

A CRITIC AT LARGE | APRIL 11, 2016 ISSUE

ENCRYPTED

Translators confront the supreme enigma of Stéphane Mallarmé's poetry.

BY ALEX ROSS

At the dawn of modernism, in the late nineteenth century, the activity of avant-garde artists often resembled rival expeditions into uncharted polar regions. The goal was to discover novel spheres of expression: the unspoken word, the unpainted image, the unheard sound. Arguably, the Amundsen of fin-de-siècle art—the first to plant a flag at an outer extreme of artistic possibility—was the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé. Upon his death, in 1898, he left behind a body of work so inscrutable that it still causes literature students to fall to their knees in despair. Such was the import of a note that I recently found in a library copy of Mallarmé's selected letters: "Please pray that God would give me the patience and perseverance to get through this next week."

After only a few lines of Mallarmé, you are engulfed in fine mist, and terror sets in.

ILLUSTRATION BY HUGO GUINNESS



Mallarmé's revolution arrived in an outwardly conservative guise. Many of his poems take the form of sonnets, and many employ the twelve-syllable alexandrine, the meter of classical French tragedy. After only one or two lines, though, you are engulfed in fine mist, and a certain terror sets in. Consider the sonnet "Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui," whose first version probably dates from the late eighteen-sixties, when Mallarmé was in his mid-twenties. The translation is by the Scottish poet Peter Manson, in a collection published by Miami University Press in 2012:

The virginal, enduring, beautiful today
will a drunken beat of its wing break us
this hard, forgotten lake haunted under frost
by the transparent glacier of unfled flights!

A swan of old remembers it is he
magnificent but who without hope frees himself
for never having sung a place to live
when the boredom of sterile winter was resplendent.

His whole neck will shake off this white death-throe
inflicted by space on the bird denying it,
but not the horror of soil where the feathers are caught.

Phantom assigned to this place by pure brilliance,
he is paralyzed in the cold dream of contempt
put on in useless exile by the Swan.

This is actually one of Mallarmé's more approachable works. By the end, a relatively clear, almost Romantic picture has emerged: a swan is trapped in ice, unable to take flight. But getting there isn't easy. The first sentence seems to have wandered in from a sunnier poem. The subsequent sentences are impacted and fractured, the jamming together of disconnected images presaging Dadaism. Since these poems were first published, many readers have concluded that the effort is not worth it. For others, though, the difficulty of the path is justified by the unearthly beauty that hovers in the distance. "*Fantôme qu'à ce lieu son pur éclat assigné*": that line has a music beyond its meaning, its six-syllable phrases singing out in turn. (The first "e" is its own syllable, according to classical rules.) The sonnet evokes Mallarmé's own sense of exile; in a strange way, it is a portrait of itself, embodying an aesthetic of submerged magnificence. Writing of Mallarmé, the French philosopher Alain Badiou observed, "What the poem says, it does."

Mallarmé's place in the English-speaking world is somewhat tenuous. As Blake Bronson-Bartlett and Robert Fernandez point out in their new collection of translations, "Azure" (Wesleyan), he lacks the wide fame of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, who, with their drug-taking and other bohemian exploits, "set the bar for trailblazing misbehavior in philosophy and the arts from the early to the late twentieth century." Mallarmé is bland by comparison. He taught English in Paris and elsewhere in France; he married a German woman, Marie Gerhard, and had two children; he presided over a Tuesday gathering of fellow-poets; he published relatively little.

Yet his influence has been immense. Paul Claudel and Paul Valéry moved in his shadow; so, to varying degrees, did Eliot, Pound, Joyce, and, especially, Wallace Stevens, who staged similar collisions of grand abstraction and mundane reality.

Mallarmé also affected the visual artists of his time, having helped to define Impressionism in an 1876 essay; Manet, Whistler, Gauguin, and Renoir made portraits of him, Degas photographed him. In music, the advent of modernism is often pegged to Debussy's 1894 composition "Prelude to 'The Afternoon of a Faun,'" a meditation on Mallarmé's most famous poem. John Cage and Pierre Boulez, masters of the musical avant-garde, studied Mallarmé's explorations of chance and discontinuity. Perhaps the most prolonged resonance was in French philosophy and theory. From Sartre and Lacan to Blanchot and Derrida and on to Badiou, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Rancière, French thinkers have defined themselves through interpretations of Mallarmé. If you can crack these poems, it seems, you can crack the riddles of existence.

This prophet of the high modern never saw himself as a revolutionary. With the exception of one grand experiment—the free-form poem "Un Coup de Dés," or "A Throw of the Dice," proofs of which he was correcting at the time of his death—Mallarmé persisted with his sonnets and alexandrines. It is, however, precisely this tension between traditional form and radical content that keeps reactivating the shock of his writing. Sartre, in a skeptical yet passionate analysis, identified Mallarmé's method as "the terrorism of politesse"—civilization stylishly blowing itself to pieces. The poet himself said that he knew of no other bomb than a book.

Mallarmé took a certain pride in the drabness of his lineage, describing himself as the scion of an "uninterrupted series of functionaries in the Administration and the Registry." He was born in Paris in 1842, and had a lonely childhood; his mother died when he was five, and his sister died of rheumatic disease when he was fifteen. Dispatched to boarding school at the age of eight, he buried himself in books but irritated his teachers with his insubordinate attitude. By the time he was twenty, he had settled on pursuing literature. He married, and decided, mistakenly, that a career as a schoolteacher would give him plenty of time to write on the side. He chose English as his subject; his interest in the language was sparked by a passion for Poe, whom Baudelaire had discovered for French readers.

Hoping for a position in Paris, Mallarmé found himself banished to the provinces, where his shortcomings as a teacher became clear. He took little interest in his pupils; his methods were peculiar. Gordon Millan's 1994 biography quotes one inspector's report: "In the senior classes the teacher has them translate 'King Lear' from the text. Inevitably, the pupils understand nothing." As complaints mounted, he was shunted from one school to another. In the late eighteen-sixties, he underwent a psychological crisis that he recounted in vivid letters to friends. He reported that he felt "utterly dead"; that he had entered "the Void"; that he had become a "diamond, which reflects everything, but has no existence in itself." Having abandoned the Catholicism of his childhood, he delved into Kabbalistic and alchemical lore. He spoke of creating a supreme Book, a "great work," which would attempt an "Orphic explanation of the Earth."

It must have seemed that Mallarmé was losing his mind, particularly when he undertook linguistic experiments that flirted with gibberish. In the prose poem “The Demon of Analogy,” written in 1864, he depicts a man—presumably himself—wandering the streets, repeating the phrase “The penultimate is dead.” He breaks the phrase down into its syllables, the “-nul-” reminding him of a taut string on an instrument. He has passed into what he calls the “void of signification”—a realm of the “virtual” in which language dissolves into a succession of sounds. The piece reads like the beginning of a story by Poe that ends in a chamber of horrors. But the experience proves to be more liberating than terrifying. The protagonist keeps on walking—“strange person probably condemned to mourn forever the inexplicable Penultimate.” The poet has hit upon his principal method, which is to combine words in unexpected ways and thus to create a “new word” in their place.

“Your dad and I are getting a divorce.”



Mallarmé’s early writing is full of trapped, tortured figures, variations on the Hamlet persona. In the mid-sixties, he worked on two large projects: a dramatic poem called “Hérodiade,” related to the Biblical tale of Salome; and the extended reverie of “The Afternoon of a Faun.” The first conjures a

proud princess in icy isolation, not unlike the swan in “Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui.” The decapitation of John the Baptist is presented as a kind of spiritual ecstasy, in which the head escapes the “ancient discords with the body.” The “Faun,” first published in 1876, seems altogether brighter, its elusive but sensually charged imagery revealing a kind of pagan ritual: “Inert, all burns in the fallow hour. . . . Then will I awaken to the primal fervor / Erect and alone, under an antique flood of light.” Yet, even as the title figure revels in the vision of two nymphs, he fears that they were merely a dream, flitting out of the “mass of ancient night.”

In 1871, Mallarmé finally obtained a teaching post in Paris. For a time, he remained a marginal presence in literary life, his name known mainly to colleagues and connoisseurs. Then, in the mid-eighties, he found sudden renown. Paul Verlaine featured him in his anthology of “*poètes maudits*,” and J. K. Huysmans’s novelistic manual of decadence, “Against the Grain,” glorified him as the ne plus ultra of esoteric refinement. Although Mallarmé was still widely considered incomprehensible—the standard joke was to request a translation of his work into French—he acquired the reputation of a sage. Writers celebrated and unknown, from Oscar Wilde to the youthful Valéry, attended his Tuesday salon, on the Rue de Rome. Newspapers sent him questionnaires: “The Top Hat: is it ugly?” (Neither ugly nor beautiful, Mallarmé said.) He dutifully answered an influx of correspondence, evading cliché in even casual communications.

Mallarmé’s letters, a selection of which were translated into English in 1988, by Rosemary Lloyd, are a complex entertainment in themselves. He was a master of ostensibly effusive notes that contain a hidden catch. When, in 1871, he tells

Verlaine that the boldness of his colleague's first volume makes him regret the "vanity which makes me want to offer my work only when it is complete and perfect," he is hinting that Verlaine has published prematurely. And when he tells the Symbolist poet Jean Moréas that "you've succeeded in everything you've attempted," he is leaving open the possibility that Moréas hasn't attempted enough. (This anticipates Orson Welles's favorite evasive remark to actors: "You've done it again!") When he is truly impressed, he drops his reserve. Among his contemporaries, he revered most of all Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, a majestically strange and inventive proto-Symbolist writer who never has had the attention in English that he deserves, even though his play "Axël" inspired the title of Edmund Wilson's "Axel's Castle." Villiers probably needed little encouragement in his mystical flights and ironic thrusts, but it must have been a happy day when he opened a letter from Mallarmé and read, "The language of a god is in every line."

In 1893, Mallarmé retired from teaching, but his freedom lasted less than five years: a spasm of the larynx killed him. Separateness and sadness hung over him to the end. His life had been punctuated by losses—the death of his mother, the death of his sister, and, most woundingly, the death of his son, Anatole, in 1879, at the age of eight, also of rheumatic disease. In the wake of that trauma, Mallarmé worked on an elegy, called "For Anatole's Tomb," which was never finished. There, for once, he spoke in terms so direct as to be brutal: "Sick in the springtime dead in the autumn . . . did not know mother, and son did not know me! . . . Your future which has taken refuge in me becomes my purity through life, which I shall not touch . . . O terror he is dead!"

Badiou, in his 1988 treatise, "Being and Event," writes, "There is a certain element of the detective novel in the Mallarméan enigma: an empty salon, a vase, a dark sea—what crime, what catastrophe, what enormous misadventure is indicated by these clues?" Mallarmé's poems preserve the ordinary spaces of bourgeois life. We pass through rooms heavy with furniture: cupboards, armoires, beds, clocks. Lace rustles against windows. Outside, we gaze at the sun and sunsets, at stars and constellations. Mallarmé liked to sail, and wrote often of boats and celestial navigation. But in one way or another these settings are torn, shaken, upended. The image of a *nauffrage*, or shipwreck, looms as an unavoidable, almost desirable eventuality: poetry has to be shattered in order to live. "Destruction was my Beatrice," he wrote.

For most of the twentieth century, Mallarmé scholars focussed on the texture of his texts, on the free play of language. His objective, it seemed, was to abandon mimesis, the depiction of people and things. His poetics explicitly called for the "vibratory disappearance" of reality into a pure, self-sufficient work. Even more radically, that work results in the "disappearance of the poet, who cedes the initiative to words." Mallarmé became the house god of Roland Barthes and the post-structuralists, who proclaimed the "death of the author." Derrida's 1972 book "Dissemination" makes almost perfect sense if you come to it after an immersion in

Mallarmé. The theorist's musings on "undecidability," on the "excess of syntax over meaning," are precise paraphrases of Mallarmé's technique.

In recent decades, scholars have explored Mallarmé's spiritual inclinations—his rejection of organized religion and his quasi-pagan invocations of the sun. Damian Catani and Hélène Stafford, among others, have emphasized his awareness of everyday life: the poems contain references to theatre, dance halls, arcades, fairgrounds. He was the flâneur in the shadows. Rancière, in his 1996 book, "Mallarmé: The Politics of the Siren," identifies a political dimension in Mallarmé's seemingly apolitical, hermetic writing. It is, Rancière suggests, a solitary protest against worn-out language and false populist gestures, intended for the "greatness of a crowd to come." Indeed, Mallarmé once said that he was the one true anarchist, the demon in the system: "I alone create a product that society does not want."

Deserving of further study are Mallarmé's relationships with other art forms, which fuelled his ambitions. When he says, in a commentary on Manet's "Le Linge," that a palpable atmosphere is beginning to subsume distinct human figures, he not only captures the direction of Impressionist painting but articulates a process unfolding in his own work. He paid close attention to contemporary musical developments, especially the phenomenon of Wagnerism. In the wake of Baudelaire's 1861 essay "Richard Wagner and 'Tannhäuser' in Paris," Wagner became a dominant force in French literature. Mallarmé was fascinated by Wagner's art of "endless melody," and by the sight of crowds transfixed by its spell. For the journal *Revue Wagnérienne*, Mallarmé produced an essay titled "Richard Wagner, Reverie of a French Poet," praising the composer's drastic renovation of decrepit theatrical traditions. He also honored Wagner in one of his most aggressively obscure poems, the sonnet "Homage," which includes the line "The god Richard Wagner, irradiating a rite."

At the same time, Mallarmé saw Wagner as a threat and a challenge. The all-devouring composer was usurping the poet's function as the mouthpiece of humanity's primal myths. And Wagner's myths were too limiting, too bounded by nationhood. Poets, Mallarmé wrote, must "take back what is ours." They must sing of heroes with no name—"the Figure that is None" ("*la Figure que Nul n'est*"). This declaration is close to the ground zero of modernist abstraction. Mallarmé's tense negotiation with Wagner indicates the degree to which artistic genres can spur each other onward. Walter Pater wrote, "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music." In fact, each art form aspires toward the condition of another, and in so doing surpasses itself.

All great poets are untranslatable, their music audible only in their native tongue. The particular problem with Mallarmé is not simply that his writing loses lustre as it moves from French to English; it's that the mere act of translation erases the ambiguities that throng the text. Consider the sonnet "Salut," which addresses a gathering of poets. Rival English translations

of the last three lines—by Manson, David Scott, E. H. and A. M. Blackmore, and Bronson-Bartlett and Fernandez—almost form a poem in themselves, in the manner of Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”:

Solitude, récif, étoile
A n'importe ce qui valut
Le blanc souci de notre toile.

solitude, reef, star
 to whatever this is that was worth
 the white disquiet of our cloth.

Solitude, barrier reef, star
 To whatever merits most
 Concerns born of our blank white chart.

solitude, star, or rocky coast
 to things of any kind deserving
 of our sail’s white preoccupation.

Solitude, reef, star
 These which gathered, drew resonant
 And plumped the naked canvas of our craft



The first trio of words is clear enough—a metaphor for the poet as lonely pilot, navigating hazardous waters with his eyes fixed on the firmament. The translators diverge in confronting the word *toile*, which can variously mean “cloth,” “painter’s canvas,” or “web,” with the blank page on the writer’s desk also implied. To choose an English equivalent is to eliminate the alternatives. A decision of meaning is forced, as on a multiple-choice test. To follow Badiou’s metaphor, the translator is the detective who unravels the mystery, spoiling it in the process.

English translators have employed several strategies against this intractable target. Some follow Mallarmé’s rhyme schemes, in order to preserve his double identity as traditionalist and experimenter. This is Henry Weinfield’s approach in a 1994 collection, published by the University of California Press. Weinfield’s solutions are ingenious, though the effort of inventing rhymes sometimes causes a visible strain. Others jettison rhyme and push Mallarmé toward the twentieth-century verse he influenced so heavily. Into this camp fall Manson and, more provocatively, Bronson-Bartlett and Fernandez, who aimed to “create translations that worked as contemporary poems.” Unlike most other translators, they supply no French texts

on facing pages.

The goal is laudable, the execution inconsistent. At times, Bronson-Bartlett and Fernandez supply lightly modernized but generally straightforward renditions of the poems, as in their crisp, economical version of Mallarmé's sonnet in honor of Poe:

As, at last, shaped into Eternity,
The Poet rises with sword drawn,
His century aghast for having missed
That death triumphed in this strange voice!

Elsewhere, they produce a kind of fantasia on the original—less updating than rewriting. In the sonnet “Sainte,” Mallarmé describes St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music, as a “musician of the silence” in a stained-glass window. Bronson-Bartlett and Fernandez introduce “black apples of silence” into the final lines, although there is no trace of apples in the poem. In the sonnet of the iced-in swan, the translators insert a mention of the myth of Leda and the Swan, which is not irrelevant but is also absent from the original. Particularly jarring is a passage from “Funeral Toast,” in which Mallarmé celebrates his Parnassian predecessor Théophile Gautier:

Magnificent, plenary, this
Nothing sucks decorum from the breasts of men.
You pathetic fucks! Confirmed: We are
Frigid echoes, stony elegiac gaze of future specters.

In their preface, the translators say that the obscenity is intended to give readers a “frisson” such as the original might have elicited. Perhaps so, but they make Mallarmé sound like a foulmouthed élitist. “You pathetic fucks!” purports to translate “*Cette foule hagarde*,” or “This haggard crowd”—the populace that mourns Gautier without understanding him. Mallarmé may be detached from the crowd, but he is not contemptuous of it. Manson, whose translation of Mallarmé's poems is probably the most elegant, allows these lines to breathe more freely:

Magnificent, total and solitary, and such
as the bogus pride of men trembles to breathe.
The crowds are wild! now they announce: We are
the sad opacity of our future spectres.

Bronson-Bartlett and Fernandez include in their collection a fairly direct translation of “Un Coup de Dés,” Mallarmé's climactic experiment. That poem is also available in a slender, handsome volume from the Seattle press Wave Books, in a fine translation by Jeff Clark and Robert Bononno. Here, Mallarmé leapfrogs

over the most radical exponents of free verse: a text of seven hundred and fourteen words is scattered across eleven double pages, in staggered lines and in type of varying sizes, often with independent sentences juxtaposed. This may be Mallarmé's ultimate response to Wagner: the layout evokes musical notation, with voices rising and falling amid expectant silences. The central thought, spilling in block letters across multiple pages, is "A THROW OF THE DICE WILL NEVER ABOLISH CHANCE." During his early crisis, Mallarmé had been shaken by the realization that language had an element of randomness, that the sounds of words often failed to match their meaning. Poetry, pictured as a roll of the dice, could never eliminate chance, but it could master it by subsuming its effects.

On close inspection, "Un Coup de Dés" presents an almost theatrical scene: after a shipwreck, a poet, or Master, bobs with his head above water, holding a pair of dice that he hesitates to roll (on what surface we do not know), even though the act would generate a "unique Number" in which some cosmic secret might be hidden. The Master vanishes, and in his wake a siren rises, beating her tail against the rock that caused the wreck. She seems to bring about a mystical transmutation:

in these indefinite regions
of the wave
wherein all reality is dissolved

At the end, a constellation of seven stars shines overhead—either the Big Dipper or the Little Dipper, both of which can be glimpsed in the layout of the final pages. Beyond these quasi-verifiable elements, interpretations proliferate wildly. "The Number and the Siren," a 2011 book by the philosopher Quentin Meillassoux, goes so far as to calculate the Number that may or may not have been thrown by the Master: it turns out to be seven hundred and seven. The argument is contorted, dizzying, and almost plausible. It seems intended less as a definitive solution to the mystery than as a virtuoso play in the endless exegetical game, which has a different outcome for each reader.

In the latter part of "Azure," Bronson-Bartlett and Fernandez venture into the darkest patch of the Mallarméan forest—the notes that he made toward his projected "great work" (usually called the "Livre"). This is the first extended English translation of the notes, and they carry mystification to the breaking point. On one page, we find nothing but the words "genius," "glory," "passion," "health," and "life." On another, we find jottings about seating arrangements and ticket prices. As the translators observe in their preface, one can faintly discern a plot: in a ruined city, a Hero poet prepares to overcome his Hamlet-like stasis and bring about the salvation of humanity. Almost certainly, though, Mallarmé did not intend these sketches to be read in sequence; indeed, before his death he asked his wife and his daughter to burn them.

Despite intimations of “Darkness Absolute,” of universal nothingness, Mallarmé saw himself to be affirming truths rather than negating them. He aimed at nothing less than a sacred book for a future humanity. As Meillassoux writes, this incantatory text was to displace conventional religious representation with a “diffusion of the divine,” a direct emanation of godly presence. The project can easily be dismissed as ridiculous, even delusional; if so, it is a delusion embedded in the act of making art.

In October, the Paris branch of Sotheby’s auctioned off a portion of Mallarmé’s private library. Sotheby’s broadcast the proceedings online, and it was a melancholy sight. Volumes that Mallarmé had treasured as sacred entities —“Everything in the world exists to end up in a book,” he once said—were sold to bidders across the globe. Then again, it was impressive to witness the intense interest that this recondite author still arouses. A sustained battle over the autograph manuscript of “Un Coup de Dés” ended when it sold for nearly a million euros, amid loud applause.

Included in the auction were a number of volumes that Mallarmé’s acolytes had sent him. These prompted little excitement on the auction floor. During one lull, I ventured to put in a long-distance bid, for about the price of a night at a mid-range Paris hotel. To my surprise, I found myself the owner of three books by Camille Mauclair, a minor writer in the Mallarmé circle. They are inscribed with expressions such as “*À mon cher Maître*” in a serpentine hand that resembles the Master’s. There are no markings on the pages, but correspondence suggests that Mallarmé read them. In a letter about the novel “L’Orient Vierge,” he told Mauclair that it was “one of the new, free books of the epoch,” although he had questions about how to “hold and balance all of it together.”

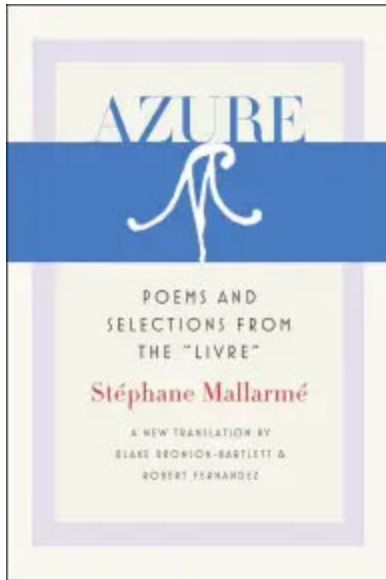
I gave one of the books to a friend, the translator and singer Laurent Slaars. The others sit on a shelf in my library. They are probably the most remarkable things I will ever own—shards of the Mallarméan temple, where the word was god. ♦



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REVIEW: Azure: Poems and Selections from the “Livre” by Blake

Bronson-Bartlett and Robert Fernandez



To translate the spirit is an intention of such enormity, so phantasmal, that it can well turn out to be inoffensive . . . — Borges, “The Translators of *The 1001 Nights*”

by Jerome Keeler

I

I had Borges’s writings on translation in mind when I picked up *Azure: Poems and Selections from the “Livre,”* the recent translation of Stéphane Mallarmé by Blake Bronson-Bartlett and Robert Fernandez. The book’s reputation preceded it. It aims to convey a sense of the peculiar energies a reader of Mallarmé’s time would have perceived in his work by rendering this work vital to our own time—that is, by creating translations that work as contemporary poems. Previous renderings, the translators feel—they single out the highly-regarded efforts of the Henry Weinfield (University of California Press, 1994) and E.H. and A.M. Blackmore (Oxford, 2006)—are too academic, too antiquated in their diction, and, most importantly, too occupied with preserving meter and end rhyme at the expense of other poetic qualities. The present version, as the translators’ note explains, “privileges a certain music—a *striking* music—that is integral to Mallarmé’s poetics.”

These are admirable aims. But they introduce a new set of challenges in tackling Mallarmé, who is justly considered the least translatable of French poets. This is all to say that Bronson-Bartlett and Fernandez had their work cut out for them, and I confess I found it hard not to go in rather skeptical of the project.

To lend some concreteness to assessing the collection, I would like to focus on important parts of two of Mallarmé’s most representative poems. Here, then, is an excerpt from the early and relatively accessible “Azure,” in the more faithful rhyming translation of Weinfield as well as the present translation.

Weinfield:

—The Sky is dead.—Toward you I run!

Bestow, O matter,

Forgetfulness of Sin and the cruel Ideal

Upon this martyr who comes to share the litter

Where the happy herd of men is made to kneel.

For there I long, because at last my brain,

Like an empty rouge-pot on a dressing stand,

Has lost the art of decking out its pain,

To yawn morosely toward a humble end . . .

In vain! The Azure triumphs [. . .]

Bronson-Bartlett/Fernandez:

—Sky's dead.—Toward you I run. Give, o

Heaviness of all things, forgetfulness of the Ideal

And of sin, to this martyr who sojourns

Among the sweat of mortal cattle.

I want out. My empty brain, empty

As a pot of face paint at the wall's foot,

Dry, empty, it can't face paint, mask, a weepy idea

Shuttling some girth toward pinned eyes . . .

Vain! Azure triumphs [. . .]

There are many interesting points of comparison here. The most noticeable, I think, are the differences in the treatments of the second stanza. Certainly the longing and the morose yawning of Weinfeld's rendering, and even the rouge-pot and the dressing stand, feel mannered by contrast to the touches of the present translation. The wordplay of "it can't face paint," for instance, strikes me as just the sort one might encounter in a contemporary poem. The enjambed

free verse of the present translation feels fresher as well, especially in contrast to Weinfield's base of rhymed iambic pentameter. The decision to abandon end rhyme and regular meter, in fact, seems much more significant to this collection as a whole than any updates in diction. But this brings me to what I find the more interesting points of comparison: the first stanza, and the thought that follows the second. Here, in terms of contemporary feel, there is, I think, little meaningful difference between the translations. This sort of unevenness from stanza to stanza and also from poem to poem reflects the general situation in the first half of this collection.

I intend this not as a major criticism but simply as an observation about the challenges in rendering a late nineteenth-century poet contemporary. Mallarmé was heavily influenced by Baudelaire, and his early verse, composed in the 1860s, has a decidedly Baudelairean atmosphere: "Ennui," "the Ideal," and "Azure," often apostrophized and capitalized, are invoked repeatedly. Consider "Azure." For Mallarmé, this is not simply a color that sounds like it belongs in a poem but a conception, an atheist alternative to "ciel," which, in French, can mean both sky and heaven. This is lost on us. And if "Ennui" can't necessarily be called antiquated, it's hard to imagine anyone today blissfully cultivating it in the manner of Baudelaire and the Decadents. "Boredom" isn't really an update, but it's also not so intimately bound to a particular historical context. And it is, at least, a translation. I wondered why it, or something like it, did not appear. Occasionally, in fact, the translators conceive an ingenious solution—I particularly enjoyed "infinite whatever" as a rendering of "langueur infinie" (literally "infinite languor") in the poem "Sigh." It's a wide departure from the original but a perfect expression of contemporary sensibility. For the most part, however, the vocabulary of the Symbolists and their precursors remains untouched. The presence of such content in one stanza or poem, then, with an update such as "night cinema," "Oxys" (for Oxycontin), or "Gravitrons" in the next, seems an indication of an unfinished battle—or perhaps simply an unwinnable one. In any case, I found the issue intriguing, though sometimes distracting, and I wondered if more might have been done to address it.

I don't wish to give the impression that nothing in *Azure* feels truly contemporary. The shorter poems toward the end of the collection are remarkably so. These are drawn from Mallarmé's mature verse of the 1880s. The Baudelairean influence is diminished. The translators are in their element here, and they take more liberties in departing from the French. Certain gestures are masterful and can be appreciated without comparison to the originals, as in the final stanza of "Scrap, as for an Album"—

Such a raw, clear

Childlike laughter

Releasing air-Valentines

—and the opening stanza of a section from "To you colonist":

No lace

Can't believe this incredible joy

And won't ironize it, open

And it would require a separate review to do justice to the 108-page selection from the “Livre,” Mallarmé’s manuscript notes toward a book-of-books that would reveal “all existing relations between everything.” This selection, translated into English for the first time, is a significant contribution to Mallarmé scholarship. But it is much more than that. I was pleased to find that these notes, fragmented and unfinished as they may be, and in fact precisely for that reason, read as a kind of postmodern concrete poem in the form of an outline for a book/stage play, complete with crossed out words, diagrams, arrows, and equations.

II

I would like to shift focus to the translators’ goal of conveying the music integral to Mallarmé’s poetics. This seems to me a much more interesting aim. It is also one in which they largely succeed. For Weinfield and other translators, end rhyme is the most important property of Mallarmé’s verse. It’s hard to say they are wrong in this. However, this is also the property most difficult to do any justice to. Mallarmé’s end rhymes are often far too complex, and too spectacular, to be transferred into English. The results are bound to be disappointing. This is particularly true of two of his greatest achievements, “Prose (for des Esseintes),” which contains a series of masterful homonymic end rhymes that cross word boundaries, and the delightfully inscrutable sonnet “Her pure nails,” also known as the “Sonnet en –yx.” The latter is far and away the most significant offering of Bronson-Bartlett and Fernandez’s collection. To understand why, we must know a bit more about the poem.

The “Sonnet en –yx” consists of two quatrains followed by two tercets. It contains an intricate scheme in which end rhymes are “crossed” between the quatrains and the tercets, playing on the cross of the letter x itself and on the image of a cross that occurs at the beginning of the first tercet and that is central to the meaning of the poem. The crossing is achieved through an inversion of the gender of the rhymes between the quatrains and tercets: the first and third lines of each quatrain end with a rhyme in the masculine *yx* or *ix* (onyx, Phénix), while the second and fourth lines end with a rhyme in the feminine *ore* (sonore, s’honore). Each tercet contains one rhyme ending in the feminine *ixe* (fixe) and two rhymes ending in the masculine *or* (septuor). The centrality of the poem’s sounds to its meaning is signaled by the wordplay of its opening phrase, *ses purs ongles* (her pure nails). When said aloud in French, the sounds of the first three syllables of this phrase are nearly identical to the sounds of the phrase *c’est pur son* (it’s pure sound).

This feat is impossible to reproduce in the absence of gendered nouns. The best a translator can do is preserve the rhymes ending in x sounds and skip the other rhymes altogether or offer some less satisfactory substitute. Weinfield tries the latter, other translators the former. Bronson-Bartlett and Fernandez realize that English allows for wordplay of other sorts.

Here is the final stanza of the poem in the original, followed by a fairly literal translation by Patricia Terry and Maurice Shroder, and then the present translation.

Mallarmé:

Elle, défunte, nue en le miroir, encor

Que, dans l'oubli fermé par le cadre, se fixe

De scintillations sitôt le septuor.

Terry/Shroder:

She, in the mirror, nude, defunct, although

Within the framed oblivion at once

Appears, all scintillation, the Septet.

Bronson-Bartlett/Fernandez:

She, stripped, dejected mist in the mirror, even

Though in this oblivion, frame-enclosed, is fixed

The coming cinquefoil, sext chiming, for our septet

The masterstroke here is the last line, which plays on the interactions among the sounds and appearances of French and English words. Most obviously, the line mirrors the sibilance of *scintillations–sitôt–septuor* through “cinquefoil,” “sext,” and “septet.” And it is not only the s sounds of “scintillation” and “sitôt” that are evoked but their initial vowel sounds: the *san* of “scintillations” is suggested through the visual “cinq” of “cinquefoil,” while the *si* of “sitôt,” is conjured, one might say, through substitution: the French six is pronounced *cease*, and “sext,” one of several ecclesiastical terms central to the poem, designates noon, the sixth canonical hour. The line goes even further when considered on a strictly visual level, playing on the French five, six, and seven (*cinq*, *six*, *sept*), openly through “cinquefoil” and “septet,” and obliquely, again, through “sext.” Thus the translation renders explicit a counting that is essentially subliminal in the French *scin–si–sept*. This counting is significant: it prepares for the culmination in “septuor,” the revelation that the “pure nails” referenced in the poem’s first line are the seven stars of the constellation Ursa Major. In terms of the actual words, with the exception of “septet,” Bronson-Bartlett and Fernandez’s line is nowhere close to the meaning of the French. I can only imagine how long it took to conceive. I would not have minded more like it.

There are many more qualities that distinguish this collection from previous translations. This is a surprisingly visceral Mallarmé, still largely impenetrable except through close study or previous knowledge, yet easier to appreciate for the immediacy of its imagery and the beauty of its language. Those with purist tendencies are sure to object to the collection’s many departures,

and those who have not read Mallarmé previously will need to turn to exegesis. But I think that, despite all of this, and rather miraculously, the translators accomplished much more than could reasonably have been expected.

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The Triumph of Translation

Diane Goodman

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be that which brings *Wordglass* to a close. “Orpheus—*The Descent into the Underworld*” unfolds like a story by Paul Bowles, leading us further and further from what feels safe. “A wisp of perfume in the night air...” is the seductive opening line, and the physically and philosophically robust culmination of this sinister narrative holds within it an admission

of compulsion that does nothing to allay our fears—rather the opposite. This is Kramer at his best: an unhindered and unsettling storyline that delivers complexity in a simple package.

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THE TRIUMPH OF TRANSLATION

Diane Goodman

**AZURE:
POEMS AND SELECTIONS
FROM THE “LIVRE”**

Stéphane Mallarmé

Blake Bronson-Bartlett &
Robert Fernandez, trans.

Wesleyan University Press
www.upne.com/0819575791.html
232 Pages; Print, \$17.95

Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898), the great French symbolist, may have been the most modernist of the Modernist poets; his work explored the elaborate complexities of his time through radical innovations in poetic language and often startling experiments in form. Often thought to simultaneously resist and demand interpretation, Mallarmé’s work increasingly pushed past traditional artistic boundaries, transcending the real toward what he envisioned as the ideal in ways that even his equally original contemporaries—Verlaine and Rimbaud, and Baudelaire before them—did not. So it is not surprising that Mallarmé’s work poses enormous challenges for translators. And while there are many highly lauded translations of Mallarmé into English, post-doctoral teaching fellow and editor Blake Bronson-Bartlett and poet Robert Fernandez have broken boundaries themselves and triumphed in their new translation *Azure: Poems and Selections from the “Livre.”*

Azure begins with the translations from *Poesies* (1899), which includes some of Mallarmé’s most well known poems, such as “Tomb of Edgar Poe,” “Tomb of Baudelaire,” “Funeral Toast,” and “The Afternoon of a Faun;” these are followed by the new translation of *Un Coup de Des* (“A Cast of Dice”) and, for the first time in English, selections of notes from the “Livre,” Mallarmé’s massive work—what he called his *grand oeuvre*—that remained unfinished at the poet’s death.

In their comprehensive, enlightening and—at least for this reader—necessary “Translators’s Note,” Bronson-Bartlett and Fernandez discuss what motivated them to take on this project, what obstacles they encountered, and what inspirations they celebrated and then employed to produce new English versions that they hope will launch a revitalized interest in Mallarmé and his poems.

There have been a lot of English translations of Mallarmé’s work and many of them have received sparkling praise. Bronson-Bartlett and Fernandez pay due respect to these efforts, particularly to the translations of Henry Weinfield (1994) and E. H. and A. M. Blackmore (2006). In the “Translators’s Note,” they demonstrate how their own work acknowledges that of these predecessors’s but then moves beyond in order to, “carry over from Mallarmé’s verse some of what Weinfield and the Blackmores did not while taking some of the same liberties.” They explain their own goals, to “create translations that worked as contemporary poems and that linked translation to the reading and writing of poetry.” To that end, the work in *Azure* is the product not only of considering French and

its English “equivalents” in terms of connotative, associative, symbolic and metaphorical meanings, but also of meticulous attention to the ways both languages present in sound—syllables and meter, inflection, internal and external rhyme (full and slant)—and many other poetic concerns and techniques to achieve what these translators call “a certain music—a *striking* music—that is integral to Mallarmé’s poetics and that has not surfaced in previous translations.”

Bronson-Bartlett and Fernandez “sought to maintain an ethos of fearlessness, respecting Mallarmé’s own wild gambles” in order “to make poetry that exceeds both poet and translator to become the very name of intervention.” To demonstrate how they did this, they provide as example the first four lines of the second stanza of Mallarmé’s poem, *Funeral Toast*—presenting first the original in French, then Weinfield’s translation, then the Blackmore’s and then their own. The comparisons reveal evidence of the theories and approaches that precede them in these “Translators’s Note;” some of the choices may seem startling but at the same time bring forth both a more powerful vision—one that is in keeping with Mallarmé’s ideas and contemporary at the same time—and a more lyrical musical version than previous translations, some of which have been described as too academic. As Fernandez himself said, “Our translation was not

**“Livre” is fascinating in terms of the
progression of Mallarmé’s ideas.**

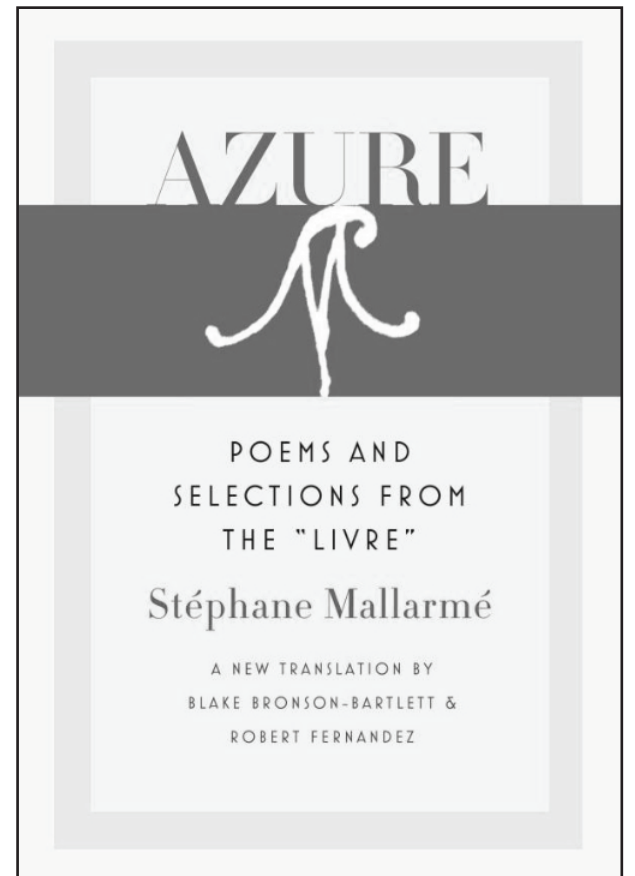
done out of survival or responsibility (who needs another Mallarmé?), but excitement and fascination and a sense of adventure. I believe that because we had nothing to lose, we were able to uncover veins of seeing and music that may otherwise have lain dormant.”

Unlike the audience of Mallarmé’s time, readers in the twenty-first Century will not be shocked or surprised by the formal layout of “A Cast of Dice” (variously translated over the years as “A Throw of the Dice,” “A Roll of the Dice”...) but it is interesting to consider how the use of white space, the bold letters in all capitals, the way the lines move back and forth across the page—ignoring traditional and creating new margins—would have unnerved late nineteenth/early twentieth century readers expecting the poetic forms they were used to, particularly when the poems explored extreme and unconventional ideas about reality in obscure and often elusive language:

in these latitudes
of the wave
in which all reality dissolves

EXCEPT
at the altitude
MAYBE

as far as place fuses
with the beyond.
Finally, we are presented with excerpts



from the “Livre” (“The Book”), which was to encompass all of Mallarmé’s ideas and theories but was not completed at the time of his death. In the “Translator’s Note,” Bronson-Bartlett and Fernandez explain how they chose excerpts from *Le Livre* (a 250+ page manuscript), provide some of the determinations behind their translation decisions, and present some necessary background regarding what Mallarmé had in mind for his *grand oeuvre*. For readers interested in process, the material in “Livre” is fascinating in terms of the progression of Mallarmé’s ideas, lines he chose to save and those he crossed out, those his markings suggest he was attempting to move around the page, etc. In addition to the lines and edits, these excerpts in “Livre” also include drawings and “schematic illustrations” of the “seating plans for the theater in which the ‘Livre’ would be enacted.” And while Bronson-Bartlett and Fernandez’s discussion of the translation choices they made in this section offers another compelling consideration of the relationship between translation and the nuances of language, there is more to be perplexed than enlightened by in the excerpts from the “Livre.”

That Mallarmé had a career, albeit not particularly successful, teaching English is an interesting aside to reading these new English translations of his poems. Of course we have no way of knowing whether or not he would have approved but this much is clear: Bronson-Bartlett and Fernandez not only showcase Mallarmé’s poetic sensibility, genius, beauty and skill, but their own as well.

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