Castration and Dissemination

Sait-on ce que c'est qu'écritre?
Une ancienne et très vague mais
jalouse pratique, dont gît le sens
au mystère du coeur.
Qui l'accomplit, intégralement,
se retranche.

MALLARME

THE “CANTIQUE DE SAINT JEAN”

The continued expansion of Les Noces in the 1880s and 1890s makes it impossible to decide on either a logical evolution of the work or definitive arrangement of its texts. There is, for example, no mention of the “Cantique de Saint Jean” until the “Bibliographie” of 1898: “Hérodiade, ici fragment, où seule la partie dialoguée, comporte outre le ‘Cantique de Saint Jean’ et sa conclusion en un dernier monologue, des Prélude et Finale qui seront ultérieurement publiés et s'arrange en poème” (O.C., 77).
It is precisely the overall indeterminancy of *Les Noces* that invites and even compels its readers to fill in the gaps. Of the various parts enumerated in the preceding note, we find that, for many critics, the “Cantique de Saint Jean” plays a key role in the structuring and general synthesizing of the work. There are several reasons for this. Frequently considered as the third part of a triptych following the “Ouverture ancienne” and the “Scène,” the “Cantique,” as Austin remarks, furnishes “la clef de l’énigme” and prepares “le dénouement.”

In its presentation of a violent scene of decapitation, the poem is also seen as the only “direct reference” to the legend of Salome and John the Baptist. Not only does a sacrifice proceed to a conclusion, it punishes a transgression and promises a reward. Is it possible that the beheading of the saint is the logical consequence of his “violation” of the “virginal” Hérodiade? At least one of Mallarmé’s contemporaries thought so when he described the progression of the drama in the following manner:

Le secret, lequel je le tiens du poète lui-même, n’est autre que la future violation du mystère de son être [Hérodiade’s] par un regard de Jean qui va payer de sa mort ce seul sacrilège. Car la farouche vierge ne se sentira de nouveau intacte et restituée tout entière à son intégralité qu’au moment où elle tiendra entre ses mains le tête tranchée en laquelle osait se perpétuer le souvenir de la vierge entrevue.

In addition to these considerations, I might point out that the “Cantique” is identified by virtually all of its critics as a crucial step in the process of artistic creation: “Le but du ‘Cantique’ est de forger un symbole, le pur regard . . . représentant l’esprit poétique détaché des contingences de la vie et préparé pour l’acte créateur.” Tantamount to a clean separation between matter and spirit, the saint’s decollation would enable the formation of a transcendent literary space, a divine synthesis between “la beauté pure et l’effrayant génie.”

A brief summary of the poem will elucidate this reading. Occurring at sunset, the execution releases a flash of light that is almost immediately extinguished by the enveloping darkness of
death and its corollary, night. No longer circumscribed by the body, the head appears to soar upward, suspend itself in midair for a few split seconds, and then fall back and bounce on the ground. Yet at the same time, its glance stubbornly follows a “pur regard” up into the mystical realm of “la froideur / Éternelle” (N, 58). In their view of the scene as a complete polarization of the head from the body, critics usually do one of two things. If they choose to emphasize the movement of ascent, the head is transformed into a “symbol of spirituality” or cosmic consciousness. Representative of the “triumph of genius in its release from life into art,” the severed head not only indicates “un plus haut niveau de conscience” but prefigures “la synthèse finale.” On the other hand, those who do recognize the head’s earthbound destination proceed to infuse the entire episode with Christian motifs: “Sans doute, y a-t-il là une réminiscence du sacre de Moïse, redescendant du Sinai, marqué au front pour avoir vu face à face l'Éternelle; . . .” What both groups of readers have in common is the consistent application of a triadic structure, a “Merveilleuse synthèse 'hégelienne'!”

But to sublimate the head and abandon the body is to suppress the seminal power of the “coup” which, in “Un Coup de dés,” results in the continued production of celestial “seeds” promising “new life”:

**UNE CONSTELLATION**

froide d'oubli et de désuetude

*pas tant*
qu'elle n'énumère

sur quelque surface vacante et supérieure

*le heurt successif*
sidéralement

d'un compte total *en formation* . . .

(O.C., 477; my emphasis)

It is not the fullness of meaning but its indefinite deferment that ensures the interminable movement of the text: “l'incohérent manque hautain de signification qui scintille en l'alphabet de la Nuit . . . selon *quelques coups d'épingle stellaires*” (ibid., 303; my italics). The decapitation of the Baptist is perhaps better viewed as a “coup de tête” or sign of impending madness reminiscent of
"Igitur": “... dernière figure, séparée de son personnage par une fraise arachnéenne et qui ne se connaît pas” (ibid., 439). Not only is the saint’s flash of genius an “éclair fou” (N, 129), but the aimless bouncing of his head on the soil (“... de jeûnes ivre/... / En quelque bond hagard,” (ibid., 58) is likened, in a variant, to the frenzied circulation of Eros: “sang se rua en moi/ardeur/fou de ce fol élan” (ibid., 133). Far from the creation of an immutable synthesis, the loss of the head signals the toppling of all hierarchical structures. This sort of equalization is stressed by Hérodiate when she addresses the head with the lines: “Je raisonne pour toi tête, pas quant à toi/je ramasse mieux ainsi/est mieux que/ramasser la tête” (ibid., 130). If, then, the scene of decapitation is instrumental in the creative process, it is because, instead of closing the text, it paradoxically continues the cycle of regeneration begun in the “Prélude.”

Decapitation as a metaphor for castration is a commonplace in psychoanalytic criticism. Thus, it is not surprising that Mauron, in his reading of the “Cantique,” should seize upon this connection while referring to the myth of Kronos:

... Kronos gelded his father Ouranos and in turn was castrated by his own son Zeus. Being put to death, being castrated, being dethroned, are synonymous in the infantile unconscious. ... It is certainly the scythe of Kronos that we find in ‘Cantique’.10

But again, in looking for the “higher” level of meaning, Mauron concludes that the “pur regard” of the “conscious saint” transcends the terrestrial weight of the body and “mounts toward Principle.”11 Omitted is that part of the myth that was perhaps of most interest to Mallarmé, that is, when cast into the sea, the genitals of Kronos created a foamy water that gave birth to Aphrodite. Recognizing this goddess as “LA VENUS LATINE,” Mallarmé describes this extraordinary event in “Les Dieux antiques”: “On dit qu’elle jaillit de la brillante écume de la mer, et fut, en conséquence, appelée Aphrodite (aphros, mousse)” (O.C., 1198). Although this productive aspect of castration might at first be difficult to envision, it is operative in the “Cantique” where the Baptist’s beheading simultaneously wounds
and fecundates the virgin: “C’est toi cruel / qui m’as blessée / en dessous / par la tête / heurtant / l’au-dela...” (N, 115) and “mon corps aveu de l’homme / nécessaire / fécondé de la splendeur par ta mort / précoce” (ibid., 136).

Before turning to an analysis of the “Cantique,” it is instructive to discuss Freud’s theory of a “castration complex” in conjunction with other poems by Mallarmé. Placed in the category of “primal fantasies,” castration involves the ambiguous relationship between truth and fiction, event and phantasm. What should be emphasized here is that castration is a threat that not only extends back to the “pre-Oedipal” phase but survives indefinitely in the form of retroactive fantasies of morcellation and death. Since any form of rupture is experienced as a menace to the child’s idealized image of narcissistic unity, it can be considered under the rubric of castration. Such fantasies, in the form of ocular transgressions, appear frequently in Mallarmé’s poetry. Generally committed by male figures, these crimes are never left unpunished. Written in 1864 and substantially reworked for the anthology “Poésies” of 1887, “Le Pitre châtié” is one of the first texts to articulate a rapport between perception, castration, and productivity. In the early version, an exuberant clown dives “comme un traitre” into the eyes of his muse—“ces lacs défendus” (O.C., 1416). Giving birth to a “corps nouveau,” this baptismal plunge acts out a desire for reunion with the maternal waters of the womb. But in washing away his make-up, that is, his power to create illusion, the swim also leaves the clown impotent: “Ne sachant pas, hélas! quand s’en allait sur l’eau / Le suif de mes cheveux et le fard de ma peau, / Muse, que cette crasse était tout le génie!” (ibid.). In the poem’s second version, the crime is transformed into an act of voyeurism: “J’ai trouvé dans le mur de toile une fenêtre” (ibid., 31). Here, the clown’s hollowing out of the window not only seals his fate “dans l’eau perfide des glaciers” but makes possible his rebirth as text: “... c’est comme si... j’innovais / Mille sépulcres pour y vierge disparaitre” (ibid.). Playing on the double meaning of “châtié” (“castrated” but also “pure”), the poem links the creative dynamic to the death of the subject and his subsequent displacement into writing. That the scriptural act presupposes the disappearance and fragmentation of the subject is evi-
denced by Mallarmé's notes for "Igitur": "plus je/plume/plume je/plume jet."  

A similar dynamic is operative in "L'Aprés-midi d'un faune." In retelling his encounter with the nymphs, the faun views his crime retrospectively as a form of carnal possession:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Mon crime, c'est d'avoir, gai de vaincre ces peurs} \\
\text{Traîtres, divisé la touffe échevelée} \\
\text{De baisers que les dieux gardaient si bien mêlée:}
\end{align*}
\]

\[(O.C., 52)\]

This version of the story does not, however, comply with the earlier statement "Je les ravis, sans les désenlacer . . ." (ibid.). Several details in the poem suggest that this rape is of an entirely different order. Since the nymphs could either be real or imaginary "Aimai-je un rêve?," ibid., 50) and the purpose of the poem is their phantasmic perpetuation ("Dormons: je puis rêver à mon blasphème / Sans crime . . ., ibid., 1453), the violation lies in the perception/narration of the episode that is itself figured as a series of cuttings and perforations: "CONTEZ / Que je coupais ici les creux roseaux" (ibid., 50) and "O nymphes, regonflons des SOUVENIRS divers / Mon oeil trouant les joncs, dardait chaque encolure . . ." (ibid., 51). The punishment for these erotic musings is exhaustion leading to impotence: "Quand tonne un somme triste où s'épuise la flamme / Je tiens la reine! O sûr châtiment . . ." (ibid., 52). Rather than give up his dream, the faun rekindles his passion by reproducing a censored version: "Couple, adieu; je vais voir l'ombre que tu devins" (ibid., 53).  

A final example of this schema is found in the prose poem "Pauvre Enfant pâle" (1864). Originally entitled "La Tête," this anecdote recounts the miserable fate of a young beggar who sings in the streets for his bread. Since the decapitation motif is central, some critics have recognized an overt parallel between this work and the "Cantique." The character is a miniature adult, a "petit homme," dressed in baggy, tattered clothes. Prematurely thin and too big for his age, he works independently while ignoring his peers playing in the street. To point up the futility of his enterprise, the narrator describes how the child's
song lacks the force to extend beyond the shutters of the first-floor windows. Penniless, the child continues to sing defiantly:

Et ta complainte est si haute, si haute, que ta tète nue
qui se lève en l'air à mesure que ta voix monte, semble vouloir partir de tes petites épaules (O.C., 274).

It is the child's rebellious nature that prompts the narrator to wonder “. . . si elle [the head] ne s'en ira pas un jour, quand, après avoir crié longtemps dans les villes, tu auras fait un crime” (ibid.). In order to commit this crime, he continues, “il suffit d'avoir du courage après le désir, et . . . Ta petite figure est énergique” (Ibid.).

It is irrelevant whether this projected crime is actually committed or not, for the child's fate is already predetermined by the criminal act of desiring itself. Encoded by this insolent voice, desire strives to penetrate the shutters above while protecting the subject from a direct perception of the room's interior: “. . . traversera . . . les volets . . . derrière lesquels tu ignores de lourds rideaux de soie incarnadine” (ibid.). The erotic overtones of “incarnadine” (“couleur de la chair,” Petit Robert), as well as the use of “tu ignores” for “tu ne vois pas” in an earlier version (ibid., 1558), suggest that the young singer, like the “criminelle enfant” of Les Noces, has indiscreetly fantasized and repressed the “mystère éclairé de son être” (N, 80). The inevitable result of this perception is the child's textual dismemberment that the narrator predicts in the poem's conclusion: “Nous te verrons dans les journaux, Oh! pauvre petite tête!” (O.C., 275). Reinforced by both the use of small letters and exclamation points (the inversion of the phallic “i”) is a close rapport between castration and the production of language.

Each text reenacts the drama of castration in an entirely different way. In settling for a symbolic reproduction of the nymphs, the faun is clearly the most cautious of the three protagonists: “. . . il faut dormir en l'oubli du blasphème” (O.C., 53). Whereas the clown tries to mitigate his offense by feigning ignorance (“Ne sachant pas, hélas!”), the orphan continuously contests all forms of authority by an undaunted display of virility: “Ta tête se dresse toujours . . . pendant que tu chantes d'un
air qui devient menaçant" (ibid., 274). In all three instances, castration involves a negative perception of absence or difference, the locus of which is decidedly feminine—"la touffe échevelée," "l'eau perfide des glaciers," and "lourds rideaux de soie." But perhaps even more important is the idea that in all three poems castration is both real and imaginary, a scenario that may or may not take place. Permeated with dreams and fantasies, this threat is only experienced in its effects: mimed by the clown, sublimated by the faun, and prophesied by the narrator of "Pauvre enfant."

More than a mere theme, castration is a dynamic process that, as Weber succinctly explains, entails a "restructuring of experience, including the relation of perception, desire and consciousness." It is a "crisis of phenomenality" that subverts the dichotomies of past and present, interior and exterior, body and mind. Significantly, all three of Mallarmé's characters simultaneously recognize and repudiate knowledge of castration through the erection of screens functioning as filters: the clown's window, the child's curtains, and the faun's grapeskins that he interposes between himself and the scene of his desire: "Rieur, j'élève au ciel d'été la grappe vide / Et.../.. . jusqu'au soir je regarde au travers" (O.C., 51).

In the refraining of this perceptual doubt, the Mallarmean subject inevitably glimpses the rupture that constitutes identity. The endless branching of the faun's doubt ("En maint rameau subtil") confirms ("qui prouve, hélas!") not the nymphs' absence but the inseparability of desire, absence, and dream: "... les femmes, dont tu gloses / Figurent un souhait de tes sens fabuleux" (ibid., 50).

For Freud, there are two principal means that enable the subject to ward off the threat of castration. To preserve an illusion of narcissistic wholeness, one can create a double or a fetish. Examples of both strategies occur in the "Scène." In her attempts to achieve immortality through the fixation of mirror images, Hérodiade, as we have seen, is ultimately led toward a recognition of her own alterity. Her spectral confrontation with a "rêve épars" (image of a "corps morcelé") recalls Freud's observation that the figure of the double can "reverse its aspect," acting as both "an assurance of immortality" and the "uncanny
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harbinger of death” (S.E., 17:234-35). Rather than acknowledg­ing the image of her “nudité” that erupts from the hole of her mirror, Hérodiade rearticulates her desire by crystallizing it in the form of substitute objects, a conglomerate of precious stones, flowers, and metallic icons. This reification of the self depends on that continuous displacement of desire that Freud links to the practice of fetishism. In the symbolic representation of the missing phallus (i.e., by other parts of the body or objects in contact with the body), the fetishist simultaneously recognizes and denies all evidence of castration: “In very subtle instances both the disavowal and the affirmation of the castration have found their way into the construction of the fetish itself” (ibid., 21:156). Within such a space, the fetish demonstrates its textuality—“fetish” (derived from the Latin factisio signifying “the work of imitation through signs”). Exceeding the simple polarity of presence/absence to affirm instead a space of vertiginous oscillation, the fetish, as Derrida remarks, embodies and sustains an “économie de l’indécidable.”

In my reading of the “Cantique,” I will demonstrate how the text, in maintaining a similar kind of contradictory structure, creates a surplus that renders any type of final synthesis impossible. The placement of the “Cantique” in terms of either motivation or reconciliation is both problematic and irrelevant. Emphasized in virtually all of the references to the poem is the interpenetration of the real with the fictional. In several places in the manuscript, Hérodiade minimizes the significance of the decapitation almost to the point where the reader wonders if it really occurs: “plus que par le glaive / vain du bourreau / je meurs / en mon martyr / solitaire” (N, 122) and “Non c’etait / vain—couper / tête / tu étais mort . . . / et ton regard / meurt et depuis / longtemps . . .” (ibid., 108). This is further reinforced by those variants that describe the Baptist as a “trivial époux” (ibid., 80), a “passant” (ibid., 109, 129), “celui qui ne devait même pas être intrus” (ibid., 131) and, most importantly, “quelqu’un n’étant pas qui passe le premier” (ibid., 80). At the same time, however, a parallel is drawn between the saint’s death and the process of the heroine’s development: “j’en porte le remords / un même instinct qui te porta à transgresser le ciel / . . . je recueille mieux pieuse cet éclair . . . par ta mort . . . douée de le
savoir” (ibid., 135). Finally, in another variant, the reader is given to believe that the decapitation and the bridal rite are simply two versions of the same story: “le glaive qui trancha ta tête a déchiré mon voile” (ibid., 136). Functioning as a metaphorical structure for both the breaking of the hymen and the piercing of the veil, the loss of the head recapitulates and continues the series of ruptures that punctuate Hérodiade's history, forcing her toward maturity. Like the maternal breast of the “Prélude” and “Scène,” (“tête” provoking its displaced homonym “têter”), the severed head articulates a basic rapport between separation and desire. Consequently, Hérodiade's identification with it (“Tu me possèdes, tu m'es”) (ibid.) can only be ambivalent: “Je hais la tête / ai-je dit . . .” (ibid., 101).

In the first stanza of the “Cantique,” Mallarmé foregrounds this same type of indecision by setting up a tension between upward and downward motions:

Le soleil que sa halte
Sur naturelle exalte
Aussitôt redescend
Incandescent

(N. 57; my italics)

This diverges substantially from an earlier version that reads: “L’astre épars / bas / Le soleil que prolonge / . . . Cèrtes, aujourd'hui, choit” (ibid., 184). Rather than a definitive fall, Mallarmé opts for a certain suspension with vibratory effects. It is continued, for example, in the rhythmical bouncing of the head as it attempts repeatedly to soar “Dans les vols triomphants.” With the fall of the executioner's ax, it appears that the body is granted a measure of peace:

Et ma tête surgie
Solitaire vigie
Dans les vols triomphants
De cette faux

Comme rupture franche
Plutôt refoule ou tranche
Les anciens désaccords
Avec le corps
Qu'elle de jeunes ivres
S'opiniâtre à suivre
En quelque bond hagard
Son pur regard

(ibid., 57-58)

The echo in "trionphaux/faux" sounds a note of deception that is reinforced in the following stanza by the use of "refoule" ("to repress"). As a result of the syntactic ambiguity of these lines, the itinerary of the head remains undetermined. It is not fortuitous that Barbara Johnson chooses these very lines to illustrate Mallarmé's practice of syntactic "pivoting":

Depending... on whether the word que... introduces a subjunctive command or a relative clause, the poem is saying either 'que la tête s'opiniâtre à suivre son pur regard là-haut' or 'la tête refoule ou tranche les anciens désaccords avec le corps qu'elle s'opiniâtre à suivre.' It is equally plausible, therefore, to see the head rising up after its pur regard, or falling down in reconciliation with the body.¹⁸

In positing both possibilities, the text deprives the head of either transcendance or reconciliation. What emerges rather is a continuous rotational movement that undercuts the ascendancy of any one proposition. This failed aspiration creates a lateral rhythm, a wave of oppositional pairings that persist through to the poem's conclusion: dispersion/contraction ("S'éployer... un frisson / A l'unisson"), darkness/illumination ("des ténèbres" "noirs coups" / "Solitaire vigie" "Pic lustral") and white heat/iciness ("Incandescent"/"froideur," "glaciers").

As obscurity spreads through the vertebral column, text and body spin in parallel spheres. Mallarmé introduces the analogy with "vertèbres," evoking the Latin vertère ("tourner") and the French vers ("toward" and "verse"). The conflation of "tête surgie" with "Solitaire vigie" yields another structure with reversible terms. Coterminous with the head's partial emergence from maternal waters ("vigie" signifying both a "poste d'observation sur un navire" and a "petit flot émergeant à peine de la mer")¹⁹ is its reimmersion into the Source, a baptism of
sorts. Here again, the creation of suspense translates into the suspense of creation—an incomplete birth or, maybe, a semideath:

\[
\text{Là-haut où la froidure} \\
\text{Éternelle n'endure} \\
\text{Que vous le surpassiez} \\
\text{Tous ô glaciers} \\
\text{Mais selon un bapêtre} \\
\text{Illuminée au même} \\
\text{Principe qui m'élu} \\
\text{Pence un salut.}
\]

\text{(N, 58)}

To read these last lines as an assurance of transcendance is to miss the "principle" at work. There is no sense of resolution, no symbol forged; just a vague ritual ("selon un" and "par quelque," ibid., 183) loosely connected to an indefinite "salvation" or, more possibly, a form of "salutation." With "Penche un salut," Mallarmé invokes that "oblique" movement by which language names and suspends meaning in the same gesture. Thus the variants for "salut" include "Délice," "Arcane," "Sourire," "Mystère," and "Miracle" (ibid.). The ploy resurfaces in the play of the letter. Now the confrontation of male plosive p's with maternal m's, as well as the poet's hesitation between masculine and feminine articles in an earlier draft ("Que vous la[e] surpassiez," ibid., 182), extends the text's vacillation toward the problematic of sexual difference.

There is an undeniable pleasure in this maneuvering. Reflecting a \textit{jouissance} without object or aim, language pivots in polymorphous fashion. It is precisely this capacity for reversal that allows the text to address and yet defer the question of its own productivity. In propagating several alternative texts, the saint's death, according to one variant, is a "sign" that "flowers in reverse" (N, 133). Castration, as Barbara Johnson has argued, "can neither be assumed nor denied, but only enacted in the return of unsuitable difference in every text." In the "Can­tique" as well, it is not simply a question of representing castra-
tion but of disfiguring its effects: "Comme rupture franche / Plutôt refoule ou tranche / Les anciens désaccords / Avec le corps." From this perspective the splitting of "désaccords" calls forth its opposite (des/accords) and thereby restores the fragmentation it sought to repress.

THE "DOUBLE FLOWER"

Indecision is what makes Hérodiade the female counterpart of Mallarmé's Hamlet figure, "le seigneur latent qui ne peut pas devenir" (O.C., 300). Besieged from within and without by contradictory impulses and desires, our child-queen, like Hamlet, wanders through a labyrinth of adolescence, prolonging its "circuits avec le suspens d'un acte inachevé" (ibid.). In the heroine's case, the act is, as we have seen, either a defloweration, a castration, or both. Most readers are inclined to anticipate a resolution or dénouement in the "Finale" for, in spite of its unfinished, fragmentary state, Mallarmé did refer to it as "le pourquoi de la crise" (N, 83).

Yet in the beginning of the monologue, Mallarmé frustrates that intention by a striking interplay of conflicting temporal modes:

O, désespérément sous l'aile échevelée  
Obscure de la nuit future violée  
Quand ton morne penser ne monta pas plus haut  
Dur front pétrifié dont le captif sursaut  
_Tout à l'heure n'aura de peur de se dissoudre_  
_Suivi la magnifique intérieure foudre_  
_Heurtée à quelque choc de ses rêves décus_  
_Sans l'établir vivante et regner par-dessus . . ._

_(N, 77; my italics)_

Setting up a "perpétuelle allusion" between past and future, event and fiction, these lines suggest that what is about to take place may have already taken place. Or, in Derrida's terms: "What takes place is only the _entre_, the place, the spacing, which is nothing. . . ."21
In contrast to this initial structural ambiguity is a hint of causality reinforced in the poem’s concluding lines. It is here that Hérodiade justifies, in retrospect, the role of an anonymous force in her development:

Comme soufflant le lustre absent pour le ballet
Abstraite intrusion en ma vie, il fallait
La hantise soudain quelconque d’une face
Pour que je m’entr’ouvrisse et reine triomphasse.

(N, 79)

The selection of these lines as proof of Hérodiade’s encounter/violation/marriage with the Baptist is rendered problematic by the use of ‘entr’ouvrisse’ (“entrobuvrir” signifying “ouvrir à demi, très peu,” and “entrouvert” “qui est déchiré par endroits”). Both here and in other fragments, the verb indicates the incomplete and solitary nature of Hérodiade’s flowering. Compare the note “entr’ouvrant un baiser solitaire” (ibid., 119) and Mallarmé’s description of Hérodiade’s autoerotic behavior in a variant for the “Ouverture”: “Froide enfant, de garder en son plaisir subtil / . . . Et quand le soir méchant entr’ouvre [changed to “a coupé” in the definitive version] les grenades!” (ibid., 149-50). The metaphor of half-opened pomegranates clearly anticipates the vision of Hérodiade’s phantasmic garden in the “Finale”:

Il est                       péristyle
Maints fruits           jardins
Néigeux               ambrés, incarnadins:
Mais aucun partagé pour savoir que je l’aime
Sinon l’espalier opulent de moi-même
Un selon de chers pressentiments inoui
Se sera tout à coup sans aide épanoui

(ibid., 77-78)

Rather than a carnal possession by a lover, this spontaneous but partial opening of fruits evokes the blossoming of adolescent sexuality: “Comprend le sens de ses marques précoces / De toute se libère / Et magnifiquement pubère / Célèbre ses noces” (ibid., 214). That Hérodiade’s virginity is indeed dubious, but nevertheless real, is evidenced by several notes and variants: “Une virginité mûre” (ibid., 220), “Une virginité que c’est trop” (ibid., 132), “chaque
dénie / une virginité" (ibid., 83), and "Avant que sur le sol / La double fleur n'ait chu . . ." (ibid., 162). In the "Finale" the undecidability of this "double fleur" is figured in the flow of an "inexplicable sang déshonorant le lys" that is "A jamais renversé de l'une et l'autre jambe" (ibid., 78). Finally, as the text of the "Finale" states most explicitly, "Ce n'est point / Hymen froid d'une enfance avec raffreux génie" but a perpetual enmeshing of red and white, a "hésitation entre la chair et l'astre" (ibid.).

Since it is impossible to decide whether Hérodiade's wedding vows have been or ever will be consummated, the drama remains virtual. In fact, the paradoxical conception of virginity as something intact and yet forever divided from itself is, at times, put forth as a general principle: "Toute virginité / nubilité / enfance disjointe en la tunique / Le fut de tous les temps selon l'approche unique / De quelqu'un n'étant pas qui passe le premier" (N, 211). The same principle is woven into Mallarmé's essays on aesthetics, where the notion of a divisive unity, or two-in-one paradox, constitutes the very locus of artistic creativity: "Virginité qui solitairement, devant une transparence du regard adéquat, elle-même s'est comme divisée en ses fragments de candeur, l'un et l'autre, preuves nuptiales de l'Idée" (O.C., 387). In the unedited fragments for the "Finale," the potentiality of this virginal space is again exploited in the heroine's execution of a most extraordinary dance. Set in a "lieu nul" (N, 114) and performed in utter solitude, the dance recapitulates the "l'une ou l'autre" rhythm of the entire text:

se penche-t-elle d'un
côte—de l'autre—
montrant un
sein—l'autre—
et surprise
sans gaze
selon ce sein, celui-là
identité

(ibid., 113)

In leaning to one side or the other, Hérodiade performs not the act but the "Idea" in its "hymen," figuring, as it were, an excess
and a lack: "Une virginité que c'est trop / pour l'homme de rêver" (ibid., 132). Like the fetishist, she denegrates castration through the erection of a contradictory symbolic substitute, executing "sur les pieds seins / une sorte de danse / effrayante esquisse" (ibid., 114). Reframed in one striking moment is the horror and denial of castration: "La fiancée adorable et funeste / Dans sa gaine debout nulle de firmament / A peine la minute inoubliablement" (ibid., 83).

It would be easy to reify both the moment and the dance with a gesture toward the absolute. In this connection Jean-Pierre Richard speaks of a "perfect equilibrium," a "conscious and neutral existence," in which Eros is again made to serve a "metaphysics" of sorts. This would require, however, that we eliminate the alternative ("l'ambiguïté d'Hérodiade et de sa danse," N, 111) and reinstate the vertical, all to the contrary of the poet's reminder:

\[
\text{avant que le}
\]
\[
\text{froid ne gagne—}
\]
\[
\text{aujourd'hui}
\]
\[
\text{je retrouverais}
\]
\[
\text{la danse}
\]
\[
-\text{déplacement de}
\]
\[
\text{la danse—ici—et}
\]
\[
\text{pas anecdotique.}
\]

(ibid., 94)

For this displacement is, in effect, the primary trait of all of Mallarmé's ballerinas, who function not as individuals but as living metaphors, bodying forth "mille imagintions latentes" (O.C., 307). Without identity or sex, they, like Hérodiade, mime the androgynous fluidity of language, exchanging roles in what Mallarmé calls "le double jeu" or "toute l'aventure de la différence sexuelle" (ibid., 305). By virtue of her spontaneous execution of multiple figures or "pirouettes," the dancer's movements coincide with the practice of a hieroglyphic writing. Although the dancer produces the text, she is also consumed by it. As a linguistic sign, she is inevitably shattered and dispersed
by the disseminating power of language: "... elle ... morte de l'effort à condenser hors d'une libération presque d'elle des sur-sautements attardés décoratifs de cieux, de mer, de soirs, de parfum et d'écume" (O.C., 309).

The same process of creative dissolution emerges in the proliferation and perpetual transformations of the name "Hérodiade." In a letter to Lefebure, Mallarmé reveals his fascination with the poetic resonance of this name:

... la plus belle page de mon œuvre sera celle qui ne contiendra que ce nom divin Hérodiade. Le peu d'inspiration que j'ai eu, je le dois à ce nom ... ce mot sombre et rouge, comme une grenade ouverte, Hérodiade.

(C, 1:157; Mallarmé's italics)

Redramatized by the various semes of this name is "l'ambiguïté d'Hérodiade et de sa danse" (N, 111). Aside from the comment in the Correspondance, this hypothesis finds support in the poet's discussion of the power of proper names in "Les Mots anglais": "Mêlés encore à la Langue, leur sens tient l'imagination en éveil; autrement, incompréhensibles ou anciens, c'est par leur aspect presque bizarre" (O.C., 1041). On page after page of "Les Dieux antiques," Mallarmé points out how the etymologies of the names of mythological figures encapsulate the basic drama of the myth. Proper names are also frequently designated as the inspirational starting point for the elaboration of a poetic text. One sonnet begins with "Mes bouquins refermés sur le nom de Paphos / Il m'amuse d'élire avec le seul génie" (ibid., 76). Equally suggestive is the visual trace of the name's letters: "Hamlet . . ., son nom même affiché exerce sur moi, . . . une fascination, parente de l'angoisse" (ibid., 299).

In his comparison of the signifier "Hérodiade" to a "grenade ouverte," Mallarmé emphasizes the name's generative capacity. A cross-section of a pomegranate offers an image of hundreds of seeds waiting regeneration. Again, what permits the proliferation of the fruit is its ripening, fall, and découpage. It is precisely in this way that language develops and renews itself in "Les Mots anglais": "Soit cette isolation pure et simple du Mot inaltérable, soit cette copulation de plusieurs Mots . . .
tout, jusqu'à disparition même du sens . . . n'est qu'alliage de vie et de mort et double moyen factice et naturel . . . .” (O.C., 1052-53). This cooperation/intermingling of creative and destructive forces in nature is best illustrated by the language of flowers running through several of Mallarmé's essays and poems. In the early poem “Les Fleurs,” it is by means of a floral motif that the name “Hérodiade” is associated with both fertility and death:

L'hyacinthe, le myrte à l'adorable éclair
Et, pareille à la chair de la femme, la rose
Cruelle, Hérodiade en fleur de jardin clair,
Celle qu'un sang farouche et radieux arrose!

(ibid., 34)

In a fragment for Les Noces, a similar language of flowers links the fertility of the heroine's name with artistic productivity:

vierge lourd rehaussant un
La dame au nom fier ombrageant son visage

l'ombre étonné
Comme un casque léger d'impératrice enfant

toujours
D'où pour toute personne il tomberait deux roses

la figurer roses jumelles
(N, 161)

Overburdened with signification, the name signals the impending loss of Hérodiade's virginity. This idea is reinforced by a variant for the passage that reads: "D'où, pour feindre sa joue il tomberait des roses" (ibid., 158). The use of “feindre” (“forger,” “imaginer,” “simuler,” Petit Robert) points up a parallel between the “chute” of the “double fleur” and the production of Art. At the same time, however, the conditional “il tomberait” intimates that the work, like the “vierge violée,” is to remain suspended between desire and its accomplishment.

It is not difficult to demonstrate the haunting repetition of the name “Hérodiade” in the text of Les Noces. In his analysis of the “Ouverture,” Robert Cohn focuses on the contrasting pat-
terns of “roi/roide/froide” (evoking “the hard virile aspect of the virgin:) and the “liquid harmonious r and or” as in “or/rose-arôme.” But the signifying force of this name can be taken even further. What is indeed fascinating about the word “Hérodiade,” for our purposes, is that it reproduces the alternating structure of the text as previously discussed. The feminization of the essentially masculine appellation “Hérode” returns us not only to the question of sexual ambiguity but to the ambivalent relation between child and parent, the self and its mirror image: “Hérode/Hérodias/Hérodiade.”

From the circulation of this “nom épars” and the suspension of the heroine’s dance, we derive a better understanding of what Mallarmé meant by “le pourquoi de la crise.” Both gestures posit a liminality that maximizes the “double game” and deprives the text of any fixed point or center from which to order its meaning. Thus, the problem of self-figuration becomes coextensive with the problem of reference. Accordingly, Hérodiade performs her dance “sans bouger” somewhere between the margins of consciousness and dream:

```
au loin elle se réveille
(rien de tout cela est-il arrivé)

et danse un moment
pour elle seule—afin d’être
à la fois ici là—et que
rien de cela ne soit arrivé

pour la première fois
yeux ouverts—
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(N, 139)