

Introduction: Mallarmé of Our Times

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The centenary of Stéphane Mallarmé's death will fall five years from now in 1998, and so the appearance of a special issue devoted to the poet's modernity, almost a hundred years after he died, might seem paradoxical. Yet for Mallarmé, modernity is precisely an epoch that escapes historical definition. Contemporaneous with a renewed understanding of the power of art over society, modernity helps inaugurate the end of time (understood as a set of dates within which human acts are contained and constrained). This is not because literature, as envisaged by Mallarmé, is a body of ageless verities, or a collection of literary figures that are detached from the vicissitudes of history. Instead, it is a form of writing whose effectiveness lies in its ability to change the way that its users define themselves, and hence in its capacity to *transform* their lives. "Je crois que la Littérature, reprise à sa source, qui est l'Art et la Science, nous fournira un Théâtre," declared Mallarmé in an 1891 interview with Jules Huret. He went on to characterize the dramas that would be played out in this personified theater as being "le vrai culte moderne, un Livre, explication de l'homme, suffisante à nos plus beaux rêves."¹

The present issue of *Dalhousie French Studies* explores the relevance of this far-reaching insight for contemporary theory. Mallarmé's work is, in fact, doubly relevant. For on the one hand, Mallarmé was one of the first writers to define poetry as an action that is entirely propelled by the goal of theorizing its own practice; on the other hand, he was also one of the earliest theorists to attack the hold that *reportage* exerts over our day-to-day living. Mallarmé *is* the theorist of our times, in every sense that this statement has. The following articles suggest that there are three such senses, depending on the value that one ascribes to the preposition "of," and which one could paraphrase as: "Mallarmé *from* our times," "Mallarmé *for* our times," or "Mallarmé *to* our future."

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1. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, eds. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1945) 875-76. Further references to this volume will be contained in the body of the text and preceded by the initials *OC* with the page number following. An important study of Mallarmé's comments on an impending end to time, as it is usually conceived, is Mary Shaw's "Turning Around the Century: Modernism's Ends," forthcoming in *Le tournant du siècle: actes du colloque d'Anvers*. Other discussions of the question can be found in Bertrand Marchal's *La religion de Mallarmé* (Paris: José Corti, 1988), and in the introduction by François Cornilliat and Mary Shaw to the edited volume of *essays Rhétoriques fin de siècle* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1992) 7-24.

I

First, "theorist of our times" translates the awkward anachronism that arises with many of Mallarmé's works. His writings come from another time, the France of the 1860s to 1880s and yet they have come into their own ("tels qu'en eux-mêmes," so to speak) only in our time, and in particular since 1950. As Jean-Jacques Thomas demonstrates in his essay below, Mallarmé remained either little read or else generally criticized by his immediate posterity. Most of his readers today consider him to be a poet of the 20th century—a habit reinforced by the tendency to include his works in university courses on 20th, rather than 19th, century literature. Vincent Kaufmann has suggested an appealing explanation for this time-warp in his book *Le Livre et ses adresses*.² For if, as Professor Kaufmann suggests, Mallarmé's poems stage nothing but the circuit of performative address, and stage it, moreover, so that the reader can stand back and observe this circuit (pp. 8, 12, 27), then his texts are peculiarly modern. They constitute a model for meaning construed as spectacle (contemporary advertising, or political discourse being other obvious examples), and, more importantly, they also map out the first steps towards an effective replacement of this model.

Mallarmé is also the theorist of our times for a more obvious reason: his pronouncements have been axiomatized by modern critical theory. One need only think, in this regard, of his advice to Degas that sonnets are made not with ideas but with words, or his claim in "Crise de vers" that the ideal poet "cède l'initiative aux mots" (*OC* 366), in order to realize that Mallarmé is one of ours. The "we" here may be Charles Mauron, searching for a hidden psychic life within words, Maurice Blanchot speculating on the meaning of an ideal book yet to come, Julia Kristeva examining a liberated life of sounds, or Barbara Johnson writing about the position of mothering that is entailed by the contradictory gesture of "leaving the initiative" to one's offspring, be they children or texts.³ The gesture is contradictory since "a mother's self-effacement is never done," as Johnson points out (p. 140). Consequently, although Mallarmé may have mothered modern textual criticism and given it the authority to follow "words' own initiative," that very giving is parental, which means that "la disparition élocutoire du poète" (*OC* 366) is never quite achieved, or that textual criticism carries within its inaugural gift a trace of its own parent. As Professor Kaufmann points out, Mallarmé's writing (especially in his correspondence) "fait fonctionner un 'effet-père,' auquel la possibilité de l'impersonnalité semble

2. Vincent Kaufmann, *Le Livre et ses adresses* (Mallarmé, Ponge, Valéry, Blanchot) (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1986).

3. Charles Mauron, *Mallarmé, Écrivains de toujours* (Paris: Seuil, 1964); Maurice Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959); Julia Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique: l'avant-garde à la fin du 19^e siècle—Lautréamont et Mallarmé*, Tel Quel (Paris: Seuil, 1974); Barbara Johnson, "Mallarmé as Mother," in *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1987) 137-43.

intimement liée."⁴ Or, as Jean-Jacques Thomas once said laconically, "Mallarmé."

We use Mallarmé but are never quite sure if instead we are being used by him. For when textual criticism seeks approval in Mallarmé for its own development, it is actually mirroring the justification that Mallarmé sought for his own illocutionary disappearance through words. Parents come to ground their own acts by ascribing their significance to their children, and vice versa. I'll argue shortly that this is something more than a family drama.

II

For an obvious reason, Mallarmé is the theorist for our times. He theorized the ravages of *reportage* even before the latter took over every aspect of modern life. His attack on the economy of meaning-consumption, which consists of "échanger la pensée humaine, de prendre ou de mettre dans la main d'autrui en silence une pièce de monnaie" (*OC* 368), has become a haunting premonition for modern technological existence where everything from soap to a Middle Eastern war is reduced to the illusion of fact-transmission.

As Evyln Gould demonstrates in the opening essay, Mallarmé sketches a way out of the impasse of consumption in his theory of *l'action restreinte*, whereby the act of writing connects its reader to action—though not a completed act (which would be *l'action non restreinte*, or *l'action totale*), but instead potential action. This action, which is a performance done by the reader and which points the latter into the future, triggers off a "spectacle," to use Professor Gould's term. Moreover, as Mary Shaw points out, such an open-ended form of spectacle sucks the crowd into the performative structures of its disappearing and reappearing act. The spectacle embraces the world of *le journalier* (as both Professor Shaw and Jean-Jacques Thomas underscore), but in such a strong embrace that *le reportage* is turned inside out, with the result that what seemed to be anti-literary turns out to be that most highly artistic of objects, Mallarmé's planned yet never completed *Livre*.⁵ In short, *la chose mallarméenne* is the whole of the real, as Sydney Lévy reminds us, a real that cannot be theorized in terms of image or simulacra.

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4. Vincent Kaufmann, *L'équivoque épistolaire*, Critique (Paris: Minuit, 1990) 95.
 5. In his book *Un fantôme dans le kiosque: Mallarmé et l'esthétique du quotidien* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), Roger Dragonetti explores in detail the ways in which Mallarmé's apparently most prosaic writings, such as *La dernière mode* and his correspondence, constitute a fragment of *Le Livre*, whose completion the poet left up to others. Cf. the 1885 letter to Verlaine, in *OC* 663: "je réussirai peut-être non pas à faire cet ouvrage dans son ensemble (il faudrait être je ne sais qui pour cela!) mais à en montrer un fragment d'exécuté [...] en indiquant le reste tout entier auquel ne suffit pas une vie." See Dragonetti pp. 26, 40, 41 and *passim*.

III

Insofar as Mallarmé has given us a way of theorizing the times in which we ourselves are living, he has also shown that theory cannot justify itself by merely copying its object of study in detail, or, in other words, by explaining the modern world back on to itself. Theory always unearths the internal tensions in its object, it reveals the damages of *reportage*, for instance, or the shortcomings of certain literary topoi (for example, lyric fervor metaphorized as wine, women and song, and which is replaced, as Marshall Olds demonstrates, by the performative fervor of public utterance in Mallarmé's sonnet "Salut"). As a result, theory and the kinds of performative poetry that Mallarmé wrote point us, as readers, forever forward into our own future. It is a "theory without end," as Malcolm Bowie characterizes Lacan's writing.⁶

The Mallarmé legacy cannot therefore be a gift in the sense of an object, a hidden meaning, or a revered secret that would be handed down to future readers and theorists. Instead, like any legacy, it is an imperative to act, as well as a gesture that enables its recipients to do so. It is a freeing up of the spaces in which action, in the strongest sense of that word, becomes possible. Quite simply it is the gift of life—which is why Mallarmé and his contemporary readers often seemed to be involved in a family drama, if not a family feud (as in *Pour un tombeau d'Anatole*). This life is not, however, genetic, generational, or even historical; it seems to me to be ethical, an important word put forward by Vincent Kaufmann in his essay below. The ethical is any activity which bends back on itself in order to define its own impulse. In Mallarmé's case, the impulse is good action, deeds which both justify themselves and set the standard for our engagements with the real. One model for this reciprocity of *donnant donnant* is given by the fans that Dennis Minahen has analyzed, and which Mallarmé gave to certain women in order to stage an imaginary gift of love in reply.

Another model for the power of legacy, or of a giving that resonates far beyond the gift given, is Mallarmé's poem "Don du poème," where what is given, as Marshall Olds points out, is *not* a poem but an aborted child, which figuratively calls out to the reader to lend his or her own voice to the text, and thus replace failure by enactment. As in most of Mallarmé's later works, the call to readers to make up the constative deficiencies of the written word with their own performative force ("un instrument [...] dédi[é] à la Langue," *OC* 363), is a call for the reader to *act through words*, rather than let herself be fooled by the tyranny of *reportage* into thinking that we can only be acted upon by language. Mallarmé's legacy is therefore a "don du *poiein*," where *poiein* takes on its full etymological meaning of a doing, or a making through words that constantly redefines everything in life. This doing is consequently both a self-making and a making possible of others' joy. It is what Malcolm Bowie calls "a self-generation that takes place in the hands of the other."

All of the essays that follow live up to this ethical imperative. For they all demonstrate, in different ways, that to characterize Mallarmé's writings as

6. Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1991) 158.

hermetic, or as enclosing some arcane truth about the world, is wrong. Instead of statements *about* something, his works are first and foremost forceful, with their force taking on the forms of parody or disappearing tricks, of lyricism or didactic attacks. Such forcefulness comes directly from the new ways in which writing was able to theorize itself under Mallarmé's pen.

Each essay in turn widens the scope of Mallarmé's theorizing, so that we move from the positions taken by the poet on the literary questions of his day, up to the lessons drawn later—by dadaists and psychoanalysts, by Jakobson and Ponge. **Evlyn Gould** opens our debate by situating Mallarmé's comments on *le drame* within the longstanding opposition between public theater and intellectual drama that traversed Romanticism. Professor Gould shows that Mallarmé's blending of high and low drama dissolves the opposition and paves the way for an analysis of modern culture as spectacle. **Marshall Olds** dissects Mallarmé's changing attitude to music from the 1870s to the 1890s, and concludes that the poet was able to give music its due once he had recast lyricism as a public phenomenon. The third article, by **Dennis Minahen**, is a detailed examination of Mallarmé's poems inscribed on paper fans. Being the very symbol of symbols, a hand-held fan engages its bystanders, according to Professor Minahen, in the enactment of performance art. **Jean-Jacques Thomas** continues the examination of Mallarmé's circumstantial writings by turning to the poet's attempts at journalism. He demonstrates, among other things, that the famous Mallarmeian gesture of self-erasure is part and parcel of a journalistic style. In her meticulous yet refreshingly candid interpretation of certain passages from *Le Livre*, **Mary Shaw** dispels the myth that this work is the epitome of high art, detached from daily concerns. On the contrary, its links to popular stage-show performances are essential, and they prefigure, as Professor Shaw amply proves, the irreverent spectacles of dada, as well as the contemporary parodies of post-modernism. Professor Shaw's argument is also an important corrective for all of us who often read too far into Mallarmé the abstruse arguments of contemporary literary theory. **Vincent Kaufmann** and **Malcolm Bowie** then go on to explore the resonances between Mallarmé and Lacan. Professor Kaufmann examines the way in which both writers mythified their life through complex structures of writing. In Lacan's case, writing was always directed towards a virtuoso spoken performance by the author, whereas in Mallarmé's the author's power of address was made to disappear behind the illocutionary effects that he had on his readers. **Malcolm Bowie** provides a detailed study of this mythification in his reading of "Prose (pour des Esseintes)" and a parallel extract from Lacan. **Sydney Lévy** closes our volume by examining the importance of Mallarmé for one of France's major poets of the 20th century, Francis Ponge. As Professor Lévy demonstrates, from Mallarmé to Ponge a poet's obsession with the sky (*l'azur*) is the locus for a new type of writing that bends back upon itself. Instead of a lesson in hermeticism, this bending-back allows writers to approximate the density of real objects within their works, and thus engage the reader of poetry within the everyday world.

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