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BELIEVE THAT IT WAS TO BE VERY BEAUTIFUL  
(MALLARMÉ AND BAUDELAIRE)

*An anti-philological tale*

*Translated by Robert Boncardo*

*In memory of Barbara Johnson*

How did Mallarmé read Baudelaire? What does he owe him? In what sense is he his heir, as it is often acknowledged he is? We will attempt to respond to these complex and multifaceted questions, which bring into relation two veritable continents of French literature, by setting out once again from *Literary Symphony*, a sort of “critical poem” *avant la lettre*, published in 1865 and devoted to Gauthier, Baudelaire and Banville, all three of whom were admired by the young Mallarmé. In the Pléiade edition of 1945, *Literary Symphony* figures under the rubric “Proses de jeunesse”. In the new edition curated by Bertrand Marchal (2003), it is integrated into the dossier of *Divagations*. However, the latter postdates *Literary Symphony* by more than twenty years. Marchal’s choice is nevertheless justified by the fact that a part of this text — the part on Baudelaire, precisely — is reprised in the *Divagations (Long Ago, in the Margins of a Copy of Baudelaire)*.<sup>1</sup> By its rigour, Bertrand Marchal’s critical edition is a model of the genre. The fact remains that this specific choice constitutes an anomaly, or at least an exception, since all the other pieces from the dossier of *Divagations* are contemporaneous with it. Should *Literary Symphony* have been included or not in the dossier from *Divagations*, for the reason of its partial republication? Whatever the case may be, Marchal’s decision should not make us forget that besides some extensively reworked motifs, the texts from 1865 and 1888 have very little in common.

What has changed? What is striking is first of all the difference in size between the two texts. *Long Ago, in the Margins of a Copy of Baudelaire* is, in accordance with the Mallarméan “style” of the 80’s and 90’s, a sort of condensation of the first. A certain number of terms and images return, but with the syntactical shortcuts typical of

*später* Mallarmé. Where in 1865 he wrote: “No sooner have I opened my Baudelaire than I am drawn into a stunning landscape that strikes my eyes as if created by some marvellous opiate”, we now read: “A landscape haunts like opium” (D 49 – *modified trans.*). The example can be generalized: from one version to the other, all of the markers of enunciation and, therefore – as impersonality demands – all of the markers of subjectivity have notably disappeared, except in the first sentence of the text to which we will return. Baudelaire is still there, in a vision combining a livid sky, leafless trees, gloomy pools, a sunset, tears, Satan, crime and remorse. There are still figures, things to see, and perhaps it is still the same vision, even if everything happens as if there were no longer anybody there to see it.

No more subjective positioning: by the same stroke, the young and admiring Mallarmé of 1865 is nowhere to be found. No longer is it Baudelaire and I (Baudelaire for me, my Baudelaire, etc.), but Baudelaire such as into himself at last, which is to say without me in order to sustain him. I am no longer there to claim an inheritance. In 1888, there is no longer “my Baudelaire” (OC, 282), no more “I dip with delight into the dear pages of *The Flowers of Evil*” (OC, 282). The text from 1865, by contrast, is that of a young and admiring poet, apparently fated to impotence by this very admiration, as per a well-known topos that Mallarmé revives, no doubt in an ironic way given the grandiloquence (though it is possible that irony is part of this very topos).<sup>2</sup> It functions as a declaration of filiation (as we would say a customs or a tax declaration), as a search, if not for paternity, then at least for a *homeland* [*patrie*], a rare term, to say the least, under Mallarmé’s pen and one which occurs, precisely, in the section devoted to Baudelaire:

What, then, is the homeland?

I closed the book and the eyes, and I seek the homeland. Before me there arises the apparition of a learned poet who points to it for me in a hymn that comes forth mystically like a lily. The rhythm of this song resembles the rose window of a cathedral: amongst the ornamentation of the ancient stone, smiling in a seraphic lapis-lazuli which seems to be a prayer emerging from their blue eyes rather than from our vulgar azure, white angels sing like a host their ecstasy accompanied by harps imitating their wings [...] – and I can look no higher than their theological virtues, such is their holiness ineffable; but I hear ring out these words in an eternal fashion: *O filii et filiae* (OC II, 283).

Would Baudelaire thus take the place of the *homeland* for Mallarmé? In any case, the means of accessing this homeland are themselves very Baudelairean, since it is reached by closing the book and the eyes, which is to say by giving oneself over to the force of the imagination, so central in Baudelaire. And if reading Baudelaire does not give us access to any homeland, not even to an exclusively imaginary homeland, then it at least compensates for the possible absence of a homeland by substituting for it a place whose connotations are clearly religious. The Baudelaire-homeland is an “old church” at the same time as being the song of the angels that

invite us to gather there. It brings about an effect of communion, of invitation and thus of belonging (*O filii et filiae*). If we set out again from a question as essential to Mallarmé as that of the “religion of letters”, which his entire œuvre confronts, in particular by reposing in every possible way the question of the *place* proper to a religion of letters,<sup>3</sup> we can thus say that, in 1865, nothing permits us to doubt the fact that Mallarmé believes in the possibility of salvation or redemption by literature, with eyes closed to the world, and that in 1865 this salvation passes by way of a relation of admiration for — as well as an appropriation of — Baudelaire. In sum, the latter is the exponent of Mallarmé’s belief in a “religion of letters”. This does not mean, of course, that Baudelaire himself can be identified, above all in 1865, with such a religion, since for a number of years he had ceaselessly deconstructed its idealist presuppositions; we will return to this. But Mallarmé perhaps does not yet know this, or at least is not ready to acknowledge it. For the time being, he follows Baudelaire *with his eyes closed* — and this blindness is, to my mind, at the centre of the complex relation between Mallarmé and Baudelaire and constitutes one of the keys for comprehending, if not the ambivalence, then at least the considerable discretion, which commentators have often remarked upon, of the young poet in relation to his senior.

All of this is amputated from the reprise of 1888. Nothing here evokes any admiration, any belief in salvation, any mystical communion, any angels. The invocation of the homeland has disappeared and has been replaced by a question bearing upon the sky, confirming *a posteriori* the religious implications of the interrogation of 1865 concerning the homeland — that is, the proper place of the poetic. But unlike the question posed in 1865, that of 1888 remains without a response and is combined with a vision of nightmare and of exile:

Or is this torrent of tears lit up by the fireworks of that artificer Satan  
moving behind the scenes? Night only prolongs crime, remorse, and Death.  
Therefore you veil your face in sobs, less because of this nightmare than  
because of the fragments of attempts to go free implied in any exile; what,  
oh, what is the Sky? (D 49)

Is this simply to say that, between 1865 and 1888, Mallarmé lost faith and renounced a certain religion of literature of which Baudelaire would have been the representative? That it was necessary for him to detach himself from Baudelaire and cease to be his admiring son in order to become Mallarmé? Must we frame this scene in Oedipal terms, or in terms of an “anxiety of influence”, as Harold Bloom would no doubt suggest,<sup>4</sup> an anxiety explicitly visible at the beginning of *Literary Symphony* and more generally in the excessively laudatory tone of this text?<sup>5</sup> This is one possible avenue of inquiry: the evidence for it is not lacking, nor indeed are the discrete admissions of Mallarmé himself, who wrote in 1867 to his friend Henri Cazalis: “Dierx’s book is a beautiful development of Leconte de l’Isle. Will he separate himself from him as I have from Baudelaire?”<sup>6</sup> Indisputably, for Mallarmé, Baudelaire had been a master from whom it was necessary to detach himself. And he was all the more so since he remained a mute master who Mallarmé never knew and from

whom he never obtained anything more than an approving silence following a reading of 'Les Fenêtres' and 'L'Azur',<sup>7</sup> and later a remark on *Le Phénomène futur* in *La Belgique déshabillée*.<sup>8</sup>

It is equally possible to assess Mallarmé's ambivalence by taking a detour past Poe, of whom he wrote in 1864: "All the same, the further on I go, the more I will be faithful to these exacting ideas that my great master Edgar Poe has bequeathed me".<sup>9</sup> From one master to another: Poe is perhaps all the more respectable since he allows Mallarmé to avoid recognizing his other master, Baudelaire, who is nevertheless the first to translate these "exacting ideas". The relation of Mallarmé to Poe, who he will also go on to translate, is a relation of re-appropriation that occasionally involves the disavowal of what his knowledge of Poe owed to the translations (or the appropriations) of Poe by Baudelaire. Taking into account the admiration he claims he has for the one and the other, it is all the same surprising to read in a letter to Lefébure, written in 1865 at the moment Baudelaire's translation of *Tales of the grotesque and arabesque* appeared: "I have no money with which to buy the grotesque or serious tales, and moreover I am not currently reading".<sup>10</sup> It is true that two years later recognition is apparently in the offing, since he writes to Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, who asks him for translations of poems by Poe for a journal: "You will have in one of the first editions some poems by Poe that I will work on: I accept this task as a legacy from Baudelaire".<sup>11</sup> But in the meantime Baudelaire has died, and we know that it is always easier to be the inheritor of a dead man than a living one.

Other evidence would no doubt confirm the hypothesis of an anxiety of influence that Mallarmé had to overcome. But is this not a too simple and too obvious hypothesis, which, in the final analysis, does not explain much at all? In any case, it does not allow us to explain the transformation-reprisal of *Literary Symphony* twenty years later, nor indeed the *Tomb of Charles Baudelaire*, which dates from 1893. If Mallarmé detaches himself from Baudelaire in the 60's, it is also clear that he *returns* to him and that the texts from 1888 and 1893 have the value of a recognition of debt that, moreover, has not been entirely paid back in the text from 1888 and which continues to haunt it: "Muse of impotence, who dries up the sources of rhythm and forces me to reread; opposed to inebriants, *I give you the intoxication that comes from others*" (D 49). Here, in the first sentence, is the only "I" still present in the text, and it is not for nothing that it is an "I" who is there precisely to offer up "the intoxication that comes from others".<sup>12</sup>

From what intoxication or alienation is Mallarmé seeking to disentangle himself? What remains for him to render unto Baudelaire in 1888 or in 1893 and which could not have been recognized or declared in 1865? It is to this question that we must attempt to respond, at least if we hypothesize that Mallarmé's relation to Baudelaire cannot be summed up in what would after all be a relatively banal history of a necessary detachment, beyond which something new would come to be; that is, if we depart from the principle that Baudelaire is still *at work in* (in the work of) Mallarmé, whatever the quite systematic silence of the latter from 1867 onwards — the date of the death of his prestigious predecessor.



In the spring of 1866, Baudelaire is struck down in Namur after an attack that leaves him hemiplegic and above all aphasic. Mallarmé evokes these facts and the sadness that they provoke in him in a letter to Cazalis, which is famous for other reasons. Indeed, this famous letter is the one in which Mallarmé recounts his discovery of nothingness:

Unfortunately, in hollowing out verse like this, I have encountered two chasms, and they make me despair. One is Nothingness, which I came to without knowing about Buddhism and I am still too distressed to believe even in my poetry and to return to the work that this crushing thought has made me abandon. Yes *I know*, we are just pointless forms of matter, and yet thoroughly sublime ones for having invented God and our soul.<sup>15</sup>

There is thus a coincidence between Baudelaire's aphasia, who had before this been silent on the subject of Mallarmé's first poems, and the discovery of nothingness, of which we could say, taking into account this letter and everything that we know of Mallarmé's trajectory and of his relation to religion, that it also corresponds to the abandonment of the belief the situation of the lyrical poet is steeped in: I have hollowed out verse and, at the bottom of this hollow, there is nothing, there is no salvation to hope for. At the very moment Baudelaire is condemned to silence, Mallarmé ceases to believe not so much in God, since he never believed in him, but in poetry; or, more precisely, no doubt — for as such the formula does not mean much — in the redemptive function of poetry, in the possibility of salvation through poetry. The Baudelairean position involves mourning for the world, a renunciation of the world (Baudelaire writes with his eyes closed), a position of exile by turns glorious and cursed and which, despite everything, it is up to poetry to *redeem*, as Leo Bersani has shown.<sup>14</sup> To this mourning for the world to which he is initially faithful in an almost dogmatic fashion, more Baudelairean than Baudelaire himself,<sup>15</sup> Mallarmé now adds the mourning for poetry itself. Salvation is thus precisely confused with shipwreck.<sup>16</sup>

It is not that he ceases to write, even if there is indeed in Mallarmé's trajectory a period of almost twenty years, between 1867 and 1885, to be brief, in the course of which he writes remarkably little (a few articles, some fragments of *Igitur*, 'L'Après-midi d'un faune', *La Dernière Mode*, *Les Mots anglais*, that's about all). The discovery of nothingness, contemporaneous with Baudelaire's aphasia, will almost have made him aphasic as well. But above all he does not write, and will no longer write, in the same manner. If he still has, at least provisionally, one foot on the side of nothingness to be hollowed out (with *Hérodiade* then *Igitur*), the other tends more and more towards the *circumstantial*: not towards the insignificant, far from it, but towards a form of writing as if lightened of the load of the pathos of transmission, a formal writing, at once play and ritual, an effect of, or the foam of, the mourning for belief as such.<sup>17</sup> The despairing Mallarmé has ceded place to a histrion, a clown

who sometimes plays at the Faun. And it is necessary to wonder whether it is possible to be the inheritor of a clown or a Faun, or what such a heritage would consist in, especially if this clown simultaneously and perpetually touts a sublime total book — a null heritage, mere drafts that he recommends his inheritors burn.

From nothingness to the ironic assumption of the “nothing” — such would be Mallarmé’s trajectory since Baudelaire’s aphasia. Or since the death of his older sibling, for we cannot resist noting here another coincidence. Mallarmé’s biography is in fact placed under the sign of two great intellectual adventures, if we can call them that: the first, as we have seen, consists in exploring nothingness at the moment Baudelaire becomes aphasic. The second immediately follows: an effect of the first, it is evoked one year later, that is, almost precisely at the moment of Baudelaire’s death. This is the famous experience of impersonality, recounted in a letter to Cazalis, of which it is necessary to recall the following points, which appear essential:

I have just had a terrifying year: my thought has thought itself and has arrived at a pure conception. Everything my entire being suffered as an aftereffect during this long agony is indescribable, but fortunately I died completely, and the most impure region where my Spirit may venture is Eternity [...]

I am now at that point, after a supreme synthesis, of slowly gaining strength — incapable, you see, of distracting myself. But how much more so I was a few months ago, first of all in my terrible struggle with that old and wicked plumage, now crushed, fortunately, God.

This tells you that I am now no longer a person, no longer the Stéphane you have known — but a means by which the spiritual Universe can see and unfold itself through what was once me.<sup>18</sup>

Baudelaire dies, but Mallarmé, in his own way, also becomes impersonal, a pure aptitude of spirit reflecting on itself. There is in the Mallarméan experience of nothingness and impersonality something like an *imitation* of Baudelaire’s death, and I take as proof of this the fact that the other “abyss” that Mallarmé encounters while hollowing out verse is the “void of his chest”, a sickness which there is every reason to believe will lead to his death thirty years later. Whatever the real state of Mallarmé’s health, whatever role hypochondria played (but all of this is even more significant if it is a case of hypochondria), it is necessary to point out that at the moment of Baudelaire’s death Mallarmé begins to be sick, to die — as if he were contaminated by Baudelaire’s death.

To be convinced of Baudelaire’s implication in the Mallarméan “adventure”, for all of this to not appear as a mere coincidence, it is necessary to redefine the central issue of Mallarmé’s strange intellectual adventure, the only one he would have known. Having followed the different declarations from Mallarmé cited above, we can now summarize them in the following way. In striking down God, that “old and wicked plumage”, which is to say by experiencing the absence of any form of

transcendence — “God is dead” is certainly all the rage at the time — Mallarmé is simultaneously confronted with *his own disappearance*, with his own becoming-impersonal. “We are nothing but vain forms of matter — and yet thoroughly sublime ones for having invented God and our soul”, he writes to Cazalis. In order to escape nothingness, we have invented not only God but also our soul, that is, our existence as a *subject*. Take away God and there is no longer any subject that holds. The Other must die, but so must the subject. I am a subject only insofar as there exists a transcendental Other who assures me that I can be a subject, an Other I can *rely on*. What remains, then, if the Other is absent? Nothing, or more precisely language, words to which the poet must “cede the initiative”, within or beyond a problematic of meaning that ultimately corresponds, as all readers of Mallarmé know by experience, with an effect of *belief*. Meaning does nothing more than *gleam*, it comes to the reader henceforth in the form of a question, indeed of an enigma — of an “is this really it?”

A cascade of disappearances: God, the subject, meaning.<sup>19</sup> Mallarmé’s poetics come down in their entirety to the unbinding — the deconstruction, as we used to say — of this trinity, which is obviously not without a relation to *the* trinity, and from which it is impossible to dissociate the very constitution of 19<sup>th</sup> century lyrical poetry. We can thus minimally define the latter as the expression — or the song — of a subject.<sup>20</sup> It is this question that determines that the “coincidences” of 1866 and 1867 are not, precisely, mere coincidences. The crisis that Mallarmé lives through in the course of these years is very much a crisis of the “subject” of poetry, that is, of a cultural construction that is taking on water from all sides, which is sinking at the moment of Baudelaire’s death, who had made it *his* question. The question of the subject, or more precisely its questioning, its permanent state of crisis: in the history of poetry, Baudelaire represents the crisis of poetry, a crisis that has since never ended; he represents a systematic indictment of everything that, in the course of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, sanctioned the convergence of the poetic and the theological in the lyrical.

Let us recall some of the procedures or figures through which the Baudelairean crisis passes. On the side of God, these are almost too obvious: blasphemy, of course, the denial (of Saint Peter, for example), the choice of perversion and voluptuousness, of evil, of Satan. Amidst the perfume of a corpse. On the side of a subject we can note exile, identification with those who are marginalized and with those who are excluded from society — an identification whose real counterpart will be the famous trial lost in 1857 — but also the self-destitution, the overturning of (poetic) charity to become violence. If I had to characterize with a single term the Baudelairean operation carried out on the poetic tradition, I would readily resort to that of *denunciation*, as we speak of a sin or a crime, but also of a contract: Baudelaire denounces a specific poetic contract signed by God, the (charitable) poet and meaning (the good), a contract which has had its glory days and its romantic predecessors, Hugo in particular.

These themes are central, particularly in *Les Tableaux parisiens*, which were added to *The Flowers of Evil* after cuts prompted by the trial of 1857, and then of course in *le Spleen de Paris*. The following examples could be developed (and certain of them already have). *Assomons les pauvres*, *Le Gâteau*, *Les Yeux des Pauvres*, or also *Le Mauvais Vitrier* — all of these critique the motifs of charity, of love for one's neighbour, the veritable stock in trade of Romanticism, and unveil or denounce the latter as both violent and hypocritical.<sup>21</sup> *La Corde* is at once a denunciation of a relation of violence (between the painter and his model) hidden behind another denunciation, that of the illusions of maternal love.<sup>22</sup> Numerous texts from *Tableaux parisiens* expose the mechanism of identification with the others as being a surplus-value created by the poet, who thus poses as a charitable swindler: this operation is "theorized" in *Les Foules* and radicalized in *La Solitude*, which it is possible to read as a denunciation of the fundamental Christian "contract", which demands that the other be similar to my fellowman, my brother, my neighbour. *Perte d'auréole* refers almost explicitly to the loss of the aura (of the poet) dear to Walter Benjamin. *Le Galant Tireur* overthrows the woman as muse and thus as a mediator of the divine. As for texts (in prose) like *L'Invitation au voyage* and *Un Hémisphère dans une chevelure*, Barbara Johnson has shown that they are based upon an operation of a *defiguration* (and thus of a destitution) of poetics that Baudelaire carried out, starting with his texts in verse.<sup>23</sup>

Upon the death of Baudelaire, Lefébure writes to Mallarmé "that genius is a magnificent sickness and that one can die from it".<sup>24</sup> Mallarmé could certainly have subscribed to such a statement, above all if the genius of Baudelaire consisted in the destitution of the subject, in denouncing and sacrificing it, before transmitting this problematic to him. Mallarmé also dies, in his way, from Baudelaire's genius. He begins to truly become Mallarmé ("no longer the Stéphane that you knew") at the point where Baudelaire ceases to be Baudelaire, where the adventure of lyricism ends in its own renunciation. From the aphasia of one to the "Nothing, this foam, virgin verse" of the other: the whole question is, in a word, to know how poetry is possible after the Baudelairean denunciation; how to come after a poetry infected by a pathology; how to be cured of it. It is not insignificant that in *Long Ago, in the Margins of a Copy of Baudelaire*, it is a question of opium and of "the intoxication that comes from others": Baudelaire is toxic, and this ultimately leaves one outside, "in the sinister fragments of all exile" (OC II, 110). How is it possible to come after this? Almost thirty years ago Baudelaire died, and yet his shadow is itself a poison:

Celle son ombre même un poison tutélaire  
Toujours à respirer si nous en périssons (OC I, 39)

[being his Shade a tutelary poison  
we breathe in deeply though we die of it]<sup>25</sup>

Until the end, until the 'Tomb of Charles Baudelaire' written in 1893, Mallarmé will therefore have remained faithful to the Baudelairean poison, to what is toxic in his lesson. Until the end, this is what he will have chosen to remember: the poison,



actualised also in the figure of the prostitute, so emblematic of a Baudelaire associated with “the horribly dribbling / sepulchral sewer-mouth loosening mud and rubies”,<sup>26</sup> and who chose the mud of the real against poetic charity; a figure now as if snuffed out since it had been too well illuminated (by the modern illumination of gas) and destined to be nothing more than a shadow caused by the very absence of shadow. Baudelaire: a shadow, a *revenant*, perhaps, and for this precise reason always toxic. We cannot separate ourselves from revenants.



God, myself, the good: the denunciation of this little *ménage à trois* on which the position of his lyrical seniors was based also leads Baudelaire to disqualify all forms of *community*. The Other is no longer my fellowman and even less a brother, if not by *hypocrisy*. His œuvre is anti-communitarian, it is written in mourning for the hopes which were his at the moment of the 1848 revolution: mourning for the people, mourning for an active community, the disavowal of Saint Peter. At the political as at the literary level, 1848 would have truly marked the end of an epoch.<sup>27</sup> Fraternity has become “fraternal prostitution”<sup>28</sup> and universal communion is the privilege of the solitary walker slipping in almost as a voyeur amongst the crowd. In this context we could also evoke the question of dandyism, which is at the very least the index of a desire for absolute *singularisation*<sup>29</sup> just as much as it is a renunciation of the great tasks of transmission that the preceding generation had assigned itself (summarized by Bénichou under the term of *prophétisme*).

At this level, whose religious connotations are manifest, it is tempting, even if it is too simplistic, to describe things in terms of a dialectic, with Hugo — the contrary of the dandy — in the role of the thesis, Baudelaire in that of the antithesis and Mallarmé in that of the synthesis, with the following particularity: namely, that in strictly historical terms the thesis (Hugo) extends his reign beyond the antithesis (Baudelaire). In any case, we can remark that if Mallarméan “silence” and impersonality coincide with the disappearance of Baudelaire, he is back in business at the death of Victor Hugo (1885), as if he had to wait, as Barbara Johnson has observed, for he who was “verse personified” (OC II, 205) to also die in order for there to emerge the possibility of an alternative to Baudelairean solitude, which is to say of a new form of community destined also to be translated into a new poetical form — precisely that or those invented by the later Mallarmé.

It is necessary to reaffirm, in order to avoid any misunderstanding concerning the Mallarméan “religion” of literature, that this community is destined to remain *virtual*. It has nothing to do either with a return to the people of 1848, to its prophets or its self-proclaimed spokespeople, or with the different versions of romantic socialism or a socialist romanticism that constituted its backdrop. Mallarmé perfectly understood the lesson: there is no possible return to a configuration anterior to the Baudelairean denunciation. How, then, or with what, can a community be made when one is Mallarmé, someone so familiar with nothingness, unbelief

and the death of God? How can impersonality and community be conjugated? Of what is a community made if there are no subjects to constitute it? There remains language, given to and shared by all; there remain the twenty-four letters of the (French) alphabet and their infinite combinations, which lead, according to Mallarmé, to the Book, to a total book attempted by all, albeit unwittingly.<sup>30</sup> Beyond the Baudelairean destruction, there is community, there is meaning. These are almost the same thing since there is only meaning if meaning is transmissible, shared, if it exists for more than one, if there is language. There is some community, even if it is unaware of itself, even if it remains *reserved*, secret, virtual, and as a result perfectly compatible with Mallarmé's discreet anarchism, with his indifference at turns amused and contemptuous with respect to any social link, which he considered fundamentally as a fiction (an illusion, a belief).<sup>31</sup>

From this viewpoint, almost the entirety of Mallarmé's œuvre would have to be reread, or at least the quasi-totality of the texts from *Divagations*, in which the conditions of possibility for a community founded on a poetic (rather than a musical, theatrical or religious) ritual are made explicit. This cannot be envisaged here and I will content myself with one or two particularly relevant examples with respect to the inversion of Baudelaire's position. To texts like *Assommons les pauvres*, *Les Yeux des Pauvres*, etc., which denounce the identification of the poet with the poor (with the people, the proletariat, etc.), Mallarmé responds with texts like 'Conflict' and 'Confrontation'. In both cases, it is a question of encounters between the poet and proletarians, and in both cases this encounter remains virtual, impossible to express, mute, whether the workers are "upright", as in the first example, or sleeping like a "blind herd" after their working day, as in the second example:

My look pressed limpidly on his confirms, for the humble believer in these riches, a certain deference, oh! how a mute handshake makes itself felt — since the best that happens between two people always escapes them as interlocutors (*Confrontation*, D 278).

Constellations begin to shine: I wish that, in the darkness that covers the blind herd, there could also be points of light, eternalizing a thought, despite the sealed eyes that never understood it — for the fact, for exactitude, for it to be said (D 46).<sup>32</sup>

The best — the common thought — escapes the interlocutors, and by the same stroke the community escapes them. It is the role of poetry to provide despite everything a place for this community, or more precisely to designate such a place, to avow its existence, not in order to effect a return to religion, to belief and to identification, but "for the fact, for exactitude, for it to be said". This expression links up with the famous "I imagine, following an unextractable and no doubt writerly prejudice, that nothing will remain without being proffered" (D 209-210). Thus is programmed the reversal of an entire problematic — a romantic problematic, even if it continues to resonate until Sartre and beyond — of transmission and of the "engagement" of the writer. In order for there to be engagement, there must be a subject, com-

munication, and even an Other — God, the people, the proletariat, etc. — in whose name the poet speaks: a tradition or, if one prefers, an inheritance that Mallarmé declines, not with a Baudelairean passion for sacrifice, but by commenting on it in its entirety with an ironic “we can always pretend”. Let us insist upon the following point: the Mallarméan reversal of the Hugolian position is not thinkable without the preliminary traversal of Baudelairean negativity. It is because he integrated, indeed swallowed, Baudelaire melancholically that Mallarmé is finally ready, in 1885, to untie himself from Hugo, as well as from any form of “engaged”<sup>33</sup> literature. As if to finally do “justice” to the poet who, as a lost child, died too soon, twenty years before his senior (Hugo), over whom he will only triumph posthumously.



It is in ‘Crisis of Verse’, one of his most decisive texts, that Mallarmé evokes Hugo, for reasons that are only indirectly linked to what we have just seen. Here it is a question of verse, of the difference between verse and prose, and therefore of the identity of the poetic, which is said to have broken at the death of Hugo, the veritable incarnation of poetry, at least in France:

Verse, I think, respectfully waited until the giant who identified it with his tenacious and firm blacksmith’s hand came to be missing, in order to, itself, break. All of language, measured by meter, recovering therein its vitality, escapes, broken down into thousands of simple elements (D 202).

With Hugo gone, verse “breaks” and free verse comes to be. But we know that Mallarmé never practiced free verse, that for him it was not the central issue, even if he pays tribute to its advent, notably in ‘Crisis of Verse’. What is truly at stake is specified in the response to an inquiry by Jules Huret on literary evolution:

Verse is everywhere in language where there is rhythm, everywhere, except in posters and on the fourth page of newspapers. In the genre called prose, there are verses, sometimes admirable ones, of all rhythms. But in truth, there is no prose: there is the alphabet and then more or less tight verses: more or less diffuse. Every time there is an effort towards style, there is versification (OC II, 698).

Mallarmé displaces the debate. The question is not that of knowing whether the small transgressions of the alexandrine by the adepts of free verse are tolerable or not. They are, of course; it is not Mallarmé who should be asked to bring order to this crisis of verse. But his position consists above all in accentuating and in radicalizing this crisis so as to transform it into a crisis of the *identity of poetry*, which is only timidly announced by free verse. By affirming that “verse is everywhere in language where there is rhythm”, Mallarmé makes impossible any simple identification of poetry, any assignation of a form to poetry, whether it be institutional or not. Verse is everywhere in language, and by the same stroke it is nowhere, or more precisely it is nowhere for *certain*. There is verse in prose, even in newspapers, and

inversely perhaps not all alexandrines are real verses. It is a question of the eyes, of the ear, and for whoever has neither one nor the other, of *belief*, but there is now no more official form susceptible to support it. The crisis of the identity of the poetic is also, ultimately, a crisis of the belief in poetry.<sup>34</sup>

“Verse is everywhere in language”: it is not only a question of a theoretical affirmation, but also of one of the keys allowing us to understand the diversity of literary “genres” practiced by Mallarmé from 1885 — a diversity prophesied, incidentally, by the very important stage of *La Dernière Mode* (1874): poems in verse, but also in prose, as well as the “critical poems” that make up the *Divagations*, the very numerous circumstantial texts (*Dons, Loisirs de la Poste, Eventails, Tombeaux*, etc.), of which a certain number count amongst the most difficult of Mallarmé’s texts, articles, conferences, reports, translations, without forgetting the *Coup de dés*, or the never-published fragments of the “Book”. In a discrete but systematic fashion, Mallarmé anticipates the great undermining of official artistic forms by the avant-gardes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>35</sup> This is an often unremarked paradox: he who has for a long time been made the champion of a “pure” conception of poetry, which would arise only from what he himself qualified as “essential speech”, is also he who would have done the most to *shuffle the cards*, to subvert the identity of poetry, notably by producing multiple supposedly minor writings. Yes, there no doubt exists an “essential speech” in Mallarmé, but clever is he who can say where to find it, since it is true that the essential endlessly takes on the allure of the circumstantial.

Just as there is at the heart of Mallarmé’s poetics an operation of the suspension of meaning, we can also speak in his case of a *disidentification* of the poetic — or, to use a less barbarous term and to render homage to Barbara Johnson, a *defiguration* of poetic language.<sup>36</sup> This leads us back once more to Baudelaire, since what is most essential in Barbara Johnson’s book is devoted to him, and for good reason. For the great defigurator, he who opened the path of disidentification followed by Mallarmé, is precisely Baudelaire and in particular the Baudelaire of the *Spleen de Paris*, whose denunciation of the “lyrical” contract thus finds its equivalent at the level of form. As a literary form — and this is also the entire point of a form in lockstep with modernity — *Le Spleen de Paris* implies a destitution, a loss of poetry’s aura (or halo); or, to propose a more barbarous term, a prosaification of poetry, perceptible notably in the prose version of the poems from the *Flowers of Evil* (*Invitation au Voyage, la Chevelure*). Numerous critics, who are unconditional adepts of the *Flowers of Evil*, have not failed to reproach these texts for their unpoetic, or, to speak frankly, prosaic character: Baudelaire is no longer what he was; he is no longer at his height. It is thus that the entire critical operation carried out by Baudelaire on the lyrical configuration is often occulted, indeed repressed, in favour of a Baudelaire who incarnates “true” poetry — a bitter or ironic victory over Hugo. As for Mallarmé, it is not only certain that he perceived perfectly well the scope of the Baudelairean defiguration, but also that his own strategy, above all in his “critical poems”, engages with that of Baudelaire. From *Spleen de Paris* to *Divagations*, there plays out the entirety of the *critical* adventure of French poetry, that is, of what is

also just as much a reversal of its religious underpinnings. Later on, this will not always be well understood. There are often inheritances that are lost.<sup>37</sup>



Let us begin again, one last time, at a more biographical level. The Baudelairean heritage is toxic: less than any other, Baudelaire was never at home, he could never have been; he was perpetually in forward flight so as to escape his debts, both symbolic and financial.<sup>38</sup> Note his problems with property, from his endlessly abandoned hotel rooms to the maternal house at Honfleur, which was in the process of collapsing. After him, how can one occupy a place, how can one inherit from Baudelaire, from he who swallowed and spent his inheritance in a few months, who destroyed himself as an heir before being placed under supervision by the “family counsel” for the rest of his days? Baudelaire’s œuvre is written in the guilt and jubilation of an inheritance refused, squandered. It is also this destruction, an accident of transmission that, in a word, he transmits to Mallarmé, intoxicated as he is from his youth onwards; but time will be needed in order for him to realize it, or to bring this inheritance to fruition. This is what happens with the inheritances of revenants: they incubate for a certain time.

In any case, the predispositions are not lacking in Mallarmé. Recall here that everything in his world is made in order that families and inheritances collapse. His mother disappears when he is five years old, his father remarries and loses interest in him, entrusts him to his grand-parents, who send him to boarding school. At age fifteen he loses Maria, his child, his sister, and at age thirty he loses his son Anatole. Geneviève, his daughter, remains, and she devotes herself almost exclusively to her father and will never herself have children: a definitively interrupted descendance, a short circuit. Certainly, none of this is truly uncommon in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it must be admitted that in order to inherit or to transmit a heritage, we haven’t gotten off to a good start. In short, there is nothing surprising if we find, at the other end, at the moment where the chasm of his chest becomes a spasm and grips his entire body, those words hastily scribbled by a Mallarmé close to death, words addressed to his wife and his daughter and which concern notably the fragments of his famous *Book*, the impossible total book that he did not cease to tout: “The terrible spasm of asphyxiation suffered just now can recur during the night and prevail over me. Thus do not be surprised that I think of the demi-centennial heap of notes, which will become only a great embarrassment to you; because not a page therein can be of use. I alone could draw from it what it contains... I would have done had the final absconded years not betrayed me. Burn, therefore: there is no literary heritage there, my poor children. Do not even submit it to anyone for appraisal; and forbid all inquisitiveness and friendly meddling. Say that nothing there would be distinguished, it is true anyway, and, you, my poor prostrates, the only beings in the world capable at this point of respecting an entire life of a sincere artist, believe that it was to be very beautiful”.

Believe that it was to be very beautiful. Because it was not? Because they were worth nothing, those fragments of the *Book* published formerly by Jacques Scherer, which have fascinated generations of researchers? But what precisely were they searching for? Was it only time that he lacked to leave a total work, an absolute heritage in the face of which one could only submit for all eternity? We could consider, as many have done, that here there was an inheritance that would finally give their full meaning to now-completed works. Or on the contrary we can think that absence of an inheritance left by Mallarmé retrospectively destines his published works to the same uncertainty: are they fragments of nothing, or of something? Are they beautiful? Would they have been beautiful? Believe it, or not.

#### Notes

1. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*. Translated by Barbara Johnson (Cambridge/Massachusetts/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007) p. 49 (D). All the citations from Mallarmé will refer to this edition, unless noted otherwise. *Volumes on My Divan* does not appear in the edition of 1945, Henri Mondor, ed., (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1945). Let us also note that in 1888, Mallarmé is correcting the proofs of a new edition of the ensemble of *Literary Symphony*, which will be abandoned as such in favour, one might say, of *Long Ago, in the Margins of a Copy of Baudelaire*. Banville and Gautier are thus scrapped.
2. See in particular the preamble to *Literary Symphony*, which evokes the three “masters”: “Modern muse of Impotence, who has long prohibited me the familiar treasure of Rhythms, and who condemns me (pleasant torture) to do nothing more than reread — until the days where you will have enveloped me in your irremediable net, ennui, and everything will then be finished — the inaccessible masters whose beauty makes me despair; my enemy and yet my enchantress of malicious potions and melancholy drunkenness, I dedicate to you, as a taunt or — I know it — as a token of love, these few lines of my life written during clement hours during which you will not have inspired in me a hatred of creation and a sterile love of nothingness’ (OC II, 281). Let us also note that numerous commentators of *Literary Symphony* have not failed to point out the imitative, indeed plagiaristic, character of this text: in 1865 — and this is the other side of “impotence” — the relation of Mallarmé to Baudelaire is still a relation of appropriation, even if it is not reducible to it.
3. Recall that Mallarmé’s œuvre is indissociable from a problematic of *place*, and thus of staging or performance, which determines its value as a (potentially) religious ritual. See on this point Mary Shaw, *Performance in the Texts of Mallarmé. The Passage from Art to Ritual* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993). See also Diana Schiau-Botea’s recent doctoral thesis *Le texte et le lieu du spectacle de La Plume au Mur. Stéphane Mallarmé parmi les avant-gardes*, thèse de doctorat (Rutgers University — Paris III) (2010); and of course Bertrand Marchal, *La Religion de Mallarmé: poésie, mythologie et religion* (Paris: Corti, 1985).
4. *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry* (New York/Oxford: 1973, Oxford University Press).
5. The excessive nature of the praise, and thus its fundamental ambivalence, is more evident still in the parts of *Literary Symphony* devoted to Banville and Gautier who, in any

case, play a less important role than Baudelaire in the history of the ‘influences’ undergone by Mallarmé. In terms of influence, an essential difference seems to reside in the fact that from the point that Mallarmé truly becomes Mallarmé — in the second half of the 1860s precisely — the works of Banville and Gauthier will cease to be at work in Mallarmé, in contrast to Baudelaire, whose heritage is in some sense infinite and never-ending.

6. *Correspondance. Lettres sur la poésie*, éd. Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 1995) coll. ‘Folio’, p. 346.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 177. To be precise, it would be necessary to speak of a *reported* silence: the reading in fact took place in the salon of Baudelaire’s cousin, without Mallarmé being there.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 286.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 246.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 368.

12. On the basis of the thesis of ambivalence, we can also note the fact that Mallarmé refused to preside over a banquet that *La Plume* organized in 1893 in memory of Baudelaire, before announcing, almost at the last moment, as if he were ravished by the idea, that he would all the same write a text for this circumstance: *Le Tombeau de Charles Baudelaire*, a poem which we know has left many readers and commentators perplexed, as if it were not fully-formed, or as if there were something in the relation of Mallarmé to Baudelaire that was not clear.

13. *Correspondance. Lettres sur la poésie, op.cit.*, p. 297.

14. *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, Mas: Harvard University Press 1990), pp. 63-86.

15. In 1863, Mallarmé writes the following to Cazalis in criticism of the “simplicities” of Emmanuel Des Essarts: “He confuses too often the Ideal with the Real. The stupidity of a modern was to write that ‘Action was not the sister of Dream’ — Emmanuel is one of those who regrets this” (*Correspondance. Lettres sur la poésie, op. cit.*, p. 143). The modern poet evoked here is Baudelaire, who expresses this regret in *Le Reniement de Saint-Pierre* with respect to the “betrayal” of Christ by God. In other words: Mallarmé does not follow Baudelaire at the point where he criticizes God on the basis of a position of identification with a Christ who is come to *save the world* and who has been betrayed. Radical melancholy, which is assumed as such, with neither renunciation nor revolt being possible: Mallarmé will always be resolutely on the side of what he calls ‘restricted action’, which is to say theatre.

16. It is not necessary to venture very far into Mallarmé’s work to realize this, since the poem placed as an introduction to *Poésies*, entitled *Salut*, opens with an evocation of a shipwreck: “Rien, cette écume, vierge vers / A ne désigner que la coupe/ telle loin se noie une troupe / de sirènes maintes à l’envers” (OC, I, 4). On this poem, see the exhaustive reading by Lucette Finas, in *Le Bruit d’Iris*, Paris, 1979, Librairie des Méridiens-Klincksieck, p. 44-48. The *Salut* dossier benefits by being completed by the poem *À la nue accablante tu* (see equally Vincent Kaufmann, *op. cit.*, p. 103-109), the two poems taken together constitute what inspired Jacques Rancière in choosing the title of his important book on Mallarmé: *La Politique de la sirène* (Paris: Hachette, 1996).

17. See Vincent Kaufmann, *Le Livre et ses adresses*, *op.cit.*; Marian Zwerling Sugano, *The Poetics of the Occasion. Mallarmé and the Poetry of Circumstance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).
18. *Correspondance. Lettres sur la poésie*, *op.cit.*, pp. 342-343.
19. Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1974).
20. On the religious foundations of lyrical poetry in France, see the unsurpassable works of Paul Bénichou: *Le Sacre de l'écrivain* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1973); *Le Temps des prophètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977); *L'École du désenchantement*, (Paris, Gallimard, 1992); *Selon Mallarmé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).
21. Jérôme Thélot, *Violence et poésie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).
22. Pierre Pachet, *Le premier venu. Essai sur la politique baudelairienne* (Paris: 1976, Denoël).
23. *Défigurations du langage poétique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980).
24. Mallarmé, *Correspondance. Lettres sur la poésie*, *op.cit.*, p. 299.
25. Mallarmé, *The Poems in Verse. Translation and Notes by Peter Manson* (Ohio: Miami University Press, 2012) p. 171.
26. *Ibid.*
27. See Dolf Oehler, *Le Spleen contre l'oubli. Baudelaire, Flaubert, Heine, Herzen* (Paris: Éditions Payot & Rivages, 1988) Payot; as well as Ross Chambers, *Mélancolie et opposition: les débuts du modernisme en France* (Paris: José Corti, 1987).
28. *La Solitude, Oeuvres Complètes*, éd. Le Dantec et Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1961) p. 264.
29. Roger Kempf, *Dandies* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1977).
30. In *Music and Letters*, it is precisely language which now appears as the place of the poetic, as the equivalent of what Mallarmé used to think of in terms of the homeland. The alphabet provides the poet, "our civilized inhabitant of Eden", with "a doctrine as well as a country" (D 186).
31. See also Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica Ficta (Figures de Wagner)* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1991). The analyses of Lacoue-Labarthe, which bears in particular upon the relation of Baudelaire and Mallarmé to Wagner, an unsurpassable exponent at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century of a problematic of the community "produced" by art (or by art returning to religion), confirm the hypothesis affirmed here, namely that the passage from Baudelaire to Mallarmé plays out the question of the abandonment of the subject in favour of a virtual form of community, a hypothesis with which both Jacques Rancière (*La Politique de la Sirène*, *op. cit.*) and Alain Badiou (*Théorie du sujet* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1982), p. 116, *sq*) agree.
32. On *Conflit*, see also Vincent Kaufmann, 'De l'interlocution à l'adresse (la réception selon Mallarmé)', *Poétique* 46, 1981, pp. 171-182.
33. Engaged literature, about which it cannot be repeated enough that was not invented by Sartre, constitutes notably the target of Mallarmé in *L'Action restreinte* (OC II, 214-218).



34. In other terms, the responses to the question “what is poetry?” will always arise, from our historical point of view, which is at once post-Baudelairean and post-Mallarméan, from an effect of belief. Poetry is everything that we believe it is, its “particularity is to escape ontological categories”. Daniel Oster has shown this in *Passages de Zénon*, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1983).

35. This point is documented in a convincing fashion by Diana Schiau-Botea, *Le texte et le lieu du spectacle de La Plume au Mur. Stéphane Mallarmé parmi les avant-gardes*, *op. cit.*

36. *Op. cit.*

37. I am thinking here notably of the Surrealist movement, which would have represented in the history of French poetry a restoration of the rights of the subject and of expression. There is nothing surprising if this restoration occurs via (1) a relative indifference to the Baudelaire of the *Spleen de Paris*; (2) an even more obvious indifference to Mallarmé, who the Surrealists don't quite know what to do with; (3) an immense misunderstanding of the two other great post-Baudelairean “disfigurers” of French poetry, namely Rimbaud and Ducasse-Lautréamont, to whom the Surrealists will give a mythical dimension by forcefully re-injecting, one is tempted to say, some subjectivity into them<sup>3</sup>, a lyrical consistency, neither of which are at stake in Rimbaud or in Lautréamont.

38. Vincent Kaufmann, *L'Equivoque épistolaire* (Paris: Minuit, 1990), p.55 sq.