INTRODUCTION

One does not introduce, much less sum up, the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé. Though the quantity of the work is small, it contains a world and it is a world. My only way of encompassing that work and that world has been to translate it, poem by poem, and to interpret it, poem by poem, in the hope that the accumulation would add up to something. The translation contained in these pages includes, with the French text *en face*, all of the poems that Mallarmé wished to preserve and a few additional poems that have come to be regarded as central to the canon: the *Poésies* (poems in traditional forms), the *Poëmes en Prose*, and *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira le Hasard* (the great free-verse poem of his final period); only the juvenilia and the occasional verse have been omitted. The interpretation, besides what is contained in the translation itself, appears as a separate Commentary at the back of the volume.

Mallarmé is at once the most musical and the most philosophical of modern poets—if we may speak of "music" and of "philosophy" not as they exist in themselves but from the standpoint of a poetry that completely transforms them to its own requirements. I would say, speaking metaphorically, that my primary struggle in this translation has been to render the "music," or "musical essence," or "spiritual essence," of the poetry. We don't have a language in which to express these things with any clarity: they are finally ineffable; but this, in a sense, is to the point, for the poetry of Mallarmé presents itself as the most resonant site that modern literature provides for coming to terms, at least in some fashion, with these ineffabilities. What I *can* say, with absolute certainty, is that in translating the *Poésies* it has been essential to work in rhyme and meter, regardless of the semantic accommodations and technical problems this entailed. If we take rhyme away from Mallarmé, we take away the *poetry* of his poetry. "Because, to him who ponders well, / My rhymes more than their rhyming tell / Of things discovered in the deep, / Where only body's laid asleep": thus Yeats, who had learned an enormous amount from Mallarmé and whose work would have been impossible without him.

The music and the philosophy of Mallarmé's poetry are ultimately one and the same; yet in order to grasp this fundamental unity, one must come to see how the vectors of form and content are turned in what may initially appear to be antithetical directions. On the level of form, we must take account of how Mallarmé "cede[s] the initiative to words" themselves—as he insists the poet must do in "Crise de Vers," the great theoretical essay that he rewrote

several times between 1886 and 1896. Consider, for example, Mallarmé's penchant for polysyllabic homonymic rhyme, a tendency that comes to fruition in "Prose (pour des Esseintes)," the *ars poetica* of 1885, which, from one point of view at least, is his most radical poem. When rhymes such as *désir, Idées,* and *des iridées* come together, as they do in that poem, it is clear that the neoclassical ideal, according to which "the sound must be an echo to the sense," no longer applies; rather, we seem to have a situation in which, ceding the initiative to words, the poet has become a kind of magician or alchemist of language (both of these are metaphors that Mallarmé himself applies), raising hitherto undiscovered meanings out of the alembic of his craft. From this point of view, poetry becomes oriented to *enchantment* or *incantation* (Mallarméan terms that bring together the senses of music and magic), and the poet, working not in the abstract but in the concrete medium of a specific language, assumes the responsibility of invoking and gathering the divine Irises that would otherwise be stillborn in the soil of desire and of the idea.

Paul Valéry, who composed some of the most luminous—and loving—pages of criticism ever written on Mallarmé, is especially fine on the sheer poetic power of the verse:

> This poet was the least *primitive* of all poets, yet it came about that by bringing words together in an unfamiliar, strangely melodious, and as it were stupefying chant—by the musical splendor of his verse as well as by its amazing richness—he restored the most powerful impression to be derived from primitive poetry: that of the *magical formula.* An exquisite analysis of his art must have led him toward a doctrine, and something like a synthesis, of incantation. (*Leonardo, Poe, Mallarmé*, 279)

"Everything that is sacred and that wishes to remain so must envelop itself in mystery" ("Hérésies Artistiques: L'Art pour Tous," *OC*, 257). That sentence was written when Mallarmé was twenty years old, but the hermetic attitude he was already cultivating was, if anything, deepened with the course of time. So it is not surprising that he should have been dogged during his lifetime by accusations of mystification and preciosity, and that accusations of this kind should continue to the present day. (He sometimes deflected them in the contempt he expressed—in the poems themselves—for the bourgeois reading public, which, in the "Tombeau d'Edgar Poe," for example, is likened to a many-headed hydra.) Mallarmé is often obscure, but he is no obscurantist; his obscurity and difficulty are organic to, necessary concomitants of, the demands of his artistry, on the one hand—what Valéry terms "the rigorousness of [his] refusals" (*Leonardo, Poe, Mallarmé*, 250)—and on the other, the philosophical vision, the actual content of his poetry: the quest for Beauty and for a transcendent Ideal and the tragic vision on which that quest is based.

Georges Poulet has drawn a distinction between "the act of Cartesian consciousness by means of which existence founds itself in thought and the properly Mallarméan act of consciousness by means of which thought creates existence" (*The Interior Distance*, 264). I would add that the dualism that obtains in Mallarmé's work is not so much that of mind and body as of poetry and prose, the former corresponding to an ideal realm of the spirit and the latter to the actual realm of material reality. This basic attitude informs Mallarmé's thought as a whole; it is stated very explicitly in a famous letter of April 1866 to his close friend Henri Cazalis, which was written when Mallarmé was twenty-four, teaching

English in a lycée at Tournon, and in the midst of a deep spiritual crisis (the so-called "Nuits de Tournon"):

> Yes, I *know*, we are merely empty forms of matter, but we are indeed sublime in having invented God and our soul. So sublime, my friend, that I want to gaze upon matter, fully conscious that it exists, and yet launching itself madly into Dream, despite its knowledge that Dream has no existence, extolling the Soul and all the divine impressions of that kind which have collected within us from the beginning of time and proclaiming, in the face of the Void which is truth, these glorious lies! (*Selected Letters*, 60)

And again, to choose a matching passage from the poetry, it is present, more or less explicitly, in the great sonnet, "Quand l'ombre menaça de la fatale loi" (see p. 66), an early draft of which was written around the same time as the letter.

The spiritual crisis that Mallarmé underwent in the 1866-1867 period (in my opinion, it is merely the culmination of an experience that was waiting to unfold in him from the beginning) is a reflection of a general religious crisis occuring in Europe during the nineteenth century, with roots that stretch back much earlier. The form/content paradox in Mallarmé, then, is that while he conceives of poetry as that which "must envelop itself in mystery," his confrontation with the religious crisis of his time is as immediate and profound as that of any writer. Thus, Mallarmé is a genuine spokesman for his age, although without having had the slightest desire to serve as one.

Poetry is implicated in the religious crisis in a double sense (and we should recall the title of the essay, "Crise de Vers," from which a passage was quoted earlier): first, because in responding to the religious crisis, poetry confronts and to some extent transforms its traditional modes and procedures; and secondly (and perhaps more importantly), because it is given to poetry to step into the breach of theological certainty. Matthew Arnold, certainly a more conservative thinker than Mallarmé, makes precisely this point in "The Study of Poetry," an essay originally published in 1880:

> There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialized itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea *is* the fact. The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry.

Insofar as the European mind is not simply overwhelmed by the forces of materialism, poetry becomes increasingly central and increasingly crucial; at the same time, however, it becomes more difficult, more sealed off from the quotidian—in a word, more hermetic.

"Poetry," wrote Mallarmé, in reply to a request for a definition, "is the expression of the mysterious meaning of the aspects of existence through human language brought back to its essential rhythm: in this way it endows our sojourn with authenticity and constitutes the only spiritual task" (see Michaud, *Mallarmé*, 107). And again, in the autobiographical sketch that he prepared for Paul Verlaine, Mallarmé defines poetry in terms of "the Orphic explanation of the earth, which is the sole duty of the poet" (*OC*, 663). Poetry is thus not only the vehicle but the locus of the sacred for Mallarmé, and in a sense, he remains

a religious poet even though he loses his belief. The sacred exists for Mallarmé, but only insofar as it can be experienced phenomenologically; it exists only as an experience, through the concrete medium of language, or, in other words, as Beauty.

It would not, however, be true to say that the realm of poetry, with its hidden depths, represents an escape from the prosaic world of empty matter for Mallarmé, or that poetry exists in default of that world. Not only is the charge of mystification unfounded but there is a sense in which Mallarmé is much more of a realist than we have been given to understand, and I would even argue that an essential aim of this poet is toward demystification. Mallarmé would have agreed with Walter Pater's dictum that music is "the art toward which all the others aspire," and music is always and everywhere the signifier in his work of a transcendental ideal; but at the same time poetry remains for him, as it does for Hegel, the supreme art form. The reason for this, I would suggest, is that while the language of music presents itself as an already given transcendence, the language of poetry is initially the language of ordinary communication; thus, the transformation of ordinary language into poetry makes poetry an allegory of the transformation of life itself. For this reason, the duality of our being is concretized in poetry in a more immediate way than is possible in music. In the Mallarméan universe one might say that the "prosaic" world gazes darkly at the "poetic" one, as through a window (and the reverse is also true), so that the actual poetic emotion is engendered not by the vision of the ideal taken in itself but by this tragic duality. "I look at myself and see myself as an angel," the poet writes in "Les Fenêtres," one of the greatest of his early poems. The abundance of images in his verse that are at once symbols of reflection and of a passage to another life—windows, mirrors, ice, glass, and water—affirms the extent to which the Mallarméan vision is grounded in a series of irreconcilable polarities—self and other, the prosaic and the poetic, the temporal and the eternal.

It is true that for Mallarmé, as he asserts in "Le Livre, Instrument Spirituel" (another one of the essays on poetry that verges on being prose-poetry), "everything in the world exists in order to end up [or culminate—"*aboutir*"] in a book" (*OC*, 378). If we hear, in that sentence, an echo of the gospels, where everything happens "in order that the Scriptures be fulfilled," this is because, in the Mallarméan scheme of things, it is only through poetry that the indeterminacy otherwise governing the universe can be overcome. An additional level of irony must be taken into account, however, for the tragic in Mallarmé is not only composed of an omnipresent duality but is itself dual, in the sense of being aimed not only at a transcendental ideal but (since the latter is grasped as static and hence indistinguishable from death) at the temporal ground of our being. In the famous Swan sonnet, for example (see p. 67), it is as if the eternal gazed down upon the temporal, lamenting its loss. If there can be a definition of humanity, for Mallarmé, it is that which is always to be conceived in terms of "memories of horizons" ("Toast Funèbre," pp. 44–45); thus, in the final analysis—contrary to our received assumptions about the ingrown aestheticism of this poet and notwithstanding his preoccupation with death and nothingness—it may be that the real emphasis of the work is simply on life—life itself, which, in its beauty and fragility, always exceeds our grasp.

Mallarmé's development as a poet and as a thinker on poetry was extraordinarily rapid and intense; it

can be traced in a series of remarkable letters written mainly during the 1866-1867 period referred to earlier, letters that are to French poetry what those of Keats, written when he was roughly the same age, are to English. During this period, Mallarmé was at work on two major poems, *Hérodiade* and "L'Après-midi d'un Faune," and his letters read as a workshop of his reflections and his discoveries. All of the characteristic emphases that constitute what we can call the Mallarméan system emerge during these years; for although he remained in large measure an "occasional" poet, responding, especially in sonnets, to events and experiences as they unfolded in his own life, very early on Mallarmé conceived of his oeuvre as an integrated totality, in terms of which each poem would represent both a part of the whole and, like Leibniz's monads, a reflection of the whole.

In July 1866 he writes to Théodore Aubanel:

> For my part, I've worked harder this summer than in my entire life and I can say that I've worked *for* my entire life. I've laid the foundations of a magnificent work. . . . I have died and been born again with the gem-encrusted key to my final spiritual casket. It's up to me now to open it in the absence of all extraneous impressions and its mystery will emerge into a very beautiful sky. I'll need twenty years during which I'll remain cloistered within myself, renouncing all publicity other than readings to friends. I'm working on everything at once, or rather I mean that everything is so well ordered in my mind that, as a sensation reaches me now, it is transformed and automatically places itself in the right book or the right poem. When a poem is ripe, it will drop free. You can see that I'm imitating the laws of nature. (*Selected Letters*, 66)

The emphasis on poetic impersonality, which was to have such an important impact on Yeats, Eliot, and twentieth-century poetry in general, emerges in this letter, not as an idea but as an experience born out of the creative process. As an idea, it can be traced to Hegel's assertion in the *Aesthetics*, that "however intimately the insights and feelings which the poet describes as his own belong to him as a single individual, they must nevertheless possess a universal validity" (2: 1111). But Mallarmé goes much further than Hegel; and, in a subsequent letter written the following May to Cazalis, we can see how the metaphorical death he describes coincides with the religious struggle to which we have already referred:

> I've just spent a terrifying year: my Thought has thought itself and reached a pure Concept. All that my being has suffered as a result during that long death cannot be told, but, fortunately, I am utterly dead, and the least pure region where my Spirit can venture is Eternity. My Spirit, that recluse accustomed to dwelling in its own Purity, is no longer darkened even by the reflection of Time.
>
> Unfortunately, I've reached this point through a dreadful sensitivity. . . . But this was even more the case a few months ago, firstly in my terrible struggle with that old and evil plumage, which is now, happily, vanquished: God. But as that struggle had taken place on his bony wing which, in death throes more vigorous than I would have suspected him capable of, had carried me into the Shadows, I fell, victorious, desperately and infinitely—until at last I saw myself again in my Venetian mirror, such as I was when I forgot myself several months before.
>
> I confess, moreover, but to you alone, that the torments inflicted by my triumph were so great, I still need to look at myself in that mirror in order to think and that if it were not in front of this desk on which I'm writing to you, I would become the Void once again. That will let you know that I am now impersonal and no longer the Stéphane that you knew—but a capacity

> possessed by the spiritual Universe to see itself and develop itself, through what was once me. (*Selected Letters*, 74)

In the same letter Mallarmé writes: "I have made a long enough descent into the Void to speak with certainty. There is nothing but Beauty—and Beauty has only one perfect expression, Poetry. All the rest is a lie" (75). By taking on the mantle of impersonality, so as to become a "capacity possessed by the spiritual Universe," Mallarmé makes poetry an instrument of the Absolute, removing it, as he will say to Villiers de L'Isle-Adam in a letter of September 1867, "from the realms of Dream and Chance" (*Selected Letters*, 81).

The trajectory of Mallarmé's poetic career, however, is much more complex and varied than a discussion of his most salient themes and emphases would allow us to infer or that can be encompassed in a short introduction. The earliest poems in the *Poésies* and many of those in the *Poëmes en Prose* date from 1862, when Mallarmé was in his twentieth year; the last poems, the *tombeau* on Verlaine and *Un Coup de Dés*, were published in 1897, the year before the poet's death. In the interim the work undergoes profound changes, of course, but the poems of the early 1860s are already mature and of a very high order of excellence. Mallarmé was an assiduous reviser and he often returned to poems written many years earlier; so the stylistic propensities of the early poems often reflect the poet's later development. The work is extraordinarily self-contained and in some ways more single-minded than that of any poet of equal stature. Unless we study Mallarmé's poetry as a whole, however, we are likely to see it as much more one-dimensional than it actually is. In early poems such as "Le Guignon" and "Le Phénomène Futur," for example (poems that are not among Mallarmé's most famous, especially in the English-speaking world), what one might call the poet's historical imagination and his concern with social and political issues is very much in evidence. This is a very different Mallarmé from the one we are accustomed to contemplating.

Similarly, when we conceive of Mallarmé's work as a whole, we find that his relationship to poetic patrimony is a more complex matter than we might have assumed. Baudelaire and Poe occupy the foreground early on, as is well known; but those influences become less salient over time, and, among the poet's most immediate forbears, one could argue that the role of Gautier is of equal, or even greater, importance. Lucretius and Dante are very strong presences in the work, both in themselves and through the mediation of others, and the voices of Gray, Shelley, and Keats connect Mallarmé to a poetic tradition that the author of *Les Mots Anglais* dearly loved. The poetry of Mallarmé is synonymous with the power of condensation he was able to bring to bear on the language; consequently, it is not surprising that the intertextual meta-narrative contained in the work is as richly complex as it is, and that much of it still remains to be mined.

The portion of the story that I have been able to uncover—either on my own or through my gleanings of the labors of other Mallarmistes—is articulated in the Commentary, which can thus be read both in relation to individual poems and as a loosely structured essay. The Commentary was originally intended as a series of explanatory notes on the poems. As the work progressed, however, my approach became increasingly essayistic, and I eventually aban-

doned what had been a naive attempt to separate annotation from interpretation. Whatever lucidities I have to offer, I hope are not tainted by corresponding oversimplifications (always a danger with Mallarmé criticism); and if, "musing the obscure," as Wallace Stevens would say, I have further clouded what was already veiled in ambiguity, I can only ask the reader's indulgence. I have allowed myself to have my say, both in the Commentary and in the translations themselves; for otherwise (such are the paradoxical vicissitudes of poetic translation and interpretation), it would not have been possible to be *faithful* to Mallarmé; and I have wanted to be faithful—though in the same measure that I have wanted to express myself and to be true to my own sense of the language. Faithfulness, with regard to the translations themselves, has meant balancing the literary against the literal—although, in the case of Mallarmé, it is not always possible to ascertain the literal meaning of a passage. To translate is to carry across, and I have wanted to carry Mallarmé across to a poetic milieu whose values are in many ways antithetical to those espoused by the French poet.

"English and French are one language," wrote Stevens optimistically; and I am consoled also by Jacques Derrida's generous observation that "Mallarmé's language is always open to the influence of the English language, that there is a regular exchange between the two . . . [and that] 'Mallarmé' does not belong completely to French literature" (*Acts of Literature*, 125). Indeed, if the poems have come to exist for me simultaneously in English and in French, in the "original" and in "translation" (as we say in our inadequate language), this should be taken neither as an expression of immodesty nor as a sign of incipient madness—for I can hardly expect that the reader will have a similar experience; rather, it is the inevitable by-product of a five-year immersion in the work of one who is certainly among the greatest of all lyric poets—and in whom I discovered, if not exactly *myself* (for that would be too great an irony), then at least something that I could do and perhaps be, something I could call my own. I am sufficiently admonished, in any event, by the animadversions of those semioticians for whom poetry (much less the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé!) is untranslatable. According to Michael Riffaterre, for instance, "poetry does not translate—not because of certain intangible, quintessential elements usually invoked, but because of a semiotic displacement quite accessible to description" (*Semiotics of Poetry*, ix). In some moods, and from a theoretical point of view, I am willing to agree—but I did it anyway.

I was not so foolhardy, of course, as to have actually *planned* a translation of Mallarmé. It happened to me gradually, in the way most things in life do. Five years ago, when I tried my hand at one of the poems (I believe it was "Les Fenêtres"), I had no intention of going further; but the poetry pulled me in and my friends encouraged me, and, as my involvement took hold, I found that I had a work of some kind. Of course, my love for this strange poet goes back many years earlier, even (I am tempted to believe) to my childhood, and I think it has something to do with Montreal, the place where I was born, and where, if it were not for politics, English and French really would be one language. "The imperfection of languages," wrote Mallarmé in "Crise de Vers," "consists in their plurality, the supreme one is lacking: thinking is writing without accessories or even whispering, the immortal word still remains silent; the diversity of idioms on earth prevents everybody from uttering the words which otherwise, at one single stroke, would materialize as truth." Walter

Benjamin makes this passage the centerpiece of his great essay, "The Task of the Translator" (*Illuminations*, 77; *OC*, 363–364), as Hannah Arendt notes ("Introduction," *Illuminations*, 50), and George Steiner follows Benjamin in doing the same in *After Babel*, his study of translation. But the passage from "Crise de Vers" ends on a note that to lovers of poetry, at least, will not seem unduly pessimistic. After observing that the plurality of languages militates against the immediacy of spoken truth, Mallarmé concludes that if there were only one language, and if the truth could therefore be uttered immediately, then "poetry would not exist: supreme complement [or completion], it compensates philosophically for what all languages lack" (*OC*, 364).

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