Mallarmé, or: Active Negation

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- 1 As a major late 19th century reference, Charles Baudelaire seems to have more or less vanished from the imaginary museum of 20th century artists. Stéphane Mallarmé, on the other hand, seems, with hindsight, like *the* obligatory path of modern and contemporary thinking. This ubiquity has its very own history. From the discovery of *Le Coup de dés* by Thibaudet in the early 20th century to the mythographic discovery of *Le Livre* in the 1950s. A not inconsiderable share of modern creative activity has been defined through the way Mallarmé has been received. From Arp's random collages to Broodthaers' literary assemblies.
- 2 The philosopher and aesthetician Pierre-Henry Frangne devotes a dense and searching essay to French Symbolism.
- 3 Taking the body of philosophical writings which fuelled the Symbolist nebula since the 1860s, the author lays down the terms of an intellectual radicalism which has been nurtured, in a disorderly way, by the generation war, and a state of social crisis rendered even more acute by the questioning of whole swathes of knowledge, and people's certainties. The story is well-known. The rise of various forms of individualism lent

Symbolism its complexity—starting with its resistance to any kind of unambiguous definition. The essay's merit lies elsewhere: in the determination to freeze in a philosophical yonder what we might describe as symbolist consciousness. Where Schopenhauer meets neo-Platonism, Mallarmé sets the course and dictates his redefinition of the work as something going beyond poetry and philosophy. A Symbolism is thus outlined that is less academically oriented towards mythology, but on the other hand sensitive to the back-to-source operation to which the call to myth extends an invitation. The symbol—without which there can be no Symbolism—changes shape. It frees itself from the fixedness of the sign and conveys, intaglio-like so to speak, the assertion of a central nothingness. P-H. Franghe thus directs his aesthetics of Symbolism towards a philosophy of negativity. The essay's essential contribution lies in a reversal of values which breaks with the prospect of decadentism still laid claim to by the most reactionary fringe of contemporary criticism. It is replaced by a line of thinking which works through purification to the point where it achieves abstraction. And the vocabulary of art history links up with the vocabulary of philosophy to underwrite the main revolution in artistic language in the 20th century, set on the pedestal of a negative ontology. An active and radiating void.

- 4 Frangne deduces from Mallarmé's poetics the crux of the break that would gain acceptance through the historical avant-gardes. In a shrewd and scholarly way, his study deals with the central themes of the Symbolist culture: silence and beauty, narcissistic absorption, myths and religions, spiritualism and the death of art. The crisis of art changes into the art of crisis. A decisive shift for 20th century modernity.
- 5 Responding to other limitations—a book going hand-in-hand, not to say page-in-page, with an exhibition held in Nantes—the essay by Jean-François Chevrier earmarks a predominant place for the image which Frangne's book broached at a theoretical level without really challenging its outstanding tangible quality.
- 6 In J-F. Chevrier's eyes, the Tournon crisis undergone by Mallarmé represents the opening act based on which poetry would turn into cultural criticism. Under the aegis of "restricted action" an economy of the image is outlined, which comes across as thought in action. Following these images gathered one by one, Chevrier lends the discourse a slight tremor which aims at perpetually exceeding the drawn-up value of meaning. Brought back to the work of Odilon Redon, there is a gain in both suggestion and mystery. In writing too. The excellent text explores this work of linguistic disintegration—in a parallel which joins poetry and painting together—to the point of atomization.
- 7 At the hub of the critical apparatus, the notion of mystery links together the artistic revolutions of the 20th century—from Symbolism to Surrealism, and from abstraction to conceptualism—while at the same time committing its legality to obscurity. This "something occult deep within us" jostles classical outlooks and turns the work into a place of emergence: collage, drawing linked with writing, and photography all refer to one and the same origin. A dynamic issuing from the luminous weave of ink—looming from that inkstand, which Mallarmé described as "crystal as conscience", and from spotless paper corresponds to the history of painting. Needless to say, the idea might seem at times forced if not excessive. But the panoramic and multi-disciplinary dimension of the exercise called for a certain radicalness. Chevrier has thus achieved the feat of rethinking Cubism in the light of Mallarmé. And in his wake he revisits the linguistic revolution brought about by the historical avant-gardes. In a probably more decisive way, the essay comes up with a new reading of the utopian foundation of these

same avant-gardes. As the author stresses, “Mallarmé’s strength is that he understood that art is a twofold process: an idealization of perceptible things materialized in language”.

- 8 Jacques Rancière has borrowed a text initially planned for the Broodthaers retrospective held in the Palais des beaux-arts in Brussels a few years back, and has now published *L'Espace des mots*. This lively if at times hermetic essay offers an essential interpretation of the bond linking Marcel Broodthaers with Mallarmé’s thinking. The argument is significant. Basing his stance on “the literary exhibition around Mallarmé” put on by Broodthaers in 1968, and focused on the potential provided by *Le Coup de dés*, the philosopher joins forces with the art historian. Like this latter, Broodthaers found a model in Mallarmé. Not in poetry or literature, but for developing a poetics with means other than those of the man of letters. He does not draw the line at the historical process, but the author does put forward the principle which led Broodthaers to draw from the so-called “visual” arts a forum of exchange between forms of expression released from their specificity. But where Mallarmé sketched out a new horizon, Broodthaers consummated its impossibility. An historical trajectory came full circle between 1898 to 1968. By mutually cancelling one another, words and images create a new reality: the reality of our mirrored future development. A labour of questioning which each one of the three essays brought together here has thrown into relief, and on the basis of which it behoves us to reinvent our immediate past.