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Review Article

Stéphane Mallarmé: Face and Facelessness*

During his own lifetime Stéphane Mallarmé was certainly no leader of any literary school, despite the reverence and adulation meted out to him by the generally younger writers of the day during his celebrated *martis*, and his published work was largely ignored by the critics and scholars dominating the intellectual life of *fin de siècle* France. Like his obscure and involute writings, Mallarmé himself remained always at a remove from things, discreet, withdrawing, marked by a *pudeur* signalling at once an instinctive delicacy of sensibility and a lucid toughness of genial intelligence. Although writers such as Gide, Valéry, Claudel, Proust and, more oddly, Jarry and Breton, expressed varyingly motivated and intense fascination with his work, Mallarmé has in effect been remarkably unappreciated until recent years and often considered, amazingly enough, a literary *raté* with his scant poetical opus and his unfulfilled dream of realising the ultimate and all-embracing *Grand Oeuvre*. Since the Second World War, however, his reputation has grown immensely—dangerously even, as the poet and critic Yves Bonnefoy, in the perspective of his own urgent preoccupations, has persuasively argued in his brilliant essay “L’Acte et le lieu de la poésie” and, more recently, in his perceptive preface to the Gallimard “Poésie” edition of Mallarmé’s *Igitur, Divagations, Un coup de dés* (1976).¹ Successive, essentially exegetical studies by critics from all over the world, Noulet, Chadwick, Davies, Richard, Chisholm, Austin, Cohn and others, revealed a Mallarméan universe initially Baudelairean in both its formal and imaginative, thematic qualities, and

* *Mallarmé: Igitur*. By Robert Greer Cohn. University of California Press, 1981.

The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé. By Leo Bersani. Cambridge University Press, 1982.

subsequently characterised by an increasingly radical originality that even now is perhaps not at all well understood. The last few years have seen some particularly sensitive criticism, with, in addition to essays by Yves Bonnefoy, Henri Peyre (in *La Littérature symboliste*, 1976), Bettina Knapp (in *Yale French Studies*, 54, 1977) and Roger Cardinal (in *Figures of Reality*, 1981), books by Judy Kravis: *The Prose of Mallarmé* (Cambridge, 1976), Malcolm Bowie: *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult* (Cambridge, 1978), Austin Gill: *The Early Mallarmé* (Oxford, 1979), and, now, Robert Greer Cohn: *Mallarmé: Igitur* (University of California, 1981) and Leo Bersani: *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé* (Cambridge, 1982). The two latter studies, both fine and valuable in their own right, are especially interesting when read together, for they illustrate splendidly the fundamentally divergent, if equally comprehensible approaches available before Mallarmé's work in particular and literature in general. If Bersani's criticism respects and owes much to the rich and often penetrating exegesis and semantic reconstruction exemplified by Cohn's line by line analysis of *Igitur*, it is essential to understand that his *Death of Stéphane Mallarmé* finally centres itself upon a rejection of the exegetical mode bent upon the elimination of "fiction," the restoration of some definitive, seamless meaning, the replacement of the enigmatic and the disturbing by the ideal and the reposeful.

Let us look very briefly at one of the famous late sonnets of Mallarmé, "A la nue accablante tu," a poem not appearing in France until 1913, although published earlier in 1895, three years before his death, in the international German review *Pan*. Here is the text of the poem:

A la nue accablante tu
 Basse de basalte et de laves
 A 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?²

No longer derivative in either form or tone, the sonnet evokes in many respects the darkly hermetic innovativeness of *Igitur* or *Un coup de*

dés. Less elliptical than elaborated via, around, a series of parentheses and oppositions, the textuality of "A la nue accablante tu" unfolds slowly, marked by the deep creases of its syntactic compactness. Its semanticity, on the other hand, is not so much telescoped by this form into some impenetrable ball of sense than it is rarefied, rendered distant and less tangible both by the poem's refusal of any contextualisation of its meaning, and by its preference for periphrasis, use of totally ungrounded metaphor and symbol, or what Bersani terms metaphoric and 'ontological sliding.' The exegetist, conscious of the meticulously aware control that Mallarmé brought to bear upon all his writing, and perceiving through the imbricated clutter of the poem's fragments a very real continuity, both syntactic and semantic, might be prepared to offer the following explanation of its raw meaning: In the midst of a raging and knowing, yet unheeded sea, under heavy, unwitting skies, there occurs a shipwreck, a death, or the wretched drowning of something, some minimal thing, the "barely glimpsed form of a dawning myth."³ Upon this skeletal sense all manner of "symbolic" interpretations or "grills" might then be placed: for example, the idea of the desperate turmoil of seeing swallowed up what has not, or only barely, been—for Mallarmé, the Great Work, the Book defying chance, containing the whole world, forever sought after, yet never realised. Going out from the obsessions of this poem, in an extended exegetical fashion, Mallarmé's "imaginative universe," to use Jean-Pierre Richard's term, would thus oppose art and existence, ideal and chaos, what is already and what might be created, the horror of being and the Beauty of Being. Into this potentially transcendent equation, for whose completion all available human powers are required, is introduced, jarringly, tragically, the terrible awareness of the flawed nature of the Word, of Art. Chance and absurdity are omnipresent, ubiquitous. Pure consciousness or spirituality, sheer transcendent Idea, may continue to tantalise, but the irony of the cracked nature of the human condition, the black doubt hovering over transcendence, are now forever with Mallarmé.⁴ The *Coup de dés*—like "A la nue accablante tu"—may be, for him, a supreme example of the Supreme Game, but Mallarmé is performing an essentially tragic celebration of a maximum/minimum of poetic and ontological transcendence. What is opted for is a necessary human *jeu*, an intricate and painstaking weaving of "glorious lies," or what may be thought of as the face of truth... of Nothingness.

It is into this teeming pool of notions that Robert Greer Cohn fearlessly dives in undertaking his detailed assessment of Mallarmé's much neglected *Igitur*. Not that Cohn comes ill-prepared to his task. His earlier books, especially *L'Oeuvre de Mallarmé: Un coup de dés*

(1951) and *Towards the Poems of Mallarmé* (1965), have established him as perhaps even the leading critic of Mallarmé from a certain point of view. What *Igitur* might be said to speak of, in a word—if any purely unintentional presumptuousness can be overlooked!—is the act of psychic suicide undertaken, committed, in order to attain to perfect Being. *Igitur* will thereby rid consciousness of existence and permit access to pure Idea, via the annulment of chance, of the absurd. He will lose all—by “blowing his mind,” as the occasionally all too disarming Cohn might have put it—to gain all. Most usefully, Cohn seeks to demonstrate—indeed does so to a considerable degree—that Mallarmé’s thought process is not only dialectical, but marked by a series of dialectics and paradoxes that intersect one another and hence set up what he terms “tetrapolar” and even “polypolar” thought “structures.” Further, these structures are not necessarily merely static; they may be intersected diachronically, such configurations creating a kind of “spiralling” effect vertiginous in its degree of abstraction, yet, Cohn argues with conviction and often a good deal of intellectual dexterity, characteristic of the most complicated and modern modes of conception of our material and psychic condition. Although Cohn speaks of *Igitur*’s “comparative aesthetic sterility, its one-sided abstractness,” he is quick—and right—to point out that this is one of Mallarmé’s most profoundly meditated texts and, although it is incomplete, like *Hérodiade* and the *Grand Oeuvre* itself, it can also show Mallarmé at his most densely and darkly brilliant, at his most persistently probing, caught as he is at the intersection of amazing potential and despairing anguish.

The “problem” posed by such swirling exegetical analyses as those offered by Robert Greer Cohn, and quite apart from their perhaps inescapable but regrettable fragmentation, is very much a function of their intention, and indeed their merit. What they perceive, or seek to perceive, in everything—and with Mallarmé this means in the thick of an “elitist” obscurity deliberately designed to eschew sense or to push it out of shape, into the intervals of the text, to make it unavailable, absent, as it were—is a coherence, a continuity, of thought and meaning which, quite simply, were never there, can never be there. Recent critics such as Malcolm Bowie and Roger Cardinal have endeavoured to show that the beauty and value of Mallarmé’s most celebrated poems - “Prose pour des Esseintes,” “Ses purs ongles...,” *Un coup de dés*, for example—are not to be found through an effort of reduction or systematising of sense, but on the contrary via a reading of them that allows for their hermeticism to become a source of infinite openness, of endless potentiality rather than definitive, congealed substance and form. Whilst Leo Bersani’s lucidly penetrating and finely

original *Death of Stéphane Mallarmé* does not continually pursue this line of thought, it owes to it, and acknowledges, a certain crucial amount. Concerned with the "radical unlocatability of meaning in literary language" in general and Mallarmé as a classic instance of this unlocatability, Bersani seeks, amongst other things, to shift the stress from the bizarre idea we might have, in reading most criticism of Mallarmé's work, that the latter is somehow "deficient in narrativity," to the idea that narrativity was just about the last thing of interest to Mallarmé.

What is fundamental to Bersani's view of Mallarmé's work is, firstly, that Mallarmé's aesthetic entails, as with *Igitur*, a certain mode of death of the self, and, secondly, that the poet becomes a piercing and relentless critic of his own nevertheless persistent illusions. That is to say that poetry itself 'dies' whilst continuing to breathe on as, in a sense, the articulation of the death of itself, its profound "other-ness." As Bersani puts it, "the experience of poetry as a kind of separation from the self remains the condition for all the 'inessential' texts which signal both Mallarmé's failure to produce his Work and his entrance into the activity of writing." This does not mean the "themes" of the self disappear progressively, and of course particularly after Mallarmé's derivative period; rather do they persist as "psychologically inert" phenomena. Instead of thematic or imaginative contrast we find in works such as those to which we have referred, that play, textual/ontological—and not ontic—interplay, *is* their meaning.⁵ Intelligibility is treated as negligible by Mallarmé, and, by implication, our efforts to restore it to some imagined integrity risk violating the "spirit of his obliquity." Language is perceived as being incapable of reproducing reality or of giving knowledge of it; language—and literature—can only produce fictions, "nothing," can only be "inessential." The radical "mis-naming" or *préciosité*, as Bersani may call it, of Mallarmé's writing thus functions as a reminder of the equally radical human inability to name correctly, with true ontic correspondence and depth. On the other hand, and despite the fact that Mallarmé's crisis of the 1860s, at once physiological, psychic and poetic, was devastatingly severe—*Igitur* is not idle fabrication of the aesthete mind—, despite the sense of epistemological despair that continues to pervade his work, the latter clearly may give rise to 'a joyous abstract sensuality' in which the world, *objet*, becomes, as with Francis Ponge today, *objeu* or even *objoie*. But this comes about, as Leo Bersani shows in one of his shrewd comparisons, this time between Mallarméan textuality and the 'reality' of Henry James' Maggie Verver, by rendering the text/character "a model of positioned rather than substantive sense," its/her meaning becoming "identical to, and [going] no further than,

the self-displacements" articulated. Mallarmé's poems or poetic *proses* may thus be said to take place in the intervals of their (non) sense. We are not given statements to read, but are invited continually to cross the intervals of textuality, of heaving sense in flux. As Bersani so pertinently says, "the intervallic sense of the Mallarméan esthetic is the nothingness of consciousness eroticized"—thought worked upon by desire that is to produce a pregnant, richly promising, yet curiously absent, precisely because unlocatable, interstitial textual substance or meaning. It is in this perspective that he also suggests we view *Un coup de dés* as, not so much the symphony and synthesis it is often thought to be—the repository and locus of union of multiple stellar strands of the Intelligible—but rather a diagramming of intervallic sense. None of this should be thought to imply that a Robert Greer Cohn does not, too, perceive the shifting, unstable, forever uncongealed flow of sense in Mallarmé's writing. But it is equally clear that his, and indeed the general aim, is to provide sense, to put a face to the amorphous moving shadows of a dead self everywhere half-visible in Mallarmé. What Leo Bersani prefers ultimately to demonstrate, is the inalienable facelessness of Mallarmé's still stunningly present poetry.

NOTES

1. "L'Acte et le lieu de la poésie," in *Du mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve*. (Gallimard, "Poésie," 1970); and in *L'Improbable*, (Mercure de France, 1959).
2. *Oeuvres complètes*. (Gallimard, "Pléiade," 1945 [1974]), p. 76. My translation:

To the overwhelming cloud silenced
 Low with basalt and lava
 Amidst the echoes slave
 To a horn without virtue

What sepulchral shipwreck (you
 Know, foam, but slobber over it)
 Supreme one amongst the pieces of flotsam
 Abolishes the unclad mast

Or that which furious for lack
 of some high ruination
 The whole vain abyss spread forth

In the so white hair trailing
 Out of miserliness must have drowned
 The child flank of a siren.

3. See Emilie Noulet, *Dix poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*, (Geneva: Droz, 1948), 138. My translation.
4. The notion of transcendence implies, in Mallarmé, not other-worldliness, but merely that "Reverdyan" transcendence, both empty and full, of the artistic heterocosm.
5. This movement away from the themes of the self to a "thematics" of the rarefaction of meaning, its instability, its unreliability, and its joyous ringing nothingness, is finely argued by Bersani through his examination of the two versions of "Le Pitre châtié" (1864 and 1887),