The Veil of Isis: Mallarmé's Poetry As a Rite of Initiation

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According to Proclus and Plutarch, there once stood in the ancient Egyptian city of Saïs a statue of the goddess Isis, her face concealed by a veil, bearing upon its pedestal the following inscription: "I am all that is, was, and will be. No mortal has ever raised my veil." Isis was also a member of the important Egyptian trinity: Osiris-Isis-Horus. It was she who wandered throughout the world gathering together the dismembered pieces of her husband-brother Osiris, cruelly murdered by his jealous brother Seth, so that their son Horus, using the supernatural power of the gods, could resuscitate his father, thereby establishing the cycle of life, death, and resurrection so common in mythology.

Regarded as the Queen of Nature, guardian of the secrets of the universe, Isis was worshiped throughout ancient Egypt during elaborate fertility rites. The figure of Isis was also one of the favorite emblems of the medieval Hermetists, who believed that she possessed the answer to the eternal enigma of the "Great Work." Isis as a cardinal hermetic symbol soon became a commonplace among esoterics. Her veiled figure represented the unattainable Absolute, the interminable quest for Truth. Isis's veil continually reminded the adept that, try as he would, his discoveries would lead only to further mysteries: "No mortal has ever raised my veil," the goddess boasts.

The figure of Isis was fascinating to not a few authors of the nineteenth century. Among them was Stéphane Mallarmé, who refers to this myth in *Les Dieux antiques*[1] and alludes to the veiled goddess in "Solennité": ". . . plutôt que d'avouer le voile de la Déesse . . ." (*Oeuvres complètes* 332). As mentioned above, other writers, intrigued by the figure of Isis, readily adopted this symbol and made extensive use of it in their works. As Jean Gaudon has shown, for example, in *Le Temps de la contemplation*, the veiled goddess is a significant theme in Victor Hugo's poetics.[2] Isis was so popular in nineteenth-century esoteric circles that a leading journal of occultism was entitled *Le Voile d'Isis*. Mme Helena P. Blavatsky, a prominent occultist of the last half of the nineteenth century, audaciously called one of her esoteric tomes *Isis Unveiled*. (After spending several hours poring over this strange amalgam of esoterica, some of which is entirely

original, one is convinced that the epigraph on the base of the statue of Isis is in no danger of being proved untrue.) Let us now investigate how Mallarmé considered his poetry as an attempt to "lift the goddess's veil" in order to reveal the mysteries of the universe to all mankind.

Mallarmé's lifelong goal, as he expressed it to Verlaine in his autobiographical letter, was to give "l'explication orphique de la Terre, qui est le seul devoir du poëte et le jeu littéraire par excellence" (*Correspondance: 1886-1889* 301). His ambition was none other than to reveal the secret principles of the universe once and for all to posterity. Many of the poet's latter works, especially *Igitur* and *Un coup de dés*, were composed with precisely this aim in mind, and Mallarmé's projected masterwork—"*le Livre*"—was to have been the perfect culmination of all his previous hermetic writings. Even some of his shorter poems, such as the sonnet "Ses purs ongles . . ." were intended to have cosmic significance, for, as Mallarmé wrote Henri Cazalis (July, 1868), ". . . mon oeuvre est si bien préparé et hiérarchisé, représentant comme il le peut l'Univers . . ." (*Correspondance: 1862-1871* 279).

But, as anyone who has carefully studied Mallarmé's difficult works well knows, Mallarmé's "explications" are often more profound than the mysteries they are attempting to "unveil." The complicated system of symbols that confront the reader of *Un coup de dés*, for example, can be as confusing as the elaborate symbology of apocalyptic literature. In fact, there is a definite parallel between Mallarmé's hermetic texts and the Biblical books of Daniel and the Apocalypse, as well as similar works purporting to "reveal" secret knowledge. All of these texts are based upon a common principle governing this type of literature, regardless of its subject or intention: the "dialectic of revelation."[3]

All revealing is actually a "reveiling," a "recovering" of the mysteries to be disclosed. The secret knowledge is couched in mysterious symbols and figures which are left entirely to the interpretation of the adept who has hopes that he possesses or can discover the proper "key." The "Beast of the Apocalypse," for example, has for centuries caused serious consternation among scholars seeking to decipher its prophetic meaning, and it is said that, after having spent a lifetime expounding the fundamental principles governing the world around us, even the great Sir Isaac Newton devoted his last years endeavoring to determine the mystic significance of the "number of the beast"—666—believing that this number held the "key to the universe."

The Hermetic and Kabbalistic literatures abound with this type of apocalyptic symbolism. One of the sections of the "Emerald Tablet," a medieval Hermetic text, will serve as an excellent specimen of this type of writing: "Its father is the sun, its mother the moon; the wind carries it in

its belly, its nurse is the earth."[4] To the adept, this sentence is a *revelation* concerning the production of the "Philosopher's Stone." But, as the Hermetic knows, the veil still remains; Isis will always be veiled, at least for mere mortals. As soon as one veil falls away, another is there to take its place. All revelation is founded upon this necessity of the veil. The veil is lifted only to reveal another. As Gaudon expresses it, "Le dévoilement suppose la pérennité du voile" (3).

Even after a cursory reading of Mallarmé's works, one can easily recognize their apocalyptic quality. The constellations, the figure of the Master (*le Maître*), the cosmic shipwreck, strange flowers, vast expanses of azure sky, endless nights, the Abyss, the Void—all lend an atmosphere of mystic significance behind the veil of Mallarmé's hermetic poetical language.

But the key to Mallarmé's hermetic poetry is not an external one, even though, as we shall indicate later, valuable efforts have been made by serious "exegetes" of Mallarmé. It is to be found within the poetry itself, as Jean-Pierre Richard has so admirably demonstrated in his *L'Univers imaginaire de Mallarmé*. In the Introduction to this work, Richard defends the rationale of this approach:

> Que chaque poème se réduise à un crytogramme, telle est au fond la présupposition commune à tous les efforts de déchiffrage terme à terme. Il nous semble pourtant que si l'hermétisme doit s'éclairer fructueusement par en-dessous, une recherche des architectures a plus de chance d'y réussir qu'une traduction juxtalinéaire. (17-18)

The symbols of themselves and in themselves mean little: it is the concerted whole which endows them with universal significance. Richard explains further:

> Rêver à un envol d'oiseau pour signifier l'acte poétique n'a rien, en soi, de bien original; imaginer le ciel comme un plafond contre lequel on se heurte ne réclame non plus une invention particulièrement active. Mais si l'oiseau crève une vitre, si cette vitre est aussi un tombeau, un plafond, une page, si cet oiseau laisse tomber des plumes qui font vibrer des harpes, puis deviennent des fleurs effeuillées, des étoiles tombées, ou de l'écume; si cet oiseau-écume déchire la transparence aérienne tout en se déchirant à elle; si cette transparence, devenue chant d'oiseau, éclate en mille gouttelettes qui se muent à leur tour en jet d'eau, en fleurs épanouies, en explosions de diamants ou d'étoiles, en coups de dés, on accordera que nous sommes chez Mallarmé et chez lui seul. (29-30)

All attempts at "explaining away" or "unveiling" once and for all the secret significance behind Mallarmé's works are doomed from the outset, for all the carefully thought out "revelations" of Mallarmé's exegetes are in the final analysis only further "veilings" of the poet's work. There will always be, as Mallarmé himself phrases it in one of his articles, "le voile dernier qui toujours reste" (*Oeuvres complètes* 307). It is this sense of an eternal *mystique* that forms the basis for the intense fascination within man for all things occult, for all things not readily apparent. Knowing this principle full well and using it to its optimum in his poetry, Mallarmé says of this innate passion of mankind for the unknown:

> Il doit y avoir quelque chose d'occulte au fond de tous, je crois décidément à quelque chose d'abscons, signifiant fermé et caché, qui habite le commun: car, sitôt cette masse jetée vers quelque trace que c'est une réalité, existant, par exemple, sur une feuille de papier, dans tel écrit—pas en soi—cela qui est obscur: elle s'agite, ouragan jaloux d'attribuer les ténèbres à quoi que ce soit, profusément, flagramment. (*Oeuvres complètes* 383)

This is not to say that the excellent efforts of Emilie Noulet, Charles Mauron, and others of their caliber have not made a significant contribution to Mallarmé studies. To the contrary, their meticulous probings into the circumstances and factors which affected the creation of Mallarmé's poems and their detailed analyses of these works, while not definitively conclusive, have paved the way for a more profound understanding of the poet's unusual philosophy of literature as well as a deeper appreciation of individual writings.

Instead of attempting to render a word-for-word translation, however, Mallarmé's hermetic poetry can best be understood as an *initiation*, in its most ancient sense, a secret rite which confers upon the applicant a new knowledge of himself and of the world around him, a vision of the universe theretofore unimagined.[5] A mystic initiation is not unlike death. It is a totally *individual* experience that no one can undergo for someone else. By its very nature it permits of no substitutes. The initiation ceremony itself may be carefully and intricately planned, but in the final analysis it is the initiate himself who must experience it.

The initiatory rite serves only to *prepare* the candidate for a proper reception of occult knowledge, sparking in him a return to the "primitive mentality," which is so fundamental to the esoteric tradition. As Robert Amadou states in his study on occultism, commenting on this cardinal principle of esoterism:

> Les rites, les doctrines livrés au nouvel adepte ne sont qu'une aide. Ils sont destinés à faciliter sa mise en rapport direct avec la Tradition. Osons remarquer que les cérémonies initiatiques cherchent le plus souvent à éveiller la mentalité primitive dans l'âme du candidat et à le rendre conscient de cette mentalité afin d'en tirer les conclusions rationnelles qui, mises en ordre, constitueront *sa* doctrine occultiste. (81)

And since a mystic initiation is a completely individual experience, it is correlative that no two people are affected by it in exactly the same way. Each initiate will have an appreciation of the event which might be widely divergent from that of his fellows. Amadou reminds us further on in his study:

> . . . lorsque la Tradition semble être communiquée d'homme à homme, ce sont rarement des traités didactiques que l'on place entre les mains des initiés. Ce sont plutôt des symboles, ces objets ineffables mais excitants pour la pensée; ce sont des phrases énigmatiques que chacun devra creuser; ce sont des procédés qui amèneront le 'nouveau-né' à un état de vive réceptivité. (82-83)

"Des phrases énigmatiques que chacun devra creuser"—there could be no better description of Mallarmé's hermetic poetry, for Mallarmé was not trying to *communicate* anything, in the usual sense of the word. He disdained narrative and descriptive speech and writing, the "journalistic" use of language, as he made very clear in numerous articles and writings, notably in "Crise de vers":

> Narrer, enseigner, même écrire, cela va et encore qu'à chacun suffirait peut-être pour échanger la pensée humaine, de prendre ou de mettre dans la main d'autrui en silence une pièce de monnaie, l'emploi élémentaire du discours dessert l'universel *reportage* dont, la littérature exceptée, participe tout entre les genres d'écrits contemporains. (*Oeuvres complètes* 368)

Mallarmé's poetical system was based instead upon the seemingly magical *suggestive* power of the spoken and written word, the use of which he never ceased to advocate. In a letter to Cazalis, Mallarmé tells his friend that his new technique will be: "Peindre, non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit" (*Correspondance: 1862-1871* 37). He reinforces this idea in a letter to Eugène Lefébure referring to the now famous word "*ptyx*" in "Ses purs ongles . . . ": ". . . concertez-vous pour m'envoyer le sens réel du

mot ptyx, on m'assure qu'il n'existe dans aucune langue, ce que je préférerais de beaucoup afin de me donner le charme de le créer par la magie de la rime . . . " (*Correspondance: 1862-1871* 274). Speaking to a young, inexperienced poet, Mallarmé reminds him in "Toute l'âme résumée . . ." that "Le sens trop précis rature / Ta vague littérature" (*Oeuvres complètes* 73). In answering Jules Huret's *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire* concerning his "obscurity," Mallarmé replies, "*Nommer* un objet, c'est supprimer les trois quarts de la jouissance du poème qui est faite de deviner peu à peu: le *suggérer*, voilà le rêve" (*Oeuvres complètes* 869). And finally Mallarmé underlines the creative power of the spoken word in the often cited section of "Crise de vers": "Je dis une fleur! et, hors de l'oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose d'autre que les calices sus, musicalement se lève, idée même et suave, l'absente de tous bouquets" (*Oeuvres complètes* 368).

Mallarmé's poems, however, do much more than suggest particular ideas or concepts. They evoke an attitude, a state of mind, a raising of the level of consciousness like that of mystic insight, induced, Mallarmé believed, by the intrinsic power of the word, which in its purest expression —Poetry—could unfold in their most pristine forms the untold mysteries of the universe. One of the most illustrative examples of this "revelatory poetical principle" can be found in one of Mallarmé's sonnets, "Ses purs ongles . . .," originally entitled "Sonnet allégorique de lui-même," about which Mallarmé admitted to his friend Cazalis: "En se laissant à le murmurer plusieurs fois, on éprouve une sensation assez cabalistique" (*Correspondance: 1862-1871* 278). It is particularly through this use of the incantatory power of the *spoken* word that many of Mallarmé's poems can be considered rituals of initiation, which almost always involve some type of chanting or oral formulaic expression—rituals in which the inrushing of the eternal Absolute may be felt and experienced by mere mortals. The "Prose pour des Esseintes," *Hérodiade*, sonnets like "Ses purs ongles . . ." and "A la nue accablante tu . . . ," the story-drama *Igitur*, and *Un coup de dés*—all seem to take place outside the ordinary bounds of time, in a sort of mythical "Great Time," as Mircea Eliade has phrased it in his *Traité d'histoire des religions*. The repetition of the poem, the vocalizing of the words, coincides with the Absolute of which it is, according to Mallarmé, the perfect expression and establishes the ideal channel of communication between man and his greater self: "la notion pure de soi"—a total transformation taking place within the eternal moment, the "*halte surnaturelle*" that he refers to in the "Cantique de Saint Jean" (*Oeuvres complètes* 49), and it was in this instant that Mallarmé was at last able to lift the "veil of Isis," a fleeting moment that the poet attempted to make manifest within his poetry so that others too might participate in this

glorious experience of exaltation, perhaps man's only claim to immortality. To this end Mallarmé dedicated his life. As the psychologist Ernest Fraenkel has suggested in *Les Dessins transconscients* . . ., Mallarmé's agonizing struggle to capture "sa chimère, son Rêve" on paper for the ultimate good of others, may have even subconsciously triggered the spasmodic constriction of the throat which prematurely took the poet's life (13). If this is indeed so, then Mallarmé could well be counted among humanity's most courageous martyrs.

● NOTES

[1] See Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, eds. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1945) 1274.

[2] See particularly the first chapter, "Contempler," 25-41.

[3] For a complete presentation and discussion of this dialectic, see Gaudon 36-41.

[4] Cited by John Senior, *The Way Down and Out: The Occult in Symbolist Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1959) 24.

[5] Of course, a liberal application of this "initiatory principle" could be applied to all literature, but we shall attempt to indicate how Mallarmé's poetry is particularly suited for this interpretation.

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Jean Genet at the Guthrie: Akalaitis's Taming of *The Screens*

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Les Paravents (The Screens), Genet's last and most challenging work for the stage, is a powerful play of contradictions and profusions. To produce it is an act of courage, because the play is so demanding— technically, emotionally and financially, with its uncommon length (four and one-half hours) and large cast: approximately forty actors, most playing multiple roles. Since it was published in 1961, *The Screens* has been produced only ten times. Patrice Chéreau, the director of the most recent staging in France, in fact called it "an impossible play. It is a polyphony without a score; we need actors trained in disciplines that haven't yet been invented" (Bernard 7).[1] The latest production of *The Screens*, in an excellent new American translation, took place at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis two seasons ago under the direction of Joanne Akalaitis, one of the founding members of the Mabou Mines theater troupe.[2]

As a spectator who had studied *The Screens* before seeing this staging, I admired the undertaking of this ambitious project by Akalaitis and the Guthrie; at the same time, however, I was disturbed by differences between the written text and the production. In my paper I will discuss both Genet's play and the performance that I attended, and reflect upon the difficulties inherent in my position between the two.

As I have indicated, Genet's play is a complex one, for spectators and theater troupe alike. Both the difficulty and the strength of *The Screens* lie in its ambiguities. Like all of Genet's work, it straddles the line between comedy and tragedy, beauty and ugliness, good and bad, and reality and illusion. On one level, the play concerns the Franco-Algerian war of the late 1950s and early 60s—the war that led to France's loss of its colony. It depicts the changing relations between Arabs and European (largely French) colonists, focusing upon an Arab family of petty thieves called the "family of the Nettles": Saïd, his Mother, and his wife Leïla, anti-heroes in the tradition of Alfred Jarry's Ubu. Saïd, a disgusting young thief, marries Leïla ("the ugliest woman in the country," as she is called by other characters), since she is the only one whom he can afford. Leïla responds to Saïd's hatred of her by embracing along with him the practice of evil—thievery, betrayal, and humiliation of self and others. The Mother com-