Mallarmé and the Plastic Circumstances of the Text

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Mallarmé’s quest for a pure poetry that would give expression to “les gestes de l’idée” has been the source of a vast corpus of criticism that is as divergent in its approaches as it is in its conclusions. Each view seems to be convincing on its own terms, mainly because of scholarly reliance upon Mallarmé’s own remarks on the theory of writing. However, a close look at his reflections on the subject of poetry reveals so many inconsistencies that nearly any point of view and any sort of interpretation can be substantiated by lines taken from his prose commentaries and correspondence. In fact, Mallarmé’s observations on the substance of poetry and its articulation are a veritable vortex of “variations” and “divagations,” for he writes more about what poetry is not than about what it is and should be. Moreover, his theories are not interpretations of his own texts; rather, they are the expression of his aspirations for an absolute, what he calls Poetry. Consequently, any attempt to penetrate his poetic universe must distinguish between Mallarmé the aesthetician and Mallarmé the poet.

Turning to the Pléiade edition for a study of Mallarmé the poet at work, we find some eighty-six pages of verse and prose poetry that are familiar in critical circles. But such textual selectivity excludes nearly one thousand pages of poetry and other creative writings and brands them as “imitative,” “charming,” “unworthy.” These writings include Mallarmé’s translations, essays, articles, textbooks, and a volume of formal poems, Vers de circonstance, most of which were composed, edited, and published by Mallarmé in 1894 under the title Les Loisirs de la poste.

What I should like to propose here is that attention to Mallarmé’s creative writing reveals that his conquest of the art of suggestion and mastery of the ambiguous are based on the plastic circumstances of the text. The manipulation of words as objects of a literary game coheres the structure of his work from his adolescent endeavors in Entre quatre murs to his masterpiece, Un Coup de dés, including the fragments of Le Livre and Un Tombeau pour Anatole. By setting aside the theory and focusing on the poet at work, we see his poetic practice as one that consistently depends on the familiar worlds of experience, myth, and language.
The 471 poems of Vers de circonstance were written between 1881 and 1896. Although this is not the only group of texts that is deliberately ignored in Mallarmé studies, it does constitute the only group that seems to embarrass the faithful. True, the Vers de circonstance are pieces of whimsy that exhibit playfulness, wit, and linguistic virtuosity. Hardly serious in either tone or subject, they are, paradoxically, serious in treatment; and in these formal quatrains and doublets of lightheartedness are indications of Mallarmé’s working method during his most productive years as a “pure” poet.

In Vers de circonstance everything and anything are taken up by Mallarmé: addresses, fans, New Year’s gifts, birthdays, Easter eggs, albums, pebbles, bottles of Calvados. Tied to people, places, and things, these verses are directly related to the world of human activity, and they are concrete in the most basic sense of the term. Mallarmé delights in the events that transform ordinary daily life; he writes on the occasion of a trip, a baptism, the founding of a journal, the publication of one of his poems, over-drinking, a WC, the return of a fishnet, an exclamation point, a lecture, the opening of a circus; there are even mocking, humorous verses about an edition of L’Après-midi d’un faune, as well as a text written in -or rhymes for a friend who did not like -or rhymes. The verses are populated by objects of every kind: teapot, plate, glass of water, handkerchief (and there are eight of these), music box, china dog, real dog, “fruits glacés.” The sense of satire and irony that runs through these poems reveals a Mallarmé who never turned his back on actuality. On the contrary, he is acutely aware of the actual, the real world, for he not only evokes the concrete things around him, but he also writes on them: dyed Easter eggs, fans, envelopes, pebbles from Honfleur, photographs. He amuses, but at the same time he is sharpening his skills, for to conquer the realm of the ambiguous demands familiarity with the concrete.

Technically, Vers de circonstance is based on wordplay, punning, visual affectation. The texts must be read with the eye in order to be understood; rhyme schemata depend on divided syllables (l’un, becque-lêtre), syntactical distortions, purposeful orthographic changes, dislocated end rhymes, double entendres. In one sense, Mallarmé is rebelling against formalism, against all rhetorical devices, even against all accepted poetic practice, something he did as a schoolboy in Entre quatre murs. Yet what seems to be a refutation of poetic good taste in Vers de circonstance is actually a verbal game in which words are the pieces to be placed in play upon the board of written expression by a masterful gamester, the poet. Objectively, detachedly, and deliberately Mallarmé scrutinizes words as objects; he continually moves them around to form new patterns with which to dazzle the spectators. The text is indeed “l’autre.”

Throughout these brief poems Mallarmé is conscious of an audience, the presence of others who enjoy a good game; and, as in games, the texts demand visual skill. The rhyme between “cueille” and “Eye,” for example, is inane
until the reader translates *eye* into the French, *œil*. There is no reason to spell *guéririte* (sentry box) with a double *t*, but visually such an orthography makes a better rhyme with the double *t* in a soldier's family name *Margueritte*. As in the fragments of *Le Livre*, *Vers de circonstance* shows that "Représentation" must precede "Interprétation." Despite Mallarmé's avowed preference for oral reading of his work, his texts must be seen to be grasped because they depend primarily on the tactile sense: "dans telle"/"dentelle," "Cold"/"Hérol," "m'accommoder"/"comme ode," "rêveur"/"ever," "Commentaire"/"comme en terre," "qu'on fit"/"confit." His use of irregular verse and inconsistently pronounced mute *e*’s attests to a linguistic gamesmanship at the basis of his poems.

*Vers de circonstance* is not atypical of Mallarmé's work. *Entre quatre murs* is replete with texts of a similar vein; though they are youthful in enthusiasm, there can be no doubt that they represent a revolt against existing literary dicta and dogma ("Racine"/"déracine") and manifest a certain verbal plasticity that only a love for words as things could bring about. In *Mallarmé lycéen* Mondor notes that Mallarmé's more serious youthful texts show him to be under the influence of others, mainly Hugo; uneasily, Mondor hopes that the satire that is so blatant in many of the texts is a form of exorcism of the past. With regard to the three notebooks of *Glènes*, which represent some eight thousand lines of poems by others that Mallarmé faithfully recopied in 1859 as a means of learning and mastering poetic methodology, Mondor remarks that Mallarmé's taste in the texts copied is rather unorthodox. He is not interested in the esoteric works, but in the humoristic, ironic, satirical, and even scatological ones.

A cursory glance at *Entre quatre murs* and the choices in *Glènes* shows us a Mallarmé fascinated by language tricks. A word gains potential in meaning by its setting and in its association ("Héraclite"/"hétéroclite"); words are objects that can be arranged and rearranged; their very fixity of meaning can be altered topographically. And, in fact, these early texts show interest in the placement of words on the page (descending order, spacing) and in type size. Mondor cautiously ventures the possibility that Mallarmé is throwing off the influence of Hugo. Why then would not the texts of the 1870s—the ones ignored because Mallarmé only wrote four "pure" poems during the decade—be a way of throwing off the influence of Baudelaire that marks his writing during the 1860s? And why would not *Vers de circonstance* be a pivotal work that turns literary exorcism into a celebration of the plasticity of language?

Looking at the 1870s, we find that these so-called years of impotence are marked by a rather tremendous output of work. In 1871 Mallarmé wrote about the International Exposition in London: articles on things of the world, articles in which he observes objects and describes them for his readers. In 1874 he published the witty fashion journal *La Dernière Mode*, in which clothing, menus, and other aspects of Parisian cultural life are painstakingly, but cleverly and amusingly, described, pictured, and enumerated. In 1877 *Les Mots anglais*
appeared; again, a work of objects, only this time the things painted verbally are words, English words. Although hardly a true work of philology, *Les Mots anglais* is important for what it reveals about Mallarmé’s plastic sense of words. Written in a chatty, conversational tone, with numerous asides and direct addresses to his readers, *Les Mots anglais* is amusing to read; as a textbook, it enlivens language, breathes life into words, makes jokes out of linguistic inconsistencies. Unfortunately, it is becoming stylish to use this work as supportive material for the theoretical interpretation of Mallarmé’s “pure” poetry. True, he makes some observations that seem to be borne out later in *Variations sur un sujet*, but close attention to the linguistic details of the work reveals that it is a naïve rendering of the English language in terms of what was known and espoused by philologists of the time. In fact, *Les Mots anglais* is a highly imaginative book, which declares that language is fun, a game to be played and enjoyed.

Hence, Mallarmé’s interest in language manipulation is borne out by his light verse, his textbooks and translations, and his fascination with the appearance of a printed word. He examines words in their visual setting as early as *Entre quatre murs*; his experimentation with type size is evidence of his long-standing awareness that the form of a word has a dramatic effect on the reader. His use of capital letters, italics, and punctuation, notably parentheses, underscores the plasticity that is inherent in his texts. In the proofs for *Un Coup de dés*, for example, we are struck by his careful attention to the form of the $f$’s and to linear alignment. In *L’Après-midi d’un faune*, as well as in *Hérodiade* and *Igitur*, Mallarmé pays strict attention to the setting, offering the reader a scenic, tactile atmosphere. His use of objects instead of paper for many of the verses in *Vers de circonstance* presents later and further evidence of his insistence on the plastic.

In addition to the paginal appearance of the written word, however, Mallarmé was intensely preoccupied with “éditions de luxe.” In fact, in *A rebours* des Esseintes is drawn to Mallarmé’s poetry first by the luxuriousness of the cover and second by the aura of fantasy (“le suc concret”) of the texts. Certainly, Mallarmé’s attraction to painting is well known; his friendships with Manet, Morisot, Whistler, Chavannes, Renoir, Gauguin, and others have been well documented. His work, published in his lifetime, was illustrated by Manet, Laurent, Renoir, and Regnault; and the *Chansons bas* were originally written as the legends for sketches by Jean-François Raffaelli under the title *Les Types de Paris*. In preparation at one time was *Le Tiroir de laque*, which was to have been quite ornate in appearance and accompanied by John Lewis Brown’s illustrations, and Odilon Redon was asked by Mallarmé to illustrate *Un Coup de dés*. Mallarmé also did some sketching, as his drawings of peacocks on notes to Méry Laurent show; many of his fan poems are colorful juxtapositions of written word and decorated object, just as the Easter poems are written in gold
ink on red eggs. The very title of *Quelques médailles et portraits en pied* is taken from the world of plastic art and offers us verbal portraits of writers and painters alike, for words, the pen, and paper are to the poet what the palette, brush, and canvas are to the painter.

By his interest in combining the plastic and the written, Mallarmé demonstrates that he seeks not an absolute realm beyond our reach but one that is within our very grasp. Although man may look to the stars for his destiny, he plays out his role in the *hic et nunc*. Considering all of Mallarmé’s writing, we are struck by his constant return to, and reliance upon, the familiar world of myth. In his *Mythologies* Barthes could easily have been writing about Mallarmé when he says: “Ce que le monde fournit au mythe, c’est un réel historique . . . et ce que le mythe restitue c’est une image naturelle de ce réel.”

What is myth if it is not man’s attempts to personify, make concrete, “plasticize” if you will, those things that he does not understand? Mallarmé’s *Les Dieux antiques*, published in 1880 at the end of the decade of impotence, presents myth in terms of Barthes’s definition: deformation of the meaning, but not destruction and disappearance of meaning.

Myth occurs and recurs frequently in Mallarmé’s work. The nymphs and faun of *L’Après-midi d’un faune* surface in “Pan” in *Entre quatre murs*; Venus is another myth that continues from this earliest work to *Un Coup de dés*. Other mythological references include Syrinx, Phoenix, Chimera, Paphos, Styx, Prometheus, Hebe; there are allusions to biblical legends (angel, demon, Lucifer, Idumea), historical tales (Anastasius, Cecilia), literary creations (Hamlet); fairies, sirens, and heroes populate all decades of his writing. The constant reference to constellations is basically mythological: Big Dipper, Little Dipper, Berenice’s Hair, Swan, Clock, Unicorn, Peacock, Phoenix. Even his fascination with the sea and the life of adventure and risk are indicators of the use of archetypal figures and themes in his poetry.

According to Barthes, “La fonction du mythe, c’est d’évacuer le réel.” Setting this statement alongside Cohn’s observations that Mallarmé’s poems are marked by a standard vocabulary, and a rather limited one at that, we note that it is, indeed, the evacuation of the real that accounts for a reworking of the same objects, the same words, over and over again in his work. An object is, of course, external to the mind; it is something that can be experienced and known in an empirical sense. Moved to a different, unfamiliar setting, the object gains in its dimensions and in the possibilities of its meaning. The effect becomes an affect, as simple everyday things are mutated into emblems.

Looking now at Mallarmé’s “pure” poems, the texts of *Poésies*, we find the banal real world at every turn, and picture words abound: “écume,” “nuage,” “plume,” “astre,” “soleil,” “fleur,” “cygne,” “joyau,” “pli,” “aile.” Mallarmé’s word choices are drawn heavily from the classical animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms; ephemeral terms are rare, for even “ciel” is
always used in conjunction with “soleil,” “nuage,” “étoile,” and so forth. Every part of the human body is evoked directly, and emotional terms occur in amazing frequency (“heureux,” “cruel,” “triste,” “las,” “sourire”). These texts are also rather noisy poems (“cloche,” “angélus,” “sonneur,” “glas,” “fanfare,” “voix,” “rire,” “chant,” “appel,” “cri,” “tonnerre”), and musical instruments are used throughout his work (“flûte,” “cymbale,” “viole,” “ clavecin”). There are very few silences in a Mallarmé poem. It is as though the reader must first be subjected to a visual display, then to an oral enchantment.

Many of Mallarmé’s earlier poems are simply verbal portraits and scenes. “Le Guignon” is a picture of bad luck, and “Le Pitre châtié” describes the poet as a clown; though the rewritten lines that evoke a prostitute at work in “Une Nègresse par le démon secouée” are less graphic than the original ones, they are still descriptive. Vision is at the basis of “Les Fenêtres,” the simple natural objects of “Les Fleurs” involve four of the five senses, and “Renouveau” is an anecdote on spring fever. The last seven lines of “Las de l’amér repos” actually paint a landscape on a cup: the moon sinking into the waters of a lake. In “Le Sonneur” we see the poet ringing the bell, and the famous “L’Azur” teems with the concrete and the picturesque, in both form and content. “Brise marine” paints a quayside scene, “Soupir” describes the falling of autumn leaves, “Don du poème” is an allegory. In the four versions of “Aumône,” we find Mallarmé reworking the description of the coin thrown to the beggar: from twenty sous, to one hundred sous, to a piece of gold, to just some metal in the final version; but all four are concrete, and the last one, “métal,” is the original plastic source for the others, the “myth” for the object thrown.

Hérodiade is spectacle, remarkable for its use of colors, jewels, ingenious but graphic end-rhyme play, and the recurrent folds, which serve as a point of reader orientation: folds of the tapestry, folds of thoughts, folds of a bad dream, folds of words. The use of light and shadow, type variations, and the universal myth of Pan contribute to the highly scenic quality of L’Après-midi d’un faune, which Mossop describes as “magnificently plastic.”15 “Sainte” draws its inspiration from a stained-glass window; “Quand l’ombre menac’a” is dependent upon the view of the constellation in the black night; “Le Vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui” is what Carol Clark describes as an emblem poem, a poetic commonplace, borne out by Morisot’s illustration of the text.16 “Victorieusement fui le suicide beau” is based on a sunset, “Surgi de la croupe” describes a vase, “Une Dentelle s’abolit” refers to a piece of lace, “Toute l’âme résumée” is vividly related to the smoking of a cigar. “Prose (pour des Esseintes)” (and I agree with those who see the term prose as an ironic one as in “Prose des fous” and “Prose pour Cazalis”) has two historical events at its base: Huysmans’s A rebours and the Byzantine rulers; Fowlie even describes it as a narration with characters and some action.17

“Salut” is a toast, inspired by the bubbles in a glass of champagne. a
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description found earlier in the same context in *Entre quatre murs*; whereas “Le Tombeau d’Edgar Poe” actually describes the frieze on the tomb. The highly hermetic and mysterious “Sonnet en yx” is replete with concrete referentials that have a priori significance: “onyx,” “ongles,” “minuit,” “Phénix,” “salon,” “bibelot,” “Styx,” “licornes,” “nixe,” “miroir,” “septuor”; even the famous “ptyx” exists: it is a precise English botanical term for a leaf in the bud.

The plastic points of departure in these “pure” poems do not detract from the refinements of Mallarmé’s treatment of them. On the contrary, discovering the circumstances of each text—and Mallarmé’s verse and prose are circumstantial—increases the possibilities of their interpretation. Cohn, for example, poses five different logical, concrete referentials for “dentelle,” and in his study of “Don du poème,” Riffaterre asserts that Mallarmé’s poetry depends on the reader’s determination and ability to decipher the verbal referentials. Mallarmé’s objects are unembellished in and of themselves; they are there to be detected by the skillful reader. Each detail in its unadorned natural state and with its underlying legend invites the reader to reestablish the adornment that identifies it. Hence, Mallarmé does not abolish matter from his work; rather, he eliminates the particular modification that identifies the object, but the object is always there. Granted, this is the art of suggestion, but it is also the gamesmanship noted in Mallarmé’s “impure” poems. Why is it not permissible to see “A la nue accablante tu” as another tub poem, which Berthe Morisot believed it to be, and why can “M’introduire dans ton histoire” not be about a bidet? Why do we continue to insist on an unreal Mallarmé when his writing is of the concrete, everyday world? Breton may well have put his finger on the actual Mallarmé when, in 1924, he declared: “Mallarmé est surre*aliste dans la confidence”—confidence in man’s creative ability, confidence in man’s capacity to attain the absolute, confidence in our untapped potential to throw the dice, play the game, and win.

Dice are a preferred Mallarmé referential, as is the notion of game. As his *Vers de circonstance* shows, Mallarmé plays games with words; they are his poetic dice. Keeping in mind that a good number of these light poems were reedited and published by him in 1894, and keeping in mind his demonstrated plastic sense of poetry, we see that *Un Coup de des* emerges as an example of his “Littérature”/“rature.” It is visual, as Cohn and others have established. What’s more, it is “clear as myth,” as Williams says, although he fails to say what kind of myth or which myth. Based on topographic concerns in the use of seven different type settings, it appeals to the eye first. It is highly tactile, demanding that the reader turn the pages, and we are reminded that in the fragments of *Le Livre* the role of the reader in unfolding the pages and changing their position is of great importance to Mallarmé. It is directly linked to painting in that Redon was asked to do the illustrations.

Beginning with a concrete object, a pair of dice, Mallarmé structures his
entire poem around the rolling of the dice, the act of forming a pattern. His preface (and Cohn terms it “coy” in tone) calls for “un lecteur habile,” a player skilled in verbal games. And this structuration is the basis of the text; every time the reader-player rolls the dice—turns the page—a new pattern turns up. Dice, as we know, always form a pattern and, being cubes, a three-dimensional one at that. The pattern may or may not be the one we would prefer, but it is there on the double page, just as the dots are on the die. Hesitation to roll the dice or turn the page ends the act or game; acceptance of the risk is commitment to continued play, hence the circularity of the text, which begins and ends on the same phrase, returning the reader-player to the initial plastic object, “dés.” Can the reader-player beat the house, the poet? Can chance be conquered and the reader-poet together form the constellation of Poetry? It is not a matter of the master’s failure to throw the dice; the dice have already been thrown once (“lance”); the risk lies in what the reader sees.25 Just as dice always form a pattern, so do constellations, and both are fixed in space. But, unlike the dice, which are pluridimensional, the constellation is one-dimensional, the “issue stellaire” of our skill: “rien n’aura eu lieu que le lieu.” The constellation makes space contract into an absolute, but visual, unity.

The constellation that Mallarmé uses is Ursa Minor, the Little Dipper, and it is to be noted that this is the only constellation that contains a fixed star, Polaris, and the only constellation that never goes below the earth’s horizon: it is always visible from any point on the globe. Is this not another version of the Orphic explanation of the earth? In the Orphic mysteries, the earth is the shell of an egg; chaos is surrounded by night, ether is the day or life within; the upper egg is the sky, and the lower part is earth.26 Hence, the pattern of the multidimensional dice on earth is reflected in the singularity of the stellar constellation if the reader can roll the right combination.

The myth of Orpheus is not the only one present in Un Coup de dés, for the myth of the Halcyon birds also provides the poem with its basic anecdote. Ceyx is the master of the ship lost during a storm at sea; as the fury of the storm increases and the ship begins to break up, the sailors lose their skill and courage. The waves triumph, the mast and rudder are broken, the vessel is shattered. Clinging to a piece of floating debris, Ceyx thinks of his wife, Halcyon, and prays that the foam of the waves will carry his body to her for burial. Losing the struggle, Ceyx drowns, as clouds cover the face of the grieving Day Star. In the form of Ceyx, Morpheus flies to Halcyon to tell her of her husband’s fate. Refusing to live without him, Halcyon goes the next morning to the seaside where the waves bring Ceyx’s body to her. In grief she leaps on a jetty, and, as wings appear on her, she flies over the surface of the water, brushing the sea with her wings. The pitying gods change both of them into birds, who mate and produce young.27

The parallels between this fable and Un Coup de dés are striking. Although
the fragments of *Un Tombeau pour Anatole* also bear relationship to the text, it is doubtless accurate to say that the death of his son was too personal for the detachment necessary in a text that would appeal to a skilful reader: hence, Mallarmé jettisoned the story of his son's death and substituted one of classical mythology. Be that as it may, the use of myth in *Un Coup de dés* is essential to its plastic structure. Giving form to a legend is the writing of a poem; it is rolling multidimensional words-objects until a fixed unity, an agreement between player and house, a constellation emerges simultaneously for the reader and the poet. In addition, the use of a myth in *Un Coup de dés* allows Mallarmé the freedom to play with his codes of communication: word, sound, gesture, syntax, groupings, topography, typography. The capital letters of the beginning phrase serve to make the basic act in the text an allegorical one: every thought does send forth a throw of the dice that will never abolish the chance of playing.

*Hasard* is generally interpreted as chance, happenstance beyond human control, but it originally meant "le jeu de dés." Moreover, when we look at all of Mallarmé's writing, we find a penchant for wordplay, which increases the meaning of the text. Usually Mallarmé writes this word with a z, that is, in other texts, the word appears in its English spelling, but *hazard* is not the English translation of *hasard.* Typical of Mallarmé's love of linguistic games is the distinct possibility that *hasard* is a play on the English dice game Hazard, which is described in full by Littre. Hazard is a complicated game of dice with arbitrary rules, based on odds favorable to the one who holds the dice. Hazard can be played with two or three dice, and the betting is done on a given layout. In terms of *Un Coup de dés*, such an explanation for the construct of the text is certainly tenable.

Mallarmé's subtitle for *Un Coup de dés* is "Poème" because of its invitation to the reader to participate actively in the interpretation (reading-playing) of his representation. In no way, then, can this poem, or any of his work, for that matter, be viewed as the negation of a negation that embraces the pure idea, for matter continually rejoins matter in the Mallarmé universe: dice-constellation.²⁸ His practice, not his theory, demonstrates that what concerns him is the visual, concrete world and the language used in it. Only words—language—can conjoin the earth and the stars, the sea and the skies by making them plastic objects. In reading Mallarmé we should look at the patterns his dice have formed, not at his thoughts about throwing them. He is not abstract, but very, very real. Not an idealist, but a humanist. Not a postromantic, a wayward Parnassian, or a presymbolist, but a modern cocreator whose sense of the literary game led him to write ideograms before Apollinaire, to be concerned with topography before Reverdy, to write of the marvelousness of the everyday before the surrealists, to combine the visual and graphic before Michaux, to pulverize the text before Char, to be on the side of things before
Ponge, to affirm acting as being before Sartre, to know that the text is plural before the structuralists, new novelists, Tel Quel. Before Proust, Mallarmé knows that art is "la vraie vie."

Paula Lewis has observed that Mallarmé finds all aspects of reality valid, and Judy Kravis has noted that Mallarmé's prose investigates the relationship of language with reality. I would like to add that only reality is valid in the Mallarmé text. Writing poetry for him is the experience of life, and the experience of life—its circumstances—is the game of words. Mallarmé consciously deletes his own personality from his texts, but he leaves the objects that permit us to reconstruct our own worlds as poems. As Barthes says: "Le vrai jeu n'est pas de masquer le sujet mais de masquer le jeu lui-même."

As early as 1864 in "Le Démon de l'analogie," Mallarmé demonstrated that his poetic practice would be based on plastic circumstances and verbal challenges to the reader: "La Pénultième est morte." Of course, the penult is dead; it died when it dropped in the development of the French language. But we know what the penult was because we have the remaining syllables on each side, the parentheses that indicate its form and identity. It is this very kind of ordinary, really plastic sign that Mallarmé uses in the structuring of his poetry. The problem, then, is to accept the invitation to play skilfully a literary game of interpretation, to rediscover the penult, to see our dice patterns in the plastic experience of a poet's poem.

1. In Toward the Poems of Mallarmé (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), Robert Greer Cohn bases his analysis of "Tombeau (de Verlaine)" on the word play technique of Vers de circonstance; he is the only scholar to date to perceive any relationship between Mallarmé's "pure" and "impure" poems (pp. 170–76).

2. Charles Chassé, in Les Clés de Mallarmé (Aubier: Montaigne, 1954), dismisses them as Parnassian caledbours that console Mallarmé "d'une renonciation forcée à son ancien idéal" (p. 57). Yet in chapter 21 of this same work, he offers the only available study of Mallarmé's scatological texts (pp. 210–18).

3. In Structuralist Poetics (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), Jonathan Culler faults Mallarmé for being too conscious of his audience, for assuming reader expectations (pp. 88–90).


6. In fact, one is struck by Mallarmé's lack of philological knowledge, as well as by his choice of examples. From a scholarly standpoint, the work is faulty.


9. In Toward the Poems of Mallarmé, Cohn shows how Mallarmé's homage to Chavannes is constructed faithfully along the lines of a Chavannes painting (pp. 186–88).

11. Ibid.
23. Mallarmé couples “littérature” and “nature” at the end of “Toute l’âme résumée,” a “pure” poem, and on two occasions in *Vers de circonstance* (*Œuvres complètes* [Paris: Gallimard, 1945], pp. 73, 109, and 119).
25. In other words, the reader’s risk of interpretation is Mallarmé’s constituent structuring element; it is not the risk of an either-or situation, but the opportunity to conjoin the reader and poet in an and situation.
26. Again, noting that the Orphic explanation of the universe is a graphic one, we cannot help but see a relationship between this mythological vision and Mallarmé’s use of fans, Easter eggs, and pebbles in *Vers de circonstance*.
28. It is interesting to note that dice are black on white, whereas a constellation is white on black; they are plastic reversals of each other.
33. In his preface to *Mallarmé* (Paris: Gallimard, Collection Poésie, 1952), Jean-Paul Sartre asserts that Mallarmé’s refusal to dirty his hands in a protest against the world leads him to put it instead between parentheses (p. 5); in the introduction to Ernest Fraenkel’s *Les Dessins transconscients de Stéphane Mallarmé* (Paris: Nizet, 1960), Etienne Souriau agrees that Mallarmé places meaning between parentheses (p. 8).