

TO WHAT IS MALLARMÉ REFERRING?

Abstract

Mallarmé, like many poets before and since, is seen to be struggling with a recalcitrant language which is not normally precise enough to cope with the complex richness that is reality. Consequently, the poetic strategies that he adopts make for a language that is obscure rather than clear. However, in the 'vers de circonstance' the relationship between poem and referent is usually clear while the same linguistic complexities as in the major poems are still to be found. The latter are linguistic constructions. In the case of 'Salut', the referent turns out to be created by the poem rather than being described by it. Indeed, on closer examination, the 'vers de circonstance' turn out to be similar. It is the art of verbal creation that predominates, being more highly valued than the thing to which reference is made. In fact, the actual referent may have disappeared and can only be known through the verse that accompanied it. Reality is transitory and presence becomes absence. Language is a strategy that allows us to deal with this fact, corresponding to the absent object and filling the void it leaves.

Stéphane Mallarmé has the reputation of being difficult. So does Jacques Derrida. Yet the latter gives a very simple explanation as to why the former's poetry should pose a challenge for the average reader:

A text is made to do without references; either to the thing itself, as we shall see, or to the author who consigns to it nothing except its disappearance.¹

Lloyd Austin would agree with Derrida about the difficulty of Mallarmé's poetry:

A la tradition de l'énonciation claire et directe, la «clarté française» chère à Boileau et à ses successeurs, Mallarmé opposait la poétique de l'allusion, de la présentation oblique, de la suggestion, du mystère. Il lance un défi au lecteur, l'appelant à une participation active au travail de l'imagination créatrice.²

For Austin, the link between language and world is not direct but oblique. The poet can allude to or suggest what is already there but essentially his is a poetry of imaginative creation rather than depiction.

For Claude Abastado the poems are a mixture of both clarity and obscurity:

Une recherche fondée sur une expérience singulière du langage, un contact affectif, voluptueux, avec les mots reste difficilement transmissible: il n'y a pas de dictionnaire des connotations. C'est pourquoi le poème unit l'obscurité à la clarté.³

Of course, this very difficulty is seen by many commentators to be a virtue. Maurice Blanchot warns against the danger of over-valuing what sup-

posedly simple, direct language can achieve. The real source of obfuscation is everyday language which substitutes habit for reality:

La parole brute n'est ni brute ni immédiate. Mais elle donne l'illusion de l'être. Elle est extrêmement réfléchi, elle est lourde de l'histoire. Mais, le plus souvent, et comme si nous n'étions pas capables dans le cours ordinaire de la vie de nous savoir l'organe du temps, les gardiens du devenir, la parole semble le lieu d'une révélation immédiatement donnée, semble le signe que la vérité est immédiate, toujours la même et toujours disponible. La parole immédiate est peut-être en effet rapport avec le monde immédiat, avec ce qui nous est immédiatement proche et notre voisinage, mais cet immédiat que nous communique la parole commune n'est que le lointain voilé, l'absolument étranger qui se donne pour l'habituel, l'insolite que nous prenons pour coutumier grâce à ce voile qu'est le langage et à cette habitude de l'illusion des mots.⁴

Mallarmé himself was aware of everyday language's inability to convey reality materially:

Les langues imparfaites en cela que plusieurs, manque la suprême: penser étant écrire sans accessoires, ni chuchotement mais tacite encore l'immortelle parole, la diversité, sur terre, des idiomes empêche personne de proférer les mots qui, sinon se trouveraient, par une frappe unique, elle-même matériellement la vérité.⁵

Language is not coincident with reality. Verse, however, makes good this deficiency: 'lui, philosophiquement rémunère le défaut des langues, complètement supérieur' (p. 364).

All of the above make the assumption that the difficulties of Mallarmé's work spring from the inadequacies of language in conveying the real world. Unable to render the immediacy of experience it becomes opaque, substituting itself for the experience. As Jacques Michon puts it:

Si le symbole rend le langage opaque, et refuse de s'effacer devant le réel, c'est justement pour remplacer cette réalité par le monde intermédiaire de la fiction poétique.⁶

Mallarmé's language usurps reality. Words point the way to other words and form self-sustaining and self-perpetuating chains and patterns. As Blanchot says, writing is the art of finding 'le point où ici coïncide avec nulle part'.⁷ The result is that, as Michon implies, reality is the victim of language. The former is itself unproblematic. Mallarmé calls it 'la vérité' and the writer's problems arise from the fact that language is imperfect, inadequate to the task.

It would seem reasonable to suppose, therefore, that the central preoccupation of Mallarmé's poetry is how to use language and that the difficulties arise from his attempts to bend this unsuitable medium to his purposes: it is a poetry wrestling with problems of form. Though this may be true, even a superficial overview of his poetic output will show that there is more to it than that. 'Vers de circonstance', which are a celebration of everyday life, form a large part of his output. He writes verses for fans, gifts

and photographs. Furthermore, his major poems are frequently celebrations of events and people. Mallarmé's subject matter, then, does not lead us to expect a poetry that flees the real world but rather one that seeks to tackle it. Content is important. A language which is opaque, obscure, which seeks to replace the real, which does away with reference would seem to be at odds with such an expectation.

The real is literally present in such squibs as:

Un parisien compliment
Dans ces oranges on insère
A vous ici tout uniment
Redevenus des fruits de serre.
(p. 129)

or:

Toute gracieuseté qu'on fit
Se change l'hiver en fruit confit.
(p. 130)

In these light-hearted and witty poems we find many of the characteristics we normally associate with Mallarmé. There is the disruption of syntax, allied to a rhythmic impulse which pushes the reader ever onwards, and the allusiveness of 'fruits de serre' to describe the candied fruit is different in degree only from 'Ce blanc vol fermé' in 'Autre éventail' (p. 58) which describes the closed fan. What makes these poems – part of the 'Dons de fruits glacés' from the 'Vers de criconstance' section of his complete works – interesting is their relationship to their referents. The first poem mentions 'ces oranges' and the second 'fruit confit', leaving us in no doubt to what they refer. Furthermore, they bring their referents with them! It is rather like Swift's Laputa where the inhabitants carry around objects in sacks and use these to communicate instead of relying, as does Gulliver, on language.

Another example of Mallarmé's lighter verse is to be found in his habit of writing his addresses in verse:

Chez Mademoiselle Augusta
Holmès, rue, environ quarante,
Juliette Lamber (reste à
Dire qu'elle est des Dieux parente).
(p. 91)

According to Whistler, quoted by Mondor and Jean-Aubry: 'Aucune des adresses en vers collationnées ici n'a manqué son destinataire' (p. 1503) – and this despite the fact that we find features associated with the obscure poetry, such as the audacious rhymes and the use of parentheses. If the

earlier 'Vers de circonstance' brought their referents with them, the position here is reversed in that the address in verse is brought to that part of reality that corresponds to it – thus establishing its validity.

Clearly, the link between language and reality needs to be re-examined. It is not necessarily the case that the world is hidden from view by an opaque language. Dislocation of syntax, allusiveness and the other features of Mallarmé's poetry are not a barrier between it and reality. However, the relationship is complex. Mallarmé exploits the fact that addresses are read by more people than intended. We always read our own addresses on the letters that we receive and that despite the fact that we can learn nothing from doing so and that it is the one part of the letter that is not intended for us. We are eavesdropping on a communication between the writer and the postman. Realising this, Mallarmé inserts into the address, by means of the parentheses, a message about Augusta Holmès. Ostensibly, this is meant to be a private communication to the postman and thus an honest opinion rather than a piece of flattery. However, the situation has been deliberately calculated so that she will read this fine opinion and furthermore she cannot but know that this is the case. Language plays a key role in the creation of this complex situation.

The poem 'Salut', accounted one of the major poems, also has a complicated relationship with reality. It is very much an occasional poem and the circumstances are very important to our understanding. It is the reference to the author and his position, surrounded by friends and proposing a toast, which is the backbone of the poem, on which the poet builds his elaborate and rich arabesques of sense. The first lines demonstrate this:

Rien, cette écume, vierge vers
A ne désigner que la coupe.
Telle loin se noie une troupe
De sirènes mainte à l'envers.

(p. 27)

Once we know that this is a toast, the phrase, 'cette écume', its referential status heightened by the use of the demonstrative article, can only refer to the froth of the wine, presumably champagne. It does not refer to the froth on the sea. The latter is, however, suggested but the metaphor, while striking and apt, presents no major interpretative problems. The context provides a stability around which the poet creates subsidiary meanings – but these are always subordinate. They are the vehicles of secondary senses, enriching by suggestiveness, clothing but not cloaking the situation. New patterns are suggested or shadow the main outline of the verse. Thus, 'rien' which is initially to be read as self-deprecatory joins with 'écume', 'vierge', 'ne . . . que' and 'coupe' to create a pattern of absence, dissolving, paring away. This is an evocation of the insubstantial. At the same time, 'rien', which comes from 'rem', meaning 'thing',

produces a counter-pattern, suggesting the possibility of real substance beyond the insubstantial. Added to this, the word 'coupe' suggests the shape or form a thing may take, the essential contours that make it what it is.

Yet despite this elaboration, the primary meaning of 'coupe' remains paramount. The other possible interpretations remain no more than that. What they do, however, is allow the reader access to a rich polyphony of sense. This can be seen by the treatment of 'vers' and 'coupe'. The former sounds like 'verre' but there is no question of Mallarmé wishing us to accept the reading 'glass', thereby giving access to some secret, ultimate meaning. Mallarmé's hermeticism is not simple-minded. It does not treat the world as some sort of illusion, hiding a true meaning from the uninitiated. Rather, the whole world is imbued with multiple meanings, each echoing the others to a greater or lesser degree. Consequently, the word 'verre' is echoed phonologically in 'vers' and semantically in 'coupe'. But that is not the end of the story. If 'coupe' strengthens the echo of 'verre' in 'vers', it is also true that 'vers' sets up an echo in 'coupe' because a 'coupe' can also mean a caesura or point of rest in a line of verse. The placing of 'vers' and 'coupe' at the end of a line, setting one against the other, reinforces this notion. Furthermore, the position of 'coupe' at the end of a line, a place where such a point of rest is of prime importance, uses form to reinforce this pattern. The patterns relating to verse form and cutting are brought together in this word as is the pattern of dissolution suggested by the 'écume' that it contains. Form and formlessness, the transience of the champagne bubbles and the permanence of Mallarmé's verse are brought together into a complex inter-relationship. Instead of sense being a point at which we arrive, a reference point, a point of stability, we become aware of sense as a process, a making of meanings. Like the address on a letter, it leads us on to where we want to go, without being itself the destination.

Nevertheless, the poem keeps the secondary meanings in their place. For they are like sirens, attractive and possessing a beauty all of their own. Their aim is to distract us, to make us listen to them and pursue them but if we do so we will, like the sailors in the Greek myth, drown. In Mallarmé's poem, it is the sirens who drown, as though lured by themselves to their doom. This is what happens when meaning follows meaning, unable to rest or reach a point of repose (the 'coupe' or caesura). Like the sailors, it is distracted away from the route that leads to its destination and destroys itself. Kept under control, however, the richness of secondary meanings leads to an enhancement of life. Like champagne, it produces 'une ivresse belle'.

So, in 'Salut', the referent has an important role to play. It is the ground bass on which Mallarmé erects his polyphonic edifices. The latter may obscure the former, but cannot do without it. Reference, despite what Derrida says, would appear to be essential. Yet it is a more complex process than

in the case of the candied fruit or Augusta Holmès' address. While it is true that this poem was indeed proclaimed at a literary banquet on the 15 February 1893, its relationship with reality is more complex than might at first appear. The following is a brief description taken from the account in *La Plume* and quoted by Mondor and Jean-Aubry:

. . . Stephane Mallarmé, se lève, prend sa coupe et d'une voix sonore, quoique mal assurée, dit l'exquis poème qui s'inscrit au fronton de cette revue.

(p. 1407)

Even bearing in mind that this is no less a text than is 'Salut', we realise that its relationship to its referent is different. Despite, or even because of the use of the historic present tense, the newspaper report is of an event that has already taken place and which is irrevocably separated from it. 'Salut' purports, on the one hand, to be the event and, on the other, to be, in its published form, an account of what took place. It claims to be the event and its evocation.

More than that, the referent, the touchstone of reality that provides stability, something against which we can judge the truth of the poem, turns out to be unstable. Although it is the same event in the real world (that is, there was only one toast), its referential status has altered. The newspaper is referring to the past while the poem is referring to event as both past and present. In fact, it is more than that. If Mallarmé picks up the glass, it is in part because that is what the conventions associated with the toast dictate. But he also picks up the glass because it is pre-written that he will do so. The poem is a prediction of the future because written before the event described. The phrase 'cette écume' – which shows that Mallarmé has picked up his glass – also requires him to do so. What Mallarmé does is determined by what he has written. If Mallarmé were to have clutched his notes and read from them instead of picking up his glass, the poem would have lost its point and been reduced to a nonsense.

Such a relationship between language and situation must make us reconsider R. A. York's description of the Mallarmean utterance as 'proud gesture without effect on the world'.⁸ However, the control of language over events must not be exaggerated. Mallarmé's freedom is limited by conventions. It is convention that allows him to determine what will happen. Convention dictates that the proposer of the toast will pick up the glass of champagne and Mallarmé uses this knowledge in the composition of his poem. Reality is created by the text which precedes it whereas in the case of the account in *La Plume* the text is determined by what happened. Carrying the argument a stage further, the piece in *La Plume* is secondary to Mallarmé's poem (to which it refers the reader) so that the referent of what purports to be a realistic account turns out to be another text.

The point that needs to be stressed is that the poem is both the creator of reality and of another text. This is not the case with the 'Vers de

circumstance'. An address written on a letter is a memory of where the addressee lives – it matters little whether it comes from the mind or an address-book. Similarly, the description of Augusta Holmès is Mallarmé's memory of what she is like. 'Salut' on the other hand masquerades as a memory. It pretends to be an account of what happened. It is not. It shapes the unknown future rather than recalls the known past. In being like a memory but not a memory, 'Salut' has a freedom with respect to its referent that the address does not have. It is not tied down by what exists already but can be creative. It is free to explore, to break new ground, to write the books that have not been read already. In 'Brise marine' that which surrounds the poet cannot hold him, whereas the unknown, that which has yet to be discovered, be it ever so dangerous, is what excites him:

Et, peut-être, les mâts, invitant les orages
Sont-ils de ceux qu'un vent penche sur les naufrages
Perdus, sans mâts, sans mâts, ni fertiles îlots . . .
Mais, ô mon coeur, entends le chant des matelots.

(p. 38)

It is clear that the first three lines are not a memory but a projection and the song of the sailors in the last line is one that carries promise of future adventure. Mallarmé is referring to a potential shipwreck not an actual one, to potential adventures which the ending of the poem leaves unrealised. The address, on the other hand is real. However, the number is not precisely given. It is 'environ quarante'. Although more firmly anchored to memory than 'Salut' or 'Brise marine', there is a lapse which weakens the link. The memory is not as attached to reality as it might be. There is a weakening of the bond.

What we see in the three poems then, is a differing relationship between reality, memory and the creative imagination. In the case of the address, the role of memory predominates and the poetic imagination is re-creative – though memory's ability to keep a grip on reality is undermined by the element of vagueness. In 'Brise marine', there is a finely balanced tension between memory and the imagination as the poet seeks to escape his debilitating context. In 'Salut', what poses as memory is really imagination and the poem does not re-create but creates the moment. It is the voyage (with its attendant dangers) that was imagined in 'Brise marine'. 'Salut' moves beyond the real world to create its own reality: it becomes its own referent. It is not, however, divorced from the real world. It shapes events to conform to what it says. It thus is able to pose as a memory – in essence indistinguishable from the newspaper report. It is imagination become memory. It creates its own referent and becomes the referent of other texts.

In this respect, 'Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui' is interesting because it has a literary referent as its starting point. Mondor and Jean-Aubry mention a possible source in a poem by Gautier:

Un cygne s'est pris en nageant
 Dans le bassin des Tuileries.

(p. 1485)

What Mallarmé's poem refers to, then, is not an event that really happened but a text. It is a description of a description, a reference to a reference. Unlike the address, which really existed, there does not appear to have been a scene of a swan stuck in the ice of Mallarmé to witness.

Nor does it represent an event that will take place. It has about it the quality of the lake itself:

Ce lac dur oublié que hante sous le givre
 Le transparent glacier des vols qui n'ont pas fui

(p. 67)

The 'lac dur' suggests something which resists penetration, through which one cannot see, while the 'transparent glacier' – notice how the reversal of the position of the respective adjectives underlines the contrast – suggests something that is so pervious that it is almost invisible. The 'givre' in its pivotal position at the end of a line is the hard crystalline substance that prevents us from seeing that which cannot be seen anyway. It is the cloak that hides the body but lets us know that the latter is there nonetheless. Thus it fulfils the contradictory role of hiding what exists – and thus allowing us to doubt it – while at the same time indicating where something must exist – our powers of reasoning supply the lack.

Indeed a parallel can be drawn with the address. It is what points the way to the place where Augusta Holmès lives. Like the address, these lines are meant to lead us – in this case, from something which is evidently there to something which must be there. The final destination, however, is something that could not possibly be there – the 'vols qui n'ont pas fui'. The noun and the epithet cancel each other out. 'Vol' is not just flight in the aviation sense but also flight in the sense of fleeing. Therefore, a 'vol' that is qualified by the verb 'fuir' in the negative is a contradiction in terms. The negative form of the verb suggests the static while its subject is by definition movement. There is thus a tremendous tension, of two equal and opposite forces in conflict, each trying to gain the upper hand.

This pattern is repeated. The 'lac dur' is qualified by both 'oublié' and 'que hante'. On one level these are compatible. In convention, the neglected is the prerequisite for a haunting. However, on another level there is the same fundamental incompatibility as in 'vols qui n'ont pas fui'. Thus 'hante' in addition to indicating a visitation by phantoms – in this case the unreal 'vols qui n'ont pas fui' – can also mean, and did originally mean, quite simply that the place mentioned is inhabited or frequented. Consequently it cannot be neglected or forgotten. The verb 'hante' is incompatible with 'oublié'.

Such tension means that the phrase can be read in two ways. The line 'Le transparent glacier des vols qui n'ont pas fui' is similarly paradoxical. What is transparent is so because it allows light – which is itself invisible, a medium not a message – to pass through it. It conveys meaning but does not add to (or subtract from) it. Thus the reader passes through the 'transparent glacier' to the 'vols qui n'ont pas fui'. But these are not capable of being seen either. The reader's gaze has nowhere to come to rest – our seeing has no object. The referent is thus effaced. If anything the 'transparent glacier' is more visible than what we are supposed to be able to glimpse through it. Ice for all its transparency, gets in the way of what we are seeing. We always know when we are looking through and at it. The medium transforms the message by interposing itself between the subject and object of the gaze. Ice transforms vision but does not prevent it. In this particular instance, however, the reader's gaze has nothing to alight on except the ice. The only thing that impedes light and is consequently visible is the 'transparent glacier' the conveyor of light. Paradoxically therefore the only thing the reader can apprehend is not the message but the medium. The message is the medium.

Derrida highlights this feature of Mallarmé's poetry:

All of Mallarmé's text, however, is organized in such a way that at its strongest points, the meaning remains *undecidable*; from then on, the signifier no longer lets itself be traversed, it remains, resists, exists and draws attention to itself. The labor of writing is no longer a transparent ether. It catches our attention and forces us, since we are no longer able to go beyond it with a simple gesture in the direction of what it 'means', to stop short in front of it or to work with it.⁹

However, in the light of what I have said above, I would disagree with the statement that 'the signifier no longer lets itself be traversed'. As we have seen, from the example of the 'transparent glacier', and as is implied by Derrida's earlier comment about the disappearance of the referent, the signifier does indeed let itself be traversed even if we never arrive anywhere. Signification becomes an unending process because denied a destination. Without a referent it is the only thing that is. Consequently, although we are traversing the signifier, it is the only thing that we can be aware of. Like the glacier, it is not quite as transparent as we might have thought and it is in this way that 'it remains, resists, exists and draws attention to itself'. As a result, in reading this poem our attention is focussed not on what is said but on the way it is said. Even more than in 'Salut', the poem is the event. When we try to look at what Mallarmé is saying, when we try to see what he means we find ourselves looking not at the ways in which the words fit the world they purport to describe but at the ways they fit in with each other. It is a verbal universe, a construct of words. They have their own coherence – but are certainly not meaningless. Nor are they capable of bearing any meaning the reader cares to impose upon it. The

patterns in the poetry provide boundaries beyond which there is nothing. No meaning can exist beyond them.

As already mentioned in the analysis of lines from 'Salut', our reading can no longer be linear. Moving through the text in such a way is like the gaze moving through the 'transparent glacier' – it is merely skating over the meaning. We must look instead at what we are reading through, attentive to those distortions that impeded the smoothness and draw attention to themselves and to the patterns they form. For example 'lac dur' and 'transparent glacier' form a chiasmus which is all the more appropriate given that the change in position of the two nouns with respect to their adjectives underlines the fact that 'lac' and 'glacier' are the same substance under different and opposite forms. On the other hand, a symmetrical counter-pattern of compatibility also suggests itself. The first and second words of each pair would also go together since a lake is normally transparent and a glacier hard. However, in this instance, the situation is abnormal – swans are not normally found trapped in the ice. Consequently, normal expectations are turned on their head.

In all the poems that we have looked at up to this point, we can see that more and more the emphasis is on transformation and on the role of language. Indeed language comes to usurp what we think it is describing. As York puts it: 'in Mallarmé the gratuitousness of description is blatant'.¹⁰ Style takes the dominant role. Thus in the address, it is the language not the information that stays with us. In the lines accompanying the glacé fruit, it is perhaps not too fanciful to suggest that the gift of the fruit was a mere excuse for the greater gift, the witty verse. indeed we would not be surprised, in fact we might expect it, if the recipient were to declare that she prized the poem more than the fruit. (It would be considered bad manners or a very cruel put down if it were claimed that the fruit gave more pleasure than the verse.) The very rhyme 'qu'on fit'/'confit' makes the preserving of the fruit part of the linguistic processes that preserve experience. The fruit then is doubly preserved and it is so because of language.

As we have seen in 'Salut', language does not preserve experience but can actually create it. the difference between this poem and 'Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui' is that in the latter case, as we have seen, the language is the experience. Reality is, normally, something beyond the poem and to which it refers. Yet this commonsense assertion is put into question when viewed from the vantage point of 'Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui'. Reality ceases to be, as the Laputans would like, a collection of objects that language lets us look at. Instead, all that language gives us access to is its own image and likeness. The 'transparent glacier' has become a mirror. Thus the reality that we see through this glass – which can be both window and mirror – is language – like. Reality is an image of language. It is a construct like language.

This is not of course to deny the existence of a real world. What is in question is its naturalness. With this in mind, the referents of the poems we have examined take on a new importance. The kind of fruit that is being offered is not fresh, natural produce. It is something that has been transformed. It has a transparent sheen caused by the sugar but at the same time resists the piercing gaze. It is real but it is not real fruit. It is something which has been made and whose glazed surface reflects the artifice of its own origins. This is underlined by the rhyme 'qu'on fit'/'confit' which stresses the facticity of the candied fruit by reminding the reader of the etymological link between 'confit' and 'faire'. This fruit is a construct, what Abastado, speaking of the symbol, describes as 'l'objet devenu parure' (p. 23).

Furthermore, the instability of the referent, noted in 'Salut', is also a feature here. When the verse first reached its intended audience, the recipient of the fruit, it brought its referent with it. This is no longer the case. The fruit has long gone. It did indeed exist and was referred to. Now it is referred to in a different way. It has to be re-created by the sympathetic reader. The verse which was a descriptive decoration now is the creator of the fruit. It is still the same fruit that is being referred to but its status has changed. From being a presence it has become an absence.

The address functions similarly. It is not the real house in which Augusta Holmès lives but it stands in for it. It is a verbal construction, a set of conventions which allow us to situate a dwelling in relation to others. It functions through these relationships so that we expect that No. 40 will be next to No. 38. In reality or in mathematics, however, it is 39 which should be next to (or should that be 'before'?) 40. Mallarmé's use of addresses in verse-form highlights the fact that they are one among many possible conventional constructions, part of a system which functions with its own internal coherence. The postman will only be able to find the appropriate house if housing is laid out according to similar conventions. If it is, then there is no point in looking for No. 40 next to No. 39. The numbers on our houses are but descriptions and so are addresses – descriptions of descriptions, a double gratuitousness. Consequently, we are all the time kept at one remove from the real. However, the system lets us cope with the real world. Letters do get delivered.

This means that we are not condemned to solipsism, imprisoned in language and unable to know what is in the real world. The candied fruit is or was a real object and Augusta Holmès a real woman living in a real street. Therefore, language can correspond to reality. It is in a sense a parallel contour describing what is there but not occupying the same space. It is like the hoarfrost in 'Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui'. It is not the ice itself but it delineates it.

This, far from proving the deficiency of language, shows the opposite. The quotation from Blanchot places great stress on the immediate and on

language's inability to grasp it. But is it possible to grasp the immediate? When Blanchot says that 'cet immédiat que nous communiquons la parole commune n'est que le lointain voilé' there is the implication that language is deceiving us, presenting us with something under false pretences. However, the problem surely lies with the here and now. It is never still but always changing. One here and now is replaced even at the moment it is experienced by a different one. The ousted one then becomes veiled in the distance. It remains the same experience but its status has changed. From being in the present, it has become part of the past, Just like the toast in 'Salut', it is a referent whose status has changed. The immediate is not an object but a status and one that is unstable. It is a quality that cannot be conveyed. The Laputans carrying around their objects so as to communicate in an immediate fashion are merely ridiculous. The immediate is always lost to us.

All we possess, all that language possesses, is the 'lointain voilé – never completely accessible, as the adjective shows. Mallarmé's is a poetry that prizes not the immediate – for it recognises that it cannot – but the secondary or derivative. This is to be seen in the subject matter of some of the poems that we have been examining. It is not fresh fruit but candied that is offered. Augusta Holmès is not a goddess, as in some poems, but is 'parente' – from the stock of the gods. As has already been pointed out, 'Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui' refers to a poem not a scene.

Language, therefore, surrounds the immediate, a zone whose contents are always slipping away. It recuperates and preserves what is not in that zone, what is thrust out of it. What is real is only definitive when it is no longer immediate. Hence Poe only achieves his true self when in death he is thrust from the immediacy of life into the eternity of death. The triumph of 'Salut' is in the way it so completely surrounds the immediate. Although it purports to be the event, we know that it cannot be. It is an account, in the same relationship to the event as candied fruit is to fresh. However, it also, as we have seen, predetermined the event. The immediate was constructed.

Language is not to be seen as deficient. It is in the nature of the immediate that it cannot be communicated. It is the real that is the ultimate solipsism. Language is about sharing and communicating. The toast that opens the Mallarmé's major poems is a confirmation of this. It is about sharing not excluding. It is only the immediate that excludes. What it excludes is the richness of our lives, that which we have already lived and hope to live. It keeps out the lives of others. The prison-house is not language but the here and now. Language reconstructs in its rich and elaborate form the complexity of the experience we do not have. It gives us what we do not have. Mallarmé recognised this when he wrote:

Je dis: une fleur! et, hors de l'oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque

chose d'autre que les calices sus, musicalement se lève, idée même et suave, l'absente de tous les bouquets.

(p. 368)

Language permits that which is absent, that which is no longer immediate to be recreated in poetry.

Absence is at the heart of Mallarmé's poems. What is absent is that immediacy that is single, absolute and undeniable. There is therefore no point of stability or repose, a point at which we can say that our interpretation must stop, that it can go no further, that all possibilities of meaning are ended. As we have seen in the poems examined above, traditional poetic effects are no less important. The only difference is the degree of freedom they have. The patterns of contrast and similarity, of rhyme and rhythm are just as powerful. It is the polyphony of sense that attracts. We enjoy the elaborations of the poetry for their own sake. If imagination is no longer tied to the immediate, its creativity is given its head. And so descriptions become gratuitous, important in themselves and not for their closeness to the real world of the here and now. Just as gifts or compliments are. They all exist for their own sakes. We enjoy the poem about the candied fruit without the thing itself. What we appreciate is the form – the rhyme, the rhythm. We dispense with the thing itself so that its absence is what sets in motion the poem.

To seek a referent, if by that we mean a presence that will guarantee one single meaning at the expense of others, is to limit the poetry. Taken to its logical conclusion, language would become what it is in Swift's Laputa where logical reasoning is taken as far as it can and communication is through inanimate objects not language. Mallarmé refuses to see words as being unique references to objects. If a message has one meaning, then when it delivers that meaning it is redundant and can be thrown away. This, indeed, is what is normally meant by 'vers de circonstance'. The gift is meant for one person and so is the message. The fruit has long since been consumed. Yet the message lives on – which strictly speaking it should not do. It lives not as a dedication but as a construction in language. Like Poe, it is transformed by its death into its definitive form against which time is now powerless. Similarly, the address has a life beyond the functional, firstly as a message about Augusta Holmès and then to her. Mallarmé realises that even in such apparently context dominated cases as these, language retains its power to transcend. In the other poems we have examined, he maximises this potential, showing how language can shape reality and outlive it: it is the immediate which is evanescent, not the poem. In 'Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui', there is no real starting point except the text of another poet, just as the newspaper report of the banquet has as its ultimate starting point the poem declaimed by Mallarmé. Language is in a world of its own corresponding to our own. Were it not

so, it would be impossible to use our knowledge of the properties of ice to understand the implications of 'transparent glacier', for example. Yet the poem has its own coherence, its own patterns of language which, as Derrida reminds us:

are infinitely vaster, more powerful and intertwined than is even possible to hint at here, are as if without support, always suspended. It is the Mallarméan doctrine of *suggestion*, of undecided allusion. Such indecision, which enables them to move alone and without end, cuts them off, in spite of appearances, from all meaning (signified theme) and from all referents (the thing itself, and the conscious or unconscious intention of the author).¹¹

As the above has demonstrated, Mallarmé's poetry may arise from particular circumstances but its deployment of the power of language is such that it transcends the particular. The real object is effaced to be resurrected in language, in a world where it may endure, even outliving its author.

University of Ulster
Faculty of Humanities
Magee College
Londonderry BT48 7JL
Northern Ireland

JOHN McCANN

Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, edited by Derek Attridge (New York and London, 1992), p. 113.
2. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Poésies*, edited by Lloyd Austin (Paris, 1989), p. 15.
3. Claude Abastado, *Expérience et théorie de la création poétique chez Mallarmé* (Paris, 1970), p. 40.
4. Maurice Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire* (Paris, 1955), pp. 40–41.
5. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris, 1945), pp. 363–364. Future references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
6. Jacques Michon, *Mallarmé et Les Mots Anglais* (Montreal, 1978), p. 158.
7. Blanchot, p. 52.
8. R. A. York, *The Poem as Utterance* (London, 1986), p. 58.
9. Derrida, p. 114.
10. York, p. 59.
11. Derrida, pp. 120–121.