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Robert Greer Cohn

MALLARMÉ'S PROSE POEMS

A CRITICAL STUDY

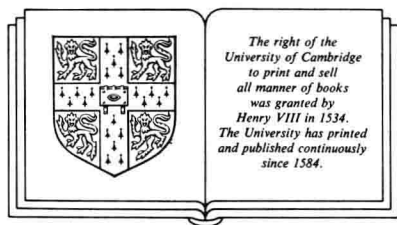


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A CRITICAL STUDY

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NOTE

Numbers without other indication refer to the Pléiade edition of the *Œuvres complètes*.

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INTRODUCTION

Poetry and prose are an immemorial pair, endlessly quarreling and making up like a couple of Beckett characters; one tends to be tall and intense, the other rather broad and on-babbling, parallel to metaphor and metonymy (but not limited to them) as well as sexual dialectic. They are inclined to cross, like the sexes, in all sorts of ways, at times producing highly “individuated” – i.e. with strong representation of both poles – results, textually. Though I use the term “poles”, as they are traditionally and relaxedly used, it should be patent from the introduction of the current coinage of “metaphor” and “metonymy” that the crossing is more accurately seen as dimensional.

In “A Poetry Prose Cross,”¹ along with some distinguished colleagues, I try to show how this seminal strand of our psychic evolution develops into the modern prose poem beginning, for convenience, with Aloysius Bertrand and his *Gaspard de la Nuit*, during the Romantic period (1842). The next big step is Baudelaire’s *Spleen de Paris* (1869); its preface pays full homage to Bertrand. Mallarmé, whose major efforts in this genre run from his early twenties (1864) until his death, is another noteworthy phase; he too honors Bertrand as well as Baudelaire.

How important are these works? Not much attention has been paid to them, but, upon re-reading them after a lifetime devoted to studying Mallarmé, I find them persistently exhilarating. Mallarmé is such a rarely and rawly *authentic* writer, even in these pieces which he called self-deprecatingly – though ambiguously – “Pages oubliées” and “Anecdotes ou Poèmes.” But he spoke that way about most of his writings, including the *Poésies*, which he called “exercices,” “comme on essaie les becs de sa plume,” and he referred to his critical volume as “Divagations.” Baudelaire before him had treated his experiments in the genre very casually, particularly in the preface, where his remarks are at times jocular, even frivolous. As Henri Peyre rightly insists – in opposition to

those who, like Philippe Soupault, see them as high points of Baudelairean art – the texts are a very mixed bag. Sometimes the injection of anecdotal, relaxed – at times point-scoring and vindictive – prose produces flat and dull fare. But the reverse can and does happen: the challenge of making the ordinary into magic sometimes results in a dialectical progression. Understatement, in the form of conversation with Laforgue, Eliot, Pound; realism, generally with the impressionists and their literary contemporaries; science (in naturalism) – all can, in the right hands on the right days, “take off” into something refreshing, daring, superior. The *heurté* aspect of imagery alluded to in the preface and the cobblestones and wrinkled cheeks found in the texts, represent a sort of metonymy, a jumbled variety, as well as a broad and tolerant perspective of flowing charity to the Other, along this newly-emphasized horizontal of the imaginative mind, and the dirt-grooved modern metropolis, Eliot keenly observes, is in Baudelaire occasionally raised to “poetry of the first intensity.”

The city,² in this sense, is the constant background of Mallarmé's prose poems. Moreover, given the epistemological cross of dimensions, we should not be surprised that, at the surface of these texts, as so often in Bertrand and Baudelaire – notably, the latter's masterly *Les Fenêtres* – in the imagery, there should appear windows or something like them. This, as we shall see, is almost always the case with Mallarmé. And along this challenging new way, he usually surpasses his forbears in density and intimacy.

This brings us to a trendy and touchy critical point: were Baudelaire and Mallarmé, as various Young Turks would have it, “deconstructing” poetry and Romantic subjectivism, burning what they had adored? Not really: rather, they were trying out a challenging manoeuvre in an attempt to *raise* poetry and prose to a higher synthesis. It is a risky enterprise, and sometimes they fail. It does not matter, incidentally, whether you see poetry as enhancing prose or the reverse – both ways have resulted in classics as well as flops – but the patent fact is that these symbolists were artists, poets, visionaries first and last and that only some form of tiredness could make them seem to be giving up on what often seemed more precious than life to them. Mauron convincingly shows, for example,³ that Baudelaire was ailing, ageing, crochety and miserable when he wrote some of the meaner pieces of *Spleen de Paris* (as well as *Pauvre Belgique*), but as I try to clarify in a recent essay,⁴ the very texts that the deconstructionists cite to make their sceptical case demonstrate, on a closer reading, the very opposite. Rather, it

Introduction

is a sort of Byzantine critical fatigue, an unwillingness to renew the fertile mainstream of our tradition, that explains these easy, arriviste putesches (cf. the excessive fuss made over the *fragment* in our time).

In his final masterpiece, *Un Coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard*, Mallarmé, like Proust and Joyce, tries for an ultimate crossing of the two ancestral genres and says so in his brief Preface, but the last words of that, confirming our perception, are “la Poésie – unique Source.” There is no real ambiguity there any more than in his “On ne peut se passer d’Eden.” The work is entitled proudly “Poème” (the better-known line quoted above is a sub-title).

Mallarmé’s prose poems, in brief, are, together with the *poésies* (and, naturally, in terms of genre, complementary to them) very much on the way to his fullest artistic vision and, accordingly, though they complicate and challenge poetry, never forsake it: at their best, it is rather the contrary case. Although the scale is greatly different, *mutatis mutandis*, the situation is like that of Proust, whose vast novel is admired most of all for its poetry by many, notably Mauriac.

In the special case of *Le Démon de l’Analogie*, which I put first in my study for that reason, an enormous amount of his developing insights and obsessions have been packed into one short text, which has fascinated and puzzled readers for a century. It is indeed only by opening up its meaning along a large number of divergent lines through Mallarmé’s intensely evolving and crystallizing artistic universe that we can begin to understand what it is saying.

After that, I treat the others in order as he presented them.⁵ There is an early group consisting of the first six, written and published around his twenty-second year (1864), an intermediate one (1875), and a later group of six, which appeared in his forties and fifties, during the Paris years, after 1885. These are usually more complex, consonant with his difficult later manner, but none the less very readable particularly with the help of a few tips, which I endeavor to provide. They are *exquisite* difficulties, in a rich sense of that word, affording rare, subtle, sophisticated aesthetic delight, often akin to the vibrant, fluvial tone of his impressionist friends (a clear example being Monet, in the case of *Le Nénuphar blanc*).

Whatever else I have to say about these texts will be found in the individual chapters. I do not deal much with biographical facts except insofar as they shed some direct light on a given work. Some scholarly indications will be found in endnotes and appendices. But my main purpose is to comment on these prose poems in the terms

Mallarmé's Prose Poems

which I have made familiar to those of Mallarmé's readers who have looked into my studies over many years, since I began writing on him in 1940. My assumption is that anyone interested in these pieces is likely to know the important facts about the poet's life and career; it becomes wearisome to rehearse them in book after book. Besides, the scholarly ground has been prepared in an excellent study – the only complete one on the subject – by Ursula Franklin.⁶ I refer to her often and am grateful to her researches and insights. Suzanne Bernard, in her earlier, comprehensive comment on the hybrid genre, *Le Poème en prose de Baudelaire jusqu'à nos jours*, made valuable contributions as well, specifically in her chapter on Mallarmé. She was a first-rank critic, and one feels her loss keenly.

Three graduate students – Raymond Bach, Alisa Klein, Nancy Ruttenberg – deserve my appreciation in particular. We egged one another on in reading these often demanding texts together, and when they said bright things, like a greedy old magpie I helped myself, jewelled my own little nest.

1

LE DÉMON DE L'ANALOGIE



Le Démon de l'Analogie

Des paroles inconnues chantèrent-elles sur vos lèvres, lambeaux maudits d'une phrase absurde?

Je sortis de mon appartement avec la sensation propre d'une aile glissant sur les cordes d'un instrument, traînante et légère, que remplaça une voix prononçant les mots sur un ton descendant: "La Pénultième est morte," de façon que

La Pénultième

finit le vers et

Est morte

se détacha de la suspension

fatidique plus inutilement en le vide de signification. Je fis des pas dans la rue et reconnus en le son *nul* la corde tendue de l'instrument de musique, qui était oublié et que le glorieux Souvenir certainement venait de visiter de son aile ou d'une palme et, le doigt sur l'artifice du mystère, je souris et implorai de vœux intellectuels une spéculation différente. La phrase revint, virtuelle, dégagee d'une chute antérieure de plume ou de rameau, dorénavant à travers la voix entendue, jusqu'à ce qu'enfin elle s'articula seule, vivant de sa personnalité. J'allais (ne me contentant plus d'une perception) la lisant en fin de vers, et, une fois, comme un essai, l'adaptant à mon parler; bientôt la prononçant avec un silence après "Pénultième" dans lequel je trouvais une pénible jouissance: "La Pénultième" puis la corde de l'instrument, si tendue en l'oubli sur le son *nul*, cassait sans doute et j'ajoutais en manière d'oraison: "Est morte." Je ne discontinuai pas de tenter un retour à des pensées de prédilection, alléguant, pour me calmer, que, certes, pénultième est le terme du lexique qui signifie l'avant-dernière syllabe des vocables, et son apparition, le reste mal abjuré d'un labeur de linguistique par lequel quotidiennement sanglote de s'interrompre ma noble faculté poétique: la sonorité même et l'air

de mensonge assumé par la hâte de la facile affirmation étaient une cause de tourment. Harcelé, je résolu de laisser les mots de triste nature errer eux-mêmes sur ma bouche, et j'allai murmurant avec l'intonation susceptible de condoléance: "La Pénultième est morte, elle est morte, bien morte, la désespérée Pénultième," croyant par là satisfaire l'inquiétude, et non sans le secret espoir de l'ensevelir en l'amplification de la psalmodie quand, effroi! – d'une magie aisément déductible et nerveuse – je sentis que j'avais, ma main réfléchie par un vitrage de boutique y faisant le geste d'une caresse qui descend sur quelque chose, la voix même (la première, qui indubitablement avait été l'unique).

Mais où s'installe l'irrécusable intervention du surnaturel, et le commencement de l'angoisse sous laquelle agonise mon esprit naguère seigneur c'est quand je vis, levant les yeux, dans la rue des antiquaires instinctivement suivie, que j'étais devant la boutique d'un luthier vendeur de vieux instruments pendus au mur, et, à terre, des palmes jaunes et les ailes enfouies en l'ombre, d'oiseaux anciens. Je m'enfuis, bizarre, personne condamnée à porter probablement le deuil de l'explicable Pénultième. ❧



The Demon of Analogy

Did unknown words [ever] sing on your lips, damned shreds of an absurd phrase?

I left my apartment with the particular feeling of a wing, gliding over the strings of an instrument, languid and light, which was replaced by a voice pronouncing with a descending intonation the words: "The Penultimate is dead," so that

The Penultimate

ended the line and

Is dead

detached itself from the fateful suspension more uselessly in the void of meaning. I took some steps in the street and recognized in the sound *nul* the taut string of the musical instrument which had been forgotten and which glorious Memory had certainly just touched with its wing or a palm branch and, my finger on the mystery's artifice, I smiled and implored a different speculation with intellectual wishes. The phrase, virtual, released from a previous fall of a feather or a branch came back henceforth heard through the voice, until finally it articulated itself alone, living through its own personality. I went along (no longer satisfied with a perception) reading it at the end of a line of verse,

Le Démon de l'Analogie

and, once, as though testing it, adapting it to my speech; soon pronouncing it with a silence after "Penultimate" in which I found a painful pleasure: "The Penultimate" then the instrument's string, so stretched in forgetfulness over the sound *nul*, probably broke and I added in the style of a prayer: "Is dead." I did not cease to attempt to return to thoughts of my predilection, alleging, to calm myself, that, surely, penultimate is the lexical term signifying the next-to-last syllable of utterances, and its appearance could be explained as the poorly renounced remains of linguistic labors on account of which my noble poetic faculty daily weeps to be broken off: the very sonority and the appearance of falsehood assumed by the haste of the facile affirmation were a cause of torment. Harried, I resolved to let the words of sad nature wander of their own accord over my lips, and I walked murmuring with an intonation susceptible of expressing condolence: "The Penultimate is dead, she is dead, dead indeed, the desperate Penultimate," believing thus to satisfy my anxiety, and not without the secret hope of burying it in the chant's amplification when, horror! – by an easily deductible and nervous magic – I felt that I had, my hands being reflected by a shop window there making the gesture of a caress coming down on something, the very voice (the first, which had undoubtedly been the only one).

But the moment at which the irrefutable intervention of the supernatural sets in, and the beginning of the anguish, under which my mind, not long ago lord and master, agonizes, that was when I saw, raising my eyes, in the street of the antique dealers which I had instinctively taken, that I was in front of a lute maker's shop, a vendor of old musical instruments hung on the wall, and, on the ground, some yellow palms and ancient birds, their wings hidden in shadow. I fled, a queer person probably condemned to wear mourning for the inexplicable Penultimate. ❧

Le Démon de l'Analogie is an early work, one of a group of prose poems Mallarmé wrote around 1864, and, accordingly, its difficulties are not those of his daunting later manner. Indeed, it *seems* to be straightforward, elegant and not very poetic prose. None the less it is a fascinating enigma, still needing exploration. The best commentary to date is by Ursula Franklin in her *Anatomy of Poesis: The Prose Poems of Stéphane Mallarmé*.¹ Here I will gratefully draw on her work and try to round out the investigation along the lines of my previous work on the poet.

The title was originally *La Pénultième*, referring to the unfam-

thomable protagonist-phrase, "La Pénultième est morte," which haunts the poet's mind and around which crystallizes a proliferation of images that seem to attract each other powerfully but never come into focus. Though at the end of the piece they correspond in an eerie way with some objective reality which the narrator encounters in a sort of shock of recognition, this does not amount to understanding. That crystallizing process is the gist of the piece, its narrative development and *raison d'être*. It shows how Mallarmé's mind works, developing a poetic reality through the gravitation of words and images intertwined; as he put it in *Crise de vers*, "[le] poète cède l'initiative aux mots" (p. 366).²

In an interview towards the end of his life, Mallarmé claimed that he "had no separate ideas." That is of course an exaggeration, but it was probably truer of him than of anyone we can well think of. In any case, this distinct tendency gives a remarkable unity to his whole *œuvre* (as well as the final ambitious *Œuvre*), and *Le Démon de l'Analogie* is very much a part of that total picture, as we shall see. In these terms the reason for the definitive title (appearing in *Divagations* in 1897) is patent.

In her excellent study, Ursula Franklin quotes Camille Mauclair's *Princes de l'esprit*:³

... une faculté personnelle qu'il possédait à un degré incroyable: celle de l'analogie. Stéphane Mallarmé eut le sens des analogies développé jusqu'à stupéfier quiconque parlait avec lui ... Il concevait si nativement et avec une si grande force la plénitude indéfinie de l'univers, qu'à son esprit rien ne se présentait isolément, et que tout était système de signes cohérents et solidaires.

These things are well known to Mallarmé readers, and we need not dwell on them. Naturally, the coherence of which Mauclair speaks did not come about all at once – we are certainly aware of his numerous tentative moves, tackings, gropings, throughout his creative years – and in *Le Démon de l'Analogie* we are left "on our hunger." But with hindsight, drawing on the challenging synthesis of the *Coup de Dés* and much that leads up to it – *Igitur*, the denser *Poésies*, various jottings – we can see just how directly his musings in this instance were on the main track of his universal understanding, the "hymne ... des relations entre tout" (p. 378). We can see how his very earliest writings and obsessions are involved in this central evolution.⁴

The title seems to reflect Poe's *The Imp of the Perverse* (which Baudelaire translated as *Le Démon de la Perversité*), and there is a

Le Démon de l'Analogie

Poe-like tone of detective coolness in the narration of a part-playful, blood-curdling mystery and shocking outcome. There are more important echoes of Poe which we will talk about later.

The piece opens: “Des paroles inconnues chantèrent-elles sur vos lèvres, lambeaux maudits d’une phrase absurde?” This is direct and unproblematic, on the surface. Experienced Mallarméans may be pardoned for suspecting some undertones in the *inconnues* when we think of that other elusive feminine presence in *Le Nénuphar blanc*, “l’inconnue à saluer,” and we are aware of the rich undercurrent of eroticism in that masterly prose poem,⁵ playing on the elements *nue* and *con* (and the Biblical *connaître*) – *nue* is a favorite ambiguity in many a poem of his (“cloud” or “naked woman”). The feminity is determined here by the gender of *paroles*, but it fits with the overall tone set by the original title, *La Pénultième*, which is a definitely feminine presence (capitalized, personalized), especially taken with the accompanying “est morte” (“la Pénultième est morte, elle est morte, bien morte, la désespérée Pénultième”). But the most important echo here is the *aile(s)* in *elles*, which goes back to some revealing juvenilia, e.g. *Sa Fosse est fermée*, in which a dead girl is evoked:

Car, comme la mouette, aux flots qu’elle a rasés
Jette un écho joyeux, une *plume* de l’aile
Elle donna partout un doux *souvenir* d’elle [my italics]

The echoed *aile* will arise in the very next sentence of *Le Démon*. All this is alive already with his budding universe and the meaning of our prose poem. The girl-spirit revenant – Mallarmé’s beloved dead sister Maria is certainly also involved, as she is in *Plainte d’automne* and much of his poetry altogether – is like a muse descending as a *souvenir* from her other-worldly sphere, angelically, with plumed wing, in a maternally protective and caressing mood reflected in the imagery here (as in much of the juvenilia):

Anges à la robe d’azur
... De vos ailes couvrez ce joyeux sanctuaire
(*Cantate pour la première communion*)

Also:

Que sous ton aile encore il aille au Dieu ...
qu’un ange dans ses rêves
Passe, essuyant de l’aile une larme en son œil
(*La Prière d’une mère*)