

# New Artistic Rhythm Practices and Conceptions (1857-1897) - part 2

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[Previous chapter](#)

## Free Verse Rhythm vs Metric Rhythm (Mallarmé - 1886-1897)

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the last important artist who contributes to the theory of rhythm is Stéphane Mallarmé. Through a deep reflection on poetry and language, based on a very innovative writing practice, Mallarmé provides new insights on the relation between rhythm, language and subjectivity.

In a very famous letter written in 1886, Mallarmé presents rhythm as nothing less than the “essential” part of “human language,” through which poetry expresses “the mysterious meaning of the aspects of existence.” Rhythm is the main means that enables Man to reach an “authentic” life and therefore it is a crucial element of the only valuable “spiritual task.”

Poetry is the expression, through human language reduced to its essential rhythm [*par le langage humain ramené à son rythme essentiel*], of the mysterious meaning of the aspects of existence: it thus bestows authenticity on our sojourn and constitutes the only spiritual task. (Letter to Léo d'Orfer, avril 1886, *Corr.* p. 572)

In 1894, notes written for a conference in England bear witness that in Mallarmé's mind poetic and world rhythms actually take part in a loop. Poetry is a “song” drawn “from the world in order to illuminate its fundamental rhythm.”

To the impersonal or pure Verse will adapt the instinct which draws a song from the world in order to illuminate its fundamental rhythm and which refuses the vain residue. (*Music and Letters*, 1894, my trans.)

During the same conference, Mallarmé uses the term rhythm to describe human subjectivity.

Every soul is a braid of rhythms [*toute âme est un nœud rythmique*]. (*Music and Letters*, 1894, trans. Mary Ann Caws [\[1\]](#), 2001, p. 33)

In 1896, quite consistently with his previous statements, he argues that since the poet is endowed with a particular “instinct for rhythm,” he is the most directly related with the human being in its least accessible depths.

Now, following that instinct for rhythm [*l’instinct de rythmes*] which elects him to office [*qui l’élite*], the poet permits himself to see a lack of proportion between the means unleashed and the result. (*Mystery in Literature*, 1896, trans. Mary Ann Caws, 2001, p. 47)

This series of statements has rarely been commented for its own sake. And it is a pity for it provides a completely new insight in Mallarmé’s art theory and practice. It also completes the rhythmological reflections of Baudelaire, Wagner and Hopkins.

In Mallarmé’s case, this lack of understanding or interest for rhythm can be explained mainly for two reasons. The first is that a lot of specialists in aesthetics and literature have focused ever since the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century on the larger interest of Mallarmé, Verlaine and the Symbolists for music and their extensive use of musical metaphors. Therefore poetic and language rhythm have been confused with musical rhythm.

Indeed, in his late texts dedicated to the literary movement of his time and to poetics, Mallarmé often refers to music. Symbolists did for poetry, he says, what Wagner already did for the latter: they aimed at closely joining language and music together.

To hear the indisputable ray – as particular arrows/lines/features [*comme des traits*] gild and tear a wandering melody; or Music joins Verse to form [*pour former*], since Wagner, Poetry. (*Crisis of Verse*, 1896, trans. Barbara Johnson [\[2\]](#), 2007, p. 207)

As Bergson a few years before in *Time and Free Will* (1889), Mallarmé also compares the “soul” to a “melody.” It is not, as it has been said for centuries especially by theologians and philosophers, a “substance” but a “tune” or a “melody” that anyone plays with his/her own body as “flute or viola.”

Each soul is a melody that needs to be renewed [*Toute âme est une mélodie, qu’il s’agit de renouer*]; and for that, each becomes his own flute or viola. (*Crisis of Verse*, 1896, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 205)

Naturally the poet is deemed a master musician since poetic and musical crafts are similar. In his poem “Art poétique” (1884), Paul Verlaine famously insisted on the importance of “music above everything else” which he associated with irregularity or better yet, unevenness.

De la musique avant toute chose,

Et pour cela préfère l'Impair  
Plus vague et plus soluble dans l'air,  
  
Music above everything else,  
And for that favor the Impair  
  
Which is vaguer and melts better into the air,

Mallarmé's legendary late poem "A Throw of Dice will Never Abolish Chance" (1897) seems to take the relationship between poetry and music even further. In this poem, the poet radically experiments with type size and placement, leaving many blank areas, which themselves seem to carry meaning. Following some suggestions by Mallarmé himself, the "Throw of Dice" has regularly been compared to a musical score with blanks that prescribe rests and with phrases that evanesce in much the same way as the music of Mallarmé's contemporary, the composer Claude Debussy.

In the "Observation Concerning the Poem" he published concurrently, Mallarmé underlined the inspiration he received from the newest forms of poetry, "free verse and the prose poem," but also the "foreign influence" of Music heard in concerts, some of whose "resources are found here."

The venture shares, with something unforeseen, in pursuits particular and dear to our time, free verse and the prose poem. They are joined together under an influence, I know, foreign, that of Music heard in concerts; several of its resources are found here having seemed to me to belong to Letters, I retrieve them. (O.C. Ed. Marchal, I, my trans., p. 392)

David Hertz, one of the best specialists who studied the criss-cross mutation of music and poetry in 19<sup>th</sup> century, showed that Mallarmé was influenced both by Baudelaire and Wagner (D. Hertz, 1987). Inspired by the elimination of alexandrine and the development of poetic prose by the former, as much as the rejection of quadratic phrase and regular meter, the frequent change in tonality, and the collage of melodic fragments by the latter, Mallarmé and the Symbolists began during the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to liberate poetry from symmetrical and repetitive forms of organization. Symmetry, ordered succession of stresses, identical or alternating number of syllables in lines, regular return of rhymes, periodic distribution of stanzas were abandoned as too rigid to render the "individual modulations of the soul."

Instead, their objective was to develop suggestion by breaking the usual syntactical integrated organization, using frequent juxtapositions and therefore forcing, so to say, the meaning to float.

In Mallarmé's poetry, which evolved from Baudelaire's theories, polyvalent signifiers are formed from recurrent symbols that are freed from dominance of hypotactic structures [that is to say, subordinated, by opposition to paratactic structures organized like juxtapositions]. "Rien," "écume," "musique," "rêve," "éventail," "dentelle" are some of the isolated images wrenched

from banal contexts and juxtaposed against other images in order to create an open-ended pattern of meaning. (D. Hertz, 1987, brackets are mine, p. 24)

All those pieces of evidence are correct, at least superficially. But first, one must be careful not to take Mallarmé's comparison between the Symbolists and Wagner at its face value. If Wagner rejected the Italian tradition of writing lyrics according to the music and took great care instead to write music following the accents and meanders of the lyrics (Dufour, 2005), he still used two different media: music *and* language, whereas Symbolists used only one, making "music" internal to language, "elocution descend[ing] into *the* twilight of sonorities."

It's not that one or the other can't still, in its integrity, separate triumphantly from the other (Music without articulation gives a mute concert and Poetry alone can only enounce [*en tant que concert muet s'il n'articule et le poème, énonciateur*]): from their combination and mutual strengthening [*de leurs communauté et retrempe*], instrumentation is illuminated until it becomes obvious beneath the veil, just as elocution descends into *the* twilight of sonorities. (*Crisis of Verse*, 1896, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 207)

Furthermore, whereas Bergson will a few years later contrast the fluidity of musical melody with the discontinuity of cinematographic rhythm which he will consider as too mechanical (Bergson, 1907, chap. 4 and 1911), Mallarmé tends to give to rhythm the theoretical primacy in his theory of poetic subjectivity. By so doing, Mallarmé seeks, just like Bergson, to reflect the unity of a stream which is both linear and differentiated. But since, for him, the stream is primarily speech and secondarily consciousness, its concept may in no case be analyzed using as evidence a series of sounds without any signification. As a poet, he cannot adopt the viewpoint of the pure "duration" (*durée*). He aims at the deployment of a discourse endowed with meaning in which each element will signify while "echoing" what has already been said before and also, by anticipation, what will eventually be uttered. From Mallarmé's viewpoint, Bergson's focusing on melody reduces the stream of speech – and therefore of the soul – to something in which the totality is unduly subjected to the primacy of linearity. The soul, because of its plurality, its "oscillatory" nature, and its way of mixing with language activity cannot be described in this way and must be grasped with a multifaceted rhythm concept, "a more complex thyrus" as we will see below.

A note written for the lecture *Music and Letters* in 1894 seems to go in that direction. Verse aims at ideas "less as a succession than almost simultaneously" and "reduces the duration [*la durée*] to a spiritual division specific to the subject."

Verse shot towards the idea like arrows, less as a succession than almost simultaneously, reduces the duration [*la durée*] to a spiritual division specific to the subject [*une division spirituelle propre au sujet*]; different is the sentence or temporary development, of which prose makes use, while veiling it, in thousand ways. (*O.C.*, my trans., p. 654)

The last argument against the conflation of poetry and music in Mallarmé's thought consists in reading, as Richard Sieburth rightly does, his famous answer to Debussy asking for permission to set

*L'Après-midi d'un faune* to music, as an explicit refusal to confound both arts. Mallarmé may have been influenced by Wagner, as David Hertz claims with good reasons, but if music there is in poetry, it is only metaphorically.

Wagner had wedded music to poetry but had done so only by juxtaposition, by superadding one to the other in a "harmonious compromise" that did not totally transform either. True poetry, by contrast, needed no musical accompaniment because music already inhered in it as its essence – hence Mallarmé's celebrated (and perhaps apocryphal) retort to Claude Debussy when the latter asked him permission to set *L'Après-midi d'un faune* to music: "But I thought I had already done that!" Despite the musical metaphors that Mallarmé so subtly deployed throughout his poetry and criticism, the music he was after had finally very little to do with what he took to be its clangorous Wagnerian embodiment. It was instead to be discovered in the silent, sacred music of St. Cecilia, a music purely of and for the mind, an act of mute symphony such as occurs when eye and inner ear perform their solitary apperceptions within the concert of the written page. (Sieburth in Hollier, 2001, p. 795)

As a matter of fact this argument has been elaborated by Mallarmé in a lecture on *Music and Letters* delivered on March 1 and 2, 1894 at Oxford and Cambridge, where most of the speech is significantly dedicated to poetry and music discussed only at the very end and in very scarce statements. This famous text gives valuable hints about what Mallarmé was designating by the term music when applying it to poetry.

Implicitly comparing it to an Anarchist "attack" – a bomb exploded on December 9, 1893 in Parliament house – Mallarmé explains to his British audience that an "*attentat*" has just been committed against French poetry, which resulted in a deep transformation of "prosody."

Ladies and Gentlemen, [...] The interest you reveal inviting me to provide information on various circumstances in the state of our literature – you have chosen an auspicious date to do so. Indeed, I come bearing news. The most amazing news.  
Such a situation has never before been seen.

Poetry has been under attack. [*On a touché au vers*]

Governments change; yet prosody has always remained untouched: either because in revolutions, it passes unseen, or because the revolutionaries fail to convey the belief that it might ever change [*l'attentat ne s'impose pas avec l'opinion que ce dogme dernier puisse varier*]. (*Music and Letters*, 1894, trans. Mary Ann Caws, 2001, p. 32)

What was this "*attentat*" about? Mallarmé notes that whereas at the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic poets still combined time-honored meter and new concern for sound flowing, the latest poets strictly separated the latter from the former. Metrical and what we could call rhythmical poetry differentiated and took separate courses. In other words, instead of following a linear and progressive Hegelian dialectic, modern art – but it is probably true for any art – has grown branches.

Very strict, numerical, direct, with associated games [*à deux conjoints*], the meter, which is older [*antérieur*], subsists alongside the new forms, which is the stage we've certainly reached just now. One of separation.

Whereas at the beginning of this century, the powerful Romantic ear combined the twin elements in its undulating alexandrines – those with punctuated division of the line and enjambements [*ceux à coupe ponctuée et enjambements*]; the fusion is in the process of dissolving towards integrity. (*Music and Letters*, 1894, trans. Mary Ann Caws, 2001, p. 33)

Slightly ironical, Mallarmé suggests that traditional metrical poetry will certainly remain as an “official canon” for “the grand ceremonies.”

A few initiators, as was necessary, surged far ahead, thinking that they had done with the official canon (as I call it, as a guarantee): it will remain so, for the grand ceremonies. (*Music and Letters*, 1894, trans. Mary Ann Caws, 2001, p. 33)

As we know, himself produced a lot of texts – especially sonnets – written according to older metric patterns. But what really matters to him, in 1894, are two new poetic practices closely related to one another.

The first appeared with the revolution initiated by Baudelaire in the 1860s with his *Little Prose Poems*. “Prose poetry” has made the traditional opposition between prose and poetry collapse. But contrary to what one could think a bit hastily – Baudelaire himself described poetic prose as “musical without rhythm and without rhyme” – it did not make verse nor rhyme nor rhythm disappear. On the contrary, it revealed their existence and crucial role in another sort of writing which was traditionally considered as utterly adverse to them: “The line of poetry is all in all, as soon as one writes.” Any poetic prose is always “equivalent to a broken line of poetry,” that is, it contains parts of lines without ever being numerically patterned. Lines should then be considered as prime elements of any kind of speech, although being of different lengths and belonging to a strictly organized set.

The line of verse, on occasion fulminates, a rarity (although we have just seen that everything, measured, is [*quoiqu'ait été à l'instant vu que tout, mesuré, l'est*]). (*Music and Letters*, 1894, trans. Mary Ann Caws, 2001, p. 33)

And consequently – contrary to what Baudelaire said but in accordance with his actual practice – poetic prose plays, as much as maybe more than versified poetry, with “timbres,” “hidden rhymes” and, one may add, “rhythms.” It is in no way different and must also be considered as a complex organization, a “complex thyrsus.”

Because the line of poetry is all in all, as soon as one writes [*le vers est tout, dès qu'on écrit*]: style, versification, if there's cadence. That's why the prose of any luxurious writer – liberated

from the carefree style usually affected – a prose, that’s ornamental, is worth/equivalent to a broken line of poetry [*vaut en tant qu’un vers rompu*], playing with its timbres and indeed with hidden rhymes. He follows a more complex thyrus; and it was the flowering of all this that in the old days [*naguères*] obtained the designation of *prose poetry* [poème en prose]. (*Music and Letters*, 1894, trans. Mary Ann Caws, 2001, p. 33)

The second new poetic practice is more recent and “has seemed more or less to bring previous efforts to a close.” While disregarding some Baudelaire’s *statements*, Mallarmé presents himself and the Symbolist poets as direct heirs of his *way of writing*. Indeed, following an exactly opposite path, but completely parallel to “poetic prose,” “free verse” has introduced in versified poetry a radical break with metric requirements. By not using any longer consistent meter patterns, rhymes, at least at the end of lines, stanzas, or any other traditional form, “free verse” has made poetry closer to prose and to natural speech – just like Hopkins’s “sprung rhythm” intended, as one may remember, to be “the nearest to the rhythm of prose, that is the native and natural rhythm of speech, the least forced.”

Moreover, by ridding poetry of meter, “free verse” has taken over Baudelaire’s aim to find a new kind of writing able “to adapt to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of reverie, the jibes of conscience,” in other words, to make the speech flow exactly as the soul, the imagination and the conscience do. Thanks to its prosaic fluid organization, “free verse” aims at more adequately reflecting the complex nature of the soul itself, then defined by Mallarmé, quite unexpectedly, as *un nœud rythmique*, “a braid of rhythms.”

A fortunate discovery, which has seemed more or less to bring previous efforts to a close: the *vers libre* – a modulation (as I often say) which is entirely individual because every soul is a braid of rhythms [*toute âme est un nœud rythmique*]. (*Music and Letters*, 1894, trans. Mary Ann Caws, 2001, p. 33)

A lot has been written on this surprising expression but it has never been noticed, at least to my knowledge, that that conundrum of Mallarmé’s readers begins to clear up when compared to Hopkins’s contemporary reflection.

As for the latter, poetry must be for the former an “entirely individual modulation” of speech, i.e. a unique organization of the flow of language. Similarly, the “individual modulation” or the “inscape” of a line and by extension of a poem entails less meter, regularity, repetition than interplay of timbre, hidden rhymes and prosodic series.

Furthermore, Mallarmé makes explicit the rhythmic conception of the soul that was only presupposed by Hopkins, but conversely Mallarmé’s suggestion becomes more substantiated when supplemented by Hopkins’s view. Indeed, this “braid of rhythms” may be taken as a quite adequate description of the flowing yet lasting entity implicit in Hopkins’s poetics in which one’s dynamic “inscape,” one’s unique performative force meets and battles with an infinity of others forces, through “instresses,” that is perceptions and appetitions, to use Leibnizian terms, or soul, imagination and conscience in Baudelairean terms, or perceptions, desires and acts of will, in

modern terms. The only difference with Hopkins is the absence of any religious belief, which puts Mallarmé on Spinoza's and Diderot's side, but the conception of poetic craft, the notion of poetic subjectivity and the central role given to *rhuthmos* in both of them are comparable.

After having lengthily presented what really counts for him, Mallarmé finally discusses Music. As expected, he starts by placing both arts on the same level. Their ultimate aim is the same, he says: the Idea. By their alternation and oscillation, they harmonize, balance and fecundate each other.

Let us forget the old distinction between Music and Letters [...] Music and Letters are the alternative face here extended towards the obscure; scintillating there, with certainty, of one phenomenon, the only one, I called the Idea. Each mode predisposes to the other and after vanishing in it reemerges with benefit: twice, oscillating, a whole gender is completed. (*O.C.*, my trans., p. 649)

A note written during the same year emphasizes their parity and complementarity.

Music without Letters presents itself as a very delicate cloud; alone, they [the Letters] are banal cash [*seule, elles, une monnaie si courante*]. (*O.C.*, my trans., p. 656)

But other statements sounds quite differently and show that music is taken by Mallarmé as an ontological and we may say a rhythmological concept.

Already the year before (1893), he made perfectly clear, in a letter to Edmund Gosse, that the *Music* he is talking about as a poet is not the *music* made by musicians but "arrangement of speech" or, he notices, "rhythm between relationships."

I make music but not the kind of music which one actually hears when in presence of an orchestra, which is already industrial [*déjà industriel*]; rather the beyond magically produced by certain arrangements of speech [*dispositions de la parole*]; not by the words themselves, but by their dispositions; Music in the Greek sense, signifying at root Idea or rhythm between relationships [*au fond Idée ou rythme entre des rapports*]. (Corr. VI, 1893, my trans., p. 26)

The same year in *Verse and Prose*, in a paragraph that will be reused without change in *Crisis of Verse* in 1896, he again explicitly makes "Music" result "not from elementary sonorities by brass, strings, and wood wind" but "from intellectual speech at its apogee" and "the totality of relationships existing in everything."

It is not from elementary sonorities by brass, strings, and wood wind, undeniably but from intellectual speech at its apogee that there must wholly and patently result as the totality of relationships existing in everything [*en tant que l'ensemble des rapports existant dans le tout*],



Music." (*O.C.*, my trans., p. 367-368)

Finally, in *The Book, Spiritual Instrument* written in 1895, he clearly assigns to poetry the highest place, as being the true Music destined to intone "the hymn, harmony and joy [...] of the relations between all things."

The hymn, harmony and joy, as pure set, grouped [*pur ensemble groupé*] in some fulgurating circumstance, of the relations between all things [*des relations entre tout*]. (*O.C.*, my trans., p. 378).

All those extracts concerning music converge and meet the previous reflection on poetics but not, as it is usually claimed, under the cloak of a rather vague and sentimental conception of music. The latter ended up on the definition of poetry as "individual modulation," interplay of timbre, hidden rhymes and prosodic series, and therefore only means to render the existence, the flowing-through-time of the subject as "braid of rhythms." The former expose a conception of poetry as "arrangement of speech" or "rhythm between relationships" or, as we will see below, "arrangement of fragments with alternations and confrontations, adding up to a total rhythm," and therefore only means to render the infinite ways the being is flowing as "the totality of relationships existing in everything" or "the relations between all things." Thanks to these two converging movements, *Music and Letters* defines a full-fledged rhythmological program comprising a poetics, which is also a theory of language, a theory of subjectivity and an ontology, all placed under the aegis of rhythm as *rhuthmos*.

The second obstacle to a better understanding of the crucial importance of rhythm for Mallarmé has been raised by philosophers. Mallarmé's poetry has often been misunderstood and costumed as either a mere literary illustration of Hegelian idealism or a brilliant anticipation of the various Heideggerian deconstructions of metaphysics that developed during last century. In all these interpretations, the *rhuthmic* dimension of Mallarmé's thought and practice has been completely obfuscated by either the dialectic or the phenomenological conception of becoming, Heraclitus and Humboldt by Hegel or Heidegger. Since this obstacle is even more difficult to overthrow than the previous one, I will spend the rest of this section to explain how this could be done.

In 1896, just two years before his death, Mallarmé published his last important text on poetics: *Crisis of Verse* [*Crise de vers*]. As in *Music and Letters*, the "dissolution of the official number," the "free verse" are presented as the epitome of "nouveau", or what could be translated with a Baudelairean expression: "modernity."

The whole modernity lodges, concerning free verse [*Toute la nouveauté s'installe, relativement au vers libre*], not as the expression was understood in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when people spoke of fables or operas (which was only an arrangement, without stanzas, of various known meter), but let's call it, as befits, "polymorphous": and let's imagine the dissolution of the official number [*nombre officiel*], the form becoming whatever one wants, so long as pleasure repeats in it. (*Crisis of Verse*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 204)

Mallarmé recalls that two opposite ways of writing poetry have separated: "the grand general and

historic organs" and "individual manner[s] of playing and ear" the "Language": namely, traditional prosody, and poetic prose and free verse.

What is remarkable is that, for the first time in the literary history of any people, concurrently with the grand general and historic organs, where, according to a latent keyboard [*latent clavier*], orthodoxy exults, anyone with his individual manner of playing and ear can compose his instrument, as soon as he breathes, touches, or taps it with skill [*avec science*]; he can play it on the side and also dedicate it to the Language [*à la Langue*]. (*Crisis of Verse*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 204-205)

A quite remarkable string of expressions – "the form becoming whatever one wants, so long as pleasure repeats in it," "anyone with his individual manner of playing and ear can compose his instrument," "he can play it on the side" – emphasizes the drastic individualization of the ways of writing that just occurred. But, whereas two years before Mallarmé contented himself with rejoicing for the "attacks" committed against classical poetic tradition, he now tries to overtake his spontaneous anarchism and elaborate further the poetic consequences of this change.

He first notes that the collapse of "metric" pattern has enabled the recovering of "language vitality" through its "breakdown" and release of myriad new "elements" – as in his own rather unusual use of syntax and punctuation. But he also insists on the fact that the alternatives to meter and traditional rules that recently developed do not imply sheer randomness and individual caprice. They are "not without similarity to the multiplicity of cries in an orchestral score, which remains verbal," i.e. to sound and meaning elements, signifier and signified, which combine in a larger signifying system. The whole text is dedicated to elaborate this idea and its consequences, which is a way to continue the reflection engaged in previous essays, especially *Music and Letters*. It has therefore a great significance for rhythmology.

Verse, I think, respectfully waited until the giant who identified it with its tenacious and firm blacksmith's hand came to be missing, [Victor Hugo passed away in 1885] in order to, itself, break. The whole language [*Toute la langue*], adjusted to metric [*ajustée à la métrique*], recovering therein its vitality, escapes, freely broken down into thousands of simple elements; and, I add, not without similarity to the multiplicity of cries in an orchestral score, which remains verbal [*la multiplicité des cris d'une orchestration, qui reste verbale*]. (*Crisis of Verse*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 202)

This time, Mallarmé starts by introducing a few elements of a completely new theory of language that has often been misinterpreted and taken as proof of a view exactly opposite to the one he actually defends. Despite contrary statements in the relatively early Cratylic fantasy called *English Words*, published in 1877, Mallarmé takes a strong stand in favor of radical arbitrariness of language.

Just as Humboldt, he first links the so called "imperfection of language" that has saddened so many philosophers since Plato, to the simple fact of the diversity (*Verschiedenheit, diversité*) of human languages, "languages being imperfect insofar as they are many." Any theory of language that

pretends to see a necessary correspondence between sound and sense is therefore contradicted by the mere existence of a vast number of human languages and the undisputed fact that each has its own word for any one thing or concept. Moreover, this diversity implies that there is no such thing as a “supreme language” in which the Spirit could directly, “materially” so to say, tell the truth. This “prohibition,” against which one bumps “with a smile,” averts human beings taking themselves “for God.” Nobody can escape the harsh deflating consequence of this view of language, especially Idealist philosophers. Poetry, since it starts from the languages as they are and even entails a grammatological primacy of writing upon thought, “thought is writing without accessories,” may reach reality more easily than philosophy which quite often represses its own linguistic condition and remains bound by the illusion of being able to talk without any mediation, “despite of” or “beyond” specific human languages, as the Spirit himself.

Languages being imperfect insofar as they are many, the supreme one is lacking: thought considered as writing without accessories, or whispering but the immortal word still being tacit, the diversity, on earth, of idioms prevents anyone from proffering words that otherwise would turn out to be, by a unique stamp, materially truth itself. This prohibition explicitly prevails in Nature (one bumps up against it with a smile), where nothing leads one to take oneself for God. (*Crisis of Verse*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 205)

Mallarmé’s second point applies not to language in general but to each individual idiom considered for its own sake, nevertheless the anti-Idealist consequences are the same. French shows – but the experiment could be done with any other tongue – that there are no necessary connections between sounds of words and meanings. *Jour* has a “dark” timbre but a “light” referent (day) while conversely *nuit* has a “light” timbre but a “dark” referent (night). This single example, which he characterizes with humor as “perversity,” suffices to demonstrate the fallacy of supposing with Cratylus that, even in a single language, there can ever be an intrinsic correspondence between sound and sense.

Beside *ombre*, which is opaque, *ténèbres* darkens little; what disenchantment, in front of the perversity that makes *jour* and *nuit*, contradictorily, sound [*confère des timbres*] dark in the former and light in the latter. (*Crisis of Verse*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 205)

The last point concerns the variety of functions of the language. In a quite extraordinary way, although he presents his intuition in a dated aristocratic vocabulary, Mallarmé underlines something that has been painfully rediscovered only during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Referring to objects is only one function of language among many others like phatic, pragmatic, emotive, metalinguistic and poetic functions (Jakobson, 1960) and therefore poetry can and should expand beyond reference. Poetry’s task is not to represent or talk “about the reality of things.” It is to “allude to it” or to “deduct their quality, in which some idea might be incorporated.”

Speaking has to do with [*Parler n’a trait à*] the reality of things only commercially: in literature, it is limited to alluding to it or deducting their quality, in which some idea might be incorporated [*distraindre leur qualité qu’incorporera quelque idée*]. (*Crisis of Verse*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 208)

Language is not, contrary to what the “crowd” believes – but among them most of philosophers and scientists – , a mere instrument that the mind uses to communicate with other minds. It is “primarily dream and song,” i.e. it carries visions thanks to its sounds. And when it is transformed into poetry, that is into “an art devoted to fictions,” it “recovers its virtuality.” In other words, it aims at absent, unheard of, still unknown realities. I will return to this below.

As opposed to an easy and representative monetary function, as the crowd first treats it, speech, which is primarily dream and song, recovers, in the Poet’s hands, of necessity in an art devoted to fictions, its virtuality. (*Crisis in Poetry*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 210)

This short but very efficient anti-Idealist theory of language offers to Mallarmé the theoretical background he needs to explain the crisis poetry has recently been through – and its positive consequences.

The first one concerns what literature is really “about.” The newest poetry “rejects natural materials as too crude” and rather develops techniques of “suggestion” based on the indirect production of higher or ideal intuitions brought about by carefully pairing selected primary “images.” It has adopted “the viewpoint of an Idealism.”

Decadent, Mystic, the Schools naming themselves, or being labeled in haste by the press, have adopted, as what they have in common, the viewpoint of an Idealism that (as in fugues or sonatas) rejects natural materials as too crude, even when thought organizes them; to retain from them only suggestion. To institute an exact relationship between images, from which will emerge a third aspect, fusible and clear [*un tiers aspect fusible et clair*], offered up to divination... (*Crisis of Verse*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 207)

At the end of the essay, Mallarmé gives the very famous example of “a flower.” He notes that the mere utterance of the word makes “arise, musically, the very idea” of flower.

What good is the marvel of transposing a fact of nature into its vibratory near-disappearance through the play of speech, however; if it is not so that from it should emanate, without the encumbrance of a close or concrete reminder, the pure notion.

I say: a flower! And out of the oblivion where my voice casts every contour, insofar as it is something other than the known calyxes, there arises, musically, the very idea in its mellowness, the one that is absent from all bouquets. (*Crisis of Verse*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 210)

A lot has been written on this subject in order to relate Mallarmé’s self-proclaimed Idealism to Hegel’s. Some say that the “third aspect, fusible and clear offered up to divination” produced by poetic suggestion or the “rise of the very idea” of flower, “the one that is absent from all bouquets,” would be the equivalent in poetry of the Hegelian *Aufhebung* of uttered words into pure ideas devoid of any materiality and sensitivity. Others claim that since it causes “the near disappearance” of

“natural materials” or “fact of nature” in favor of a “pure notion,” “the very idea,” the discourse would result in the *Aufhebung* of the thing itself. But whatever the interpretation, the limitation of language would thus be overcome in favor of an unadulterated “ideal” expression of the Spirit. (Blanchot, 1949, Langan, 1986)

How is poetic language different? The key is what Mallarmé calls transposition. [...] The most famous sentence in this essay once again stresses the nonrepresentational functioning of poetic language. [...] The result of the use of language is not the transfer of a concrete thing; the thing is “transposed” so that only the pure notion of it remains. As Mallarmé says in another famous statement, “*Divine transposition . . . goes from fact to the ideal*” (*O.C.*, p. 522; Mallarmé’s emphasis). The “flower absent from all bouquets” is the ideal flower evoked in the sound “flower,” and it is absent for the good and sufficient reason that it is ideal. (Cassidy, 1990, p. 72)

To prove that Mallarmé was heavily indebted to Hegel it has been regularly alleged that, in his youth, Mallarmé very likely read some Hegelian texts and that in any case he knew of some of his ideas through his friend Villiers de l’Isle-Adam. And it is true that his letters in the crisis years of 1866-1867 testify to this influence. Having finally overcome his Christian belief, Mallarmé went in search of another absolute and hoped to reach a new conception of the universe through self-reflexive mind.

This is to make you know I am now impersonal, not Stéphane you knew – but the ability of the Spiritual Universe to see and develop itself, through what was me. (Letter to Henri Cazalis, May 17 or 14, 1867, quoted in Bourassa, 1999).

But, as a matter of fact, the link to Hegelian Idealism can be easily discarded. A first clue is what Mallarmé himself wrote to another of his friends when his belief crisis was over: “I come down from the Absolute” and will not do “Its Poetry” nor develop the “living panorama of the forms of the Becoming.” (Letter to Eugène Lefébure, May 3, 1868, quoted in Bourassa, 1999)

Another one appears at the beginning of the essay where Mallarmé exposes the historical situation of the new poetry, especially the tense relation between modernity and classicism it triggered. Mallarmé explicitly underlines the fact that art does not know of any *Aufhebung*, any suppression/sublation process. The “newest liberty” does not mean the “erasure of anything that was beautiful in the past.” “Classic” art will remain alive forever. There is no progress in art. The *rhuthmos* of art is not reducible to dialectic.

This is quite a bit of liberty to count on, the newest: but I don’t see – and this remains my intense opinion – an erasure of anything that was beautiful in the past. I remain convinced that on grand occasions, poets will obey solemn tradition, of which the preponderance comes from the classic genius [*dont la prépondérance relève du génie classique*]: it’s just that, when there’s no reason, because of a sentimental breeze or for a story, to disturb those venerable echoes, a poet will ensure to do so [*seulement, quand n’y aura pas lieu, à cause d’une sentimentale bouffée ou pour un récit, de déranger les échos vénérables, on regardera à le faire*]. (*Crisis of Verse*, trans.

We should also remember the huge gap separating the poetics and rhythmic drawn from their experience by writers and poets at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and that fabricated in quite a reactionary spirit by Hegel with a few references to contemporary research and mainly on speculative grounds. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (1821-1831), rhythm is taken as sheer metaphor for dialectic. But this use requires both a certain formalism and a firm teleology that put Hegel's conception of rhythm clearly on Plato's side. In the *Lectures on Aesthetics or Philosophy of Art* (1818- 1829), there is not one single stand that is not opposed to Mallarmé's view and one wonders whether the Hegelian commentators of Mallarmé have ever read Hegel. He claims that poetry has nothing to do with the "collocation [of words] into sentences and elaborate paragraphs, nor in euphony, rhythm, rhyme, etc." It is only a matter of "imagination and ideas." Hegel argues that there are no bonds between ideas and sounds and that rhythm produces anything but a "sensuous charm" or "magic" that blurs the pureness of our "feelings and ideas." Hegel preserves nothing from the discoveries made by his predecessors. For him, rhythm is limited to meter and strictly separate from prosody, from sounds. Following Hermann, he most often defines it in a strictly metric way. Poetic rhythm is otherwise assimilated to musical beat. Last but not least, modern poets are wrong when they blend rhythm and rhyme and should stick instead to classical meters. Hegel explicitly rejects the new experiments and longs for what Mallarmé humorously names "the grand general and historic organs" of "orthodoxy." (for all this see above chap. 3)

One last argument is that Mallarmé's reflection, in contrast to Hegel's and in accord with Humboldt's, sticks to the linguistic condition of thought. Since language is radically arbitrary - "even though [the opposite claim] governs masterpieces" - poetry and more generally art are not governed by *mimesis*. They must not strive to render the "forest," the "intrinsic and dense wood of the trees," the "palace" or the "stones" themselves, in their physical reality. After all, Mallarmé quips, we would not be able to close the book on those big stones. Hegel would have agreed on that. But this does not mean that poetry aims at ideas, as most commentators claim, through a dialectic process of suppression/sublation of words or things.

It certainly communicates intangible feelings, like "the horror" the forest inspires or "the mute thunder scattered in the foliage", i.e. as Cassidy nicely notices "not the actual crashing thunder, but the residue of feeling it leaves behind in the trees." (Cassidy, 1990)

Abolished is the claim, aesthetically an error, even though it governs masterpieces, to include on the subtle paper of a volume anything other than, for example, the horror of the forest, or the mute thunder scattered in the foliage; not the intrinsic and dense wood of the trees. A few spurts of intimate pride veraciously trumpeted arouse the architecture of the palace, the only one habitable; outside of any stone, on which the pages would close with difficulty. (*Crisis of Verse*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 207)

But above all, as we have seen before, poetry makes appear the "virtuality" of things and ideas, that is, things and ideas in a state still unknown or better yet, *unheard of*.

[It] gives you the surprise of never having heard that fragment of ordinary eloquence before, while the reminiscence of the object named is bathed in a brand new atmosphere. (*Crisis in Poetry*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 210)

This means two things. First, that poetry is not about copying or mimicking the world or the already existent, but it is not either about purifying, abstracting, or suppressing and sublimating the old in order to make the new appear. It is about pure “suggestion,” “imagination,” “fiction,” that is plain creation of new possibilities of life and existence. It is *rhuthmic* but not dialectic. Second, that this creation is made through entirely human and material means – i.e. through articulated speech in one particular language. The ideas never separate from sonic, sensitive, bodily, material aspects: “There arises, musically, the very idea in its mellowness.” To put it in a nutshell, Mallarmé’s poetics appears as a materialist thought enclosed in an idealist candy wrapper.

The second insight drawn from the recent poetic crisis concerns the organization of speech. By ridding poetry from meter and rule, and by breaking the language into “elements” the Symbolists have freed the language activity and allowed some radically new ways of expression. But this does not entail neither caprice nor chaos because, as we have seen above, language provides others means for keeping together and organizing those myriads of elements.

Mallarmé notes that if our wish for a universal match between bright words and bright ideas, dark words and dark ideas, were to come true, then we would no longer have verse. Paradoxically, verse owes its sheer existence to that very “languages’ deficiency.” In other words, poetry would not exist if language was not radically arbitrary.

Hope for a resplendent word glowing, or being snuffed out, inversely, so far as simple light-dark alternatives are concerned.—Only, let us be aware that *verse would not exist*: it, philosophically makes up for languages’ deficiency, as a superior supplement. (*Crisis of Verse*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 205-206)

Stephen Cassidy rightly observed that this is certainly a novel idea, particularly since other, contemporary poets and thinkers assert the distinctness of verse by claiming for it the mythical, Cratyllic condition of words (Cassidy, 1990). But one should add that this stand does not mean that language is devoid of *any* motivation (in Saussurean sense). On the one hand, nobody can deny that language does not follow Cratyllic pattern, that it is not created according to a mimesis process, that it is radically historical – and that so is man as well. But, on the other hand, there is a strong motivation aspect in this human activity called speech which makes it a consistent signifying flow that does not separate sound from meaning. What the Symbolists discovered and converted into the main support of their poetry is that in any speech there is a kind of cross motivation of signifier and signified, between themselves and between each other, and that this relational phenomenon ensures that the flow of language remains organized despite its fluidity.

In this instance, Mallarmé is close to Diderot who, as one remembers, claimed that the feeling of beauty does not pertain to the direct perception of an object or a work of art, but to the apperception of the “relations” (*rappports*) that organize it. He is also very close to Baudelaire who

placed at the center of poetry and art, the correspondences between senses and between all linguistic elements. And he joins – although he seems maybe more interested in global than in individual aspects – with Hopkins’s belief that a unified complex of characteristics, Hopkins calls “inscape,” gives each thing and also each poem its uniqueness and beauty. As his predecessors, he argues that there is a kind of “correspondence” between the “fragments” that make a poem or a “book of verse,” “a strange certainty about [their] appropriate place in the volume.” Quoting himself, he elaborates the metaphor of the orchestral score of cries, “any cry possesses an echo – motifs of the same type balance each other, stabilizing each other at a distance,” and opposes this organized complex to both the “sublime incoherence of a romantic page” and the “artificial unity” provided by classical metric.

Now, any subject is fated to imply, among the fragments brought together, a strange certainty about its appropriate place in the volume [*tel accord quant à la place, dans le volume, qui correspond*]. It is susceptible to this because any cry possesses an echo – motifs of the same type balance each other, stabilizing each other at a distance, and neither the sublime incoherence of a romantic page, nor that artificial unity yore entirely measured by the book [*jadis, mesurée en bloc au livre*], can provide it. (*Crisis of Verse*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 208-209)

The signifying system makes a poem works like a net where each “fragment,” better each node is balanced and “suspended” by all others. This net induces “a total rhythm,” i.e. a rhythm organizing and animating the whole poem or book through an accumulation of “alternations and confrontations.”

Everything is suspended, an arrangement of fragments with alternations and confrontations, adding up to a total rhythm [*concourant au rythme total*], which would be the poem stilled, in the blanks [*lequel serait le poème tu, aux blancs*]; only translated, in a way, by each pendant. (*Crisis of Verse*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 209)

These lines show quite clearly why poetry cannot be reduced to music and what exactly Mallarmé means when he talks about rhythm. For the newest poetry, it does not designate any more an abstract, linear and regular succession of strong and weak beats; it is not a measure or a meter. Since it can only be perceived negatively through the “silencing” of the reader or the “blanks” that penetrate the poem on the page, it has no empirical consistency. It is a pure and complete system of opposing signifying elements, at both signifier and signified levels, which organizes the discourse.

Mallarmé uses the same enlarged concept of rhythm in notes he adds in November 1896 to the collection *Divagations* where he explains the typographical arrangement of his essays. The “ruptures of the text,” the “intervals,” the “blanks” and the “bare space” are ways to transform the “prose poem” into “critical poem.” He sees them as “a means to show [...] such immediate rhythms of thought ensuring order to prosody.”

The reason of intervals, or blanks [*blancs*] [...] The ruptures of the text [*les cassures du texte*], we won’t mind, ensure to correspond, meaningfully, and they inscribe some bare space [*espace nu*]



only until they reach their illuminating points: a form, perhaps, appears, present [*actuelle*], enabling what has been for a long time prose poem [*poème en prose*] and our research to lead to, if we may better join words, critical poem [*poème critique*]. [...] Each sentence, when fragmented into paragraphs, gains by isolating a rare type with more freedom than in the carriage of volubility. Little by little I realize that thousands of demands, all very particular, are popping up through experience in this treatment of writing. No doubt that there is in this instance, for a poet who is not in the habit of writing free verse, a means to show [*montrer*], through comprehensive and short pieces, later, with experience, such immediate rhythms of thought ensuring order to prosody. (*O.C.*, my trans., p. 1576)

The third insight brought by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century poetic crisis concerns the role of subjectivity in poetry, the ultra famous “elocutionary disappearance of the poet.” This statement has triggered as many misinterpretations by philosophers as the comparison of poetry with music by specialists of aesthetics and literature.

The pure work implies the elocutionary disappearance of the poet [*la disparition élocutoire du poète*], who yields the initiative to words, mobilized by the clash of their inequality; they light up from their reciprocal reflections, like a virtual swooping of fire across precious stones, taking the place of that rhythm of respiration, perceptible in the lyric breath of yore or the enthusiastic personal direction of speech. (*Crisis of Verse*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 208)

A large number of commentators claim that Mallarmé, after having condemned the mimetic view of literature, rejected its subjective conception in order to finally make appear its purely linguistic nature. Meaning would no longer come from the poet, as a speaking presence or, as Mallarmé puts it, his “enthusiastic personal direction of speech.” Instead, it would emerge from the “reciprocal reflections” of the words “like a virtual swooping of fire across precious stones,” in other words, from the relational complex, the “total rhythm” formed by the poem. This interpretation, consistent with Heideggerian, Structuralist and Poststructuralist views of subjectivity and language, has had a great success in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and replaced the older Hegelian view (e.g. Gadamer, 1960, Foucault, 1966, Derrida, 1974).

While pointing at something important, this interpretation went nevertheless largely astray because it applied to Mallarmé’s poetics reductive philosophical conceptions of language and subjectivity. For Heideggerians as for Structuralists and Poststructuralists, the language (*die Sprache* or *la Langue*) would speak by itself i.e. apart from man and any subjectivity, as a pure ontological or social force. Some as Gadamer even claimed that Mallarmé’s poetics would thus complement Hegel’s speculative dialectic with his own poetic insights on language (Dostal, 2002, p. 147). The alternative to the conception making language a linear accumulation of word-references governed by an intentional subjectivity would entail for Mallarmé to consider it as a production of “texts” or “structures,” that is of sheer relational complexes, that would be more or less independent of reference to reality and governed by a more or less collective unconscious (*die Überlieferung*, the Tradition, or *le Ça/le surmoi*, the Id/the Superego).

A passage already quoted above opposing the Hegelian view of artistic progress sheds also some light on the Heideggerian, Structuralist and Poststructuralist interpretations of subjectivity in poetry

and more generally art.

This is quite a bit of liberty to count on, the newest: but I don't see – and this remains my intense opinion – an erasure of anything that was beautiful in the past. I remain convinced that on grand occasions, poets will obey solemn tradition, of which the preponderance comes from the classic genius [*dont la prépondérance relève du génie classique*]: it's just that, when there's no reason, because of a sentimental breeze or for a story, to disturb those venerable echoes, a poet will ensure to do so [*seulement, quand n'y aura pas lieu, à cause d'une sentimentale bouffée ou pour un récit, de déranger les échos vénérables, on regardera à le faire*]. [...] (*Crisis of Verse*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 205)

The beginning of the paragraph is quite clear. Mallarmé does not claim that the “solemn tradition” should be respected at all times. There will be “occasions” when it will still be useful but also, implicitly, many others when it will be necessary to get rid of it and write in a new way.

The end of the paragraph seems more obscure at first reading but it begins to make sense when one sees that “when there's no reason” may refer to “poets will obey solemn tradition” and that the last part of the sentence, built on a classical inversion, quite probably reads: one will ensure “to disturb those venerable echoes” [*on regardera à le faire: déranger les échos vénérables*]. In other words, when there is no reason to obey tradition, like when one exposes feelings or tells a story, one *must* break free from metric and classical forms.

Finally, the passage just below compares the soul to a melody “that needs to be renewed” and explicitly stresses the need “not just of expressing oneself” but of “modulating oneself, as one likes.”

[...] Each soul is a melody that needs to be renewed [*Toute âme est une mélodie, qu'il s'agit de renouveler*]; and for that, each becomes his own flute or viola.

According to me, there arises quite late a true condition or the possibility not just of expressing oneself, but of modulating oneself, as one likes [*de s'exprimer non seulement, mais de se moduler à son gré*]. (*Crisis of Verse*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 205)

The conclusion one must draw from these statements is that poetry certainly entails “the elocutionary disappearance of the poet” as biographical person, intentional subjectivity, intimate agent of “expression,” – in *The Book, Spiritual Instrument*, he presents as an ideal for the Book “not to have any signatory” – but this does not imply the disappearance of all subjectivity. On the contrary, the making of poetry involves a new kind of subject, a *poetic subject*, that first comes up by rejecting metric and traditional forms, then develops by writing new kind of verse, and finally, by “modulating oneself,” transforms into a “melody,” i.e. a shareable, transhistorical and therefore beyond selfhood *rhuthmic* motive. A poetic *transsubject* as Meschonnic calls it.

Mallarmé here discovers what will be in the very same years at the center of Proust's reflection on the difference between the “biographical self” and the “poetic self” – the various essays composing

*Contre Sainte-Beuve* were written between 1895 and 1900, and were first published posthumously in 1954. The first, which is embedded in the individual and limited to it, has unfortunately been the main subject of inquiry during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example by Sainte-Beuve. Only the second was important in Proust's eyes to explain the *value* of poetry or more generally literature because only the poetic self could be shared or reactualized by any reader.

It is quite remarkable that, at the end of the text, just like in *Music and Letters* when subjectivity meets with organization of poetry under the aegis of rhythm, the so-called "elocutionary disappearance of the poet" rephrased as the "omission of the author," is explicitly bound with the overall order and arrangement of poetry. This *ordonnance* is so stringent, he notices, that it "eliminates chance."

An order/arrangement [*une ordonnance*] innate to the book of verse dawns [*poind*] inherently or everywhere, eliminating chance [*élimine le hasard*]; it's also necessary, to omit the author [*omettre l'auteur*]. (*Crisis of Verse*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 208-209)

One remembers that in 1894, while presenting the new freedom obtained through poetic prose and free verse, Mallarmé insisted on the drastic order that it paradoxically demanded.

Although we have just seen that everything, measured, is. [*quoiqu'ait été à l'instant vu que tout, mesuré, l'est*]. (*Music and Letters*, 1894, trans. Mary Ann Caws, 2001, p. 33)

The association of the poetic subject with a strict organization of speech explains why, for Mallarmé, the first and maybe unique aim of a poet – as for Hopkins with "sprung rhythm" – is "to loosen the constraints and relax the zeal that got official schools into trouble" and to produce "in his very breath" his own personal "prosody." Such a statement does not make any sense when read from a Heideggerian, Structuralist or Poststructuralist viewpoint. But it becomes perfectly intelligible as soon as one realizes that Mallarmé – just as any other poet – does not abandon human subjectivity for the so-called "subjectivity of language." The latter is a pure speculation made up by philosophers which has absolutely no grounds, at least in real poetry and real speech. On this matter, it is much more useful to compare Mallarmé's stand with Hopkins's: "My verse is less to be read than heard." (Letter to Robert Bridges, Aug. 21, 1877) And, complementary to the previous one: "Poetry is in fact speech only employed to carry the inscape of speech for the inscape's sake." (*Journals and Papers*, 1873-1874)

It will take time to loosen the constraints and relax the zeal that got official schools into trouble. All very precious: but from this liberation, to hope for something else, or to believe, seriously, that every individual brings a new prosody in his very breath [*une prosodie, neuve, participant de son souffle*]. (*Crisis of Verse*, 1897, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 206)

Any poet uses small pieces of meaning, "an idea broken up into a certain number of motifs that are equal in some way," which are closely linked to small pieces of sounds – one remembers that a few

lines before he referred to “the whole language freely broken down into thousands of simple elements.” These pieces or elements are then combined into one single flow, through generalized internal “rhyme” which give them “common measure.” In other words, writing poetry means achieving, by using for the best the radical arbitrariness of language, a generalized cross motivation of discourse elements.

Similarity between verse, and ancient proportions, some kind of regularity will last because the poetic art consists of suddenly seeing that an idea can be broken up into a certain number of motifs that are equal in some way, and of grouping them; they rhyme; as an external seal, the final words are proof of their common measure. (*Crisis of Verse*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 206)

Further down, he argues that the “great literary rhythms” that have been broken up and “dispersed,” have been replaced by “articulated shivers,” as if the new forms of poetry would directly articulate the body and the body permeate the articulation of speech.

We are stuck at precisely the point of searching, faced with the breaking up of great literary rhythms (I’ve spoken about this above) and their dispersion into articulated shivers [*frissons articulés*] close to instrumentation, for an art of achieving the transposition into the Book of the symphony, or merely to take back what is ours. (*Crisis of Verse*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 210)

Instead of limiting the analysis to the *enunciated*, as most Hegelian, Heideggerian, Structuralist and Poststructuralist interpretations do, let us then take seriously Mallarmé’s theory and look at his own “personal prosody,” i.e. the organization of his *enunciation*, the *rhuthmos* of his discourse. To do so I will extensively use the very precise and insightful prosodic analysis of the six last paragraphs of *Crisis of Verse* proposed by Lucie Bourassa (Bourassa, 2002) which corroborates my own analysis of Baudelaire’s *Correspondances* partly exposed above. I must here apologize to the English speaking reader but it will be necessary to cite the original French, which thanks to common roots is however quite comprehensible.

Lucie Bourassa starts by emphasizing the dualistic aspect of the thought explicitly exposed by Mallarmé. After distinguishing in paragraphs 1 and 2 between “two states of speech,” “brute and immediate here, there essential,” he sets a series of oppositions between “fact of nature” and “pure notion,” “flower” and “idea,” “known calyxes” and “absent of all bouquets.” All these statements remain traditional; they only implement a dualism common in Western thought, that of the “sign paradigm” (Meschonnic, 1975).

We could add that Mallarmé seems here to take to his account the traditional opposition between ordinary and poetic speech: “narrate, teach, even describe” or “the elementary use of discourse serving the universal *reporting*,” on the one hand; “literature” on the other.

1 Un désir indéniable à mon temps est de séparer comme en vue d’attributions différentes le

double état de la parole, brut ou immédiat ici, là essentiel.

2 Narrer, enseigner, même décrire, 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.

1 An undeniable desire of my time is to distinguish in the double state of the speech two different attributes: brute and immediate here, there essential.

2 Narrate, teach, even describe, that's fine and even if it were enough for each of us perhaps, in order to exchange human thought, to take from or to put into someone else's hand in silence a coin, the elementary use of discourse harming/serving the universal *reporting*, in which, except for literature, all genres of contemporary writing participate. (*Crisis of Verse*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 210)

But, as Lucie Bourassa convincingly argues, Mallarmé's "personal prosody" *does* something very different from what his discourse simultaneously *asserts*: it actually pragmatically challenges his own dualistic views. Some sound repetitions re-connect concepts that the argumentation separates: "notion pure" echoes "fait de nature." A network of recurring signifiers composed of /p/ and /r/ supports a definition of language that establishes a continuity between ordinary and poetic speech: "le jeu de la parole" echoes "la merveille de transposer." In paragraph 3 and 4, "le jeu de la parole" rebounds in "je dis," "un fait de nature" in "une fleur," and "sa presque disparition vibratoire" in "ma voix." Therefore, what is explicitly deemed as "notion pure" or "disparition" simultaneously appears inseparable from enunciation and sensibility. It is in "ma voix" and "musicalement" that "se lève" the "idée même et suave, l'absente de tous bouquets." When it is read aloud, this famous line does not replace the "calices sus" but recalls them by its very sounds. The adjective "suave" that qualify the "idée" applies in French to smell, taste, ear and view and connects the latter with the body. Finally, the "transposition" of "fait de nature" into "notion pure" does not imply – as most interpretations claim – a negation of matter and concreteness but its "vibratory near-disappearance" which, first, is deemed not to be completed and, second, includes a sensitive aspect.

In paragraph 4, series of identical or related phonemes, like the occlusives /t/, /d/, /k/, /g/, the sibilants /s/, /z/ et the vowels /a/, /i/, /y/, /u/ produce a great number of counter-accentuations or "immediate successions of two accented positions" which before the 19<sup>th</sup> century were considered as "abnormal" and "ugly" in French poetry (Morier, 1975, Meschonnic & Dessons, 1998, p. 148-156). Such odd accentual saturation of the discourse, which sounds like a cacophonous stuttering, indicates Mallarmé's corporal investment in these crucial lines but it also *forces* the reader *to articulate* almost each sound and make him/her sensibly share, in his/her mouth, the idea that is expressed or better yet, performed.



Simultaneously, the names of the supposedly vanishing things (“contours,” “calices,” “bouquets”) or the abstractions that should replace them (“idée,” “absente”) form a single *prosodic* series dominated by relational words – indefinite words (“aucun,” “quelque chose,” “autre,” “tous”); conjunctions (“en tant que,” “que”), prepositions (“de,” “d’,” “de”) – which transform them into something other than names designating stabilized entities. Paired with syntactic words by the sounds /k/, /t/, /r/, /d/, /s/, /u/, their referential function fades and their meaning is over-determined by the relational and dynamic aspect of syntax.

3 À quoi bon la merveille de transposer un fait de nature en sa presque disparition vibratoire selon le jeu de la parole, cependant ; si ce n’est pour qu’en émane, sans la gêne d’un proche ou concret rappel, la notion pure.

4 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.

3 What good is the marvel of transposing a fact of nature into its vibratory near-disappearance through the play of speech, however; if it is not so that from it should emanate, without the encumbrance of a close or concrete reminder, the pure notion.

4 I say: a flower! And out of the oblivion where my voice casts every contour, insofar as it is something other than the known bloom [*les calices sus*], there arises, musically, the very idea in its mellowness [*idée même et suave*], the one that is absent from all bouquets [*l’absente de tous bouquets*]. (*Crisis of Verse*, trans. Barbara Johnson, slightly modified, 2007, p. 210)

The same prosodic saturation occurs in the last two paragraphs which resume the reflection on the difference between states of speech exposed in paragraph 1 and 2. To the mere naming of the “fait de nature” or the “fleur,” or the “fonction de numéraire facile et représentatif, comme le traite d’abord la foule,” Mallarmé substitutes an “art consacré aux fictions,” a “dire” which is “avant tout, rêve et chant” and which “retrouve [...] sa virtualité,” especially thanks to the “vers, qui de plusieurs vocables refait un mot total, neuf, étranger à la langue.” But, as we see or better as we hear, while the enunciated affirms the existence of an opposition between two kinds of speech, the enunciation re-connect them through a modulated sound flow produced by a series of words including a /v/ or an /f/.

The definition of the “essential state” of speech that is finally given in paragraph 6 clarifies the kind of discontinuity/continuity with its ordinary use. In poetry each word is made “a total word, entirely new, foreign to the language, and almost incantatory.” Poetry “achieves that isolation of speech.” But this result is obtained by “negating with a sovereign blow, the arbitrariness that remains” in them, that is, in more modern terms, by re-motivating the terms, first by their “alternate toning into

sound and sense" – *retrempe* is a term used in the iron or textile industry – second, to use another technical metaphor, by intensifying the meaning of the words through their weaving into one unique fabric, one relational complex of meanings and sounds, one great poetic *rhuthmos*. The effect of this *rhuthmic* re-motivation is a completely new perception of the uttered words, "a surprise of never having heard that fragment of ordinary eloquence before," as well of the idea of the object whose "reminiscence [...] is bathed in a brand new atmosphere."

5 Au contraire d'une fonction de numéraire facile et représentatif, comme le traite d'abord la foule, le dire, avant tout, rêve et chant, retrouve chez le Poète, par nécessité constitutive d'un art consacré aux fictions, sa virtualité.

6 Le vers qui de plusieurs vocables refait un mot total, neuf, étranger à la langue et comme incantatoire, achève cet isolement de la parole : niant, d'un trait souverain, le hasard demeuré aux termes malgré l'artifice de leur retrempe alternée en le sens et la sonorité, et vous cause cette surprise de n'avoir ouï jamais tel fragment ordinaire d'élocution, en même temps que la réminiscence de l'objet nommé baigne dans une neuve atmosphère.

5 As opposed to an easy and representative monetary function, as the crowd first treats it, speech, which is primarily dream and song, recovers, in the Poet's hands, of necessity in an art devoted to fictions, its virtuality.

6 Verse, which, out of several vocables, makes a total word, entirely new, foreign to the language, and almost incantatory, achieves that isolation of speech: negating, with a sovereign blow, the arbitrariness that remains, despite their alternate toning into sound and sense, in the terms, and gives you the surprise of never having heard that fragment of ordinary eloquence before, while the reminiscence of the object named is bathed in a brand new atmosphere. (*Crisis in Poetry*, trans. Barbara Johnson, 2007, p. 210)

So, as in Hopkins's case, we must look at what Mallarmé is really doing when he writes and avoid reducing his work to his alleged ideological or psychological stands. If we observe not only his statements, his images, but also his syntax, the way he plays with sounds, with accents, with all elements of *signifiance*, we may see that "the elocutionary disappearance of the poet" ironically rather entails "a prosodic appearance of a poetic subject." Similarly, what one might label the "elocutionary disappearance of the object," the flower as "the absent of all bouquets," also implies the appearance of a "poetic object." Such *subject* and *object* should naturally not be confused with the intimate intentional Self and the exterior passive Thing, but their existence suffices to falsify all Hegelian, Heideggerian, Structuralist and Poststructuralist interpretations of Mallarmé's poetics and poetry and to open the latter to a *rhuthmic* analysis.

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Subject to further studies – it would be for instance probably quite interesting to pay attention to the English poet William Wordsworth (1780-1850) to whom orality and rhythm have always been a concern of outmost importance – we can say that after a disappearance that lasted at least two decades, due to the rise of metric, Idealist philosophies and science of the living, the issue of *rhuthmos* surreptitiously re-emerged at the end of the 1850s. At first denied by its very promoters,

Baudelaire and Wagner, then barely visible with Hopkins, whose poetry remained for the most part unpublished, it was finally explicitly promoted by Mallarmé in the 1890s, not without some confusion though, at least in the general public, on its relationship to music and philosophy.

Notably, as in previous century, most of the early *rhuthmic* intuitions were brought forth by artists; philosophers and sociologists came to *rhuthmos* a bit later. The only exception to this rule is Nietzsche, who especially between 1868 and 1875, benefited from his intense reflection on art, particularly Wagnerian music and poetry, but also his extensive research on pre-Socratic ontology and his passionate philological studies of ancient literatures and languages. I will come to him in the next chapter.

This precocity of artists, especially poets, is quite puzzling but it may have something to do with their absolute dedication to the *activity* of language, to the problems and visions it raises, but also, certainly, with their particular sensitivity to the rapid *change* in European societies that started after 1850, first in England, then in Belgium and France, and finally in Germany, Central and Northern Europe. As Baudelaire quite clearly put it, by getting rid of the traditional constraints specific to their arts, mainly metric rules, these artists wanted to better “adapt” their poetry either “to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of reverie, the jibes of conscience,” and to the hectic life in the “huge cities” and “the medley of their innumerable interrelations” that were developing at the time.

I agree on this with Walter Benjamin: besides and maybe beyond the willingness to produce new aesthetic effects making a greater share in music to random, continuity and fuzziness, and in poetry to unevenness, irregularity and suggestion, the main objective of the novel *rhuthmic* quest was to find artistic equivalents to the new freedom gained by the individuals, to the smoother flow of social life, but also to the constant rhythmic dis-adjustments and incessant shocks that this freedom entailed in the emerging industrial societies and new urban monsters. (Michon, 2005, chap. 7 and 8)

Naturally, after 1860, due to their particularly good adaptation to the new social situation, the metric, philosophical and scientific models of rhythm continued to spread out, but there were not without any opponents. The *rhuthmic* conception of rhythm, became for many years a real critical force which, despite its subterranean aspects, its great fragility and sometimes its ambiguity – in Wagner for instance – has been very influential. While metric, Idealist philosophy and science of the living, partly colonized by mechanistic schemes, faithfully reflected and participated in the establishment of the so-called *Modern world*, i.e. a rigid power and class system, artistic practices and conceptions brought forth and popularized a new *rhuthmic Modernity*, i.e. a set of original but sharable ways of deploying speech, making the body flow, and organizing the functioning of society, that were at odds with those of the late industrial and capitalist world.

[Next chapter](#)

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## Footnotes

[1] For *Music and Letters*, I used Mary Ann Caws’s translation but I took the liberty of changing a few passages to stay closer to the French



[2] For *Crisis of Verse*, I used Barbara Johnson's translation but I took the liberty of changing some passages to stay closer to the French