

STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ

## THE AFTERNOON OF A FAUN

Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) was born in Paris, France. He earned a teaching certificate in London in 1863 and worked as a teacher in Tournon (1863), Besançon (1866), Avignon (1867), and Paris (1871). His most well-known poem, “L’Après-midi d’un faune,” was published as a book in 1876 and included in the collection *Poésies* (Poems, 1887). It inspired several musical compositions, including Claude Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* (Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun, 1894) and Maurice Ravel’s *Trois poèmes de Mallarmé* (Three Poems by Mallarmé, 1913). The first English translation was published in Aldous Huxley’s collection *The Defeat of Youth and Other Poems* (1918), and the following translation by Hope H. Glidden and Elisabeth Young-Bruehl was published in the spring 1984 issue. As Michael Bishop notes in an essay in the winter 1982 issue, the poem reflects Mallarmé’s “increasingly radical originality,” which “even now is perhaps not at all well understood.”

These nymphs I would make last.

So rare

Their rose lightness arches in the air,

Torpid with tufted sleep.

I loved: a dream?

My doubt, thick with ancient night, it seems

Drawn up in subtle branches, ah, that leave

The true trees, proof that I alone have heaved

For triumph in the roses’ ideal folds.

Look, perhaps . . .

are the women which you told  
 Ones your mythic wishing-sense has schemed?  
 Faun, the illusion, when the fountains teemed,  
 Fled her cold, blue eyes—she untouched.  
 But the second, full of sighs, say you how much  
 Like a hot day's breath she thrilled your fleece?  
 If not? Through this still, slack-flesh peace  
 That would, if heated, choke the fresh morning,  
 No stream goes but that my flute is pouring,  
 Over assent-sprayed groves; the solo breeze  
 —Agile from my double pipe—it is eased:  
 To shower down the sound in arid rain  
 And then, on the unrippled world-plane,  
 Be breath—visible, serene, man-sent—  
 Of inspiration, lodged in firmament.

O you Sicilian marshes with your calm edges  
 That my vanity, to the sun's envy, ravages,  
 Quiet under these flower flashes, let me RENDER:  
 “That I cut here the hollow reeds I master,  
 While on golden veils the greens nearby  
 Their traces, to the fountains, inscribed,  
 Like wavelets, now, of still animal white;  
 And that in slow prelude to birth of pipes  
 These arching swans, no! naiads, up turned  
 Or plunged . . .”

Inert, all in fulvous hour burned  
 But of the art of their escape, nothing wrote.  
 Too much hymen he wished, who sought their note.  
 Next I will awake to that first appetite,  
 Upright, alone, under antique waves of light,  
 Lillies! and you one who spell my artlessness.  
 More than the lip's secret, sweet nothingness  
 —That kiss, soft, assures of falsities—  
 My breast, virgin of proof, attests for me  
 Strange teeth of some mouth, majestic;

But cease! Choose such sounds for secrets  
 As the spacious twins you play, azure-bent,  
 —Your own cheek's uneasiness indent;  
 Dream, in long solo, how we might amuse  
 The beautiful environing to err, confuse  
 Herself and our song, so readily believed;  
 And make, as far up as love can key,  
 A distillate of accustomed schemes  
 Of back, pure flank, sealed eyes' after-dream,  
 A single, sheer, and so sonorous line.

Strive, then, escapist instrument, malign  
 Syrinx, to bloom again, where you wait!  
 I, proud of my rumour, still confabulate  
 Of goddesses; and by my words of worship  
 Undress their shadows of imagined vests:  
 As when I've sucked the vines of clearness,  
 To shun regret with sham unloneliness,  
 And, laughing, lifted up the empty grapes,  
 Blown their luminous skins; thirsting, gaped  
 In longing, down to the penetrable dusk.

O nymphs, we diverse MEMORIES instruct.  
 "My eyes, piercing the reeds, downed each neck,  
 Immortal, which plunged, fires in the lake,  
 With a cry up of rage to the forest sky;  
 And the brilliant bath of their hair lies  
 Under the shimmer and thrill, o gems!  
 I run; when at my feet they are fastened  
 (Being two have tasted bruising languor)  
 These sleepers, asleep in arms of danger;  
 These I seize and steal, still enlaced,  
 To this thicket, by fickle shade unloved,  
 Of roses, all sucked of scent by sun,  
 Where trysts must fade, like day, undone."  
 I adore you, virgins' ire, you fierce goad  
 Slipping down some sacred, naked load,

To flee my lip aflame, like a full lash  
 Of lightening, this secret dread of flesh;  
 From the cruel one's feet to the timid's heart,  
 In this time, their innocences depart,  
 With wild tears and some less saddened mists.  
 "My crime is that gaily I divided this  
 Ruffled complex—conquered then the traitoress  
 Fears—of kisses that gods kept well enmeshed;  
 For scarcely could I hide my ardent smile  
 In the happy folds of my one (I whiled  
 With my finger this unblushing nymph, nai-  
 Eve, until her plume's openness had dyed  
 the flutter of her sister with gleaming eyes:),  
 Out of my arms, untwined by vague demise,  
 This thankless prey went free, without pity  
 for the sob that, still, intoxicates me."

Ah, so, toward happiness I will be borne  
 By others' hair-leashes hooking in my horns:  
 Know! My passion, that purple and just mature  
 Each fruit bomb bursts and is a full bee-lure;  
 And our blood, heated by the one it warms,  
 Flows for all of desire's eternal swarm.  
 Any time this wood is hued like gold or coal,  
 A feast erupts in the stark tree-folds:  
 Etna! Here it is that your Venus sets  
 On lava-flesh her artless, quick footsteps;  
 When the flame dies in sad sleep's roll  
 I hold the queen!

Penalty sure . . .

No, but soul

Of words void and with body overfraught  
 Sinks at last to noon's so proud naught:  
 No more; come sleep, of blasphemy oblivious,  
 On these dry sands will I love, and lie thus  
 To give my mouth the wine's strong star-fame.  
 Both, farewell! I wait the shade that you became.