Mallarmé

Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard

(A throw of the dice will never abolish chance)
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

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 bonds

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

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

surgi
inférant
de cette configuration
à ses pieds
de l'horizon unanime
que se
prépare
s'agite et mêle
au poing qui l'êtreindrait

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 reployer 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
cressée et polie et rendue et lavée
assoupie 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
chancelera
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
dérision en opposition au ciel
pour ne pas marquer exiguément
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
da vertige
au front invisible
scintille
puis ombrage
debout
une stature mignonne ténébreuse
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
issu stellaire

LE NOMBRE
EXISTÂT-IL,
autrement qu’hallucination épars d’agonie

COMMENÇÂT-IL ET CESSÂT-IL
sourdant que nié et clos quand apparu
enfin
par quelque profusion répandue en rareté
SE CHIFFRÂT-IL.

evidence 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’ou sursauta son délire jusqu'à une cime
flétrit
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 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
du Septentrion aussi Nord
UNE CONSTELLATION froide d’oubli et de désuétude pas tant
qu’elle n’énumère sur quelque surface vacante et supérieure
d’un compte total en formation le heurt successif sidéralement
veillant douteant 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 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
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
siderally
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
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 Mallarme’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