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WHITE SPACE:

Reflections On the Poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé

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HOW CAN ONE APPROACH THE OEUVRE OF STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ, THE FRENCH SYMBOLIST POET NOTORIOUS FOR HIS INDECIPHERABLE WRITINGS? MALLARMÉ WAS IDOLIZED BY HIS GENERATION OF ARTISTS, THOUGH EVEN HIS CONTEMPORARIES OFTEN FOUND THEMSELVES UNABLE TO DISENTANGLE HIS INTRACTABLY COY BUT BRILLIANT POEMS. AS ONE CRITIC NOTED, THE POET'S WORK SEEMS "SUSPENDED IN PERMANENT UNCERTAINTY," AND THE SHEER DENSITY OF WORDPLAY IS ENOUGH TO DISHEARTEN ANY READER. BUT WITH THE HELP OF SEVERAL MODERN CRITICS AND THE GUIDANCE OF MALLARMÉ'S OWN CHARACTER, THE LUSTFUL FAUNE WHO FIGURES IN ONE OF MALLARMÉ'S MOST RECOGNIZABLE PIECES, THE READER MAY DISCOVER AN AVENUE INTO THE MIND OF ONE OF THE MOST MYSTERIOUS AND EXQUISITELY RADIANT POETS WHO EVER DARED TO COMMUNICATE HIS VISION OF BEAUTY.

“No matter how many of his secrets we may uncover, there is always more to learn from Mallarmé.”

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The poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé is renowned for its cognitive brilliance and utter originality, but also notorious for its near total impenetrability. As Hans-Jost Frey notes, perhaps somewhat ironically, “Allusions, vagueness, ambiguity, and uncertainty keep Mallarmé’s text suspended in permanent uncertainty.”ⁱ In the face of this overwhelming enigma, how is it possible to attain an appreciation, much less an understanding, of his poetic genius? Should this even be attempted? Furthermore, if Mallarmé’s poetry is so essentially untranslatable, is it merely an exercise in folly for one not fluent in French to attempt a reading of his poems? All of these obstacles stand in the reader’s way, and they are indeed daunting. Without a keen understanding of French, it is impossible to appreciate fully the poet’s linguistic virtuosity; without a genius greater than that of Mallarmé himself, it is impossible to perceive all of the abstraction, imagination, and cognition present in even a single poem. Yet, even faced with such deterrents, the reader must persevere.

For the occultedness of his poetry is not simply a dissuasion: it is also an invitation. No matter how many of his secrets we may uncover, there is always more to learn from Mallarmé. Each reader begins surrounded by the same cryptic darkness, and although some may progress more quickly than others, all must approach Mallarmé somewhat differently than they would certain other poets. Not with the hope of comprehending, processing, and assimilating his poems, but rather with the hope of sensing the shape of their presence. Even the most limited appreciation, an ever-so-slight peripheral contact with a poem’s moods and thoughts, is an experience of the sublimity of great art. Underneath its hermetic abstraction, the poem also expresses the simple joy of creation; the love of wordplay, ideas, and storytelling; and the pleasure taken in beauty. If the reader too can delight in the poem’s fundamental beauty as a work of art, then he or she will have the first and most important tool with which to begin the exploration.

THE STORY OF THE FAUNE

An excellent place to start is with one of Mallarmé’s most familiar poems (if anything about Mallarmé can be characterized as familiar). Written over the course of ten years, “L’après-midi d’un faune” became one of the most influential works in the poet’s oeuvre. Numerous illustrations, a woodcarving, a sculpture, and even a ballet were all inspired by the story of the Faune. And of course, Debussy’s enchanting prelude, which put to music the adventures of Mallarmé’s mythical creature, must not be forgotten. But more important for our purposes than its fame, one can point, if very covertly, to the presence of what appears to be a recognizable narrative. Whether the narrative is indeed what it seems, or whether it evaporates, like the nymphs, when one gets too close, is a peril that the reader will avoid confronting for the moment. And who could expect other-

wise, particularly when faced with other works by Mallarmé in which merely locating a subject seems a futile struggle in itself? However, the reader must be careful not to cling to this guide with the presumption that the Faune will lead to any answers, but merely to hope that the figure will act as an aperture through which to glimpse one aspect of the text. Frey explains the rationale for the attractiveness of this particular poem as follows: “This is not to say that “L’après-midi d’un faune” can be reduced to a message, only that the discourse of this poem is more closely tied to an object and can therefore be more easily read for content.”ⁱⁱ Now, this “reading for content” may be a detour, or worse a hindrance to further reading, if one expects the content to provide some concrete understanding, or assumes that the narrative of the poem is indeed its primary “content.” Nevertheless, it allows the reader to feel a certain comfort, which encourages him to continue investigating the poem. So then let us turn to the poem itself.

To begin: the Faune wakes up on a hot afternoon, his mind filled with the thought of rosy nymphs. But he wonders if the nymphs were real, or merely a dream. He describes his doubt as the branches of a tree, diverging outward into innumerable uncertainties. Real trees surround him, which makes him doubt the nymphs’ existence. In other words, his memory of the nymphs occurs in a forest setting.ⁱⁱⁱ He sees that the forest setting does exist, and remains the same, but the nymphs have disappeared; thus he suspects that they were merely a dream against the real backdrop of the forest. He recalls two nymphs, one “more chaste” with “blue eyes...like a weeping spring” another in contrast, “all sighs...like a day-breeze warm upon [his] fleece.” But again, the vivid memory is contradicted by his surroundings: there is “no water,” no weeping spring, nor is there any real wind. Instead, the notes of his music mimic the sound of water, and the breath “exhale[d] from the twin-pipes” mimics the feeling of wind. But this breath is “the visible and serene artificial breath of inspiration.” Artificiality and its association with art is an extremely important theme to which we will soon return, but for now we listen to the Faune as he recounts his encounter with the nymphs.

On the banks of a river, he is cutting reeds for his flute, when he notices an “animal whiteness” undulating in the distance. Looking more closely, he sees that they are not swans, as he first suspected, but Naiades (or water nymphs). Frightened by the sound of his flute, the nymphs flee or dive into the water: the Faune cannot tell which. It must be noted that these sections, in which the Faune relates his memory of the nymphs, are set off in italics to designate their status as a past occurrence, although this distinction does not remain entirely unambiguous. Breaking off his story, he reminds us again that his natural surroundings are “inert” and have taken no notice of the nymphs. Following this description, the imagery becomes abstracted to such an extent that it becomes difficult to explain in such a way as this summation aims. A rather inadequate paraphrase is that the Faune renounces music and attempts to recapture the nymphs through speech; he is “going to talk at length.” Empty grape skins are then described, and the Faune, “puffing into these luminous skins...[gazes] through them till evening.” In an attempt to adhere to summary, the simplest interpretation of this passage is as a metaphor for the nymphs, whose presence is like the “bright juice of the grapes,” which the Faune has “sucked” out. Taking these “empty hulls,” he will “raise [them] to the summer sky,” and with his words, inflate the “luminous skins.” Despite the absence of the nymphs, he embellishes his memories with language, makes them beautiful, and continues his story.

Searching for the vanished nymphs, he finds them among the reeds and rushes up to them. They lay “at my feet, entwined,” at which point the Faune “[seizes] them, not untangling them, and [runs] to this clump...of roses.” In the clearing, he attempts to ravish both nymphs. But to do this, he must separate them, and in doing so precipitates his ruin. “My crime is, gay at vanquishing their traitress/-fears, to have parted the disheveled tangle/of kisses that the gods kept so well mingled.” Separation leads to a necessity for decision, and the Faune cannot decide. While kissing one nymph, he holds the other “with only a finger,” in an attempt to have both nymphs separately. But this is an impos-



sibility; because the Faune has separated them but cannot choose one, both escape.

The Faune is left alone, in a frenzy of rage, and he ventures to “embrace the queen!” of love herself, Venus. But even as this thought forms, the Faune allows it to fade away. He is “empty of words now and the body numbed.” In the last stanza, the Faune lays on the sand and returns to sleep.

Reflecting on this sequence of events, it becomes clear how fragile the narrative is. Nothing is resolved, and there is little that actually “happens.” The Faune is left without the nymphs and never discerns their reality; he fails even to be changed by the experience. At the end of the poem, he goes back to sleep, just as if he had never awoken.

THE POETRY OF UNDECIDABILITY

This sense of utter irresolution is what Hans-Jost Frey terms the “undecidability” of texts in his enlightening essay on Mallarmé and “L’après-midi d’un faune”. He speaks first about the referential illusion of language, which, though difficult to explain, seems an essential conceit in an attempt to further comprehend Mallarmé. According to Frey, “the referential illusion is the assumption that whatever is expressed has some extralinguistic correspondence.”^{iv} That is to say, words alone cannot verify the existence of that to which they refer. The word chair is not itself a chair. Discourse about a chair cannot, in and of itself, confirm the existence or any physical attributes of the actual chair. More words cannot confirm that the word chair actually corresponds to a particular chair. Certainly, the words can be confirmed by other senses such as sight, smell, or touch, but the words themselves are never more than letters that have become an accepted convention. Another, more frightening, example of the activity of the referential illusion is the linguistic possibility for lying; a speaker can fabricate or contradict reality, which exposes the extent to which language need not correspond to reality.

The illusion becomes more significant when we move out of the realm of simple objects in physical reality, and towards a discourse of actions and ideas. Denial of the refer-

ential illusion “[degrades language] to an available means” of communication, treating language as a dead object, which serves merely as an inert tool for any speaker who may choose to wield it. This denial ignores the power of language to be more than simply an instrument of physical reality, and it attempts to separate the expression of the thing which is being expressed from the language that expresses it. In short, the referential illusion attempts to deny that “expression cannot be separated from its being expressed.”^v

On the other hand, the very terror of the referential illusion is that it may in fact be possible that language does have extralinguistic correspondence. At times, language can indeed communicate information, refer directly to physical reality, and precipitate change in the physical world. “It is therefore impossible to come to grips with the referential illusion by asserting a lack of referentiality. The realization that texts are undecidable is the only solution.”^{vi} Why is the text undecidable?

To answer this question, we must return to the fundamental alternatives that compose the referential illusion: either language is a tool of and dependent upon the reality that makes use of it, or language has no correspondence to anything outside itself, and is merely discourse. But the very nature of language is that it is simultaneously both; one cannot choose between the two alternatives, and thus language is undecidable. Its extralinguistic referentiality is uncertain. As Hans-Jost Frey demonstrates, literature is the discourse of undecidability.

Unlike informative communication, which “always attempts to suppress language in favor of what it can convey,” literature “is created when we realize that information is dependent upon language.”^{vii} The task of literature is to expose the referential illusion, to “question the fact that what is expressed is always taken seriously.”^{viii} Mallarmé’s poetry is the poetry of this kind of literature, the poetry of undecidability. As a text that refuses to decide itself, it is a text obsessed with the “simultaneity of meaning.”^{ix} Not only do Mallarmé’s poems refuse to decide among alternatives, they frequently refuse even to delineate specific alterna-

tives. His texts are purposefully vague, and “a list of possibilities would destroy the many possibilities of vagueness.”^x A list would be a sequence of alternatives, and an “essential part of the ambiguous text is lost in the transformation of the simultaneous to the sequential.”^{xi} An example of this refusal occurs immediately in “L’après-midi d’un faune”:

*“Réfléchissons...
ou si les femmes dont tu gloses
Figurent un souhait de tes sens fabuleux !
“Let’s think it over...
or if those girls you explain
be but an itching in your
fabulous brain!”^x*

The clause “ou si les femmes...” begins with “ou,” which indicates a choice between two alternatives. There is one alternative after the “ou,” but before the conjunction where the first alternative should be situated, there is blank space, a white space.

White is used unexpectedly in Mallarmé’s poetry; often, it represents an emptiness, an abyss, which is traditionally signified by black. But for a writer, white is perfectly appropriate as the color of uncertainty. Referential illusion destroys the certainty of language, which clearly unsettles the poet, and the illusion also suggests a metaphysical uncertainty about the nature of reality and human communication. Language nevertheless attempts to overcome this uncertainty and persists in efforts at communication. Language, for the poet, is writing: black text on a white page. A white page evokes uncertainty: the impossibility and the failure of communication.

Edouard Manet’s famous portrait of Mallarmé is particularly admirable in associating the color white with Mallarmé. Upon examining the painting, one notices that the page to which Mallarmé holds his pen remains blank, white and unmarked. Furthermore, his eyes do not seem to be looking at the page, nor even both in the same direction. One eye appears directed toward the smoke issuing from

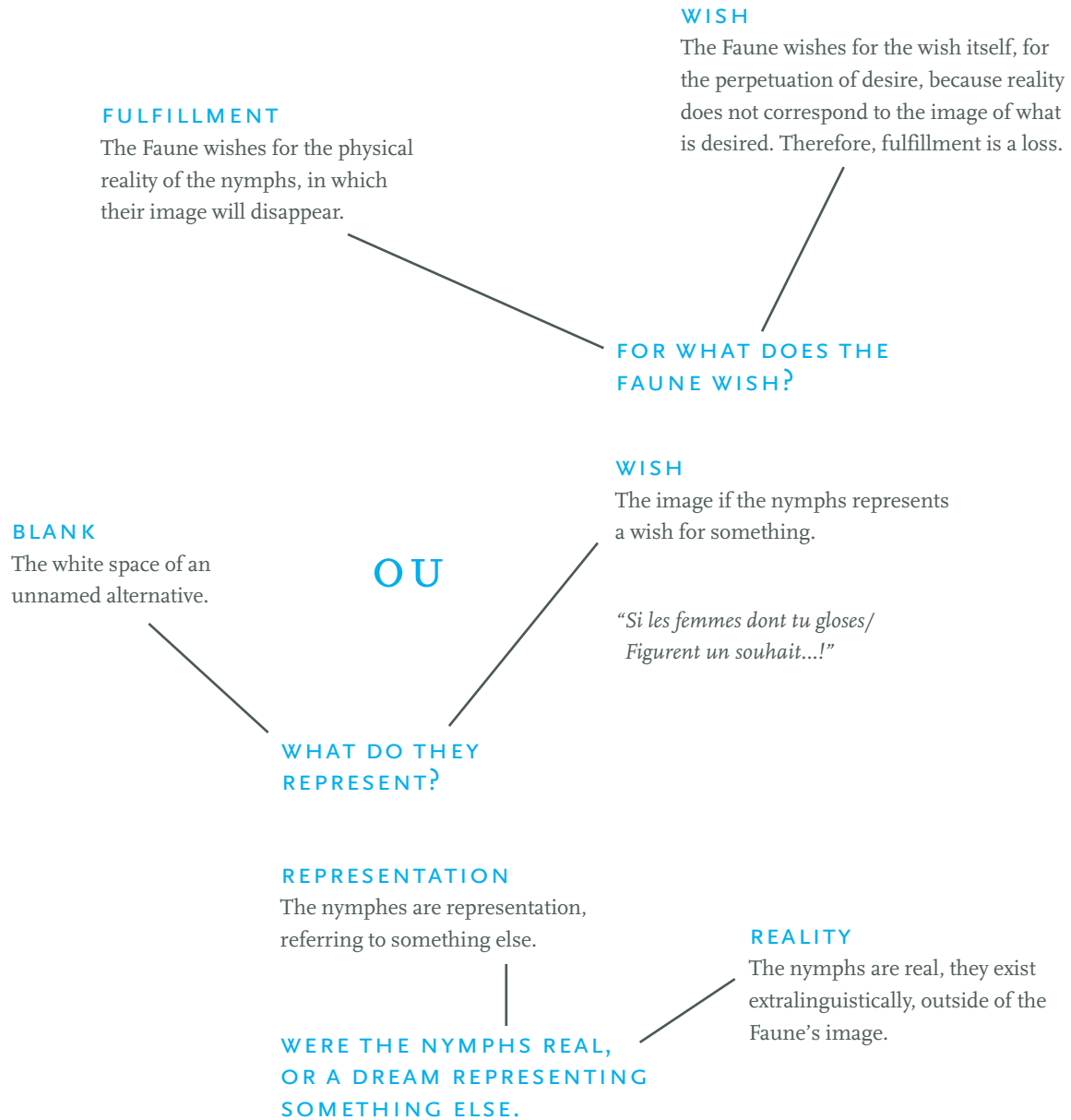
the poet’s cigar, which is a delightful way of implying that the intangibility of the escaping smoke has as much to do with the peculiar quality of Mallarmé poetry as does the page upon which he has not yet written. The other eye seems to be looking into the distance, into nothingness, and indeed, the poet is able to see something that we cannot.

This white page is not only a symbol of uncertainty, it is also active — it fights against the words written upon it. For even when the poet does manage to take up his pen and write, to speak against the void, the white may encroach upon the poem as it does in the above stanza. The writer is never permitted to forget that his work remains unconfirmed, and that while language cannot merge with extralinguistic reality, it also cannot escape extralinguistic correspondence. This uncertainty of language is embodied in the Faune, who cannot choose between art and reality.

EMBODYING DOUBT

As Frey explains, the Faune turns the nymphs into language so that they acquire meaning, because for the Faune beauty and significance are found in art, and poetry is the art of language. He “does not love them as they are, but as the image he has created.” Yet this transformation, the acquisition of meaning, is the very cause of his loneliness. “The person for whom the other is what he means, does not relate to the other in his otherness. He transforms the other into a language of his own, with which he then remains alone.”^{xii} Because he transforms the nymphs into his language, his love ceases to have extralinguistic correspondence regardless of whether the nymphs are real, and his creation of images replaces the actual nymphs. As Frey suggests, “The Faune is trapped in language, because on the one hand he tries to go beyond language in order to achieve what he does not have in it, and on the other hand he must stay in language in order not to lose what he cannot find outside it,” which is significance. Language imparts significance, but in doing so, effaces reality.

So what, then, does the Faune really want? Does he want the real nymphs, who are meaningless without language, or



does he desire his own image of the nymphs, which precludes their physical presence? The Faune's own language enacts the conflict:

*“Ces nymphes, je les veux perpétuer.
“I would perpetuate these nymphs.”*

First, *perpétuer* is the last word of the construction. Without it, the sentence would read, “Ces nymphes, je les veux,” which is an unequivocal desire. But with the late addition of the word, the Faune now wishes to perpetuate them, no longer a simple want. What is it that the Faune wants to perpetuate? If the Faune wants the nymphs to stay with him longer, then perpetuate is a strange word to use in association with presence. Perhaps what he wants to perpetuate is something else entirely, such as his image of them or his desire for them.

Second, within the word *perpétuer* is contained the word *tuer*, “to kill.” There is a sense in which the perpetuation is a death, which would certainly reinforce the reading that construes art and reality as mutually exclusive. To illustrate the doubt surrounding the Faune, Frey has constructed the Tree of Doubt (see attached Figure A). The Tree illustrates the several levels of doubt regarding the nymphs, of whom not only the existential reality is questioned, but also their significance to the Faune. What is it that he truly wants? He himself does not know, and in fact it seems unlikely that the Faune is aware of the depth of the conflict.

One of the most fabulous aspects of the character of the Faune is that not only does he have doubt, he is doubt. He enacts the very undecidability of the poem. He is wonderful in his denial of the irreconcilability of reality and art: “He refuses to recognize the disappearance of presence in connection with the turning into language.”^{xiii} Stubbornly, he persists in the attempt to have both art and sensuality. The poem reminds him of this conflict, but with tragic hilarity, it undermines him through his own speech: when describing the hot afternoon, the “tawny hour” in which “all things burn,” he describes the natural scenery as “inerte.” Frey points out that, “Etymologically, *inerte* means the absence of art, and is here used as a direct negation of art to illustrate

the irreconcilability of the Faune's art and surrounding nature.”^{xiv} The inert quality of nature is prefigured when the Faune describes how “the illusion escapes from the blue eyes/and cold of the more chaste, like a weeping spring.”^{xv} Nature is embodied in the coldness of this nymph, who rejects illusion with her tears, analogous to a natural spring, like the stream into which the real nymphs disappear.

Later, when he has separated the two nymphs and is attempting to ravish the “sister who burned,” who represents the allure of art, he also tries to maintain his grip on “the little one” (“the more chaste”), who again represents the tangible world of Nature. But because he has separated their necessarily intermingled state, and then tried to possess each one individually, both escape.

At a certain moment in the poem, he does appear to succeed in transforming his language into reality. For this moment, the chronology of the poem is interrupted in a way reminiscent of the myth of Pan. In the italicized stanza that begins, “*Mon œil, trouant les joncs...*” the Faune seizes the nymphs and brings them to a clearing. As he is recalling the sight of the nymphs, he forgets that he is recounting the past and begins to relive the memory. Whereas the italics stop twelve lines later, the Faune continues to experience the passion aroused by the nymphs: “I adore you, anger of virgins, O fierce delight/of the sacred naked burden that slips to flee/the fiery drinking of my lips, like the crack/of lightning!”^{xvi} He has succeeded in merging the sensuality of the past with the artistic language of the present, but when the italics begin again, all is lost. The first phrase of the next italicized stanza begins with “*Mon crime, c'est...*”, and this first verb is in the present tense, again confusing present with the past. But this confusion must soon end, for the nymphs escape, and the Faune is left alone.

Alone, what is the Faune? Importantly, he is a creature of legend: half-animal, half-myth, “a mixed being suspended between nonlinguistic nature and human spirituality.”^{xvii} The tremendous power of the figure of the Faune as narrator, his own doubt and unawareness, and his very nature suddenly become clear. The Faune is like the reader, in the

way that he is outside the meaning of the text in the sense of not encompassing it. But he is astonishing in that he is also part of the meaning by acting as an expression of the metaphor of his own doubt, which he does not understand. Ironically, the Faune embodies the very abstraction which plagues him, suggesting the inescapability of the linguistic dilemma.

How does the Faune react to his position, trapped in language, his desires uncertain and inaccessible? He tells us in the last stanza: “On the thirsty sand, forgetful of/the outrage, I must sleep, and as I love/open my mouth to the powerful star of wine!”^{xviii} The Faune sleeps, returning the world of dreams, drinking the wine of illusion and inspiration, but lying atop the earth itself. Nothing is resolved, and yet we are left with a sense of unity in the very undecidability and ambiguity of the Faune’s lack of decision. In a certain sense, the poem ends where it began, and the middle text is simply a digression from the Faune’s dreaming.

DERRIDA AND THE QUESTION OF LITERATURE

This irresolution is characteristic of Mallarmé, frequently to the frustration of one attempting a reading. Hans-Jost Frey has provided a superlative reading, but there are certainly others. One in particular, the *Double Séance* of Jacques Derrida surpasses any other reading in its sheer evocation of the Mallarméan simultaneity of lucid perspicacity and total impenetrability. The *Double Séance* is not related to “L’après-midi d’un faune” in particular, but is rather a reflection upon Mallarmé (among other topics) through the medium of a particular text. This text addresses some of the same subjects as Frey, but its remarkable eloquence and form distinguish it from simple commentary.

Because of the text’s resemblance to Mallarmé’s own work, and because of Derrida’s own inimitable cognitive gymnastics, it does not support a gloss; the explanation becomes a redaction, and the essentials of the text are lost. Nonetheless, the *Double Séance* is fascinating enough that even a superficial discussion is worthwhile.

Derrida considers two primary texts: a dialogue between Socrates and Protarchus on the subject of the soul, and a text by Mallarmé entitled “Mimique.” The first page proposes the question “what is literature?” and although the question is nearly dismissed before it has even been asked, and any subsequent attempt to answer is immediately undermined, it is useful to keep the question in mind for the present discussion. Derrida’s central metaphor in the text is the hymen, and his central image is the Mime.

What is the activity of the Mime? Simply speaking, he mimics (imitates) reality. But the mime in Mallarmé’s text (for example) the “ever original” PIERROT MUDERER OF HIS WIFE, does not enact a reality that has happened, is happening, or that he expects to happen. He is referring to an event that does not and will not exist. However, that is not to say that the Mime exists without correspondence to reality. His gestures are consciously imitative, not meant to be actions themselves, but rather to imitate action. He is not the “empty signifier” pointing to reality, nor is he the “full signified” of reality itself. He is between these things, he is ENTRE, in the cave, the ANTRE, in which, if we recall, our friend Pan chose to reside. The Mime is situated between the emptiness of pure language and the inertness of simple reality. He represents the ENTRE of Mallarmé, the ENTRE DE Mallarmé, the ENTRE-DEUX, BETWEEN-TWO. He is the hymen.

The activity of the Mime is the activity of literature, a point we must dwell on for a moment. Like the Mime, fiction mimics reality. A narrative tells the story of a reality, but the story of a reality that does not and never will exist; it gestures toward an empty reality. Raskolnikov never murdered the old pawnbroker and he never will, because outside of *Crime and Punishment* the character of Raskolnikov does not exist. And yet the book does not claim to be reality itself; empty and nonexistent though the reality toward which it gestures may be, literature is never independent of this reality. It still makes this gesture, pointing away from itself toward something of which it is merely a representation. ^{xix}

Literature points toward reality without ever becoming reality. In this way, like the Mime, it “is confined to a perpetual allusion without breaking the mirror.” This perpetual allusion is intimately related, if not precisely analogous, to the metaphor of the hymen. Literature, the Mime, and Mallarmé’s poetry all enact this hymen.

When the hymen is intact, a woman is a virgin, and thus there is desire. When the hymen is broken, there is fulfillment, and desire is eradicated. Outside the body, there is no hymen, but inside the body, when penetration has occurred, neither is there a hymen. Restraint is the state of desire, penetration is the state of pleasure. In neither event is the hymen active, or “taking place.” As Derrida puts it so charmingly, “The hymen only takes place when it doesn’t take place, when nothing *really* happens.”^{xx} That is, the hymen itself acts in the non-existent space between restraint and penetration, between outside and inside, or as the analogy can be employed, between language and reality. This nonexistent space is actually the union of the two opposites, the two antitheticals of pure art and inert reality. The Mime reflects both, but is neither; so too does the “pure medium” of fiction.

Mallarmé’s poetry is similar, in that it reflects some non-existent but corresponding reality, which one could term the void, the abyss, or any number of signifiers. Immaculate white evinces the flawless clarity of undecidability that so characterizes the poetry of Mallarmé. And indeed, there is a masterful beauty in this double reflection, in sitting back and simply watching the Mime perform, taking pleasure in his art and in the joy of the creative act of fiction.

ENDNOTES

i Frey (48)

ii Frey (31)

iii It should be noted that although the terminology of memory will be used to describe the Faune’s encounter with the nymphs, this designation is misleading, and used only for the purpose of consistently distinguishing the fact of his memory from the question of whether the memory is a dream. That is to say, it is not in doubt that the Faune has a memory of (or rather, a feeling about) the nymphs; it is in doubt whether he is remembering a dream or remembering a real encounter.

However, the terminology of memory is in itself too specific; a word such as vision or image or emotion is more properly vague, because the precise nature of the Faune’s relationship with the nymphs is itself in doubt as much as their reality. A designation such as memory removes the doubt that is so central to the poem, but it is accompanied by such past-tense terminology (for example, the Faune recalls the nymphs) as aides in describing the action of the poem with a certain amount of necessary clarity.

iv Frey (8)

v Frey (7)

vi Frey (9)

vii Frey (13)

viii Frey (13)

ix Frey (13)

x Selected Poems (47)

xi Frey (34)

xii Frey (37)

xiii Frey (38)

xiv Selected Poems (47)

xv Selected Poems (51)

xvi Frey (46)

xvii Selected Poems (55)

xviii v. Derrida.

xix Derrida (213)

xx Derrida (213)

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