

MICHEL DEGUY

## The Dancer: Mallarmé

Translated by Christopher Elson<sup>1</sup>

“O Kindheit, O entgleitende Vergleichung”

“O Childhood, O elusory comparison”

– R.M. Rilke

Which is to say that the dancer (female) is not a woman who dances, for the juxtaposed reasons that (a) she isn't a woman, but a metaphor summing up one of the elementary aspects of our form, sword, cup, flower, etc. and (b) she doesn't dance (in the ordinary sense; rather) suggesting by the prodigiousness of (either) short-cuts or élans, with a bodily writing what it would take paragraphs of prose dialogue as well as descriptive (prose) to express in a written text: (she is) a poem freed from all the apparatus of a scribe.<sup>2</sup>

IT IS AT THIS LEVEL of complexity that we must take and read “metaphor” in Mallarmé and in poetry. The metaphor here is not a local process of discourse, a rhetorical turn: metaphor is a figure, an actor figuring in the play of the world. Metaphor is taken ‘metaphorically,’ if the term does not primarily designate here a way of speaking, a trope, a stylistic artefact, but, taken at the very level of the reciprocity of the phase and of the fable, the ‘summary of an elementary aspect.’

---

<sup>1</sup> This is the first English translation of Michel Deguy's “La Danseuse: Mallarmé,” in *Choses de la poésie et affaire culturelle* (Paris: Hachette, 1986) 63–65.

<sup>2</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Crayonné au théâtre*, trans. Robert Greer Cohn, in *Mallarmé's Divagations: A Guide and Commentary* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990) 148.

The formula is *paradoxical*; in this, that it *refuses*, or displaces, or surmounts, any literal take on a tautological, analytical principle of identity, in other words, one that would just be obvious: 'A woman is a woman, the dancer is a woman.' No.

The scope of the *metaphor* envisaged by Mallarmé is held in that proposition, that the dancer is a metaphor, a prodigy, a 'prodigiousness of short-cuts.' It is a matter of a metamorphosis *in* metaphor; of changing the dancer into metaphor. *A reciprocity of proofs between woman and metaphor.*

A woman is not a woman. And one might just as well say, taking the Mallarmean formula in its reversibility: the metaphor is woman; take the woman dancer as a chance to appear, a roll of the dice where chance is figured in formula or emblem, without being abolished because of it, but giving itself elsewhere under another aspect. Metaphor is woman to the extent that a woman is not a woman.

In general, and I will insist on it here, this means that we must take up again (and relearn) the way (of thought) where Paul Ricoeur recently 'revivified metaphor': the principle of comparison (A *is like* B) is not the principle of identity. Poetic thought, through approach and approximation, by bringing into proximity, treats of the comparable-incomparable.

The principle of poetry is suspicious of identification; respectful of the fold of difference deployed by being-like-or-as, it has to do less with the common than with the *commune* [*le commun*], the as-oneness, in the experience of common diversity; do not take 'Nature is a temple,' any more than 'Life is a dream' or 'Being is night' (Novalis) for a judgement about identity. It is symbolically that an element can be the whole, in a particular meaning of being, a sense that is developed in the expression *being-like-or-as* [*être-comme*].

A thing is in its being-like, like another, to the extent that it refrains from identifying itself with its other, while comparing itself to comprehend itself (which is all the easier to accept when the thing is an activity).

Comparison maintains the incomparable; the distinction of things among themselves.

Poetry forbids violent identification, through the like-or-as of comparison: refusing simplification all the while wresting from diversity a common being or configuration.

Comparison has at its disposal poetry, which deploys itself as comparative.

In such a way that the poetic grasp of things implies a double refusal: of identification (of the type: 'men are beasts'); and of analogy, which would expel us from this world. It awakens us to the hearing of the like-or-as, and so to paradoxicalization, to the is-and-is-not; and attaches itself to the operation (work, art) which transforms, which allows its figurants to rise up in the world, making differences flourish in 'correspondences.'

Let us come back to the dancer; to the modern metamorphosis operated by Mallarmé: how does Mallarmé do it? An utterance that describes by transposing, transporting, detaching, transforming the dancer into that like/as which she is; the refusal to call her by her (proper) name is very explicitly broken down into two parts by analysis: not a woman, nor one who would dance. The paradox *detaches* by heteronymizing, by pseudonymizing, toward 'blade, cup, flower ... etc.'

The detachment which compares (O elusory comparison ...) thus allows the 'dancer' to appear in another relation of the singular to the plural; detachment tears away from the tautological symmetry of the predicate and the subject (subject in the singular, predicate in the singular). The singularity of the dancer is that of the 'summary' which is an open plural, prodigiousness of short-cuts; the dancer exchanges with that which she is like; she only appears by making appear alongside her, as witnesses, that with which she adorns herself: that to which she is comparable: a multiple configuration of elementary aspects; if I lose sight of her while plunging her, *guided by the names*, into the family of aspects, following a multiple semblance, she will reappear, changed into 'metaphor,' where 'blade, cup, gladiolus etc.' are associated.

The 'I,' poet, subject of the word who will subject himself to language in that 'inspired' manner, is one who 'reads the being.' That which is, is describable aspect, decipherable; is an ideogram.

The dancer is mute (like the mime or the acrobat); she does not impose her name, she bears no properly reserved appellation; she is legendary; to be read; or an emblem; in the prodigiousness of short-cuts she sums up aspects; she is what she is while being-like, like a rebus.

'Here are the names ....' The dancer occasions some misprision, 'misreading.' To recognize her, recognizing that-which-has-

surged-up-pure-enigma, is 'to be mistaken!' And all of the errors are good, because they evoke the resemblance, that for which we can take her, that with which we might confuse her; I take you for blade, cup, flowers ...—dancer. It is a matter of spelling out a great many aspects. Yet there is no key, no particular prototype-model to be discovered: the reading of the dancer invents all that-which-she-resembles, as she (the dancer) demultiplies her semblance, revealing the point of view in which everything gathers step by step, one to another (blade, cup, flowers, etc.) in the milieu (Imaginarium) where things have semblance, have to do with one another, have a view one upon another, comparable in their common appearance to testify [*comparution*].

Dance makes-like poetry, and reciprocally; one does not found the other; dance is not a more original 'principle' than poetry. The principle is multiple. Dance gives to be grasped, heard and understood, that which poetry does, poetry which goes toward things (to any thing) as toward dancers, the bird, the flower, insofar as they do dance in the general choreography: circulation, reversibility, general in the equality of the common appearance; equality in difference, horizontality, reality of places, extensibility of space, spacing of any figure ....