

Mallarmé

Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard

(A throw of the dice will never abolish chance)

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Contents

Translator's Introduction	4
Mallarmé's Preface of 1897	5
The French Text	6
The English Translation	18
The English Translation – Compressed, and Punctuated	30

Translator's Introduction

The 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.

Mallarmé's Preface of 1897

'I would prefer that 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

blanchi l'Abîme
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
sa béante profondeur entant que la coque

d'un bâtiment
penché de l'un ou l'autre bord

LE MAÎTRE
surgi
inférant
de cette configuration
que se
comme on menace
l'unique Nombre qui ne peut pas
hésite
cadavre par le bras
plutôt
que de jouer
en maniaque chenu
la partie
au nom des flots
un
naufrage cela

hors d'anciens calculs
où la manoeuvre 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

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 aigrette
au front invisible
scintille
puis ombrage
une stature mignonne ténébreuse
en sa torsion de sirène

de vertige

debout

le temps
de souffleter

par d'impatientes squames ultimes

bifurquées

un roc

faux manoir
tout de suite
évanoué 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

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
 beyond former calculations
 where the lost manoeuvre with the age
 rose
 implying
 of this conflagration
 of the concerted
 that formerly he grasped the helm
 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
 that of the man
 without a vessel
 empty
 no matter where
 straight shipwreck

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
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 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

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, and his pursuit of the White Whale that signifies Le Néant, and not merely for its compulsive and obsessive digressions!)

A. S. Kline, 3rd March 2007