The Genesis and Development of “Les Noces d’Hérodiade, Mystère”: Mallarmé and Freud

La poésie, sacre; qui essaie, en
de chastes crises isolément,
pendant l’autre gestation en train
Mallarmé

I believe I am in a cocoon, and
heaven knows what sort of creature
will emerge from it.
Freud, Letter of 12 June 1897
to Wilhelm Fliess

With Hérodiade, Mallarmé conceived a text and an aesthetic. It is in relation to this first major work that the poet, in his Correspondance, discusses theory, evaluates progress or lack of it, reflects openly on his psychic makeup and, more often than not, relates it to his creative process. What emerges from the self-analysis of the 1860s and early 1870s is a nascent psychology of
literary production. In retracing this psychology, I do not propose a rigid application of Freudian principles. Nor will I search out an unconscious obsession in order to correlate it with biographical events. My intention, rather, is to consider Mallarmé and Freud as "valuable allies," exploring with them the nocturnal labor of writing and the slow gestation of an idea and Oeuvre.²

In October of 1864, Mallarmé and his young wife, Maria, were awaiting the arrival of their first-born. An examination of the poet's letters of this period reveals genuine uneasiness concerning the advent of his paternity: "Je tremble à cette idée que je pourrais être père."³ And shortly before the birth: "Je ne peux pas me faire à l'idée de ma paternité" (C, 1:133). The arrival of a daughter brings his writing to a standstill and provokes the following comparison in a letter to Rômanille: "... j'ai eu une petite fille bien rythmée, dont les yeux ont un bleu que je ne saurais mettre à mes rimes, et les cheveux se déploient déjà avec l'allure de vos grands vers provençaux. Ce poème, malheureusement me prive des autres ..." (ibid., 147).

One month after Genviève's birth, Mallarmé composes a sonnet in order to resume work on Hérodiade. Entitled "Jour," "Poème nocturne," and finally "Don du poème," this poem sets up a sense of rivalry between maternity and artistic production. The biblical allusion of the opening verse ("Je t'apporte l'enfant d'une nuit d'Idumée")⁴ refers to a mythical country that preceded Adam and the creation of women. The kings of Edom were sexless individuals who gave birth to monsters.⁵ Recounted in the sonnet is the same possibility of parthenogenesis. But here, the birth of the child/poem is a "horrible naissance," a near stillbirth that points up the solitude and sterility of artistic endeavors. Unable to nourish his deformed offspring ("Noire, à l'aile sanglante ... déplumée" (O.C., 40), the poet/father helplessly hands it over to the nurturing powers of woman. This scenario returns us to Mallarmé's immediate crisis. Driven out by the healthy, relentless cries of Genviève, "le petit vampire" who devours her mother, Hérodiade remains, at least for the time being, an aborted text, another descendant of "Idumée."⁶

Henceforth, all of Mallarmé's metaphors for the creative act will be colored by a sense of impotence, separation, and loss.
When he refuses to send his latest work to Cazalis, it is because “les pertes nocturnes d’un poète ne devraient être que des voies lactées,” and his verse is but a “vilaine tache” (C, 1:138). Continuous interruptions at home, “le hideux travail de pédagogue,” (ibid., 1:160) poor health, disjointed and unfocused thoughts are the elements that produce a state of paralysis; in the poet’s estimation, a cruel expiation for “le priapisme” of his youth (ibid., 1:144).

From 1865 to 1867 there is a constant interchange between the development of an aesthetic and the writing of Hérodiade. It is while working on this “sujet effrayant” that Mallarmé discovers “une façon intime et singulière de peindre et de noter des impressions très fugitives” (C, 1:161). Yet the experimentation impedes writing, and Mallarmé soon becomes obsessed with the idea that either he will die before this work is finished or that the immensity and difficulty of the project will doom it to incompletion. It is perhaps futile, he tells Cazalis, to speak so passionately “d’un Rêve qui ne verra peut-être jamais son accomplissement, et d’une œuvre que je déchirerai peut-être un jour . . . .” (ibid.). By June of 1865, Mallarmé decides to put the poem aside for the “cruel winters” and sets to work on a new dramatic monologue, “L’Après-midi d’un faune.” But when Théodore de Banville finds the “Faune” unsuitable for theatrical production in August, Mallarmé quickly returns to “Hérodiade, non plus tragédie, mais poème” (ibid, 1:174).

Letters of this period indicate that this shift in genre does indeed bear fruit. In April 1866 Mallarmé finishes the first draft of the “Ouverture musicale.” And by December 1866, he offers Armand Renaud a time schema for the completion of his “Great Work”:

J’ai infiniment travaillé cet été, à moi d’abord, en créant, par la plus belle synthèse, un monde dont je suis le Dieu, — et à un Œuvre qui en résultera, pur et magnifique, je l’espère. Hérodiade, que je n’abandonne pas, mais à l’exécution duquel j’accorde plus de temps, sera une des colonnes . . . de ce Temple. Je m’assigne vingt ans, pour l’achever, et le reste de ma vie sera voué à une Esthétique de la poésie. (C, 11:21-22)
What is of interest here is the relationship between the production of poetry and extensive self-analysis. Mallarmé is clearer about this when he informs Renaud that his work requires prolonged hours of "réverie" and that he is still in the process of locating "certains poèmes intérieurs" (ibid.). Yet, it is precisely the locating of such inner texts that brings the poet face to face with Nothingness: "Malheureusement, en creusant le vers à ce point, j'ai rencontré . . . le Néant" (ibid., 1:207). With this discovery, the production of poetry becomes strangely aligned with the dismantling of Mallarmé's persona. To Cazalis he writes that he is now "impersonnel," an "aptitude qu'a l'Univers à se voir et à se développer, à travers ce qui fut moi" (ibid., 1:242).

The willed transformation of a coherent self into an "aptitude" or sheer locus of potentiality is primarily a strategic move that, according to Leo Bersani, plays out the "consequence of the poet's subjectivist aesthetic." When Mallarmé chooses to liberate language through the suppression of reference and the creation of poetic effects, he deconstructs the self, dissects its machinery, and begins to construct a new theory of textual dynamics. Again, it is clear that the experience at hand is neither purely philosophical nor mystical. With some reluctance, Mallarmé admits to Villers de l'Isle Adam that his understanding of the relations between poetry and the universe is based on "la seule sensation" (C, 1:259). For the importance of sensations, we refer to the poet's intention in writing Hérodiade ("... et toutes les paroles s'effacer devant la sensation" (ibid., 1:137) and to the experiments performed during this period. Figuring prominently in the letters is the poet's methodical cultivation of a "horrible sensibilité." The aim is to restore the materiality of language, that is, to magnify its power of expression by evoking the more primitive text of the body. The brain is no longer considered to be the privileged center of inspiration, for strictly cerebral thoughts come and go "sans se créer, sans laisser de traces d'elles" (ibid., 1:249). The true poet, Mallarmé claims, must think with his "entire body."

A new method of sketching poems focuses on direct communication between mental impressions and their physical counterparts. Viewed as a series of gestures, this body language would spontaneously convey "une pensée pleine et à l'unisson":

In order to illustrate the technique, Mallarmé attempts to simulate the vibrating resonances of a musical instrument: “J’essayai de ne plus penser de la tête, et, par un effort désespéré, je roidis tous mes nerfs... de façon à produire une vibration en gardant la pensée à laquelle je travaillais alors, qui devient le sujet de cette vibration” (ibid.). To think with all of one’s body involves the maximum use of all of its parts. One such exercise calls for complete concentration on “la main qui écrit” and the conscious obliteration of the rest of the body. As instruments of creativity, the various parts of the body function as metonyms. Although the interaction of the parts produces something greater, the body itself remains dislocated and fragmented. At the end of the demonstration, Mallarmé compares his state of dissolution to a museum exhibit entitled “La Valeur d’un homme.” The image of a long box with several drawers, each one containing a different element, either natural or synthesized, recaptures both the decomposition and the forced interaction implicit in aesthetic experience.

The correspondence of 1866 traces the gradual conversion and refinement of the “Neant” into a complex series of aesthetic principles. In summer the poet is still working on the “ouverture musicale” when he writes three letters that contain quasi-theoretical descriptions of a writing space. The creative process is first described as a journey into the frigid zones of the “Inconnu,” “les plus purs glaciers de l’Esthétique” (C, 1:220). Here, the poet’s encounter with the void is superseded by his discovery of Beauty. In a second letter, Mallarmé declares that the mystery of his inner Self, once unlocked, will reveal itself in the form of a sensation. Still enshrouded by mystery, this sensation resitutes itself in a text, the production of which is again analogous to maternity and birth: “Quand un poème sera mûr, il se détachera. Tu vois que j’imite la loi naturelle” (ibid., 1:222). The continual use of reflexive verbs (“se transfigure,” “se va d’elle-même,” and “se détachera”) reinforces the passivity of the creator who, during this period of gestation, witnesses the coming-into-being of the text. Language, at this point, is beginning to take on an autonomous character.

A third letter indicates that the poet, having reached his destination (“la clé de moi-même,” “clé de voûte, ou centre”),
assumes the position of a spider “sur les principaux fils déjà sortis de mon esprit.” The locus of creativity is the center of the Self from which is spun a textual spider web: “... je tisserai aux points de rencontre de merveilleuses dentelles.” The filaments of the mind constitute a pre-text or web (“que je devine et qui existent déjà,” C, 1:224-25), which is to be transposed into the intricate lacework of poetry. The relationship between these two texts is one of permeability—a continual exchange occurring at the interstices or “points de rencontre.” In this way the inner text, presented as a chaotic collection of signs, continues to inhabit and punctuate the literary text. Spun from the etymology of “texte” (the Latin “texere,” “to weave”), the metaphor of the web underscores the view of language as an expansive force that spontaneously reaches out in multiple directions. The spider’s web, the perforations of the lace, and the fruition and falling of the text, figure a silent writing that foregrounds spacing and mobility. The poet does not attempt to decode the secret of the inner self but observes its transfiguration and insertion into “tel livre ou tel poème” (ibid, 1:222). As a reweave of other internal texts (impressions, sensations, memories), the psyche harbors an endless string of dislocated signifiers.

By placing the entire operation under the rubric of “Rêve,” Mallarmé encourages a reading of his poetics with Freud’s model for the formation and interpretation of dreams. Conceived as a textual effect dislodged from its referent, Freud’s dream is also a misplaced text, a multilayered structure the façade of which is “disordered and full of gaps” (S.E., 4:211). The dream’s meaning does not reside in the elucidation of a predetermined or fixed sense but in the differential patterns and subtle interplay between its manifest and latent contents. Freud accentuates the graphic dimension of this double register and eventually decides that it is “more appropriate to compare dreams with a system of writing than with language.” A dream’s interpretation, he asserts, “is completely analogous to the decipherment of an ancient pictographic script such as Egyptian hieroglyphs” (ibid., 13:177).

The notion of the hieroglyph, with its scrambling of phonetic and graphic elements, is consonant with Mallarmé’s fabrication of a “mot total, neuf, étranger à la langue et comme
incantatoire" (O.C., 368). In the poetic, as in the dream text, words are treated as things, material objects in a spatial and visual field. Perceived "indépendamment de la suite ordinaire" (ibid., 386) and left to its own "initiative," Mallarmé's signifier approaches the polyvalence of Freud's dream discourse. Attentive to the white, or intervals, between words, Mallarmean syntax subverts traditional mimetic practices to create an unpredictable textual play. His use of contradictions, juxtapositions, cuttings and composites conforms with the subterranean processes of Freud's dream-work: condensation, displacement, representability, and secondary revision.

Investigating the fundamental differences between the operations of language and the dream-work, Jean-François Lyotard proposes a strategy that would undoubtedly interest Mallarmé: "The dream cannot be made to speak? Then we will try to make discourse dream." Both dream and poem defy the logic of simple translation. Hieroglyphs proliferate to produce an excess of signification. Words, endowed with the material properties of things, reflect and transform one another. To translate vertically between unconscious and conscious systems is, as Derrida has argued, to eliminate the body of the signifier, to ignore the dream's "idiom" or "poetry."

To "make discourse dream," Mallarmé cultivates a poetics of suggestion. The poet's effort is not the translation of the dream's content but the replication of its process and trace: "Toutefois, l'écrivain," he writes, "recopie ou voit d'abord en le miroir de sa pensée, puis transcrit dans une écriture . . ." (O.C., 878). The gesture is global, for the poet must "tout recréer, avec des réminiscences." No longer subservient to the representation of the thing/referent, writing becomes a procreative act—"une sommation au monde" (ibid., 481).

If the writing of poetry resembles the writing of dreams, it is because both operate according to principles of exclusion and substitution. Mallarmé recaptures both the indestructibility and the infinite transforming powers of Freud's unconscious when he compares the formation of language to a "merveilleux ouvrage de broderie" in which ideas, like "threads," constantly disappear only to resurface tied to other ideas (O.C., 828). In a letter of 17 May 1868 to Eugene Lefébure, he presents the same
dynamic, this time on a universal scale: “Toute naissance est une destruction et toute vie d’un moment l’agonie dans laquelle on ressucite ce qu’on a perdu pour le voir, on l’ignorait avant” (C.I., 249). The combination of the present tense (“ressucite”) with the past tense (“a perdu”) suggests that what is repeatedly resurrected is an original loss. Moreover, what one seeks to restore at each moment is not the object itself but the perception of its loss. The desire to see, albeit to master, merely reenacts a repetition of the first loss. To create, as Mallarme will eventually write, is to refigure “la notion d’un objet, échappant, qui fait défaut” (O.C., 647).

This paradoxical linking of perception and loss, blindness and possession, occurs also near the beginning of the letter. Here, Mallarme speaks of immersing himself in “Total Darkness” in order to contemplate, with “eyes closed,” a first draft of his Oeuvre. The entire experience is offered as proof that the poet is “un critique avant tout.” We can appreciate the full impact of the statement by considering the etymology of “critique”: Latin “criticus,” meaning “decisive,” and the Greek “krinein,” “to choose” and “to separate.” By means of their common root, “skeri,” these etymons can be linked to the Latin “scribere” and the Greek “skariphos,” both signifying “scratch, incise, write.” These associations become more explicit when Mallarme continues with: “Je n’ai créé mon œuvre que par élimination, et toute vérité acquise ne naissait que de la perte d’une impression . . .” (C, 1:245-46). The writing of poetry performs the death or elimination of an impression. Consider now the etymology of “élimination”: Latin “eliminare” is “to drive outside a threshold.” If writing is a form of rupture, a crossing of a threshold, it involves a relation and a separation between an inner and an outer text the boundaries of which remain uncertain. Situated between “le désir et l’accomplissement, la perpétuation et son souvenir,” Mallarmé’s poem as “hymen” or “Rêve” (O.C., 310) is an imbrication of other cryptic texts.

The notion of the poet-critic has both stylistic and theoretical implications. The aim is not the elimination of logical conscious thought but the loosening of its strictures. Exploitation of textual space generates the modern poème-critique. To simulate the “naked use of thought” is to transcribe the movement of its
fading—thought "retreating, protracting, fleeing" (O.C., 455). Whether it be the progressive chiseling or hollowing out of the phrase, the careful maneuvering of the syntax or the calculated spacing of the text, the work of censorship constitutes an integral part of Mallarmé's creative process. His description of his procedure in a letter to Maurice Gillemot provides an excellent example: "Il y a à Versailles ces boiseries à rinceaux, jolis à faire pleurer; des coquilles, des enroulements, des courbes, des reprises de motifs. Telle m'apparaît d'abord la phrase que je jette sur le papier, en un dessin somaire, que je revois ensuite, que j'épure, que je synthétise."15

It can also be argued that to give poetry a "critical" dimension is to make it recognize and evaluate its own dynamic. As Leo Bersani has demonstrated, Mallarmé's writing "moves" him "to the side of his verse," producing "an ironic consciousness of poetry."16 Anyone who reads the Correspondance will note the incongruous welding of enthusiasm and despair, progress and defeat. In the same letter to Lefèbure, for example, we find a confident affirmation of the poet's passage from "conception" to "comprehension" (the conviction that he will finish his Work) immediately followed by a long digression on the inadequacies of language. To prove his point, Mallarmé describes the grasshopper's song as being intimately tied to the earth—a connection that renders it "sacred" and "less fragmented" than a bird's song, which already expresses "un peu de mort" (C, 1:250). In contrast to the more spontaneous sounds of nature, a woman's voice appears "transparente de mille mots . . . et pénétrée de néant" (ibid.).

As discourse, poetry is not immune from such criticism. But it is perhaps more accurate to say that, for Mallarmé, poetry includes its own critical apparatus. By exposing its own limitations, literature redefines itself as illusion, game, and fraud. Rather than escape or dominate the instinctual forces that generate it, poetic discourse reactivates them and makes them visible. Figuring its own process of production, Mallarmé's poème-critique demonstrates a dynamic interaction between the conscious or critical aspects of language and the unconscious influences of a "primary process."17 Redramatizing the lack of knowledge from which it springs, literature, by its
very obscurity, is nothing more than an “imaginative compréhension” of “ce que eût dû se produire antérieurement ou près de l'origine” (O.C., 856). Herein lies its difference: “on ressuscite . . . pour le voir, on l'ignorait avant” (C, 1:249; my italics).

But to perceive “le Rêve dans sa nudité idéale” (C, 1:270) is, for Mallarmé, a serious transgression against the natural order. To Coppée he admits that he has nearly lost his sanity; to Cazalis he complains of peculiar “symptoms,” a sense of “hysteria” precipitated by writing.\(^{18}\) It is little wonder that by the end of the 1860s Mallarmé abandons \( \text{Hérodiade} \) and begins to rethink language from a different angle.\(^{19}\) In 1870 he informs Lefébure of a new project that will bring him to Paris: “. . . j'ai choisi des sujets de linguistique, espérant que cet effort spécial ne serait pas sans influence sur l'appareil du langage à qui semble en vouloir principalement ma maladie nerveuse” (C, 1:318).

Scholarly pursuits result not in the projected doctoral thesis but in a philological treatise, \( \text{Les Mots anglais} \) (1877). That Mallarmé does not significantly modify his views of the 1860s is evident in his description of language as a living organism. Metaphorically portrayed as a “chair” and an “ossature” inviting dissection, language as body still bears evidence of its instinctual foundations. Product of an interminable play of transformation, the word is an “alliage de vie et de mort” which simultaneously advances “vers quelque point futur” and “se replonge aussi dans le passé” (O.C., 1053). Although language structures and represses, reveals and conceals, it is also subject to decomposition (“une mort continuelle,” ibid.) and in Freud's terms the “return of the repressed.” Finally, it is the double character of language that makes it a replica of the irresolvable contradictions of human nature: “factice dans l'essence non moins que naturel; réfléchi, que fatal, volontaire, qu'aveugle” (O.C., 901). This version of the historical development of language may be superimposed on earlier descriptions of textual production as well as Freud's theories of instinctual drives. Indeed, the Freudian problematic of Eros and Thanatos, the intermingling and overlapping of life and death, could well be the most potent response to Mallarmé's question: “Qu'est-ce que le Langage, entre les matériaux scientifiques à étudier?” (ibid.).

Yet another project of this period suggests that what began
as a splitting of the poet's psyche, or "crise de verre," is to be gradually reworked into the linguistic "Crise de Vers." In 1868 Mallarmé sends Cazalis a poem taken from "une étude projetée sur la Parole." This "sonnet nul" is an inverted composition whose meaning is totally derived from a "mirage interne des mots même" (C, 1:279). Originally entitled "Sonnet allégorique de lui-même," this text dramatizes its own genesis across a series of repetitions, chiasmic reversals, and specular refractions. Each word, doubled and divided by its own reflective qualities, is inscribed in continuous play with the other words of the sonnet. Words, writes Mallarmé, "se reflètent les uns sur les autres jusqu'à paraître ne plus avoir leur couleur propre, mais n'être que les transitions d'une gamme" (ibid, 1:234). Here, the use of "paraître" points to the alterity lodged in language. We are reminded of the poet's specular drama ("il [the mirror] me fond—il me montre la désagrégation profonde de mon être" (ibid, 1:247)) and the "trou profond" of Hérodiade's mirror. In each instance the mirror, by collapsing the static polarities of subject/object, interior/exterior, suspends reference, threatens consciousness, and ultimately questions the possibility of meaning.

The shift toward a science of language does not, then, abolish the oscillating play of Mallarmé's mirror but rather reconstitutes it in the impersonal structure of verse. Language, in its duplicity, recaptures the dynamic struggle between the conscious and the unconscious—two texts, inextricably allied, one inhabiting the other. Significantly, as early as 1864 Mallarmé conceived of Hérodiade in terms of a similar technique of textual reflexivity. Implicit in this early vision of the poem is the rapport between the production of multiple poetic effects and the erosion of meaning:

J'ai enfin commencé mon Hérodiade. Avec terreur, car j'invente une langue qui doit nécessairement jaillir d'une poétique très nouvelle, que je pourrais définir en deux mots: Peindre, non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit. Le vers ne doit donc pas, là, se composer de mots; mais d'intentions, et toutes les paroles s'effacer devant la sensation. (C, 1:137)

At this early stage, the far-reaching implications of this new
poetics were not yet evident. The abolition of the object and the breakup of verse still constituted a point of departure, a question of technique. It is only after a systematic study of language that Mallarmé grasps what he later calls "le pourquoi de la crise" and the presence in Herodiade of a mysterious "motif." In the later fragments for the poem's preface, the only reason given for its interruption is a discrepancy between artistic technique and critical insight. In spite of the risks involved in the late revision of an early work, the poet insists that, from the outset, Herodiade was far in advance of his own critical abilities. As a result, twenty years later he claims "... je n'aie pas trop à reculer en arrière."  

What is discovered in the five-year period between the conception of Herodiade and its interruption, and again between 1868 and the poem's revival in the 1880s, is the paradoxical nature of knowledge. During these intervals, the psychological and the aesthetic merge in a series of crises provoked by language ("... en creusant le vers... j'ai rencontré le néant") and transposed into poetry. By exploring through writing the textual mechanisms of repetition, depersonalization, and repression, Mallarmé becomes "conscious" of the limitations of "consciousness." "Le sens trop précis," he insists, "rating ta vague littérature" (O.C., 73). The "conscious" character of writing institutes logical relations that restrict, obscure, and therefore, violate the ideal purity of the white page, the poet's figure for the potentiality of thought unexpressed. In order to maximize the latent powers of language, this form of consciousness must be deconstructed and its processes reversed.

In retrospect, Mallarmé will consider his crises and intellectual development of the decade in terms of an evolution from an essentially reductive form of consciousness toward another:

La conscience, excédée d'ombres, se réveille, lentement, formant un homme nouveau, et doit retrouver mon Rêve après la création de ce dernier. Cela durera quelques années pendant lesquelles j'ai à revivre la vie de l'humanité depuis son enfance et prenant conscience d'elle-même. (C, 1:301; my italics)

This slow awakening of consciousness signals the movement
toward a critical awareness of its own problematic. As a critical operation, poetry is a double instrument of revelation and repression. As both defense and transgression, the writing of poetry alternately obscures and reveals, blocks and liberates the unconscious and virtual forces at work in language.

During the 1860s, then, Mallarmé develops a dual system that brings together the processes of writing and reading, text and interpretation. As we have seen, the language of his poetry, like the language of dreams, is built around another discourse which, having its own syntax and rules, cannot be successfully penetrated from the viewpoint of consciousness. By focusing on the processes of transformation and the elliptical communication between these systems, Mallarmé constructs a textual apparatus that functions in much the same manner as Freud's psychical apparatus. If fiction is, as Mallarmé suspected, "le procédé même de l'esprit humain" (O.C., 851), no other thinker did more to demonstrate this idea than Freud. After years of analyzing writing-effects in dreams (condensation, displacement, overdetermination), Freud designated the Unconscious as the "true psychical reality." Concerned by the "much abused privilege" of consciousness, he stresses its reductive aspects and, more specifically, its exaggerated role in the fabrication of art. Calling for precisely the same shift in emphasis as Mallarmé, he concludes: "The more we seek to win our way to a metapsychological view of mental life, the more we must learn to emancipate ourselves from the importance of the symptom of being conscious." (S.E., 14:193).

Having drawn this parallel between Mallarmé's and Freud's practices of textual interpretation, we might stop here to consider the role of "conscious expectations" in the critical discourse surrounding Hérodiade. It is certainly disconcerting that most interpretations concern only those parts of the poem published in the Pléiade edition of Mallarmé's works. By avoiding the series of fragments preserved in manuscript form, this criticism systematically represses the processes of textual production. Negated are those very textual forces that Mallarmé strove to sustain. Although a number of critics do insist on a relationship between Hérodiade and the question of creative process, it is the character of the virgin princess as a static symbol of
ideal beauty that commands their attention. Moreover, those critics who do deal with the manuscript are preoccupied with the reinstatement of a fixed narrative framework. As the editor of the text, Gardner Davies, remarks: “... il est tentant de spéculer, à partir des données qui existent, sur le développement vraisemblable des parties inachevées du poème.” This temptation to complete the text by imposing a chronological order, or to avoid its complexities by suppressing the variants, explains to a large extent the persisting tendency to read *Hérodiade* across a series of static polarized images. Working toward a definitive reconciliation of opposites, this approach most often results in the formation of a “parfaite beauté ayant la pleine conscience de soi,” — a radical negation of the poet's views on artistic process.

For what emerges from the preceding discussion of the *Correspondance* is that Mallarmé, like Freud, questions the very authenticity of consciousness. The contradictory versions of a text like *Hérodiade* offer an implicit critique of the fictional process itself. Since each successive version of the poem, whether published or not, opens up the possibility of a new reading, there can be no definitive meanings or ultimate truths. Product of an “enfantement interieur,” the unfinished manuscript for *Hérodiade* is bound up with the invention of a language, the genesis of a text. How does matter become meaning? By what processes does a thought become conscious? What is the relationship between desire, language, and death? And finally, what does it mean to write—“Sait-on ce que c'est qu'écrire”? (O.C., 481).