

# STEPHANE MALLARME



## *UN COUP DE DES* & OTHER POEMS

*Translated into English by*

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## ABOUT THIS WORK

These translations of Mallarmé's major poetry reflect his position as a leading Symbolist poet of the nineteenth century. His use of complex syntax, and subtle turns of phrase, often makes his verse seem more abstruse than its content indicates, revealing as it does a relatively narrow though sophisticated world, predominantly literary and philosophical in nature. Part of the charm of his poetry is his ability to create a rich and detailed edifice from the simplest of ideas, objects, or occasions. Philosophically he is associated with ideas of absence and emptiness, but also of a quasi-Platonic realm of forms inherent in that emptiness, though paradoxically his verse, which often attempts to realise the ideal essence of the perceived external reality, through its images, symbols, and metaphors, appeals strongly to the senses. The impression is therefore given of a gleaming fin-de-siècle void, the gleam indeed strongly related to the world of Impressionist painting, the void partly a consequence of the earlier poetry of Baudelaire and Rimbaud with its analysis of the emptiness and frustrations of modern life, and partly derived from his own experience and thought.

Added here is a new translation of Mallarmé's free-verse poem 'Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard' ('A throw of the dice will never abolish chance'). An experiment in typographical layout, the author used variable spacing to indicate voids and pauses which highlight and contrast with the elements of text. The poem contains symbolist, impressionistic, and proto-surrealist themes, the various linguistic threads being emphasized by changes in font size. The poem has influenced many later experiments in the graphic design of free verse texts.



'The Siren clothed in barbs, emerged from the waves'

Odilon Redon (French, 1840 - 1916)

*National Gallery of Art | NGA Images*

A TOAST

Nothing, this foam, virgin verse  
Depicting the chalice alone:  
Far off a band of Sirens drown  
Many of them head first.

We sail, O my various  
Friends, I already at the stern,  
You at the lavish prow that churns  
The lightning's and the winters' flood:

A sweet intoxication urges me  
Despite pitching, tossing, fearlessly  
To offer this toast while standing

Solitude, reef, and starry veil  
To whatever's worthy of knowing  
The white anxiety of our sail.

FUTILE PETITION

Princess! In jealousy of a Hebe's fate  
Rising over this cup at your lips' kisses,  
I spend my fires with the slender rank of prelate  
And won't even figure naked on Sèvres dishes.

Since I'm not your pampered poodle,  
Pastille, rouge or sentimental game  
And know your shuttered glance at me too well,  
Blonde whose hairdressers have goldsmiths' names!

Name me...you whose laughs strawberry-crammed  
Are mingling with a flock of docile lambs  
Everywhere grazing vows bleating joy the while,

Name me...so that Love winged with a fan  
Paints me there, lulling the fold, flute in hand,  
Princess, name me the shepherd of your smiles.



A NEGRESS

Possessed by some demon now a negress  
Would taste a girl-child saddened by strange fruits  
Forbidden ones too under the ragged dress,  
This glutton's ready to try a trick or two:

To her belly she twins two fortunate tits  
And, so high that no hand knows how to seize her,  
Thrusts the dark shock of her booted legs  
Just like a tongue unskilled in pleasure.

Facing the timorous nakedness of the gazelle  
That trembles, on her back like an elephant gone wild,  
Waiting upside down, she keenly admires herself,  
Laughing with her bared teeth at the child:

And, between her legs where the victim's couched,  
Raising the black flesh split beneath its mane,  
Advances the palate of that alien mouth  
Pale, rosy as a shell from the Spanish Main.



'The Queen of Sheba'

Odilon Redon (French, 1840 - 1916)

National Gallery of Art | NGA Images

ANGUISH

I don't come to conquer your flesh tonight, O beast  
In whom are the sins of the race, nor to stir  
In your foul tresses a mournful tempest  
Beneath the fatal boredom my kisses pour:

A heavy sleep without those dreams that creep  
Under curtains alien to remorse, I ask of your bed,  
Sleep you can savour after your dark deceits,  
You who know more of Nothingness than the dead.

For Vice, gnawing this inborn nobleness of mine  
Marked me, like you, with its sterility,  
But shroud-haunted, pale, destroyed, I flee

While that heart no tooth of any crime  
Can wound lives in your breast of stone,  
Frightened of dying while I sleep alone.



'Perversity'

Odilon Redon (French, 1840 - 1916)

*National Gallery of Art | NGA Images*

SUMMER SADNESS

The sun, on the sand, O sleeping wrestler,  
Warms a languid bath in the gold of your hair,  
Melting the incense on your hostile features,  
Mixing an amorous liquid with the tears.

The immutable calm of this white burning,  
O my fearful kisses, makes you say, sadly,  
‘Will we ever be one mummified winding,  
Under the ancient sands and palms so happy?’

But your tresses are a tepid river,  
Where the soul that haunts us drowns, without a shiver  
And finds the Nothingness you cannot know!

I’ll taste the unguent of your eyelids’ shore,  
To see if it can grant to the heart, at your blow,  
The insensibility of stones and the azure.



'A woman clothed with the sun'  
Odilon Redon (French, 1840 - 1916)  
*National Gallery of Art | NGA Images*

THE CLOWN CHASTISED

Eyes, lakes of my simple passion to be reborn  
Other than as the actor who gestures with his hand  
As with a pen, and evokes the foul soot of the lamps,  
Here's a window in the walls of cloth I've torn.

With legs and arms a limpid treacherous swimmer  
With endless leaps, disowning the sickness  
Hamlet! It's as if I began to build in the ocean depths  
A thousand tombs: to vanish still virgin there.

Mirthful gold of a cymbal beaten with fists,  
The sun all at once strikes the pure nakedness  
That breathed itself out of my coolness of nacre,

Rancid night of the skin, when you swept over me,  
Not knowing, ungrateful one, that it was, this make-up,  
My whole anointing, drowned in ice-water perfidy.

THE POEM'S GIFT

I bring you the child of an Idumean night!  
Black, with pale naked bleeding wings, Light  
Through the glass, burnished with gold and spice,  
Through panes, still dismal, alas, and cold as ice,  
Hurled itself, daybreak, against the angelic lamp.  
Palm-leaves! And when it showed this relic, damp,  
To that father attempting an inimical smile,  
The solitude shuddered, azure, sterile.  
O lullaby, with your daughter, and the innocence  
Of your cold feet, greet a terrible new being:  
A voice where harpsichords and viols linger,  
Will you press that breast, with your withered finger,  
From which Woman flows in Sibylline whiteness to  
Those lips starved by the air's virgin blue?





'Angel with a chain in their hands'  
Odilon Redon (French, 1840 - 1916)  
The Rijksmuseum

L'APRES-MIDI D'UN FAUNE

ECLOGUE

THE FAUN

These nymphs, I would perpetuate them.

So bright

Their crimson flesh that hovers there, light

In the air drowsy with dense slumbers.

Did I love a dream?

My doubt, mass of ancient night, ends extreme

In many a subtle branch, that remaining the true

Woods themselves, proves, alas, that I too

Offered myself, alone, as triumph, the false ideal of roses.

Let's see....

or if those women you note

Reflect your fabulous senses' desire!

Faun, illusion escapes from the blue eye,

Cold, like a fount of tears, of the most chaste:

But the other, she, all sighs, contrasts you say

Like a breeze of day warm on your fleece?

No! Through the swoon, heavy and motionless

Stifling with heat the cool morning's struggles

No water, but that which my flute pours, murmurs  
To the grove sprinkled with melodies: and the sole breeze  
Out of the twin pipes, quick to breathe  
Before it scatters the sound in an arid rain,  
Is unstirred by any wrinkle of the horizon,  
The visible breath, artificial and serene,  
Of inspiration returning to heights unseen.

O Sicilian shores of a marshy calm  
My vanity plunders vying with the sun,  
Silent beneath scintillating flowers, RELATE  
*'That I was cutting hollow reeds here tamed  
By talent: when, on the green gold of distant  
Verdure offering its vine to the fountains,  
An animal whiteness undulates to rest:  
And as a slow prelude in which the pipes exist  
This flight of swans, no, of Naiads cover  
Or plunge...'*

Inert, all things burn in the tawny hour  
Not seeing by what art there fled away together  
Too much of hymen desired by one who seeks there  
The *natural A*: then I'll wake to the primal fever  
Erect, alone, beneath the ancient flood, light's power,  
Lily! And the one among you all for artlessness.

Other than this sweet nothing shown by their lip, the kiss  
That softly gives assurance of treachery,  
My breast, virgin of proof, reveals the mystery  
Of the bite from some illustrious tooth planted;  
Let that go! Such the arcane chose for confidant,  
The great twin reed we play under the azure ceiling,  
That turning towards itself the cheek's quivering,  
Dreams, in a long solo, so we might amuse  
The beauties round about by false notes that confuse  
Between itself and our credulous singing;  
And create as far as love can, modulating,  
The vanishing, from the common dream of pure flank  
Or back followed by my shuttered glances,  
Of a sonorous, empty and monotonous line.

Try then, instrument of flights, O malign  
Syrinx by the lake where you await me, to flower again!  
I, proud of my murmur, intend to speak at length  
Of goddesses: and with idolatrous paintings  
Remove again from shadow their waists' bindings:  
So that when I've sucked the grapes' brightness  
To banish a regret done away with by my pretence,  
Laughing, I raise the emptied stem to the summer's sky  
And breathing into those luminous skins, then I,  
Desiring drunkenness, gaze through them till evening.

O nymphs, let's rise again with many memories.

*'My eye, piercing the reeds, speared each immortal*

*Neck that drowns its burning in the water*

*With a cry of rage towards the forest sky;*

*And the splendid bath of hair slipped by*

*In brightness and shuddering, O jewels!*

*I rush there: when, at my feet, entwine (bruised*

*By the languor tasted in their being-two's evil)*

*Girls sleeping in each other's arms' sole peril:*

*I seize them without untangling them and run*

*To this bank of roses wasting in the sun*

*All perfume, hated by the frivolous shade*

*Where our frolic should be like a vanished day.'*

I adore you, wrath of virgins, O shy

Delight of the nude sacred burden that glides

Away to flee my fiery lip, drinking

The secret terrors of the flesh like quivering

Lightning: from the feet of the heartless one

To the heart of the timid, in a moment abandoned

By innocence wet with wild tears or less sad vapours.

*'Happy at conquering these treacherous fears*

*My crime's to have parted the dishevelled tangle*

*Of kisses that the gods kept so well mingled:*

*For I'd scarcely begun to hide an ardent laugh*

*In one girl's happy depths (holding back*

*With only a finger, so that her feathery candour*

*Might be tinted by the passion of her burning sister,  
The little one, naïve and not even blushing)  
Than from my arms, undone by vague dying,  
This prey, forever ungrateful, frees itself and is gone,  
Not pitying the sob with which I was still drunk.'*

No matter! Others will lead me towards happiness  
By the horns on my brow knotted with many a tress:  
You know, my passion, how ripe and purple already  
Every pomegranate bursts, murmuring with the bees:  
And our blood, enamoured of what will seize it,  
Flows for all the eternal swarm of desire yet.  
At the hour when this wood with gold and ashes heaves  
A feast's excited among the extinguished leaves:  
Etna! It's on your slopes, visited by Venus  
Setting in your lava her heels so artless,  
When a sad slumber thunders where the flame burns low.

I hold the queen!

O certain punishment...

No, but the soul

Void of words, and this heavy body,

Succumb to noon's proud silence slowly:

With no more ado, forgetting blasphemy, I

Must sleep, lying on the thirsty sand, and as I

Love, open my mouth to wine's true constellation!

Farewell to you, both: I go to see the shadow you have become.



'Ophelia, the blue cape on the waters'

Odilon Redon (French, 1840 - 1916)

*The Rijksmuseum*



FUNERAL LIBATION (AT GAUTIER'S TOMB)

To you, gone emblem of our happiness!

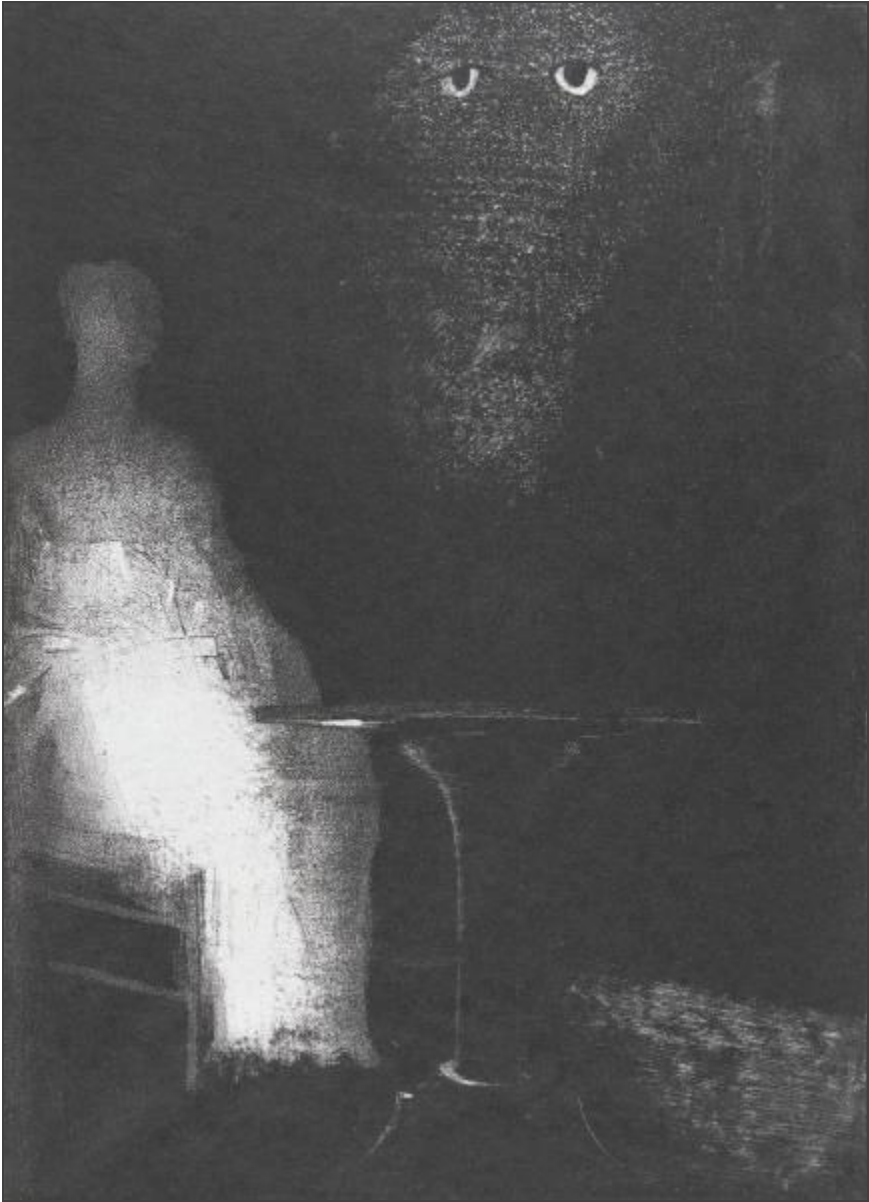
Greetings, in pale libation and madness,  
Don't think to some hope of magic corridors I offer  
My empty cup, where a monster of gold suffers!  
Your apparition cannot satisfy me:  
Since I myself entombed you in porphyry.  
The rite decrees our hands must quench the torch  
Against the iron mass of your tomb's porch:  
None at this simple ceremony should forget,  
Those chosen to sing the absence of the poet,  
That this monument encloses him entire.  
Were it not that his art's glory, full of fire  
Till the dark communal moment all of ash,  
Returns as proud evening's glow lights the glass,  
To the fires of the pure mortal sun!

Marvellous, total, solitary, so that one  
Trembles to breathe with man's false pride.  
This haggard crowd! 'We are', it cries,  
'Our future ghosts, their sad opacity.'  
But with walls blazoned, mourning, empty,  
I've scorned the lucid horror of a tear,

When, deaf to the sacred verse he does not fear,  
One of those passers-by, mute, blind, proud,  
Transmutes himself, a guest in his vague shroud,  
Into the virgin hero of posthumous waiting.  
A vast void carried through the fog's drifting,  
By the angry wind of words he did not say,  
Nothing, to this Man abolished yesterday:  
'What is Earth, O you, memories of horizons?'  
Shrieks the dream: and, a voice whose clarity lessens,  
Space, has for its toy this cry: 'I do not know!'

The Master, with eye profound, as he goes,  
Pacified the restless miracle of Eden,  
Who alone woke, in his voice's final *frisson*,  
The mystery of a name for the Lily and the Rose.  
Is there anything of this destiny left, or no?  
O, all of you, forget your darkened faith.  
Glorious, eternal genius has no shade.  
I, moved by your desire, wish to see  
for Him who vanished yesterday, in the Ideal  
Work that for us the garden of this star creates,  
As a solemn agitation in the air, that stays  
Honouring this quiet disaster, a stir  
Of words, a drunken red, calyx, clear,  
That, rain and diamonds, the crystal gaze  
Fixed on these flowers of which none fade,  
Isolates in the hour and the light of day!

That's all that's left already of our true play,  
Where the pure poet's gesture, humble, vast  
Must deny the dream, the enemy of his trust:  
So that on the morning of his exalted stay,  
When ancient death is for him as for Gautier,  
The un-opening of sacred eyes, the being-still,  
The solid tomb may rise, ornament this hill,  
The sepulchre where lies the power to blight,  
And miserly silence and the massive night.



'I look from above at the vague forms of a human figure'

Odilon Redon (French, 1840 - 1916)

*The Rijksmuseum*

THE TOMB OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

Such as eternity at last transforms into Himself,  
The Poet rouses with two-edged naked sword,  
His century terrified at having ignored  
Death triumphant in so strange a voice!

They, like a spasm of the Hydra, hearing the angel  
Once grant a purer sense to the words of the tribe,  
Loudly proclaimed it a magic potion, imbibed  
From some tidal brew black, and dishonourable.

If our imagination can carve no bas-relief  
From hostile soil and cloud, O grief,  
With which to deck Poe's dazzling sepulchre,

Let your granite at least mark a boundary forever,  
Calm block fallen here from some dark disaster,  
To dark flights of Blasphemy scattered through the future.



'Glory and praise to you, Satan, in the heights of heaven'

Odilon Redon (French, 1840 - 1916)

*National Gallery of Art | NGA Images*

THE TOMB OF CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

The buried shrine shows at its sewer-mouth's  
Sepulchral slobber of mud and rubies  
Some abominable statue of Anubis,  
The muzzle lit like a ferocious snout

Or as when a dubious wick twists in the new gas,  
Wiping out, as we know, the insults suffered  
Haggardly lighting an immortal pubis,  
Whose flight roosts according to the lamp

What votive leaves, dried in cities without evening  
Could bless, as she can, vainly sitting  
Against the marble of Baudelaire

Shudderingly absent from the veil that clothes her  
She, his Shade, a protective poisonous air  
Always to be breathed, although we die of her.



'Passage of a Spirit'

Odilon Redon (French, 1840 - 1916)

*National Gallery of Art | NGA Images*



TOMB (OF VERLAINE)

*Anniversary – January 1897*

The black rock enraged that the north wind rolls it on  
Will not halt itself, even under pious hands, still  
Testing its resemblance to human ill,  
As if to bless some fatal cast of bronze.

Here nearly always if the ring-dove coos  
This immaterial grief with many a fold of cloud  
Crushes the ripe star of tomorrows, whose crowd  
Will be silvered by its scintillations. Who

Following the solitary leap  
External once of our vagabond – seeks  
Verlaine? He's hidden in the grass, Verlaine

Only to catch, naïvely, not drying with his breath  
And without his lip drinking there, at peace again,  
A shallow stream that's slandered, and named Death.



'Pilgrim of the sublunary world'  
Odilon Redon (French, 1840 - 1916)  
*National Gallery of Art | NGA Images*

PROSE

Hyperbole! From my memory  
Triumphantly can't you  
Rise today, like sorcery  
From an iron-bound book or two:

Since, through science, I inscribe  
The hymn of hearts so spiritual  
In my patient work, inside  
Atlas, herbal, ritual.

We walked set our face  
(We were two, I maintain)  
Toward the many charms of place,  
Compared them, Sister, to yours again.

The reign of authority's troubled  
If, without reason, we say  
Of this south that our double  
Thoughtlessness has in play

That its site, bed of a hundred irises,  
(They know if it truly existed),  
Bears no name the golden breath  
Of the trumpet of summer cited.

Yes, on an isle the air charges  
With sight and not with visions  
Every flower showed itself larger  
Without entering our discussions.

Such flowers, immense, that every one  
Usually had as adornment  
A clear contour, a lacuna done  
To separate it from the garden.

Glories of long-held desire, Ideas  
Were all exalted in me, to see  
The Iris family appear  
Rising to this new duty,

But the sister sensible and fond  
Carried her look no further  
Than a smile, and as if to understand  
I continue my ancient labour.

Oh! Let the contentious spirit know  
At this hour when we are silent  
The stalks of multiple lilies grow  
Far too tall for our reason

And not as the riverbank weeps  
When its tedious game tells lies  
Claiming abundance should reach  
Into my first surprise

On hearing the whole sky and the map  
Behind my steps, without end, bear witness  
By the ebbing wave itself that  
This country never existed.

The child so taught by the paths,  
Resigns her ecstasy  
Says the word: Anastasius!  
Born for scrolls of eternity,

Before a tomb can laugh  
Beneath any sky, her ancestor,  
At bearing that name: Pulcheria!  
Hidden by the too-high lily-flower.



'Nasturtiums'  
Odilon Redon (French, 1840 - 1916)  
*Yale University Art Gallery*

A FAN

*(Of Mademoiselle Mallarmé's)*

With nothing of language but  
A beating in the sky  
From so precious a place yet  
Future verse will rise.

A low wing the messenger  
This fan if it is the one  
The same by which behind you there  
Some mirror has shone

Limpidly (where will fall  
pursued grain by grain  
a little invisible dust, all  
that can give me pain)

So may it always bless  
Your hands free of idleness.



'Pandora'  
Odilon Redon (French, 1840 - 1916)  
*The Met*



ANOTHER FAN

*(Of Mademoiselle Mallarmé's)*

O dreamer, that I may dive  
In pure pathless joy, understand,  
How by subtle deceits connive  
To keep my wing in your hand.

A coolness of twilight takes  
Its way to you at each beat  
Whose imprisoned flutter makes  
The horizon gently retreat.

Vertigo! How space quivers  
Like an enormous kiss  
That, wild to be born for no one, can neither  
Burst out or be soothed like this.

Do you feel the fierce paradise  
Like stifled laughter that slips  
To the unanimous crease's depths  
From the corner of your lips?

The sceptre of shores of rose  
Stagnant on golden nights,  
Is this white closed flight that shows  
Against your bracelet's fiery light.

ALBUM LEAF

All at once, as if in play,  
Mademoiselle, she who moots  
A wish to hear how it sounds today  
The wood of my several flutes

It seems to me that this foray  
Tried out here in a country place  
Was better when I put them away  
To look more closely at your face

Yes this vain whistling I suppress  
In so far as I can create  
Given my fingers pure distress  
It lacks the means to imitate

Your very natural and clear  
Childlike laughter that charms the air.

*(Written to Mademoiselle Roumanille whom Mallarmé knew as a child.)*



'Child's head with flowers'  
Odilon Redon (French, 1840 - 1916)  
*The Rijksmuseum*

NOTE

Not meaningless flurries like  
Those that frequent the street  
Subject to black hats in flight;  
But a dancer shown complete

A whirlwind of muslin or  
A furious scattering of spray  
Raised by her knee, she for  
Whom we live, to blow away

All, beyond her, mundane  
Witty, drunken, motionless,  
With her tutu, and refrain  
From other mark of distress,

Unless a light-hearted draught of air  
From her dress fans Whistler there.

LITTLE AIR

I

Any solitude  
Without a swan or *quai*  
Mirrors its disuse  
In the gaze I abdicate

Far from that pride's excess  
Too high to enfold  
In which many a sky paints itself  
With the twilight's gold

But languorously flows beside  
Like white linen laid aside  
Such fleeting birds as dive  
Exultantly at my side

Into the wave made you  
Your exultation nude.

II

Unconquerably there must  
As my hope hurls itself free  
Burst on high and be lost  
In silence and in fury

A voice alien to the wood  
Or followed by no echo,  
The bird one never could  
Hear again in this life below.

The wild musician,  
The one that in doubt expires  
As to whether from his breast or mine  
Has spurted the sob more dire

Torn apart may it complete  
Find rest on some path beneath!



'The Drowned'  
Odilon Redon (French, 1840 - 1916)  
*The Rijksmuseum*



SONNET: 'QUAND L'OMBRE MENAÇA...'

When the shadow with fatal law menaced me  
A certain old dream, sick desire of my spine,  
Beneath funereal ceilings afflicted by dying  
Folded its indubitable wing there within me.

Luxury, O ebony hall, where to tempt a king  
Famous garlands are writhing in death,  
You are only pride, shadows' lying breath  
For the eyes of a recluse dazed by believing.

Yes, I know that Earth in the depths of this night,  
Casts a strange mystery with vast brilliant light  
Beneath hideous centuries that darken it the less.

Space, like itself, whether denied or expanded  
Revolves in this boredom, vile flames as witness  
That a festive star's genius has been enkindled.

SONNET: 'LE VIERGE, LE VIVACE...'

The virginal, living and lovely day  
Will it fracture for us with a wild wing-blow  
This solid lost lake whose frost's haunted below  
By the glacier, transparent with flights not made?

A swan from time past remembers it's he  
Magnificent yet struggling hopelessly  
Through not having sung a liveable country  
From the radiant boredom of winter's sterility.

His neck will shake off this whitest agony  
Space inflicts on a bird that denies it wholly,  
But not earth's horror that entraps his feathers.

Phantom assigned to this place by his brilliance,  
The Swan in his exile is rendered motionless,  
Swathed uselessly by his cold dream of defiance.

SONNET: 'VICTORIEUSEMENT FUI LE SUICIDE...'

Victoriously the grand suicide fled  
Foaming blood, brand of glory, gold, tempest!  
O laughter if only to royally invest  
My absent tomb purple, down there, is spread.

What! Not even a fragment of all that brightness  
Remains, it is midnight, in the shade that fetes us,  
Except, from the head, there's a treasure, presumptuous,  
That pours without light its spoiled languidness,

Yours, always such a delight! Yours, yes,  
Retaining alone of the vanished sky, this  
Trace of childish triumph as you spread each tress,

Gleaming as you show it against the pillows,  
Like the helmet of war of a child-empress  
From which, to denote you, would pour down roses.



'Profile of Light'  
Odilon Redon (French, 1840 - 1916)  
*The Rijksmuseum*

SONNET: 'SES PURS ONGLES TRÈS HAUT...'

Her pure nails on high dedicating their onyx,  
Anguish, at midnight, supports, a lamp-holder,  
Many a twilight dream burnt by the Phoenix  
That won't be gathered in some ashes' amphora

On a table, in the empty room: here is no ptyx,  
Abolished bauble of sonorous uselessness,  
(Since the Master's gone to draw tears from the Styx  
With that sole object, vanity of Nothingness).

But near the casement wide to the north,  
A gold is dying, in accord with the décor  
Perhaps, those unicorns dashing fire at a nixie,

She who, naked and dead in the mirror, yet  
In the oblivion enclosed by the frame, is fixed  
As soon by scintillations as the septet.

*(The septet may indicate the constellation of Ursa Major in the north.)*



'If on a close dark night...'  
Odilon Redon (French, 1840 - 1916)  
*The Rijksmuseum*

SONNET: 'POUR VOTRE CHÈRE MORTE, SON AMI...'

*(For your dear departed wife, his friend) 2 November 1877*

– 'Over the lost woods when dark winter lowers  
You moan, O solitary captive of the threshold,  
That this double tomb which our pride should hold's  
Cluttered, alas, only with absent weight of flowers.

Unheard Midnight counts out his empty number,  
Wakefulness urges you never to close an eye,  
Before in the ancient armchair's embrace my  
Shade is illuminated by the dying embers.

Who wishes to receive visitations often,  
Mustn't load with too many flowers the stone  
My finger raises with a dead power's boredom.

A soul trembling to sit by a hearth so bright,  
To exist again, it's enough if I borrow from  
Your lips the breath of my name you murmur all night.'

TO THE SOLE CONCERN

To the sole task of voyaging  
Beyond an India dark and splendid  
– Goes time's messenger, this greeting,  
Cape that your stern has doubled

As on some low yard plunging  
Along with the vessel riding  
Skimmed in constant frolicking  
A bird bringing fresh tidings

That without the helm flickering  
Shrieked in pure monotones  
An utterly useless bearing  
Night, despair, and precious stones

Reflected by its singing so  
To the smile of pale Vasco.



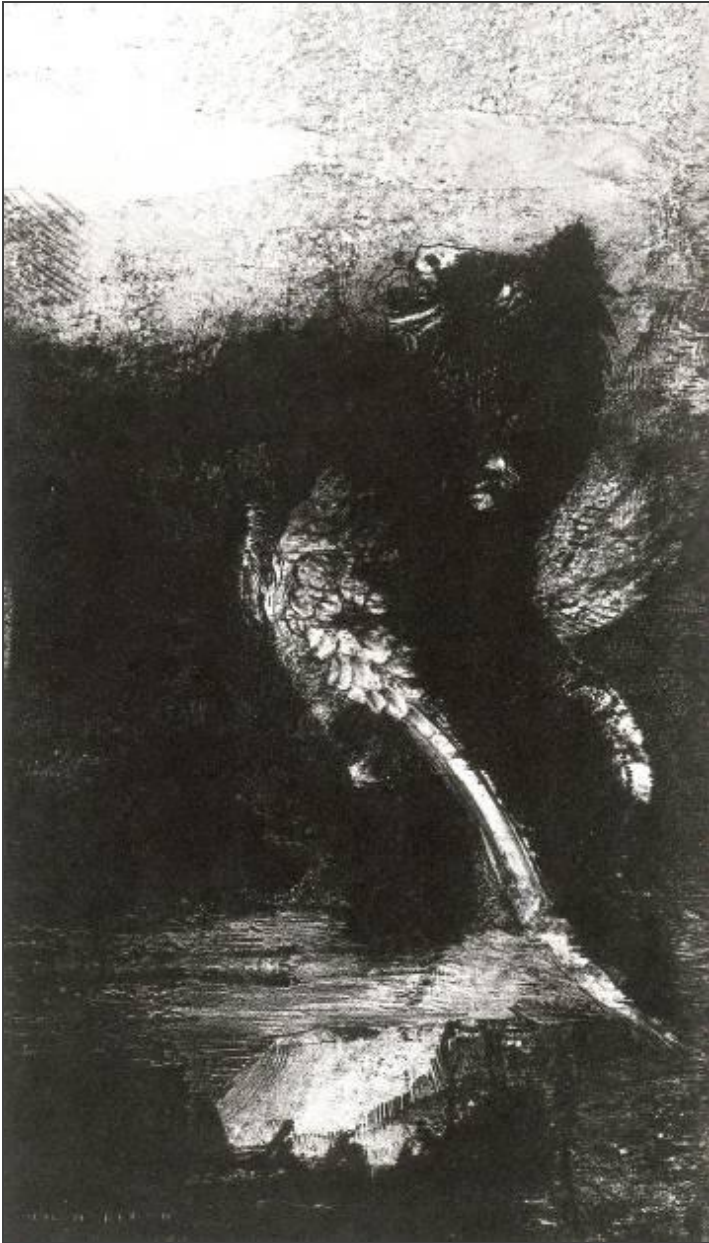
ALL SUMMARISED THE SOUL...

All summarised, the soul,  
When slowly we breathe it out  
In several rings of smoke  
By other rings wiped out

Bears witness to some cigar  
Burning skilfully while  
The ash is separated far  
From its bright kiss of fire

Should the choir of romantic art  
Fly so towards your lips  
Exclude from it if you start  
The real because it's cheap

Meaning too precise is sure  
To void your dreamy literature.



'The chimera with green eyes'  
Odilon Redon (French, 1840 - 1916)  
*The Rijksmuseum*

WHAT SILK...

What silk of time's sweet balm  
Where the Chimera tires himself  
Is worth the coils and natural cloud  
You tend before the mirror's calm?

The blanks of meditating flags  
Stand high along our avenue:  
But I've your naked tresses too  
To bury there my contented eyes.

No! The mouth cannot be sure  
Of tasting anything in its bite  
Unless your princely lover cares

In that mighty brush of hair  
To breathe out, like a diamond,  
The cry of Glory stifled there.



'Parsifal'

Odilon Redon (French, 1840 - 1916)

*The Rijksmuseum*

TO INTRODUCE MYSELF...

To introduce myself to your story  
It's as the frightened hero  
If he touched with naked toe  
A blade of territory

Prejudicial to glaciers I  
Know of no sin's naivety  
Whose loud laugh of victory  
You won't have then denied

Say if I'm not filled with joyousness  
Thunder and rubies to the hubs no less  
To see in the air this fire is piercing

With royal kingdoms far scattering,  
The wheel, crimson, as if in dying,  
Of my chariot's single evening.

CRUSHED BY . . .

Crushed by the overwhelming cloud  
Depth of basalt and lavas  
By even the enslaved echoes  
Of a trumpet without power

What sepulchral shipwreck (you  
Know it, slobbering there, foam)  
Among hulks the supreme one  
Flattened the naked mast too

Or that which, furious mistake  
Of some noble ill-fate  
All the vain abyss spread wide

In the so-white hair's trailing  
Would have drowned miser-like  
The childish flank of some Siren.

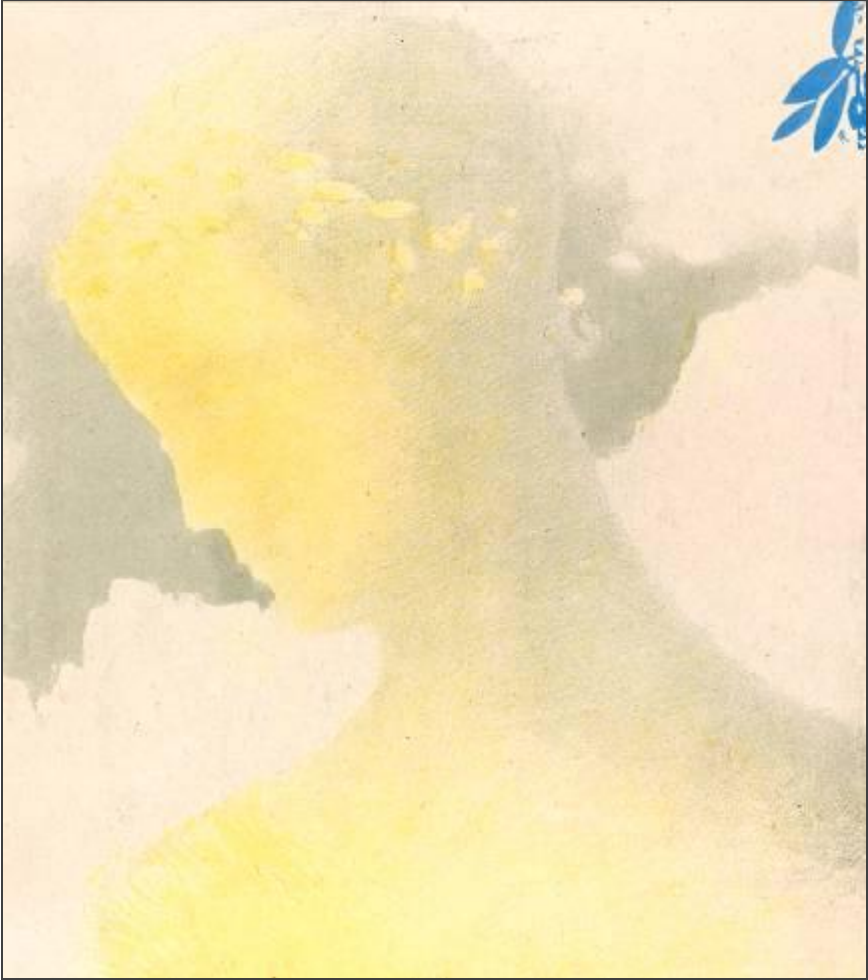
MY BOOKS...

My books closed again on Paphos' name,  
It delights me to choose with solitary genius  
A ruin, by foam-flecks in thousands blessed  
Beneath hyacinth, far off, in days of fame.

Let the cold flow with its silence of scythes,  
I'll not ululate here in a 'no' that's empty  
If this frolic so white near the ground denies  
To each site the honour of false scenery.

My hunger regaled by no fruits here I see  
Finds equal taste in their learned deficiency:  
Let one burst with human fragrance and flesh!

While my love pokes the fire, foot on cold iron  
I brood for a long time perhaps with distress  
On the other's seared breast of an ancient Amazon.



'Beatrice'

Odilon Redon (French, 1840 - 1916)

*National Gallery of Art | NGA Images*



SIGH

My soul, towards your brow where O calm sister,  
An autumn dreams, blotched by reddish smudges,  
And towards the errant sky of your angelic eye  
Climbs: as in a melancholy garden the true sigh  
Of a white jet of water towards the Azure!  
– To the Azure that October stirred, pale, pure,  
That in the vast pools mirrors infinite languor,  
And over dead water, where the leaves wander  
The wind, in russet throes, dig their cold furrow,  
Allows a long ray of yellow light to flow.

HOMAGE

Each Dawn however numb  
To raise a fist obscure  
Against trumpets of azure  
Sounded by her, the dumb,

Has the shepherd with his gourd  
Joined to a rod struck harshly  
Along the path to be  
Till the vast stream's outpoured

Already thus solitary  
You live O Puvis  
De Chavannes  
                never alone

Lead our age to quench its thirst  
From the shroud-less nymph, the one  
Whom your glory will rehearse

...MYSTICIS UMBRACULIS

She slept: her finger trembled, amethyst-less  
And naked, under her nightdress:  
After a deep sigh, ceased, cambric raised to her waist.

And her belly seemed of snow on which might rest,  
If a ray of light re-gilded the forest,  
A bright goldfinch's mossy nest.



'Closed Eyes'

Odilon Redon (French, 1840 - 1916)

*National Gallery of Art | NGA Images*

FAN

*(Of Méry Laurent)*

Frigid roses to last  
Identically will interrupt  
With a calyx, white, abrupt,  
Your breath become frost

But freed by my fluttering  
By shock profound, the sheaf  
Of frigidity melts to relief  
Of laughter's rapturous flowering.

In carving out the sky  
Like a fine fan you ply  
Outdoing that phial's glass

Without loss or violation  
Unable to hold fast  
Méry's sweet emanation.



'Silence'  
Odilon Redon (French, 1840 - 1916)  
*Minneapolis Institute of Art*

O SO DEAR

O so dear from far and near and white all  
So deliciously you, Méry, that I dream  
Of what impossibly flows, of some rare balm  
Over some flower-vase of darkened crystal.

Do you know it, yes! For me, for years, here,  
Forever, your dazzling smile prolongs  
The one rose with its perfect summer gone  
Into times past, yet then on into the future.

My heart that sometimes at night tries to confer,  
Or name you most tender with whatever last word  
Rejoices in that which whispers none but sister –

Were it not, such short tresses so great a treasure,  
That you teach me a sweetness, quite other,  
Soft through the kiss murmured only in your hair.

***Note:** Dated 1895. This being one of the series of poems written for Méry Laurent, a friend also of Manet and others.*

SONNET

*(Méry, sans trop d'aurore...)*

Méry,

Without dawn too grossly now inflaming  
The rose, that splendid, natural and weary  
Sheds even her heavy veil of perfumes to hear  
Beneath the flesh the diamond weeping,

Yes, without those dewy crises! And gently,  
Unbroken when the sky fills with storm,  
Jealous to add who knows what spaces  
To simple day the day so true in feeling,

Does it not seem, Méry, that each year,  
Where spontaneous grace relights your brow,  
Suffices, in so many aspects and for me,

Like a lone fan with which a room's surprised,  
To refresh with as little pain as is needed here  
All our inborn and unvarying friendship.



## AUTUMN PLAINT

Since Maria left me to go to another star - which one, Orion, Altair - or you green Venus? - I have always loved solitude. How many long days I have passed *alone* with my cat. By alone I mean without a material being, and my cat is a mystic companion, a spirit. I can say then that I have passed long days *alone* with my cat and *alone* with one of the last authors of the Roman decadence; for since the white creature is no more I have loved, uniquely and strangely, everything summed up in the word: *fall*. So, in the year, my favourite season is the last slow part of summer that just precedes autumn, and, in the day, the hour when I walk is when the sun hesitates before vanishing, with rays of yellow bronze over the grey walls, and rays of red copper over the tiles. Literature, also, from which my spirit asks voluptuousness, that will be the agonised poetry of Rome's last moments, so long as it does not breathe a breath of the reinvigorated stance of the Barbarians or stammer in childish Latin like Christian prose. I was reading then one of those dear poems (whose flakes of rouge have more charm for me than young flesh), and dipping a hand into the pure animal fur, when a street organ sounded languishingly and sadly under my window. It was playing in the great alley of poplars whose leaves, even in spring, seem mournful to me since Maria passed by them, on her last journey, lying among candles. The instrument of sadnesses, yes, certainly: the piano flashes, the violin gives off light from its torn fibres, but the street organ in memory's half-light made me dream despairingly. Now it murmured a delightfully common song that filled the *faubourgs* with joy, an old, banal tune: why did its words pierce my soul and make me cry, like any romantic ballad? I savoured it slowly and did not throw a coin through the window for fear of troubling my spirit and discovering that not only the instrument was playing.

SEA BREEZE

The flesh is sad, alas! – and I’ve read all the books.  
Let’s go! Far off. Let’s go! I sense  
That the birds, intoxicated, fly  
Deep into unknown spume and sky!  
Nothing – not even old gardens mirrored by eyes –  
Can restrain this heart that drenches itself in the sea,  
O nights, or the abandoned light of my lamp,  
On the void of paper, that whiteness defends,  
No, not even the young woman feeding her child.  
I shall go! Steamer, straining at your ropes  
Lift your anchor towards an exotic rawness!  
A Boredom, made desolate by cruel hope  
Still believes in the last goodbye of handkerchiefs!  
And perhaps the masts, inviting lightning,  
Are those the gale bends over shipwrecks,  
Lost, without masts, without masts, no fertile islands...  
But, oh my heart, listen to the sailors’ chant!

UN COUP DE DÉS JAMAIS N'ABOLIRA LE HASARD  
(A THROW OF THE DICE WILL NEVER ABOLISH CHANCE)



'The game is done!' Gustave Doré (1832 - 1910)  
The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, Samuel Taylor Coleridge  
*Wikimedia Commons*

## TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

**T**he French text displayed here is as close as I could achieve to that printed in the edition of July 1914, which produced a definitive version superseding the original publication of 1897. The English 'translation' is offered as an equivalent text to, or interpretation of, the original. The compressed and punctuated translation is offered as an aid to grasping the poem as a whole, in a swift reading.

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MALLARMÉ'S PREFACE OF 1897

I would prefer this Note was not read, or, skimmed, was forgotten; it tells the knowledgeable reader little that is beyond his or her penetration: but may confuse the uninitiated, prior to their looking at the first words of the Poem, since the ensuing words, laid out as they are, lead on to the last, with no novelty except the spacing of the text. The 'blanks' indeed take on importance, at first glance; the versification demands them, as a surrounding silence, to the extent that a fragment, lyrical or of a few beats, occupies, in its midst, a third of the space of paper: I do not transgress the measure, only disperse it. The paper intervenes each time as an image, of itself, ends or begins once more, accepting a succession of others, and, since, as ever, it does nothing, of regular sonorous lines or verse – rather prismatic subdivisions of the Idea, the instant they appear, and as long as they last, in some precise intellectual performance, that is in variable positions, nearer to or further from the implicit guiding thread, because of the verisimilitude the text imposes. The literary value, if I am allowed to say so, of this print-less distance which mentally separates groups of words or words themselves, is to periodically accelerate or slow the movement, the scansion, the sequence even, given one's simultaneous sight of the page: the latter taken as unity, as elsewhere the Verse is or perfect line. Imagination flowers and vanishes, swiftly, following the flow of the writing, round the fragmentary stations of a capitalised phrase introduced by and extended from the title. Everything takes place, in sections, by supposition; narrative is avoided. In addition this use of the bare thought with its retreats, prolongations, and flights, by reason of its very design, for anyone wishing to read it aloud, results in a score. The variation in printed characters between the dominant motif, a secondary one and those adjacent, marks its importance for oral utterance and the scale, mid-way, at top or bottom of the page will show how the intonation rises or falls. (Only certain very bold instructions of mine, encroachments

etc. forming the counterpoint to this prosody, a work which lacks precedent, have been left in a primitive state: not because I agree with being timid in my attempts; but because it is not for me, save by a special pagination or volume of my own, in a Periodical so courageous, gracious and accommodating as it shows itself to be to real freedom, to act too contrary to custom. I will have shown, in the Poem below, more than a sketch, a 'state' which yet does not entirely break with tradition; will have furthered its presentation in many ways too, without offending anyone; sufficing to open a few eyes. *This applies to the 1897 printing specifically: translator's note.*) Today, without presuming anything about what will emerge from this in future, nothing, or almost a new art, let us readily accept that the tentative participates, with the unforeseen, in the pursuit, specific and dear to our time, of free verse and the prose poem. Their meeting takes place under an influence, alien I know, that of Music heard in concert; one finds there several techniques that seem to me to belong to Literature, I reclaim them. The genre, which is becoming one, like the symphony, little by little, alongside personal poetry, leaves intact the older verse; for which I maintain my worship, and to which I attribute the empire of passion and dreams, though this may be the preferred means (as follows) of dealing with subjects of pure and complex imagination or intellect: which there is no remaining justification for excluding from Poetry – the unique source.'

THE FRENCH TEXT

## UN COUP DE DÉS



**JAMAIS**

**QUAND BIEN MÊME LANCÉ DANS DES CIRCONSTANCES  
ÉTERNELLES**

**DU FOND D'UN NAUFRAGE**

Soit

que

l'Abîme

blanchi

étale

furieux

sous une inclinaison

planche désespérément

d'aile

la sienne

par

avance retombée d'un mal à dresser le vol  
et couvrant les jaillissements  
coupant au ras les bords

très à l'intérieur résume

l'ombre enfouie dans la profondeur par cette voile alternative

jusqu'à adapter

sa béante profondeur autant que la coque

d'un bâtiment

penché de l'un ou l'autre bord

LE MAÎTRE

surgi  
inférant

de cette conflagration

que se

comme on menace

l'unique Nombre qui ne peut pas

plutôt

que de jouer

en maniaque chenu

la partie

au nom des flots

nauffrage cela

un

hors d'anciens calculs  
où la manœuvre avec l'âge oubliée  
jadis il empoignait la barre

à ses pieds

de l'horizon unanime

prépare

s'agite et mêle

au poing qui l'étreindrait

un destin et les vents

être un autre

Esprit

pour le jeter

dans la tempête  
en reployer la division et passer fier

écarté du secret qu'il détient

envahit le chef  
coule en barbe soumise  
direct de l'homme  
sans nef  
n'importe

où vaine

ancestralment à n'ouvrir pas la main  
crispée  
par delà l'inutile tête  
legs en la disparition  
à quelqu'un  
ambigu  
l'ultérieur démon immémorial  
ayant  
de contrées nulles  
induit  
le vieillard vers cette conjonction suprême avec la probabilité  
celui  
son ombre puérile  
caressée et polie et rendue et lavée  
assouplie par la vague et soustraite  
aux durs os perdus entre les ais  
né  
d'un ébat  
la mer par l'aïeul tentant ou l'aïeul contre la mer  
une chance oiseuse  
dont  
le voile d'illusion rejailli leur hantise  
ainsi que le fantôme d'un geste  
chancellera  
s'affalera  
folie  
Fiançailles

## N'ABOLIRA

COMME SI

*Une insinuation*

*simple*

*au silence*

*enroulée avec ironie*

*ou*

*le mystère*

*précipité*

*hurlé*

*dans quelque proche*

*tourbillon d'hilarité et d'horreur*

*voltige*

*autour du gouffre*

*sans le joncher*

*ni fuir*

*et en berce le vierge indice*

COMME SI

*plume solitaire éperdue*

*sauf*

*que la rencontre ou l'effleure une toque de minuit  
et immobilise  
au velours chiffonné par un esclaffement sonore*

*cette blancheur rigide*

*dérisoire*

*en opposition au ciel*

*trop*

*pour ne pas marquer*

*exigüment*

*quiconque*

*prince amer de l'écueil*

*s'en coiffe comme de l'héroïque  
irrésistible mais contenu  
par sa petite raison virile*

*en foudre*

soucieux  
expiatoire et pubère

muet

rire

que

SI

La lucide et seigneuriale algrette  
au front invisible

scintille

puis ombrage

une stature mignonne ténébreuse  
en sa torsion de sirène

de vertige

debout

le temps

bifurquées

de souffleter

par d'impatientes squames ultimes

un roc

faux manoir

tout de suite

évanoré en brumes

qui imposa

une borne à l'infini

**C'ÉTAIT**  
*issu stellaire*

**LE NOMBRE**

EXISTÂT-IL  
autrement qu'hallucination éparse d'agonie

COMMENÇÂT-IL ET CESSÂT-IL  
sourdant que nié et clos quand apparu  
enfin

par quelque profusion répandue en rareté  
SE CHIFFRÂT-IL

évidence de la somme pour peu qu'une  
ILLUMINÂT-IL

**CE SERAIT**  
*pire*

non  
davantage ni moins

*indifféremment mais autant*

**LE HASARD**

Choit  
la plume  
rythmique suspens du sinistre  
s'ensevelir  
aux écumes originelles  
naguères d'où sursauta son délire jusqu'à une cime  
flétrie



RIEN

de la mémorable crise  
où se fût  
l'évènement

accompli en vue de tout résultat nul

humain

N'AUURA EU LIEU  
une élévation ordinaire verse l'absence

QUE LE LIEU  
inférieur clapotis quelconque comme pour disperser l'acte vide  
abruptement qui sinon  
par son mensonge  
eût fondé  
la perdition

dans ces parages  
du vague  
en quoi toute réalité se dissout

EXCEPTÉ  
à l'altitude  
PEUT-ÊTRE  
aussi loin qu'un endroit  
fusionne avec au-delà  
hors l'intérêt  
quant à lui signalé  
en général  
selon telle obliquité par telle déclivité  
de feux  
vers  
ce doit être  
le Septentrion aussi Nord  
UNE CONSTELLATION  
froide d'oubli et de désuétude  
pas tant  
qu'elle n'énumère  
sur quelque surface vacante et supérieure  
le heurt successif  
sidéralement  
d'un compte total en formation  
veillant  
doutant  
roulant  
brillant et méditant  
avant de s'arrêter  
à quelque point dernier qui le sacre  
Toute pensée émet un Coup de Dés

## The French Text

### COMPRESSED, AND PUNCTUATED

**U**N COUP DE DÉS JAMAIS, QUAND BIEN MÊME LANCÉ  
DANS DES CIRCONSTANCES ÉTERNELLES DU FOND  
D'UN NAUFRAGE, Soit que l'Abîme blanchi, étale, furieux sous  
une inclinaison planche désespérément d'aile, la sienne, par avance  
retombée d'un mal à dresser le vol et couvrant les jaillissements, coupant au  
ras les bords très à l'intérieur résume l'ombre enfouie dans la profondeur,  
par cette voile alternative jusqu'adapter à l'envergure sa béante profondeur  
entant que la coque d'un bâtiment penché de l'un ou l'autre bord

LE MAÎTRE, hors d'anciens calculs, où la manoeuvre avec l'âge oubliée  
surgi jadis, il empoignait la barre inférant de cette conflagration à ses pieds  
de l'horizon unanime, que se prépare s'agite et mêle au poing qui  
l'étreindrait, comme on menace un destin et les vents, l'unique Nombre, qui  
ne peut pas être un autre Esprit, pour le jeter dans la tempête en reposer la  
division et passer fier; hésite, cadavre par le bras écarté du secret qu'il  
détient plutôt que de jouer, en maniaque: chenu la partie au nom des flots,  
un envahit le chef, coule en barbe, soumise naufrage, cela direct de l'homme  
sans nef, n'importe où vaine

ancestralement à n'ouvrir pas la main crispée par delà l'inutile tête, legs en la  
disparition, à quelqu'un ambigu, l'ultérieur démon immémorial, ayant de  
contrées nulles induit le vieillard vers cette conjonction suprême avec la  
probabilité, celui son ombre puérile caressée et polie et rendue et lavée

assouplie par la vague, et soustraite aux durs os perdus entre les ais né d'un ébat, la mer par l'aïeul tentant ou l'aïeul contre la mer, une chance oiseuse, Fiançailles dont le voile d'illusion rejailli leur hantise, ainsi que le fantôme d'un geste chancellera, s'affalera, folie **N'ABOLIRA**

COMME SI Une insinuation simple au silence, enroulée avec ironie, ou le mystère précipité, hurlé, dans quelque proche tourbillon d'hilarité et d'horreur, voltige autour du gouffre sans le joncher ni fuir et en berce le vierge indice COMME SI

plume solitaire éperdue, sauf que la rencontre ou l'effleure une toque de minuit et immobilise au velours chiffonné par un esclaffement sonore, cette blancheur rigide, dérisoire en opposition au ciel, trop pour ne pas marquer exigüment quiconque prince amer de l'écueil, s'en coiffe comme de l'héroïque, irrésistible mais contenu par sa petite raison, virile en foudre

soucieux expiatoire et pubère muet rire que **SIL** la lucide et seigneuriale aigrette de vertige au front invisible scintille, puis ombrage, une stature mignonne ténébreuse, debout en sa torsion de sirène, le temps de souffleter, par d'impatientes squames ultimes, bifurquées, un roc faux manoir tout de suite évaporé en brumes qui imposa une borne à l'infini

**C'ÉTAIT LE NOMBRE**, issu stellaire, EXISTÂT-IL autrement qu'hallucination éparse, d'agonie; COMMENÇÂT-IL ET CESSÂT-IL, sourdant que nié, et clos, quand apparu enfin, par quelque profusion répandue en rareté; SE CHIFFRÂT-IL évidence de la somme, pour peu qu'une; ILLUMINÂT-IL, **CE SERAIT**, pire non davantage ni moins indifféremment mais autant, **LE HASARD** Choit la plume, rythmique suspens du sinistre, s'ensevelir aux écumes originelles naguères, d'où sursauta son délire jusqu'à une cime flétrie par la neutralité identique du gouffre

RIEN de la mémorable crise où se fût l'événement accompli, en vue de tout résultat nul humain, N'AURA EU LIEU, une élévation ordinaire verse l'absence QUE LE LIEU inférieur clapotis quelconque, comme pour disperser l'acte vide abruptement, qui sinon par son mensonge eût fondé la perte, dans ces parages du vague, en quoi toute réalité se dissout

EXCEPTÉ à l'altitude PEUT-ÊTRE, aussi loin qu'un endroit fusionne avec au-delà, hors l'intérêt quant à lui signalé, en général, selon telle obliquité, par telle déclivité de feux, vers ce doit être le Septentrion aussi Nord UNE CONSTELLATION froide d'oubli et de désuétude, pas tant qu'elle n'énumère, sur quelque surface vacante et supérieure, le heurt successif, sidéralement, d'un compte total en formation, veillant, doutant, roulant, brillant et méditant avant de s'arrêter à quelque point dernier qui le sacre  
Toute pensée émet un Coup de Dés.



THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION

**A THROW OF THE DICE**



**NEVER**

**EVEN WHEN TRULY CAST IN THE ETERNAL  
CIRCUMSTANCE**

**OF A SHIPWRECK'S DEPTH**

Can be  
only  
the Abyss  
raging  
whitened  
stalled  
beneath the desperately  
sloping incline  
of its  
own wing  
through  
an advance falling back from ill to take flight  
and veiling the gushers  
restraining the surges  
gathered far within  
the shadow buried deep by that alternative sail  
almost matching  
its yawning depth to the wingspan like a hull  
of a vessel  
rocked from side to side

THE MASTER

rose  
implying  
of this conflagration  
of the concerted  
that formerly he grasped the helm  
where the lost manoeuvre with the age  
horizon at his feet  
that  
readies itself  
moves and merges  
with the blow that grips it  
as one threatens  
fate and the winds  
the unique Number which cannot  
be another  
Spirit  
to hurt it  
into the storm  
relinquish the cleaving there and pass proudly  
by the arm from the secret  
hesitates  
a corpse pushed back  
rather  
than taking sides  
a hoary madman  
on behalf  
of the waves  
one  
straight shipwreck  
overwhelms the head  
flows through the submissive beard  
that of the man  
without a vessel  
empty  
no matter where

ancestrally never to open the fist  
clenched  
beyond the helpless head  
a legacy in vanishing  
to someone  
ambiguous  
the immemorial ulterior demon  
having  
from non-existent regions  
led  
the old man towards this ultimate meeting with probability  
this  
his childlike shade  
caressed and smoothed and rendered  
supple by the wave and shielded  
from hard bone lost between the planks  
born  
of a frolic  
the sea through the old man or the old man against the sea  
making a vain attempt  
an Engagement  
whose  
dread the veil of illusion rejected  
as the phantom of a gesture  
will tremble  
collapse  
madness

**WILL NEVER ABOLISH**

AS IF

A simple

insinuation

into silence

entwined with irony

or

the mystery

hurled

howled

in some close

swirl of mirth and terror

whirls

round the abyss

without scattering

or dispersing

and cradles the virgin index there

AS IF

*a solitary plume overwhelmed*

*untouched*

*that a cap of midnight grazes or encounters  
and fixes  
in crumpled velvet with a sombre burst of laughter*

*that rigid whiteness*

*derisory*

*in opposition to the heavens  
too much so  
not to signal  
closely  
any*

*bitter prince of the reef*

*heroically adorned with it  
indomitable but contained  
by his petty reason virile*

*in lightning*

anxious

expiatory and pubescent

dumb

laughter

that

IF

The lucid and lordly crest      of vertigo

on the invisible brow

sparkles

then shades

a slim dark tallness    upright

in its siren coiling

through impatient ultimate scales

bifurcated

at the moment

of striking

a rock

a deceptive manor

suddenly

evaporating in fog

that imposed

limits on the infinite

**IT WAS**

*stellar outcome*

**THE NUMBER**

WERE IT TO HAVE EXISTED  
other than as a fragmented agonised hallucination

WERE IT TO HAVE BEGUN AND ENDED  
a surging that denied and closed when visible  
at last

by some profusion spreading in sparseness  
WERE IT TO HAVE AMOUNTED

to the fact of the total though as little as one  
WERE IT TO HAVE ILLUMINATED

**IT WOULD BE**

*worse*

*no*

*more nor less*

*indifferently but as much*

**CHANCE**

*Falls*

*the plume*

*rhythmic suspense of the disaster*

*to bury itself*

*in the original foam*

*from which its delirium formerly leapt to the summit*

*faded*

*by the same neutrality of abyss*



**NOTHING**

of the memorable crisis  
where the event  
matured

accomplished in sight of all non-existent

human outcomes

**WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE**  
a commonplace elevation pours out absence

**BUT THE PLACE**  
some lapping below as if to scatter the empty act  
abruptly that otherwise  
by its falsity  
would have plumbed  
perdition

in this region

of vagueness  
in which all reality dissolves

EXCEPT  
at the attitude  
PERHAPS  
as far as a place fuses with beyond  
outside the interest  
signalled regarding it  
in general  
in accord with such obliquity through such declination  
of fire  
towards  
what must be  
the Wain also North  
A CONSTELLATION  
cold with neglect and desuetude  
not so much though  
that it fails to enumerate  
on some vacant and superior surface  
the consecutive clash  
sidereally  
of a final account in formation  
attending  
doubting  
rolling  
shining and meditating  
before stopping  
at some last point that crowns it  
All Thought expresses a Throw of the Dice

THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION  
COMPRESSED, AND PUNCTUATED

**A** **THROW OF THE DICE NEVER**, EVEN WHEN TRULY  
CAST IN THE ETERNAL CIRCUMSTANCE OF A  
SHIPWRECK'S DEPTH, can be only the Abyss raging, whitened,  
stalled beneath the desperately sloping incline of its own wing, through an  
advance falling back from ill to take flight, and veiling the gushers,  
restraining the surges, gathered far within the shadow buried deep by that  
alternative sail, almost matching its yawning depth to the wingspan, like a  
hull of a vessel rocked from side to side

THE MASTER, beyond former calculations, where the lost manoeuvre  
with the age rose implying that formerly he grasped the helm of this  
conflagration of the concerted horizon at his feet, that readies itself; moves;  
and merges with the blow that grips it, as one threatens fate and the winds,  
the unique Number, which cannot be another Spirit, to hurl it into the  
storm, relinquish the cleaving there, and pass proudly; hesitates, a corpse  
pushed back by the arm from the secret, rather than taking sides, a hoary  
madman, on behalf of the waves: one overwhelms the head, flows through  
the submissive beard, straight shipwreck that, of the man without a vessel,  
empty no matter where

ancestrally never to open the fist clenched beyond the helpless head, a  
legacy, in vanishing, to someone ambiguous, the immemorial ulterior  
demon having, from non-existent regions, led the old man towards this  
ultimate meeting with probability, this his childlike shade caressed and  
smoothed and rendered supple by the wave, and shielded from hard bone  
lost between the planks born of a frolic, the sea through the old man or the

old man against the sea, making a vain attempt, an Engagement whose dread the veil of illusion rejected, as the phantom of a gesture will tremble, collapse, madness, **WILL NEVER ABOLISH**

AS IF A simple insinuation into silence, entwined with irony, or the mystery hurled, howled, in some close swirl of mirth and terror, whirls round the abyss without scattering or dispersing and cradles the virgin index there AS IF

a solitary plume overwhelmed, untouched, that a cap of midnight grazes, or encounters, and fixes, in crumpled velvet with a sombre burst of laughter, that rigid whiteness, derisory, in opposition to the heavens, too much so not to signal closely any bitter prince of the reef, heroically adorned with it, indomitable, but contained by his petty reason, virile in lightning

anxious expiatory and pubescent dumb laughter that IF the lucid and lordly crest of vertigo on the invisible brow sparkles, then shades, a slim dark tallness, upright in its siren coiling, at the moment of striking, through impatient ultimate scales, bifurcated, a rock a deceptive manor suddenly evaporating in fog that imposed limits on the infinite

IT WAS THE NUMBER, stellar outcome, WERE IT TO HAVE EXISTED other than as a fragmented, agonised hallucination; WERE IT TO HAVE BEGUN AND ENDED, a surging that denied, and closed, when visible at last, by some profusion spreading in sparseness; WERE IT TO HAVE AMOUNTED to the fact of the total, though as little as one; WERE IT TO HAVE LIGHTED, IT WOULD BE, worse no more nor less indifferently but as much, **CHANCE** Falls the plume, rhythmic suspense of the disaster, to bury itself in the original foam, from which its delirium formerly leapt to the summit faded by the same neutrality of abyss

NOTHING of the memorable crisis where the event matured,  
accomplished in sight of all non-existent human outcomes, WILL HAVE  
TAKEN PLACE a commonplace elevation pours out absence BUT THE  
PLACE some lapping below, as if to scatter the empty act abruptly, that  
otherwise by its falsity would have plumbed perdition, in this region of  
vagueness, in which all reality dissolves

EXCEPT at the altitude PERHAPS, as far as a place fuses with, beyond,  
outside the interest signalled regarding it, in general, in accord with such  
obliquity, through such declination of fire, towards what must be the Wain  
also North A CONSTELLATION cold with neglect and desuetude, not so  
much though that it fails to enumerate, on some vacant and superior  
surface, the consecutive clash, sidereally, of a final account in formation,  
attending, doubting, rolling, shining and meditating before stopping at  
some last point that crowns it All Thought expresses a Throw of the Dice

NOTES:

1. The larger and smaller words in capitals in the poem are to be read as intertwined statements, and dominant and secondary threads of the poem, in accordance with the hints in Mallarmé's Preface.
2. The French *Septentrion* meaning the North, derives from the Latin *Septentrio* also meaning the North, but specifically referring in addition to the constellation Ursa Major known variously as the Great Bear, Wain, Plough or Big Dipper. Note that a constellation is a chance arbitrary visual formation of often widely disparate stars, delineated and designated purely by the human mind.
3. Note the following possible literary echoes, which may equally indicate no more than Mallarmé's absorption of and interest in common 19th century themes:
  - Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner* (1797-1799: especially the casting of dice on the deck of the spectral barge);
  - The legends of the Flying Dutchman, and of the Maelstrom (See for example the final chapter of Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, 1870);
  - Shakespeare's Hamlet who also appears in a Mallarmé sonnet (*The Clown Chastised*);
  - Rostand's *Cyrano* (First performed 1897) with his defiant plume (also of course in French a pen and a quill or swan's feather, a key multiple meaning impossible to capture in English);
  - Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851: for Ahab's defiance, his pursuit of the White Whale that signifies Le Néant, and not merely for its compulsive and obsessive digressions!)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**S**téphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) was born in Paris. He was strongly affected by the early deaths of his mother, and younger sister, and later by that of his father. After learning English in London in 1862/3, he worked for most of his life as an English teacher, at first in the provinces and later in Paris. Mallarmé was relatively poor, but became noted for his literary salons on the rue de Rome, which were a centre of Parisian intellectual life, and with which he greatly influenced the literary direction of his time, through his poetry, his criticism, and his poetic theory, despite his relatively limited output. Of his two children, his son Anatole died sadly young. He himself died at Valvins, on the Seine near Fontainebleau, the location of his holiday home and retirement residence.

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## ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

**A**nthony Kline lives in England. He graduated in Mathematics from the University of Manchester, and was Chief Information Officer (Systems Director) of a large UK Company, before dedicating himself to his literary work and interests. He was born in 1947. His work consists of translations of poetry; critical works, biographical history with poetry as a central theme; and his own original poetry. He has translated into English from Latin, Ancient Greek, Classical Chinese and the European languages. He also maintains a deep interest in developments in Mathematics and the Sciences.

He continues to write predominantly for the Internet, making all works available in download format, with an added focus on the rapidly developing area of electronic books. His most extensive works are complete translations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*.