From the ‘Ouverture Ancienne’
to the ‘Prélude’:
Repetition and the Uncanny

Je crois décidément à
quelque chose d’abscons,
signifiant fermé et caché qui
habite le commun.

MALLARME

Approximately one year after composing the “Scène,” and barely three months after switching genres, Mallarmé set to work on the celebrated “Ouverture ancienne.” The difficulties posed by this new undertaking are described at length in letters to Cazalis and Aubanel:

December 1865:
... j’ai souffert toute la semaine d’une atroce névralgie ... aux minutes de répét, je me jetais en maniaque désespéré sur une insaisissable ouverture de mon poème qui chante en moi, que je ne puis noter (C, 1:195).
January 1866:
Il m'est si difficile de m'isoler assez de la vie pour sentir, sans effort, les impressions extra-terrestres, et . . . harmonieuses que je veux donner, que je m'étudie jusqu'à une prudence qui ressemble à de la manie (ibid., 1:195).

Despite the steady deterioration of his psychological state, leading him toward his encounter with the "Néant," Mallarmé completes a first draft of the "Ouverture" in the spring of 1866. A new sense of pride and confidence toward his work becomes evident by March. Writing to Cazalis, he draws the following comparison between the "Scène" and the new "ouverture musicale": "... la scène dramatique . . . n'est auprès de ces vers que ce qu'est une vulgaire image d'Epinal comparée à une toile de Léonard Da Vinci (ibid., 1:207). But this initial enthusiasm does eventually sour. Ironically, it is the "Scène," rather than the "Ouverture," that will survive the many years of revision and editorial pruning. Never once considered for publication, the "Ouverture" would remain in manuscript form. That the poet intended its eventual reworking is evident from the cutting-up of the manuscript into displaceable sections. On the last page, a blank space followed by the word "Et . . ." indicates that the piece was simply left unfinished.

In his 1896 "Bibliographie" for Les Noces d'Herodiade, Mystère, Mallarmé finally admits to a major revision: Un fragment seul de ce poème avait été publié de — à — ; il était précédé d'une ouverture que je remplace par une autre, en le même sens . . . (N, 87). The poet's definitive discarding of the "Ouverture" in favor of a new "Prélude" has puzzled, and even displeased, certain of his critics who judge the former superior. Thus, in spite of the poet's explicit intention, the "Ouverture" has been the object of many more critical studies.

Yet it is misleading to dismiss the thirty years that separate the "Ouverture ancienne" from the "Prélude." In the interim Mallarmé's poetics evolved considerably. The experiments with language in the late 1860s, the progressive exploitation of graphic and phonic values in works like "Un Coup de dés," and the modernist implications of the later essays on art and liter-
ature ("Crise de vers," "Le Mystère dans les lettres") must all have influenced the writing of the "Prélude." A first reading of both texts reveals that there are indeed differences. In both content and form, the "Ouverture" is, of course, the more accessible of the two works. Structured around a series of symmetrical divisions, rhymical constructs (homophony, assonance, alliteration), and verbal repetitions, it is easy to understand why Mallarmé subtitled it "Incantation." One finds descriptions of Hérodiade, her morning walks and childhood fears, references to a father/king off fighting in some distant land. These anecdotal elements combine with smatterings of chronology to create a skeletal narrative. The "Prélude," on the other hand, more closely approximates the ideas put forth in the late preface to Les Noces: "déplacement de la danse — ici — et pas anecdotique" (N, 94). In the "Prélude" mysterious objects have replaced characters and there is an insistence on things half-hidden. Wavering between an unknown past and an uncertain future, the "Prélude" takes the form of a question. Catalyzed by the very first word "Si," the chain of incomplete conjectures that displace and defer meaning forces the reader to rethink any and all forms of logic. The same sense of disquieting circularity characterizes Mallarmé's mature formulation of dramatic action: "... un moyen authentique de théâtre, ... lequel consiste à feindre son avis prouvé par un fait demeuré hypothétique, ... pour suggérer cependant à l'esprit des conclusions qui seraient exactes en supposant que le fait sur quoi tout repose fût vrai. Quoi de plus conforme à la loi de Fiction" (O.C., 341).

But if, indeed, the differences between the "Ouverture" and the "Prélude" are so great, then why did Mallarmé insist that he wrote the works "dans le même esprit" (N, 87)? Fragments for the preface to Les Noces suggest that the poet was quite aware of the risks involved in this tardy revision: "— dangereux de compléter mûr un poème de jeunesse . . . " (ibid., 95-96). In juxtaposing the two texts, we do find certain obvious continuities. Images like the ruffling of lace, the twisted candelabra and the crimson dawn, as well as words like "orfèvrerie," crop up in both contexts. Still, this does not account for Mallarmé's comments. It is only by considering
these texts in the broadest of terms that we are able to perceive a common function. Both are designed to evoke a first encounter with the supernatural through the manipulation of linguistic effects. The previously-quoted passages of the Correspondance specify that the writing of the “Ouverture” involved the interpretation of “impressions extra-terrestres,” the painstaking decrypting of an “insaisissable ouverture . . . qui chante . . .” (C, 1:179-80). Similarly, in composing his “Prélude,” Mallarmé voices his intention to “. . . faire miroiter ce qui probablement hanta . . .” (N, 51).

Although each work is haunted by sinister shadows, strange omens, and echoing prophecies, the approach to “le fantastique” is not at all the same. Due to its rigorous architecture, the “Ouverture” appears heavily censored. The calculated repetition of entire word-clusters, as well as the systematic exploitation of rigid internal rhyme schemes, reinforce a sense of inertia and quiescence. Still languishing “dans les plis jaunes de la pensée” (Nf 147), the voice of prophecy falters and fades away into the stagnant waters of what resembles an unconscious reservoir:

Et, force du silence et des noires ténèbres,
ancien
Tout rentre également en l’immortel passé,
lassé
Fatidique, vaincu, monotone, éffacé
Comme l’eau des bassins anciens se resigne.

(ibid., 148-49)

Although the incessant repetitions of the “Ouverture” do problematize narrative coherence, there remains, nonetheless, a strong narrative intention. Whence the nurse’s efforts to describe Héroïdie, her room, her history, and, in this last passage, to logically account for the bizarre circumstances at hand.

As Jacques Scherer astutely points out, Mallarmé would abandon his incantatory style of the 1860s in favor of a syntactical complexity in the 1870s. Perhaps he realized that the mesmerizing effects of his “Ouverture” bordered on the monot-
onous. Translating Poe in the early seventies, the poet speaks of an essential incompatibility between obsessive repetition and the poetic effects of his native language:

Le poète (Poe), dans le groupe de morceaux qui compose ce poème célèbre ("The Bells"), a utilisé librement d'un procédé que récuse la poésie française, c'est la répétition consécutive d'un ou de plusieurs mots dans un ou plusieurs vers. La traduction devait reproduire cette intention, voisine d'une curieuse manie, quand, toutefois, il ne résultait rien de contraire à notre euphonic. . .

The effects of Mallarmé’s transition are certainly visible in the “Prélude,” where repetition is centered in poetic analogy and the hidden etymological resonances between words. Whereas the “Ouverture” simulates the harmonious structuring of a symphony, the “Prélude” problematizes the notion of structure itself. Even the title, generating both ludere (“jouer”) and eludere (“tromper”), suggests that the reader is here given over to the elusive play of an unpredictable text. By a proliferation of syntactical ambiguities, contradictory images, and unsettling gaps, the “Prélude,” rather than focusing on the content of a prophecy, dramatizes its textual effects. The elliptical style of this work signals Mallarmé’s progressive cultivation of repression as a creative mechanism. The poet, who now considers himself a “critique” or interpreter of texts ("Je n’ai créé mon œuvre que par élimination"), seeks to restore a latent potentiality for infinite textualization. In so doing, he abandons a thematics of repetition, moving instead toward a demonstration of its scriptural functioning.

From this perspective, the poetic text brings into focus an oscillating play between that which is repressed and preserved in the corporal structures of language and that which inevitably returns to haunt the surface of the page. In other words, the haunting effect is no longer the product of simple reduplication; it arises rather from the covert displacement of unconscious materials. In what follows I will analyze how, in the “Prélude” and its intertext, this ongoing struggle between black and white, light and shadow, is the practice of writing itself.
TALES OF THE FANTASTIC

A writer’s treatment of the supernatural is undoubtedly bound up with his particular view of the Unconscious and the means by which it resurfaces and shapes a literary text. In order to appreciate Mallarmé’s complete reversal concerning the “Ouverture ancienne,” as well as the belated revisions of its replacement, the “Prélude,” it is imperative to first explore the poet’s vision of what Freud labeled as “the return of the repressed.”7 Both Mallarmé and Freud wrote specifically on the subject of the Uncanny. Whereas Freud’s essay “The Uncanny” (1919) involves the laying of a foundation for a theory, Mallarmé’s prose poem “Le Démon de l’analogie” (1862) narrates the story of an unsettling encounter with the supernatural.8 We know that Freud illustrated many of his psychological insights with examples taken from literature. Similarly, Mallarmé’s studies of linguistics led him to consider literature as the “Science du langage” (O.C., 849). Thus, it is not surprising that Freud should devote a good part of his analysis of the Uncanny to a reading of Hoffmann’s “The Sand-Man” and that Mallarmé’s narrator should turn out to be a poet-linguist desperately seeking a rational explanation for the remnants of a “phrase absurde” that continues to haunt him. The parallelism of these works is extraordinary.9 Not only do both writers share the same experience with the Uncanny, but both fail in the end to establish its precise cause.

When the narrator of “Le Démon” leaves his apartment one day, he experiences the sensation of a wing brushing lightly over the strings of a musical instrument. This feeling is quickly transmuted into the sound of a voice pronouncing the words “La Pénultième est morte” in a falling intonation so that:

La Pénultième
finit le vers et
Est Morte
se détacha de la
suspension fatidique plus inutillement en le
vide de signification . . .

(O.C., 272)
Starting down the street, the poet suddenly identifies the sound “nul” of “Pénultième” with the stretched string of the instrument. Now the eerie phrase comes back again, this time “virtuelle” and completely autonomous: “elle s’articula seule, vivant de sa personnalité.” From this point on, the narrator will use all of the resources of his “noble faculté poétique” to explicate and, hopefully, exorcize the enigmatic verse. First he reads it aloud. Then, by reproducing the same break after “Pénultième,” he tries to adapt it to his own voice. Experiencing a “pénible jouissance,” he finally attempts to compose himself by recalling the dictionary sense of “Pénultième.” Despite these manoeuvres the phrase continues to obsess and distress. Taking a passive stance, he decides to let the words wander by themselves over his lips. Suddenly, with the reflection of his hand caressing something in a vertical motion, he senses that his voice has coincided with “la première, qui indubitablement avait été l’unique.” This victorious moment is, however, rapidly overturned when he discovers himself standing in front of a lutemaker’s boutique gazing at a collection of old instruments, yellowed palms, and wings half-buried in shadows. Unable to overcome his anguish, he runs away “condamné à porter probablement le deuil de l’inexplicable Pénultième” (ibid., 273).

Like Mallarmé’s narrator, Freud, in the beginning of “The Uncanny,” sets out to track down a demon. Comparing the term heimliche (“familiar” and “homely”) with its opposite unheimliche (“strange” and “hidden”), he discovers that the former can also signify “concealed” or “secret.” This identical shade of meaning, which subverts the polarity and establishes rhetorical ambivalence, prompts Freud to define the Uncanny as “that class of the terrifying which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (S.E., 17:22). Paraphrasing Schelling’s definition of the Uncanny as “something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light” (ibid., 241), Freud next identifies the “Un” of “Unheimliche” as “the token of repression” (ibid., 245). When this once very familiar repressed material, proceeding from either “infantile complexes” or “animistic beliefs” that have been “surmounted” (ibid., 248-49), returns in distorted form, it inevitably produces a feeling of overwhelming anxiety.
To illustrate this eerie sense of repetition, Freud narrates a short anecdote. Once, while in Italy, he was lost in the streets of a small town in the provinces. Although he wanted to avoid a particular district inhabited by prostitutes, he found himself returning again and again "by devious paths" to the same place. This sort of involuntary repetition recalls the helpless poet of "Le Démon" wandering "dans la rue des antiquitaires instinctivement suivie" (O.C., 273; my italics). If repetition has a demonic character, it is because the repressed always returns in the estranged form of an Other. And what first might appear as chance is transformed through repetition into a confrontation with destiny. Freud's description of an uncontrollable, uncanny sense of repetition certainly fits the disruptive, repetitive movement of the "inexplicable Pénultième." By identifying the demon as analogy (the original title was "Pénultième"), Mallarmé emphasizes the movement of the text rather than its content. Analogy, of course, is a poetic principle that connects its terms by contiguity or metonymic displacement. Each repetition of the "Pénultième" shares only an oblique connection with the preceding instance. In its continual displacement of the signifier, the text creates a threatening mobility that cannot be checked or explained away by any singular reading.

When Freud undertakes a reading of Hoffman's "The Sand-Man," he focuses on the endless repetition of optical imagery: eyes, spectacles, telescopes, and the optician Coppola, whose name comes from "coppo," or "eye-socket." Since there is a "substitutive relation between the eye and the male organ" (S.E., 17:231), this emphasis on sight is, for Freud, evidence of a deep-seated fear of castration and death.

Juxtaposing again Mallarmé's prose poem with Freud's text, one finds the same movement of substitution and indefinite expansion at work. In the former, the images of "aile," "voix," "palme," "plume," and "rameau" (some of which are repeated more than once) constitute a chain evoking the creative process. From one end to the other, this chain is punctuated by a series of ruptures. Analogous to both the breaking of the instrument's string and the splitting of the mysterious verse is the fragmentation of the poet's persona. The possession of the singular voice ("je sentis que j'avais . . . la voix même . . .") (O.C.,
(273) occurs only momentarily when the narrator willfully erases his own subjectivity, becoming himself the mouthpiece of language. But the mystery of the Penultimate is not so easily laid to rest. With its return at the poem’s conclusion (now “imexplicable Penultième”), the narrator realizes that he cannot shake what continues to be one of life’s “irrefutable” paradoxes. Since the reader never learns what the Penultimate signifies, the demon eludes interpretation and remains at large.

Although Freud does recognize the dynamic principle at work in Hoffmann’s text, his interpretation attempts to expel the demon through recourse to an external referent. As Samuel Weber points out, Freud’s reading of Hoffmann treats the concept of castration as “possessing a fixed identity, as a substantial, visible theme.” In doing so, he undermines the dynamic of castration—the contagious, interminable movement of the substitute. Like castration, the “Unheimliche,” writes Weber, “is less involved with a what than a how, with the mechanism of repetition, recurrence and return.” It is significant that, during his discussion of uncontrollable repetition, Freud refers to the notion of a “repetition-compulsion.” Written at the same time as “The Uncanny,” his “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1920) works from the hypothesis that organic life strives compulsively towards “an earlier state of things” and that “the goal of all life is death” (S.E., 18:36-38). Associated with the “death instinct,” this form of involuntary repetition may well be, according to Freud, “more primitive” and “more instinctual” than the “pleasure principle which it overrides” (ibid., 23). But in many situations, Freud describes how this destructive instinct toward inertia may also be turned around. In this connection he discusses the repetition of traumatic dreams in terms of symbolization and mastery. The play of children, for example, is regarded as a secondary formation that consists in the active re-creation of absence as symbol and the movement from passivity and helplessness to mastery. Thus, Freud interprets his grandson’s game of throwing away a spool of thread and then drawing it back while uttering the alternating sounds “fort” and “da” (“gone/here”) as a successful dramatization of his mother’s departure and return. This sort of symbolic mastery is also acknowledged in the literary domain. In “The Theme of the
Three Caskets" (1913), he analyzes how characters in myth and literature appear to choose freely what, in reality, they are obliged to confront: "Choice stands in the place of necessity, of destiny. In this way man overcomes death, which he has recognized intellectually" (S.E., 12:299).

Whereas Mallarmé's text emphasizes the demonic, instinctual character of repetition, Freud's interpretation of castration in the "Sand-Man" ultimately privileges repetition as a form of mastery. By identifying castration (the concept) as the final referent and cause, Freud reduces the text to an unequivocal meaning. The "Unheimliche" is cornered and exorcized: "For the conclusion of the story makes it quite clear that Coppola the optician really is the lawyer, Coppélius, and also, therefore, the Sand-Man" (S.E., 17:230). Although this reductionism can, in part, be attributed to the scientific purpose that guides the essay, it cannot be reconciled with Freud's continuous references to literature as the "more fertile province of the Uncanny" (ibid., 249). While using literature to illustrate his theory, Freud inevitably finds that the text exceeds the model: "... nearly all the instances which contradict our hypothesis are taken from the realm of fiction and literary productions" (S.E., 17:247).13

For Freud, one of the most effective means of producing uncanny effects in fiction is the writer's intentional confusion of the supernatural with the real: "It is true that the writer creates a kind of uncertainty in us in the beginning by not letting us know, no doubt purposely, whether he is taking us into the real world or into a purely fantastic one of his own creation...." (ibid., 230). In the years following the writing of the "Overture," Mallarmé begins to explore precisely this kind of covert manipulation in the production of the Uncanny. His search for new forms and techniques is at the root of the late composition "La Fausse entrée des sorcières dans 'Macbeth'" (1897). Here, he proposes a rereading of Shakespeare's opening scene in light of Thomas De Quincey's essay "On the Knocking at the Gate in 'Macbeth'" (1823). The latter's persuasive explanation of the profound effect that the knocking at the gate after King Duncan's murder left on him as a child is Mallarmé's point of departure. For De Quincey, the drunken porter's knocking represents the reawakening of the everyday world. Functioning
as a link between the chaotic world of murderous fantasies and the more rational, ordered world of consciousness, this very commonplace gesture rescues the spectator from a dreamlike stupor. When the murder scene fades "... le pouls de la vie commence à battre encore: et le rétablissement des faits communs au monde dans lequel nous vivions, soudain nous rend sensibles profondément à la terrible parenthèse qui les avait suspendus" (O.C., 348).

But, as Mallarmé insists, this is not the only place in "Macbeth," where Shakespeare has skillfully and deliberately obscured the distinction between real and imaginary states. The first appearance of the sorceresses, who seem to emerge out of a dreamlike haze, partakes of the same type of ambiguity. That Mallarmé is primarily interested in the playwright's technique is evident from his interrogations "Introduire le funeste Choeur, par quel moyen?" and "Les présenter, insiste-je, comment?" (O.C., 349). Rather than simply representing "l'irruption du fantastique" as part of the play, he notes that Shakespeare breaks with tradition and tricks his audience into believing that they have indiscreetly stumbled upon the witches' secret ritual already in progress. It is as if "le rideau simplement s'est levé, une minute, trop tôt, trahissant des menées fatidiques" (ibid., 351). The sorceresses, who neither enter nor exit (they fade into the air), are merely there "en tant que le destin qui préexiste" (ibid., 349). Mallarmé perceives this "Artifice extraordinaire" as Shakespeare's device for putting the notion of chance and its counterpart, fatality, into play. When not directly involved in the action, these "Weird Sisters," as Shakespeare called them, hover in the background, ready to reemerge at any point: "Au seuil et qu'elles y règnent; même pas en prologue participant de la pièce: extra-scéniquement" (ibid.).

Perched on the threshold between the exterior and the interior, the past and the future, the conscious and the unconscious, the witches evoke that sense of uncanny undecidability that, according to Freud, arises when "the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced" (S.E., 17:244). The multiple reverberations of this initial apparition continue to infect the rest of "Macbeth." From this point on, neither the characters nor the spectators can decide if their perceptions are real or imaginary,
the result of fate or mere chance. What Mallarmé's reading accentuates, then, is that the Uncanny is not a theme but a structural ambiguity. On a superficial level, one could compare these witches to the figure of the nurse/sybil in the "Ouverture." The idea of an incantation is common to both. But again, what fascinates Mallarmé is Shakespeare's radical departure from the very concept of character: "... pas de sorcières relevant de la figuration ou des accessoires, mais dissipées si entrevues, authentiques donc, qui sait? réelles" (O.C., 350). In bringing to light the Unheimliche (that which "ought to have remained hidden"), the witches connect us with a "psychic reality," in Mallarmé's words, a "travail étranger de pouvoirs latents" (ibid.) that continues to reverberate throughout Shakespeare's play.

These last quotations suggest that the basis of comparison between "La Fausse entrée" and Les Noces is a profound reconsideration of technique. When Mallarmé returns to his masterpiece in his later years, he is faced with the problem of a new beginning: How to begin something that has already begun and the origin of which must remain mysterious? Secondly, how to portray the effects of something that is invisible, cut-off from consciousness, and yet has come to light? Or, as Mallarmé puts it, how to "faire miroiter ce qui probablement hanta ..." (N, 51)? Since "La Fausse entrée" was written at approximately the same time as the "Prélude," it is highly conceivable that Mallarmé followed Shakespeare's example and completely revamped his beginning episode after the fact: "... on a conté ... qu'il décida, [Shakespeare] après coup, la présence, initiale, des sorcières, ... c'est très beau ainsi" (O.C., 350).

NO WAY TO KNOW

It is always a matter of waking up, but never of some first awakening.

Jacques Derrida

Mallarmé begins his "Prélude" with a riddle to be solved, a riddle created by the uncertainty of a contorted hypothesis.
After wading through a speculative muddle ("Si," "Aussi peut-être," "hors," "Ni que," "Même quand"), we begin to sense that the purpose of this hypothetical framework is to explain the uncanny persistence of a golden platter:

Alors, dis ô futur taciturne, pourquoi
Ici demeure-t-il et s'étend comme le raisin
Selon peu de raison que le richissime orbe
Opiniâtrement pour se parfaire absorbe
Jusqu'à l'horizon mort en un dernier éclat
Cette vacuité louche et muette d'un plat?

(N, 56)

As the passage indicates, it is not the survival of the plate itself that disturbs, but the memory of a sinister emptiness its vestigial presence reevokes. Note the contrast between the demonstrative "cette vacuité" and the indefinite "un plat." That which remains behind is precisely that which cannot be absorbed into any logically meaningful formulation. Since the platter has been divested of its normal function, it will not, we are told, contain "Le délice attendu du nuptial repas" (ibid.). Deprived of any frame of reference, the golden dish, like the demonic "Pénième," becomes pregnant with meaning: "Lourd métal usuel, où l'équivoque range / Avec anxiété . . ." (ibid., 55). As in Freud's text, the infiltration of the very familiar by the Unheimliche results in acute anxiety.

By means of a "revolving hypothesis," Mallarmé forces the reader to recognize both the "enigma" and the curtain that veils it. Rather than solving the riddle, which by nature remains groundless and unrepresentable, I will analyze how it functions in the successive versions of the text. Dividing the "Prélude" into two main sections, the first part ("Si . . . / Génuflexion comme à l'éblouissant," N, 55) will be read in terms of its four different segments: a brief sketch of eight lines, two working drafts (with numerous variants and corrections) of thirty and thirty-five lines, and a final draft of twenty-nine lines. The differing lengths and characteristics of each draft indicate that Mallarmé probably began with a single idea or metaphor in mind, expanded it twice to include other connecting motifs, and finally contracted the entire segment into a more elliptical structure.
Reenacted in the shortest and, no doubt, earliest version (N, 175-76) is a dynamic struggle between light and darkness, vision and obscurity. Although the golden plate is missing, the notion of inheritance is already central. Will the remnants of “Notre ancestoriale et lourde orfèvrerie / Hérittaire . . .” survive or fall back into irrevocable oblivion: “. . . choir dans l’évanouissement nocturne du dressoir?” The repetition of “Peut-être,” as well as the abrupt and indefinite ending “Comme . . .,” renders the outcome of the conflict most uncertain. Containing a perfect anagram of “rêverie,” the word “orfèvrerie” (an “assemblage of ornaments or jewels”) implies that the legacy in question is somehow related to the mysterious realm of dreams and phantasms. 17 Reminiscent of the “ors ignorés” and “froides pierreries” that make up Hérodiade’s memories in the “Scene,” this “orfèvrerie” is both indestructible (“Etalée à jamais”) and in potentia—a “Joyau intact sous le désastre” (O.C., 302).

Significantly, the Unconscious is envisioned not in terms of a magnetic verticality, as in the “Ouverture,” but as a distant flickering or lingering half-light that perpetually animates the cursive, ghostly decor of Hérodiade’s bedchamber. Like Shakespeare’s witches, who vanish if noticed, the Unconscious in the “Prelude” is only perceptible in terms of the uncanny effects it produces. Thus, it is equated not with the candelabra or object itself, but with its “magnificence à tarder” or afterglow. In order to illustrate the powerful and continuous grip of these unconscious phantasms on consciousness, Mallarmé interpolates a very graphic image:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{En l’immobilité de vains bras hasardeux} \\
\text{la diversité vastes crocs} \\
\text{la magnificence}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Au loin sans empêcher peut-être par un d’eux} \\
\text{brusquement} \\
\text{étrignant ancienne} \\
\text{En soupesant la gloire inutile meurtrie} \\
\text{— en des griffes} \\
\text{Notre ancestoriale et lourde orfèvrerie . . .}
\end{align*}
\]

(N, 175-76)

A comparable use of this imagery in two other works supports
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this reading: "Un rêve, m'étreint sous sa griffe" (O. C., 155) and "Affres du passé nécessaires / Agrippant comme avec des serres" (ibid., 73).

This constant interplay between light and darkness, presence and absence, signals the ongoing battle between the resurfacing of the repressed and the opposing forces of censorship. What we are in effect witnessing is the staging of an unconscious phantasm and its simultaneous repression through the act of interpretation. At this early stage in the manuscript, in which images are juxtaposed rather than syntactically aligned, several suggestive analogies are spawned. It becomes impossible to determine whether the clutching arm, for example, is a figure for the persistent forces of the Unconscious erupting in the text or for the analytical powers of a conscious mind trying to decipher, and thereby dominate, the enigmas it is forced to confront. There is substantial evidence to support either viewpoint, for, aside from its physical connotation, the verb "étreindre" could also refer to the grasp of comprehension. This alternative meaning is repeated in its replacement "soupesant," signifying "peser" or évaluer." Again, the figure of a hand judging something by its weight is implied. The same possibilities surround the term "évanouissement." Is it a fading of consciousness in favor of the Unconscious (i.e., the lifting of censorship as in dreams) or a blacking-out of the phantasm, a defensive tactic? The second meaning anticipates a description of the nurse's reaction, in another fragment, when she finally realizes the import of her role: "... et la vieille reconnaissant prophète s'évanouit" (N, 80). Again, this ambiguity is perfectly articulated by the notation: "Nul ne saura jamais pas même elle évanouie / mais a-t-elle entendu . . ." (ibid., 128)? Finally, we should bear in mind that Hérodiade is described as an "enfant attentive au mystère éclairé de son être" (ibid., 80), an "enfant les yeux fixés en soi" (ibid., 127). The place of knowledge in this first fragment is exceedingly ambiguous. There is a gradual merging of the limiting powers of the mind (its ability to order and integrate) with the limitations of consciousness (the dysfunctioning of conceptual thought). In this sense the drive to know is inseparable from a desire to forget. Knowledge, in other words, is synonymous with repression.
In the second version for this segment of the "Prélude" (N, 171-74), Mallarmé brackets the imagery of his first draft with the hypothetical marks "Si . . . si" and expands his central dialectic to cosmic proportions. The "évanouissement nocturne" is now depicted in the form of a dying sunset:

\[
\text{Si . . .}
\]

\[
toute en
\]

\[
selon
\]

\[
toute
\]

Génuflexion comme la l'éblouissant

\[
\text{là-bas}
\]

peut-être aux cieux

Nimbe vide là-bas peut-être arrondissant

louche

Dans le vide — rigueur de l'heure

\[
\text{Parmi l'heure par une mort éparse refroidie}
\]

Malgré l'attendue d'une

très vide

Son et vacant incendie

(N, 171)

As Robert Cohn points out most perceptibly in a recent article, this "Horizon mort en un dernier éclat" (ibid., 170) mimes what Freud called the "primal scene." Defined as a retrospective phantasy based on a child's accidental perception of parental intercourse, the "primal scene," whether real or imagined, redramatizes the origin of the individual. Comparing it to a "collective myth," which attempts to resolve the "major enigmas" encountered in childhood (procreation, the awakening of sexual desire, sexual differentiation), Laplanche and Pontalis discuss the "primal scene" as a setting for desire rather than its object. The subject is not absent from the scene but appears obliquely in "desubjectivized form." Along the same lines, Mallarmé, in "Les Dieux antiques" (1880), insists that the common origin of all myths is "la double évolution solaire" (O.C., 1169), the peregrinations of the sun as it rises and sets. The following
description of a sunset simultaneously evokes and masks a primal phantasy of sexual desire, orgasm and death: "Comme il (the sun) s'enfonce, les brumes ardentes l'étreignent et les vapeurs de poudre se jettent par le ciel, ainsi que des ruisseaux de sang qui jaillissent du corps du mythe..." (ibid., 1216).

The reader is immediately reminded of the celestial combat that takes place in the opening lines of the "Prélude." Although I am citing the final draft, the principal images are used in both the second and third versions:

Si...

Genuflexion comme à l'éblouissant
Nimbe là-bas très glorieux arrondissant
En le manque du saint à la langue roidie
Son et vacant incendie
Aussi peut-être hors la fusion entre eux
Immobilisées par un choc malencontreux
Des divers monstres nuls dont l'abandon délabre
L'aiguèère bossuée et le tors candélabre
A jamais sans léger de souvenir au soir
Que cette pièce héréditaire de dressoir...

\( N, 55 \)

That this "vacant incendie" is, in essence, a form of "combat amoureux," dissimulating and displacing the phantasized link between procreation, death and birth, is evidenced by several textual details. First of all, the "fusion entre eux" culminates in a "choc malencontreux," which, according to another variant, is analogous to "une mort épars" (ibid., 171). Retraced is the exact progression of a violent sexual act. Underscoring the notion of chance, the term "malencontreux" ("unlucky") generates the contrasting pairs "mâle"/"con" and "crête"/"creux." The second pair emphasizes the convexity of the male element (reiterated by the multiple is and morbid images of desiring rigidity—"roidie," "endurci" (ibid., 168), "refroidie" (ibid., 127), and "dressoir," as opposed to the female element (contained in the somber feminine sounds of "ou," "on," and "en," as well as the numerous circular shapes of the passage: "Nimbe," "arrondissant," and "aiguèière"). This continual crossing over of oppo-
sites is inscribed in the letter “X” which, for Mallarmé, is analogous to a “nodal point” or “zero umbilicus.” Inextricably fused in this double sign of emptiness and productivity are the forces of life and death: “Genuflexion,” “glorieux,” “eux,” “malencontreux,” and, a bit further on, “anxiété.” The monsters’ “abandon,” suggesting a sexual abandon or release, is echoed by another, more graphic, image placed near the end of this first section: “. . . l’âpre faim muée en pamoison / Les entrelace bouche à bouche puis les vautre” (N, 56). Not only is the progression the same but the verb “vautrer” signifies both “coïter” and “se coucher, s’étendre en se roulant . . . en prenant une position abandonnée” (Petit Robert, my italics).

Despite the suppression of the image “vains bras hasardeux,” which Mallarmé also uses in a most erotic scene of “L’Après-midi d’un faune,” we still have the impression of a random intermingling of various body parts. A sense of extensive morcellation is expressed by the manipulation of the indefinite article and the partitive (“un choc,” “Des divers monstres”) as well as certain words in the variants stressing plurality and fragmentation: “Parmi l’heure,” “Mort épars,” “mille monstres,” and “pièce à pièce” (N, 167-68, 176). Mallarmé’s noted exploitation of the “S” and “ss” as a disseminating letter reinforces this effect: “Si,” “éblouissant,” “arrondissant,” “Aussi,” “bossuée,” and “dressoir.” Finally, the curvature of “Genuflexion” generating “nu” and “flexion” reappears in the convulsive erotic posture traced by the modifier “tors.” Mallarmé often uses this word and its forms as a figure evoking twisted torsos engaged in deadly, sexual activity. Compare: “. . . pour séduire un roi / Se tordent dans leur mort des guirlandes célèbres” (O.C., 67) and “Où la Chimère s’esténuée / Vaut la torse et native nue” (ibid., 75).

The visualization of these phantom figures (“le manque du saint” “monstres nuls”) brings to mind several references to perception dispersed throughout the poem. Remembering that the “primal scene” is a miscomprehension or inaccurate observation that, in its fantasized repetition, produces both pleasure and anxiety, one begins to discern a definite association between sight, horror, and transgression. The following examples are taken from various section of Les Noces:
L’arrière volupté jusque dans l’agonie
Du regard révulsé par quelqu’un au néant . . .

(N, 78)

. . . effroi de la pauvre vision/qui s’en fut . . .

(ibid., 128)

Et l’interdit
Que veut voir celle-là

(ibid., 213)

Mais horreur! des soirs, dans ta sévère fontaine,
J’ai de mon rêve épars connu la nudité!

(ibid., 65)

According to Laplanche and Pontalis, the violent nature of the “primal scene” fantasy results from “the child’s introjection of adult eroticism”—the alienating language of passion and its prohibition. That which is hereditarily transmitted is the subject’s confused perception of parental desire. If Hérodiade’s bedroom is both “charmante” and “nuptiale déjà” (N, 163), it is because, even before her entrance in the “Scène,” the marital bed is already, as the text states, “fait d’une horreur maternelle / Dans quelque noir baiser” (ibid., 155-56). It is, then, the young girl’s forbidden reminiscence of this scene that makes her a “très attentive et criminelle enfant” (ibid., 212). This same sort of sexually violent imagery is inscribed in both the interior and exterior settings of the “Ouverture”: “Ciel brûle . . . / Et bientôt sa rougeur de triste crépuscule / Pénètrera du corps la cire qui recule!” (ibid., 151) and “De l’or nu fustigeant un espace cramoisi” (ibid., 143).

The only visible residue of this amorous encounter in the “Prélude” is the platter—“cette pièce héreditaire de dressoir.” In variants of the third draft, Mallarmé aligns the plate with the words “race” and “rejeton”:

Aujourd’hui
Cependant souvenir au
A jamais sans léguer de sacré dans le soir
Toutefois race dans le
rejeton

Que héreditaire
Autre que cette pièce encore de dressoir

(N, 168)
With "rejeton" (signifying "nouveau jet," "tige de plante," and "descendant"), the text foregrounds the power of regeneration while devaluing the offspring. Both the "jeton" ("token") of "rejeton" and "pièce," evoking "pièce de monnaie," suggest the indefinite circulation of empty currency. Continually energized by the emptiness it provokes, this "vide vaisselle" (ibid., 173) is to play a principal role in a vast metonymical circuit.24

As both a golden halo ("nimbe") and an ordinary piece of tableware ("Lourde métal usuel"), the mysterious disc is permeated by an uncanny familiarity. By focusing exclusively on the projected contents of the plate (the head of the Baptist), most critics have entirely overlooked its functioning in the text. To imagine the head on the plate is to create a reference (in this case, biblical) thereby domesticating, or even eliminating, the Uncanny. But again, the text's infrastructure resists this kind of reading, pointing instead to those aspects of fiction that cannot be economized:

Ce Le passé
Cet
tte vacuité louche et muette d'un plat?
Le fantôme
simulacre
inoccupé

(N, 170)

Expressing nothing ("muette"), the plate's emptiness ("vacuité") returns uncannily ("fantôme") in the form of a (nother) sign ("simulacre"). Infinitely replaceable and displaceable, it operates like any sign in a system of currency or language. To borrow Derrida's terms, it "re-marks" an originary void by filling it momentarily.25 Figured in the plate's migration is what Mallarmé calls the "double character" of language that, in doubling back, always marches forward.26

As soon as the last glimmers of light fade and the monstrous forms are half submerged by the evening shadows, the plate conjures up the ghostly apparition of an anonymous mask: "On ne sait quel masque âpre et farouche éclairci" (N, 55). Playing, as he often does, on the etymology of "aucun" ("quelque" "quelqu'un"), Mallarmé underscores the notion of an
absent presence in a variant: “Aucun masque de saint” (ibid., 168). With the appearance of this “face defunte” (ibid.), the text comes to a brusque halt: “Quelque silence abrupt” is jotted in italics in the second draft (ibid., 172). In the final draft, he blocks out this notation and simply closes the parenthesis of the initial hypothesis with another “si.” In this way the entire segment becomes only plausible:

... si

La chimère au rebut d'une illustre vaisselle
Maintenant mal éteinte est celle
Sous ses avares feux qui ne contiendra pas
Le délice attendu du nuptial repas
Ni que pour notre reine enfant et le convive...
ne survive
Comme une chère très délicate à foison

(ibid., 56)

With these lines, Mallarmé introduces what appears to be an entirely new set of images. To be noted is an extensive use of the oral code: “repas,” “une chère,” “l'âpre faim,” “bouche,” “le mets supérieur,” and “gouîte.” Precipitated by the metonymical displacement of “chimère” to “vaisselle,” this sudden intervention of the oral motif can be viewed as an attempt at censorship. For, as a monstrous fusion of incompatible creatures (lion, goat, and serpent) and a figure for the processes of poetic imagination and rêverie, this phantom chimera inevitably recalls both the bizarre mating of “divers monstres nuls” and the image of the “orfèvrerie.” Moreover, in the apposition of “mal éteinte” with “avares feux,” there is a continuation of the dynamic struggle between vision and obscurity. By analyzing further the deletions and disguises of the manuscript, we shall see that the primal fantasy surrounding the solar combat has thwarted the censor by returning, so to speak, in the form of a “festin amoureux.”

That the adult psyche is still visited and influenced by the phantoms of childhood is first implied by the description of Hérodiiade as “notre reine enfant.” On the verge of puberty, this “enfant... financée au sens” (N, 174) is both virginal and sex-
ual. In the "Ouverture" the nurse chastizes Hérodiade for her self-indulging pleasures: "Froide enfant, de garder en son plaisir subtil, / . . . ses promenades, / Et quand le soir méchant a coupé les grenades" (ibid., 149-50). If, then, the empty platter is not to contain "le délice attendu du nuptial repas," it is because "délice" refers primarily to the appetite of the senses—desires that are both infinite and unappeasable. This association between orality and sexuality is strengthened by several details in the manuscript. For example, Mallarmé's use of "rassasier" rather than "contenir" in an early draft combines the meanings of "satisfaire la faim" and "satisfaire pleinement les désirs de quelqu'un." If the "délice attendu" is, as the text proposes, "Comme une chère [or 'chair'] très délicate à foison," then its lack is also equivalent to a voracious insatiable hunger—"l'âpre faim muée en pâmoison." Precipitating a loss of consciousness ("pâmoison"), this hunger is recovered by fantasy. One is immediately reminded of Hérodiade's ambivalent hallucination of the maternal breast in the "Scène":

Si tu me vois les yeux perdus au paradis  
C'est quand je me souviens de ton lait bu jadis.

Like the term "évanoisissment," "pâmoison" can refer either to a lifting of repression or to the act of censorship itself. On the one hand, "muée" ("to shed the skin") and its homonym, "muet" (the "unspoken"), imply repression by means of displacement. Yet in the final draft, it would seem to indicate, as well, the invasion of the Unconscious, for it is immediately followed by the most overtly erotic image of the entire "Prélude":

Les entrelace bouche à bouche puis les vautre  
Le mets supérieur qu'on goûte l'un à l'autre . . .  
(ibid., 56)

The use of the oral code as a metaphor for a sexual embrace leads the reader to believe that the entire scene concerns only the future bride and groom. This significantly deemphasizes the oral dynamic. But compare Mallarmé's use of "vautrer" in another work: "Vautré dans le bonheur, où ses seuls appétits / Mangent . . ." (O.C., 33). And in certain fragments for "Le
Livre,” Mallarmé writes about a starving guest who, after being invited to a feast by a lady and forbidden to eat, ends up by devouring his hostess: “manger la dame.” My point is that, by consistently confusing the sexual with the oral, the poet successfully camouflages the phantasm that structures the text.

Looking now at the variants to this passage, we find that the “mets supérieur” is equivalent to a “mets incestueux” (N, 173) and that all of the references to nourishment and hunger can be traced back to the missing maternal breast. Not only is the oral motif repeatedly tied to the past (“le vieux repas” “l'antique faim,” “chère d'autrefois” as opposed to “quelque faim nouvelle”), but this “ancienne faim” is, for the child, the only “chère authentique” (ibid., 169, 173). On this level the wedding banquet is not merely a future event that is not to take place but a ritualized repetition of a phantasmic communion between mother and child that never could take place. Like Hérodiade’s solitary nuptials, this archaic feast is the object of a wish. That such transgressive desires must result in guilt and punishment is evidenced by a draft for the “Finale” that reads: “Sa chair de s'offrir en festin / Pour avoir reconnu le seigneur clandestin” (ibid., 80).

But who is the “seigneur clandestin”? In view of the preceding evidence, it is not at all certain that this “principal convive” is, as others all too quickly assume, John the Baptist. Backtracking a bit, let’s reconsider the opening lines of the “Prélude” in light of these last variants. Here, horror is strangely equated with “le manque d'un saint” (N, 167). It is noteworthy that, in several variants, the oral drive resurfaces in the repetition of the homonymic pairing of “saint”/“sein.” Likened to a “sceau de sainteté,” the faceless “masque de saint” becomes an ambivalent sign (“sceau”) for both the breast (“sainteté” or sain/tété) and its lack (“En le manque d'un saint”/sein) (ibid., 172, 167). These same associations generate “seigneur clandestin” (“seing” as signature recalls “sceau”) in the “Finale” (ibid., 80), and “Seigneurial écrin du nénuphar” (ibid., 144) in the “Ouverture.” The insistence of certain letters throughout the passage under consideration again identifies the maternal body as the stage-setting for the object and its loss: the multiple v's correlating femininity with oscillation and division (“Vide vaisselle,” “con-
vive," and "survive") and the systematic use of the "m" ("mâle et maternelle" expressing "la rencontre, la fusion, et le terme moyen" [O.C., 960]: "Troimphalement," "péremptoirement," "chimère," and "Maintenant mal").

The second draft for the wedding feast is the most revealing. Not only does it posit a close connection with the solar drama ("Aujourd'hui comme le précédent jour / soir fameux en fusion"), but it contains the deleted phrase "le mets incestueux" (N, 171-74). At this exact point, the entire scene suddenly fades. Analogous to the breaking of a thread, this hole in the text is articulated in the following manner:

l'écheveau rompt avec l'  
ici à votre âge
Alors, le fil rompu s'achève ici, pourquoi  
arrete
Secret refleur voiles ou
Stupeur à prolonger dans les transes et coi  
roides
Comme sa révérence
Le spectre que sa clairvoyance comme défaille  
témoin
Le confident, parmi la soie et la faille

(ibid., 174)

Outlined in these lines is a description of the process of repression itself. Originally signifying "tourner de l'œil," the verb "défaillir" echoes both "évanouissement" and "pâmoison." The paradoxical notion that darkness favors vision is suggested by "clairvoyance comme défaille." Reflected only in the observer's rigid stance ("Stupeur," "transes," and "roides"), the content of this horrifying vision is to remain a secret. Although the use of "confident" and "spectre" indicate that it is the nurse's perception, we should recall that Mallarmé intentionally confuses the characters in several places throughout Les Noces. The ambiguity of this personage is repeated just a few lines later in the text, in the juxtaposition of "vierge enfant" with "vieux corps." It could be that Hérodias the adolescent is remembering the child's illicit view of adult sexuality "parmi la soie et la faille."
Since "faille" can refer to both a woman's veil and a lack ("manque" or "fissure"), the spectator's vision constitutes an integral part of the phantasm. On a structural level, the floating veil comes to represent the oscillating movements of the text between vision and obscurity, repression and the return of the repressed. In a later fragment, Hérodiade's dance of veils evokes a similar vacillating uncertainty: "se penche-t-elle d'un côté—de l'autre—montrant un sein—l'autre . . ." (ibid., 113). Thus the reader, like the observer in the text, witnesses only its effects "dans les transes / voiles et coi" (ibid., 174).

Mallarmé's suppression of this fragment is quite understandable. For it illustrates the genesis of the text in a much too vivid fashion. By the more subtle insertion of a colon and a rapid shift to a different symbolic register, the poet recreates this pause in his final draft. A return to the solar imagery of the beginning indicates that the text has come full circle:

\[
\begin{align*}
   \text{Le mets supérieur qu'on goûte l'un à l'autre:} \\
   \text{Alors, dis ô futur taciturne, pourquoi} \\
   \text{Ici demeure-t-il et s'éternise coi} \\
   \text{Selon peu de raison que le richissime orbe} \\
   \text{Opiniâtrement pour se parfaire absorbe} \\
   \text{Jusqu'à l'horizon mort en un dernier éclat} \\
   \text{Cette vacuité louche et muette d'un plat?}
\end{align*}
\]

(N, 56)

The use of the interrogative tells the reader that the hypothesis cannot be verified. For the chain of correspondences initiated by the plate (nimbe/souvenir/masque/chimère/vaisselle/chère/orbe/vacuité) remains impervious to any type of logical arrangement. By inserting the connector "Selon . . . que" to mark a series of indefinite, open-ended rapports, Mallarmé underscores the analogical expansion of the text. Borrowed from different contexts, the images of this passage (mets/orbe/éclat/vacuité/plat) figure as bits and pieces of a collage, the surviving remnants of the "ancestoriale et lourde orfevrerie." The various strands of the phantasm converge in the term "orbe," which again confuses the solar and oral codes. Generally denoting a "sphere, globe or coil," "orbe" is also a common metaphor for the bosom. However, if this word connects the empty platter to
both the rounded halo ("nimbe") and the "gorge ancienne et
tarie," it is because the etymological root of its adjectival form is
the Latin "orbus," signifying "prive de lumiere" or blind. That
which is relayed from one image to the next is the division
or lack from which it was issued. This sort of repetition is
demonic because, as Weber asserts, it "... consists not in the
re-presentation of the identical but rather in the indefinite incess­
tsant and often violent displacement of marks and traces. ..."30
Thus, when attempting to become reabsorbed into the celestial
body that engendered it ("pour se parfaire absorbe"), the plate
("rejeton" and "descendant") is once more cast aside and another
image is spawned. Doomed to regenerate itself perpetually
across a field of signifiers, the plate is both an excess and a
lack—a "simulacre," "fantome," and "vacuite louche" (N, 170).

Significantly, the failure of this nostalgic desire for fusion is
also the failure of interpretation. The same forces of obscurity
that cloud the text and threaten engulfment paradoxically
preserve its endless capacity for regeneration. As previously
noted, all breaks in the text (lapses in consciousness, reawaken­
ings, relapses, blank spaces, and disquieting gaps) both aid and
foil the censor.

As in "Le Demon de l'analogie," there is no unequivocal
meaning to be had. In the final section of the "Prelude," the
plate, like the "inexplicable Pénultième," continues to circulate
in a most uncanny fashion. Here, the same primal phantasms
of procreation, separation, and death reemerge across an exten­
sive network of increasingly abstract imagery. Due to the lack of
variants for this segment ("A quel psaume . . .", N, 59-60), it is
impossible to study the processes of repression and repetition in
the same depth as in the first part of the "Prelude." In view of my
previous discussion of certain parts of this fragment in relation­
tship to the "Scène" (see chapter 2), the analysis will be brief.

Evoked in the opening verse is the sound of an elliptical
psalm described as belonging to "nul antique antiphonaire." Since an "antiphona" is a type of liturgical chant usually sung
before and after a psalm, this song arises independently, like an
answer without question or response. Floating erratically in the
background, the destination of this "écho jailli" (N, 191) is at first
as mysterious as its origin: "Oui planer ici comme un viril ton-
nerre / Du cachot fulguré pour s'ensevelir où?” (ibid., 59). After its eruption through a hole already opened by a “vol ébloui de vitrage” (ibid.), the voice suddenly attaches itself to a speaker:

Le Fantôme accoudé du pâle écho latent  
Sous un voile debout ne dissimule tant  
Supérieurement à de noirs plis Prophète  
Toujours que de ne pas perpéteur du faîte  
Divers rapprochements scintillés absolus . . .

(ibid.)

A translation of these very complex lines would read that the ghost of the pale, latent echo does not dissimulate well enough so as not to perpetuate diverse and absolute relationships that scintillate. It is instructive to recall that in “Macbeth” this sort of imperfect dissimulation precipitated a seemingly accidental perception of the witches’ secret ritual: “Shakespeare . . . feint, plutôt, de dissimuler insuffisamment et laisser voir, dans un coup de vent” (O.C., 350). The same fleeting and indiscreet perception is afforded in the “Prelude” by the “vol ébloui de vitrage”—the double sense of “vol,” implying a stolen look. Continuing the parallel, a raising of a theatre curtain is next suggested by the swirling motions of a “fatidique panache / De dentelles à flot torses sur le linon” (N, 60). Such convulsive movements (“torses”) indicate that this bedchamber, unlike the motionless “lit aux pages de vélin” of the “Ouverture,” is continually animated by the restless activity of a dreamer creating associations or “rêves par plis”:

Divers rapprochements scintillés absolus:  
Et, plus  
Insoumis au joyau géant qui les attache . . .

(ibid., 59)

There is a striking resemblance between the imagery of this section and Mallarmé’s sonnet “Une dentelle s’abolit”:  

Cet unanime blanc conflit  
D’une guirlande avec la même  
Enfui contre la vitre blême  
Flotte plus qu’il n’ensevelit . . .

(O.C., 74)
Reinscribed in the billowing folds of the lace, the "Jeu suprême" (ibid.) or white struggle links procreation and doubt with the process of writing. Emphasizing movement, productivity, and uncertainty, the color white is, as Cohn remarks, the "nourishing source" of Mallarmé's poetry. Reminiscent of several descriptions of the "nourrice d'hiver" (N, 64) throughout Les Noces ("sachet d'os . . . de cendre," "robe blanchie en l'ivoire," ibid., 198, 146), this pallid "Fantôme's" unsuccessful attempts at repression inadvertently assure the transposition of the "pâle écho latent" into "Divers rapprochements scintillés." Perpetuated now in the fluttering motions of white lace and sheets, these celestial inscriptions figure also on a visual level by the space left blank in the following verse: "Et, . . . plus." Finally, when set in apposition to "noir plis Prophète," such patterns bring to mind one of Mallarmé's favorite metaphors for a non-repressive writing—the shimmering alphabet of white stars set against a night sky.

Now the plate returns, this time under a completely different aspect:

Vains les noeuds éplorés, la nitidité fausse  
Ensemble que l'agrafe avec ses feux rehausse,  
Plus abominé mais placide ambassadeur  
Le circonstanciel plat nu dans sa splendeur,  
Toute ambiguïté par ce bord muet fuie,  
Se fourbit, on dirait, s'époussette ou s'essuie  
Aux dénégations très furieusement

(N, 60)

As in "Igitur," the action of dusting or polishing is analogous to the elimination of doubt: "... la clarté la lueur se mirait dans la surface polie, inférieure, dépourvue de poussière" (O.C., 446-47). Yet the use of "noeuds éplorés," "nitidité fausse," "placide ambassadeur," and "circonstanciel" points up the artificiality of this newly found certitude. Tantamount to a scouring of the mind or erasure of a text, the wiping of the dish is an attempt at repression. Ironically, it is in the repetition of this very commonplace (heimliche) gesture that the repressed suddenly resurfaces:
Loin dans froûlement
De l'Ombre avec ce soin encore ménagère:
Il il exagère
Le sépulcral effroi de son contour livide

(N, 60)

In another fragment the circular shape of the platter creates further associations: "elle époussette un nimbe / et de sa coiffe / même tremblant que ce soit cela qui l'a glacée d'effroi" (ibid., 123).

But what is "cela"? Is it the empty halo, the nurse's coif, a combination of the two, or something entirely separate? Ambiguity is maintained by the timely insertion of two more blank spaces in the text. These white spaces function simultaneously as bridges and cut between the various images of the passage. As both a blank and the color white, the signifier "blanc" is not just an image or theme but, as Derrida demonstrates in "La Double séance," a space of writing. It is useful to recall that, in the "Prélude," Mallarmé's whites constitute a "ponctuel décor" that is first emblazoned on the nurse's white wimple and coif but then immortalized in the sporadic flow of her celestial milk:

L'ordinaire abandon sans produire de trace
Hors des seins abolis vers l'infini vorace
Sursautant à la fois en maint épars filet
Jadis, d'un blanc, et maléfique lait.

(N, 60)

Again, by leaving a space after the word "blanc" in his final draft, Mallarmé indirectly inscribes the ambivalence of the maternal breast as a double structure of plenitude and lack. Since the same manoeuvre is reproduced in one of the few variants for this passage, the intention is quite clear:

Lieu de plus noir secret
Pour voile se frange
Sinistrement blanchit et s'illumine

(ibid., 192)

By now, it should be apparent that any reading of the "Prélude" remains unfinished. This is a direct effect of the structur-
ing of the “Prélude” as both a phantasm and its interpretation. By recourse to variants, I have discovered an extensive work of textual transformation that, although suppressed from the final draft, continues to influence and animate its surface. This dynamic is especially visible in the successive versions of the first section “Si . . . / Génuflexion . . . .” From this, I have demonstrated that the creation of uncanny effects in the “Prélude” proceeds from a poetics of repetition that differs substantially from the incantatory structures of the “Ouverture.” A retracing the covert displacement of key signifiers in the text, shows that repetition is no longer a principle of identity but one of difference. The intermingling of the imaginary with the real, the familiar with the extraordinary, and the forces of repression with the resurgence of the repressed, are the mechanisms Mallarmé employs in the creation of the fantastic. The same operations are also at issue in Freud’s essay, “The Uncanny.” One could say that the difficulty of Freud’s investigation comes from the nature of the Uncanny (indefinable, imperceptible, and illogical) versus the purpose of his analysis. As already noted, the difference between Freud’s reading of “The Sand-Man” and Mallarmé’s work lies in the former’s inability to relinquish mastery. Yet, in spite of his conclusion, Freud’s analysis of the processes of substitution and repression offered a point of entry for the “Prélude.” Whereas Freud demonstrates psychological processes by recourse to fiction, Mallarmé uses the psyche to stage the genesis of the text with its interpretation. Continually addressing the question of its own origin, the “Prélude,” unlike the “Ouverture,” is a self-reflexive text. Like “Le Démon de l’analogie,” and “La Fausse entrée des sourcières,” the “Prélude” redramatizes a crisis of interpretation, one that is ultimately bequeathed to the reader, who can follow either Freud, and pretend to have ousted the demon, or Mallarmé: “Enfin la fiction . . . semble être le procédé même de l’esprit humain — c’est elle qui met en jeu toute méthode, et l’homme est réduit à la volonté” (O.C., 851).