

## Stéphane Mallarmé and the "Eternal Moment"

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The years that Stéphane Mallarmé spent at Tournon as an English teacher in a *lycée* (1863-1867) were difficult, and for the most part, unhappy ones for the poet. Much of this time Mallarmé was plagued with moods of great depression, illness, fears of insanity, and a general dissatisfaction with his career and way of life. In July of 1864, Mallarmé wrote to Henri Cazalis, his faithful confidant and *alter ego*, complaining of an extreme malaise which he felt in the isolation of Tournon: "Quant à moi, je lui sacrifierai la moitié des vacances, mais je suis si malade du cerveau que je deviendrais idiot, sans plaisanterie, si je ne respire un peu un meilleur air" (*Correspondance: 1862-1871* 122). Mallarmé could never acclimate himself to life in Tournon, and, in fact, his periods of despondency, especially during the winter months, became even more frequent, often rendering him incapable of productive literary activity. He tells Cazalis in November, 1864, "Pour les vers je suis fini, je crois: il y a de grandes lacunes dans mon cerveau qui est devenu incapable d'une pensée suivie et d'application" (144).

Mallarmé's agonizing crises became worse during the winter of 1865-1866. He reports to Cazalis in April, 1866:

Malheureusement, en creusant le vers à ce point, j'ai rencontré deux abîmes, qui me désespèrent. L'un est le Néant, auquel je suis arrivé sans connaître le Bouddhisme et je suis encore trop désolé pour pouvoir croire même à ma poésie et me remettre au travail, que cette pensée écrasante m'a fait abandonner. (207)

But these phases of extreme despondency had their positive and beneficial side as well. Mallarmé seems to have emerged from them with a fresh, new outlook on life, as if his terrible experiences were a catharsis, a purging of every despairing thought and attitude, leaving his mind free to attempt ambitious goals. In May, 1866, Mallarmé reveals the initial plans for a project that was soon to evolve into his masterwork: "Je suis en train

de jeter les fondements d'un livre sur le *Beau*. *Mon esprit se meut dans l'Eternel, et en a eu plusieurs frissons, si l'on peut parler ainsi de l'Immuable*" (216). This feeling of well-being and confident optimism continued throughout the summer months. Writing Cazalis in July, he says:

En vérité, je voyage, mais dans des pays inconnus et si, pour fuir la réalité torride, je me plais à évoquer des images froides, je te dirai que je suis depuis un mois dans les plus purs glaciers de l'Esthétique—qu'après avoir trouvé le Néant, j'ai trouvé le Beau,—et que tu ne peux t'imaginer dans quelles altitudes lucides je m'aventure. (220-221)

However, the summer of 1866, filled with ambitious plans and confidence in their successful attainment, was but a brief reprieve, for the following winter was Mallarmé's "*noche oscura del alma*." During this period, the poet's previous moods of overwhelming despondency culminated in a grueling mental crisis which finally found its resolution in an experience not at all unlike those encountered in mystic initiations.

It was several months before Mallarmé could begin to relate to his best friends exactly what he had undergone. Mallarmé wrote first to Cazalis on May 14, 1867:

Je viens de passer une année effrayante: ma Pensée s'est pensée, et est arrivée à une Conception pure. Tout ce que, par contrecoup, mon être a souffert, pendant cette longue agonie, est inénarrable, mais, heureusement, je suis parfaitement mort, et la région la plus impure où mon Esprit puisse s'aventurer est l'Eternité, mon Esprit, ce solitaire habituel de sa propre Pureté, que n'obscurcit plus même le reflet du Temps. (240)

Several months later, writing to Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, Mallarmé uses some of the same key phrases in an attempt to communicate what he had experienced:

Ma pensée a été jusqu'à se penser elle-même et n'a plus la force d'évoquer en un Néant unique le vide disséminé en sa porosité.

J'avais, à la faveur d'une grande sensibilité, compris la corrélation intime de la Poésie avec l'Univers, et, pour qu'elle fût pure, conçu le dessein de la sortir du Rêve et du Hasard et de la juxtaposer à la conception de l'Univers. (259)

Thus, in his letters describing his experience, Mallarmé claims that at last he has "une conception pure," a harmonious comprehension of the universe and its mysteries, an understanding of "la corrélation intime de la Poésie avec l'Univers," the result of a terrible spiritual struggle during which, he tells Cazalis, he has finally abandoned the vestiges of his former faith. From this moment on, Beauty is his only God, the sole Absolute to which he will devote his life, and Poetry its only transcendent reality: "Il n'y a que la Beauté,—et elle n'a qu'une expression parfaite, la Poésie" (243).

In the traditional phraseology of the esoteric mystic who declares that he has undergone a complete transformation, involving a "spiritual suicide," a "dying" of the old self and a "rebirth" of the new, Mallarmé informs Cazalis:

Je suis parfaitement mort . . . . C'est t'apprendre que je suis maintenant impersonnel en non plus Stéphane que tu as connu,—mais une aptitude qu'a l'Univers spirituel à se voir et à se développer, à travers ce qui fut moi. (243-44)

But unlike the mystic initiate who passively accepts his experience with no thought of *acting* upon it, Mallarmé sought to "capture" his own in literature for the benefit of others, with the idea of sparing his fellow man the excruciating agony which he had undergone in arriving at his new vision of the universe. Like the esoteric Hermetist who with saintly devotion dedicated his life to the successful completion of the Great Work—the creation of the Philosopher's Stone—Mallarmé thenceforth pledged himself to the writing of his masterwork. In fact, eighteen years later in his autobiographical letter to Verlaine, Mallarmé refers to his "patience d'alchimiste" (*Correspondance: 1886-1889* 301).

Like the celebrated Philosopher's Stone which was believed to possess the power of transmutation, Mallarmé's masterpiece to which he often referred simply as "the Book," was to be, in his words, the "*instrument spirituel*" by which life would at last be given true meaning and authenticity. It was this supreme form of literature which would finally endow human existence with universal significance. Mallarmé undoubtedly intended his Great Work to have a soteriological function. Mallarmé once remarked to Barbey d'Aureville: "Je pense . . . que le monde sera sauvé par une meilleure littérature" (quoted in Delfel 80). Everything about the Book would have a spiritual, even religious attribute. For example, the folds of the pages would be, "vis-à-vis de la feuille imprimée grande, un indice, quasi religieux" (*Oeuvres complètes* 379) and the typography "approchant d'un rite" (380).

Mallarmé intended his Great Work, the Book, to be the Supreme Initiation, the catalytic agent for an experience of mystic insight much like that which the poet underwent in Tournon. The Book would be able, through its overwhelming suggestive power, to recreate in its readers or auditors the same sensation of accession to the sublime as that described by Mallarmé in his letters to Cazalis and Villiers. What, in essence, was the nature of this experience which Mallarmé strove to impart? Quite simply, it can best be described as an impression of complete "atemporality," a period in which time ceases to exist, a moment when all Eternity rushes in to fill the terrifying void of the Present. As Mallarmé describes it to Villiers, ". . . l'Eternité ait scintillé en moi et dévoré la notion survivante du Temps . . ." (*Correspondance: 1862-1871* 259). And as we have seen, he tells Cazalis that, as a result of this experience, he has become a pure spirit, wandering through Eternity, unrestrained by the confining bounds of Time. It is during this moment that all the Universe seemed to fit together at last into a coherent whole, all of its apparently disparate elements harmoniously falling into place as a perfect unity. As we have mentioned, Mallarmé says that he was finally able to comprehend "la corrélation intime de la Poésie avec l'Univers" and that as a result of his experience he now has "une vue très—une de l'Univers!" (259).

Several critics have called attention to Mallarmé's unique perception of the universe which seems to be the result of his unusual experience discussed above. In my view, the most notable among these in this respect are Thomas Williams, who discusses Mallarmé's association with mysticism in *Mallarmé and the Language of Mysticism*; Guy Delfel, who in *L'Esthétique de Stéphane Mallarmé*, presents the poet's conception of time and the Absolute; and particularly Georges Poulet, who in *La Distance intérieure* offers significant insight into the mind of the poet concerning what Poulet has called "un moment éternel" (see page 14 below). However, although these critics have described, even in detail, Mallarmé's conception of "atemporality" as a means of understanding the poet's literary philosophy and practice, none of them have used this approach to analyze Mallarmé's use of this idea as an almost omnipresent theme in much of his poetical work. Therefore, what follows is my own interpretation of several significantly illustrative poems from this critical standpoint, using references from the authors mentioned above as crucial corroboration for my analysis.

Mallarmé's vision of an eternal cosmic harmony is strikingly similar to those described throughout the esoteric tradition. The author of the first *libellus* of the *Hermetica*, using Thoth-Hermes as his protagonist, tells of a similar experience:

I see that by God's mercy there has come to be in me a form which is not fashioned out of matter, and I have passed forth out of myself, and I entered into an immortal body. I am not now the man I was: I have been born again in mind, and the bodily shape which was mine before has been put away from me. (*Hermetica* 1: 241)

Then he goes on to relate the wonderful vision of the universe which had been suddenly imparted to him. Similar accounts are numerous in esoteric literature, from ancient times up to present day, for the intense rationalism of the modern age has in no way dulled the mystic insight, the occult *Weltanschauung* of contemporary man.

An excellent example of a modern man's experience with a mystic revelation of eternal cosmic harmony is that related by a certain N.M., which W. T. Stace includes in his study *Mysticism and Philosophy*. One day as he was looking from the window of a Brooklyn tenement building, N. M. reports:

Suddenly every object in my field of vision took on a curious and intense existence of its own; that is, everything appeared to have an 'inside'—to exist as I existed, having inwardness, a kind of individual life, and every object, seen under this aspect, appeared exceedingly beautiful . . . Everything was urgent with life . . . All things seemed to *glow* with a light that came from within them. I experienced complete certainty that at that moment I saw things as they really were, and I was filled with grief at the realization of the real situation of human beings, living continuously in the midst of all this without being aware of it . . . I began to be aware of time again, and the impression of entering into time was as marked as though I had stepped from air to water, from a rarer to a thicker element. (Quoted in Williams 30)

James Joyce called these visions of cosmic unity "epiphanies" which he describes as moments "when the meaningless flow of ideas and perceptions—the 'stream of consciousness'—suddenly makes a kind of sense" (quoted in Williams 45). They are moments which endow life with authenticity, revealing the obverse side of existence, known only vaguely as the *Absolute*. These instants of eternity might be sparked by a beautiful painting, an inspiring sunset, or as Mallarmé believed, by a well-written poem, but regardless of the catalyst, the result is always basically the same sensation of "at-oneness" with the universe, outside of the ordinary bounds of

space-time. And it was in many of Mallarmé's works, especially his hermetic poems, that he reveals his preoccupation with this sensation of a period of complete atemporality, which, using one of Mallarmé's own expressions, I have chosen to call the "eternal moment."

Mallarmé was continually perceiving in the world around him objects and situations which reminded him and perhaps reinduced a sensation of his original experience. For example, in the "Cantique de saint Jean," Mallarmé compares the daily journey of the sun with the path of the head of the saint during his execution. Just as the sun rises toward the zenith, then descends to the horizon, so does St. John's head mount toward the block, then after it is decapitated from the body, falls to the ground. Both objects describe a trajectory in their movements and, as in all trajectories, they contain one point, the apogee, at which all vertical motion is completely stopped for a brief instant of time, which the physicists call "zero time," a moment of time so infinitesimal as to be immeasurable. This parallel between the path of the sun and that of the saint's head is made even more striking by the fact that St. John's Day is June 24, approximately the date of the summer solstice, when the sun reaches its highest point in the northern hemisphere then descends once more toward the equator. For the sun, the apogee occurs at midday; for the saint, at the moment of his death. Mallarmé was fascinated with this particular instant of "zero time" and called it in this poem the "halte surnaturelle":

Le soleil que sa halte  
Surnaturelle exalte  
Aussitôt redescend  
Incandescent. (*Oeuvres complètes* 49)

Mallarmé attributes a supernatural quality to this moment because, in effect, it annihilates time, fusing all past and future into one instant, and affirms an existence entirely outside the confines of space and time. Actually this moment is the opposite extreme of eternity; it is an instant of absolute timelessness which seemingly escapes from the ordinary bounds of time. As Georges Poulet says of midnight, which is also a type of *halte surnaturelle*, exactly dividing one day from the next, yet not existing in either, the eternal moment is "d'une importance unique, puisqu'il n'est pas déterminé par un hasard qui fait et défait l'existence, puisqu'il existe par lui-même, cause de lui-même, moment donc essentiel, éternellement subsistant, moment qui 'fait le présent absolu des choses'" (326). The *halte surnaturelle* "exalts" the saint because during this brief moment of eternity he becomes more than just dead or alive; he is beyond all life and death; and

as Mallarmé has Hérodiade say in one of the sketches for the dramatic version of this poem:

Non c'était  
vain . . .  
de te couper la tête  
c'était fait  
au moment éternel (*Les Noces d'Hérodiade* 108)

The martyrdom of the saint, actually a form of suicide, for St. John knew he would be executed if he continued his preaching, represents for Mallarmé a spiritual death, one of total self-immolation to the Absolute, by which one becomes "wholly other," or as he phrased it, "une aptitude qu'à l'Univers Spirituel à se voir et à se développer," for it is only in dying to the material existence in this life that one can be born anew to a spiritual existence. As Poulet expresses it: "Dans le moment où nous nous donnons la mort, nous nous donnons la vie. Notre existence propre ne peut consister que dans un acte qui dure un moment. Un acte de suicide" (325). It is in this instant of suicide between life and death that all past and future merge into one eternal moment, destroying Time as well as Chance, which makes use of Time to enforce its harsh demands upon mankind:

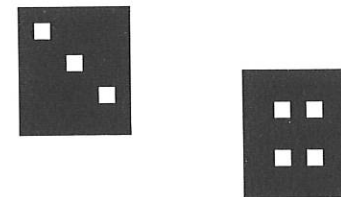
L'être qui se tue devient pure conscience de soi, et échappe ainsi à la spirale de la durée. Passé et futur se résorbent en un moment unique, leur aboutissement et leur négation . . . [Le suicide] abolit le temps et du même coup le hasard qui, en divisant l'instant, créa le temps. (322)

It was in effecting this type of "spiritual suicide," in denying the reality of his own existence, that Mallarmé found in the split-second of this act, the eternal moment, le "Rêve absolu, la Conception pure."

The motion of the sun was not the only movement that caused Mallarmé to consider the *halte surnaturelle*. The leap or "*bond*" for Mallarmé held a special fascination, perhaps because of this ideal moment of suspension that it contains when all vertical movement is completely stopped. Mallarmé uses the figure of a leap in several of his poems. For example, in "Le Pitre châtié" Mallarmé qualifies the continued dives of the clown as *bonds*: "A bonds multiples, reniant le mauvais Hamlet!" (*Oeuvres complètes* 31). Similarly, the dive of the woman in "Petit Air I," like a leap, forms a complementary trajectory to that described by the flight of the bird, and in "Soupir," the continual leaping and suspension of a fountain also caught the poet's sensitive eye.

Mallarmé characterizes the life of Verlaine as a "bound" in the "Tombeau" dedicated to this poet, calling it "le solitaire bond tantôt extérieur" (71). The words "tantôt extérieur" imply that, having now become interior, and consequently invisible after death, the bound continues its course. However, this time the trajectory described is inverse, with its *halte surnaturelle* not at the zenith, but within the tomb of the poet, for it is here that Verlaine, with the aid of his poetry which will glorify him, annihilates his former self, misunderstood and unfortunate, the Verlaine of the "maux humains" and becomes totally other: the new, real Verlaine, "la notion pure de soi-même." It is precisely the eternal moment of this metamorphosis that Mallarmé is describing in the poem. Verlaine is exactly between his unhappy past and his glorious future. The grave is not his final resting place, but the womb of Death, calumniated because it is from her that the poet will be reborn exalted and victorious.

In *Igitur* we find once again a curved path of which the *halte surnaturelle* represents the eternal moment of the spiritual suicide, the moment when absolute truth invades an individual and incorporates him totally within the harmonious fabric of the cosmos. The vial of poison traces a curve towards Igitur's lips, then halts there for a brief instant just before the poison enters his mouth, and it is during this moment that Igitur, in destroying himself, attains also his "notion pure de soi." In one of the drafts for this story, Mallarmé has Igitur toss a pair of dice before drinking the potion. The tossed dice also have a *halte surnaturelle* before falling during which Chance is held in suspension and is incapable of rendering its cruel dictates. It is during this brief respite that chance is destroyed, or in Mallarmé's words, "le hasard est aboli." This idea is developed more amply, of course, in *Un Coup de Dés*, in which the master throws a pair of cosmic dice, the Constellation generally known as the Big Dipper (Ursa Major), which can be represented thus:



Mallarmé seems to suggest in this work, that we may all have our being during the *halte surnaturelle* of these cosmic dice which seem to hang in the sky forever. And perhaps the full appreciation of this glorious moment of eternity is our only exaltation and our sole claim to immortality.

I believe, however, that it is in his poem simply entitled "Sainte" that Mallarmé best captures the idea of the *halte surnaturelle* or the eternal

moment. This poem is masterfully constructed like a double-paneled screen which is sometimes found behind a monstrance in Catholic churches and chapels. The poem is divided into exactly two parts, each one of eight verses, by a colon which could very well represent the hinges of the screen (cf. Williams 41). In the first "panel" of the poem, Mallarmé presents Saint Cecilia, the patron of musicians, who is also about to commit a type of "spiritual suicide," and it is the exact moment of this act that the poet has transformed into poetry. In abandoning her worn terrestrial instruments, which represent her past, for a celestial one, a harp formed by the wing of an angel at her window, the saint denies her former existence as an earthly musician and from this "death" is reborn to an ideal, heavenly one. However, this glorious metamorphosis is not entirely effected. The saint does not yet play her celestial music, for indeed the angel is in the other "panel" of the poem representing the saint's future. Mallarmé has therefore frozen Cecilia in the *halte surnaturelle* of the curve that one of her hands traces just before she touches the celestial instrument, while she puts down her old hymnal, the last vestige of her past (an action which, in fact, describes a complementary trajectory). Like the lover in Keat's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" who is about to kiss his sweetheart, but will never touch her, Saint Cecilia is always on the point of playing the angel's wing. She, too, is exalted in this eternal moment of her transformation into a heavenly musician, "musicienne de silence" (54).

In order to communicate impressively the idea of the eternal moment, Mallarmé utilized in this poem what I have labeled as a "temporal oxymoron," an intriguing combination of simultaneous allusions to the past and the future. In the first part of "Sainte" by juxtaposing present participles with the adverbs, Mallarmé succeeds in establishing a kind of "past present":

De sa viole étincelant  
 Jadis avec flûte ou mandore . . .  
 Du Magnificat ruisselant  
 Jadis selon vêpre et comédie . . . (Oeuvres complètes 53)

Similarly, the present tense in the second part is actually a form of "future present," for Mallarmé here presents the future glory of the saint, when she will play the divine harp, as presently taking place. Mallarmé thus masterfully conveys by these intricate mixtures of time the convergence of past and future into one common point or eternal moment, the *halte surnaturelle*. As Poulet has stated:

Le temps mallarméen est fait d'un mélange ambigu de futur et

de passé, de notions qui toujours s'avouent actuelles, mais au milieu desquelles, comme au sein d'un tourbillon, se discerne la présence de l'Idée éternelle, jamais contemporaine mais pourtant toujours au bord de l'actualité. . . . La durée mallarméenne tend à se ramener à la création d'un moment éternel. (347)

In fact, Mallarmé's conception of time was quite distinct from the conventional one which is actually conjectural and without any positively established basis, i.e., that time "passes" and that our existence is entirely contained within the present which continually takes shape from a nebulous future and becomes, at a regular and inexorable rate, a past lost forever. In fact, as J. B. Priestly has pointed out in his study entitled *Man and Time*, this idea of time is relatively modern dating from the birth of Christianity, for, as he indicates, it was the first Christians who developed and promulgated this conception of time to support their assertion that, unlike certain mythical gods who had recurring deaths, "Christ died once and for all and that this death was a fact of the past, an event of History which could not be repeated" (143). Mallarmé's ideas concerning time, however, are very similar to the primitive concepts of a sacred, Absolute Time, completely independent from man's time, in which mythical and religious events never actually "take place" historically, but occur repeatedly and even simultaneously within some "eternal now." It is, as Priestley characterizes it, "'all-at-once' instead of 'one-thing-after-another,' past and present and future merging and becoming the eternal instant" (121). Although this absolute time is entirely separate from man's realm of time, there are moments in which the two appear to be contiguous, at least at one single point, and it is during this moment that human beings feel they can truly experience the eternal, the Absolute. As Mircea Eliade states in *Traité d'histoire des religions*, "Tout temps, quel qu'il soit, est 'ouvert' sur un temps sacré, en d'autres termes peut révéler ce que nous appellerions d'une formule comme l'absolu, c'est-à-dire le surnaturel, le surhumain, le surhistorique" (327). And it was in this fleeting moment that Mallarmé felt that he was at least able to glimpse Eternity, and it was this eternal moment that the poet attempted, not without some spectacular success, to make manifest within his poetry so that others too, he hoped, might participate in this glorious instant of exaltation.

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## The Elusive Kafka as a Man of His Times: Reflections on Recent Research

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The name Kafka and the subsequent derivation kafkaesque invariably evoke images of the surreal, of feelings of existential *Angst*, and of deep emotional reactions ranging from utter despair to cautiously guarded hope. The legendary obtuseness and mythical impenetrability that have come to be associated with Kafka and his world stand inversely proportional to the overt intent of the ever burgeoning number of critical attempts to explicate his work. By the most recent count, the number of books, studies, essays, and articles on Kafka over the past three-quarters of a century has surpassed the staggering total of 11,000.<sup>1</sup> Yet so much of Kafka remains hidden deep within the vault of a middle-European capital, notwithstanding the nostalgic appeal Prague exudes and the current widespread entrepreneurial efforts of its Czech citizenry to capitalize on a native son so long summarily ignored.<sup>2</sup> The essential answers to the questions of who Kafka was and what his message means seem increasingly elusive and enigmatic as they are filtered repeatedly through a plethora of ambiguous discourses and subjective interpretations. Though he stands as the paradigmatic representative of modernism *par excellence*,<sup>3</sup> the real Kafka remains today perhaps as veiled as ever.

To be sure, even the casual reader of Kafka is familiar in general terms with the essential biography: with his threefold isolation from Czech, German, and Jewish society, with his problematic relationship with family and friends (captured most incisively in his literary and autobiographical depiction of his relationship with a domineering father and with his two-time fiancée Felice Bauer), with the poor health that plagued him and the tuberculosis that claimed his young life, and with the introverted personality and uncompromising commitment to writing in the face of the harsh realities of everyday life and work. But when this casual reader is nevertheless confronted with a literary legacy that defiantly thwarts explication, he oftentimes submissively accepts the contradictions as the irrational and unfathomable reflections of the dysfunctional, eccentric, modernist mind. And yet each decade from the 1920s to the present has approached