

CHAPTER 1

“Mallarmé, par Jacques Derrida”

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peindre non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit
[to paint, not the thing, but the effect it produces]

MEETINGS

My title is drawn from an encyclopaedic history of French literature published in 1974 and entitled *Tableau de la littérature française, vol. III: de Mme de Staël à Rimbaud*.¹ This may appear a strange place for the names of Mallarmé and Derrida to meet. Strange because one does not think of Derrida as a literary historian; strange because one does not think of Mallarmé as quite fitting into a history of French literature. He was either too late to be a Parnassian because of his age; or too advanced to be one because of his “poétique très nouvelle” [very new poetics].² He was too old to be a card-carrying Symbolist, although he seemed happy enough to patronize those of his young admirers who enjoyed such a label.³ A century later, he was tardily rejuvenated by the *nouvelle critique*, structuralism, *Tel Quel*, and so on—diverse movements in which the name *Stéphane Mallarmé* has circulated with inconstant value and to differing effects. So Mallarmé is also a contemporary—living if paradoxical proof that:

Unique fois au monde, parce qu'en raison d'un événement toujours que j'expliquerai, il n'est pas de Présent, non—un présent n'existe pas . . . (*Oc*, 372)⁴

[One and only time in the world, because owing to an event always which I shall explain, there is no Present, no—a present does not exist . . .]

What we have in “Mallarmé, par Jacques Derrida” is a meeting of equals and opposites. A contemporary philosopher and a contemporary ghost.⁵ Clearly, the encounter is governed by particular rules of engagement. Literary history makes assumptions about periods, meanings, movements, lives, etc.—in short, assumptions about representation—all of which we would expect Jacques Derrida to question and probably to subvert. This indeed is what he will go on to do (see next section on “mimicry”). And yet even this meeting of minds cannot quite escape the grasp of historical time—which is why I shall now say something about the occasion of “Mallarmé, par Jacques Derrida.”

The meeting takes place in 1974. Now, whatever one might think of intellectual history as a discipline, it is clear that for the year 1974 the name, Stéphane Mallarmé, would have to be an object of its attention—perhaps even a privileged one at that. Moreover, this had been the case at least since the early sixties. The publication in 1961 of Jean-Pierre Richard’s monumentally ambitious *L’univers imaginaire de Stéphane Mallarmé* had inspired the rereading of Mallarmé by (amongst others) Genette, Sollers, Kristeva . . . and of course Jacques Derrida.⁶ If we focus on the last of these figures, we should certainly indicate the 1963 essay “Force et signification,” which later opened *L’écriture et la différence* (1967). Although the direct target of the piece is Jean Rousset’s *Forme et signification: essais sur les structures littéraires de Corneille à Claudel* (1962), the real force of Derrida’s argument is an interrogation (not to say “deconstruction”) of what had come to be known already as “structuralist” or “structural” criticism, and in particular its highly dubious assumptions about the unity or totality of a work, an age or, indeed, a universe. It is in this article that Derrida foreshadows the polite but devastating mimicry that in “La double séance” he will act out on Richard’s world stage. Perhaps the sharpest signal of ulterior motivation appears at the epigraph to *L’écriture et la différence*:

le tout sans nouveauté qu’un espacement de la lecture.

[the whole without novelty other than a spacing out of reading.]

In its original context (the preface to “Un coup de dés”), the passage continues:

Les ‘blancs’ en effet, assument l’importance, frappent d’abord; la versification en exigea, comme silence alentour, ordinairement, au point qu’un morceau, lyrique ou de peu de pieds, occupe, au milieu, le tiers environ du feuillet; je ne transgresse cette mesure, seulement la disperse. (*Oc*, 455) *Copyrighted Material*

[The "blancs" in effect take on importance, strike first: versification demanded them, as silence all around, ordinarily, to the point that a piece, lyrical or of few feet, occupies, in the middle, a third roughly of the sheet; I do not transgress this measure, only disperse it.]

Now, the epigraph often stands as a strategic indicator, but equally can function as a site of identification. *Dixit Mallarmé, ditto Derrida*. The difference and novelty marked *re* Richard (who is simply the best of all Mallarmean exegetes, and the only hermeneutician one could conceivably describe as "delicious") turns on the term *espacement*. In that "spacing out," unity falls for *différance*, and the totalitarian universe of meaning implodes into a virtual discontinuum of unpredictable "events." But also a printer's "space" where anything or nothing indifferently might happen or mean. A space in which *blanc* might also just be a blank.⁷

Were proof required that Mallarmé had remained on Derrida's mind between *L'écriture et la différence* (1967) and "Mallarmé, par Jacques Derrida," one need look no further than *Positions* (1972), the series of interviews published in the same year as *La Dissémination*. Mallarmé's name appears significantly on both the first and the last page of this collection. In response to Henri Ronse's bold opening question as to what Derrida's "system" might be—indeed what the organizing principle of the "ensemble de ses livres" ['entirety of his books'] might look like—the philosopher deflects the probing gaze toward the dead poet:

Ils (mes livres) forment, en effet, mais bien comme *déplacement* et comme déplacement d'une *question*, un certain système ouvert quelque part à quelque ressource indécidable qui lui donne son jeu. La note à laquelle vous faites allusion rappelait aussi la nécessité de ces 'blancs' dont on sait, depuis Mallarmé, qu'en tout texte ils 'assument l'importance.' (*Pos*, 11)

[They (my books) form, in effect, but indeed as a *displacement* and as displacement of a *question*, a certain system open somewhere to some undecidable resource which gives it its movement. The note to which you make allusion recalled also the necessity of these "blancs," of which we know, since Mallarmé, that in every text they "take on importance."]

The name unsurprisingly reoccurs throughout the eponymous dialogue with Jean-Louis Houdebine and Guy Scarpetta, the discussion returning repeatedly to *La Dissémination* and "La double séance" in particular.⁸ For my present purpose, the philosophical details of what is said in those pages are less interesting than the insistence of

the name as reference and authority, as kindred spirit or absent friend. To address the meeting of "Mallarmé, par Jacques Derrida," to calculate their relative positioning (or *gisement*) around this time, one need only examine the post-scriptum to *Positions*—a text that attempts precisely to situate or represent "Derrida" in relation to the literary-philosophical public:

P.S. Et si nous donnions à cet échange, pour intitulé (germinal), le mot *positions*, dont la polysémie se marque, de surcroît, dans la lettre *s*, lettre 'disséminante' par excellence, disait Mallarmé? J'ajouterai, s'agissant de *positions*: scènes, actes, figures de la dissémination. (*Pos*, 133)

[P.S. And if we give to this exchange, as (germinal) title, the word *positions*, whose polysemy is marked, moreover, in the letter *s*, an excellently "disseminating" letter, as Mallarmé used to say? I shall add, taking of *positions*: scenes, acts, figures of dissemination.]

I suggest, then, that at the time of the meeting in question Stéphane Mallarmé was, virtually speaking, Derrida's second hand—if it be true that writing is "une machine à deux mains" (*Ed*, 334 ["a two-handed machine"]). Before and after writing; in the title, in the text, in the seminar; even, it would appear, in the signature, since each time the philosopher wrote the "s" of "Jacques" he would sign disseminatingly the "s" of "Stéphane"...

My own position here may seem a little extreme, so let me now examine the meeting in simpler, more straightforward terms. Time and place have been established, as have the names of those present. Remains the agenda. What was *to be done*? What did Derrida *want* from the meeting? And what did he *get*? The occasion of "Mallarmé, par Jacques Derrida" (perhaps no more than an accident of French publishing history) provided a place for the philosopher to "resume" a decade of his application to Stéphane Mallarmé—reading, writing, thinking. Twenty years on, it will allow me to schematize for you the *effects* (on Derrida) of "ce qui fut, par Mallarmé, écrit" (*Tableau*, 369 [what was, by Mallarmé, written]).

MIMICRY

Before doing that, however, I should like to make some brief remarks concerning the way in which Derrida chose to negotiate the particular rules of engagement implicit in the *Tableau*; as well as the extent to which he might be seen to mimic Mallarmé's own approach to similar literary-philosophical contexts. I shall do this under the headings of *address*, *exposition*, and *representation*.

On the question of address, a project such as a *Tableau de la littérature française* is evidently aimed at the general or at least the reading public. This immediately raises the problem of Derrida's reputed difficulty—a.k.a. obscurity, obscurantism, charlatanism . . . The offensiveness of the term tends to expand in inverse relation to the literacy of the reader. The present audience scarcely requires a demonstration of that general formula. Now, Mallarmé dead or alive is still faced with a similarly perplexing accusation and aggression. To which at times he riposted with a simple counterpunch:

Je préfère, devant l'aggression, rétorquer que des contemporains ne savent pas lire—(Oc, 386)

[I prefer, faced with aggression, to riposte that some contemporaries do not know how to read]

Usually, however, the aggressive demand for transparency was deflected by humor, as in the brief *ars poetica* known as "Toute l'âme résumée":

Le sens trop précis rature
Ta vague littérature (Poé, 164)

[Too precise meaning erases
Your vague literature]

Similar examples and anecdotes abound, most of which would have been familiar to Derrida, so the hypothesis of mimicry in this regard does not seem implausible. Textually and publicly, provocatively and humorously, Derrida has responded to aggression from diverse, and often unsolicited, addressees. But the most important lesson he might have drawn from Mallarmé's experience is simply that the addressee—like the speaking subject—is indifferently Anyone or Nobody. Or, as Mallarmé would have put it: "Le Monsieur, plutôt commode, que certains observent la coutume d'accueillir par mon nom" (Oc, 401 [The rather comfortable gentleman whom some observe the custom of greeting with my name]) addresses "Monsieur Tout-le-Monde" ["Mr Everyone"]. In this article at least Derrida uses "les mêmes mots que le Bourgeois lit tous les matins, les mêmes!" [the same words that the Bourgeois reads every morning, the same ones!]⁹—although he may be doing something different to them, with them, or in between them.⁹ Essentially, both writers make the reader an offer s/he can freely refuse. It states:

L'oeuvre de ma patience . . . s'adresse à l'Intelligence du lecteur qui met les choses en scène, elle-même. (Poé, 44/Oc, 433)

[The work of my patience . . . is addressed to the reader's intelligence, which arranges things dramatically itself]

In other words, the “effort au style” (*Oc*, 867 [effort for style]) works both ways, and is as difficult as you want to make it. As Mallarmé once replied to a journalist:

C'est, en effet, également dangereux, soit que l'obscurité vienne de l'insuffisance du lecteur, ou de celle du poète . . . mais c'est tricher que d'éluder ce travail.¹⁰

[It is, in effect, equally dangerous, either that the obscurity should come from the inadequacy of the reader, or from the poet's . . . but it is cheating to avoid this work.]

The second demand one might reasonably make of an encyclopaedic entry is that it should *expose* certain information: the life of the man, the early crises and influences, the phases of production, and a few choice morsels of meaning. In the French cultural context, one might call this activity “popular republican pedagogy.” Bordas, Larousse, Hachette, all three publishing houses have excelled at it for decades . . . (How could one repress the infinite *jouissance* of a series known simply as *Que sais-je?*) Not wishing to force this issue of mimicry, I should announce quite clearly that, although neither Derrida nor Mallarmé belongs intimately to that educational tradition, the former has proved himself internationally as both pedagogue and thinker, whilst the latter was an incompetent and unpopular English teacher in a variety of Parisian and provincial *lycées*. Only the premature death of his mother deprived him of a daily sick note. In the case of “Mallarmé, par Jacques Derrida,” however, one may detect traces of a shared disregard for the conventions of exposition. Most notable, or frustrating, is the fact that of the twenty or more quotations that decorate the article not a single one is referenced. None of which matters here, of course, other than insofar as it mimics Mallarmé's casual approach to certain informational speech acts. The nonspecialist may be unaware that Mallarmé was obliged for pecuniary reasons to produce two pedagogical tomes (*Les Dieux antiques* and *Les Mots anglais*), which he later described to Verlaine as “des besognes propres, et voilà tout (*Dieux Antiques, Mots Anglais*) dont il sied de ne pas parler.” (*Oc*, 663 [mere obligations, and that's all (*Ancient Gods, English Words*), of which it is fitting not to talk]). To illustrate his offhand expository style, here are a few examples (all but one of which, I should stress, form complete paragraphs):

Tout ceci va apparaître (*Oc*, 901 [All this will become apparent]); Etc., etc., etc. (901/1015); Quelques faits (998 [Some facts]); Trêve de détails (1010 [Enough details]); Je commence (1024 [I'll begin]); Voilà (1033/1048 [There it is]).

The exposition of information usually implies structure of argument and presentation. This again is a French educational speciality; indeed, it is more like an institutionalized pathological obsession. Now, neither Derrida nor Mallarmé is René Descartes, as most readers will know. And yet it would again be unwise to conflate the two names undiscerningly. The former has repeatedly stated the futility of pretending to stand "outside" Cartesian rationality. He is as methodical, rigorous, and coherent a philosopher as Descartes thinking in the warm glow of his *poêle* [heated room].¹² Mallarmé, by contrast, is a poet. And it is Derrida himself who states categorically in the *Tableau* (I shall return to this point at the end of my chapter) that the twain will never quite meet, or at least that their meeting will always be tainted or tinged by mutual suspicion. Since Plato, he maintains, the philosopher owes it to himself and his discipline to observe an "active méconnaissance" (*Tableau*, 378 [active ignorance]) in the face of poetry and the poet's works. As for Mallarmé's feeling for philosophy, I suspect that when in 1869 he noted on a scrap of paper that "nous n'avons pas compris Descartes" (*Oc*, 851 [We haven't understood Descartes]), he was in all likelihood speaking for himself, and certainly said more than he meant. The meeting of poet and philosopher, then, may be adjourned *sine die*, but "Mallarmé, par Jacques Derrida" at least marks the *non-lieu* in which it might have taken place. As *Prose (pour des Esseintes)* puts it:

... ce pays n'exista pas (*Poé*, 45)

[... this land did not exist]

My final words on the matter of mimicry will refer the reader to Mallarmé's own series of *tableaux*, which represented in a variety of styles the major literary, artistic, and even musical figures of the day. Derrida would certainly have known the *Tombeaux* and *Hommages* to Poe, Baudelaire, Wagner, Verlaine, Whistler, Puvis de Chavanne, . . . and even Vasco de Gama! These verse representations have understandably intrigued generations of commentators, although the majority appear to experience an exegetical block at the thought that great minds might not always think alike, or indeed that Mallarmé may even be using the monumental occasion to dance madly on his rival's or predecessor's grave.¹³ As Derrida approached this *tableau* of Mallarmé, moreover, he would surely also have had in mind the prosaic representations known collectively as *Quelques médaillons et portraits en pied* [Some medallions and full-length portraits]; the extended "rêverie d'un poète français" [reverie of a French poet] on Richard Wagner; and even the snippets Mallarmé occasionally accorded to

journalists in response to surveys on Voltaire, Tolstoy, Maupassant, Stevenson, et al. I have advanced elsewhere the thesis that, throughout this diversity of texts—occasional, witty, cruel, monumental, etc.—Mallarmé was working out *practically* (the adverb and the emphasis are Derrida's) a nexus of theoretical problems concerning the name and the art of naming; the signature, the works, and the Work; and literary posterity's negotiation with the anonymity of writing. Now, Derrida does indeed discuss issues of representation (and precisely of nomination) within the space afforded him by the *Tableau*. His opening paragraph runs:

Y a-t-il une *place* pour Mallarmé dans une 'histoire de la littérature'? Et d'abord, autrement: son texte a-t-il lieu, son lieu, dans quelque tableau de la littérature française? dans un tableau? de la littérature? française? (*Tableau*, 369)

[Is there a *place* for Mallarmé in a "history of literature"? And firstly, in other words: does his text take place, its place, in some tableau of French literature? in a tableau? of French? literature?]

But this is not Mallarmean mimicry. We are firmly grounded in the interrogative tone of early seventies "deconstruction," a manner that would necessarily look rather grey if set against the cerulean *trompe-l'oeil* effects Mallarmé created around the names of "Voltaire," "Manet," "Whistler"; or, as in the following passage, "Tennyson vu d'ici":

Ce chaste agencement de syllabes, *Tennyson*, avec solennité, dit, cette fois: *Lord Tennyson*. . . . Le nom du poète mystérieusement se refait avec le texte entier qui, de l'union des mots entre eux, arrive à n'en former qu'un, celui-là, significatif, résumé de toute l'âme, la communiquant au passant . . . (*Oc*, 529–530)

[This chaste arrangement of syllables, *Tennyson*, with solemnity, said, this time: *Lord Tennyson*. . . . The name of the poet mysteriously reworks itself into the entire text which, from the union of the words between them, comes to form just one, that word, significant, summary of the whole soul, communicating the latter to the passer-by. . .]

It strikes me now that, whereas after 1974 Mallarmé as a name and a reference seems to fade from immediate view in Derrida's work, perhaps his ghostly shadow phanetically reemerged in those broodings on death, and friendship, and posthumous renown, such as "Les morts de Roland Barthes" (1981), or *Mémoires—pour Paul de Man* (1988), or "Louis Althusser" (1990). The list of examples will only grow longer. Perhaps one day the phantom will return in order to write "Derrida, par Stéphane Mallarmé," and the onomastic miracle will resume the

whole soul of the philosopher, and Luton and Cerisy and Cotonou will simultaneously cease to exist. Before such a disaster befalls us, however, let me turn to my final question, possibly the most practical in the eyes of the present audience. What did Derrida *get* from Mallarmé (in 1974)? What are the *effects*, on Jacques Derrida, of what was, by Mallarmé, written? I have arranged these effects into a Derridean portrait of Stéphane Mallarmé in seven brief *tableaux*:

1. *déjouer*
2. *événement*
3. *sens*
4. *opération*
5. *crise*
6. *blanc*
7. *salut*

EFFECTS

In 1995, the concepts I have just enumerated may sound to your ears more "Derridean" than "Mallarmean," and it is certainly not my intention to waste your time by explicating terms you know far better than I do. However, given Derrida's declared enthusiasm for the *greffe*, for citation, and for the problematics of "context" in general, I hope you will nonetheless *get* something from the ensuing "scholia," as Mallarmé would have called them. The very word *effect*, as a preliminary example, is one that Derrida has circulated throughout philosophy to great . . . effect. You all know "La philosophie en effet." But, *en effet*, you do not know "la philosophie." Is that what philosophy is?—(With Gallic shrug) *En effet*. It is not my place here to mimic, nor certainly to mock, but rather to point out that there is another place where a writer—Stéphane Mallarmé—activated the *différend* between the thing (of philosophy?) and its effect. I refer you to Derrida's epigraph in the *Tableau*, the full text of which is:

Pour moi, me voilà résolument à l'oeuvre. J'ai enfin commencé mon *Hérodiaëde*. Avec terreur, car j'invente une langue qui doit nécessairement jaillir d'une poétique très nouvelle, que je pourrais définir en ces deux mots: *Peindre, non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit*. (Corr. vol. 1, 137)

[As for me, here I am resolutely at work. I have finally started my *Hérodiaëde*. With terror, for I am inventing a language which must necessarily spring from a very new poetics, which I could define in these two words: *to paint, not the thing, but the effect it produces*.]

Might this not be the very motto of “La philosophie en effet”? With such a question in mind, here are my seven snapshots.

In the second paragraph of “Mallarmé, par Jacques Derrida,” please note two terms in particular—*machiné* and *déjouer*:

Près d'un siècle de lecture maintenant: nous commençons seulement à entrevoir que quelque chose a été machiné (par Mallarmé? en tout cas selon ce qui se passe *par* lui, comme à travers lui) pour déjouer les catégories de l'histoire et des classifications littéraires, de la critique littéraire, des philosophies et herméneutiques de tout genre. (*Tableau*, 369)

[Almost a century of reading now: we are beginning to realize that something has been plotted (by Mallarmé? in any case according to what happened *by* him, as indeed through him) to confound the categories of history and of literary classifications, and of literary criticism, of philosophies and hermeneutics of all kinds.]

This is Mallarmé as troublemaker, breaking up or spoiling the deadly game of categories: “*déjouer* = cesser de jouer” [stop playing] (*Dictionnaire Robert*). It is also Mallarmé as trickster or cheat, C. Auguste Dupin outwitting the plodding hermeneutics of Monsieur G-, the Parisian prefect of police: “*machiner* = former en secret (des desseins, des combinaisons malhonnêtes, illicites)” [form in secret (plots, intrigues, which are dishonest, illicit)] (*Robert Dictionary*). From the interplay of these two attractive terms, one could spark off some thoughtful pyrotechnics: the dysfunctioning of Descartes’s *machine*; the *machin* in relation to the *chose*; Mallarmé as linguistic virus in the thinking internet; and so on. If we develop this line of thought, the verb *déjouer* splits neatly into an imaginary noun *dé-joueur*, leading us unerringly to Mallarmé the *joueur de dés* [dice-player], the poetic player running the ultimate risk that maybe with “Un coup de dés” [a throw of the dice]—forerunner or fragment of the “Livre total,” the Orphic song to order and harmonize the universe—his gamble might actually come off, bequeathing us the totalitarian nightmare—into which we would have already woken—of a world that really did make sense. We can sometimes be grateful that Mallarmé died mysteriously of a brain hemorrhage at the age of fifty-six. But when he showed young Valéry the proofs of “Un coup de dés,” “il (lui) dit [according to the acolyte] avec un sourire admirable, ornement du plus pur orgueil inspiré à un homme par son sentiment de l’univers: ‘Ne trouvez-vous pas que c’est un acte de démesure?’” [he told him with an admirable smile, ornament of the purest pride inspired in a man by his feeling of the universe: “Do you not think that this is an act of folly?”] (*Oc*, 1582). And

what if Derrida had been watching the scene, would it have been in silent admiration or passive denial?

In the third paragraph, the keywords are already underlined for us:

On ne peut plus parler ici d'un *événement*, de l'événement d'un tel texte; on ne peut plus interroger son *sens* sauf à retomber en deça de lui, dans le réseau de valeurs qu'il a *pratiquement* remises en question; celle d'événement (présence, singularité sans répétition possible, temporalité, historicité) . . . (*Tableau*, 369)

[One can no longer speak here of an *event*, of the event of such a text; one can no longer ask its *meaning* without falling short of it, back into the network of values which it has *practically* brought into question; the value of the event (presence, singularity without possible repetition, temporality, historicity) . . .]

The image of Mallarmé is again here essentially deconstructive. One effect of what Mallarmé wrote demands to be read as an "event," in the sense that he both provoked and diagnosed a "crisis in verse," the repercussions of which drowned out the anxious or liberating cries about the mere counting of syllables. He not only asked the question, "Sait-on ce que c'est qu'écrire?" (*Oc*, 481), or, "quelque chose comme les Lettres existe-t-il?" [Do we know what it is to write? . . . Does something like Letters exist?] (*Oc*, 645), but, as Derrida insists, he *practically* took apart the accepted values of reading and writing, in a way that seems utterly contemporary. The resulting paradox, however, is that the "avènement" [coming] of Mallarmé equally destroys the chances of a workable diachronic model for reading literature. Lastly, Mallarmé delivers a hammer blow to the text event as immutable object, the well-wrought urn, etc. The textual act for Mallarmé could always just as well have happened very differently, or indeed might never have happened at all; "rien n'aura eu lieu que le lieu" translates as "the paradigmatic axis is infinite," although I must declare a preference for the original. Beware confusion, however, at this point. Both Derrida and myself, I believe, would take on pugilistically any man or woman in the audience who claimed that Mallarmé either preached or practised *n'importe quoi*—some sort of random aesthetics of chance. Mallarmé could write an urn as well as the next poet, and my own private version of the final paroxysm imagines a Mallarmé lucid to the end ("cela devait être très beau" [it was going to be very beautiful])¹⁴ regarding the true relation of the Work to the works, of poetic *oeuvres* (feminine plural) to the alchemical *Oeuvre* (masculine singular). It is the very impossibility of the notorious "Livre total" that both determines

and liberates the “poèmes, ou études en vue de mieux” [poems, or studies with a view to something better], the “feuillettes d’album” [sheets from an album], the “divagations” [divagations], the “cartes de visite” [calling cards], the “loisirs de la poste” [leisures of the postal system], the “vers de circonstance” [occasional verse] . . . That unwhole mess of *jouissifs* non-events is for me “resumed” in the opening line of the liminary sonnet to *Poésies*:

Rien, cette écume, vierge vers (*Poé*, 3)

[Nothing, this froth, virgin verse]

The keyword *sens* has already occurred in the passage cited above, but Derrida does not want to let it go:

La valeur . . . de sens: Mallarmé n’a cessé de traquer la signification partout où s’y produisait la perte du sens, en particulier dans ces deux alchemies que sont l’esthétique et l’économie politique. (*Tableau*, 369)

[The value . . . of meaning: Mallarmé unceasingly tracked down signification wherever the loss of meaning was taking place, in particular in those two alchemies which are aesthetics and political economy.]

The first trap to avoid here is called semantic richness, or polysemy in the Richardian sense of the term: the plenitudinous, unified, interminably coherent universe of the poetic imagination. Three times no. It is the fading or loss of meaning which Derrida’s Mallarmé tracked down like a sleuth determined elegantly to reveal not whodunit but rather that nothing in effect happened at all: the purloined letter was a blank page. Ever since Mallarmé said “ayant appris l’anglais simplement pour mieux lire Poe” [having learned English better to read Poe] (*Oc*, 662), scholars have assumed he was referring to the poetry. This is hardly surprising, given that Mallarmé was the first to defy Baudelaire’s challenge that the poems were untranslatable. But there may still exist an unseen role for Mallarmé in that academic psycho-soap of some years back, when Lacan and Derrida fought it out for the right to play C. Auguste Dupin. My second warning on Derrida’s use of *sens* concerns the juxtaposition of aesthetics and political economy:

Tout se résume dans l’Esthétique et l’Economie politique . . . (*Oc*, 656)¹⁵

[Everything is summed up in Aesthetics and political Economy . . .]

One might be tempted to read the conjunction of aesthetics and politics as a belated effort to reactivate Mallarmé in the form of a *soixante-*

huitard radical; and no doubt in the early seventies he was occasionally employed in this capacity. If one reads more closely, however, the ensuing passage from "Magie" (a short text on Huysmans and alchemy), what emerges as more appealing to Derrida and to Mallarmé alike is the deconstruction of the apparent complementarity of economics and aesthetics. A genealogical maneuver reveals the former simply to be the metropolitanized country cousin of the latter; the alchemist's "pierre nulle, qui rêve l'or, dite philosophale . . . annonce, dans la finance, le futur crédit, précédant le capital en le réduisant à l'humilité de la monnaie!" [empty stone, dreaming of gold, known as the philosopher's . . . announces, in finance, future credit, preceding capital whilst reducing it to the humbleness of money!] (*Oc*, 399). Economics and finance are intriguing insofar as they deal in "empty" signs, circulating within a closed system of otherwise meaningless symbols, notes, and figures. Later in his portrait (*Tableau*, 376), Derrida carefully unfolds the multiple apparitions and significations *chez* Mallarmé of the word *or*, notably in the text of that name (*Oc*, 398). But if he does so, it is only the better to puncture the accumulated illusion of so many meanings, of so much *or*—thus mimicking the bursting of bubbles, the shock of financial disaster, in this particular case the scandal around the Panama canal:

Le numéraire, engin de terrible précision, net aux consciences, perd jusqu'à un sens. . . . Si un nombre se majore et recule, vers l'improbable, il inscrit plus de zéros: signifiant que son total équivaut spirituellement à rien, presque. (*Oc*, 398)

[Coin, a machine of terrible precision, clear in our consciousness, loses even a meaning. . . . If a number gets bigger and retreats toward the improbable, it inscribes more zeros: signifying that its total equals spiritually nothing, almost.]

The values of meaning may be wiped off the screen as easily and spectacularly as the exponential multiplication of market zeros.

In his theoretical speculations, Mallarmé gave to the simple word *opération* the kind of depth and scope that Derrida has invested in the equally banal term *écriture*. The manner in which the philosopher expresses his admiration for the poet's "takeover" of literature ("opération" in the financial sense) necessarily draws him back into the kind of historicism he would normally rather avoid. But the phrase "et si Mallarmé marquait une rupture . . ." [And if Mallarmé marked a rupture . . .] advances a historical hypothesis, which Derrida then curiously inflates into an almost apocalyptic hyperbole: "elle (la rupture) révélerait par exemple l'essence de la littérature passée comme

telle" [it would reveal for example the essence of literature past as such] (*Tableau*, 370). The end of the word as we know it, all brought crashing down by the anonymous little name of *Mallarmé*? In truth, Derrida recognizes the paradoxical role of the *signature* in this comical catastrophe:

La logique nouvelle . . . qu'on ne pourrait d'ailleurs attribuer à Mallarmé qu'en recourant à une théorie naïve et intéressée de la signature, celle-là même que Mallarmé, définissant justement ce qu'il appelait l'"opération," n'a cessé de dérouter. Un texte est fait pour se passer de références. A la chose même, nous le verrons, à l'auteur qui n'y consigne que sa disparition. Cette disparition est activement inscrite, elle n'est pas un accident du texte mais plutôt sa nature; elle y marque la signature d'une omission incessante. (*Tableau*, 370)

[The new logic . . . which by the way one could only attribute to Mallarmé by having recourse to a naïve and motivated theory of the signature, the very one that Mallarmé, defining precisely what he called the "operation," unceasingly undermined. A text is made so as to do without references. Even to the thing, as we shall see, to the author who consigns to that place merely his disappearance. This disappearance is actively inscribed, it is not an accident of the text but rather the latter's nature; it marks there the signature of an incessant omission.]

My own past work on the "name of the poet" has thus far done little more than explore in scholastic detail the "Mallarmean" side of this crucial strategic meeting point between the two writers. For development of the "Derridean" side, I refer you to the sections entitled "Le nom propre" and "La signature" in the excellent *Jacques Derrida* (1991).

At first glance, *crise* might look like a mere repetition of the historical "rupture" indicated above. In fact, Derrida teases out a quite distinct line of reasoning, which brings into a state of crisis the solid notions of criticism and decision.

La *crise*, moment où la *décision* simple n'est plus possible, où le choix entre les voies opposées se suspend. Crise de la critique, donc, qui aura toujours voulu par un jugement *décider* (*krinein*) de la valeur et du sens, discerner entre ce qui est et ce qui n'est pas, ce qui vaut et ce qui ne vaut pas, le vrai et le faux, le beau et le laid, toute signification et son contraire. (*Tableau*, 370)

[The *crisis*, the moment when the simple *decision* is no longer possible, when the choice between opposite paths is suspended. Crisis of criticism, therefore, which has always sought by a judgment to *decide* (*krinein*) value and meaning, to discriminate between what is and what isn't, what has value and what doesn't, the true and the false, the beautiful and the ugly, all signification and its opposite.]

Criticism decides meaning, beauty, truth, etc., as long as to decide means to fix, to hold, to arrest:

Philosophie du *sens*, du *mot*, du *nom*. (*Tableau*, 370)

[Philosophy of *meaning*, of the *word*, of the *name*]

Ambiguity it can just about handle, providing that the relation between the two possible meanings itself remains stable and under control. But what happens if one goes firstly beyond the dual relation of the *double entendre* into an unstoppable slippage of signifiers? And worse, for the decider, if the relation between the terms forces him to suspend judgment?

Or tout le texte de Mallarmé est organisé pour qu'en ses points les plus forts, le sens reste *indécidable*; dès lors, le signifiant ne se laisse plus traverser, il reste, résiste, existe et se donne à remarquer. (*Tableau*, 371)

[Now Mallarmé's text is organized so that in its strongest points meaning remains *undecidable*; thenceforth, the signifier no longer allows itself to be traversed, it remains, resists, exists, and offers to be noticed.]

Is suspension, though, just another form of fixation? Is Mallarmé, like the sophist Zeno, simply hypnotizing the philosopher into critical paralysis? Derrida almost looks as if he is arguing himself into this position, but is saved by the dynamic Diogenes of Mallarmé's syntax, which simply gets up and *moves*:

Ce qui suspend la décision, ce n'est pas la richesse de sens, la ressource inépuisable d'un mot, c'est un certain jeu de la syntaxe. (*Tableau*, 371)¹⁶

[What suspends judgment is not the richness of meaning, the inexhaustible resource of a word, it is a certain play of syntax.]

Mallarmean syntax is "poetry in motion": it shifts words around and about the page, up and down and back and forth, so as to leave the arbiter not so much suspended as dismissed, *hors-jeu* according to what he presumed to be the rules by which he would arrive at (*arrêter*) his decision. "Je suis profondément et scrupuleusement syntaxier" [I am profoundly and scrupulously syntactical], Mallarmé proudly declared. He was not merely playing with words, Derrida claims, but reworked the profound and scrupulous structures of *la langue* itself.

I have already mentioned the importance the *blancs*, for Mallarmé and Derrida, assumed. As the following passage will indicate, the *blanc* emerges from "Mallarmé, par Jacques Derrida" (and perhaps from the whole *Tableau de la littérature française*) as the emblem of what

the philosopher has already named "la nouvelle logique" [the new logic]. Politely repositioning himself in relation to the aptly named Richard's polysemic universe, Derrida explains the double operation of the *blanc*:

Par exemple le signe *blanc*, avec tout ce qui s'y associe de proche en proche, est un immense réservoir de sens (neige, froid, mort, marbre, etc.; cygne, aile, éventail, etc.; virginité, pureté, hymen, etc.; page, toile, voile, gaze, lait, semence, voie lactée, étoile, etc.). Comme par aimantation symbolique, il traverse tout le texte de Mallarmé. Et pourtant le blanc marque aussi, par l'intermédiaire de la page blanche, le lieu de l'écriture de ces blancs; et d'abord l'espacement entre les différentes significations (celle de blanc entre autres), *espacement de la lecture*. Les "*blancs*" en effet, *assument l'importance*. Le blanc de l'espacement n'a pas de sens déterminé, il n'appartient pas simplement à la plurivalence de tous les autres blancs. En-plus ou en-moins de la série polysémique, perte ou surcroît de sens, il replie le texte vers lui-même, en indique à chaque instant le lieu (où *rien n'aura eu lieu . . . que le lieu*), la condition, le travail, le rythme. (*Tableau*, 372)

[For example, the sign "blanc" (white/blank) with everything which is gradually associated with it, is an immense reservoir of meaning (snow, cold, death, marble, etc.; swan, wing, fan, etc.; virginity, purity, hymen, etc.; page, canvas, sail, gauze, milk, seed, milky way, star, etc.). As if by symbolic magnetism, it traverses the whole of Mallarmé's text. And yet the *blanc* also marks, by the intermediary of the white page, the place of the writing of these *blancs*; and firstly the spacing between the different significations (that of *blanc* amongst others), *the spacing out of reading*. The "*blancs*," in effect, *take on importance*. The *blanc* of spacing out does not have a determined meaning, it does not belong simply to the multivalence of all other *blancs*. More than or less than the polysemic series, loss or overabundance of meaning, it folds the text back into itself, indicates at each instant the place within it (where *nothing will have taken place . . . but the place*), the condition, the work, the rhythm.]

I shall append to this brilliant exposition a merely technical point, pertaining to the word *rythme*. French versification is fundamentally different from English verse in that its basic rhythm is syllabic rather than accentual. To put it simply, the classic alexandrine (e.g., "Tel qu'en lui-même enfin l'éternité le change") must have twelve syllables, otherwise it is not an alexandrine. By contrast, an English pentameter (e.g., "Shall I compare thee to a summer rose?") may or may not have ten syllables; what makes it a pentameter is the beating of the five stressed syllables: shall/pare/to/sum/rose. Now, major fisticuffs have been known to break out over the finer details of comparative metrics,

but my point here is to explain uncontroversially the consequences of the *numerical* base of French verse, especially as exploited by Mallarmé. Imagine you are going to compose an octosyllabic sonnet—What do you have before you on your page? Horizontally (left to right and vice versa), you have eight blank spaces to fill; vertically (up and down and vice versa) you have fourteen blank lines to complete. Now, even if we exclude some of the other pertinent factors such as stanza, rhyme, caesura (and naturally the whole history of the sonnet and its transitions), we can see that the poem, in its virtual or blank state, looks as much like an empty grid—a spatial object waiting to be constructed—as it does a silent song—sounds waiting to be articulated in time:

A ce vitrage d'ostensoir
 Que frôle une harpe par l'Ange
 Formée avec son vol du soir
 Pour la délicate phalange

Du doigt, que, sans le vieux santal
 Ni le vieux livre, elle balance
 Sur le plumage instrumental,
 Musicienne du silence. (*Poé*, 41)

[In the glasswork of an ostensory
 Which a harp touches by the Angel
 Formed with her evening flight
 For the delicate phalange

Of the finger, which, without the old sandalwood
 Or the old book she balances
 On the instrumental plumage
 Musician of silence.]

That spatio-temporal virtuality, which is also a collapsing of those dimensions, runs through French verse, French prose, French "effort au style"—and always already will have done so, *since* Mallarmé.

The word *salut* can mean in French either "hello" or "goodbye" according to the context. Mallarmé exploited this resource (the word has plenty of other meanings) by placing a sonnet so entitled at the head of his *Poésies*:

Rien, cette écume, vierge vers (*Poé*, 3)

[Nothing, this froth, virgin verse]

But the unfolding of the sonnet, as well as the actual context of its first public delivery (see note 3), render the speech act as much a valediction as a salutation. As I bring this chapter to a close, the question

arises: How did Derrida (in 1974) say “salut” to Mallarmé? Greetings, compliments, exchange of gifts, even a degree of friendly mimicry: all these might be read as rituals of salutation. But what of separation? How do poet and philosopher go their separate ways? My first response is to suggest that, despite the relative fading of “Stéphane Mallarmé” from the Derridean corpus post-1974, the resuscitated figurehead of so much radical theory between 1960 and 1975 may have lingered on in phantomatic form, especially upon the backdrop to more recent debates about signatures and subjectivity, memory and anonymity. I now merely reiterate that hypothesis, and leave it in suspense . . . Turning now for the final time to “Mallarmé, par Jacques Derrida,” in fact to the final paragraph of the piece, what can we represent as the *effect* of Derrida’s parting glance? He dons briefly once more the literary historian’s toque, and compares Mallarmé to the pre-Renaissance *grands rhétoriciens*—poets renowned for their ludic desires and dextrous experimentations. Flattering though this portrait may be, Derrida then steps back or aside from his canvas, and readjusts his thinking cap. Mallarmé’s operation, he concludes, escapes the representational controls of classical, philosophical rhetoric, and demonstrates *practically* (his adverb, his emphasis) the impertinence of that whole tradition. “So where does that leave me?” (says Jacques). He reflects a while . . . then:

Si au contraire on appelle rhéteur non plus celui qui soumet son discours aux bonnes règles du sens, de la philosophie, de la dialectique philosophique, de la vérité, non plus celui en somme que la rhétorique philosophique accepte en lui prescrivant ses règles de bienséance, mais au contraire celui que Platon—alors excédé—voulait *chasser de la cité comme un sophiste ou un anti-philosophe*, Mallarmé est peut-être alors un très grand rhétoriqueur; un sophiste, sans doute, mais celui qui ne se laisse pas prendre par l’image que la philosophie a voulu nous laisser de lui en le captant dans un spéculum platonicien et en même temps, ce qui n’est nullement contradictoire, en le mettant hors la loi. *On sait que comme tant de lecteurs de Mallarmé, Platon doublait alors son active méconnaissance d’une admiration déclarée.* (Tableau, 378; my emphasis)

[If on the contrary one no longer calls a rhetor the person who submits his discourse to the appropriate rules of meaning, of philosophy, of philosophical dialectics, of truth, nor the person to sum up whom philosophical rhetoric accepts whilst prescribing him its rules of conventional behaviour, but on the contrary the person whom Plato—beside himself at this point—wanted to *expel from the city as a sophist or anti-philosopher*, Mallarmé is perhaps therefore a *grand rhétoriqueur*, a *sophist*, no doubt, but one who does not allow himself

to get caught in the image of him with which philosophy has sought to bequeath us, by capturing him in a Platonic speculum and at the same time, which is in no way contradictory, by placing him outside the law. *It is well known* that like so many of Mallarmé's readers, Plato combined his *active ignorance* with a *declared admiration*.]

The anonymity of "on sait" allows Derrida discreetly to slip away from the picture of "Stéphane Mallarmé," and quietly slip into the space left by "Platon." Thus he declares his admiration for the poet, whilst actively deciding to know him no more.

NOTES

1. The article (hereafter referred to parenthetically as *Tableau*) is rarely referred to by Mallarmé scholars, although one exception would be John Llewelyn in his piece "Derrida, Mallarmé, and Anatole" (*Philosophers' poets*, ed. David Wood, 93–110). The encyclopaedia itself does not appear to have made its mark, and yet there are some other interesting encounters one could explore, for example "Léon Bloy, par Roland Barthes." For the full text in English, see Christine Roulston's admirable translation "Mallarmé" (*Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, 110–127; thanks to Burhan Tufail for this information). In this article, however, the translations are my own, as are any mistakes. The reader will see that I have generally erred on the side of inelegant literalism. All bibliographical references are given in full in the Bibliography.

2. Derrida's epigraph to the article reads: "j'invente une langue qui doit nécessairement jaillir d'une poétique très nouvelle" [I am inventing a language that must necessarily spring from a very new poetics]. See section 3 below for fuller version of this extract from Mallarmé's correspondence. On the matter of Mallarmé's rejection from the Parnasse, see Henri Mondor, *L'Histoire d'un faune*.

3. As Mallarmé himself said, in a moment of rare arrogance: "Très affiné, j'ai été dix ans d'avance du côté où les jeunes esprits pareils devaient tourner aujourd'hui" (*Oeuvres complètes*, 664 [hereafter *Oc*] [Very refined, I was ten years ahead in that direction where similar young minds were destined to turn today]). In chapter 2 of *The name of the poet*, I comment upon Mallarmé's positioning relative to his youthful followers, in particular the sight of the senior poet standing at the "helm" of a literary banquet held in his honor and reading "Salut," a poem in which he ironizes precisely about the "youth" of his aesthetic advance and the "age" of his advancing years.

4. Derrida seems to have been especially fond of Mallarmé's denial of the "present." In the article I am discussing, the quotation "Unique fois, etc." is granted pride of place amongst the many citations from Mallarmé's writings. The passage is drawn from "L'action restreinte," and strongly echoes a similar dismantlement of presence in "Mimique," the text with which Derrida kicks

off "La double séance." I should add at this point that, to the Derrida specialist, much of "Mallarmé, par Jacques Derrida" may look like a bite-size rewrite of the double seminar of 1969. My aim is to inform that impression with some views from Valvins rather than Ris Orangis.

5. There is a great deal one might say about the pair's shared interest in ghosts. In addition to all the *hommages* and *tombeaux*, and plain journalistic obituaries, Derrida would surely have been familiar with Mallarmé's most evident piece of prosopopeia or ghost-speech, the sonnet entitled "Sur les bois oubliés . . .," in which Mallarmé imagines the dead wife reassuring her grieving husband that "pour revivre il suffit qu'à tes lèvres j'emprunte / Le souffle de mon nom murmuré tout un soir" (*Poésies*, 158 [hereafter *Poë*] [to live again it is enough that on your lips I borrow / The breath of my name murmured for a whole evening]).

6. See, for example, "Le bonheur de Mallarmé" in *Figures I*; "Littérature et totalité" in *Logiques*; and of course *La révolution du langage poétique*.

7. "Spacing out" is the dictionary translation of "espacement." Maud Ellmann follows it in her article "Spacing out: a double entendre on Mallarmé" (22–31). Regarding my use here of the word *totalitarian*, I should make it clear that Richard himself uses it to describe his project:

Notre travail . . . se place dans une perspective que nous croyons nouvelle: nommons-la, si l'on veut, interrogative et totalitaire. Notre effort a été de comprendre Mallarmé globalement, de rejoindre en lui l'esprit à la lettre, le 'fond' à la 'forme,' et de réunir en un seul faisceau toutes les exaltations soulevées par cette oeuvre incomparable. A tous les niveaux où une même conscience poursuit un même projet d'être, il a voulu retrouver des lignes identiques de développement, des principes parallèles d'organisation. La critique, croyons-nous, peut être à la fois une herméneutique et un art combinatoire. Elle déchiffre alors en réunissant . . . elle rêvera d'instituer entre toutes les oeuvres particulières, et tous les registres—sérieux, tragique, métaphysique, précieux, amoureux, esthétique, idéologique, frivole de cette oeuvre, une relation d'ensemble qui les oblige à mutuellement s'éclaircir. (1961, 14–15)

[Our work . . . places itself in a perspective we believe to be new: let us call it, if you like, interrogative and totalitarian. Our effort has been to understand Mallarmé as a whole, to join up in him the spirit of the letter, the "content" to the "form," and to bring together in a single fasces (*sic*) all the exaltations inspired by this incomparable work. At all levels at which a single consciousness pursues a single project of being, it (our effort) has sought to find identical lines of development, parallel principles of organization. Criticism, we believe, can be at once a hermeneutic and a combinative art. It deciphers, then, as it brings together . . . it will dream of instituting between all the particular works, and all the registers—serious, tragic, metaphysical, precious, amorous, aesthetic, ideological, frivolous—of this work, an overall relationship which obliges them mutually to enlighten each other.]

I quote the passage at such length firstly because I believe it informs Derrida's rewriting of "force" and "forme," and secondly because it stands as an