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“An Aquatic Reverie” | Mallarmé’s Writing on Water and the Naming of Waves

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Abstract: At his home outside Paris, in Valvin, Stéphane Mallarmé spent much time on his small boat dreamily sailing upon the Seine, seeing this body of flowing water as a site for inspiration and inscription. Indeed, Mallarmé once confided to a friend, "I no longer write a poem without an aquatic reverie running through it," and that, for him, poetry was like an "oar stroke," and the sail, a "white page." When Mallarmé was invited to lecture at Oxford University in 1894, he did not speak specifically of time spent on the water, his life on the Seine, but his own pronouncements on poetic form and function seem inspired by his own aquatic reveries about surfaces and depths, transparency and opacity, and of those fluid spaces of the imagination that can be approached but not penetrated, of liquid impressions seen but not solidified. In my essay, I discuss Mallarmé's seminal Oxford lecture and the manner in which his time on the water, his reveries floating upon its surface, offer a way into his poetic pronouncements, as well as into a poetry that remains to this day rich in mystery, power, and enduring inspiration. The essay concludes with a discussion of my own "Writing on Water" art and poetry installation, in 2017, at Oxford University, a project presented in conjunction with the conference "Power of the Word | The Prophetic Word" where I delivered a variation of the essay that follows.[1]

Keywords: Stéphane Mallarmé, modern poetry and poetics, image, mirage, water

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"I honor the river, which swallows up in its waters whole days—yet days that don't seem wasted or lost, or surrendered by any aura of guilt. I'm a simple passer-by in my little mahogany boat; I'm a furious sailor, proud of his fleet."

—Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898)

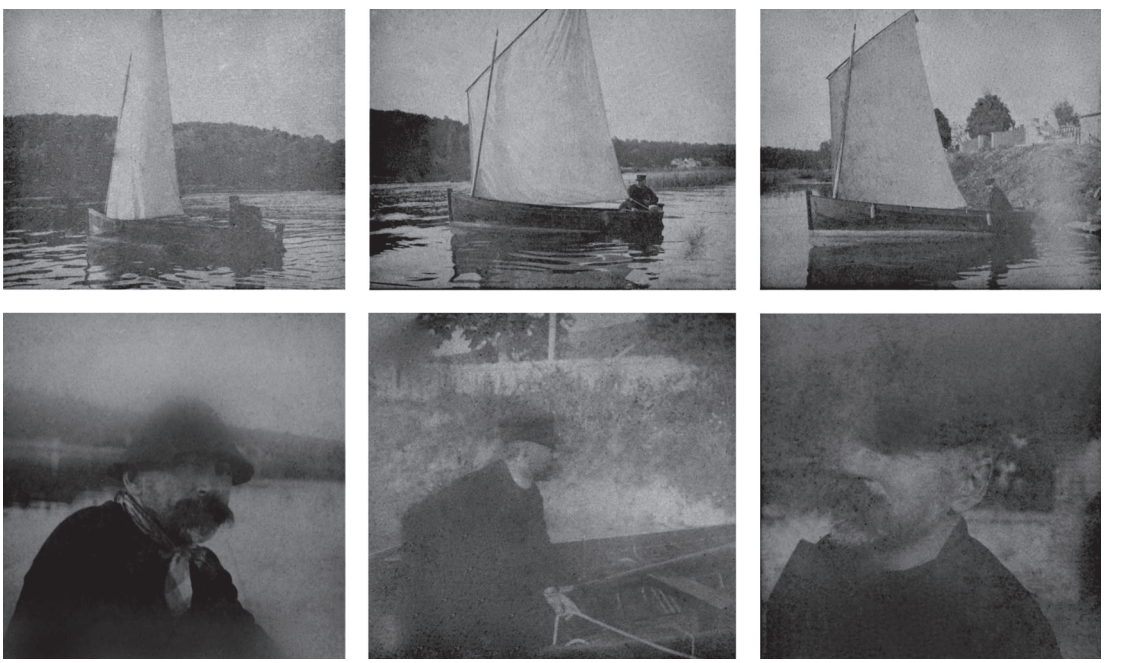
Scene One

In Mallarmé's prose-poem "The White Water Lily," a man rowing on a narrow stream one "hot, bright July" is in search of water plants, "exploring a property that belonged to" a woman he did not know—"the friend of a friend," he says—when, unexpectedly, he hears a sound from the shore, a rustling in the reeds, something or someone unseen nearby. Hidden, the source of this sound instantly

evokes vivid images of that unknown woman—"her entire lustral self"—inciting myriad impressions and desires from what's described as the "vague intimacy" of the scene, "in the arrest above the water where [his] dream suspends the hesitant one." In the heat and light of this moment, a picture instantly develops, discrete details emerge, an apparition arises in the afternoon air.

However, instead of then approaching closer to the woman, introducing himself, seeing her more completely (assuming it *was* the woman, that "friend of a friend"), the boater—"silently, rowing gently"—turns the boat around, leaving the scene of the incitement, its mystery unbroken as, what he calls, an "exquisite vacancy," that "ineffable face that [he] will always not know."

"Apart, we are together," the boater tells himself of the secret encounter, "the absence enclosed in this solitude," like a closed water lily that "spring[s] up all of a sudden," or a mirage on the horizon "made of intact dreams, of the happiness that didn't take place" (Mallarmé, *Poetry and Prose* 65-67).



Scene Two

Mallarmé once confided to a friend, "I no longer write a poem without an aquatic reverie running through it," and that, for him, writing poetry was like an "oar stroke," with the sail a "white page" (Bloch and McClatchy 19). At his country home outside Paris, in Valvins, the poet often spent whole days on his "little mahogany boat," his time swallowed up dreamily, guiltlessly, as he sailed upon the Seine. In a series of remarkable photographs taken in 1896, two years prior to his death (photographs attributed to Julie Manet,[2] the niece of Mallarmé's great friend, the painter Édouard Manet), Mallarmé is indeed seen in this boat—maneuvering its sails, adjusting its lines—floating upon the river. There, in the sepia-colored images (rendered above in black-and-white), the poet drifts upon

the river's gleaming surface, upon its reflecting depths. From that watery vantage—with the azure sky above, the verdant trees and hills on the horizon, the poet alone in the boat . . . each translated monochromatically into a sepiad haze, or veil—the known world is mirrored upon the river's unmoving waves; there, the photographed water reads like a pool of lacquered ink, reminding us in its reflections of that which remains unseen and uninhabitable below, separated and silent above.

While these photographs have faded over time, Mallarmé can still be seen within them, as each decaying image endures as a kind of luminous mirage, with the poet gazing still out of the photographs and onto the photographer, and, through time, onto us. Typically, a mirage—quivering in the heat and light of day—manifests an image of glistening water conjured in the distance, an optical illusion that, upon approach, vanishes into the larger landscape, into nothing at all. However, with these photographs, we are offered—as if allowed into a moment of Mallarmé's own "aquatic reverie"—something (*not* nothing, not *yet* nothing) even more strange and uncanny. For these images indeed resemble a mirage, an impossibly stabilized mirage, and the motionless poet sitting like a simulacrum within them, where the illusory waters of that distant, decayed moment have magically, materially endured. But how has this happened . . . time stopped, waters stilled, light captured? What are we seeing here?

Might these photographs, these images of Mallarmé floating mirage-like upon the water, offer us now a means or a metaphor for thinking about the poet's own radical uses of language, and of words as images hovering on the horizon, like a white water lily on the surface of a pond or a page? In his essay "The Mystery in Letters," Mallarmé speaks in such metaphorical terms of a word as a kind of mirage, a translucent and transient image simultaneously perceived as appearing and disappearing, the word, as he describes it, like "a fog, a precious cloud floating over the intimate abyss of each thought" (*Divagations* 233). Mallarmé goes on to speak of "Language," like light, "playing" on the page, and of a writing that "plung[es] deep, . . . getting out of the water, glistening and dripping . . . ," and of "Words, [that] all by themselves, light each other up . . . the center of vibratory suspense" (234-235).

The theorist Georges Poulet reinforces the "vibratory" image of such a mirage, the "precious cloud" in Mallarmé's poetry, further bringing to mind the fading photographs of the poet out in his boat. Poulet writes, "Mallarméan poetry takes on the aspect of a mirage . . . situated and contemplated at a distance, this thing and this indefinable place, [as] neither an object nor an external world; it is the very being of him who contemplates. A mirage in which one perceives himself on the horizon, not as he is, not where he is, but precisely as he is not and where he is not" (237-238). Mallarmé, the photographed poet, is likewise seen, faintly seen, within the mirage of the image, the image of the mirage, there and not there—"as he is not and where he is not"—like a poem of his own seen "on the horizon," as words written on water. The poet, the poem—the image of each fluidly converging—form in the liquid light, as Poulet concludes, " . . . a mirage, in which nothing is joined to anything, in which all distance subsists, in which the supreme principle of the separation of realities is safeguarded. Transcendence will thus not be degraded by any movement to bring the two worlds together" (240-241).

As with the boater in his poem "The White Water Lily" who, in the end, turns his boat around, leaving the scene of his dream, its apparitional mystery intact as an "exquisite vacancy," Mallarmé acknowledges and accepts the spatial separations and the ephemeral durations—time's site-specific interventions—and, consequently, the absence of enduring presence, the appearance of disappearance, a "nothing . . . joined to anything" (Poulet 241). Neither degrading transcendence by presupposing it

(jumping toward a singular chimerical conclusion), nor dispelling the distances by wishing them away (leaping between faraway worlds), Mallarmé's poetry no longer, as Poulet concludes, "distinguishes anything except a *phantom*, a reflection of self that is more or less translucent, less and less discernible . . . no longer any image" (256).

"Apart, we are together," Mallarmé's boater realized in "The White Water Lily," and only with sufficient distance is the phantasmatic form conjured, the mirage maintained. For to approach too close is to cause the desired object to vanish, to evaporate into the surrounding atmosphere—like a fading photograph, seen as it etymologically is, as a writing with light, a writing on water.

Scene Three

In 1894, at roughly the same period as the photographs of the poet in his boat, Mallarmé was invited to lecture at Oxford University, "inaugurating," as Mallarmé notes, "a series of foreign lecturers, whose job was to communicate to its members the state of literary affairs" (*Divagations* 181). Mallarmé, known by this time as one of France's most important if obscure poets, delivered a talk titled "Music and Letters" in which he does not speak specifically of time spent on the water, his life on the Seine. Still, his own bold pronouncements on poetic form and function, on the musicality of language—or as he insists in his talk "the musicality of everything" (185)—seem often inspired by his time on the water, his own aquatic reveries. For he presents, in his lecture, a rich Mallarméan poetics of surfaces and depths, of transparency and opacity, and of those fluid spaces of the imagination that can be approached but not penetrated, of liquid impressions seen but not solidified, of mirages manifested momentarily in the material word . . . the material world. The word as such becomes what Mallarmé describes as a "magnificent supplement" which, in its application, assures that, as he explains, "the forces of life won't remain totally blind to their own splendor" (189).

Stéphane Mallarmé, ca.1890, by Paul Nadar

Mallarmé memorably begins his Oxford lecture with the prophetic, dramatic assertion, "I do indeed bring news. The most surprising kind. Such a thing has not been seen before. Verse has been tampered with" (*Divagations* 183). He goes on to describe the nature of this tampering—this *touché au vers*—placing it in the classical French context of the alexandrine tradition only recently loosened by developments, in part, in the prose-poem, primarily in the work of Baudelaire. Such innovations led directly to what Mallarmé then describes as a "separation" from that tradition and what he characterizes as the resulting "lucky discovery" of "free verse," free in the sense of opening onto a

poetry of what he speaks of, in musical terms, as "individual modulation," where, he further notes, "every soul is a rhythmic tangle" (183-184).

At this point in his Oxford lecture, though, Mallarmé abruptly interrupts himself, as if troubled by the pedantic nature of his talk thus far, asking his audience directly: "Should I stop there? Or why do I get the feeling I've come here about a vaster subject, perhaps unknown even to me?" Shifting gears, he then proceeds, indicating that this "vaster subject" is, as he well knows, about more than what he calls "renovations of rituals and rhymes," and that this tampering with tradition, this wresting of verse from its inherited form, has caused the very act of writing to be, as he says, "scrutinized down to its origins," and subsequently for the most radical of questions to be asked, "Does something like Literature exist?" (185).

Suddenly, that earlier romantic embrace of "individual modulation" and of the "rhythmic tangle" of "every soul" is understood to have an entangling cost. And this cost has clearly contributed to, or caused, the most fundamental of uncertainties in which the poet, while freely gaining his "lucky" access to prosodic language, has apparently un-luckily lost something of the structural and conceptual confidence in why he writes at all. Mallarmé goes on to describe the dispiriting consequences of a language cast so adrift . . . so alone, as if riding in Rimbaud's own drunken boat upon wide-open waters; its words alienated to such a degree from themselves that they no longer belong to the one speaking them, revealing, as literary theorist Barbara Johnson notes, "the unreliability of language as a conveyor of anything other than the functioning of its own structure" (Feuerstein et al. 32). The words, now separated from the things they name, are indeed exposed as ephemeral vibrations in the air, or as waves upon water, structurally, syntactically empty of enduring form and content, "evoking" what Mallarmé himself describes as "an internal mirage created by the words themselves" (*Letters* 86). Caught in that soul's rhythmic tangle, the sound and sense of words no longer divinely aligned, that once-vaunted voice comes back to the poet haunted, but by nothing at all, an echo returned weakly to its speaker, Mallarmé writes, "in turmoil, as a sneer" (*Divagations* 185).

In a related essay titled "Crisis of Verse," Mallarmé attributes language's failings in large part to its very variety, its multiplicity, stating that "Languages imperfect insofar as they are many; the absolute one is lacking . . . the diversity, on earth, of idioms prevents anyone from proffering words that would otherwise be . . . the material truth" (205). And yet, instead of despairing at the thought of such a loss, such a lack of an "absolute" language, the poet doubles-down on this discovery, embracing its alienations, its separations—that "diversity, on earth, of idioms"—attributing to them the very reason, the *very modern* reason for writing at all. Accepting that there is now no turning back from the babel, from this presciently imagined web of worldwide words, Mallarmé no longer seeks a singular "supreme" language that would "materially" express "truth" (as if to *let there be light* . . . and . . . *there be light*!), what Barbara Johnson describes as an imagined "virtual language . . . perfectly in tune with itself." After all, with the cat out of the bag, the apple already eaten, the poet has come to the startling realization, an awakening of sorts, that, if this "pure" language existed, as Johnson notes, "verse itself would not exist, because verse consists of compensating for the failings of language" (Mallarmé, *Divagations* 300).

For Mallarmé, it is precisely that failure of a word to say what it means, to mean what it says—to align soundly and enduringly with its material source, "light" *as* light, "water" *as* water—that creates poetry's new attunements; indeed, from this new "musicality of everything," a music of multiplicities emerges out of the dissonance of diverse and conflicting idioms, like Mallarmé's words "floating,"

as if written upon the waves, "over the intimate abyss of each thought." The poet goes on to insist that, "lured on by nothingness," this awareness of language as an atmospheric event, an ephemeral mirage, functions still, but fleetingly, contingently, as "a way of taking note . . . hatching, inside us . . . observations and correspondences . . . endow[ed] with splendor, through vacant space, for as many solitary festivals as we wish" (186-187).

Indeed, Mallarmé presents this lack or limit in language as a radical, even revolutionary, opportunity in which "anyone with his individual game and ear can compose an instrument, as soon as he breathes" (204); or as he declared at his Oxford lecture, "you don't need abstruse theoretical considerations, you just tear off a blank white page and…start writing" (191). This new form of verse, born of, or liberated by, language's failure is now—like it or not—opened and exposed to all, while aligning conceptually and politically with Mallarmé's own characterization of the beloved painting of his time, French Impressionism, as "a democratic art for a democratic age" (Thomson 237); the poet, the painter, are now newly empowered, and, as he wrote of that moment and movement, "the multitude demands to see with its own eyes" (Mallarmé, "The Impressionists" 11).

Scene Four

Mallarmé's "way of taking note," seeing with *his* own eyes, as spoken of so evocatively, so impressionistically, in his seminal Oxford lecture—with that opening onto "observations and correspondences" such that, as he poignantly noted, "the forces of life won't remain totally blind to their own splendor"—points to a renewed focus onto this world, a world in kaleidoscopic motion. Here, the "scattered quiverings" (*Divagations* 187) of ephemeral detail, those fleeting "aspects" of events are, as he notes in an early poem, "charged not with mere visions but with sight," a prosaic perception, again positioned as if alongside water, as if seen from an island, as if, Mallarmé wrote, "every flower [were] spread out enlarged / at no word that we could recite" (*Collected* 21-24).

The philosopher Jacques Rancière writes of such a vision-less seeing, of a perception without models of blinding preconception, stating that, for Mallarmé, "In place of models to copy, there are, scattered in this dust, aspects to grasp; that is, not the forms of things, but events, the snapshot of world events which are present in every ordinary spectacle on the condition of *noticing* them" (11). Such "noticing" of the "ordinary" is not intended, though, to stabilize and clarify the world, but instead to deliberately destabilize it, to muddy its waters, to inscribe opacity onto the drifting scene, mystery into each moment, seeing the always transforming points of view, in time, as a vanishing act, a "snapshot of . . . events" appearing in the movement of their own disappearing . . . our own disappearing, our own mystery.

With writing now, as Mallarmé described, "scrutinized down to its origins" and reading "as a desperate practice" (*Divagations* 186), there is offered in place of a wish-fulfilling transparency and clarity, or Poulet's "degraded" transcendence, a newly musicated means of marking, of re-marking, the dissonance, the distance—darkness above and below, inside and out. "Silently, rowing gently" away from the shore and into the intimacy of this absence, "in the hope," Mallarmé concludes, "of mirroring oneself in it" (*Divagations* 188), one body of water reflects another, both of them, translucent and transient, "bathed in a brand new atmosphere" (211).

Floating on the river, photographed upon the stilled surface of the Seine, our "furious sailor" in his mahogany boat fades into a sepiad haze, his sepiad words written on water, seen upon a mirroring surface that, at any moment, threatens to dissolve into nothing at all, swallowing them up, the poet and his poem suspended, effervescent, hovering like a mirage in the heat of the horizon.

All Installation Photos by Carolyn Brass

Scene Five, an Addendum:

In the fall of 2017, at Oxford University, I delivered a paper at the international conference "Power of the Word | The Prophetic Word." In conjunction with my lecture presentation—four scenes from the life and poetry Stéphane Mallarmé—I was also invited to create a "writing on water" art and poetry installation on a pond adjacent to the Lazenbee's Ground Walk in the Oxford University Park. For over a dozen years, I have been designing and making such installations at locations around the world, and I was especially pleased to work on a project at Oxford University, the very site where, in 1894, Mallarmé delivered his important lecture "Music and Letters."

In thinking about Mallarmé's own "aquatic reveries," his time spent sailing on the water, and those remarkable 1896 photographs attributed to Julie Manet of the poet in his boat, I was delighted to have the opportunity to create an aquatic reverie of my own on this picturesque Oxford pond. For here was a body of water upon which I could attempt to materially manifest and shape something of Mallarmé's own vivid description of language as an ephemeral image, as "an internal mirage created by the words themselves" (*Letters* 86). And so, prompted by the poet's own thoughts, his own reveries of language, I was determined to transport those two vital words— MIRAGE | IMAGE —out of the lecture hall and into the nearby park. Positioned to mirror each other on the water, each word would then spell out something of its own inscribed evanescence, floating like white water lilies on the reflecting surface, as a kind of mirage inside of an image, an image inside of a mirage, appearing and disappearing in the vanishing act of language.

Later, with the installation completed, those two luminous words remained on the water for several days, while visitors to the park walked alongside them, reading in motion, seeing in time, moving in the light of their own momentary presence. While others, alone or in pairs, sat on the benches adjacent to the pond, looking out onto the surface, perhaps reflecting upon the two words floating before them. Clouds and trees appeared imprinted on the water, a bit of blue sky shone through, ducks swam placidly beside the large letters, as a light breeze blew tiny waves over the words.

Now, two years later, all that endures of the Oxford installation are the fluid memories of those moments, and the many mirage-like photographs of the project—images of a time now past, a site now faraway—a "magnificent supplement" of sorts, as Mallarmé spoke of language itself. And like those fading photographs of the poet sailing on the Seine, in the photographs of my installation, light and language shine still upon the page, shine now upon an absence, as an "exquisite vacancy," like "Words, [that] all by themselves, light each other up . . . the center of vibratory suspense."

More photographs and a short video of the Oxford University installation can be found here:
www.clarklunberry.com/oxford-2017.html

Notes

1. This essay is dedicated to Carolyn Brass and Jefree Shalev, dear friends whose assistance with the Oxford installation (and others as well) was invaluable.
2. Julie Manet, 1878-1966, the daughter of the French Impressionist painter Berthe Morisot and Eugène Manet (the painter Édouard Manet's younger brother), was a painter, model, diarist, art collector, and amateur photographer. Julie Manet would have been 18 years old at the time that this photograph of Mallarmé was taken. In the space of three years, and by the time that she was 16 years old, both of her parents had died, and Julie Manet was subsequently overseen for a period by her legal guardian Stéphane Mallarmé.

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