

David Mus

Should I transliterate...*

Mallarmé ! Est-il présent ?

In approximate English: What power, pressure or prescience brings him, or it, to us here, now? For we have after all been celebrating him, or it, aloud, in English, for some hours. How will he have reached us, prompting transatlantically this collegial celebration, in scholarly concord? What letter of what literality will have been transliterated, through our speech, in what renewal of an original thrust? with what urgency in view?

Mallarmé est-il présent pour celui qui s'efforce encore d'écrire de la poésie en langue française? There is a question I am better placed to raise, better equipped to answer: what does Mallarmé, he or it, matter to someone attempting to carry forward the adventure which was his? Is that adventure still a living premiss prompting a lively endeavour in the language which was his? What use of what words remains a plausible, a cogent, an imperative task?

“But among the varieties of chaos in which we find ourselves immersed today, one is a chaos of language, in which there are discoverable no standards of writing and an increasing indifference to etymology and the history of the use of words.” That was the judgement of T.S. Eliot pronounced in 1944 at the end of a lecture on Samuel Johnson. You will agree, I trust, that since that time the chaos of language has only increased, among the varieties of chaos deepening in their destructive virulence, to threaten whatever remains of a scruple for the use of words. What scrupulous use for what words may still be envisaged?

Here is Mallarmé's judgement on the use of words, in the *boutade* you all know: *Tout, au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre*. Should I transliterate, I would arrive, flatly, with: Everything in the world exists to end up as a book. Or is it: exists *for* ending up *in* a book? I call Mallarmé's judgement a *boutade* – a provocative witticism, a playful aphorism, a *trait d'esprit* of the sort to which he was given – because it hinges on a scarcely translatable equivocation, itself the translation of a paradox, which gives the *boutade* its daring: *existe pour*. Mere existence and sheer finality do not easily consort in our thinking; and we are not clear whether *au monde* be taken here as a limitation or an expansion of the lapidary *tout*. More embarrassing, for the translator, the *pour* may indicate either intended or actual result – “in order to” or else “so that” – a destiny or else a palpable realisation, achieved through the process which the very words before us, in a book, will authenticate – through the instrumentality, otherwise unspecified, of the author whose words we are reading.

Whatever the effect of these conundrums, I warrant, no writer or thinker today would risk such a judgement, even in play. You will say: That is because Mallarmé has made it for us. Eliot would say: That is because the chaos of language does not admit any such

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use of words, and the chaos of thought any such presumption. For my part and for present purposes, I shall take another tack: Mallarmé's judgement is not pertinent to our world, to its existence – only to the thought about the use of words of a man who is by now at a far remove from our own. His use of these words, their very impertinence, may help us measure what sort of presence Mallarmé has for the writer of French today.

Existe...pour...quoi ? For what do I exist, for what pursue the craft of poetry? There is no aim in view, only a vector, direction and velocity conjoined. Écrire me permet d'aller un peu plus vite vers ce qui m'attend. Writing enables me to move a bit faster toward what's ahead. Je fais corps avec ce tout qui existe, je suis au monde; je ne serai pas un livre, aboutir à un livre n'est pas mon dessein. I have no desire to end up as a book. Je n'existe pas pour ce que j'écris. Et le livre, si je parviens à en écrire un, ne peut en aucun cas se dire aboutissement. My use of words, my transliteration of what includes me, will not extract from world that sayable element, or strand, or layer, or essence which, through the writing process, becomes something not existing in just the same way. World *means* what we have found to say in it about it, and more – including the rubble and the wrack I must clear away in order to proceed. My language and world will not be disjoined – not if I can help it. L'écrit me sert seulement de moyen – moyen qui tend sans doute à nombre de buts dont la plupart est ignorée de moi, du moment qu'un livre de ma main tombe entre d'autres mains, sous d'autres yeux qu'en écrivant je ne peux voir. The book, if I end up writing one, will end up in other hands for other ends of which I know next to nothing.

Des livres il en a fait, Stéphane Mallarmé, et rêvait d'en faire un entre tous exemplaire et final, livre unique où toute l'évidence du monde abscons serait filtrée, translittérée, casée et exhibée pour quelques-uns. Et, en ce but, de se retirer vers son âtre méditatif, loin du théâtre des villes, des terres et des cieus, loin de "la pièce, dit-il, écrite au folio du ciel et mimée avec le geste de ses passions par l'homme." Se retirer, dit-il, "au coin du feu, vu que si le vieux secret d'ardeurs et splendeurs qui s'y tord, sous notre fixité, évoque, par la forme éclairée de l'âtre, l'obsession d'un théâtre encore réduit et minuscule au lointain, c'est ici gala intime." This is a passage from *Crayonné au théâtre*. Withdraw, counsels Mallarmé, to the home hearth, there to witness in silence and sanctity the play of the bare, the rich essentials: heat, light, the dance of pure flame – there to contemplate in miniature and in intimacy the world's grandeur. By such withdrawal, we are to understand, is achieved, by a technique closer to a prophylaxis than to an askesis, the *aboutissement* by which all that exists ends up book.

The hygiene of the aesthete, the old stale dualisms of matter and mind, the teleology of the petit-bourgeois, revealed here and in the *boutade* I quoted: that these were solid underpinnings of Mallarmé's thought seems to me confirmed by another phrase from *Crayonné au théâtre*, which concedes them as if they were commonplaces: "La scène est le foyer évident de plaisirs pris en commun, aussi et tout bien réfléchi, la majestueuse ouverture sur le mystère dont on est au monde pour envisager la grandeur." Here again: *on est au monde pour*. Mallarmé's withdrawal – the resulting abstruseness, the lofty rigor of his thought and language – is what most sets him apart, at a painful remove, from present undertakings. But if the underpinnings were conventional, what he built on them was not. Here was that excessively rare bird, a man bent on thinking things through for himself. Few have thought more closely about words' use, their origin but also their destiny. The small miracle is that he has given us anything to grasp at and hang onto besides his singularity.

Recent readings have tried to show, in various ways, a reassuring congruence with

undertakings we know well. Withdrawal will have been determined, for example, by nostalgia for an Edenesque plenitude of unquestioning, unconceptualized experience – for a home and a hearth, replenished by poetry, which is anything but a contemplative reduction, a theater of essences, where the world accomplishes its refinement into a book. The so-called simple things will have failed the post, turning him away... towards words. Such a reading puts on Mallarmé's work, often bizarre and forbidding, a construction even more bizarre, taking it even farther from us than it already is. In his own time Mallarmé was *strange*; how much stranger should he not seem now? Anyone who tries to turn Mallarmé into the spokesman for an official position flies in the face of his resolutely detached, independent, outsider's stance.

I have argued elsewhere that the man whose works we persist in reading, if we do, was endowed with a fervent empirical gift – for poetry I mean – plus a yearning for severe intellection; that he was burdened with a fastidiousness edging into preciosity, with other handicaps which a superior intelligence and a manly courage strove to translate into strengths; that the grown man employed these strengths through long hard-thinking years to paint himself out of a corner, by introducing into the world of festive inherence from which his adolescent dilemmas had disjoined him, the product of his strenuous abstract thrust. And that he triumphed at the end, in an heroic drama of ink and paper where thought and poetry and world are brought to cohere for our delight – not the ideal Book, thank goodness, but a book at last after his own heart, *Un Coup de Dés*, entering our maundering wavering world to stiffen its nerve.

These dilemmas, this withdrawal, this labour, even this heroism – these are very far from a poet's present concerns. Heroism in the arts has withered, along with the context of reception and appreciation which once fostered it, just as there is no longer a place for the hero in statecraft, politics and warfare, as John Keegan has shown in his remarkable study, *The Mask of Command*. Willy-nilly, in his last years, Mallarmé donned such a mask, at least for the small band of colleagues and followers who recognized his ascendancy. If the possibility of heroic display has vanished, so has that of heroic withdrawal. How should I, existing in the world, resign that which sustains even this gesture? How should I withdraw from what I must run to greet, with all speed, especially if I am to think about it? Fixity is hardly my lot; in its stead I shall not assume the pose of meditative aloofness. And where am I to withdraw? What I think about is not ideas, a venerable word I scarcely know how to use; such things, I take it, have no need to be thought about, being thought by definition; and their domain, the absolute of notions and processes, has today been stricken with futility, having lost its ancient pride of place. Likewise I may no longer gamble on ideas, casting thoughtful dice while the world of inherence where I move cries out for a desperate even if solitary revivification – not the work of words and ideas alone. In art gravely pursued, there is no room left for calculation, any more than for that game-playing which, with the sinister glee we all know, has overwhelmed popular culture.

Here, evidently, I have no quarrel with the astonishing innovator we celebrate today. His *parti-pris* – withdrawal, and concentrated abstract labour, albeit in hopes of a triumphant return, so effectively dramatised in the prose of *La déclaration foraine* – such calculated withdrawal is no longer opportune. It belongs to the period of thought and endeavor in the arts which he crowned, whose demise he witnessed. One tumultuous century later, my first task as writer is to see that neither I nor my world ends up as a book – to make sure that words, well before they are written, locate and account for that trenchant singular experience which alone gives them certification. The example

of Mallarmé's dilemmas, and the withdrawal which promised a way out, will help me see what I must from the start avoid: what I have called *l'erreur du préalable*.

I have tried to show elsewhere* that what we call Mallarmé is not a single block-like prodigy of thought and achievement, but the name of a painful evolution, a lengthy maturation of the spirit and its powers, comprising several phrases and aspects which must interest us variously. The dilemmas of the young romantic and anti-romantic poet, in the sixties, have scant bearing on present problems; the way out brought a full decade, in Paris, of re-situation, of taking in hand, of building, as Mallarmé would say later, the edifice of his own thought; and the final fifteen years give us something, at least, of the mature result: Mallarmé's thinking about the phenomenon of utterance in its highest cultural reaches – poetry, starting forth from the printed page – thinking we have yet to come to grips with and which will be, I believe, of enduring interest to writers.

Mallarmé's example bears also – as I discovered while writing *Le sonneur de cloches* – on the courage which bore him into maturity. I mean that secret intrepidity, compounding lucidity and firmness of purpose, which far from scanting doubt and especially self-doubt takes strength from them; courage which proceeds first to locate a man's place, then the solitary path onwards, then the necessary thrust down that path; courage which urges him to follow it, unswerving, stalwart, without a glance right or left at alluring byeways or convenient compromises, down to the unforeseeable end. Along the way, Mallarmé's ardent procedures – however remote from ours, however bizarre – will at the very least have revealed, with sufficient clarity, that they were his own. There is the lesson for us, I venture: the example of that singular courage could not be more pertinent today or any day; such courage may be what today's poet first attempts to transliterate, even as he approaches that re-substantiation of utterance which was Mallarmé's concern also in the last years. That challenge is not new; it has a venerable and indeed a secretly heroic cast. We glimpse it in Polonius' advice to Laertes, "To thine own self be true", the challenge which in Baudelaire's congenial reformulation becomes, "Il faut être un héros pour soi-même." Withdrawal, in other words, not *from* world, but *towards* the highest of risks: one's own.

This man, leaning with all his weight on the weight of his words, will have built in language that utterly singular place of speech which now for us bears his name. What use of what words will have made it possible? The question comes down, for writers today, to a practical matter: what is the trusted substantial element in words' behaviour which will encourage, sustain, let's say inspire, my own foolhardy undertaking – running towards, having located it, the risk of becoming myself.

Today's friendly colloquy gives me the chance to take a leaf out of Mallarmé's book and, transliterating courage, free his words and mine from the chilling grip of the page, where they may have seemed to end up. Here are a few words from a work in progress, Mallarmé's own French words which, thanks to his example, I put to my own use. You shall see if there is in them a far-off echo of his dilemmas outstripped. In any event the outcome, the *aboutissement*, of my words will have been, in the writing, the least of my concerns. I will have steered clear of making the written word into the instrument which engages any finality known to me. Such instrumentality, imposed on both men and books, has wrought the havoc our wanton century knows and begins haltingly, here and there, to reckon with.

* David Mus : *Le sonneur de cloches* (Champ Vallon, 1991) ; ch. IV.

Dans le sens d'une plongée

– pétition, répétition –

des yeux dans le vert,

d'une voix parmi d'aveugles
écoutes,

que tu tentes à la porte

ouverte – et réussis, dans le sens demain d'un matin.

—

Émergeant d'un pied – aujourd'hui

démarche de lumière –

devant le mur

en cours, dos au mur renouvelé

par une pierre des deux mains sortie
du mur ou quelques mots devant la langue
au sujet d'un mur

s'affermissant, disant l'émergé :

dans le sens de demain une parole

plongeant dans le roc pour refaire
surface.

Déjà et comme, certificat
ou pétition,

un mot échappe

cependant une main sur le loquet ouvre le mur, un,
quelqu'un, passe dehors

au-dehors, hier raidissant le dos – déjà

proféré

rebondit
sur l'herbe loin du pluriel des maisons,

refaçonne pierre en voix pénétrante :

– Tu seras libre d'être, brièvement, saillie,
bosquet, troupeau, nœud dans le jour.

D'un tour déjà étrange

– autant habitat d'hier que visite de l'aube
à pierre conjointe –

vibre

et se disloque un tournant de pierre, la porte

s'enfonce dans la face
ouverte de son mur, jamais

le bief qui s'enfièvre n'aura été enfermé

la nuit, là où

sur les mots rentrés elle claque,
eux depuis hier châtiés, déjà assouplis

défilent

le long d'un renouveau.

Porte, là, dès avant

de m'ouvrir le mur
à la frappe du jour

avec la colline, comme la vitre chancelle,
pousse et décline, coince, espace et masse mue

singulièrement :

de suite tu émerges (-) déjà demain,

déjà demain tombe le lendemain.

Unless you've fallen asleep – even if you have, baffled by the French – you will have heard the broken melodic line of breath's instrument stretching out, pressing through the air, colliding with these four walls to pass through their surface, set into vibratory motion plaster, cement and stone, reaching into their very letter, what I call *masse* and sometimes – using a word which affects me with something like sacred terror – *roche*. Should I transliterate, I would draw into awareness that literality, that stony frame: not wall alone, nor walls, but in the walls their speaking composite, of build, extent, cohesion, and design – these walls contrived to isolate, safeguard and amplify our voices. Their resonance will have entered the coiling labyrinth of your ears, to the inmost mass of the temporal bone where it resounds again, giving a precise echo of the original utterance. We are on the far side of Mallarmé's *boutade*... Everything in and of world depends on what happens next, after thought and experience and art will have seemed to end up book.

And Stéphane Mallarmé, had he read his own book aloud before his picked audience – if ever he ended up writing it, if he really intended to – the courage of this man, whatever the tenor of his fictional *idée fixe*, would have ended up just this way: as an echo of stone in the ear's cavern, evoking a second, a human echo. Walls transliterated, speaking stone set in motion by the voice's thrust, will have reached us, sending us forth beyond these walls – enlightened perhaps, encouraged, eventually more vigorous, more serene, surely more fraternal.

Here is one way living words are freed from the book, reborn to the pursuit of their headlong, unpredictable career: voice in stone becoming echo on eager awareness. Our blind connivance with these walls will have unlocked the printed page – that fixed, so often frigid graph of human speech whose misprisions, truculence and arrogance will have fed the fanaticisms which, in the century since Mallarmé's death, have ended up, to our shame, in ever more sinister versions of chaos. We must see that Stéphane Mallarmé does not end up as a book. The book today, his or another, can only be the premiss of a further, more humane, enlivening utterance. If Mallarmé is to speak to us, it will have to be with a new voice: our own, yet to be found and heard. So these walls will have been telling us.

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