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Mallarmé: The Transcendence of Language and the Aesthetics of the Book

Gerald L. Bruns

Mallarmé's dream of a book in which all existence is to be contained is predicated upon the isolation of poetic language between the world of things and the universe of meaning. Ordinary speech is structured in order to mediate between these two worlds, but Mallarmé seeks to liberate poetic language from this mediating function, and to establish it as a reality in a world of its own, by substituting the syntax of music for the syntax of speech. Moreover, the syntax of music is to be realized typographically: the words of the poem are to be arranged within the spatial field of the white page in a way that describes a musical structure. Thus the world will find expression in a book—not, however, as a structure of meanings, but in abstract form as a system of pure relations. Mallarmé gestures toward his ideal book in *Un Coup de dés*, in which a simple narrative is organized, not temporally as a sequence of episodes, but spatially and typographically as a concurrence of themes that are distinguished chiefly by different points of type. Thus typography becomes a principle of composition and the book itself a part of the poetic universe.

In this paper I want to concern myself with Stéphane Mallarmé, whose conviction it was that "all earthly existence must ultimately be contained in a book."¹ This conviction builds upon what is doubtless a *fin-de-siècle* commonplace: namely, that the creation of the world is not complete until the world comes to exist within the work of art. This is to say, perhaps, that the world cannot exist in itself but only (to take the poet's point of view) in language: the ideal unity of word and being constitutes the condition of the world's possibility, which only the poet can actualize. This view of poetry suggests the Orpheus myth and the figure of the poet-magus whose song calls the world into existence, and this in turn recalls Mallarmé's claim, in his *Autobiography*, that the book of which he dreams will constitute the "Orphic explanation of the earth" (*M*, p. 15; *Œuvres*, p. 663). But if Orpheus is the poet whose song establishes the world in being, Mallarmé, by contrast, emerges as a poet who seeks to return the

world to the original void, for his dream of the book rests not upon the unity of word and being but upon their radical separation. For him, the poetic act fulfils itself in a process of annihilation which releases language from its bondage to the world and which establishes the word in the pristine universe of nothingness, in which impossible sphere, Mallarmé was sure, the essence of beauty is to be found.

In a famous passage from "Crise de vers" (1895), Mallarmé wrote: "Why should we perform the miracle by which a natural object is almost made to disappear beneath the magic waving wand of the written word, if not to divorce that object from the direct and the palpable, and so conjure up the pure idea?" (M, p. 42; *Œuvres*, p. 368). Such a notion of language recalls Hegel's idea that all representational thinking is essentially an act of negation, in the sense that the object present to the mind in sensation is abolished and replaced by a concept; or, better, it recalls this statement from one of Hegel's Jena Lectures of 1803-4: "The first act by which Adam made himself master of the animals was to impose a name on them, that is to say, he annihilated them in their existence, *qua* existents."² Adam, by his speech, departed from the world of things into a universe of meaning. For the word, in seeking to mediate between man and the world, obliterates the world by its presence, which in contrast to the presence of the world is radiant with intelligibility. But Mallarmé appears to have interested himself in language as a process that annihilates the world, not in order to establish a universe of meaning, but in order to conjure up the presence of beauty. "When I say: 'a flower!' then from that forgetfulness to which my voice consigns all floral form, something different from the usual calyces arises, something all music, essence, and softness: the flower which is absent from all bouquets" (M, p. 42; *Œuvres*, p. 368). It is in its absence that the flower displays its beauty—its "music, essence [aroma], and softness." For in its absence the flower participates in the very nature of beauty, which is non-existence.

It was in 1866 that Mallarmé first discovered what value for the poet lay in non-existence. In March of that year he wrote to Henri Cazalis that, while struggling to compose the *Hérodiade*, "I came upon twin abysses which drove me mad. The first was nothingness, which I found without any prior knowledge of Buddhism,³ and I am still too heartsick to bring myself to believe in my own poetry . . . ; [or] to

get back to the work that I had to abandon in the face of this overwhelming vision" (M, p. 88; C, I, p. 207). Mallarmé's genius, however, was that he was able to translate this "overwhelming vision" into an *aesthetic* experience: "I am travelling," he wrote to Cazalis in July, 1866, "but in unknown lands, and if I have fled from the fierce heat of reality and have taken pleasure in cold imagery, it is because for a month now, I have been on the purest glaciers of esthetics; because, after I had found nothingness, I found beauty" (M, pp. 89-90; C, I, p. 220). Mallarmé affirms here that beauty, for so long an attribute of being, is in fact an attribute of nothingness: beauty displays itself, that is to say, in the very condition of non-existence.

This, too, is vaguely Hegelian in its gestures. In his *Lectures on Aesthetics* (delivered in 1818), Hegel wrote: "When the idea of beauty seizes itself as absolute or infinite spirit, it also at the same time discovers itself no longer completely realized in the forms of the external world."⁴ Beauty as absolute spirit is absolutely transcendent, a pure idea; it cannot be the predicate of any object. We may connect with this Hegel's statement, in the *Encyclopædia* (1817), that "The absolute negates all things that are not absolute. It is their nothing or negativity. The absolute pervades all finite and definite positions; ruling out the metaphysical value of all positivisms, and thereby affirming its sovereign *freedom*. It is unutterable, unpredictable."⁵ The Absolute emerges only upon the annihilation of all that is not absolute; its possibility rests upon negation, absence, the void. For Mallarmé, the same is true of poetry. It emerges as an art of the beautiful only upon a process of negation; its possibility rests upon the void, nothingness.

So much, indeed, is made clear in a letter that Mallarmé wrote to Villiers de L'Isle-Adam in September, 1867:

Beneath a wave of sensitiveness, I was able to understand the intimate relation of poetry to the universe; and, to make poetry pure, my design was to divorce it from dreams and chance and link it to the idea of that universe. But, unfortunately, since my soul is made for poetic ecstasy alone, I had no mind at my disposal (as you have) to clear the way for this idea. And so you will be terrified to hear that I have discovered the idea of the universe through sensation alone—and that, in order to perpetuate the indelible idea of pure nothingness, I had to fill my brain with the sensation of absolute emptiness (M, p. 91; C, I, p. 259).

Mallarmé reveals himself here to be less a Hegelian than an eclectic; he proceeds, not by reason, but by experience, and to describe his experience (and by this same token to describe the kind of poetry he would like to write) he appropriates language that is originally Hegel's. Let us mark, however, that the idea of the universe of which Mallarmé speaks is nothingness. Poetry, we are told, aspires to unity with this idea; but how is this aspiration to be realized? The answer is, in a process (or, better, in processes) of negation.

Notice that Mallarmé attains to his idea of the universe by a process of purgation: he empties himself of all that betokens an external world. Mallarmé, however, thought of this process as a kind of death, as though to purge his interior was to destroy himself as an experiencing subject. In May, 1867, he had written to Cazalis: "My thought has thought itself through and reached a pure idea. What the rest of me has suffered during that long agony, is indescribable. But, fortunately, I am quite dead now." What we have here, as Mallarmé makes clear in this same letter, is a theory of impersonality in art enclosed in radical dress: "I am impersonal now, not the Stéphane you once knew, but one of the ways the spiritual universe has found to see itself, unfold itself through what used to be me" (*M*, pp. 93-94; *C*, I, pp. 240-2). The "unfolding" of the idea has (once more) a Hegelian resonance; but, once more, the point is not philosophical but part of an emerging poetics. The contemplation of the void is a process of self-annihilation, which process is of the first importance if the creation of pure poetry is to be possible. For if poetry aspires to the condition of nothingness, and so by its purity to display the idea of the universe; or, again, if it seeks by its purity to participate in the very nature of beauty, the poem must on this account become a closed system—a structure of words closed above all to the poet himself, since it is by his mediation that the world of things and events, ideas and emotions, seeks to make its way into the poem. That expressive movement by which a world of experience becomes objectified in language must be abolished, so that what seems an utterance will finally emerge as an object—a structure that appears to occupy its own world and to display its own laws of development. "If the poem is to be pure," Mallarmé wrote in "Crise de vers," "the poet's voice must be stilled and the initiative taken by the words themselves, which will be set in motion as they meet unequally in collision. And in

an exchange of gleams they will flame out like some glittering swath of fire sweeping over precious stones, and thus replace the audible breathing in lyric poetry of old—replace the poet's own personal and passionate control of verse" (*M*, pp. 40-41; *Œuvres*, p. 336). Creativity seems to be envisioned here as a kind of alchemical process, in which words no longer function as signs in an act of speech but become instead objects with physical and, indeed, magical properties. The poem, that is to say, is no longer a human utterance, for expression has been displaced by the very *substance* of language—language as a reality transcendent in the purity of nothingness, articulating, according to a dynamism peculiarly its own, the pure poem.

And so it was, indeed, Mallarmé's conviction that the language of poetry must be isolated from the language of ordinary speech (*M*, pp. 42-43; *Œuvres*, p. 368). Poetry is not expression; its intelligibility rests upon other, more purely formal grounds. Mallarmé sought to enforce this distinction between the poetic act and the act of speech by aligning poetry with music. "Crise de vers," in fact, appears to take its cue from Richard Wagner's belief that poetry had, in the nineteenth century, reached a critical juncture in its development: it could now evolve either toward science or toward music—toward the exact signification of scientific discourse or toward the pure expressiveness of the symphony.⁶ In "La Musique et les lettres" (1894), Mallarmé makes it clear what the poet's choice must be. "Nature exists," he writes. "She will not be changed, although we may add cities, railroads, or other inventions to our material world." This being so, the poet's only recourse is "to seize relationships and intervals, however few or multiple." We must understand that to create is no longer to evoke substances in pursuit of *la belle nature*; on the contrary,

To create is to conceive an object in its fleeting moment, in its absence.

To do this, we simply compare its facets and dwell lightly, negligently upon their multiplicity. We conjure up [not the object but] a scene of lovely, evanescent, intersecting forms. We recognize the entire and binding arabesque as it leaps dizzily in terror or plays disquieting chords; or, through a sudden digression (by no means disconcerting), we are warned of its likeness unto itself even as it hides. Then, when the melodic line has given way to silence, we seem to hear such themes as are the very logic and substance of our soul (*M*, pp. 48-49; *Œuvres*, pp. 647-8).

We may recall here the passage quoted earlier: "Why should we perform the miracle by which a natural object is almost made to disappear beneath the magic waving wand of the written word . . . ?" Not, as in Hegel, to replace it with a meaning, but to "conjure up a scene of lovely, evanescent, intersecting forms." To create is to conceive an object in its absence, that is, to negate it; but whatever ideal content cognition might then ordinarily pursue is superceded, in Mallarmé's view, by "relationships and intervals"—by an "arabesque" whose movement, as Mallarmé goes on to say, marks the "creation of idea—creation perhaps unseen by man, mysterious, like some harmony of perfect purity" (*M*, p. 49; *Œuvres*, p. 648).

The difficulty is that this creation of the pure idea, this evocation of "some harmony of perfect purity," must be accomplished by means of language. The poet, for example, lacks the freedom of the musician. For the musician, freedom lies in the undifferentiated character of his material, which is sound, and which, being undifferentiated, lends itself without bias to formation according to an infinity of possible schemes. The poet's material, however, is not sound but language, which is never undifferentiated but rather is given to the poet as a system already structured for signification. Ordinary speech is governed by structural laws that guide words into those diverse syntactical relationships in which a speaker's meaning finds the condition of its possibility. One can hardly utter a single word without gesturing toward a structural relationship in which that word functions in a significant way. This is to say, in effect, that the poet is, quite as a matter of nature, drawn by his material into a universe of meaning. Mallarmé, however, resists this pull of language toward meaning. What he proposes, with his analogy between poetry and music, is the possibility of isolating the word from the system—of deviating so far from the structural laws of discourse that the word's function as an element in the formation of an utterance will be radically compromised.

Critics have long been intrigued by Mallarmé's experiments with linguistic structures in the four lyrics that make up *Plusieurs sonnets* (1887). We might consider briefly the last of these poems:

Ses purs ongles très haut dédiant leur onyx,
L'Angoisse, ce minuit, soutient, lampadophore,
Maint rêve vespéral brûlé par le Phénix
Que ne recueille pas de cinéraire amphore

Sur les crédences, au salon vide: nul ptyx,
Aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore,
(Car le Maître est allé puiser des pleurs au Styx
Avec ce seul objet dont le Néant s'honore).

Mais proche la croisée au nord vacante, un or
Agonise selon peut-être le décor
Des licornes ruant du feu contre une nixe,

Elle, défunte nue en le miroir, encor
Que, dans l'oubli fermé par le cadre, se fixe
De scintillations sitôt le septuor (*Œuvres*, pp. 68–69)

If we consider the first two stanzas of this poem, we will see that a question immediately arises as to the precise function of the structure, "L'Angoisse . . . soutient . . . maint rêve vespéral." Not only is its emergence held back by the inversion of the first line and the curious word order of the second, but the period of which it forms the (apparently) central syntactical structure is designed in such a way as to allow the insertion of additional but by no means subordinate material (" . . . brûlé par le Phénix/Que ne recueille pas de cinéraire amphore/Sur les crédences, au salon vide"). For its part, "nul ptyx,/ Aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore" is held in place less by syntax than by typography, and so remains structurally independent of the whole—a condition reinforced somewhat by the parenthetical account of the shell's absence and of its peculiar relationship to le Néant.

In "Ses purs ongles," that is to say, the ordinary function of syntax has been appreciably deflected: so far from organizing words into a unified utterance (one capable of bearing the weight of meaning), its activity here seems to have been radically subordinated to another principle of unity. For if the words do not unite syntactically, they are inclined to do so thematically: they suggest, most of them, images of absence—an empty urn, an empty room, an absent shell, a departed master, nothingness, an empty window, a dead nymph reflected in a mirror whose frame encloses forgetfulness. What we are left with, then, is not an utterance but a motif—a musical rather than

truly linguistic structure, one which, as Elizabeth Sewall has shown in her analysis of *Plusieurs sonnets*, moves freely among still more strictly musical relationships. Miss Sewall urges us to consider that "the principle of construction of this poetry is to use the elements [words] not for any intrinsic meaning but to mark positions in a relation system."⁷ This system, according to Miss Sewall, is built up from what she calls the "sound-look" properties of the words, which is to say that it is marked by the interplay of the physical properties of words ("Aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore"; "De scintillations sitôt le septuor") and not by an interplay of significant functions. The words of the poem, that is, do not come together on the basis of any unified movement of meaning, such as one finds in a system of utterances organized according to identifiably syntactic procedures; instead, one discovers somewhat more easily relations formed among separate meanings (as in the diverse images of absence in "Ses purs ongles"), and again on the basis of similar phonetic and even orthographic constructions. Thus the poem, whatever possibilities of meaning it may present to the reader, suggests at the same time (and perhaps with greater force) the presence of a system of pure relations.

We thus begin to see the full import of Mallarmé's theory of impersonality: the annihilation of the speaker is of a piece with Mallarmé's effort to displace the structural laws that govern speech (and which govern as well traditional poetic usage) by structural laws that belong to the world of music. And we begin to see also why Mallarmé attaches such a great premium to the written (or printed) word—the word, not as a functional element in a discourse, but as an object existing in a spatial and visual field. For written language (as it is well known) exists in its own right at several removes from the world of the spoken word. But there is an even more significant point to be observed. In the absence of syntax as a principle of organizing words into a unity, the spatial and visual field of the white page becomes as necessary to poetry as silence is to music. We shall see in a moment the great importance which the white page has for Mallarmé. For now we need only look to Mallarmé's remark, in "Le Mystère dans les lettres" (1895) that "Mystery is said to be music's domain. But the written word also lays claim to it," precisely as the written word is able to induce those "supreme and heart-rending musical moments [which] are born of fleeting arabesques"—

that is, when the word, by its diverse "movements" upon the white page, describes not an utterance but a structure of pure relations. Mallarmé describes such movements as follows:

The sentence may seem to stammer at first, hold back in a knot of incidental bits; then it multiplies, takes on order, and rises up in a noble harmony, wavering all the while in its knowing transpositions.

For those who may be surprised and angered by this broad application of my words, I shall describe the revels of this language.

Words rise up unaided and in ecstasy; many a facet reveals its infinite rarity and is precious to our minds. For our mind is the center of this hesitancy and oscillation; it sees words not in their usual order, but in projection (like the walls of a cave), so long as that mobility which is their principle lives on, that part of speech which is not spoken. Then, quickly, before they die away, they all exchange their brilliancies from afar; or they may touch, and steal a furtive glance (*M*, pp. 32-33; *Œuvres*, pp. 385-6).

We might notice here again that language appears to have been returned to the world of myth, for in "the revels of this language" words take on a life of their own—an independent "mobility" that perhaps asserts once for all their liberation from the syntax of speech. It is by virtue of such mobility that language, as Mallarmé puts it in "La Musique et les lettres," adumbrates "certain orchestral phrasings in which we hear, first, a withdrawal to the shades, swirls and uneasy hesitation, and then suddenly the bursting, leaping, multiple ecstasy of brilliance, like the approaching radiance of a sunrise" (*M*, p. 49; *Œuvres*, p. 648). And by this means language—written or printed language—lays claim to mystery: that is, mystery in its ancient (and, indeed, mythical) sense of revelation. The purity of form displayed by the "hesitancy and oscillation" of language marks it as the proper vehicle for beauty—the idea. (Thus Mallarmé observes, in "La Musique et les lettres," that the "winding and mobile variations of the idea . . . are the prerogative of the written word," *M*, p. 49; *Œuvres*, p. 648.)

Mallarmé proffers here the paradox of still movement—the movement of objects fixed in space. This paradox lies at the heart of his conviction that the present task of modern poets "is to find a way of transposing the symphony to the book: in short, to regain our rightful due. For, undeniably, the true source of music must not be the elemental sound of brasses, strings, or wood-winds, but the intellectual

and written word in all its glory—music of perfect fulness and clarity—the totality of universal relationships” (*M*, p. 42; *Œuvres*, pp. 367–8.) The book here is Mallarmé’s great work—the book in which all earthly existence must one day be contained. The poet’s task, in this case, would be as follows: to transpose objects into words, and to gather those words, not into structures of meaning that will refer us back to the world of things, but into a “totality of universal relationships”—into a musical structure of perhaps unimaginable proportions.

How to accomplish such a task? Mallarmé proceeds by renewing the art of the ancient scribe, whose special vocation grew out of the discovery that the world of objects and events, ideas and emotions, could be reduced to a set of physical particles, only 24 in number, yet capable of being combined in an infinite number of ways. It is well known that many ancient and medieval grammarians, and with them those curious initiates of the Cabalist tradition, invested the letters of the alphabet with mystical significance. In *Mallarmé’s Un Coup de dés*, R. G. Cohn has shown how far Mallarmé went towards re-creating this myth of the alphabet.⁸ The letters are, Mallarmé says in some notes on language and method, “purely hieroglyphic” characters, that is, ciphers whose significance is a matter of shape (*Œuvres*, p. 855). But in these notes and elsewhere he seems finally less concerned with the content of these hieroglyphs than with their function. In “La Musique et les lettres,” for example, he identifies the letters of the alphabet as “our heritage from the ancient books of magic,” and he explains that their value is that “they provide us with a method of notation which spontaneously becomes literature” (*M*, p. 47; *Œuvres*, p. 646)—spontaneously, that is, as if by magic. We seem every inch now in a mythic universe. The point to mark, however, is that in the letters the poet finds something like a principle of composition, precisely because, as Mallarmé says in “Le Livre, instrument spirituel” (1895), they are “gifted with infinity”: “Everything [the totality of earthly existence] is caught up in their endless variations,” which is to say in their capacity for forming an infinite variety of combinations (*M*, p. 26; *Œuvres*, p. 380).

It is in terms of such a method of composition, Mallarmé goes on to say, that “typography becomes a rite” (*M*, p. 26; *Œuvres*, p. 380). For “The book, which is a total expansion of the letter, must find its

mobility in the letter; and in its spaciousness must establish some nameless system of relationships . . .” (*M*, pp. 26–27; *Œuvres*, p. 380). “Nameless” is indeed the appropriate word here. For the world, existing as it does (for the poet) in words, is by the rite of typography to be displayed not as a field of objects nor as a world of experience but as a totality of relations among a set of lexical structures. There is no question here of poetry involving itself in mere representation. In “Crise de vers” Mallarmé remarks that “The inner structures of a book of verse must be inborn”—rather like an innate idea, or perhaps like those several principles deduced by Kant, whereby the mind is understood to organize the undifferentiated material of sensation into structures which, so far from corresponding to an outside world, ground their intelligibility upon their own laws of development. Whereas, however, Kant’s world is phenomenal and significant, Mallarmé’s is at once typographic and musical:

From each theme, itself predestined, a given harmony will be born somewhere in the parts of the total poem and take its proper place within the volume; because, for every sound, there is an echo. Motifs of like pattern will move in balance from point to point. There will be none of the sublime incoherence found in the page-settings of the romantics, none of the artificial unity that used to be based on the square measurements of the book. Everything will be hesitation, disposition of parts, their alternations and relationships—all this contributing to the rhythmic totality, which will be the very silence of the poem, in its blank spaces, as that silence is translated by each structural element in its own way (*M*, p. 41; *Œuvres*, pp. 366–7).

Not substance but form: not the imagining of a totality of objects but the unfolding, typographically, of a manifold of pure activities—“hesitation, disposition of parts, their alternations and relationships”—all contributing to a “rhythmic totality” that, paradoxically, constitutes the very silence of the poem.

“Silence” here is, of course, the silence that attends the written or printed word. But for Mallarmé silence takes on special importance within the context of his aesthetic as a whole. Silence, we may say, signals for Mallarmé the presence of beauty; or, again, in silence the mystery of nothingness—the idea—breaks in upon man. Consequently, in reading, Mallarmé tells us in “Le Mystère dans les lettres,”

We must bend our independent minds, page by page, to the blank space which begins each one; we must forget the title, for it is too resounding. Then, in the tiniest and most scattered stopping-points upon the page, when the lines of chance have been vanquished word by word, the blanks unfailingly return; before, they were gratuitous; now they are essential; and now at last it is clear that nothing lies beyond; now silence is genuine and just.

It is a virgin space, face to face with the lucidity of our matchless vision, divided of itself, in solitude, into halves of whiteness; and each of these is lawful bridge to the other at the wedding of the idea.

Thus the invisible air, or song, beneath the words leads our divining eye from word to music; and thus, like a motif, invisibly it inscribes its fleuron and pendant there (*M*, pp. 33–34; *Œuvres*, p. 387).

The spatial field across which the poet casts his words is gratuitous, irrelevant, in traditional verse; but here it must be understood to be an integral part of the poem itself, in the same way that silence forms an essential part of a musical composition. "Music is born, develops, and realizes itself within silence," writes Gisèle Brelet: "upon silence it traces out its moving arabesques, which give a form to silence, and yet do not abolish it. A musical work, like all sonority, unfolds between two silences: the silence of its birth and the silence of its completion. In this temporal life where music perpetually is born, dies, and is born again, silence is its faithful companion."⁹ Just so, for Mallarmé, will written language trace out its "moving arabesques" upon the white page, executing, like so many words in the void, splendid variations of the idea before it is consumed, like music, by the silence of the page. "Thus, in reading, a lonely quiet concert is given for our minds, and they in turn, less noisily, reach its meaning. All our mental faculties will be present in this symphonic exaltation; but, unlike music, they will be rarified, for they partake of thought. Poetry, accompanied by the idea, is perfect music, and cannot be anything else" (*M*, p. 27; *Œuvres*, p. 380).

That is to say, in the afterglow of our encounter with the written word, it is given to us to share the mystery of Mallarmé's poetry: our minds, "rarefied"—emptied, perhaps, of all but sensations of absolute emptiness—"partake of thought." We come to share, that is to say, that elemental aesthetic experience upon which Mallarmé grounds his poetry and in particular his dream of the book.

Such a dream, understandably, proved impossible to realize. Mallarmé could only rest content, as he says in "Crise de vers," that "Certain recent publications have heralded this sort of book," which is to say that "certain young poets have seen what an overwhelming and harmonious totality a poem must be, and have stammered out the magic concept of the great work" (*M*, p. 41; *Œuvres*, p. 367). Thus, perhaps, does the book emerge as a kind of mythic subject: not the work of one poet but of many, it attains to a cultural dimension, which is to say that it becomes the subject of a cultural activity, and so becomes not a book to be realized once for all in a single creative outburst but instead one to be approximated in successive typographic rituals—a book the totality of which is never fully to be grasped but only to be glimpsed in the luminescence of its several parts.

In this way we may interpret Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés* as a part which mysteriously evokes the whole, for in this poem Mallarmé seeks to actualize, not the book itself, but its constitutive principles.* For in *Un Coup de dés* typography replaces syntax as a way of establishing relationships among words—that is, as a way of organizing the material of the poem. Syntactical structures are everywhere adumbrated, but they are radically diffused by the way the words are positioned within the spatial and visual field of the white page. The importance of this displacement of syntax may be explained as follows: syntax, we know, describes a movement in time. In his preface to *Un Coup de dés*, however, Mallarmé makes it clear that he seeks the illusion of movement in space: "we avoid narrative," he writes, for it is his intention to "space out" our reading of the poem, so that as we move from word to word, or from one group of words to another, we will do so within "a simultaneous vision of the page" (*Œuvres*, p. 455). For the page, not the line, is the unit of Mallarmé's verse, and within the unit the "fiction"—the ostensible content of the diverse groups of words—appears and disappears "according to the mobility of the writing." As we have seen, it is principally the release of language from syntax that makes possible the kind of mobility that

* A reproduction of the Gallimard 1914 edition of *Un coup de dés* begins on page 235.

Mallarmé has in mind—the “withdrawals” and “prolongations” that betoken (for him) a musical structure (*Œuvres*, p. 455). Hence a line of verse falls in variable movements from left to right across “halves of whiteness,” its apparently discontinuous but finally carefully modulated mobility controlled by the white space, which, like silence in music, intervenes to give the line a formal (over and against a strictly linguistic) intelligibility.

The differences in points of type in the poem play an integral role in this effort toward the illusion of spatial movement—the illusion, we may say, of a symphony transposed to the book. The title and main theme, “Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard [A throw of the dice will never abolish chance],” is printed in 48-point type and is dispersed throughout the poem. In his preface Mallarmé identifies this main theme in terms of its structural function: it is “the latent conductor wire” of the poem—latent because concealed within the poem. For the subordinate themes, printed in various smaller points of type according to their structural importance, exist simultaneously with the main theme. They surround and punctuate the main theme, occupying “variable positions” in relation to it, thus to constitute what Mallarmé calls “prismatic subdivisions of the idea” (*Œuvres*, p. 455).

“Idea” here is once more the pure idea which the poem seeks to actualize structurally.¹⁰ The themes adumbrate this idea in the harmony—the “rhythmic totality”—which their mobility suggests. The themes are also accessible to paraphrase, and from them it is possible to deduce the “fiction” which underlies the poem. As in “Ses purs ongles,” which we examined earlier, the significance of the fiction appears to turn on the idea of absence, emptiness—that is, nothingness. In “Ses purs ongles,” the motif of absence gives way at the end to “De scintillations . . . septuor”—to a septet of stars, or constellation. The same structure appears to be at work in *Un Coup de dés*, in which, however, the idea of absence is not presented through images but dramatically, that is, through the representation of “l’acte vide,” an empty action. A “master,” at a critical moment in his life (certain facts of which are interspersed throughout the poem), seeks to test the efficacy of the human will. By a throw of the dice (an act of choice) he will abolish chance and thus establish himself as the master of his own fate. The moment is prepared for, but the theme

which courses through the poem in 14-point type advises us that “rein . . . n’aura eu lieu”—nothing will have taken place. And, indeed, nothing does take place, “excepté . . . peut-être . . . une constellation,” which (as in “Ses purs ongles”) emerges “froide d’oubli et de désuétude”—cold from forgetfulness and disuse.

Like “Ses purs ongles,” *Un Coup de dés* suggests the possibility of meaning. The empty act of the master has perhaps created, as though *ex nihilo*, the purely formal structure implied by the constellation. But such a meaning remains only a possibility, one held in suspension within the musical structure of the poem.¹¹ James Joyce would later begin the composition of *Finnegans Wake* with a simple and straightforward narrative, which he then would displace by creating what can only be described as a purely literary language. Mallarmé anticipated Joyce by some three decades. The narrative in *Un Coup de dés* is finally (and paradoxically) displaced by the very language in which it is realized.

This is to say, perhaps, that the action of the poem is realized not dramatically but musically—or, better, typographically. The action is adumbrated not through a traditional literary structure but through the technology of the written and finally printed word. Mallarmé understood his use of this technology to be revolutionary, in the sense that it marks the creation of a new genre—the poem as book, in whose physical dimensions the poet lays out his “matchless vision” and by this means transforms the book into an authentic medium. Through typography, in other words, the world of print comes to occupy that magical universe in which poetry finds the mystery of its being.

1. Trans. Bradford Cook, *Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays, and Letters* (Baltimore, 1956), p. 24; and *Œuvres complètes* (Pléiade Edition), ed. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubrey (Paris, 1945), p. 378. Subsequent references to Mallarmé’s works will be to both the English translation and the French text, cited respectively as *M* and *Œuvres* in parentheses following quotation. References to the letters will be to Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance*, I (Paris, 1959), ed. Henri Mondor; II (Paris, 1965), ed. Henri Mondor and Lloyd James Austin, and will be cited as *C* in parentheses following quotation.

2. Quoted by Maurice Blanchot, “La Littérature et le droit à la mort,” in *La Part du feu* (Paris, 1949), p. 325.

3. Cazalis was the author of a book on Buddhism entitled, *Le Livre du néant* (1872).
4. *The Philosophy of Hegel*, ed. Carl J. Friedrich (New York, 1953), p. 335.
5. Trans. Gustave Emil Mueller (New York, 1959), p. 103.
6. *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. Wm. Ashton Ellis, (London, 1893), III, p. 319.
7. *The Structure of Poetry* (London, 1951), p. 152.
8. (New Haven, 1950), pp. 35-38, 118-122.
9. "Music and Silence," in *Reflections on Art*, ed. Susanne K. Langer (Baltimore, 1958), p. 103; first published in *La Revue musicale*, XXII (1946), 169-181.
10. For a brilliant and exhaustive reading of *Un Coup de dés*, cf. Bernard Weinberg, *The Limits of Symbolism* (Chicago, 1966), pp. 236-321.
11. In a letter to André Gide (April, 1898), Mallarmé suggests that it was the structure of the action that chiefly concerned him, and that the typography of the poem imitates this structure. Bradford translates a portion of this letter, *M*, p. 105. Gide quotes the letter in "Verlaine et Mallarmé," *Œuvres complètes d'André Gide*, VII (Paris, 1932), p. 428.

On the following pages: Mallarmé, Stéphane. *Un coup de des jamais n'abolira le hasard*. Paris: Gallimard, Editions de la Nouvelle revue française, 1914.

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Full poem (1914 edn):
http://writing.upenn.edu/library/Mallarme-Stephane_Coup_1914_spread.pdf

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