

SERIES: LITERARY STUDIES

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Mallarmé at Play²

The paper deals with devices typical for the oeuvre of the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé. He belonged to that category of authors for whom the quest for a new poetic language was almost more vital than their own creations. As a result, his poetic texts present a certain structure wherein all elements, words, symbols and rhythms, serve a single purpose, i.e. to embody an absolute text, which goes to prove the everlasting beauty of Poetry. Mallarmé's new approach to the nature of words has largely presaged the discoveries of 20th-century modernist poets.

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Introduction

In devising a new poetic language, which would have fulfilled Mallarmé's ideas on true poetry, his playing with words, phrases and the very space of verse was of the utmost importance. The poet himself always treated it with special respect, ever since his youthful thoughts about the nature of art. For instance, in 1862, at the age of twenty, Mallarmé wrote an article entitled *Hérésies artistiques: L'art pour tous*. In this essay he defended the sacred essence of poetry, which had been lost in his contemporary world. This manifested itself even at a fleeting glance cast upon some poetic text, which hardly stood out against the background of any written work, whether a newspaper advertisement, political essay, or poem by a mediocrity or a genius. However, all art, and poetry is no exception, is a great mystery waiting to be unravelled. Everything should enhance its enigmatic nature

and contribute to its intensification. Whenever we open a score by Mozart, Beethoven or Wagner, we pause in admiration, looking at the mysterious signs, incomprehensible for the uninitiated. As for poetry – alas, it is deprived of mystery. Anyone who knows the alphabet is capable of reading any poem. Here Mallarmé is just beginning to think about the distinction of poetic language, which, for him, was not limited by words as such. In his own work the poet was the champion of the aesthetic and poetic system whose destination was to guard, as he put it, “the entrance to the temple of poetry” (Mallarmé 259). So how, according to a symbolist, is this achieved? First, a poem should not describe or explain anything. Secondly, it should not be written under the effect of poetic inspiration, because in this case the poet “draws a handful of stars from the Milky Way and scatters them on paper, letting them randomly create unforeseen constellations” (Mallarmé 161). Therefore, a poet should reject the lines and expressions that first sprang to his mind. Every word cost Mallarmé many hours of search, for he strove to attain, first and foremost, the power of *the impression produced* “without a single dissonance, without embellishments – at once delightful and implicit” (Mallarmé 161). Such an impression was made possible by means of many elements. Mallarmé sought and selected the very words, which were ambiguous, or had a complex etymology. This play on the words’ multiple meanings is crucial in the emergence of a new poetic language. A fine example is the word *ptyx* from his famous allegorical *-ix* sonnet. In letters to friends he often asked the same question – whether this word existed, hoping that it was his own invention. Another of this poet’s favourite ways to obscure the meaning of words was to take some very ordinary word, which any bourgeois could see in a morning paper at his cup of coffee, and to place it in such a combination that jointly they would sound as some mystery. To enhance the impression, the poetic rhythm is of great importance. The latter in its turn, as Mallarmé believed, should be reinforced by changing the syntactic structure of a French phrase, known to be ruled by a rather strict order. When a poet alters and rebuilds the customary syntactic order, he achieves not only the beauty of rhythm, but also a multiple meaning. Thus, one of

the lines in the same sonnet defines a nymph as *défunte nue*. In this expression both words could be either an adjective or a noun, which leads to entirely different meanings: either a “nude deceased” or a “defunct cloud”.

Of course, from this point of view the most telling is the title of Mallarmé’s last, unfinished work, *Un Coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard*. It is usually translated in two ways: “A Throw of Dice” or “Luck Will Abolish Hazard”. The very existence of two different versions suggests an ambiguity of the title’s meaning. In French, *coup de dés* and *hasard* can be synonyms translated as “accident”. But one of etymologic meanings of *hasard* is “a game of dice”, whereas *coup de dés* could be literally translated as a throw of dice, since *dé* can stand for a die. It turns out that the title words reflect each other, forming a single “total word” which the poet dreamed of.

The poem *Sainte* as a reflection of a new poeticism

The poem *Sainte* is one of those which demonstrate the emergence of this new multiple poetic language and Mallarmé’s playing with words. At first sight it seems to be an ordinary poem, written for the occasion of the name day of the poet’s goddaughter, Madame Brunet, on 22 November 1865. It is dedicated to St. Cecilia, patroness of music.

1. **À la fenêtre** recélant
2. **Le santal vieux** qui se dédore
3. De sa viole étincelant
4. Jadis avec flûte ou mandore,

5. Est la Sainte pâle, étalant
6. **Le livre vieux** qui se déplie
7. Du Magnificat ruisselant
8. Jadis selon vêpre et complie:

9. **À ce vitrage** d'ostensoir
10. Que frôle une harpe par l'Ange

11. Formée avec son vol du soir
12. Pour la délicate phalange

13. Du doigt que, sans **le vieux santal**
14. Ni **le vieux livre**, elle balance
15. Sur le plumage instrumental,
16. Musicienne du silence.

Let us try to understand how in this apparently ordinary piece the poet makes use of the main features of a new poetic language, whose necessity he always contemplated. If we would like to retell this poem, we can draw the following picture. The Saint is sitting by the window, surrounded with musical instruments. She is holding a closed book with church hymns, the Magnificat being one of the main biblical canticles, forming the culmination of the Vespers. However, these objects are not employed, and the Saint's fingers touch the Angel's feathers in silence. In order to see the poet's meaning in this work, we need some additional explaining and various interpretations. Given that Mallarmé ruled out

anything accidental in his work, we have to look for some thread that would make this entire poem an organic whole. We know two versions of it, dated 1865 and 1883. The first one included a subtitle, later crossed out by the poet, which translates as “Old song and images”. I believe, it has primarily to do with the fact that Mallarmé deliberately “obscured” the sense of the poem, allowing the reader himself to take part in this guessing game.

Now then, “Old song and images”.

The sound associations here are linked to the presence of several musical instruments, which constitute a Renaissance quartet of viol, flute, mandore and harp. The Magnificat, mentioned in line 7, reminds readers, as it reminded the poet’s contemporaries, of religious singing. The very sound pattern contributes to the music of the text: the soft *c*, the fricative *f*, the recurring [*an*] rhyme in the first two quatrains, contrasted with [*ange*] and [*ance*] of the following two. The length of melody itself is stressed visually, because, in fact, the poem consists of a single sentence, divided in two by a colon. A certain symmetry is apparent in both parts, by means of repeated expressions *à la fenêtre / à ce vitrage; santal vieux, livre vieux / vieux santal, vieux livre*, while the recurring structure of the 4th and 8th stanzas resembles a refrain. Nonetheless, the syntactic construction of the poem as a whole is rather asymmetrical, i.e. the first two stanzas contain a complete sentence *est la sainte pâle*, on which the two opposing participles *recelant* and *étalant* depend; the second part includes two subordinate clauses *que frôle... qu’elle balance* (lines 10 and 14). Knowing that Mallarmé in his works always carefully adjusted words, rhythm, phrase structure etc., we may surmise that the bipartite structure, clearly evident at different levels, carries a certain sense, being linked to the poem’s title and theme. It is even possible that the second part is largely contrasted with the first.

If we judge by the subtitle, the poem deals with an “old song and images”. And what are these? The musical instruments mentioned in the first part, viol, flute and mandore, have long been known to accompany songs, in particular. The words went side by side with music, they should have been sung. The holy Magnificat

inspired many composers, and its polyphonic arrangements have survived since the late 14th century. Surely, it not at random that Mallarmé chose the name for the closed book. It appears that we deal here not only with lyrical poetry and musical accompaniment, as in the old days (*jadis*), but also with church singing. Naturally, many interpretations can be offered. Once upon a time (*jadis*) the impression of the uttered word was enhanced by music; formerly (*jadis*) a certain canon existed. The poet may have intentionally used the word *selon* in line 8 (French for the Gospel According to St. Luke is *l'Évangile selon Saint Luc*, and the Magnificat is the glorification of Virgin Mary from St. Luke's Gospel), in order to stress that it was a canonical text which he implied, the text whose sense, significance and incarnation form an ideal harmony. Presently, when this pristine harmony, according to Mallarmé, has been irretrievably lost, the word should make an impression by other means. Music no longer accompanies the word, but is rather contained within it. This music is made in silence (*Musicienne du silence*). It is this new type of poetry, which the second part of the poem speaks about. The canon no longer applies here, and the old book (*vieux livre*) is closed, deprived of its former greatness and significance.

The –X Sonnet and innovation in poetry writing

For Mallarmé, poetry becomes the culmination of artistic development, rising to the level of the sacred text. Besides, this happened largely because in the 1860s the poet experienced a serious metaphysical crisis, which led to his loss of faith in God. He now believed that art was the only shrine of contemporary life. If there is no God, man seems to be just an empty form of matter. It is only through creativity that he can be endowed with the gift, even in his lifetime, “contempler l'Éternité en soi” (Mallarmé 316), because in the process of creation the poet is able to feel the link between himself and some Substance and, crucially, to perceive its nature. In order to penetrate the hidden sense, one has to exert all one's spiritual and mental powers to the utmost. “Je me tiens, comme une araignée sacrée, sur les principaux fils déjà sortis de mon esprit, et à l'aide desquels je

tisserai aux points de rencontre de merveilleuses dentelles, que je devine, et qui existent déjà dans le sein de la Beauté”(Mallarmé 316).

Owing to its unity, the interweaving of these “threads” – essentially, “pure concepts” – becomes a symbol of the new, absolute text and ideal poetry. Words, liberated from their preset concrete meanings, and fulfilling their whole potential, is what these “threads” are. The significance of such a text can fully manifest itself only in the unity of its rhythm, conformity and correlation between words.

In his celebrated *-ix* sonnet Mallarmé returns to the theme of poetry “reflecting upon itself”. In his own words, it is "un sonnet nu se réfléchissant de toutes les façons "(Mallarmé 392-3). In this realm of objects the lyrical hero, the poetic "I" is absent. Everything depends on the impersonal reflection of Ursa Major: all stars contemplate themselves in the mirror hanging in a room. They symbolize the principle of his shaping a poetic phrase and other use of linguistic resources, which formed part of Mallarmé's programme of studying words. In this poem we observe how the poet employs etymological and lexical pairs: *ongles – onyx; soir – vespéral; cendres – cinéraire*. The reflection of Ursa Major's seven stars is reinforced literally with seven *-yx* or *-ixe* rhymes and seven *-or* and *-ore* rhymes. The alternating male and female rhymes produce the same effect. Thus, words "s'allument de reflets réciproques comme une virtuelle traînée de feux sur des pierreries, remplaçant la respiration perceptible en l'ancien souffle lyrique ou la direction personnelle enthousiaste de la phrase".

In some sense the *-ix* sonnet can be regarded as Mallarmé's programme, if we consider the significance attached to it by the author himself, as attested by his correspondence. In July 1868 Mallarmé wrote to Cazalis: “J'extrait ce sonnet, auquel j'avais une fois songé, d'une étude projetée sur la parole : il est inverse, je veux dire que le sens, s'il en a un (mais je me consolerais du contraire grâce à la dose de poésie qu'il renferme, ce me semble) est évoqué par un mirage même des mots mêmes. En se laissant aller le murmurer plusieurs fois on éprouve une sensation assez cabalistique”(Mallarmé 392).

Therefore, at this period on the basis of ordinary language Mallarmé strove

to create a different one, entirely distinct from everyday speech. In a letter to E. Lefébure the poet inquired about the meaning of the term *ptyx* in a sincere hope that it did not exist, having been his own exclusive invention, created thanks to the magic of rhyme.

This intention surely determined the changes, which the symbolist poet made in his sonnet of 1887. The original version of 1868 opens with a description of *la Nuit approbatrice*, which transfers the evening flame, abolished by Phoenix, onto her nails. The first quatrain is a compound sentence, structured according to the French syntax: main clause (subject – attribute – predicate – objects/attributes) and subordinate clause (subject – predicate). The images used here are certain collective figures, whose importance is graphically stressed (*Nuit, Crime, Soir*). Verbal forms are clearly represented, and play a vital role: present tense (*allume, a*) characterizes a certain moment and implies action – Night is reflected in the onyx of the nails. In 1887 the sonnet's tone changes. The image of the Night disappears from the text, yielding to the lamp-bearing Anguish (*Angoisse*). But “this midnight” (*ce minuit*) is implied, which explains the disappearance of the Evening from the final version. It did not just vanish on paper, but does not exist at all in a world where midnight reigns alone. The principal clause is syntactically complicated with participial constructions, the first of which begins the text – “*Ses purs ongles très haut dédiant leur onyx*” . Consequently the verbs, as it were, withdraw to the background. Their semantic weight only stresses the sonnet's main idea: Anguish affirms the dream, already consumed by the flame of Phoenix. All this creates the impression of absolute void, and absence of any action.

In the second stanza of the sonnet dated 1868 the poet describes a drawing room immersed in darkness (*en le noir salon*). In the reworked version this room is supplanted with a kind of symbolic space, which becomes a sign of the absence of all things – *au salon vide*. This impression is strengthened by a deliberate "obscuring" of the vocabulary: *console*, a small table with curved legs, typical for a 19th-century interior, gives way to *crédence*, a richly decorated carved cupboard. The "unusual vessel" (*insolite vaisseau*), which symbolizes the *ptyx* in the first

version, is substituted with an "abolished trinket" (*aboli bibelot*).

The greatest riddle for scholars is the above-mentioned *ptyx*. Mallarmé hoped that it did not mean anything, and would only contribute in his sonnet to the harmony of rhymes. But some commentators tried to unearth its semantics, making rather varied explanations. For instance, E. Noulet suggests that it means a folded object and a shell at the same time (Noulet 98). Ch. Mauron, as an exponent of psychoanalytic criticism, believes that the *ptyx*, a sea-shell, is a feminine symbol, and interprets the second quatrain as symbolic descent towards death, where the shell is an emblem of a dead woman (Mauron 138). According to C. Soula, it is a symbol of the poet's silence in death, while Ch. Chassé claims that it stands for a horn, that is why Mallarmé describes it as *aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore*; it could have been formerly played by some shepherd, but now it is a musical nonentity. Since the shape of a horn resembles a shell, Chassé thought that it led some commentators to false conjectures (Chassé 112). In another analysis of the sonnet P. Bénichou comes to the conclusion that Mallarmé possessed very full information on the etymology and semantics of *ptyx*, but upheld his own legend about the non-existent term because in this sonnet he mainly strove to convey the effect of void and absence. Thus, the term *ptyx*, deprived of any meaning, is a pure sound. From this point of view Bénichou thinks it possible to treat it as a shell: if we put it to our ear, the roll of the sea is heard, i.e. *inanité sonore*.

The mirror symbol in this sonnet is a visual image of Poetry, which contemplates and perceives itself. It is also a symbol of speech, which reads itself. Here the poet almost entirely rules out his own presence and "cède l'initiative aux mots" (Mallarmé 366). The mirror symbol is developed so that it means not only a reflection of Poetry, but also its self-perception and "self-reading". It thus expresses the idea of purely impersonal reading process as a visual mechanism of the spirit. E. Bénoit devotes a whole chapter in his essay to the study of this device in Mallarmé's works (Bénoit).

Conclusion

To conclude, in defending the significance of poetry Mallarmé created a new poetic language, where everything is intertwined and presents the other world of Beauty, fair and harmonious, albeit difficult to perceive. His poems impress the reader as something enigmatic and mysterious. The reader involuntarily becomes a sharer of creation, since he has to search for the meaning of the poem as a whole as well as the sense of a given word. But he does not find a definite answer, because the poet's play with the space of verse suggests numerous interpretations.

Similar attitudes to words have largely defined the evolution of 20th-century poetry, and not only poetry. In his book on the poetics of symbolism G. Michaud wrote: "We can affirm with no exaggeration that Mallarmé in his own way has laid the foundations of structural linguistics half a century before Saussure; we can affirm that, half a century before Lévi-Strauss and Gilbert Durand, "the demon of analogy" prompted him to search for what today is called isomorphisms among the structures of language, structures of myths, structures of our mind, and structures of the world, for the sake of comprehending "the proportion of the relationship between all things"; and, lastly, we can affirm that, likewise, a century before Barthes, he has defined in general terms the poetic language as a multiple one, having a distinct nature from everyday language" (Michaud XXI).

Notes

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