André Stanguennec, *Mallarmé et l’Éthique de la poésie* (Paris: Vrin, 1992), and Jacques Rancière, *Mallarmé: La politique de la sirène* (Paris: Hachette, 1996).

Selected Proceedings from
the UCLA Department of French and
Francophone Studies
Annual Graduate Student Conference

CAMERA OU STYLO:
A PROBLEMATIC DIALOGUE?



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*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de rechercher
si, par hasard, se trouvait ici l'endroit où de telles
paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*.

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