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MALLARME: A NEW CONCEPT OF POETRY

THE LAST FEW DECADES have borne witness to a change of climate in the world of poetry. There has been a general rejection of most of the traditional forms and styles, accompanied by a good deal of experimentation. One often gets the impression, however, that the experimentation is a bit frenzied, a bit frantic. Why? Because the change of climate has pre-eminently meant a removal of the usual safeguards of poetry that the poet once enjoyed. At various times and places poetry could, for instance, be justified in terms of its ability to entertain or edify. But today there seems to be a general uneasiness about whether these functions define the poetic work. Indeed, we sometimes hear it said that one or the other, entertainment or edification, has no place whatsoever in poetry. In whatever way we construe the problem or problems, it all comes down to saying that we today need a refreshed if not a new understanding of poetry, of what poems are and might be.

The task of achieving a renewed understanding or concept of anything is too great to be completed at any given moment simply because it belongs to a generation and an epoch. However, the task can and must be approached in several different ways. One of these is to look back to previous generations or epochs on the assumption that they contained the kernel of thought which has since been unfolding into the present predicament, into a situation that is both a potentiality and a crisis. But even if this assumption is valid, it still remains to ask where that kernel of thought is to be found. Confining ourselves to French poetry, we could look as far back as Baudelaire (1821-1867) for the most embryonic thoughts on the poetry of modernity. We would in that case, though, be dealing with a poetry which still has strong traditional overtones since it stands, if not within Romanticism, at least at the periphery. The first radical break with the traditional styles of poetry was ushered in by the poetry, thought, and person of Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898). A re-consideration of what this man had to say might conceivably prepare the way for some insight into a new concept of poetry for us today.

Mallarmé wrote and for the most part lived in the second half of the last century. What is most distinctive about his writings, whether in verse or prose, is their obscurity. He might thus be charged with deliberately making his works incomprehensible. And there is no doubt that they are almost always hard to follow. But it is here necessary to understand and appreciate the reasons why this man, nearly one hundred years ago, found himself compelled to compose his writing, more particularly his poetry, in that way. This paper will call attention to one reason that should serve to dispel all suspicion that Mallarmé's obscurity might be fortuitous and also to suggest the problematic peculiarity of a new concept of poetry. It will be argued that this reason lies in the fact that Mallarmé was struggling to formulate a new understanding of language, the medium and stuff of poetry.

In 1868, Mallarmé wrote to François Coppée: "And now, having arrived at the horrible vision of a pure work, I have just about lost my mind and all contact with the meaning of the most common ways of speaking" (*C.*, 270).¹ The poet thus personally testifies that he strives towards an ideal work of language and thereby tends to move away from ordinary forms of everyday speech. He also implies that this direction or movement is fraught with difficulties for him: it is somehow horrible to behold the goal. This duality of the ideal and the ordinary lies in the very nature of language according to Mallarmé, who writes: "An undeniable urge of my time is to separate, in view of divergent attributes, the twofold status of language: on the one hand the crude or immediate, and on the other hand the essential" (*O.C.*, 368). This simple bifurcation is the beginning of a theory of language, but it raises a number of important questions. What is language in its "raw" aspects? What is language in its "essential" aspects? And, finally, what is the relationship between the two that makes the vision "horrible"?

Language appears most prevalently as a medium of exchange similar to money.² It serves to transfer human thought from one person to another and back again. The predominant feature of such discourse is that all value is placed on the things about which men speak. Like money, language is itself worthless; it receives its worth according to its referents, and these in turn receive their worth according to ordinary human interests such as are summed up in man's commercial life. Language thus serves a purpose at this level, and a necessary one at that. It is basically a reporting, and under this heading comes not only the obvious, such as gossiping, but also such common kinds of uses as "narrating, instructing, and even describing". In other words, Mallarmé's view of ordinary, crude, or immediate language covers

every sort except the truly literary or poetic. Indeed, one wonders what is left for essential language if narrating and describing are forbidden.

Rather than functioning definitively in the world of ordinary human concerns, language is said to receive its ultimate meaning and justification in terms of its ability, in the hands of the poet, to form and devise its *own* world. Thus Mallarmé says: "Contrary to functioning as an easy and representative mode or currency, as the crowd would have it, speaking—being above all dream and song—recovers its virtuality with the poet, who is necessarily defined by an art devoted to fictions" (*O.C.*, 368). Here we seem to have a statement of the radical creativity involved in language: if it seems to report something, as it does ordinarily, it must be seen more basically, i.e., "essentially", as producing rather than copying its subject matter. Essential language is then poetry by definition.

Mallarmé asserts that language enjoys its virtuality, its strength and validity, owing to its poetic or essential character. The appearance of language in its everyday commercial or crude and immediate aspect is its degeneration. This order of ranking implies that the poet cannot begin with ordinary patterns of human speech and work them into poetry. Poetry is not everyday language warmed over and embellished. Everyday language is language that has lost contact with its primal origin. Its apparent and ultimately false origin is henceforth the domain of human interests and motivations. It would follow that the world of fiction created by the poet must be one which abstracts from the man who tells of it, one which lets the words speak for themselves.³ Mallarmé therefore says: "The pure work implies the elocutionary disappearance of the poet who cedes the initiative to the words . . ." (*O. C.*, 366). The poet disappears and the words take over. We ordinarily speak with the opposing purpose of letting the words disappear for the sake of satisfying our human interests. Ordinary speaking is thus the exact inverse of true speaking. In July of 1868, Mallarmé wrote a commentary on one of his sonnets to Henry Cazalis: "I extract this sonnet from a projected study on speech: it is the inverse,—I mean that the meaning is evoked by an inner mirage of the words themselves. By murmuring it several times to oneself one experiences a rather cabalistic sensation" (*C.*, 278). The poet, although he be a man, must draw upon and serve the world of words and sacrifice the ordinary human world:⁴ it is no wonder that Mallarmé experiences horror at the threshold of the "pure work" so understood.

The theory that true (i.e., poetic) language creates and is its own world must still account for a subject-matter, a content. In a letter to Cazalis of

July, 1866, Mallarmé remarks: "I am in truth on a voyage, but in unknown lands, and if I like to evoke cold images in order to escape from torrid reality I should tell you that for a month now I have been in the purest glaciers of Aesthetics—that after having found nothingness, I have found the beautiful—and that you cannot imagine the lucid altitudes in which I venture" (C., 220-21). He goes on to say that a poem resulted from this voyage. The passage then implies that the subject matter of poetry is somehow linked with nothingness, with cold images, in contrast to torrid reality. The poet does not embellish this ordinary reality; he literally escapes from it and erects his own reality. Instead of founding the work of language in any way upon any element of existing reality, this theory plainly holds that the poetic work arises from a negation of this reality, from nothingness. Here we have the most radical position of Mallarmé's theory of language and poetry.

In a letter of 1867 to the poet Villiers de L'Isle Adam (C., 258-60), Mallarmé tries to delineate his experience of nothingness when thinking about his work and his future. He explains how he would like to write two books, one on "Beauty" and the other on "Sumptuous Allegories about Nothingness". But he bewails the fact that he has lost the "power of evoking, in a unique nothingness, an emptiness disseminated in its porousness". And so, failing to do justice to the "ineffaceable notion of pure Nothingness", he writes: "The mirror reflecting Being toward me has most often been Horror." He then goes on to explain that his personal experience of his impotence in the face of nothingness was one of exhaustion and pain.

Mallarmé does not seem interested, however, in doting upon his negative and fruitless experience of nothingness. He feels that poetic creativity consists of the ability of language to work nothingness into something positive, into an experience of the pure "notion": "What good is the marvel of transposing a fact of nature into its virtual vibratory disappearance according to the play of words—if it isn't so that the pure notion will emanate from it without the impediment of an approximate or concrete recollection" (O. C., 368). There are two phases of the play of words here: first the near negation of things and then also the act of *allowing* their purity to emerge into clarity. We ordinarily think of the poetic word as pointing to things, as making them explicit, as drawing them out of their everyday penumbra into the light. Mallarmé claims the exact opposite: Things in their ordinary penumbra must, by the poetic word, be even more overshadowed in order that something more real might emanate from the obscurity. In other words, the poetic word does not point to things; in so far as it points, it points to nothingness. Rather than *making*

things be, the poet *lets* and *leaves* them be. It would follow that such poetry would be inaccessible to a literary approach which desired to explicate what objects of experience the poems were meant to indicate, describe or elicit. This accounts at least in part for the difficulty encountered in reading Mallarmé's poetry.⁵

We run headlong into the crux of this theory when we ask what exactly the pure notion is or, rather, how exactly it looms into view. Mallarmé exemplifies what he means by essential or poetic language when he writes: "I say: a flower! and the one that is absent from all bouquets, the gentle idea itself, comes forth musically—beyond the oblivion where my voice relegates no contour—in as much as it is something different from all known calyxes" (*O.C.*, 368). The essential feature of poetic speech lies in its ability to evoke "the gentle idea itself", the pure notion, as something not even invoked from the memory of previously known things, as something presupposing the oblivion or nothingness of these things. But does this mean that poetry is to thrive on barren abstractions, dull and divorced from concrete existence? In other words, does the poetic world of language preclude the possibility of our playing a concrete and appreciative role in it? At first sight it might seem so. Mallarmé is evidently insisting, however, that we have a stake in this gentle idea, this pure notion; for he says that it comes forth or arises "musically". This term implies a fulness of human experience even if, perhaps even in so far as, it is not defined by any "known calyxes", i.e., by previous experiences, interests, and motivations. It follows that the so-called abstraction is neither barren nor dull. By the same token it would seem evident that it is something very close to concrete existence. To be sure, what is concrete cannot be identified here with what is ordinary or "pecuniary" in the imagery cited before. The concrete is rather a character of existence which is set to man as a task, something to be searched out and worked for. Thus in a letter dated June, 1884, we read: "Poetry is the expression of the myterious sense of the aspects of existence by means of human language brought back to its essential rhythm; in this way it endows our everyday life with an authenticity and constitutes the only spiritual task."⁶ Essential language expresses neither aspects of existence nor existence itself, but the mysterious sense of these.

Language creates its own world and is its own standard. Mallarmé even suggests that it creates the real world in its mystery. Since language is the medium and essence of poetry, its creation poses the peculiar problem of autonomy: How can it be understood since it can not be definitively related

to anything outside of itself? The poet quite literally has nothing to rely upon, but this "nothing" has two meanings here. First it means that the poet's language is neither based upon nor derived from things; it has its relevance with regard to what is absent from them, namely their idea in its purity. Secondly, it means that poetry issues from and so reminds us of the meaninglessness, the nothingness of the world apart from linguistic creativity; poetry emerges in the face of horror.⁷ This double aspect of the problem of poetry is summed up in a brief note jotted down by Mallarmé in 1869: "In poetic language—just show that the purpose of language is to become beautiful and not to express the Beautiful among other things . . ." (*O.C.*, 853). The experience of beauty stands opposed to the experience of nothingness and meaninglessness; it is what makes life worthwhile. And yet this beauty is not first found and then expressed; it comes into being first and foremost in language itself. As Mallarmé says, it is in and through verse that both language and things come into their true being.⁸

The new concept of poetry is essentially problematic. Theories of language identical with or akin to that of Mallarmé haunt almost every quarter of linguistic creativity today. The result is that we have lost all naïve confidence in the old belief that man is just naturally endowed with the capacity to speak truly, effectively, and sometimes even poetically. Roland Barthes sums up this contemporary trend very concisely when he states: "For a long time, the classical-bourgeois society has seen in the word an instrument or a decoration; now we see in it a sign and a truth. Everything that is touched upon by language is thus called into question: philosophy, the humanities, literature."⁹ Ernest Gellner points out a similar crisis in the domain of language: "The use of language and of ordinary concepts has lost both its confidence and its innocence. . . . The heightened sense of language, the self-consciousness in the employment of it, the urgent desire to find theories as legitimizing or correcting it, the sense of an abyss of meaninglessness ever yawning, and viciously camouflaged, under our feet—all this springs from the fact that the humanist culture itself, the life of the word, the confidence in its capacity to relate to reality, is threatened."¹⁰

There is nothing natural about essential language any more. Rather than resulting from a reflection of something already in the world, poetry remains and comes into being as a challenge and a problem, a reflection of language within itself, a speaking and writing which evokes the absence of the world and what it is that is absent from the world. As fundamentally prob-

lematic, the new concept of poetry can only bear fruit on the condition that we accept the responsibility implied by this autonomy.

NOTES

1. For the works of Mallarmé I use the following abbreviations: *C*: Correspondence (Paris, 1959); *O.C.*: *Oeuvres complètes*, Edition de la Pléiade (Paris, 1961). The English translations of the citations from Mallarmé and Roland Barthes in this paper are my own.
2. See also *O.C.*, 368: "Narration, teaching, even description is all right, although for each of these it would perhaps suffice in order to exchange human thought to take and put silently a money coin into another person's hand; the elementary usage of discourse serves universal *reportage* in which every contemporary genre of writing partakes, with the exception of literature."
3. Roland Barthes (*Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, pp. 45-46) interprets the trends initiated in contemporary poetry by Mallarmé in the same way: ". . . contemporary poetry has destroyed the relationships of language and it has reduced discourse to stations of words . . . these poetic words exclude men."
4. See also *O.C.*, 664: "Basically I consider the contemporary epoch as an interregnum for the poet who does not have to get mixed up in it: this epoch is too archaic and too preparatorily turbulent, thus he has nothing else to do but to work mysteriously in view of later or of never and from time to time he should send to the living ones his calling card, in the form of some stanzas or some sonnet, so that they will not lapidate him if they suspect him of knowing that they don't exist."
5. Note also in *O.C.*, 387, Mallarmé's comments on "authenticating silence". When speaking of Mallarmé's language, Roland Barthes (*op. cit.*, p. 67) writes: ". . . the writing of Mallarmé postulates a silence."
6. Henri Mondor, *Propos de Mallarmé sur la poésie* (Paris, 1946), p. 118.
7. Although Wallace Fowlie (*Mallarmé*, Chicago, 1962, p. 223) does point out that "the words are absolute" in Mallarmé's poetry, he does not mention that poetry issues from the nothingness, the meaninglessness of the world.
8. See *O.C.*, 368: "The verse remakes from several words a complete, new word, alien to language and like an incantation, thus achieving this isolation of the word: it denies, with a sovereign stroke, the hazard which remained in the expressions in spite of the artifice of being dipped alternately into meaning and sonority, and it gives you the surprise of having never before heard such an ordinary fragment of elocution, at the same time the reminiscence of the named object bathes in a new atmosphere."
9. *Critique et vérité*, p. 49.
10. *Crisis in the Humanities*, ed. J. H. Plumb, p. 73.