MUSIC AND POETRY IN MALLARMÉ AND DEBUSSY

by

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation re-evaluates music and poetry in the works of Claude Debussy and Stéphane Mallarmé. Often in such collaborations, critics assume that the music mimics various aspects of the texts it engages. Instead, I argue for a more nuanced paradigm that values both concurrences and antagonisms between the two media, in light of the specific systems of thought characterizing, respectively, the poet and the musician.

Chapter One re-evaluates the role of music in Mallarmé's œuvre. Mallarmé imagined an original language in which individual phonemes created the meaning of words. As languages evolved and multiplied, the sound-sense relationship in words became increasingly arbitrary. Traces of this original language are visible in contemporary idioms when a group of words share both a phonemic and a semantic link. For him, poetry exists to reconstruct sound-sense relationships in modern language. These relationships, and the patterns of thought they enact, are music for Mallarmé, a music which the sound of instruments and singers merely implies. Drawing evidence from Mallarmé's letters and critical writings, I establish the "musical" nature of his language and show its use in analyses of selected poems.

In the remaining chapters I examine each of Debussy's compositions that engage a Mallarmé text: the songs Apparition, Soupir, Placet futile, Éventail, and the Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune. I chronicle Debussy's early exposure to Mallarmé's poetry through Verlaine's essay "Les poètes maudits" and the song Apparition that resulted. Here, Debussy responds to the semantic content of Mallarmé's poem, constructing a musical "apparition" to parallel the poetic one. I offer a new reading of Prélude that relates it to Mallarmé's dramatic theories, and not as a mimetic illustration of the poem's text. I argue that Debussy's later song settings allow Mallarmé's poetic "music" to be perceived alongside his own. In Soupir, this is manifested through a series of mirror images in both music and text. In Placet futile, I show how the music
alters the semantic message of the poem. In Eventail, I compare the interaction of whole tone, octatonic and diatonic pitch collections to the interaction between the phonetic and semantic layers of the poem.
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Throughout the dissertation, quotations from Mallarmé’s letters and critical essays are given in translations in the body of the text, while the original French is given in footnotes. The translations of the critical prose are my own. Given the difficulty of the prose, my translations are not meant to be artistic. They sometimes violate the syntax of the original in the service of clarifying the point I wish to make. Wherever possible, I have compared my translations to those published by others, in particular the translation of letters by Rosemary Lloyd and the translations/commentaries of the critical prose by Robert Greer Cohn. When they have been particularly influenced by (or where my interpretations depart significantly from) these sources, an acknowledgement is given in the notes. What is lost in translation by adopting this strategy is, I hope, counterbalanced by greater clarity. For the poetry, however, I have placed my translations beside the original text in the body of the paper. These translations are literal rather than poetic. They strive to match the grammar and syntax of the original without trying to approximate its prosody, since the phonetic aspects of Mallarmé’s poetry that I discuss are truly untranslatable. I have followed the same procedures with quotations from Debussy, even though the language is not often difficult. For the titles of the poems and essays, I follow the somewhat idiosyncratic capitalization scheme of Marchal’s Œuvres complètes.

In the chapters that trace the interaction of Mallarmé’s poetry and Debussy’s music, a problem exists in the fact that two separate artworks are known by a single title. Therefore, throughout the dissertation, I have chosen to give all of the titles of Mallarmé’s poems in quotation marks, while rendering all of Debussy’s composition titles in italics. The only exception in this regard is Un coup de dés, which stands so far beyond any of Mallarmé’s previously published poems in complexity and ambition that it deserves this distinction. While
this scheme of quotation marks and italics is not entirely conventional, I hope that it will minimize confusion in distinguishing the poet’s work from the composer’s.

The scores for the songs in the Appendices are all prepared from the original published editions (1913 for Soupir, Placet futile and Éventail; 1926 for Apparition). They are included here because they may not be readily available in smaller libraries or previously published compilations of Debussy’s songs. I have made some editorial changes, mostly of a practical nature, clarifying the distribution of notes between the hands and removing or placing in parentheses numerous redundant accidentals. When these songs are finally published in the forthcoming Debussy critical edition, the reader is advised to consult those instead.
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For Emily
INTRODUCTION

Music and poetry are two songs that search in vain to accord with one another, and even in the very rare cases where they are in accord, have the effect of a bad pun.¹

Debussy, Letter to Pierre Louys, 10 April, 1895

This is not the kind of epigraph one usually finds introducing a discussion on music and poetry. It is one that is especially surprising from the pen of Claude Debussy (1862–1918), a composer whose debt to the poetry of the Symbolist movement has been so firmly ensconced in conventional wisdom that it hardly receives any critical reflection these days. A more typical epigraph would have been Walter Pater’s dictum that “all art aspires to the condition of music” or Paul Verlaine’s “de la musique avant toute chose,” or even an appeal to the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk; something that really plays up the happy concordance of the arts in the French fin-de-siècle. Yet I begin here because I think that Debussy has hit upon something important about the relationship between music and poetry, something that has gone largely overlooked both in Debussy’s case in particular, and in music-and-text relationships in general. This is the tension between music and language, a tension that gets progressively more intense as the two arts are brought into closer contact.² On one hand, there is a genuine desire in song to find an expressive resonance between the music and the text. Yet, at the same time, there is the fear that, if pushed too far, this resonance becomes mere imitation; that the music loses itself in the process. It is this mutual attraction and its concomitant anxiety, more than a happy

¹ Debussy, Correspondence, ed. François Lesure and Denis Herlin (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2005), 249: “D’ailleurs, la musique et les vers, c’est deux chansons qui cherchent vainement à s’accorder, même dans les cas très rare où cela s’accorde, ça fait l’effet d’un mauvais calembour.” Subsequent references to Debussy’s correspondence shall use the abbreviation Corr.

² Lawrence Kramer is one of the few scholars to give significant attention to the complexities of the music and text relationship in song. See Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).
concordance of the two arts, that characterizes the relationship between music and poetry in the French fin-de-siècle in general and Debussy’s œuvre in particular.

By 1895, when Debussy wrote the letter quoted above, he had already composed well over 60 songs (more than two-thirds of his total output) and substantial portions of two operas, the abandoned Rodrigue et Chimène and Pelléas et Mélisande, as well as the prize cantatas written for the Prix de Rome competitions. He had set a considerable number of poems by some of the most important French poets of the recent past, including Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Théodore de Banville, a prominent Parnassian poet. The vast majority of his instrumental music, including the most important pieces (save the Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune) was yet to be written. The remaining years of Debussy’s life would see an increasing inability to complete vocal works, an affliction from which his instrumental works seem relatively immune. Among the projects contemplated but abandoned, notable examples include dramatic projects on texts by various prominent writers: Cendrelune (Pierre Louys, 1895–8), Les uns et les autres (Verlaine, 1896), Comme il vous plaîra (Shakespeare, 1902–4), L’histoire de Tristan (Gabriel Mourey, 1907–9), Orphée-roi (Victor Segalen, 1907–9), Siddartha (Segalen, 1907–10) and Crimen Amoris (Verlaine, 1914). The two major opera projects on Poe texts, Le diable dans le beffroi and La chute de la maison Usher both remained unfinished at Debussy’s death. His inability to complete these works in particular, which he had contemplated for at least 25 years, speaks to an increasing difficulty he had in finding a suitable music to set alongside these texts.

Why would a composer who had been writing music in response to poetic texts for the bulk of his early career hold such a dim view of the possibility that music and text could or even should be in mutual accord? And why would his output, which until that point had consisted almost entirely of vocal music, shift to include an increasing number of instrumental
works that refer to text only obliquely, if at all? The answer, I think, involves Debussy’s growing awareness of the complexities of music and text relationships, and the increasing pressure he put on himself to make his musical responses reflect this situation.

Tensions between music and poetry characterize Debussy’s later writings. His choice of blank verse or a kind of rhythmical prose in his own texts for *Proses lyriques* (1895) was motivated by a belief that prose was more suitable than verse for settings as song. The preference was not aesthetic, but practical: he simply found prose more amenable to, or at least less resistant to, the kind of music he wanted to write than poetry. Debussy held this view, more or less intact, for the rest of his life. Fifteen years later, responding to an enquête by Ferdinand Divoire, he lays out his ideas on the subject:

[I think] that musicians who understand nothing about poetry should not set it to music. They can only spoil it.... Truly beautiful poems, we must not exaggerate, there are not many of these. Who writes them these days? But when one does find them, it is better not to meddle with them. Henri de Regnier, who writes full, classic poetry, may not be set to music. And can you envision music setting the verse of Racine or Corneille? ... Real poetry has its own rhythm, which is rather difficult for us [to set musically]. ... It is very difficult to follow well, to “veneer” the rhythms while still preserving one’s inspiration. If one fabricates, if one is content with a work of juxtaposition [of the two arts], evidently this is not difficult, but then it is not worth the trouble.

Two things emerge from this passage. The first is that a composer must understand the poetry that he intends to set. In support of this point, Debussy singles out Schumann’s settings of Heine that, in his opinion, fail to capture the inherent irony of the texts, a quality related mostly to the semantic dimension of the poems. The second and possibly more important point to emerge from the passage deals with the sonorous elements of poetry. For Debussy, it is the rhythm of the poetry—the materiality of its words, the way that they sound—rather than

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4 Debussy, *Monsieur Croche et autres écrits*, ed. François Lesure (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), 206-07: "…les musiciens qui ne comprennent rien aux vers ne devraient pas en mettre en musique. Ils ne peuvent que les gâcher... Les vrais beaux vers, il ne faut pas exagérer, il n’y en a pas tant que ça. Qui en fait aujourd’hui? Mais quand il s’en trouve, il vaut mieux ne pas y toucher. Henri de Régnier, qui fait des vers pleins, classiques, ne peut pas être mis en musique. Et voyez-vous de la musique sur des vers de Racine ou de Corneille ?... Les vrais vers ont un rythme propre qui est plutôt gênant pour nous.... c’est très difficile de suivre bien, de « plaquer » les rythmes tout en gardant une inspiration. Si on fait de la fabrication, si on se contente d’un travail de juxtaposition, évidemment ce n’est pas difficile, mais alors ce n’est pas la peine.”
simply their meaning that is the most difficult element of verse to set as music. By rhythm, of course, Debussy means much more than just the poem’s meter, but also the rhythm created by rhyme that operates inside the verses themselves. The difficulty comes in creating a counterpoint of music and poetry that both allows the original sonorous material of the poem to speak and preserves the inspiration of the composer. This suggests that in song, for Debussy at least, the music should not follow the poem too closely for fear of becoming its mimetic echo, a “bad pun” of the poetic text. Likewise, the music cannot simply be unrelated to the poem, a “juxtaposition” of the two arts. Instead, Debussy seems to argue for an interactive model of music and text relationships in which the music and the poem read across one another, configure and reconfigure their shared space. This model maintains a certain level of independence for both art forms and, in the process, creates a “polyphonic” set of meanings for the work: the poet’s, the composer’s, and that of the work itself, whose total significance resides at the intersection of these two strands of meaning.

The relationship that Debussy advocates between music and poetry in this and other late essays shows a different side of his aesthetic than the image of the composer as erstwhile symbolist poet that some studies have tried to put forward. It seems no coincidence that the increase in instrumental music and Debussy’s struggle to complete various texted works later in his career both follow a period of relatively close personal contact with many members of the Parisian literary milieu, and with the poetry and aesthetic of Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898) in particular.

DEBUSSY’S RELATIONSHIP WITH MALLARMÉ

The reasons why Debussy chose to direct his creative efforts more consciously towards instrumental music around 1895 were never definitively stated by the composer. Certainly, the
difficulties he experienced during the composition of Pelléas et Mélisande played a role in this, as did the surprising popularity of the Prélude à L’après-midi d’un faune, the première of which (in December 1894) opened up both new compositional possibilities and new sources of income for Debussy. His close personal association with figures of Parisian literary scene also cooled noticeably during this time, with the exception of his good friend Pierre Louys. He stopped attending the mardi gatherings of Mallarmé, where he had been an occasional guest since 1890. There, he would have heard Mallarmé speak on poetry, art, music and aesthetics. Mallarmé was one of the first to suggest that Wagner’s genius was not an example that French artists ought to follow. Debussy, whose enthusiasm for Wagner in the late 1880s is well-known, seems to have heeded this call in the early 1890s. The culmination of this may well be the Prélude, which can be seen as a re-writing of Tristan that recasts both its emotional power (from emphatic desire to limpid sensuality) and its harmonic language.

It is no coincidence that Debussy’s increasing difficulty with texts occurs after his closest personal and artistic contact with Mallarmé. Mallarmé was, with the possible exception of Verlaine, the most important French poet of his generation, rising to prominence first as the head of the Decadents in the wake of Joris Karl Huysmans’ novel À rebours, and as a major figure in the Symbolist movement. Despite his public position as chef d’école of the Symbolists, Mallarmé’s poetry bears only a surface resemblance to that of his contemporaries. His passion for the supremacy of verse and the stubborn complexity of his poetry and critical writings drew young writers and artists to his humble home on the Rue de Rome, where Mallarmé held forth on a wide range of topics. Central among these was the relationship

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6 Huysmans’ valorization of Mallarmé’s poetry in the novel shot the then-obscuré poet to national fame in 1884. This is detailed by Guy Michaud, Mallarmé, trans. Marie Collins and Berha Humez (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 102-3.
between music and poetry, and the way that poets must turn away from imitating musical effects and discovering the inherent music of language. He advocated a return to a pure language, one set apart from the common speech and writing of the world. In response to the Gesamtkunstwerk, Mallarmé offered Le Livre, his unfinished Great Work, which would complete the synthesis of the arts begun by Wagner. Le Livre was to be a work that would supplant music, theater and dance, and distill their essences into verse.

If Debussy was initially drawn into Mallarmé’s sphere in search of an alternative to the conservative aesthetic of the Conservatoire and the Académie, he would have found it there in spades. In both Mallarmé’s poetry and critical writings, Debussy would have heard a unique perspective, one whose deep respect for the traditions of French verse was tempered with a quiet contempt for anything derivative or commercial. Debussy had access to these views in the numerous essays that Mallarmé published in Parisian journals from 1885 through 1898, the substance of which was often incorporated into the mardi speeches. Debussy also had a personal friendship with the poet beyond the mardi gatherings, and one can only imagine the substance of their conversations. Debussy, Mallarmé and Pierre Louÿs were frequently found together at various artistic events: concerts of Renaissance polyphony at St. Gervais, performances at the Concerts Lamoureux, even the premiere of Maeterlinck’s Pelléas et Mélisande. Debussy and Mallarmé even collaborated on a proposed theatrical production of “L’après-midi d’un faune” in late 1890 or early 1891 that was the genesis of Debussy’s Prélude.7

It would seem, in light of this, that Debussy had ample opportunity to absorb Mallarmé’s aesthetic, to become another acolyte in Mallarmé’s circle (like Paul Valéry) whose

7 Mallarmé was planning a theatrical performance of “L’après-midi d’un faune” at the Théâtre d’Art in Paris. Impressed by a recent performance of Debussy’s Cinq poèmes de Charles Baudelaire, Mallarmé arranged to meet Debussy and engage him to write the necessary incidental music. The collaboration was short-lived, but the Prélude was certainly conceived during this meeting in some form. See François Lesure, Claude Debussy avant Pelléas, ou les années Symbolistes (Paris: Klincksieck, 1992), 98-99.
greatest glory would be found in the shadow of the master. Yet this did not happen. Despite their close contact, Debussy made no settings of Mallarmé texts at this time (the unpublished setting of *Apparition* in 1884 significantly predates Debussy’s personal contact with the poet). This is particularly surprising in light of the regularity with which Debussy set prominent poets like Verlaine, Banville and Baudelaire. Even the *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* does not engage a Mallarmé text directly, but stands in opposition to it. Although several scholars have attempted to line up particular passages of the poem with particular measures of the music, there is no general agreement on how, or even if, the *Prélude* responds to the text of Mallarmé’s poem (rather than its meaning or idea). If Debussy considered writing songs on any other Mallarmé text, no evidence of these compositions has survived.

It would seem then that Debussy’s increased interest in instrumental music, and his growing difficulty in producing texted work, results (in part at least) from a desire to interrogate the nature of music itself, to purify it from derivative elements of various kinds. This also throws into sharp relief Debussy’s decision, some twenty years later, to return to Mallarmé’s poetry. Perhaps his musical language had progressed to the point where he felt ready to take on the challenge posed by Mallarmé, that he had achieved a purity of expression that measured up to Mallarmé’s similar effort in verse. These songs are the only Mallarmé settings published during the composer’s lifetime. They also mark a final break with text: these are Debussy’s final songs, his last completed “essays” on music-text relationships, before turning his attention to the late works: the piano *Études*, the chamber sonatas, and various unfinished dramatic projects.

**DEBUSSY’S OPINION OF MALLARMÉ**

It is difficult to gauge Debussy’s opinion of Mallarmé from his writings. Mallarmé is only rarely mentioned by Debussy, and the few instances where the poet’s name does emerge
are ambiguous. The first significant mention of Mallarmé in Debussy’s correspondence comes
from a letter to Ernest Chausson. Here, Debussy offers a criticism of Chausson’s Le roi Arthus:

One thing that I would like to see you lose is your preoccupation with the “underpinnings”; let me
explain: I think that we have been led in this, as always, by the same R. Wagner, and that too often we
dream of the frame before having the painting, and sometimes the richness of this frame makes us
overlook the mediocrity of the idea! I’m not talking about cases where magnificent inner parts dress up
ideas, like cheap dolls! one would be better off, it seems to me, to take the opposite viewpoint, that is to
say to find the perfect outline for an idea and to place alongside it only those ornaments that are
necessary, for truly “certain” of these are like priests vesting incomparable gems on wooden idols! look
at the poverty of symbol hidden in several of Mallarmé’s last sonnets, where despite this the
workmanship is carried to its furthest limits! and look at Bach, where Everything conspires prodigiously
to highlight the idea, where the delicacy of the inner parts never absorbs the principal line.8

Debussy suggests that overly complicated compositional technique (“underpinnings”) obscures
the fact that the main melodic ideas of the work are insufficient to express the subject matter.
The images he invokes to support his point—the ornate frame that distracts from the poor
quality of the painting, the cheap doll gussied up in fancy clothing, and the wooden idol
decorated with jewels—all point to a lack in the quality of the main thing that cannot be
recompensed by clever marketing.

When Debussy invokes Mallarmé and Bach in support of his point, the situation
becomes much more complicated. Bach is clearly praised here as an example of a composer
whose “frame” never conceals a second-rate idea. Rather, it is the inherent quality of the
musical idea (the “picture”) that the “underpinnings” work to display clearly. The treatment of
Mallarmé is less certain. The way that the sentence is constructed seems to set up a parallel
between Bach and Mallarmé as two examples of artists who always have the “picture”

8 Debussy, Corr., 167: “Un chose que je voudrais vous voir perdre, c’est la préoccupation de « dessous » ; je
m’explique : je crois que nous avons été mis dedans, toujours par la même R. Wagner, et que trop souvent nous
songeons au cadre avant d’avoir le tableau, et quelquefois la richesse de celui-ci nous fait passer sur l’indigence
de l’idée ! Je ne parle pas du cas, où des dessous magnifiques habillent des idées, comparables à des poupées de
treize sous ! on gagneraient, il me semble, à prendre le parti contraire, c’est-à-dire, à trouver le dessin parfait
d’une idée, et de n’y mettre alors que juste ce qu’il faudrait d’ornements, car vraiment « certains » sont pareils à
des prêtres revêtant de gemmes incomparables des idoles en bois de sapin ! regardez la pauvreté de symbole
cachée dans plusieurs des derniers sonnets de Mallarmé, où pourtant le métier d’ouvrier d’art est porté à ses
dernières limites! et regardez Bach, où Tout concourt prodigieusement à mettre l’idée en valeur, où la légèreté des
dessous n’absorbe jamais le principal.” Emphasis mine.
foremost in their minds. But what Debussy actually says about Mallarmé works against this: if there is indeed a "poverty of symbol" hidden in several of Mallarmé’s late sonnets, then it must be hidden by the "workmanship" of the verses, which are taken to their "furthest limits" despite the lack of symbol, rather than in service of some present idea. 9

Critical reaction to this passage has been mixed. Some, like Rosemary Lloyd, contend that the letter shows Debussy’s detailed understanding of and sympathy for Mallarmé’s aesthetic. Others, like Jean-Michel Nectoux, see the letter as a rejection of Mallarmé’s late style in favor of his earlier poetry.10 I think that the latter position is more likely true. I cannot get past the phrase “poverty of symbol” which, to my mind, can not be a term of praise.11 Debussy seems to equate this with the “mediocrity of the idea” in certain of Wagner’s compositions, where a prodigious technique (here poetic, there compositional) obscures the fact that the idea itself is not particularly compelling. Mallarmé’s earlier works, which include all the poems for which Debussy crafted a musical response, are not at issue here, and nowhere does Debussy speak ill of the early works.

At issue here, I think, are the divergent notions of the word “idea” in Debussy’s and Mallarmé’s thinking. For Debussy, the idea of a composition is reducible to an actual musical line, which ought to be expressed according to its own inherent qualities, and not subjected to an external rigorous technique, no matter how beautiful the result. Elsewhere, Debussy writes, “A musical idea contains its own harmony (or at least that’s my opinion); without this,

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9 “Derniers sonnets” is the subtitle of the ninth book of Mallarmé’s Poésies (1887). It contains the sonnets “Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui,” “Quand l’ombre mençà,” “Victorieusement fui le suicide beau,” the Sonnet en yx, “Mes bousquins refermés sur le nom de Paphos,” “Quelle soie aux baumes de temps,” “Tout orgueil fume-t-il du soir,” “Surgi de la croupe et du bond,” “Une dentelle s’abolit,” “M’introduire dans ton histoire” and the Hommages to Poe and Wagner.
11 This phrase calls to mind Debussy’s comments about chords losing their “symbolic value” through being used in music with a commercial aim, written six weeks before the letter in question. See Debussy, Corr., 155.
harmony is no longer anything but parasitic and inelegant.”¹² This same attitude is expressed in a letter from Debussy to Raoul Bardac dated 24/25 February 1906.¹³ After criticizing Bardac for not exercising enough care in choosing among the various pathways that his musical ideas suggest, he continues:

You know how little I like that parasitic development, which has for too long served the glory of Masters. We need to replace this development with a more rigorous selection of ideas, a line more conscious of the value of those ideas on the orchestral and ornamental front, and a line above all that allows the ideas to breathe, as they are overwhelmed so often under the richness or the banality of the frame.¹⁴

Here, as before, the contrast of the idea and its expression (“the frame”) is drawn. Debussy’s aversion to the German symphonic tradition as an example for French composers to follow is largely rooted in that tradition’s predilection for developmental procedures that are applied indiscriminately to a diverse group of musical themes, rather than born of an inner necessity. Debussy seems to locate this same fault in Mallarmé’s late sonnets.

For Mallarmé, the idea is not immediately readable in the work itself, but located beyond the work, in the realization that the work is ultimately about nothing other than its own processes, revealing the essential nothingness of the universe. The “principal piece or nothing” at the center of Mallarmé’s late poems is therefore, for the poet, precisely the point.¹⁵ By crafting works that do not seek to act as windows onto a semantic content, but rather try to place the relationships between words in the poem in the foreground, with the “meaning” of the poem existing, if at all, through the network of images and sounds that the words engage. So for Mallarmé, the distinction that Debussy makes between the frame and the idea is irrelevant, since the poem’s meaning cannot be abstracted from the particular circumstances of

¹² Debussy, Corr., 688: “Une idée musicale contient sa propre harmonie (ou du moins il me semble); sans cela, l’harmonie n’est plus qu’une chose parasite et maladroite.”
¹³ Debussy, Corr., 940–42.
¹⁴ Ibid., 941: “Vous savez combien j’aime peu le développement parasite, qui a trop servi à la gloire des Maîtres pour que nous ne cherchions pas à le remplacer par un choix d’idées plus rigoureux, une ligne plus normalement soucieuse de la valeur qu’elles prennent sur l’horizon orchestral ou ornemental, et surtout, qu’elles y respirent, tant elles succombent si souvent sous la richesse ou la banalité du cadre.” Emphasis mine.
its expression in language. In other words, it is not simply what the poem means, but how the poem means that is crucial. For if the poem springs forth _sui generis_ from the relationships inherent in language itself, then there should be no distinction possible.\(^\text{16}\)

So both Debussy and Mallarmé argue for essentially the same aesthetic: that the idea of an artwork should be expressed with a minimum of extraneous material. The only difference is that where Debussy locates the idea as a physical and acoustical reality, Mallarmé’s idea is a metaphysical absence that is expressed through verse. It is not surprising that Debussy does not see this aspect of Mallarmé, for it was given formal expression mainly in the critical work of the twentieth century. For Debussy, in the poems of Mallarmé’s mature style, the means of expression do not find resonance with the subject matter of the poem itself: the “poverty of symbol” does not match the “workmanship” of the verse. What Debussy did not see, or did not value in Mallarmé, was the poet’s increasing abstraction from reality in the later works, his firm belief that the idea of a poem could in fact be a significant nothing rather than a significant something.\(^\text{17}\)

The only other significant mention in the correspondence of Debussy’s attitude toward Mallarmé’s poetry and its possible influence on his music comes from 1913. Shortly after Debussy had set the _Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé_, he discovered that the copyright for these texts rested with Edmond Bonniet, Mallarmé’s son in law. Writing to obtain permission to publish these settings, Debussy writes:

> I have piously conserved the most fervent admiration for the one who was “our master” ... He was, — without knowing it perhaps, — a considerable influence on the very quiet musician that I was in the era when he did me the honor of receiving me into his home. And this fervor grows as I recall in my memory

\(^{16}\) For instance, take the poem “Brise marine” (page 60 of the present study). The total significance of the poem is neither the failure of the poet to write poetry that the semantic dimension of the poem describes, nor the potential mastery of language that the play of letters and phonemes enacts, but a combination of these two elements that oscillate in the mind and ear of the reader.

\(^{17}\) Jacques Derrida’s seminal essay of Mallarmé makes much of this clear, although Derrida’s desire to emphasize the non-representational aspects sometimes obscures the relationship with objective reality that Mallarmé is always at pains to preserve. See “The Double Session,” 174–285.
his benevolent welcome to the music for *L'après-midi d'un faune* [sic]. These memories, among many others, will entitle me, I hope, to ask you to facilitate the publication of these three songs?\(^8\)

The sentiment expressed in the letter certainly seems genuine, but we should not completely ignore the fact that Debussy has an ulterior motive here. Letters to Jacques Durand suggest that he was not amused by the situation, and may have been slightly offended at having to ask permission to publish these settings: “I had written to Dr. Bonniot before receiving your letter, — which is not important, and will never change my position vis-à-vis the solitary Mallarmé!”\(^9\) Also, it seems strange that Debussy’s “most fervent admiration” for Mallarmé would not have found some expression (compositional, literary or otherwise) in the fifteen years since the poet’s death.

If Mallarmé was an enduring influence on Debussy after the composition of the *Prélude*, he seems to have kept this fact to himself. This view is supported by the recollections of Robert Godet, a close friend and confidant of Debussy. He writes:

Did he [Debussy] spend much time with the Symbolists? Was he enthusiastic about Impressionism? The Debussy we knew never mentioned a word about such things, any more than he did about his visits to Mallarmé’s salon, which were perhaps not as frequent or as fruitful as is generally made out. One remembers only the respectful but amused look in his eye when he used to see the poet concentrating on the exploits of the Lamoureux Orchestra, and noting them down instantly in a little book whose pages were black with penciled jottings.\(^{20}\)

There is little reason to doubt either the accuracy of Godet’s memory or his sincerity here. His remarks here do not imply any disdain on Debussy’s part for Mallarmé’s poetry, but merely that his attendance at Mallarmé’s salon and its influence on his musical style needs careful

\(^8\) Debussy, *Corr.*, 1650. Letter to Edmond Bonnoit, 7 August 1913: “J’ai conservé pieusement la plus fervente admiration pour celui qui fut « notre maître »... Il eut, — sans le savoir peut-être, — une considérable influence sur le très silencieux musicien que j’étais à l’époque où il me faisait l’honneur de me recevoir chez lui. Et cette ferveur s’augmente de reconnaissance au souvenir de son bienveillant accueil à la musique pour *L’après-midi d’un faune*. Ces souvenirs, parmi tant d’autres, m’autoriseront je l’espère à vous demander de me faciliter l’édition de ces trois mélodies ?”

\(^9\) Debussy, *Corr.*, 1652. Letter to Durand, 8 August 1913: “J’avais écrit au Docteur Bonniot avant de recevoir votre lettre, — ce qui n’a pas d’importance, et ne peut rien changer à ma position vis-à-vis du seul Mallarmé!”

examination. The absence of Mallarmé from Debussy’s critical writings supports Godet’s point about the composer’s tight-lipped stance on these issues.

In light of this, it is likely that Mallarmé’s influence on Debussy has been overstated by those who, desperate to locate Debussy’s break with musical convention, have sought to make him a “figure” of Mallarmé: a disciple whose ultimate failure to understand the full scope of Mallarmé’s vision mars his compositional achievement to some extent. This is the position taken by Laurence Berman, who argues that Debussy, unable to deal adequately with Mallarmé’s poetry during the composition of the *Prélude à L’après-midi d’un faune*, was finally able to match the poet’s complexity in *Jeux*. Berman simply assumes that, twenty years after the composition of the *Prélude*, Debussy would still desire to produce in *Jeux* a work that “seems to be the musical counterpart of Mallarmé’s poem [“L’après-midi d’un faune”].” This attitude can be traced all the way back to the early 20th century. The desire to see Debussy through a Mallarmean lens has thus coloured the critical appreciation of his music from its beginnings.

**LITERATURE REVIEW: DEBUSSY**

Many critics have tried to show that Debussy’s aesthetic was either molded in imitation of Mallarmé, or at least shares an exceptionally close similarity to his works. Paul Dukas was one of the earliest critics to make this connection when he claimed that it “was the writers, and not the musicians, who exerted the strongest influence on Debussy.” Arthur Symonds went even further when he wrote that Debussy is “the Mallarmé of music, not because he has set “L’Après-midi d’un faune” to sound, but because the music has all the qualities of the poem

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and none, for instance, of Verlaine.” Symonds never actually specifies what these shared qualities are, or what distinguishes them from Verlaine’s poetry. Nevertheless, his assertion and many others like it have found their way into the musicological consciousness regarding Debussy.

This sentiment is continued in the work of Stefan Jarocinski, who claims that Debussy’s attendance at Mallarmé’s mardis was particularly important to the development of his aesthetic. He sees Debussy’s contact with Mallarmé and with the Symbolists in general as positive in the sense that Debussy’s musical language was derived from “an absolute submission of music to a text.” Perceptively, he recognizes the importance of both sound and sense in Mallarmé’s poetry. He argues that Debussy found musical correspondences for these categories, with the precepts of traditional harmony being equated with semantic meaning and the use of sound for its own sake as a symbol evoking a hidden idea.

However, Jarocinsky sees no fundamental connection between sound and sense in Mallarmé’s poetry. Instead, he sees merely a juxtaposition of elements, an alternation between passages driven by semantics and those driven by sound itself, rather than a consistent counterpoint of those two elements. In this, Jarocinsky does not always fully appreciate the intimate relationship between the sound of words and their meaning that is critical to understanding Mallarmé’s poetry. So when he sets up a similar duality in Debussy’s style—where passages of traditional harmony (semantic) alternate with those conceived as pure sound—he bases his comparison on an incomplete understanding of Mallarmé. If Jarocinsky’s ideas about the juxtaposition of these elements in

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24 Quoted in Edward Lockspeiser, Debussy: His Life and Mind, 2 vols. (London: Cassell, 1962-65), I, 120. As an interesting aside, Henri Gauthiers-Villars, who wrote under the pseudonym “Willy” made essentially the opposite claim: that Debussy was the “Verlaine of music, the equal of that other Verlaine, and one who also heard voices that no one else before him had heard.” Quoted in Stefan Jarocinski, Claude Debussy: Impressionism and Symbolism, tr. Rollo Meyers (London: Eulenberg, 1976), 123.
25 Ibid., 118.
26 Ibid., 149-50.
Debussy are indeed accurate, then he has proven exactly the opposite of what he intended. Mallarmé's entire work is fundamentally concerned with the total integration of everything in poetry, and he accepts no less from himself or others.

François Lesure has definitively established Debussy's biographical connections with the major figures of literary symbolism in Debussy avant Pelléas, ou les années symbolistes. His work completes and corrects many of Jarocinsky's observations, bringing them in line with the existing documentary evidence. Although he offers little in the way of musical analysis, his observations on Debussy's activities during these years give a more balanced picture of Debussy's relationship with Mallarmé, one that posits the poet as one potential influence among many.

More recently, Mallarmé scholar Rosemary Lloyd has pointed out aesthetic similarities in Mallarmé and Debussy's thinking that she implicitly attributes to the composer's attendance at Mallarmé's mardis. She goes so far as to write that "the lack of dissonance in the thinking of these two major figures of the late nineteenth century is exceptionally striking." Lloyd explores Mallarmé's and Debussy's shared mistrust of the influence that Wagner's music dramas were having on French artists. She also notes their respective mistrust of dogmatic theoretical explanations of their respective arts. However, much of her essay is devoted to brief biographical summaries of people whom both Mallarmé and Debussy counted as friends or influences, including Pierre Louÿs, André Poniatowski, Verlaine, Henri de Régnier, Baudelaire and Poe. These vignettes may point future studies in interesting directions, but they add relatively little to understanding how Debussy's music relates to Mallarmé's poetry, either in the specific settings of Mallarmé texts or more generally.

28 Lesure, Debussy avant Pelléas, passim.
29 Lloyd, "Debussy, Mallarmé and 'Les Mardis'," 255-269.
30 Ibid., 256.
From this biographical scholarship, a tradition of criticism has sprung forth that looks for common stylistic features between Mallarmé’s poetry and Debussy’s music. Arthur Wenk’s *Claude Debussy and the Poets*, which includes significant chapters on both *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* and the *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* (1913), places heavy emphasis on Debussy’s formal responses to Mallarmé’s unusual syntax and grammar.\(^3\) While Wenk’s analyses have much merit, they generally do not consider the possibility that there could be a fundamental difference between a Mallarmé text and one by Verlaine, Baudelaire, or Banville. They do not consider the phonetic qualities of Mallarmé’s poems, the relationship between these phonetic qualities and their “meaning,” nor how Debussy’s musical setting responds to these elements in particular. For him, it seems that the function of a song is to frame an enunciation of the poem, and that the semantic and syntactic dimensions of the poem are of primary importance. For example, in his analysis of the song *Soupir*, Wenk shows all of the digressive clauses in the Mallarmé poem and how Debussy’s setting performs a “reading” of the syntax of the poem, clarifying the main clauses from those that are parenthetical.\(^2\) In Wenk’s analysis, Debussy does this through a series of harmonic digressions that parallel the syntax of Mallarmé’s original and allow a musical reconstruction of the “kernel” sentence on which the poem is based. He demonstrates Debussy’s sensitive reading of Mallarmé’s grammar, but does not consider Mallarmé’s prosody, or the ways that Mallarmé’s poem seems to exist independently inside Debussy’s setting.

In order to understand whether there is, indeed, a distinction to be drawn between Debussy’s treatment of a poem by Mallarmé and one by another poet, we must begin with the fullest understanding of that text and its place in the poet’s œuvre. Only then can we be reasonably accurate in describing the various ways that Debussy’s music interacts with its text.

\(^2\) Ibid., 246–54.
From there, it becomes possible to consider settings of other poets in a similar way and then finally to draw some conclusions. This level of detail is beyond the scope of Wenk’s project, and indeed also beyond the scope of the current one. Verlaine’s poetry, for example, is phonetically dense, and musical, in a way that is appreciably different from Mallarmé, and Debussy’s settings of Verlaine should probably be re-examined in that light also.

Marianne Wheeldon has taken steps toward the approach that I am advocating here.\(^{33}\) Looking at *Soupir* through the lens of Boulezian fragmentation, she argues that Debussy’s setting invites an actual reordering of the musical elements of the piece, so that multiple pathways through the song are at least virtually possible, if not actually intended by Debussy himself. She calls this analysis “permutational,” and attributes her method to Boulez, who in turn took it from Mallarmé. Many aspects of Wheeldon’s arguments are compelling, especially the sensitive way in which she describes the interaction of the actual musical narrative and the virtual pathways that both poem and music suggest. Her treatment of Mallarmé’s syntax and the way that it forces the reader to cast forwards and backwards across the text builds on similar ideas in Wenk, and I offer further comments on the poem later on. In the process, she gives the reader real insight into how reading a Mallarmé poem is potentially different from one by another poet, and her work shows that Debussy seems aware of this particularly Mallarmean feature. However, she characterizes *Soupir* as built from sections that are “musically autonomous and nonteleological, so that the sections do not contribute to an overall contour or dynamic shape.”\(^{34}\) I think her case is somewhat overstated in this regard, and in Chapter Four I offer various kinds of continuities that link the various sections and work to counterbalance the disruptive musical surfaces that Wheeldon notes.

\(^{33}\) Marianne Wheeldon, “Debussy’s 'Soupir': An Experiment in Permutational Analysis” *Perspectives of New Music* 38/2 (Summer 2000): 134-160.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 140.
In his dissertation *A Song Not Purely His Own: Modernism and the Pastoral Mode in Mallarmé, Debussy and Matisse*, David J. Code examines the relationship between Mallarmé and Debussy through “L’après-midi d’un faune.”\(^{35}\) He argues that the unusual spacing of certain elements in the typography of Mallarmé’s 1876 edition of the poem are designed to create a “virtual book,” implying the recto and verso of pages independently of the actual pagination of the poem. He then argues that Debussy’s *Prélude* “reads” this virtual book by making corresponding shifts in orchestration in structural places that match, with unusual numerical precision, the “virtual book” that he has uncovered in the poem. His analysis of Debussy draws several exact parallels between individual measures in the *Prélude* and specific lines of text in Mallarmé’s original.

By expressly lining up particular measures in the *Prélude* with passages in the poem, Code’s analysis is a more elegant version of the mimetic model that has been used by other writers to align music and verse lines in the *Prélude*. Although he does not explicitly state it, his idea of a virtual book in the Faun poem seems designed to evoke *Le Livre*, Mallarmé’s unfinished “Great Work.” However, the structure of *Le Livre* is not really concerned with evoking a virtual book inside a physical one. Instead, if *Un coup de dés* is an accurate example of the kind of writing that *Le Livre* would contain, the actual spacing of the text and its actual pagination would become significant elements, and the virtual elements they imply would not be structures inside the book—these would be explicit—but things external to it, particularly theatre and drama, which *Le Livre* was intended to replace. Of all of Mallarmé’s works, “L’après-midi” stands somewhat apart from *Le Livre*. It does manifest some of the same

concerns with theater and drama as the latter, but it stands more firmly in the French poetic tradition.

In her 2003 book *Mallarmé and Debussy: Unheard Music, Unseen Text*, Elizabeth McCombie has called for an approach to music and text relationships in Mallarmé and Debussy that abandons the notion of imitation. In its place, she argues for a more flexible approach that is neither properly literary criticism nor musicology, but a “mobile textual approach that is able to reconstruct the particular force of the intermediate ground [between music and literature] and its underlying dialogue of slippages and collusions, while at the same time insisting on the independence of the arts.” Her primary interest is to develop a critical language capable of exploring the ways that music and poetry interact. Mallarmé and Debussy are test cases for this language, which is drawn in part from Mallarmé’s own critical writings and from other sources only tangentially related to the subject, like the works of Boulez, whose debt to both Mallarmé and Debussy does not necessarily make his aesthetic relevant to a study of the two.

McCombie’s work is strongly influenced by Roger Pearson’s homophonic approach to Mallarmé’s poetry. For this reason, she is sensitive to the phonetic aspects of Mallarmé’s verse, and particularly to moments where common phonemes unite various key words in some of Mallarmé’s poems. She makes useful observations about Mallarmé’s phonetic patterning, as when she identifies the common phoneme /ɔr/ in several key words from the “Sonnet en yx:” “un or,” “licorne,” “décour,” though her inclusion of “miroir” as an inversion is only partially true—the letters are reversed, but the phoneme itself changes. This confusion between letter and phoneme is inherent to some degree in Mallarmé’s own writing on the subject, and he

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freely switches between various kinds of relationships that letters trace between words, whether phonetic or graphic.

In other places, McCombie’s observations seem forced, as when she analyses an excerpt from “Hérodiade.” She writes:

In the ‘Ouverture’ d’Hérodiade the simultaneous presentation and cancellation of an image and the multiplication of interpretative possibilities surrounding certain words creates an overdetermination of signification:

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Abolie, et son aile affreuse dans les larmes
Du bassin, aboli, qui mire les alarmes,
De l’or nu fustigeant l’espace cramoisi,
Une Aurore a, plumage heraldisque, choisi
Notre tour cinéraire et sacrificatrice
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This passage creates points of immobility through magnetic pulls of attraction and repulsion. The semantic space opened up by the initial act of repression or abolishing (‘Abolie’) is drowned again by its pursuit of a partner. The feminine ‘Abolie’ finds its mirroring reflection in the masculine version in line 2. The repetition both fills the emptiness created by the opening, in a matching sonority that has the effect of a double negative, and reiterates the sense of emptiness in a string of negative statements. Finding a masculine equivalent amounts to a reciprocal cancelling-out, yet the partnership gives birth to an overload of reflections in the line-final rhymes (‘cramoisi’, ‘choisi’). ‘aile’ is ‘Abolie’ with its centre removed and its internal elements juggled. Sound patterns offer the promise of possible thematic centres, refuges from the pull between volume and emptiness. Yet to follow the path suggested by the phonetic patterning is to be misled. They are loci of stabilizing and destabilizing reflection, pools of verbal heterogeneity. The abolished pool is and is not reflecting ‘les a’ of ‘aboli(e)’ (‘dans les larmes’, mire les a-larmes’).

Here, the masculine-feminine pairing of aboli(e) is certainly relevant to Mallarmé’s prosody and the excerpt’s negative semantic message. But to seriously suggest a connection (purely orthographic) between “abolie” and “aile” stretches the reader’s credulity somewhat, and her assertion about the pool both reflecting and not reflecting the /a/s depends on a homophonic reading that she does not fully support. The passage can also (and more simply) be interpreted thus: The gold and crimson of dawn disappear (‘abolie’) as the sun rises, in a common Mallarmean theme of self-consumption. Its wing-like streaks are reflected in the pool, where they are also disappearing. This disappearance reflects our own fears about the impermanence of physical reality (life, death, etc.). This process is enacted phonetically, as the /a/s of the opening—aboli(e), affreuse, alarmes, etc.—fade into the /ɔ/s of “Aurore” (/ɔʁɔʁ/) as the dawn
spends itself. A’s that no longer sound like /a/s simply enact the semantic message of the passage: a phonetic disappearance that matches the physical one described in the text. This phonetic game is not all-encompassing, nor is it meant to be.

When it comes to the actual relationship between Debussy’s music and Mallarmé’s poetry, there are some gaps in McCombie’s work. Of the four Debussy songs that set Mallarmé poems, she examines only Soupir and Éventail in detail. Instead, when she treats Debussy’s music, she prefers to deal with other works not specifically related to Mallarmé: La mer, Jeux, and some of the piano Préludes. Rather than looking for the actual intermediate ground between Debussy and Mallarmé, these studies are more concerned with the interaction of music and poetry in general. McCombie’s fifty-nine page comparison of Mallarmé’s Un coup de dés and Debussy’s Jeux (1913) is based on the fact that they both disrupt established codes of reading/listening in their respective fields. Yet again there is no particular reason to suggest that the composition of Jeux owes any particular debt (biographical, technical or otherwise) to Mallarmé’s poem.³⁸ It is possible to cite numerous examples of discontinuous musical textures in twentieth-century music that would match up equally well, by McCombie’s own criteria, with Un coup de dés. The only possible reason for the comparison of these two works must then rest on the tacit assumption that Berman also makes: that Debussy somehow aspired to the condition of Mallarmé.

In order to find an alternative to the various, essentially mimetic approaches described above, we must strike a balance between understanding what Debussy’s setting of a Mallarmé poem attempts to do, and how this reads through and across what the original poem attempts to

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³⁸ And unless Debussy had seen the original 1897 edition of Un coup de dés in the journal Cosmopolis—which differs significantly in graphic appearance from Mallarmé’s intentions—he likely would not have known the poem until at least 1914, when Mallarmé’s collected works were published.
do. This requires a detailed understanding of Mallarmé's poetry, particularly the ways that it differs from his contemporaries. For this reason, I now turn to Mallarmé's works.

**LITERATURE REVIEW: MALLARMÉ**

Despite its age, Henri Mondor's *Vie de Mallarmé* remains the standard resource for biographical information on Mallarmé.\(^{39}\) Mondor had access to numerous unpublished and otherwise unavailable documents that have more recently become available through the work of Carl Barbier (*Documents Stéphane Mallarmé*), editor of the 8 volume collection of Mallarmé's documents, and Lloyd Austin who, along with Mondor, edited the massive 11 volume collection of Mallarmé's letters.\(^{40}\) Recently, Mondor's 1945 edition of Mallarmé's *Œuvres complètes* has been supplanted by a two-volume *Œuvres complètes* edited by Bertrand Marchal.\(^{41}\)

During the century after Mallarmé's death, Mallarmé's thought has inspired a wide range of critical responses. The breadth and depth of this critical tradition far exceeds the space available in this forum to treat them fully. For this reason, I will only mention those works most relevant to my project. Several exegetical studies have shed much light on the question of meaning in Mallarmé's œuvre. Among these, works by Robert Greer Cohn (*Mallarmé's Un coup de dés: An exegesis; Toward the Poems of Mallarmé; Mallarmé's Prose Poems, Igitur*) are significant.\(^{42}\) Cohn presents a unified theory of Mallarmé's poetry that assigns an absolute semantic value to individual letters, based in part on their phonetic sound, in part on their

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\(^{41}\) Mallarmé, *OC* I & II.

graphic shape. He deduces the signification of letters from their use in Mallarmé’s œuvre as a whole, with pride of place given to *Un coup de dés*. He then shows how, in various poems, Mallarmé reinforces the semantic message of the poems by expressing them through words that contain a conspicuous number of a particular letter (or phoneme). Occasionally, Cohn argues that the letter content of a passage modifies, or even contradicts, its semantic meaning. Cohn’s theory of letters is laid out most clearly in *Un coup de dés: An exegesis*, which is an enlargement of his doctoral thesis, but the strategy informs virtually all of his subsequent work on Mallarmé. Guy Michaud’s *Mallarmé* is organized as a biography but its true value lies in his thoughtful and detailed explications of Mallarmé’s poems. More recently, Bertrand Marchal published *Lecture de Mallarmé*, an exegetical study of the major poems, in which he summarizes much of the work of previous critics like Emile Noulet and A. R. Chisolm and offers many new insights of his own. Marchal’s approach is mainly semantic, and he does not generally treat the prosodic elements of the poems as particularly significant.43

Another important strand of Mallarmé criticism deals with Mallarmé’s thought and aesthetic, which is expressed both through the poems and also in the numerous critical essays that Mallarmé wrote in the 1880s and 90s. Jean-Pierre Richard’s *L’univers imaginaire de Mallarmé* is an intellectual topography of Mallarmé’s poetry.44 He systematically treats all of Mallarmé’s favorite symbols and traces their nuanced meaning in a variety of poems to expose the more basic nature of Mallarmé’s aesthetic and epistemology. Reacting against Richard, Jacques Derrida has called into question the very notion of thematic criticism in Mallarmé, suggesting instead in “The Double Session” that Mallarmé’s writing is essentially a-referential; that it sets up a series of intra- and inter-textual networks that constantly refer to other writings

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(or objects) without the possibility of arriving at a stable and secure meaning.\textsuperscript{45} Derrida finds in Mallarmé the intellectual source of deconstruction, and an escape from writing as a system of representation that traces its heritage all the way back to the philosophy of Plato. Robert Greer Cohn has also written extensively on Mallarmé’s thought. For him, Mallarmé’s essential innovation was to modify the Hegelian dialectic to include a fourth pole, which he calls “antisynthesis.” This “tetrapolar” pattern is essentially relational, since either of the pairs of polar opposites engaged in the dialectic may be brought together, considered for their similarity, then torn apart as the dialectic brings together the terms in the perpendicular pole.\textsuperscript{46} Cohn sits somewhere between Derrida and Richard. Although he believes that there is still a singular absolute meaning in a Mallarmé poem (as does Richard), Cohn’s own tetrapolar schematic comes very close to Derrida’s notion of “undecidability” in Mallarmé.

Although Mallarmé’s critical essays are usually cited in support of a particular exegetical point in a poem, there are also important studies dedicated to the essays themselves. Cohn’s \textit{Mallarmé’s Divagations: A Guide and Commentary} explicates the essays collected in \textit{Divagations} (1897).\textsuperscript{47} Essential a work of translation, but peppered with explanatory notes, Cohn takes pains to show how consistently Mallarmé’s critical writing supports his own ideas about Mallarmé’s epistemology. Cohn’s work is nearly as difficult to navigate as the original Mallarmé essays, but offers a way through the texts that is indispensable for anyone encountering these works for the first time. Judy Kravis has also written on Mallarmé’s prose

\textsuperscript{46} Cohn’s conception of Mallarmé’s thought is explored in Chapter One.
\textsuperscript{47} Cohn, \textit{Mallarmé’s Divagations: A Guide and Commentary} (New York: Peter Lang, 1990). A new translation of \textit{Divagations} by Barbara Johnson was published too late to be incorporated into this study, but should be consulted by those interested in these works. See Mallarmé, \textit{Divagations}, trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA; Belknap Press, 2007).
essays. Her work has the added advantage of dealing with significant works like “La Musique et les Lettres” that do not appear in Cohn’s book.

Finally, Mallarmé’s unique use of the French language is explored by Gérard Genette in his brilliant book *Mimologics*. Genette explains Mallarmé’s conception of language in light of Cratylysm, which can be loosely defined as the belief that the sounds of words carry some authentic trace of the objects and ideas that they name. He locates Mallarmé’s particular brand of Cratylysm in the context of numerous theories of the French language that engage this particular type of mimology. Ultimately, Genette argues that Mallarmé sees the French language as derived from an original language that was essentially mimetic. This original language has been lost through the passage of time, through the grafting of one language into another, to the point that contemporary language no longer functions mimetically. Further, this language—or fragments of it—can be discovered in contemporary language. Genette claims that Mallarmé’s Cratylysm is essentially worked out at the level of the verse line in his poetry, where various rhyme and rhythmic gestures compensate for the mimetic defects of contemporary French. The verse line is very important for Mallarmé, but Genette’s dismissal of the word as an important element in this regard seems unnecessary.

**Sound in Mallarmé**

Like all poets, Mallarmé works essentially in two media at once. On one hand, he is a word-smith, and his poems have an acoustic reality that cannot be denied. Even a silent reading of Mallarmé’s poetry calls forth the sonorous nature of his words, words that have a particularly poignant sound. On the other hand, Mallarmé works with meanings. His poems are

all about something, even if that something is apparently trivial, and regardless of the layers of analogical reading that they invite (or that critical tradition has foisted upon them). What separates Mallarmé from the other poets of his generation is not the complexity of his poetry: that is merely an effect of his aesthetic. Indeed, Mallarmé always maintained that his poems were clear (not easy) to anyone who knew how to read. The particular quality that distinguishes Mallarmé from his contemporaries is the exceptional care with which he employs the sounds of words so that they have a significant relationship to the semantic meaning that the poem carries, and by extension with its analogical meanings as well. Throughout his correspondence and critical writings, Mallarmé constantly equates this aspect of his poetic practice with music, using musical metaphors and imagery to describe the phonetic relationship between words and referring to his poems as “musical.”

Although most Mallarmé scholars mention the importance of individual letters or phonemes at some point in their work, there are three more or less systematic treatments of the subject. Robert Greer Cohn argues that Mallarmé gives a particular semantic meaning to individual letters, a meaning that adheres not only to their sound but also their graphic shape as well. His letter table is largely based on Mallarmé’s use in Un coup de dés, which he then applies with a fair degree of consistency to Mallarmé’s larger œuvre. Roger Pearson’s interest in phonemes is directed mainly towards homophony, which Pearson posits as essential to Mallarmé’s pursuit of linguistic mastery in his poems. He adduces several convincing cases where Mallarme’s lexical range and syntax are designed to force the text to speak with a double voice, and consequently to force the listener to hear two simultaneous parsings of phonemes: one that Mallarmé’s spelling engenders on the page, and others, which the ear can

50 Cohn, Mallarmé’s Un coup de dés, 35.
51 Roger Pearson, Unfolding Mallarmé: The Development of a Poetic Art (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). By homophony, Pearson refers to homonyms – words that sound the same (or nearly so) but have different meanings.
perceive in spite of the written disposition of the word. There are moments in Pearson’s work, however, where he sees the formal manipulations of individual phonemes for their own sake, rather than in the service of an alternate semantic reading. Graham Robb sees Mallarmé’s use of phonemes through the lens of French prosody. He argues that Mallarmé’s obsession with words that have few (or no) rhymes forces him to consider other phonemic echoes (assonance, alliteration, etc.) that compensate for their relative poverty in this regard. These echoes, drawn from key words or images in the poem, bind the work together and are responsible for the unique and often bizarre sonic landscapes of Mallarmé’s poems.

Isolated references to music can be found in all three approaches, but none of them demonstrate how Mallarmé describes the phonetic relationships of language as music in a systematic way. For Mallarmé, aural similarity between words (including rhyme, assonance, alliteration, and other resemblances) indicates a hidden connection between them. This connection is both semantic and phonetic, although the semantic connection may not be immediately obvious. Mallarmé sees in these various forms of rhyme an outline of the essential unity of language in its original state. He imagines a single generative language that is the unique source of contemporary dialects, a language in which there was no distinction between poetry and language since poetry was language and language was poetry. At some point in the distant past, this original language was broken apart, scattered across and inside the world’s languages through evolution, war, cross-cultural influence, and similar factors. Modern languages are therefore broken: they do not consistently display phonetic relationships between words that are semantically related, and vice versa. This defect of language creates the need for the poet, whose purpose is to reconstruct this generative language through an exploration of

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52 Robb uses the term “prosody” to refer to the conventional codes of French poetry that Mallarmé both knew and exploited in his poems. I will use the term in the same sense throughout the present study. See Robb, Unlocking Mallarmé (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 3-31.

53 Mallarmé, Les mots anglais, OC II, 1014.
those fragments that remain intact. This, at its core, is Mallarmé’s notion of musical language, and the basis for virtually all of his later writings on music and poetry.

If, as Robb asserts, Mallarmé had a preference for words that rhyme with few or no others, this may have been because the essential unity of language could best be reconstructed through these words. A word that rhymes with a few others, say a dozen or less, gives a relatively small group of semantic, etymological, orthographic and ideographic meanings from which to extract a unifying thread. Words with dozens or even hundreds of rhymes often fall victim to language’s propensity to lie, to suggest relationships that turn out to be dead-ends or endless semantic labyrinths that make extracting the essence of particular phonemes very difficult. For example, there are only eight possible rhymes in French on the phonemes /ivr/: ivre – guivre – vivre – givre – délivre – livre – cuivre – suivre. Of these, five stand out as significant in Mallarmé’s poetry: ivre – vivre – givre – délivre – livre. The first four of these are used as rhymes in two of Mallarmé’s poems: “Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui” and the unpublished “Éventail” for Mery Laurent; “Brise marine” rhymes livre/ivre, while “L’après-midi d’un faune” rhymes ivre/délivré. Among these five words, various semantic connections can be drawn. The intoxication of “ivre” is caused by the inner life of words (“vivre”), which are immobilized (“givre”) in contemporary language until freed by poetry (“délivré”). The totality of the project is to be contained in the poet’s Great Work, Le Livre.

The relation between the phonetic structure of words and their signification is the problem that Mallarmé confronts in Les mots anglais, where he attempts to reconstruct, in the English language, the “relationships between the total signification and the letter” that point to

54 By ideographic, I refer to the meanings that could be adduced from the shapes of letters in these groups of words.
55 Derivative rhymes like “enivre” (from “ivre”) and “poursuivre” (from “suivre”) are not customarily used in poetry, and therefore are not counted in the eight rhymes. See Phillipe Martinon, Dictionnaire des rimes françaises, précédé d’un traité de versification (Paris: Larousse, 1962) s.v. “/ivr/”
56 Although inspired by Robb’s approach in Unlocking Mallarmé, these ideas are my own.
their "common origin" in a primitive language. His strategy is to begin with words that share an initial consonant, a significant letter (or phoneme) cluster in the remainder of the word, and a semantic link. These words call out to one another in constellation, suggesting a common origin that is more than etymological, but points instead to an original language. Yet this reconstruction fails, by and large, to produce stable significance for practically any letter, precisely because the proliferation of rhyme gathers so many diverse meanings around each initial consonant position that the various constellations cannot all be reconciled. The essential plurality of language casts a peculiar importance therefore on the isolated words, those for which Mallarmé finds no significant constellation. Nevertheless, Mallarmé believes that these isolated words include some of the most important ones in the language.

Mallarmé claims that it is the writer's duty to reconstruct these alliterative constellations, "to relate some terms whose unity contributes all the more to the charm and to the music of language." Of the three authors mentioned above, Cohn sees this duty most clearly. However, by trying to force a stable signification retroactively on letters (from Un coup de dés backwards onto the larger œuvre), his system becomes somewhat dogmatic, with the individual letters and phonemes speaking the same message in a dizzying variety of contexts. Robb's approach is more flexible, and allows him to respond to the actual constellations that Mallarmé's poems bring together without constantly relying on an a priori signification.

57 Mallarmé, Les mots anglais, OC II, 969: "rapports entre la signification totale et la lettre"; "origin commune."
58 Ibid., 967: "de rapprocher des termes unis avec d'autant plus de bonheur pour concourir au charme et à la musique du langage."
Throughout his life, Mallarmé consistently compared his poetry to music. In this way, Mallarmé emerges from and participates in a long tradition of nineteenth-century French poetry that found inspiration in musical works, notably Baudelaire and Verlaine. By the 1890s, he argued that his poetry was more “musical” than sounding music itself, and the confrontational nature of his attitude toward music sets him somewhat apart from many of his contemporaries. Since it is my purpose to trace the interaction of Mallarmé’s poetic “music” with Debussy’s settings of his poems, critical works that examine the role of music in Mallarmé’s œuvre are particularly relevant to my thesis.

Perhaps the most comprehensive treatment of music in Mallarmé to date is a 1959 dissertation by Suzanne Bernard, *Mallarmé et la musique*. A good portion of the work deals with Mallarmé’s relationship with Wagner as mediated through French wagnerisme. Bernard recounts Mallarmé’s attendance at the Concerts Lamoureux, which she argues permitted Mallarmé to “refine his ideas on music and on the relationships existing between music and literature.” She argues that essential features of Mallarmé’s literary technique—his penchant for alliteration and other alternatives to end-rhyme—“seem at times to apply the poetic precepts of Wagner.” She connects the Mallarmean ideals of allusion and suggestion to music, as well as the importance of silence. Some of her best insights relate to the essentially interconnected nature of all things in Mallarmé’s aesthetic, and the value that he assigns to music in this process.

However, Bernard’s treatment of Mallarmé’s “musicalization” of poetry is less successful. For her, Mallarmé’s poetic music is found primarily in the typographical

60 Ibid., 22: “preciser ses idées sur la musique et sur les rapports existant entre la musique et la littérature.”
61 Ibid., 32: “parait quelquefois appliquer les préceptes poétiques de Wagner.”
62 Ibid., 43-49.
disposition of words on the page, both in *Un coup de dés* and other poems. She calls this a formal architecture evident on the surface of the page and in the ordering of the book of verse, which she compares to the physical disposition of the orchestra on stage. In the broken alexandrines of “L’après-midi d’un faune”, Bernard sees a process of “musicalization” whose blank spaces are analogous to the silences in instrumental music. She also comments on the numerous enjambments and broken rhythms that read across the alexandrines, which she correctly identifies as an example of Mallarmé’s “musical” approach to rhythm in this poem. Yet Bernard constantly lapses into vague metaphor: she claims that the poem’s structure may be called musical because it combines three themes: sensuality, musicality and intellectuality. If the sole requirement for the “musicality” of a poem is that it combines multiple themes, then virtually any poem would be musical.

More interesting is Bernard’s treatment of music in the then-recently published sketches for *Le Livre*, Mallarmé’s unfinished masterwork. She identifies this work as Mallarmé’s ultimate response to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a synthesis of Theater, Music and Poetry. Here, she compares the combination of abstract ideas found in the geometrical diagrams or “equations” of the notes for *Le Livre* to the essential nature of music, in that these figures combine various intellectual “themes” (Theater, Drama, Hero, Hymn, Mystery, Poetry, Dance, the Book) in binary oppositions. These are then varied and repeated, brought together to display the unity that underlies their apparent diversity. She asks “What does Mallarmé do [in these “equations”] if not combine themes, forms, like a composer?” Bernard cites passages in the notes that describe a double performance of the projected volumes of *Le Livre*, in which “each volume [is] ‘presented two times like its two halves, first the one and the other

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64 Ibid., 104.
65 Ibid., 135–48.
66 Ibid., 136.
67 Ibid., 140.
last, juxtaposed with the last and the first of the one and the other'; each volume forms thus ... a symphony of 384 pages (4 x 96)."68 The relational patterns of this multiple reading would thus recast each volume according to its surroundings, much like a musical theme's signification is dependent on its context and surroundings.

Bernard concludes that Le Livre represents Mallarmé's effort to fuse the mobility inherent in music with the permanence of literature. This mobility is enacted as a reading strategy in which "vertical" and "horizontal" readings of the text produce various nuances of meaning comparable to music. In this text, one can see the "poet's persistent desire to 'take back' from Music that which seems to be the very essence of this sonorous form, its movement and the perpetual transformation of its themes."69 This is much closer to Mallarmé's vision than the derivative Wagnerian pastiche that she invokes elsewhere in the work. As we shall see, Mallarmé's poetry does in fact require such a novel approach to reading, although it need not be restricted to Le Livre or Un coup de dés, but usefully informs his entire œuvre.

Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe also sees Mallarmé through a Wagnerian lens.70 He argues that "between [the essay] "Richard Wagner: Reverie of a French Poet" [1885] and "Music and Letters" [1894], everything, or almost everything, was collected and comprehended in a project that seems to have found its origins in the 'singular challenge' launched by Wagner."71 His essay, which focuses exclusively on Mallarmé's critical writings, posits Mallarmé's entire aesthetic as a sort of negative image of the Gesamtkunstwerk: formed primarily in response to what Mallarmé perceived as Wagner's failings. Lacoue-Labarthe recognizes that Mallarmé's ultimate rejection of music in favour of poetry is based on the idea that actual concerted music

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68 Bernard, Mallarmé et la musique, 140: "chaque volume, « présenté deux fois en tant que ses deux moitiés, première de l'un et dernière de l'autre, juxtaposées à dernière et première de l'un et de l'autre » ; chaque volume forme ainsi...une symphonie de 384 pages (4 fois 96)."
69 Ibid., 141.
71 Ibid., 45.
is merely a copy of an ideal music (that Lacoue-Labarthe calls archi-music) that it is not fully equipped to represent. He identifies language as the true site of Mallarmean music, though in his conception, the musical aspects of Mallarmé’s language are entirely rhythmic and take no particular account of language’s phonetic properties. He concludes that, for Mallarmé, “[v]ersification is thus the restitution of Literature as archi-music—this archi-music of which music is itself only the imitation or the (too) sensual presentation.” Lacoue-Labarthe’s basic premise—that Mallarmé responds to the challenge of music by subsuming it into verse—is correct in my view: Mallarmé does see his poetry replacing orchestral music with the silenced “music” of written verse. However, by setting aside issues of rhyme in its most expanded sense and valorizing rhythm, Lacoue-Labarthe does not consider one of Mallarmé’s most crucial poetic techniques: the manipulation of phonetic elements and the letters that represent them, which he is constantly describing as a musical process. And since, finally, Lacoue-Labarthe provides no example of how one might read Mallarmé’s poetic works in light of the “archi-music” created by rhythm, his argument never leaves the theoretical plane, as if Mallarmé were first and foremost a philosopher and not a poet.

Several useful contributions to the study of music in Mallarmé have also been made by musicologists. In his article “Sea-Changes: Boulez’s Improvisations Sur Mallarmé,” James McCalla offers a sketch outline of music in Mallarmé’s thought. He notes that in music Mallarmé detected certain literary procedures, and that the poet’s duty was to return these to language, their original source. In a particularly suggestive passage, McCalla argues that Mallarmé saw the play of ideas in his poetry in musical terms, specifically invoking the notion

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73 Lacoue-Labarthe, Musica ficta, 81.
of counterpoint and harmony to describe this aspect of his works. However, the example he chooses for this is somewhat disappointing. In “L’après-midi d’un faune,” McCalla identifies a “literary counterpoint” within the poem’s structure between pairs of literary themes: “passion and fear, colors, light and shade, and so on.” A similar “counterpoint” of themes could be traced in virtually any piece of literature, leaving the reader to wonder how unique “L’Après-midi” is in this regard.

More promising is McCalla’s description of Mallarmé’s œuvre as a reduction of language that concentrates on “constellations” of inter-related words. His brief analysis of Mallarmé’s “Sainte” traces the way that parallel words and images from the first half of the poem are made to disappear in the second half, and the peculiarly static quality that this creates in the work. He shows how Mallarmé’s syntax and the semantic plurality of some of the poem’s key words make it more allusive than the poetry of his contemporaries. He calls this process of evocation and disappearance in the inexhaustible play of relationships the “music of silence.” Although he makes passing reference to Mallarmé’s use of phonemes, he does not really consider how these elements inform and shape Mallarmé’s notion of the constellation.

One of the few scholars to fully recognize both Mallarmé’s attraction to and antipathy towards music is Mary Breathnach. In a study of the poet’s influence on the composer Pierre Boulez, she criticizes approaches to Mallarmé that “mistake the poet for some sort of composer manqué.” She also warns of the dangers of misrepresenting Mallarmé’s ideas about music by taking individual passages out of context, and stresses the need to approach these ideas from a comprehensive view of the poet’s works. Breathnach recognizes that an essential part of

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77 Ibid., 89.
79 Ibid., 21.
80 Ibid., 22.
Mallarmé's poetic technique depends on establishing "an intricate and complex series of relationships between the words [of a poem] themselves" in order to free them from their conventional use in ordinary language.\textsuperscript{81} She demonstrates, in various poems, how Mallarmé's syntax, grammar and punctuation create such relationships. Occasionally, she alludes to the importance of the sound of words and their individual phonemes, although this notion is pushed much farther by other critics.

Perhaps her most valuable insight, from my point of view, is her recognition that Mallarmé uses the term "music" to imply, at various times, either the sounding notes of instruments and voices or a series of (essentially mental) relationships. However, she insists on minimizing the role of sound in the second of these cases, claiming that Mallarmé makes "a distinction ... between two uses of the word 'music,' one signifying the art of sounds, the other indicating the abstract, silent, structural force whose exploitation and revelation is the poet's duty."\textsuperscript{82} Focussing little on the sound of words, Breatnach proceeds with a reading of \textit{Un coup de dés} that has many merits, including a sensitivity to the visual layout of the words on the page, which she identifies as musical. But by not considering the materiality of Mallarmé's language—the sound of the words themselves—she misses an important aspect of Mallarmé's thinking about music.

At the most basic level, a poet uses words as sounds. Everything flows from his ability to see connections in sound between words that can also be arranged to mean something semantically. For a poet who believed in the supremacy of poetic language as firmly as Mallarmé did, and played with phonemes and other sound patterns (rhythm for one) as regularly, it is inconceivable that the sound of words did not matter to him. That this aspect is in dialogue with the other elements that Breatnach identifies is certainly true, but our

\textsuperscript{81} Breatnach, "Music and Mallarmé's Aesthetic," 27.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 31.
understanding of Mallarmé’s poetic practice, his ideas about music, and their potential influence on later figures, especially musicians, is incomplete without reference to the sonorous material of language.

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS IN MALLARME AND DEBUSSY

From the preceding pages it would seem that Mallarmé and Debussy have significantly different ideas about music, poetry and the proper relationship between the two. For Mallarmé, the goal was to create poetry of such purity that it would itself be music. In one of his last published descriptions of the Le Livre, Mallarmé claimed that “Poetry, close to the idea, is Music, par excellence—admits no inferiority.”\(^83\) This poetic music, freed from the typical execution of strings, brass and winds, absorbs all of the characteristics of instrumental music inside of itself in a total synthesis of everything: language, music, dance, the plastic arts and indeed the whole of the universe. Le Livre is to be nothing less than the tracing of all relationships of the universe contained in the book, that singular text that has been the unconscious effort of all writers throughout history.\(^84\) In Mallarmé’s aesthetic, music must be subsumed by poetry, transposed from the symphony to the book.\(^85\) This is why all of the musicians in Mallarmé’s œuvre are silent: the “musicien du silence” (“Sainte”), the “creux néant musicien” (“Une dentelle s’abolit”), even Wagner himself, who is “mal tu par l’encre même” (“Hommage”).\(^86\) It is not exactly that Mallarmé values silence, but rather that he values that which once sounded but has been silenced through writing.

\(^84\) Ibid., 224: “Une proposition qui émane de moi ... sommaire veut, que tout, au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre.”
\(^85\) Mallarmé, “Crise de vers,” OC II, 212.
\(^86\) Mallarmé's doubts about whether poetry could actually accomplish the silencing of music—the larger issue for which Wagner was in some ways merely a symbol—explains the “mal” in this final quotation.
For Debussy, the goal in his texted musical works was rather to create an artistic response to a pre-existing poem that was neither a mere juxtaposition to, nor an imitation of, that text. Debussy does not argue for a systematic poetification of music, nor does he seek to replace poetry with music entirely. Instead, he is interested in the simultaneous presence of these two signifying systems, these two artistic “languages,” and the ways that they write (and read) over one another in the shared space of song. So when a Mallarmean text comes into contact with a piece of music by Debussy, there is, necessarily, a complex interaction between the two systems that includes moments of congruity and discord, imitation and ambivalence. By studying the moments of tension and accord in these works, it should be possible to arrive at an accurate understanding of Mallarmé’s importance for Debussy’s musical style.

In this study, I have restricted myself to examining only those works in which Debussy’s music explicitly engages a Mallarmé poem. In this way, I hope to avoid falling into the trap that awaits more general stylistic readings of Debussy’s larger output: mistaking similarity for causation. I do not mean to argue that comparisons between Debussy’s compositional style in general can not be made with features of Mallarmé’s poetic style, or that such comparisons are not fruitful. However, when it comes to understanding which features of Debussy’s style can be traced back to his contact with Mallarmé’s poetry, we must clearly distinguish between similarity and influence, even if that influence is manifested in a modification or outright rejection of the original source. In those works where the composer has authorized a comparison, whether by bringing music and text together in song, invoking poetry in the titles of pieces, or referring to a literary work in a body of paratextual evidence (letters, marginalia, etc.) we should bring our best critical faculties to bear on understanding both the compositional and aesthetic relationships between the two works. In all other cases,
we must be extremely cautious to avoid confusing similarity in the mind and ear of the listener
for imitation or influence in the compositional process.

In order to fully understand the artistic relationship between Debussy and Mallarmé, the
limits of their mutual understanding must be articulated. First, the central features of
Mallarmé’s creative enterprise must be described. This must include not only the aesthetic
positions outlined in Mallarmé’s critical essays, but also their specific application in his poetry.
My approach to Mallarmé’s poetry is, therefore, situated somewhere between Cohn’s and
Robb’s. Taking my cue from Mallarmé’s method in *Les mots anglais*, I look for coincidences
of sound and sense that Mallarmé consciously exploits in his poetry. In many cases, these
relationships are introduced through end-rhyme and reinforced in the surrounding syllables of
the verse; however, there are several cases (documented by Robb) in which a word with no real
rhyme appears in the middle of a verse line, scattering its phonemic elements across the poem.
From the sound-sense relationship in these clusters, I read outwards to the apparent
significance of the poem, which is always in a dialectic relationship with its phonemic
qualities.

Secondly, the works by Debussy that use or refer to a specific text by Mallarmé must be
examined to see whether Debussy responds in any meaningful way (whether positively or
negatively) to the features of Mallarmé’s work and aesthetic. There are five such compositions:
*Apparition* (1884), *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* (1892–3), and *Trois poèmes de Stéphane
Mallarmé* (1913; *Soupir, Placet futile, Éventail*). What emerges from this study is a more
complex image of Mallarmé and Debussy than has previously been put forward, one where the
attraction, interaction and tension between music and poetry in their respective works stands as
a microcosm of the larger relationship between Music and Language in general.
Paradoxically, Debussy’s understanding of Mallarmé’s poetry is intimately connected to his understanding of Mallarmé’s “music” as well, a music far different from anything he had encountered before. Whether he gained this understanding intuitively through an attentive reading of his poetry, gleaned it through repeated readings of Mallarmé’s critical essays, heard it at the mardi gatherings, or pieced it together from the opinions of those in the Parisian literary milieu, close readings of Debussy’s Mallarmé pieces show the composer by turns embracing and rejecting Mallarmé’s poetry, trying to find a musical counterpart for these poems that was more than just a bad pun. What emerges is an approach to text setting in which the essential qualities of the poems are retained inside the songs through a vocal line that acts like a recitation, while the surrounding musical lines speak with their own logic and purpose.

STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

Chapter One examines Mallarmé’s ideas about music and language. First, I locate Mallarmé’s essential conflict with music in the context of his spiritual-epistemological crises in the late 1860s, fully fifteen years before his “discovery” of Wagner. I argue that the music of Mallarmé’s language is based first and foremost on the phonetic similarity between words. Shared phonemes between words—rhyme in its most elemental form—trace hidden relationships between ideas and objects in the world. These relationships point to an original language in which sound and sense were in perfect accord. Therefore, thought and language were also in perfect accord, and language was the expression of thought in the world.

87 While I agree that there is a surface resemblance between some of Mallarmé’s techniques and the ideas of Wagner, there is little evidence that he actually read any of Wagner’s writings (in French translation) until 1884. While some of his close friends—Villiers de L’Isle Adam, for example—had made the trip to Bayreuth, there is no indication in the frequent letters between the two that they ever spoke about Wagner’s music, much less his more theoretical discussions of drama, poetic language, Stabreim, etc. As Genette has shown, many of these ideas stretch back to Plato and run through French theories of language for hundred of years before Mallarmé. Very few people (Genette and Jacques Michon excepted) have tried to see Mallarmé’s treatment of language in light of these traditions. See Genette, Mimologics and Michon, Mallarmé et “Les mots anglais” (Montreal: University of Montreal Press, 1978).
Somewhere in the unconscious history of humanity, languages began to multiply and change, a Tower of Babel scenario that allowed chance to infiltrate words. The unity of sound and sense in language was fractured and scattered across and inside the world’s languages through the passages of time, war and conquest, and linguistic evolution. The poet’s task is to reunite these fragments of language in which sound and sense are conjoined, and to work thus towards uncovering the essential signification of phonemes and the letters of the alphabet charged to represent them. Verse, which Mallarmé understood broadly to include all forms of literature, has always done this whether explicitly (through rhyme) or implicitly (in prose).

In the process, I draw on evidence from Mallarmé’s letters, sketches for a planned dissertation on the word published posthumously as “Notes sur le langage,” and his explication of similar phonetic reconstructions in *Les mots anglais*. I then turn to the more famous critical essays in order to show how consistently Mallarmé sticks to his guns in the face of the Wagnerian movement. I also demonstrate how Mallarmé’s musical language functions in verse through a critical examination of selected poems, thereby grounding the more philosophical discussions that have received considerable critical attention in a poetic practice that has received relatively less attention.

The remaining chapters examine all five of Debussy’s compositions to Mallarmé poems chronologically. Chapter Two treats Debussy’s early exposure to Mallarmé, which resulted in the song *Apparition* (1884). Therein, I provide a summary of all of the Mallarmé poems that we can reasonably assume that Debussy read to that point in time, and argue that his choice of “Apparition”—a poem in Mallarmé’s early style—shows a degree of ambivalence towards Mallarmé’s mature style. I then show how Debussy’s harmonic language in the song is designed to respond analogically to the semantic meaning of the poem, but not necessarily to

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88 This is Mallarmé’s position, expressed in many of the late essays, including “La Musique et les Lettres” *OC* II, 64: “le vers est tout, dès qu’on écrit” (“verse is everything, from the moment that one writes”).
its particular phonetic effects. Chapter Three offers a new and non-mimetic reading of the Prelude à l’après-midi d’un faune (1892–4). Rather than following the poem line by line or section by section, I see the Prelude in the context of its origins as a theatrical production. In late 1890 or early 1891, Mallarmé engaged Debussy to write an overture, and perhaps incidental music also, for an upcoming performance of “L’après-midi d’un faune.” Although the performance never in fact took place, and Debussy completed the score much later, I argue from biographical and musical evidence that the Prelude is related to Mallarmé’s unique conception of theater as he must have imparted it to Debussy for their collaboration. Basically, I see the Prelude as a representation of the Idea of the poem rather than a representation of its text, for which Debussy’s opening flute solo functions as an abstract musical symbol. The way that this melody and its important pitches recur throughout the Prelude is explained as an example of the arabesque, an enactment of essential processes of thought, which can also be traced in the poem and in Mallarmé’s aesthetic. Chapter Four examines the Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé (1913), which represents Debussy’s final engagement with Mallarmé’s poetry. In these songs, I show the degree to which Debussy understood the phonetic elements of Mallarmé’s style and how this awareness, along with more traditional notions of text-setting, shaped the individual compositions to allow the music of the poems to be audible inside the songs. I will also show moments where Debussy’s music reads across Mallarmé’s texts, and moments when the reverse is also true. In the process, I sketch the limits of the relationship between music and poetry in Debussy and Mallarmé, and between the two arts more generally.

Chapter One stands in a somewhat uncomfortable relationship to the other three. The ideas I explore there are necessary to establish Mallarmé’s basic attitudes towards music and language, and therefore inform all of the texts that Debussy set to some extent. However, the extent to which Debussy knew about, understood, or agreed with Mallarmé’s theories is
impossible to establish directly, and must be inferred from the pieces he composed. For this reason, not every idea in Chapter One finds expression in the later chapters. The twin structure thus implied is, I think, emblematic of the way that music and text relate in these pieces in particular, and on more abstract levels. I hope that those with an interest in Mallarmé will find some of the observations in this chapter useful on their own merits. For those interested in Debussy, the later chapters offer some new insights into the music itself, and the way that it interacts with the texts.

**Methodology**

In dealing with Mallarmé’s œuvre, I use close readings of a number of primary texts. In this way, I hope to show that anyone who reads Mallarmé patiently and carefully—as the poet demanded—may well draw conclusions similar to my own. I have also restricted myself to those texts that it is reasonable to assume that Debussy might actually have read (i.e. those published in Parisian journals), or to those unpublished texts that provide such profound insight into Mallarmé’s aesthetic or poetic practice that they are indispensable to the topic. As such, it is reasonable to assume that Debussy would have had access to them from Mallarmé himself, or from one of their several mutual friends and acquaintances. Of course, my ideas about Mallarmé have been indelibly shaped by my contact with several important secondary sources, most notably the work of Robert Greer Cohn, Guy Michaud, Jacques Derrida, Roger Pearson, Graham Robb and Bertrand Marchal. In their work, I continue to find revelations and new directions to pursue.

In approaching Debussy’s music, I use a rather free interpretation of traditional harmonic theory, Schenkerian perspectives and pc-set theory wherever they produce useful insights. I have no particular theoretical position to espouse, nor do I believe that one particular
analytical technique is universally valid for Debussy’s œuvre. It seems to me that a composer who scorned system as thoroughly as Debussy cannot be completely explicated from any single perspective, and I freely admit that there are additional insights to be gained from analytical perspectives that I have not used here. The techniques I use in the pages that follow simply seem to be the most effective ones to communicate the particular point I wish to make. The Schenkerian-style reductive graphs here are not intended to imply the same set of assumptions about the nature and function of the music as would be the case for Mozart, Beethoven or Brahms; I use them to identify important pitches and voice-leading. Likewise, my use of Roman numerals is intended to imply discernable tonal-functional progressions in the music, even in cases where the surface of the music is more chromatic.

Perhaps the most useful model for me in this regard has been the 1965 dissertation of Laurence Berman, *The Evolution of Tonal Thinking in the Works of Claude Debussy*, whose ability to trace how Debussy’s music works inside of (and occasionally against) the traditional tonal system has not received the attention it deserves. Richard Parks’ *The Music of Claude Debussy*, a pc-set approach that uses Allen Forte’s set-class numbers, has been by turns enlightening and frustrating. While his observations about the non-tonal aspects of Debussy’s pitch organization are insightful, Parks has a habit of asserting that Debussy used Forte’s pc collections as part of his compositional practice, which he clearly could not have, since many of the more exotic collections that Parks sees as central to Debussy’s oeuvre had not received theoretical description during the composer’s lifetime. Now I do not contend that theory is or ought to be prescriptive, but it is difficult to image how Debussy could have conceived of

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many of these collections as collections, rather than as enrichments of more traditional scales and harmonies with which he was certainly familiar.

To my mind, Debussy’s compositional practice involves an underlying tonality that is distorted on the surface by various non-traditional scalar collections, most often the whole tone and octatonic collections. So a complete understanding of the music rests on seeing the underlying tonal syntax and the way that these other collections enrich and obfuscate that syntax. In Debussy’s music, the teleological nature of tonality is counterbalanced by the more static and circular pc collections. Parks tends to treat the pc collections as independent of the tonal structure of the individual pieces, which makes it hard to see how the two are related.

Models of music and text relationships in song over the past half-century have moved steadily towards a model of reading. Critics from Edward T. Cone to Lawrence Kramer have put forward and developed the notion that in a song, what the composer sets is not the poet’s poem, but the composer’s reading of the poem. Kramer’s conception is more fully developed from a literary perspective than Cone’s, but both are eager to imaginatively reconstruct the compositional process as a model for how song should be understood. There is at the heart of this conception a notion of mimesis that makes me uncomfortable. Specifically, it is the assumption that the music of a particular song was composed entirely in response to the text being set, or to a reading of that text. Following this logic, the aesthetic value of a song should be judged by how well the composer matches, follows, or illustrates the text. For convenience, I will call this type of approach to song composition mimetic. Even if it were possible to prove that this mimetic model explains what a particular composer actually does in the compositional process, it would remain a poor basis for critical evaluation. No matter how carefully a composer attempted to follow the syntax, form, sound and meaning of a poem, there would

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necessarily be numerous elements of the text that found no particular expression in the music, and a similar number of purely musical elements that would not engage with the text.

Kramer recognizes this, and is willing to concede that the process of setting a poem as song does a certain amount of violence to the text itself, regardless of how closely a composer tries to follow the text. He coins the term *transmemberment* to represent the often disharmonious way that poetry and music engage and read across one another in song.\(^92\) The music and the text of a song will each organize time in their own way, both as independent elements and also as the hybrid that is song. Kramer’s transmemberment suggests that a more complete critical reaction to song would be not only to note those places where the music and text are in accord, but also places where the musical and textual logic are unrelated or even at cross purposes.

Richard Kurth has taken this notion one step further, and argued for a view of music and text relationships in song that avoids the idea that the music represents the text.\(^93\) Instead, he advances the idea that, in song, the music and the poem engage one another on a more abstract level. Rather than seeing the music as dependent on the poem for its meaning, Kurth argues that the music already has its own meaning, generated through its own intrinsic processes.\(^94\) This musical meaning is not created “after” the poem (although the specific composition may be), but instead is an integral part of music itself that exists prior to its actual instrumental or vocal expression. Much as language engages a system of meanings that significantly predate the composition of any particular poem, music also emerges from a tradition with its own grammar and syntax. In this way, he argues that both the music and the poem be conceived as examples of *writing* as Derrida uses the term: as a forms of “generalized

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\(^94\) Ibid., 31.
writing” that are not transcriptions of prior acoustic events (speech in one case and instrumental sound in the other), but “any sort of inscription in any sort of graphic, sonic or conceptual medium.” As such, the music and poetry of a song can be understood to write over (or under) one another. Kurth coins the term *counterwriting* to describe the ways that music and poetry write across one another in song, the one constantly informing and reconstructing the other.

My own approach to music and poetry in song borrows rather freely from Cone, Kramer and Kurth. It is also informed by Mallarmé’s notion of music and poetry as “the alternate faces of the Idea,” a concept that will be treated more fully in Chapter One. Whatever a composer imagines the process to be, we should never lose sight of the fact that what the composer actually sets is not a reading of the poem: it is the text itself. By “text,” I mean not only the words of the poem, although these are fundamental and often to my mind strangely overlooked in many approaches to song, but also the network of meanings and relationships that accrue to the words through their engagement with literary tradition. Thus, on one level, song is characterized by *counterwriting*, in that both the music and the poem are self-contained cognitive acts whose individual meanings enter into a supplementary relationship. However, song is also, simultaneously, the presentation of a particular utterance of the poem: an opportunity for language and music to be heard in tandem. The way that the composer crafts this utterance may privilege some aspects of the poem, be they semantic, rhythmic or phonetic, without effacing those aspects that it does not treat as significant. Debussy’s Mallarmé’ settings often seem crafted with this idea in mind. They preserve, to a degree uncommon in song, the rhythms and pacing of the poems, in order to ensure that the collateral damage done to the poem in the process of its setting is minimal.

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The text itself is a single unit of significance, which endures its setting in song much as a diamond endures its setting in a ring. Likewise, the music with which the composer sets the poem is a single unit of significance that suffers the presence of the text. What really matters in song is the relationship between these two independent units; the way that the music and the text read (and write) across and through one another. Therefore, we cannot restrict ourselves to considering only those moments where they seem to be in accord, lest we make of the music simply a "bad pun" of the text (or vice versa). We must strive, instead, to understand the complex dialectic of music and poetry that makes up song, tracing both congruity and disjunction, whether intentional or incidental. Both the poet's voice and the composer's voice deserve recognition, even if they speak at cross purposes or with mutual indifference. That this often leaves a textural gesture without a musical counterpart or vice versa does not concern me at all.

Therefore, in the analyses that follow, I am not fundamentally concerned with showing that Debussy understood all of the finer points of Mallarmé's linguistic theories as they are formulated in his critical essays and revealed in his poetry. Likewise, I do not argue that Debussy's musical language owes a particular debt to Mallarmé, a position that I find impossible to prove in any significant way. What interests me, instead, is the way that music and text work in these pieces, producing both moments of accord and discord in the process. In the case of the songs, it is Debussy's extraordinary willingness to allow Mallarmé's text to emerge from the setting with its rhythm and syntax intact that preserves the poet's voice in the song. This allows Debussy's musical response, and particularly the piano parts, to convey the

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96 Significance is used here in the sense defined by Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978), 8.

97 Cone's approach is particularly problematic here. He claims that, in a song, the composer steals the poet's voice, climbs inside the poet's words and changes their meanings to reflect the composer's understanding of the text. All traces of this violence must then be ignored by the critic. The only meanings that count are the ones that the composer has recognized and chosen to respond to in the music.
composer's voice most directly. Debussy's typical sensitivity to syntactic and semantic issues in these poems also foregrounds those moments in which the music contradicts the text, writes over it and transmembers it. In the case of the *Prélude*, the fact that the words of Mallarmé's poem are neither explicitly heard in the piece or imagined in the listener's mind during its performance allows Debussy to focus more directly on the aesthetic ideas of Mallarmé, particularly those concerning music, the theater, and the way that Music expresses and figures the Idea.
CHAPTER ONE
THE MUSIC OF LANGUAGE: SOUND AND SENSE IN MALLARME

INTRODUCTION

From his earliest published poems in the 1860s through his final critical essays in the 1890s, Stéphane Mallarmé wrote constantly about music and its importance to his œuvre. Music and musicians figure prominently in several early poems, and Mallarmé frequently relied on musical metaphors to describe his poetic technique in letters to close friends. In the late 1860s and throughout the 1870s, music played an important role in Mallarmé’s evolving conception of language, which necessarily impacts both his later poetry and his prose. From 1885 through his death in 1898, music became more important as a subject in his critical writings. In part, this was a response to the popularity of Wagner in fin-de-siècle Paris, but it was also a reaction against several poetic movements that attempted to imitate musical effects in verse. Although Mallarmé’s aesthetic is based in large part on the idea of music, his conception of this art is intensely personal, having little to do with conventional notions of music. His mature writings advocate disregarding the traditional sonorities of instruments and voices in favour of a mental music that he found in language and explored through poetry.

In the early part of his career (1865–1869), Mallarmé’s desire to write a new and original kind of poetry coincided with a series of spiritual and epistemological crises. As letters from the period testify, he became intensely interested in the relationship between the sounds of words and their meaning, which in turn inspired him to consider the formation and evolution of language. Mallarmé undertook a series of informal linguistic and aesthetic studies that were crucial to the development of his mature poetic style. The idea of music plays an important role

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1 For example, the instrumentiste poetry of René Ghil and his circle, who arbitrarily assigned both colours and musical timbres to French phonemes in the hope of imitating music and painting.
in the crisis period, one that has received relatively little critical attention. From letters and the notes that remain from abandoned literary projects, as well as the poetry produced during that time, the role of music in Mallarmé's early works can be studied. Likewise his notion of a musical language based on the coincidence of phonetic and semantic relationships between words can be reconstructed. The conclusions that can be drawn from this evidence are confirmed by Les mots anglais, a pedagogical philology of the English language that applies many of these ideas about language to a foreign idiom.

During the crisis, Mallarmé came to believe that poetry—which is the highest expression of the musical possibilities of language—was uniquely suited to explore the mysteries of the universe. He saw a model for a new epistemology based on the way language functions: on the way that sound and sense interact to produce and refine meaning, rather than the strictly denotative system of contemporary language in which words have their meanings through a tacit conventional agreement among its users. Furthermore, he came to see that the universe is also constructed this way, as a series of relationships between things that does not necessarily point beyond itself. The reality of objects in the world (or words in language) was important insofar as it allowed him to examine the relationships they generated.

Between the end of the crisis period in 1870 and his sudden rise to prominence in 1884, Mallarmé published very little poetry. Instead, he dedicated himself to exploring the consequences of the conclusions he had drawn about language and the universe. During this time, Mallarmé began serious work on Le Livre, his vision of a great work that would summarize the history and development of the universe through poetry. This work was never finished. In the notes that remain for Le Livre, music takes on a slightly different role than in his earlier poetry. Here, music becomes a symbol for abstract patterns of thought that identify

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2 Mallarmé often ridiculed the commercial use of language, where the meaning of words was as arbitrarily defined and conventional as the value assigned to money. See Mallarmé, "Crise de vers," OC II, 212.
relationships between apparently disparate things. *Le Livre* is dedicated to the notion that there is a unity underlying the universe that is hidden from common perception. The relationships suggested by language, be they semantic, phonetic, graphic or etymological trace relationships between the actual objects and ideas that language evokes. The music of language that Mallarmé had discovered in the 1860s now became a model for the essential relationships that make up all of existence. Mallarmé’s notes for *Le Livre* provide evidence for the expanded role that music now plays in his thought.

In 1885, Mallarmé rose to prominence and his output of both poems and critical prose increased significantly. Many of the essays deal explicitly with music. Some are dedicated to the subject of Wagner, and to outlining the essential differences between the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and Mallarmé’s own ideal synthesis of the arts in poetry. Others are more abstract and theoretical, describing the contributions of music to contemporary writing and to the Great Work. In these essays, Mallarmé espouses his belief that poetry itself is music par excellence. Actual instrumental sound, as heard at a concert for example, was for him merely a sketch of some unwritten poem awaiting its fullest expression through language. Mallarmé had often attended the Lamoureux concerts from the middle of the 1880s, and could often be seen there furiously scribbling in a notebook as the music was playing, as if trying to transcribe in language the poem latent underneath the orchestra’s sonic surface. In letters to fellow poets, he often spoke of repatriating the rhythms and techniques of music to language, which was their ultimate source, and of the challenge that Wagner’s music dramas presented to a new generation of French poets. The late poetry puts into practice many of the ideas contained in the late essays, which are in essence simply further developments of Mallarmé’s ideas about musical language and verse in general.
This chapter traces the evolution of Mallarmé's musical thinking as it relates to the sound-sense relationship in language. It draws out specific ideas about the musical nature of language from his correspondence and critical writings. The most important of these are letters that describe the spiritual and linguistic crisis that Mallarmé suffered in the 1860s, notes from an aborted dissertation on Words that he planned in 1869, and the book *Les mots anglais*, which applies many of these ideas to the English language. I then show how these ideas are transformed into poetic practice in selected poems that are all obsessed with a relatively small group of letters and phonemes shared by a large number of words in the text. With this background established, I turn to Mallarmé's concept of musical thought as revealed in letters and the notes for *Le Livre*. Finally, I show how Mallarmé's ideas about music are further developed in some of the late critical essays and in his later poetry.

**Music in Mallarmé's Early Writings**

Mallarmé's first significant writing about music is found in the critical essay "Hérésies artistiques: L’art pour tous," which dates from 1862. Here, Mallarmé regrets the easy access that the public has to literary works of art. He claims that a degree of mystery is necessary to protect artworks from the profaning gaze of the general population. His ideal example is musical notation, a macabre procession of "severe, chaste and unknown signs." These signs, meaningful only to people with specialized musical training, protect music from the intrusion of ignorant readers who might otherwise stumble through masterpieces and feel that they understand the composer's message.

Poetry has no such defense from idle curiosity, since it is printed in the normal characters of the alphabet. This gives rise to the practice of teaching poetry in the schools, and

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4. Ibid., 360: "signes sévères, chastes, inconnus."
promotes the notion, abhorrent to Mallarmé, that an “educated” person—one who would not

give a second thought to his inability to understand a page of musical score—feels compelled
to offer judgment on poetry. To remedy this situation, Mallarmé dreamed of inventing “an

immaculate language,—some hieratic forms whose arid study blinds the profane and
encourages the predestined person who has patience.” This new language would be inherently
musical in its function; it would speak only to those initiated in the secrets of poetry, while
keeping the casual onlooker at arm’s length from the work.

As the polemical work of a twenty-year-old poet, “Hérésies artistiques” provides a

sketch of certain aspects of Mallarmé’s mature aesthetic. Certainly, there are derivative
elements in the essay, particularly Mallarmé’s valorization of Wagner, which at this point in
time is largely borrowed from Baudelaire’s essay on Tannhäuser, published the previous year. But from this point forward in Mallarmé’s career, the connection between music and poetry
and the need to make poetic language musical become recurring themes in both his poetry and
his critical essays.

The search for a new language, one that could answer the ambition of “Hérésies
artistiques,” became an obsession for Mallarmé in the following years. Letters from the period
between 1864 and 1866 indicate that this search was transformed into a study of words, and a
careful consideration of the relationship between sound and sense in them. In a long letter to
Henri Cazalis, Mallarmé speaks of the hours of research spent on each word for the poem
“L’Azur” so that “the first word, which contains the first idea, not only helps to create the

5 It does not occur to Mallarmé to mention that although the casual onlooker may not be able to read musical
notation, anyone who can hear has access to music as sound, and virtually anybody who hears a piece of music
feels entitled to have an opinion of it, exactly the same situation that he decries in poetry.

6 Mallarmé, “Hérésies artistiques,” OC II, 361: “une langue immaculée,—des formes hiératiques dont l’étude
arde aveugle le profane et aiguillonne le patient fatal.”

7 Mallarmé did not attend the 1861 premiere of Tannhäuser, and performances of Wagner were rare until the
1880s, when Wagner excerpts were played at the concerts spirituels led by Charles Lamoureux. There is no
evidence that Mallarmé ever made a pilgrimage to Bayreuth.
general effect of the poem, but also serves to prepare the last word. The effect produced, without a dissonance, without a fioritura, no matter how appealing, for that distracts—this is what I’m seeking.” Mallarmé continues:

For those who, like yourself, seek in a poem something other than the music of the verses, they will find a real drama there. And it has been a terrible difficulty to combine, in proper harmony, the dramatic element, hostile to the idea of pure and subjective Poetry, with the serenity and the calmness of the lines essential for Beauty.⁹

Like many of Mallarmé’s poems, the ostensible subject of “L’Azur” is the poet’s inability to write poetry. Here, the poet is oppressed by the very Azur that inspires him.¹⁰


⁹ Ibid., 104: “[P]our ceux qui, comme toi, cherchent dans un poème autre chose que la musique du vers, il y a là un vrai drame. Et ça a été une terrible difficulté de combiner, dans une juste harmonie, l’élément dramatique, hostile à l’idée de Poésie pure et subjective, avec la sérénité et le calme de [sic] lignes nécessaires à la Beauté.”

¹⁰ Bertrand Marchal has given a compelling account of Mallarmé’s fascination with the Azur. See La religion de Mallarmé: Poésie, mythologie et religion (Paris: Jose Corti, 1988).
L'Azur

De l'éternel azur la sereine ironie
Accable, belle indolentement comme les fleurs
Le poète impuissant qui maudit son génie
A travers un désert stérile de Douleur.

Fuyant, les yeux fermés, je le sens qui regarde
Avec l'intensité d'un remords atterrant,
Mon âme vide. Où fuir? Et quelle nuit hagardère
Jeter, jeter sur ce mépris navrant?

Brouillards, montez! versez vos cendres monotones
Avec de longs haillons de brume dans les cieux
Que noiera le marais livide des automnes
Et bâtissez un grand plafond silencieux!

Et toi, sors des étangs lethéens et ramasse
En t'en venant la vase et les pâles roseaux
Cher Ennui, pour boucher d'une main jamais lasse
Les grands trous bleus que font méchamment les oiseaux.

Encor! que sans répit les tristes cheminées
Fument, et que de suie une errante prison
Éteigne dans l'horreur de ses noires trainées
Le soleil se mourant jaunâtre à l'horizon!

—Le Ciel est mort. —Vers toi, j'accours! donne, ô matière
L'oubli de l'idéal cruel et du Pêché
A ce martyr qui vient partager la litière
Où le bétail heureux des hommes est couché.

Car j'y veux, puisque enfin ma cervelle, vidée
Comme le pot de fard gisant au pied du mur
N'a plus l'art d'attifer la sanglotante idée
Lugubrement bailler vers un trépas obscur ...

En vain! L'Azur triomphe, et je l'entends qui chante
Dans les cloches. Mon âme, il se fait voix pour plus
Nous faire peur avec sa victoire méchante,
Et du métal vivant sort en bleus angelus!

Il roule par la brume, ancien et traverse
Ta native agonie ainsi qu'un glaive sûr
Où fuir dans la révolte inutile et perverse?
Je suis hanté. L'Azur! L'Azur! L'Azur! L'Azur!

Blue Sky

The serene contradiction of the eternal Azure
Overwhelms, beautifully indolent like the flowers
The impotent poet who curses his genius
Across a sterile desert of Sorrows.

Fleeing, eyes closed, I feel it watching
With the intensity of a dismal remorse,
My empty soul. Where to flee? And what haggard night
To cast, shreds, to cast on this unfortunate scorn?

Mists, arise! pour out your colorless cinders
With long rags of mist in the skies
Which will drown the livid marsh of autumns
And build a great silent ceiling!

And you, come out from Lethean pools and gather
In your coming the slime and the pale reeds
Dear Boredom, to block with a tireless hand
The great blue holes that the birds spitefully dig.

Even though without respite the sad chimneys
Smoke, and though the soot, a wandering prison
Chokes in the horror of its black streaks
The sun dying yellow on the horizon!

—The Sky is dead. —Towards you I run! give, O matter
Forgetfulness of the cruel Ideal and of Sin
To this martyr who comes to share the stable
Where the happy herd of man is laid down.

For there I want, because finally my brain, empty
Like a jar of makeup lying up against the wall
No longer has the ability to dress up the sobbing idea
To yawn lugubriously towards an obscure death ...

In vain! The Azure triumphs, and I hear it singing
In the bells. My soul, it takes voice to make us
More afraid with its spiteful victory,
And from the living metal emerges an angelus in blue!

It rolls through the mist, ancient and across
Your native agony like a sure sword;
Where to flee in the useless and perverse revolt?
I am haunted. L'Azur! L'Azur! L'Azur! L'Azur!

Mallarmé's desire to have the “music of the verses” exist in a proper harmony with the
“real drama” of the poem is worked out in its prosody. Specifically, Mallarmé's end-rhymes

11 Mallarmé, OC I, 14-15.
enact the semantic message of the poem, in a technique that will come to characterize his mature style. If we take Mallarmé at his word, then the word “Azur”—the “first word” of the poem, serves both to prepare the last line of the poem phonetically and to focus the reader’s attention on the treatment of this word in particular. In this light, it is not surprising that Mallarmé uses “Azur” as an end-rhyme in the final quatrains of the poem. What is surprising is the relative poverty of the *rime suffisante* “sûr / L’Azur”, which shares only two phonemes: /y/ and /r/. Most of the rhymes here, as with Mallarmé’s poetry in general, are *rimes riches.*

For example:

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\text{regarde / hagarde} \quad \text{cieux / silencieux} \quad \text{chante / méchante} \quad \text{traverse / perverse}
\]

This observation becomes more meaningful in light of the fact that Mallarmé had several other words at his disposal, ones that would have produced a *rime riche* with Azur and could have easily been worked into the poetic fabric (of the options, “brisure” and “croisure” are especially appealing). However, each of these words would have required Mallarmé to use two different letters (s and z) to produce the /z/ phoneme, a process that he generally avoids elsewhere in the poem. In fact, if one insists on maintaining the spelling of the phonemes, then Azur becomes a rhyme-less word. Read this way, the “serene contradiction” of “Azur” is not merely that the Azur-as-Ideal is unattainable metaphysically, but poetically or prosodically as well.

Not content to abandon the struggle to find a rhyme for “azur,” Mallarmé simply switches from end rhyme to assonance, opening up a whole new set of possibilities. The

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12 Throughout this chapter, IPA phonetic characters are used to represent the sound of specific phonemes. For those unfamiliar with these characters, see Appendix B for a complete listing of French phonemes and a guide to pronunciation.

13 A *rime suffisante* shares 2 phonemes, a consonant and a vowel with the same voicing. A *rime riche* has at least three shared phonemes.
proliferation and concentration of /a/ phonemes in certain lines of the poem suggests that Mallarmé was consciously exploiting this sound:

À ce martyr qui vient partager la litière
N'a plus l'art d'attifer la sanglotante idée
Il roule par la brume, ancien et traverse
Ta native agonie ainsi qu'un glaive sûr

The tight control of phonemes that these lines exhibit, and the way that they connect with the key word Azur is likely what Mallarmé had in mind when he wrote of the “effect produced” and the “music” of the lines. Yet the haunting four-fold reiteration of “L’Azur” that closes the poem suggests that the word continues to torment the poet long after the poem itself reaches its conclusion.

Mallarmé’s struggle with language reaches a kind of critical mass with “Hérodiade,” which Mallarmé began in 1864. The desire to focus on the “effect produced” in “L’Azur” had revealed the inadequacy of everyday words, as they were commonly used, to notate the kinds of effects Mallarmé had in mind. He returns therefore to the idea set forth in “Hérésies artistiques” of inventing a new poetic language. However, now the concern is not primarily with protecting poetry from the casual glance. Instead, Mallarmé writes of inventing

a language that must of necessity burst forth from a very new poetics, which I could define in these few words: paint, not the object, but the effect it produces. Therefore, the lines in such a poem must not be composed of words, but of intentions, and all the words must fade before the sensation.

The language that Mallarmé wanted to produce was one in which there would be an accord between the intentions of the poem and the words actually used to fashion it. He wanted to eliminate, as much as possible, the tendency of individual words to stick out of the poetic texture, to live lives independent of their contextual situation. Increasingly, his thoughts turned

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14 Despite working on the poem for more than 30 years, “Hérodiade” remained unfinished at Mallarmé’s death.
to music as a model for this kind of language and the considerable use of musical metaphor to describe his struggles in the composition of "Hérodiade" testify to this.

I have, moreover, there [in "Hérodiade"] found a singular and intimate means of painting and notating very fleeting impressions. Add, for more terror, that all of these impressions follow one another as in a symphony, and that I often spend entire days asking myself whether this impression can accompany that one, what is their relationship and their effect.¹⁶

However, Mallarmé found work on "Hérodiade" exceptionally difficult. In a letter to Cazalis, he complains that "I was throwing myself like a desperate maniac on the elusive overture of my poem ["Hérodiade"] that sings within me, but which I can not write down."¹⁷ The following day, in a letter to Theodor Aubanel, Mallarmé makes a similar complaint, adding "I need the most silent solitude of the soul, and an unknown forgetfulness, to hear singing inside myself certain mysterious notes."¹⁸ It seems that Mallarmé struggled not with the idea of the poem per se, but in deciding on how that idea would be best expressed in verse. The musical metaphors here are telling, for Mallarmé’s search for the correct words with which to express his ideas are centered on the notion of phonetic harmony and balance.

This is easy to see in an 1865 letter to Eugène Lefèbure on "Hérodiade": “The most beautiful page of my work will be that which contains only the divine word Hérodiade. What inspiration I’ve had I owe to this name, and I believe that if my heroine had been called Salomé, I would have invented this dark word, red as an open pomegranate, Hérodiade.”¹⁹

Whatever inspiration Mallarmé may have drawn from the story of Hérodiade, he also drew significant poetic inspiration from the phonemes of word itself. As Eric Garnier notes, this


¹⁷ Mallarmé, *Corr.* I, 179-80. Letter to Cazalis, 5 December 1865: “je me jetais en maniaque désespéré sur une insaisissable ouverture de mon poème [Hérodiade] qui chante en moi, mais que je ne puis noter.”


technique—the “singular and intimate means of notating fleeting impressions” quoted above—can be clearly seen in line 116 of the poem, where the phonemes of the word Hérodiade (/erodiade/) are reordered and scattered throughout the line:

Hérodiade     au clair regard de diamant
/er//o//dia//da/   /o/   /er/   /da/   /dia/

This phonetic game is more than just an isolated display of poetic virtuosity. It also responds to the semantic surroundings of the text. In a section that celebrates Hérodiade’s purity and that, by extension, celebrates the purity of the poetry with which Mallarmé describes it, the image of Hérodiade gazing into a mirror finds its echo in the prosodic relationship between the word and its own phonetic surroundings:

Et ta sœur solitaire, ô ma sœur éternelle
Mon rêve montera vers toi: telle
Rare limpidité d’un cœur qui le songea,
Je me crois seule en ma monotone patrie
Et tout, autour de moi, vit dans l’idolâtrie
D’un miroir qui reflète en son calme dormant
Hérodiade au clair regard de diamant ...
O charme dernier, oui! je le sens, je suis seule.

And your solitary sister, O my eternal sister,
My dream shall rise toward you: such
Rare clarity of a heart which dreams of it,
I believe I am alone in my monotonous country,
And everything, around me, lives in the idolatry
Of a mirror that reflects in its sleeping calm
Hérodiade with the clear gaze of a diamond ...
O final charm, yes! I feel it, I am alone.

Several similar examples can be adduced. It is significant, however, that Mallarmé never allows the complete phonetic makeup of the word Hérodiade to appear in any other line. Instead, the lines typically lack one phoneme or fragment the individual syllables of her name. In this way, Hérodiade is constantly suggested by the play of phonemes on the sounding surface of the poem while at the same time highlighting the singular appearance of the entire phonemic set shown above:

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The same phonetic techniques that Mallarmé developed for “Hérodiade” can be seen at work in other poems explicitly connected with music. One such poem is “Brise marine.”

THE SONG OF THE SAILORS: MALLARME’S “BRISE MARINE”

Brise marine

Sea Breeze

La chair est triste, hélas! et j’ai lu tous les livres.
Fuir! là-bas fuir! Je sens que des oiseaux sont ivres
D’être parmi l’écume inconnue et les cieux!
Rien, ni les vieux jardins reflétés par les yeux
Ne retiendra ce cœur qui dans La mer se trempe
Ô nuits! ni la clarté déserte de ma lampe
Sur le vide papier que la blancheur défend,
Et ni la jeune femme allaitant son enfant.
Je partirai! Steamer balançant ta maturé,
Lève l’ancre pour une exotique nature!
Un Ennui, désolé par les cruel espoirs,
Croit encore à l’adieu suprême des mouchoirs!
Et, peut-être, les mâts, invitant les orages
Sont-ils de ceux qu’un vent penche sur les naufrages
Perdus, sans mâts, sans mâts, ni fertiles flots ...
Mais, ô mon cœur, entends le chant des matelots!
The flesh is sad, alas! and I have read all the books.
To flee! to flee down there! I feel that the birds are drunk
To be amid the unknown foam and the skies!
Nothing, not the old gardens reflected in my eyes
Can restrain this heart that soaks in the sea
O nights! nor the deserted light of my lamp
On the empty page that the whiteness defends,
And not the young woman nursing her child.
I will depart! Steamer balancing your masts,
Weigh anchor for an exotic nature!
A Boredom, left desolate by cruel hopes,
Still believes in the supreme farewell of handkerchiefs!
And, perhaps, the masts, inviting storms
Are those that a wind tips toward the shipwrecks
Lost, without masts, without masts, nor fertile isles ...
But, O my heart, hear the song of the sailors!

21 Mallarmé, OC I, 15.
Composed in 1865 and published the following year, "Brise marine" is, like "L’Azur," a poem motivated by the inability to write a poem. The poet sits at his desk, facing again the empty page whose very whiteness offers it a defense from the profaning stroke of his pen. The weight of literary tradition stifles his creativity, as each tentative beginning seems to be merely an imitation of another writer and another writing ("j'ai lu tous les livres"). He dreams of a voyage to uncharted regions where the poet, drunk to be in unfamiliar lands, can create something truly original. The obstacles of his quotidian life—his young family, familiar surroundings, even his notorious writer’s block—will not stop him this time. He is determined to leave all this behind in search for new and exotic lands. Yet his naïve enthusiasm is tempered by a deep-seated fear that this voyage, like others before, will end in disaster, his poor poetic vessel no match for the storms that it will face. Nevertheless, he seems resolved to set forth, spurred on by the song of the sailors.

Interpreted this way, "Brise marine" picks up on a common Mallarmean theme of failure: failure to write the great poems that his imagination has sketched (especially "Hérodiade"). Poems like this one are then seen as studies for larger works, like Le Livre. Mallarmé himself often refers to his shorter poems in this way. However, this interpretation is somewhat superficial, since it focuses on the denotative meanings of the words and the analogies they generate. It takes no account of the actual poetic processes that Mallarmé uses in its creation and is therefore only one half of the counterpoint that is essential to understanding the poem. The voyage that Mallarmé dreams of is a voyage of language, and through language. It enacts its own success even as it speaks of its own peril.

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In “Brise marine,” the poet is compelled by the song of the sailors. What, exactly, is this song? In order to answer the question, we must look at Mallarmé’s prosody. A quick look at Mallarmé’s rhymes here reveals a preponderance of *rimes riches*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Livres / Ivres</th>
<th>Mâture / Nature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/ivr/ /ivr/</td>
<td>/atyR/ /atyR/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Les cieux / Les yeux</th>
<th>Espoirs / Mouchoirs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/le sjö/ /lez jö/</td>
<td>/war/ /war/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trempe / Lampe</th>
<th>Orages / Naufrages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/äp/ /äp/</td>
<td>/ra3/ /ra3/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Défend / Enfant</th>
<th>Ilots ... / Matelots</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/fä/ /fä/</td>
<td>/lo/ /lo/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the three instances of *rimes suffisantes* in this poem, the first two coincide with the poem’s description of writer’s block and the challenges posed by his family commitments. One may interpret these *rimes suffisantes* as enactments of the poet’s struggles to write the kind of poetry to which he aspires. The third *rime suffisante* in the final couplet is harder to explain as an enactment of the semantic message of the text. The song of the sailors is supposed to be the main source of the poet’s inspiration, the reason why he will risk the storms on his rickety boat. Yet the relative poverty of this rhyme calls the whole endeavor into question: why risk everything for such an uninspiring rhyme?

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23 The visual “dissonance” in orthography reinforces the trouble here – Mallarmé’s letters from this period often complain that his daughter Genèviève (born in 1864) cried often and loudly.

24 I do not mean to imply that *rimes riches* are somehow more desirable than *rimes suffisantes* in general, but merely that in this poem the *rimes suffisantes* are made to coincide with the poem’s description of the things that stand in the poet’s way.
The answer, I think, is found in the exhortation to listen to the song of the sailors, to hear the way that it winds through the text and transforms the final word of the poem. Stated simply, Mallarmé’s poetic technique encourages the reader to hear:

"mâts-ilots"
/matilo/

as a homonym lurking behind the actual word :

matelots
/mat(o)lo/

in order to provide the *rime riche* that the listener has come to expect (the six previous lines all end with *rimes riches*). This fuses at a phonetic level three words that already share both an orthographic and a semantic connection: “mâts”, “îlots” and “matelots.” This is the “music of language” that Mallarmé will identify later on in *Les mots anglais*, and an important part of his poetic technique. The surrounding lines are densely packed with visual and acoustic echoes of this “new” word:

Et, peut-être, les mâts, invitant les orages
Sont-ils de ceux qu’un vent penche sur les naufrages
Perdus, sans mâts, sans mâts, ni fertiles îlots ...
Mais, ô mon cœur, entends le chant des matelots!

The three-fold repetition of “mâts,” the two instances of “île” (island) hidden in “sont-ils” and “fertiles,” and the two Ms in the last line demonstrate a conscious effort by Mallarmé to reinforce the individual letters of this group of words. It may also be that the striking number

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25 Graham Robb has detailed similar cases of mispronunciation in Mallarmé’s poetry. See *Unlocking Mallarmé*, 52–54.

26 Compare this with the original 1865 version of the poem, whose last four lines read:

Et serais-tu de ceux, steamer, dans les orages
Que le Destin charmant réserve à des naufrages
Perdus, sans mâts ni planche, à l’abri des îlots...
Mais, ô mon cœur, entends le chant des matelots!

And would you be one of those, steamer, in the storms
That charming Fate has destined for shipwrecks
Lost, without masts or plank, in the shelter of isles...
But, O my heart, hear the song of the sailors!
of circumflexes (6) are significant, providing a kind of visual connection between “mâts” and “îlots.” This makes the alternative pronunciation of “matelots” seem motivated by the text itself—not just a chance fragment of language or a poetic conceit, but a reconstruction of language itself through poetry.28

Mallarmé’s linguistic games thus invite an alternative reading of, and an alternative reading strategy for, the poem. In addition to the usual dialogue of rhythm, meaning and rhyme, here the reader is encouraged to scan the text for common phonemes and letters that call out to one another independently of their usual disposition in words. Certain key letters and sounds emerge from various words and invite the reader to read them as integral to the poem’s significance. Much later, Mallarmé describes the process thus: “Words, spontaneously, are exalted by several recognized facets [letters] the more rare or valid for the mind, the centre of vibratory suspense; that perceives them independently of the ordinary sequence.”29

Mallarmé himself compares this kind of reading strategy to the reading of constellations.30 Reading a constellation is essentially an act of imagination that creates meaning through the recognition of celestial patterns, connecting certain stars and not others

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27 Cohn suggests that the circumflex represents “the effect of waves” in Mallarmé’s poetry. Though I am not convinced of the universality of this claim, it may be relevant to this passage. See Cohn, *Toward the Poems*, 279.

28 Mallarmé discusses this practice in “Crise de vers,” an essay concerned with the increasing “musicalization” of poetry in France: “Le vers qui de plusieurs vocables refait un mot total, neuf, étranger à la langue et comme incantatoire, achève cet isolement de la parole : niant, d’un trait souverain, le hasard demeuré aux termes malgré l’artifice de leur retrempe alternée en le sens et la sonorité, et vous cause cette surprise de n’avoir ou jamais tel fragment ordinaire d’élocution, en même temps que la réminiscence de l’objet nommé baigne dans une neuve atmosphère.” See Mallarmé, *OC* II, 213.


30 See, for example, a letter to Cazalis in which Mallarmé contrasts his own poetic practice with that of mutual friend Emmanuel des Essarts, who “prend une poignée d’étoiles... et les laisser se former au hasard en constellations imprévues” (“takes a handful of stars... and allows them to form themselves at random into unexpected constellations”). Mallarmé, *Corr.* I, 104. Letter to Cazalis, January 1864.
because of their shared participation in a particular image. A poetic constellation applies the same kind of thinking to language, except here the stars are replaced by letters. In order to read a poetic constellation, the reader must be willing to read both in a traditional, linear, syntactic manner, and in a new, essentially geometric way, drawing connections between words with shared phonemes (or actual letters in the present case) that are significant in themselves, in addition to their grammatical or syntactic function. These constellations are engraved across the surface of the poem, adding to and refining the total significance of the text.

This play of phonemes and letters in Mallarmé’s text is, literally, the song of the sailors ("le chant des matelots"), a song which winds through the final lines of “Brise marine” as a positive counterpoint to its semantic message of longing and impending failure. On a boat made of words and sounds, the poet sails through the storms of chance, navigating by the constellations of shared sounds and letters that reveal the music of language.

MALLARMÉ’S SILENT MUSE: “SAINTE CÉCILE”

Around the same time as “Brise marine,” perhaps as a way to work out some of the finer points of the new language with which he was struggling, perhaps as a pleasant diversion from his frustrating work on “Hérodiade,” Mallarmé penned a short poem that he described as “melodic and created above all with music in mind.”

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Sainte Cécile
jouant sur l’aile d’un chérubin

(Chanson et image anciennes)

À la fenêtre recelant
Le santal vieux qui se dédore
De la Viole étincelant
Jadis parmi flûte et mandore,

Est une Sainte recelant
Le livre vieux qui se déplie
Du Magnificat ruisellant
Jadis à véprée et complie,

Sainte à vitrage d’ostensoir
Pour clore la harpe par l’ange
Offerte avec son vol du soir
À la délicate phalange

Du doigt que, sans le vieux santal
Ni le vieux livre, elle balance
Sur le plumage instrumental,
Musicienne du silence!

Sainte Cecilia
playing on the wing of an angel

(Ancient song and image)

In the window concealing
The old sandalwood that loses its gilt
Of the Viol sparkling
Once amid flute and lute,

Is a Saint concealing
The old book that unfolds
The Magnificat flowing
Once from vespers and compline:

Saint at the window of a monstrance
To close the harp offered by
An angel with its evening flight
To the delicate tip

Of a finger which, without the old sandalwood
Nor the old book, she balances
On the instrumental plumage,
Musician of silence.

The work stands out in Mallarmé’s œuvre in many ways. Formally, it is a departure from Mallarmé’s self-admitted “mania” for sonnets in his early lyric works. It is also written in octosyllabics, the first instance of this meter in his mature poetry. It is, moreover, the first of the lyric poems to have a musician as its subject. The musical elements of the poem go far beyond the musical subject of the work, however, right down into the fabric of the words themselves.

The subject of the poem is a stained glass window containing a portrayal of the patron saint of music, adorned with the customary viol and hymnal and surrounded by other winged angels. In the setting sun, the window reveals the Saint’s finger resting lightly, or so it appears, on the wing of one of the surrounding cherubim. Mallarmé sees a kind of harp in the angel’s

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32 Mallarmé, OC I, 114.
33 Like many nineteenth-century poets, Mallarmé organized many of his youthful poems according to form and meter, suggesting that he saw these elements as significant in themselves, and not wholly external to the poem’s content.
wing, which the Saint seems to prefer to the faded viol and the ancient missal. It is not difficult, given the frequency with which Mallarmé equates the poetic act with wings and flights, to understand that by choosing the poetic wing rather than the traditional musical instrument, Mallarmé is challenging music by suggesting that her patron saint actually prefers his silent, poetic music.

Guy Michaud has noted that this poem is arranged like a diptych in which the two panels of the window (one showing the Saint with the instruments, the other with her playing the wing/harp, represented by the two halves of the poem) are superimposed onto one another. Thus, the images of the Saint as musician and as poet are simultaneously present in what Michaud calls a polyvalent image. Michaud also suggests a sort of mimetic connection between certain phonemes in the poem and its key images: the labial consonants represent the flight of the angel, the dentals and combined liquids imitate the sound of the viol and harpsichord, the sibilants and “i” sounds of the final stanza evoking silence.

Michaud’s polyvalent image also works as an apt description of rhyme itself: the superimposed image of two words whose individual meanings are simultaneously present in an oscillation of similarity and difference. In light of this, notice that the masculine rhymes of the poem’s first half

\[
\text{recelant / étincelant / recelant / ruisselant} \\
/səlɑ̃/ /səlɑ̃/ /səlɑ̃/ /səlɑ̃/
\]

find their own image in the rhymes on /lâ/of the second half of the poem:

\[
\text{/səlã/} /səlã/ /səlã/ /səlã/ \]

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34 Cohn, Toward the Poems, 91-95. Cohn points to several other places in Mallarmé’s writings where angel’s wings are compared with harps.
35 Michaud, Mallarmé, 42.
36 A polyvalent image is similar to an analogy or metaphor in that it involves two ostensibly unrelated images brought into a comparison by the poet. Yet in a metaphor or analogy, the flow of meaning is hierarchical – the subsidiary image is designed to elucidate the meaning of the primary one. In a polyvalent image, the distinction between primary and subsidiary images is blurred, and the images reflect meaning onto one another. Thus, the flow of meaning is circular rather than linear. See Michaud, Mallarmé, 42.
37 Michaud, Mallarmé, 42.
These /s/ and /lɔ/ phonemes are also present, though reordered, in “santal” and “instrumental”, thus uniting each of the poem’s four stanzas.

The play of phonemes in “Sainte Cécile” is not restricted to end-rhyme alone, but spreads out in constellations across the sonorous surface of the poem. Contrary to Michaud, who argues for an essentially mimetic impulse, the phonetic concentrations here are less concerned with the imitation of physical objects or musical instruments per se than with a sort of phonetic free association in which the common phonemic elements of words seem to insist upon analogies or relationships that transcend representation and suggest more distant, elemental relationships.

The concentration of sibilants in the poem, primarily /s/ but also, in a subsidiary way /ʃ/, is striking. Far from being an evocation of silence, as Michaud claims, the /s/ sounds flow through the poem, from the first phoneme of “fenêtre” through the closing “silence” as a kind of sibilant tonic whose presence is felt in the background of the poem regardless of the actual sounding phoneme. The /s/ phonemes connect some of the central images of the poem in a constellation:


Most of these words are directly related to music, either of their own semantic accord or by association in this particular poem. The others have more distant relationships that can be reconstructed with a relatively small dose of poetic imagination. For example, “anciennes” (ancient), is an approximate homophone of “antienne” (antiphon or hymn), which is expressly connected with both the “chanson” of the subtitle and the Magnificat that appears later in the

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38 This opens up the possibility of the /s/ phoneme being prolonged by other, subsidiary phonemes in a manner analogous to a tonal prolongation in music.
And it is the angel’s “vol du soir” that produces the harp that the Saint appears to be
playing and the “ostensoir” (monstrance-like appearance) of this image in general.

These phonemic connections, like Michaud’s polyvalent images, bring words into
circular relationships. It becomes increasingly difficult to know whether the semantic
connection between words is primary, supplemented by these phonetic links, or whether the
basis for the poetic comparison begins with the phonetic similarities. Ultimately, it matters
little whether Sainte Cécile is the musicienne du silence because she actually abandons music
in the semantic sense (i.e. she prefers poetic music to that produced by instruments, resulting in
actual silence) or whether the play of /s/ phonemes casts itself (“s’y lance”) across the surface
of the poem in a shower of sibilant sound.

Mallarmé plays similar phonemic games with the /v/, producing the constellation:

vieux – Viole – livre – vêprée – vitrage – vol

Unlike the earlier /s/ constellation, where a semantic link to music was either present or easily
discernible, this one lacks a definite semantic center. The most important of these images is the
vol, a common Mallarmean metaphor for the poetic act. This vol is contained (as an anagram)
in the Viole, much as the poem itself is interwoven with music. But the other /v/ phonemes
seem to exist in an uncertain relationship to the vol. Particularly striking is the reversal of livre
vieux and santal vieux from the poem’s first half as vieux livre and vieux santal in its final
stanza. This kind of adjectival reversal may be motivated by Mallarmé’s study of English—
where the adjective normally precedes the noun—but also picks up on the chiastic reversal of
the letters V and I in vieux and livre. This graphic mirroring creates another kind of

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39 Roger Pearson chronicles the role of homophony in Mallarmé’s poetic practice in Unfolding Mallarmé. He
gives an identical reading of “ancienne” as “antienne” in conjunction with the Ouverture to “Hérodilade” on page
93, but does not invoke this homophone in his discussion of “Sainte” (pages 62–64.)
40 See, for example, “Les fenêtres,” where Mallarmé uses the image of featherless wings to represent his inability
to write his ideal poetry, and “Le jour”—later “Don du poème,”—which also compares a poem to a bird.
41 This is similar to the phonemic reversal “Ivre, il vit” in “Les fenêtres.” See Mallarmé, OC I, 9-10.
polyvalent image, superimposing the two words as if folded around the blank space that separates them.\textsuperscript{42}

This act of folding is suggested by the graphic shape of the V itself, which also resembles a wing.\textsuperscript{43} Now, it would be foolish indeed to suggest that all Vs are wings in Mallarmé's poetry, but in this particular case, the treatment of the Vs in "Sainte Cécile" leaves little doubt that this kind of relationship—in which the individual words "fade before the intention" of the line—is consciously exploited here. It is also possible that V, itself a graphic mirror image, is the motivation behind the phonemic reversal: a kind of sonorous reflection that represents the visual one.

To some extent, then, Mallarmé's choice of words in "Sainte Cécile" was motivated by his desire to invent a language that enacts the semantic content of his poem.\textsuperscript{44} The proliferation of /s/ phonemes could then be understood as flowing from Cécile (the dedicatee of the poem) out into the phonetic texture of the poem, reinforcing the semantic and analogical relationships from which it is constructed. However, it is also possible that Mallarmé's primary motivation here was an obsession with the relationship between sound and sense in language itself. This is not a simple reversal, where the phonetic sounds of the poem become primary and its sense secondary. Instead, the two are held in a supplementary relationship, where each is the image of the other, a polyvalent image made of both semantic and phonetic images. This makes their relationship here particularly unstable, and gives the poem its uniquely radiant quality.

The unusual syntax of "Sainte Cécile" plays an important role in allowing these elements to become more prominent. The poem is composed of a single sentence whose syntax is full of digressive clauses that threaten its intelligibility. This both unites the two halves of the

\textsuperscript{42} Jacques Derrida has made much of the notion of a structural blank in Mallarmé's poetry. See "The Double Session," 201.
\textsuperscript{43} Cohn, Toward the Poems, 114.
\textsuperscript{44} See Genette's brilliant analysis of Mallarmé's approach to mimetic language in Mimologics, 201-218.
poem and opens up a kind of semantic gap between the stanzas. In these semantic gaps, where
the reader casts around to make sense of the syntax and grammar, the common phonemes and
letters between individual words become more significant.

The syntax of the first two stanzas of the poem could be radically simplified thus:

À la fenêtre est une Sainte.

From this semantic kernel, Mallarmé’s sentence blossoms with a series of digressions that
transform this mundane sentence into something far more poetic. Mallarmé begins with a
parallel series of descriptive digressions, both introduced with recelant. In the following
examples, the parentheses have been added for clarification:

À la fenêtre (recelant le santal vieux de la Viole) est une Sainte (recelant le livre vieux)

Here, the digressions are set up so as to apply equally to the window or the Saint: the syntax
and lack of punctuation in the poem itself makes both interpretations possible and productive.

Mallarmé then further disrupts the syntax by drawing the reader’s focus further from either the
window or the Saint:

À la fenêtre (recelant le santal vieux (qui se dédore) de la Viole (étincelant jadis parmi
flûte et mandore)) est une Sainte (recelant le livre vieux (qui se déplie du Magnificat
ruisselant jadis à vêpres et complie)

This kind of syntactical reordering is present to some degree in virtually all poetry, but already
here Mallarmé has taken it to an unusual degree. By withholding the main verb (“est”) until the
beginning of the second stanza, Mallarmé encourages the reader to cast around the poem in
order to create meaning. Since there are multiple possible syntactic paths to chart in the poem,
the non-semantic elements of the poem—form, meter, phonetic content—become increasingly
significant.
Mallarmé’s concern with the sound-sense relationship in his poetry continued to grow in the months following “Saint Cécile” and “Brise marine.” He writes of the “study of the sounds and colors of words, the music and painting through which your thought must pass, however beautiful it may be, if it is to become poetry.”\(^{45}\) What he desires, above all, is that the individual words in a line of verse work together in support of the underlying idea. This is the basis of a criticism that he levels at François Coppée. After praising some of Coppée’s poems for their unity and purity, he continues:

Chance doesn’t enter into any line and that is the great thing. Several of us have achieved this, and I believe that when lines are so perfectly delimited, what we should aim for above all, in a poem, is that the words—which are already sufficiently individual not to receive external impressions—reflect upon each other to the point of appearing not to have their own colour anymore, but to be merely transitions within an entire scale. Although there is no space between them, and although they touch each other wonderfully, I feel that sometimes your words live a little too much as individuals, like the stones in a mosaic of jewels.\(^{46}\)

Mallarmé’s use of a musical metaphor (the scale) to describe the kind of poetry he values is neither fortuitous nor rare. For him—at this time—a musical poem is one in which the formal elements of the poem are in harmony with its semantic elements. However, his faith in the ability of language to live up to these expectations was about to be shattered.

**Music and the Crisis**

Between 1866 and 1868, Mallarmé underwent a series of aesthetic and spiritual crises. In a series of letters to close friends, he writes of his struggle to come to grips with the consequences of his growing atheism, both in philosophical and poetic terms. The religious aspects of Mallarmé’s crisis have been explored in detail by Bertrand Marchal, and cannot


\(^{46}\) Mallarmé, *Corr.*, I, 234. Letter to Coppée, 5 December 1866: “Le hasard n’entame pas un vers, c’est la grande chose. Nous avons, plusieurs, atteint cela, et je crois que, les lignes si parfaitement délimitées, ce à quoi nous devons viser surtout est que, dans le poème, les mots – qui déjà sont assez eux pour ne plus recevoir d’impression du dehors – se reflètent les uns sur les autres jusqu’à paraître ne plus avoir leur couleur propre, mais n’être que les transitions d’une gamme. Sans qu’il y ait d’espace entre eux, et quoiqu’ils se touchent à merveille, je crois que quelquefois vos mots vivent un peu trop de leur propre vie comme les pierreries d’une mosaique de joyaux.” Translation from Lloyd, *Selected Letters*, 69. Emphasis mine.
come under consideration here. The critical feature of the crisis for the present study is that these realizations are triggered through an exploration of poetic language rather than abstract philosophical contemplation. Frustrated with his work on “Hérodiade,” Mallarmé describes the first crisis thus:

Unfortunately, while mining the lines of “Hérodiade” to this extent, I have encountered two abysses that fill me with despair. One is the Void, which I have reached without any knowledge of Buddhism, and I am still too distraught to be able to believe even in my poetry and get back to work, that this crushing thought has made me abandon. Yes, I know, we are merely empty forms of matter—but truly sublime for having invented God and our soul. So sublime [...] that I want to gaze upon matter, becoming conscious of it, and, nevertheless, launching itself madly into Dream, which it knows does not exist, singing of the Soul and all the divine impressions of that kind that have collected within us from the earliest times and proclaiming, in the face of the Void which is truth, these glorious lies!

For him, “the Void” is the realization that there is nothing beyond this world—not only an afterlife for the soul, but no higher meaning or purpose. Mallarmé sees that “reality” is in fact just a construction of the mind that seeks connections between the actual physical world and metaphysical worlds of its own creation. This realization is the natural outgrowth of his earlier recognition of the conventional nature of language, fueled by his naïve yet passionate belief that poetry is (or at least ought to be) capable of explaining the universe.

Mallarmé’s conception of reality as a construction of the mind threatens to sterilize the poet in him. For if there is nothing “out there” that is real, no referent to which his words can point, then how can poetry (or language for that matter) be anything but nonsensical sound on which we arbitrarily project meaning? Yet in this deficiency of language, Mallarmé sees productive possibilities as well. For matter can launch itself into Verse as easily as into Dream

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47 Bertrand Marchal has documented this period in detail in La religion de Mallarmé.
48 Mallarmé, Corr. I, 207. Letter to Cazalis, 28? April 1866: “Malheureusement, en creusant le vers à ce point, j’ai rencontré deux abîmes, qui me désespèrent. L’un est le Néant, auquel je suis arrivé sans connaître le bouddhisme, et je suis encore trop désolé pour pouvoir croire même à ma poésie et me remettre au travail, que cette pensée écrasante m’a fait abandonner. Oui, je le sais, nous ne sommes que de vaines formes de la matière — mais bien sublimes pour avoir inventé Dieu et notre âme. Si sublimes, [...] que je veux me donner ce spectacle de la matière, ayant conscience d’elle, et, cependant, s’élançant forcennément [sic] dans le Rêve qu’elle sait n’être pas, chantant l’Âme et toutes les divines impressions pareilles qui se sont amassées en nous depuis les premiers âges, et proclamant, devant le Rien qui est la vérité, ces glorieux mensonges !” Translation from Lloyd, Selected Letters, 60. Emphasis mine.
(and the homophonic palindrome “Vers / Rêve” is often productive in Mallarmé, as we shall see in “Soupir,” treated in Chapter Four), and the poet can in fact try to reconstitute the missing order of a Godless world. The process is straightforward, but not easy. First, the poet must always be aware of the constructed nature of language and the universe. Second, the poet must explore his own history, and the history of his race, by exploring his language, collecting the “divine impressions” that the centuries have deposited there “from the earliest times.” Lastly, the poet must produce poems that reconstruct language, and in so doing, the universe, as if there were a reality beyond this one at which they could point. This is the “glorious lie” to which Mallarmé refers.

These ideas are developed in a series of letters to Theodor Aubanel from the summer of 1866. There, Mallarmé claims to have laid the foundations for his life’s work, a solitary pursuit that demanded the exclusion of all outside influence. His project was to reconstruct language from the inside out, to penetrate into the collective linguistic consciousness of the French mind and uncover an essential unity between sound and sense in language that had been lost with the proliferation of languages and the passage of time. He thought that it would take him twenty years of patient work to complete this task. As it turned out, the work would never be finished, and it is impossible to know, from the drafts that remain, how close he came to realizing this dream.

Music and Epistemology

Mallarmé’s meditations on language led him to more abstract reflections on the nature of thought and knowledge itself. The epistemological aspect of this crisis was probably influenced by his exposure to the ideas of Hegel, who saw an essential unity behind the

50 Ibid.
contradiction and negation of the exterior world.\textsuperscript{51} Hegelian terms like Idea, Being, Time, Synthesis, etc. become regular features of Mallarmé's correspondence, and these same letters often dwell on the essential interconnectedness of all things. In his later critical works, as we shall see, Mallarmé will consistently describe this interconnectedness as musical. For now, let us begin with some of the basic patterns of Mallarmé's thought.

Shortly after his discovery of the Void—the realization that "reality" is purely subjective and internal, rather than something to be discovered externally—Mallarmé found Beauty, a new aesthetic that he claimed would form the cornerstone of his work.\textsuperscript{52} This Beauty was nothing more or less than the desire to explore the various relationships inherent in language, and through them to better understand the universe. His new poetics became a model for a new epistemology that conceives of the world as a series of relationships—at various distances and through various media—rather than as an objective reality. Mallarmé believed that understanding the fundamental relationships of the universe was best served by exploring these relationships through language. The ultimate goal of this was to uncover a divining thread that would bind the various illusions of the physical world together. Mallarmé called this goal the Idea, and described it as a series of interconnected lines between objects or notions.

I wanted to tell you [in a previous letter] simply that I had just cast the plan for my entire Work, after having found the key to myself—keystone, or center, if you will, so as not to mix metaphors—, the center of myself where I dwell like a sacred spider, on the principal threads that have already been cast from my mind, and with the assistance of these threads, I will weave at the meeting places marvelous lace, which I divine, and which exists already in the core of Beauty.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{51} It is unclear exactly how Mallarmé might have gained his exposure to Hegel's ideas. Two of his close friends—Eugène Lefebure and Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam—were self-admitted Hegelians. See Janine D. Langan, *Hegel and Mallarmé* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986) for a comprehensive treatment of this question.

\textsuperscript{52} Mallarmé, *Corr.*, I, 220. Letter to Cazalis, 13 July 1866.

\textsuperscript{53} Mallarmé, *Corr.*, I, 224. Letter to Aubanel, 28 July 1866; "J'ai voulu te dire simplement [in a previous letter] que je venais jeter le plan de mon Œuvre entier, après avoir trouvé la clef de moi-même—clef de voûte, ou centre, si tu veux, pour ne pas nous brouiller de métaphores—, centre de moi-même, où je me tiens comme une araignée sacrée, sur les principaux fils déjà sortis de mon esprit, et à l'aide desquels je tisserai aux points de rencontre de merveilleuses dentelles, que je devine, et qui existent déjà dans le sein de la Beauté." Translation after Lloyd, *Selected Letters*, 67.
Here, Mallarmé lays out his poetic project with remarkable concision. The "principal threads" of his thought are basic patterns of similarity and difference, while the individual poems are woven at the intersection of these lines, at the places where similarities (of image, metaphor, phoneme, etc.) converge momentarily. Therefore, each individual poem is a synecdoche of the whole, a fragment of the Idea that demonstrates one of its facets. The Idea as a totality is inaccessible (though Mallarmé attempted this in Le Livre), but is rather a product of poetry itself in its totality. By exploring individual intersections of thought in particular poems, Mallarmé hopes to sketch the essential outlines of the Idea.

The thought process that Mallarmé outlines above is not coldly intellectual, though its consequences are extremely challenging. Mallarmé is seeking a total integration in the mind of all things simultaneously. Poetry provides a model for this in the way in which it superimposes words, images and ideas, but even poetry is not thought in its most abstract form. Instead, thought must be musical if it is to encompass the totality of the Idea. Mallarmé describes his process thus:

I think that to be truly a man, to be nature capable of thought, one must think with one's entire body, which creates a full, harmonious thought, like those violin strings vibrating directly with their hollow wooden box. As thoughts are produced by the brain alone [...], they now appear to me like airs played on the high part of the E string whose sound is not reinforced in the box,—that pass through and disappear without creating themselves, without leaving a trace of themselves.⁵⁴

The musical metaphor of the violin here is no accident. Mallarmé uses the same image in the prose-poem "Le démon de l'analogie" to represent the syllable nul and the way that its sound and signification haunt the narrator, to which we shall turn now our attention. At its core,

⁵⁴ Mallarmé, Corr. I, 244. Letter to Eugene Lefebure, 27 May 1867: "Je crois que pour être bien l'homme, la nature se pensant, il faut penser de tout son corps—ce qui donne une pensée pleine et à l'unisson comme ces cordes du violon vibrant immédiatement avec sa boîte de bois creux. Les pensées partant seul du cerveau [...] me font maintenant l'effet d'airs joués sur la partie aiguë de la chanterelle dont le son ne réconforte pas dans la boîte — qui passent et s'en vont sans se créer, sans laisser de trace d'elles." Translation from Lloyd, Selected Letters, 79–80.
Mallarmé demands a polyvalent sensibility to sound, sense, image and analogy, a network of relationships that will come to dominate his œuvre despite the fact that they are radically unstable, and ultimately illustrate the process of thought.\(^{55}\)

**MALLARMÉ’S DEMONS**

Mallarmé’s struggle to uncover the relationship between individual letters and the meaning of the words that they compose, and how this play of language explains objective reality, are central themes of his prose poem “Le démon de l’analogie.”\(^{56}\) Mallarmé slowly realized that poems made of words that “exist merely as transitions within a scale” are difficult to make because of the essentially unstable relationship between sound and meaning in language. The epigram that he chooses for the poem summarizes this struggle aptly:

\[
\text{Des paroles inconnues chantèrent-elles sur vos lèvres, lambeaux maudits d’une phrase absurde ?} \\
\text{(Have unknown words ever sung on your lips, cursed fragments of an absurd phrase?)}
\]

In the body of the poem, the poet is haunted by a sound which at first seems to be a violin melody. This melody is transformed into a voice uttering the phrase “la pénulitème est morte” in such a fashion that the violin’s tone can still be discerned in the sound nul. This meaningless phrase becomes an obsession, as the poet turns it over and over in his mouth and his mind, trying vainly to understand either the semantic significance of this phrase or its transformation into the violin melody. As he wanders the streets of Paris, a sense of panic

\(^{55}\) Jean-Pierre Richard’s thematic criticism of Mallarmé, and his ability to trace images from poem to poem and analogy to analogy must stand as a landmark in Mallarmé criticism. Yet, as both Derrida and Cohn have shown, Mallarmé’s capacity for analogy and hidden relationships exposes any thematic criticism as a tautology, and the whole signifying chain of images collapses. In the final analysis, there is no way to fix the boundaries of a group of images. What is left, then, in a poem is not a meaning *per se* but the illustration of a thought process, a way of seeing the relationship between things. See Richard, *L’Univers imaginaire de Mallarmé*; Derrida, “The Double Session,” 174–285; Cohn, “Appendix: on Derrida’s *Mimique*” in Mallarmé’s *Divagations*, 167–71.

\(^{56}\) In the 1945 edition of Mallarmé’s *Œuvres Complètes*, Henri Mondor and Georges Jean-Aubry place the date for this prose poem in 1864 (it was only published in 1874). However, Bertrand Marchal suggests a date of 1867, which would put this work right in the middle of Mallarmé’s spiritual crisis. Given the subject of the poem and its flirtation with insanity which closely parallels Mallarmé’s descriptions of the crisis, Marchal’s date seems credible. The text and my translation appear in Appendix C. See Mallarmé, *OC* I, 1335–6.
overtakes him as he struggles to convince himself that the *nul* can be contained by the semantic meaning of “pénultième.” Seeing that this is not possible, he attempts to bury his concern by singing the words as if they had no meaning at all (“le secret espoir de l’ensevelir en l’amplification de la psalmodie”). But this too fails to satisfy the feeling that this “cursed fragment” of language is meaningful. Engrossed in thought, the poet hardly notices his surroundings until he catches sight of his reflection in a shop window. With a sense of horror, he sees his reflected hand passing over the strings of a violin in a luthier’s shop window, and realizes that this was the source of the original sound that haunted him, and the voice pronouncing the absurd phrase was his own.

Certainly, the tone here owes something to Poe’s *The Imp of the Perverse.* However, the central issue for us here is the poet’s obsession with the syllable *nul* and the way in which it fluctuates between pure music (as a representation of the violin tone) and pure representation (either as an independent term signifying “nothing”—which can hardly be coincidental—or as a component of “pénultième”). The sound emerges from and returns to music, as if enacting Mallarmé’s earlier proclamation in the letter to Coppée about words which must fade before the sensation or intention of the line. The search for the “meaning” of *nul* motivates the action of the poem, but is also a consequence of it. The poem’s speaker can not decide whether his obsession with *nul* comes from his struggle to write poetry—finding an apt rhyme for “pénultième” for instance—or from the violin hanging in the luthier’s window that he “plays” with the reflection of his hand at the end of the poem. Priority and anteriority are blurred, as are cause and effect. The drama of the poem itself is wrapped up in its obsession with nothing, both literally and figuratively. In this way, *nul* is at once a negative space (the Void) signifying lack and absence, and a positive space, both through its presence – through – absence (in

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57 Cohn, *Mallarmé’s Prose Poems*, 2-19. As Cohn points out, the title was probably influenced by Baudelaire’s translation of Poe’s *The Imp of the Perverse*, which Baudelaire rendered as *Le Démon de la Perversité*. **
Derrida’s sense of the term) and in that *nul* is a real sound, even if it points to nothing beyond itself. So the poem is at once inherently self-referential and at the same time reaches out to a potentially infinite number of metaphorical or analogical readings. It is a masterpiece of undecidability, and in that way approaches Mallarmé’s basic condition of Music as a series of mental relationships that stretch over a yawning chasm of meaninglessness.

In the year after “Le démon” was written, and at the height of the crisis, Mallarmé wrote the “Sonnet allégorique de lui-même” in 1868. When he first sent it to Henri Cazalis, Mallarmé claimed that it was extracted from a projected study on “the Word” on which he had been working.\(^{58}\) Like “Le démon,” the sonnet is created from obsession with a particular sound that may in fact be meaningless.

**Sonnet allégorique de lui-même**

La nuit approbatrice allume les onyx
De ses ongles au pur Crime lampadophore,
Du Soir aboli par le vespéral Phoenix
De qui la cendre n’a de cinéraire amphore

Sur des consoles, en le noir Salon: nul ptyx,
Insolite vaisseau d’inanité sonore,
Car le Maître est allé puiser l’eau du Styx
Avec tous ses objets dont le rêve s’honore.

Et selon la croisée au nord vacante, un or
Néfaste incite pour son beau cadre une rixe
Faite d’un dieu que croit emporter une nixe

En l’obscurcissement de la glace, Décor
De l’absence, sinon que sur la glace encor
De scintillation le septuor se fixe.

**Sonnet allegorical of itself**

The approving night lights the onyx
Of her nails in the pure flame-bearing Crime,
From Evening abolished by the vesperal Phoenix
From whom the ash has no funeral amphora

On the credenzas, in the black Room: no ptyx,
Strange vessel of sonorous inanity,
For the Master has gone to draw water from the Styx
With all the objects with which the dream honors itself.

And according to the vacant northern casement, a gold
Ill-fated incites for its beautiful frame a brawl
Made by a god that believes he is carrying a nixie

In the obscurity of the mirror, Décor
Of absence, except that in the mirror still
The scintillation of the septet fixes itself.

This early version of the “Sonnet en yx” shows the same obsession with rhymes on “yx” as its more famous published version (1887). In fact, this early version contains seven rhymes on “yx” (compared with only six in the “Sonnet en yx”). The details of this sonnet are

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\(^{58}\) Mallarmé, *Corr.* I, 277. This study—elsewhere identified as a dissertation—was never in fact completed. The notes which remain will be examined later on in this chapter.
well-known to Mallarmé enthusiasts: Mallarmé set a task for himself to create a sonnet using the rare syllable “yx” as one of its rhymes. Having exhausted the French language of such rhymes, Mallarmé invented the word “ptyx,” believing that it existed in no language whatever. Thus, the poem seems to call forth this word as an incantation, a word created by the text in order to complete itself.

Mallarmé claimed that the sonnet’s meaning “is evoked by an internal mirage of the words themselves.” Robert Greer Cohn has noted the double image created here, both by the repetition of the syllable “yx” and of the palindromic shape of the letter x itself. The rhyme on “yx” here is more than Mallarmé’s attempt at poetic virtuosity. It is also intimately related to his notion of the Void and to a growing poetics of absence.

The poem is set in a vacant room on some abolished evening. The room is wholly defined by absence—the Master is out, the “ptyx” missing—except for the mirror, which reflects the lights of a distant constellation out of the window. Since this presence is merely a reflection, or illusion, it serves only to confirm the emptiness of the room. From this point of view, the “sonorous inanity” of “ptyx” becomes the perfect phonemic symbol for the emptiness of the room itself: a word that is pure play of sound, devoid of semantic meaning.

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59 It has since been identified as a possible derivative of a Greek word referring to a shell, but Mallarmé’s letters suggest that he was unaware of this at the time.
61 Cohn, Toward the Poems, 139. Cohn further connects this idea to a basic pattern in Mallarmé’s thought that he calls “tetrapolarity.” I will return to this idea, and its musical basis, later on.
62 In the letter to Cazalis, Mallarmé offers his own explication: “A nocturnal window is open, its two shutters fastened; a room with no one inside, despite the stable appearance that the fastened shutters present, and in a night made of absence and questioning, without furniture, except for the plausible outline of vague credenzas, a frame, warlike and dying, of a mirror hung up at the back, with its reflection, stellar and incomprehensible, of [the constellation] Ursa Major, which links to heaven alone this lodging abandoned by the world.” (“[U]ne fenêtre nocturne ouverte, les deux volets attachés ; une chambre avec personne dedans, malgré l’air stable que présentent les volets attachés, et dans une nuit faite d’absence et d’interrogation, sans meubles, sinon l’ébauche plausible de vagues consoles, un cadre, belliqueux et agonisant, de miroir appendu au fond, avec sa réflexion, stellaire et incompréhensible, de la grande Ourse, qui relie au ciel seul ce logis abandonné du monde”) Mallarmé, Corr. 1, 278. Letter to Cazalis, 18 July 1868.
63 Mallarmé identifies this constellation as Ursa Major, but given the reference to the “septuor,” he may well have had in mind the Big Dipper (itself a fragment of the larger Bear).
However, Mallarmé is not content to invoke an empty and meaningless space. By invoking the constellation glimpsed through the mirror, he suggests an alternative reading that allows the richness of rhyme to remunerate the semantic deficiency of “ptyx” in particular, and the sonnet in general. The seven rhymes on “yx” here can be aligned with the constellation glimpsed in the mirror, likely the seven stars of the Big Dipper. Like the celestial constellation, whose individual stars have no meaning, but onto which, as a whole, human imagination imposes a form (and, in the case of the constellations, an entire mythology), Mallarmé’s rhymes transform an otherwise meaningless sound into something meaningful. In this way, “ptyx” becomes a significant nothing, a physical emptiness that alludes to a poetic fullness, and potential mastery.

Before leaving the “Sonnet allégorique de lui-même,” we would be well advised to consider its other rhyme, on /ɔr/. If “ptyx” is the site of semantic poverty, and its rhymes serve to compensate for this lack, then “sonore” is its opposite, a site of semantic richness (“un or”) that acts as a counterbalance. The homophonic rhyme “sonore / s’honore” is predicated on the notion that individual phonemes can carry multiple meanings, and that this too is the province of the poet. This homophonic richness finds a further echo in “[glajce encor” and “septuor.” The difficulty posed here is in uncovering the hidden relationships between these words and the others that would justify their appearance in the poem, if in fact Mallarmé’s claim that “chance does not enter into any line” is valid. It may be that the seven letters of the word “septuor” are called forth by the seven rhymes on /ɔr/, the seven on /iks/ and the seven star points of the constellation that fills the otherwise empty room. If so, then in the face of absence (of meaning, of furniture, of the Master) that is represented by the rhymes on /iks/, the

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64 Given the myriad possible referents given for ptyx in the critical literature, Mallarmé seems to have succeeded.
65 For a comprehensive treatment of homophony in Mallarmé’s poetry, see Pearson, Unfolding Mallarmé.
phonetic richness of the rhymes on /ɔr/ suggest its opposite, the poet's defense against a language that does not always behave as it should.

**AN ABORTED DISSERTATION**

The "projected study on the Word" from which Mallarmé claimed the "Sonnet allegorique de lui-même" was detached had evolved in Mallarmé's mind into a doctoral thesis by 1869. Like so many of his projects, this was ultimately unrealized. However, a collection of notes published posthumously as "Notes sur le langage" gives some insight into the scope of the project, and its conclusions, and provides perhaps the most profound insight into the linguistic dimension of Mallarmé's spiritual crisis.

For Mallarmé, the word is, or rather it ought to be, tied to its meaning in a stable and predictable way. Its component phonemes should reinforce the semantic meaning of the words they comprise, such that "certain sounds are equivalent to a certain idea, modified in such a fashion that a certain sound signifies this particular thing." The signification of the phoneme ought not to be restricted to one language in particular, but should be a universal property of sound, so that "finding a neutral language, if there is one, that some sound means this thing absolutely, that this sound has a certain value." However, this is not the case in contemporary language, since words with diverse phonetic properties can have very similar meanings (synonyms, for example), while words with virtually identical phonemes can have widely divergent meanings (homonyms, etc.). Yet in other cases, there are (or at least there seem to be) words in which sound and sense are in perfect accord, displaying both the inherent

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66 Mallarmé, *Corr.* I, 315. Letter to Cazalis, 31 December 1869: "l'étude n'est que l'humble servante de l'Imagination ... et, si j'en ai la force, me laisse entrevoir les résultats possibles de la licence et du doctorat."

67 In the new collected edition of Mallarmé's works, these are collected under the title "Notes sur le langage," *OC* I, 501-512.

68 Ibid., 510: "tels sons équivalent à telle idée, modifiée de telle et telle façon que tels son[s] signifient ceci."

69 Ibid.: "trouvant une langue neutre, s'il en est une, que tel son par excellence signifie ceci, a telle valeur."
potential of language, and its history. In other words, the relationship between the meaning of a word and its phonetic structure has fallen victim to chance, its elements scattered throughout contemporary language. Minimizing the role of chance through poetic language will become Mallarmé’s chief poetic project. For the time being, he formulates it thus:

The *Word* is a principle that develops through the negation of all principle, chance, like the Idea, and reconstitutes itself forming (like Thought, aroused by Anachronism), itself, Speech, with the assistance of Time which permits these scattered elements to meet up and to join together following the laws aroused through these diversions.⁷⁰

In Mallarmé’s conception of language, words are in constant danger of losing their semantic capacity and degenerating into a nonsensical collection of sounds. This was the essential drama of “Le démon de l’analogie.” Yet words, recognizing their own deficiency, reach out to one another to form Speech, and in this way negate chance. In other words, the conversations through which people interact in their daily lives proceed as if all words have stable meanings and therefore as if certain sounds actually signify certain things. This negation of chance is not absolute, of course, but provisional. In the course of speech, the mind compensates for the failing of words and gives them a temporary cohesion. In this, semantics, syntax, tone, custom and grammar all play a role, but none of these is absolute. Therefore, language works in the same way as the universe, which—like language—proceeds from day to day as if there were some “reality” beyond itself, despite the fact that (for Mallarmé), this is an illusion.⁷¹

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⁷⁰ Mallarmé, “Notes sur le langage,” *OC* I, 505: “Le Verbe est un principe qui se développe à travers la négation de tout principe, le hasard, comme l’Idee, et se retrouve formant (comme elle la Pensée, suscitée par l’Anachronisme), lui, la Parole, à l’aide du Temps qui permet à ses éléments épars de se retrouver et de se raccorder suivant ses lois suscitées par ces diversions.” It is no accident that “Verbe” can mean not only “word” (mot), but also “word of God” (as in the English notion of “the Word”). Another aspect of Mallarmé’s crisis, which cannot come under consideration here, is Mallarmé’s struggle with his faith. For Mallarmé, as for the apostle John, the beginning of the world begins with the word.

⁷¹ There is some similarity between Mallarmé’s ideas and those of Hegel, Schopenhauer, Plato, etc. Perhaps the best philosophical consideration of Mallarmé’s aesthetic is Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Mallarmé, or the Poet of Nothingness*, trans. Ernest Sturm (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988).
Language reconstitutes some of the meaning which words, on their own, are lacking. Language, then, perpetuates a fiction, a deception, a "glorious lie" in which words which ought to be related by sound analogies are brought together through grammar and syntax instead. Language creates secondary analogies to supplement the inconsistent nature of the word, brings terms together as temporary mental acts which appear to draw their meaning from the lexicon but in fact are also relational:

The spoken word, across Idea and Time which are "the identical negation of the essence" of Becoming becomes Language.

Language is the development of the Word, its idea, in Being, Time became its mode: this across the phases of the Idea and of Time in Being, that is to say according to Life and the Mind. From whence come these two manifestations of Language, Speech and Writing, destined [...] to reunite both things through the analogies of sound—Writing by marking the gestures of the Idea manifesting itself through speech, and offering them their reflection, in order to perfect them, in the annals of successive effort of speech and of its filiations and to give it ancestry so that one day, their analogies noted, the Word would appear behind its means of language, returned to the physical and the physiological, as a principle, freed, suitable to Time and to the Idea.²²

So for Mallarmé, language is the social development of the word over time which serves to reunite speech and writing through the "analogies of sound" while at the same time allowing the word itself to remain independent of its context, both at the heart of and beyond language.²³ Therefore, the history of the world is wrapped up (for Mallarmé) in the history of language, the way that it has transformed over time. If one were able to strip away the layers of history from language, then words would show themselves to be analogous to the Idea. Their

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²² Mallarmé, “Notes sur le langage,” OC I, 505-6: "Le Verbe, à travers l’Idée et le Temps qui sont “la négation identique à l’essence” du Devenir devient le Langage. / Le Langage est le développement du Verbe, son idée, dans l’Être, le Temps devenu son mode: cela à travers les phases de l’Idée et du Temps en l’Être, c’est-à-dire selon la Vie et l’Esprit. D’où les deux manifestations du Langage, la Parole et l’Écriture, destinées [...] à se réunir toutes deux choses par les analogies des sons – L’Écriture en marquant les gestes de l’Idée se manifestant par la parole, et leur offrant leur réflexion, de façon à les parfaire, dans les annales de l’effort successif de la parole et de sa filiation et à en donner la parenté de façon à ce qu’un jour, leurs analogies constatées, le Verbe apparaisse derrière son moyen de langage, rendu à la physique et à la physiologie, comme un principe, dégagé, adéquat au Temps et à l’Idée.”

²³ The division that Mallarmé makes here between “Parole” and “Écriture” is also important to Mallarmé’s thought but cannot be explored in detail here. For Mallarmé, writing is more than a transcription of the phonetic qualities of sound (although it is that, too). The letters themselves, in their graphology, are like a transcription of the Idea, as a kind of written ballet of signs which temporarily fix meaning. See Mallarmé’s essays on Ballet in Crayonné au théâtre, OC II, 170-8 for an expansion of this idea. It has been treated by a host of literary critics, including Derrida and Cohn. See Derrida, Of Grammatology, and Cohn, Mallarmé’s Divagations, 145–64.
connections would accurately and consistently point to the significant and essential relationships that explain the universe. At the same time, the Word is a physical and physiological entity. It exists as an object in sound (and in writing), and it is this material existence of the word that, freed from the semantic constraints of language, forms the poet’s basic materials.

Mallarmé’s formulation of language as a fiction is based on the paradox of the word. On one hand, the word is abstract, like thought itself. When language draws words together, it creates a fiction because it refuses to acknowledge the arbitrary nature of the individual word. This fiction is “the same process as the human mind,” which itself draws things (objects, ideas, etc.) together momentarily, as if they had real existence. This is why language itself, and literature in particular, is uniquely suited to explorations of abstract thought, since they both operate on the same foundation. However, and at the same time, words do have meanings, and these are not (or at least are not always) merely conventional:

Finally words have several meanings, otherwise people would always understand one another—we will profit from this—and for their principal meaning, we seek what effect they would produce in us if pronounced by the interior voice of our mind, deposited through exposure to books of the past [...], if this effect distances itself from the one that it makes on us these days.

Mallarmé has not entirely abandoned the notion that there is a bond between the sound of a word and its meaning. Rather, the plurality of meanings that accrues around a word is the result of the word’s use in common speech and the passage of time which transforms and deforms an original meaning. If there is access to this original meaning, then it is through literary language (“la frequentation des livres du passé”) that these relationships may be reconstituted.

74 Mallarmé, “Notes sur le langage,” OC 1, 504: “le procédé même de l’esprit humain.” Robert Greer Cohn has identified this formulation of Mallarméan fiction as the keystone of his poetic vision. See Cohn, Toward the Poems, 299.

75 Ibid., 508-9: “Enfin les mots ont plusieurs sens, sinon on s’entendrait toujours—nous en profiterons—et pour leur sens principal, nous cherchons quel effet ils nous produiraient prononcés par la voix intérieure de notre esprit, déposée par la fréquentation des livres du passé [...] si cet effet s’éloigne de celui qu’il nous fait de nos jours.”
In “Notes sur le langage,” Mallarmé claims that language is a manifestation of the Idea, connecting individual words as the Idea connects individual thoughts. Since language is merely a “play of relationships in the Mind”, an understanding of language is itself an approximation of the idea. Mallarmé continues by claiming that writing is a kind of transcription of the Idea, and not merely a phonetic transcription of language, since the very shape of the letters themselves is significant.

For Mallarmé, the Idea is both eternal and ephemeral. On one hand, the Idea as the essential interconnectedness of all things is a kind of universal truth, a universal constant. However, the idea as the individual act of making connections between specific thoughts is merely an enactment of the Idea, “a temporary act of the mind responding to the need of a notion.” Language models this duality in its capacity for analogy and its propensity to rhyme. Both of these make connections which are essentially temporary—they may be undone or refocused in another poem—and are suggestive of more stable and universal relationships between things.

This leads Mallarmé to the paradoxical conclusion that “[t]he moment of the Notion of an object is therefore the moment of the reflection of sound purely present in itself or its present purity.” The idea-as-temporary-act is a mental representation of the Idea, a flash of the pure thing-in-itself which is triggered by its reflection in sound (rhyme in its various forms). This is, in summary form, Mallarmé’s epistemology.

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76 Mallarmé, “Notes sur le langage,” OC I, 505.
77 Ibid., 506.
78 Ibid., 507: “un acte momentané de l’esprit répondant au besoin de notion.”
79 Mallarmé’s continual use of certain words and images – aile, vierge, écume, grimoire, etc. is related to this position.
80 Mallarmé, “Notes sur le langage,” OC I, 509: “Le moment de la Notion d’un objet est donc le moment de la réflexion de son présent pur en lui-même ou sa pureté présente.”
Many of the ideas which Mallarmé sketched out for his aborted doctoral dissertation surface again in the 1870s in Les mots anglais, a pedagogical work designed to help French students to gain an understanding of the English language more quickly. In it, Mallarmé again, and in more systematic fashion, lays out his views on language and on the relationship between the sound of words and their meaning.

In Les mots anglais, Mallarmé takes the position that modern languages are merely “a transformation, corrupt or elegant, of earlier speech.” Every contemporary idiom, therefore, can be traced back to a common source, a single generative language from which all others developed over time. This generative source, this common origin no longer exists in the world, but fragments of it can still be discovered in contemporary language. Mallarmé’s stated task in Les mots anglais is to uncover these fragments as they exist in English in order to help students to recognize the semantic relationships between words that share common letters and phonemes. However, in his constant digressions, a much more ambitious aim becomes clear: to reconstruct this generative language by a double application of intellect and imagination.

This project is related to his desire, expressed in “Notes sur le langage,” to discover a “neutral language” where the semantic values of phonemes are both constant and evident. Mallarmé contrasts this with contemporary language in which historical layers of language

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81 The practical value of Les mots anglais is certainly debatable. Mallarmé dismissed the work (along with his Dieux antiques) in the autobiography which he provided for Paul Verlaine’s Les hommes d’aujourd’hui (OC I 789), calling them “des besognes propres […] dont il sied de ne pas parler” (“my own labours […] about which it is not fitting to speak”). Cohn questions their explanatory value for Mallarmé’s poetry, since the conclusions that he draws about the significance of English phonemes do not transfer readily to French. See Cohn, Toward the Poems, 265–80. However, my interest here is not in the pedagogical or truth value of the work, but in what it inevitably reveals about how Mallarmé thinks about language. In this, I follow Genette, whose commentary on Les mots anglais places Mallarmé in the context of mimetic theories of language. See Genette, Mimologics, 201–219.

82 Mallarmé, Les mots anglais, OC II, 949: “une transformation, corrompue ou élégante, de parlers antérieurs.”

83 Ibid., 969.
(whether literary or spoken) have created a vast repertoire or words, while at the same time fracturing the sound-sense relationship that would bring it meaning.

Important themes from the *Notes sur le langage* resurface here in a more polished form. Mallarmé identifies words as a “jumble of phonemes” whose present arrangement in the columns of a dictionary is not merely the product of chance. Instead, the dictionary presents layers of linguistic history, as words develop themselves according to discernable principles.

New, however, is the notion that this process may be uncovered through the careful, inductive study of a single language (rather than an etymological exploration of many languages). Such a study would reveal the development of language as “[s]o many acts, complex and long forgotten, gently beginning again, for you alone, attentive to their history.”

Also new is the conjecture that acts of understanding (in language and more generally in the world) can be achieved these days by “seizing a few relationships between many things.” This posits an underlying unity that sits behind an apparent diversity, which is the strategy by which Mallarmé sees connections between words themselves.

A large portion of *Les mots anglais* is devoted to grouping the English lexicon. Mallarmé seeks out words with a common set of letters that also share a semantic meaning, as a means of reconstructing the original signification of these letters from inside the language. For the most part, Mallarmé assumes that common letters imply also common phonemes, but his examples show that this need not always be the case. In *Les mots anglais*, Mallarmé gives preference to the consonants of words, which he likens to a skeletal structure (where the vowels and diphthongs act as a kind of flesh to be stripped away), since the vowels of many

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84 Mallarmé, *Les mots anglais*, OC 11, 948: “un pareil fouillis de vocables.”
87 Ibid.: “dans l’ére présente on n’apprend un peu qu’à force de comprendre, ou en saisissant quelques relations entre beaucoup de choses.” In the 1880s and 90s, and with remarkable consistency, Mallarmé equates this process of finding underlying relationships with music.
English words change depending on case and tense. Mallarmé begins by noting several words whose common phoneme(s) and letters seem to reinforce their semantic connection:

What more charming work, for example, and done even to compensate for many deceptions, than the bond recognized between words like house, la maison, and husband, who is its head; between loaf, un pain and lord, un seigneur, whose function was to distribute it; between spur, éperon, and to spurn, mépriser; to glow, briller, and blood, le sang; well, bien, and wealth, la richesse or even thrash, l’air to beat the grain, and threshold, le seuil, packed or close like pavement?

With the exception of glow and blood, which share the interior phoneme /l/ and the letters L and O, all of Mallarmé’s examples here share an initial consonant group, reinforced by a common consonant later in the word. Mallarmé’s desire to see a semantic link between these words sometimes leads him to fanciful lengths, such as his link between loaf and lord. Yet he is also aware that common letters and phonemes do not always point to common meanings:

[C]ertain words do not show this conformity of impression; but then are like a dissonance. The reversal in signification may become absolute to the point, nevertheless, where it is as interesting as a true analogy: it is thus that heavy seems to rid itself all of a sudden of the sense of heaviness that it denotes, to furnish heaven, le ciel, high and subtle, considered as a spiritual journey.

The challenge then, in Les mots anglais, is to give an account of those letters (and the phonemes they represent) that do seem to point towards a common signification in the language while at the same time avoiding false relations between words. Mallarmé explains:

Meaning, certainly, and sound, skilfully tried one against the other, here you have the double index guiding the Philologist in the familial classification. Without going so far as to unite dry and thirst, offering a relationship in ideas, but nearly none in form, one must not relate to mow, faucher, to mow, meule, where there is an accord in spirit and letter, because this one comes from a word that means pile and that one from a word that indicates cutting: but the affiliation of words which display only an exterior analogy is first and foremost to be avoided. The Word, in its personality so difficult to recognize,
it is necessary to come back to it: although the Family encompasses great diversity, but which, all, gravitate around something held in common.⁹¹

In *Les mots anglais*, Mallarmé provides tables for each letter that enumerate various constellations. These tables are organized around a common initial consonant, with key words appearing in the left column. The right column contains less fundamental members of the constellation. The example that follows is drawn from the tables in *Les mots anglais*; the English translation in the lower right column is my own.

| W | to wave, ondoyer, to waft, flotter. |
|   | et to —er, vaciller, to waddle, se dandiner, Lat[en] vêho. |
|   | puis to weave, tisser. weft, trame. |
|   | weed, vêtement de veuvage. woof, étoffe. |
|   | to warp, ourdir. to wrap, envelopper, et —, enveloppe. |
|   | to swerve, errer. to swerve, errer. |
|   | wry et awry, tors. wrist, poing. |
|   | to writhe, to wreath, tordre. to wreath, entrelacer. |

Très fréquent en tant que lettre initiale, W s’appuie à toutes les voyelles et peut-être moins aux diphtongues, dont il risque aussi d’être séparé par un h inscrit ; on ne le rencontre que devant une seule consonne, r, et il reste muet alors. Les sens d’osciller (celui-ci semblerait dû au dédoublement vague de la lettre, puis de flotter, etc.; d’eau et d’humidité ; d’évanouissement et de caprice ; alors, de faiblesse, de charme et d’imagination) se fondent en une étonnante diversité : peut-on, par exemple, dire que wr, authentiquement, désigne la torsion, à

Very frequently as an initial letter, W is followed by all of the vowels, perhaps less by diphthongs, from which it may also be separated by a written h; one finds it (W) before only one consonant, r, and it remains mute in that case. The sense of oscillation (this one here seeming to be the result of the vague division into two halves of the letter, then of floating, etc. of water and humidity; of disappearing and of caprice; then, of weakness, of charm and imagination) mixes in a surprising diversity: may one, for example, say that

⁹¹ Mallarmé, *Les mots anglais*, OC II, 966-67. “Le sens, certes, et le son, habilement essayés l’un à l’autre, voilà le double indice guidant le Philologue dans le classement familial. Sans s’aventurer jusqu’à réunir dry et thirst, offrant une relation dans l’idée, mais presque pas en la forme, on doit ne pas rapporter to mow, faucher, à mow, meule, où s’accordent l’esprit et la lettre, parce que celui-ci vient d’un mot qui veut dire tas et celui-là d’un mot qui indique couper : mais la filiation de vocables n’offrant qu’une analogie tout extérieure est principalement à éviter. Le Mot, dans sa personnalité si difficile à reconnaître, il faut en revenir à cela : quoique la Famille en compte de très divers, mais qui, tous, gravitent autour de quelque chose de commun.”
Upon reading the tables, it is immediately striking that Mallarmé is unwilling or unable to give a primary signification to practically any letter. Instead, he identifies a few of the principal meanings that can be deduced from the examples, occasionally giving priority to one. Of some letters he has nothing to say whatsoever. This suggests that, far from having a workable scheme in mind for the absolute signification of individual letters, he is still identifying trends and tendencies in language, refining his ideas as he examines individual word families more closely. It is interesting, however, that in the tables there are several examples of words with a strong phonetic connection but only the most tenuous semantic connection. Likewise, there are words grouped together which do not share even an initial consonant (Mallarmé's guiding principle) because the semantic link between the two words justifies the weak phonetic connection.

Mallarmé is aware of the limits of philology to fully explain the signification of letters. That task, if it can indeed be realized, is left only for the writers and poets, those who craft the language daily, seeking out its hidden symmetries and relationships: “It is up to the poet or even to the skilful writer of prose, through a superior and free instinct, to relate some terms whose unity contributes all the more to the charm and to the music of language.”

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93 Ibid., 967: “Au poète ou même au prosateur savant, il appartiendra, par un instinct supérieur et libre, de rapprocher des termes unis avec d’autant plus de bonheur pour concourir au charme et à la musique du langage.”
The "music of language" is therefore found in those instances when sound and sense in language are in accord ("whose unity..."), in other words, in places where rhyme suggests a "secret kinship" between words. Mallarmé’s notion of rhyme here is expanded to include alliteration and, from the tables in *Les mots anglais*, it is also evident that a shared initial consonant is not essential for a relationship to exist, despite his statements to the contrary. The poet’s effort to reconstruct the common origin of language touches on one of its perilous mysteries; and that it will be prudent to analyze only on the day when Science, possessing the vast repertoire of idioms ever spoken on the earth, will write the history of the letters of the alphabet across the ages and what was nearly their absolute signification, sometimes divined, sometimes misunderstood by mankind, creator of words.

So the poet may not indeed by able to go all the way back into the history of language to uncover the "absolute signification" of the letters of the alphabet, but he can move in this direction by being attentive to the music of language as it expresses itself through sonic similarities between words.

**MALLARMÉ’S GREAT WORK**

After *Les mots anglais*, Mallarmé never again attempted to uncover the absolute signification of letters, either in French or English, from a theoretical point of view. However, he continued to manipulate phonemes in his poetry along the lines that were explored earlier. He began to realize that, even if it were possible to assign an absolute value to letters, his aesthetic, which depends so heavily on allusion and suggestion, would be severely limited by such a denotative phonetic system. However, his interest in sound-sense relationships was not abandoned, but merely refocused. After *Les mots anglais*, Mallarmé began to write more

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95 Ibid., 968: "touche à l'un des mystères sacrés ou périlleux de Langage ; et qu'il sera prudent d'analyser seulement le jour où la Science, possédant le vaste répertoire des idiomes jamais parlés sur la terre, écrira l'histoire des lettres de l'alphabet à travers tous les âges et quelle était presque leur absolue signification, tantôt devinée, tantôt méconnue par les hommes, créateurs des mots." Emphasis mine.
consistently of the Great Work, "a book which would truly be a book, architectural and premeditated, one which would represent the sum total of all literary effort throughout the ages, and would be nothing less than the Orphic explanation of the World."\textsuperscript{96} \textit{Le Livre} was never completed, and the sketches which remain for the work have not yet been reconstructed into a coherent whole. However, Mallarmé's descriptions of the work make it clear that the sounds of words would play a prominent role. He claims that \textit{Le Livre} would be a "total expansion of the letter" that would draw correspondences from its component letters, and institute a literary game confirming the fiction of language.\textsuperscript{97}

From the fragmentary notes which Mallarmé left for \textit{Le Livre}, we gain further insight into the connection between phonetic relationships in language and abstract categories of thought.\textsuperscript{98} This is done through a series of geometrical figures that represent the relationship of terms which are likely intended to stand for larger categories of art. In Figure 1.2 the primary relationships are shown with lines that connect individual terms, while secondary relationships are indirectly connected by two lines.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{Diagram from Mallarmé's "Notes en vue du Livre," OC I, 567.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{96} This description of the Great Work comes from a letter addressed to Verlaine, 16 November 1885. See Mallarmé, \textit{Corr.} II, 301: "une livre qui soit un livre, architectural et prémédité."
\textsuperscript{97} Mallarmé, "Le Livre, instrument spirituel," \textit{OC} II, 226.
\textsuperscript{98} See Jacques Schérer, \textit{Le "Livre" de Mallarmé} (Paris: Gallimard, 1978) and Mallarmé \textit{OC} I, 1372-83.
As the figure shows, Mallarmé envisions primary relationships between Theater and Idea through the intermediary of the Hero, while Drama and Music (here represented by the Hymn) come together in Mystery. Elsewhere in the Notes, he writes “Drama is caused by Mystery of that which follows—the Identity of the Theater and of the Hero through the Hymn—the Hero—the (maternal) Hymn that creates him, and returns to the Theater that which was—from the Mystery where the Hymn is buried.”

There is much work yet to be done to definitively reconstruct Le Livre from the remaining notes, and it may ultimately prove to be impossible. However, the diagrams found in the notes can help us to understand the relational patterns of Mallarmé’s thought, and how these patterns find expression in his poetry. In Figure 1.2, Mallarmé includes six rhymes on /wa/, one paired with each of the six larger categories. It is tempting to speculate about the relationship between these larger categories and the rhymes that seem to bind them all together. For example, if the Hero is found at the convergence of Theater and Idea, then perhaps the king (roi) is located at the intersection of faith (foi) and law (loi). The king is indeed the law-giver who rules according to an act of faith by the people, and by Divine Right. Pursuing this idea, if Mystery is found where Drama meets Music (Hymne), then are we to understand that the true self is found only in the relationship between persons (“you” and “I”)? In the case of the /wa/ rhymes, it is a phonetic similarity that drives the mind to find appropriate semantic links between the words, even if these sometimes teeter on the brink of the irrational.

Similar diagrams are found throughout the notes. They differ somewhat in physical disposition, and a comprehensive treatment of the role of music in Le Livre must one day be

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99 Mallarmé’s fascination with the letter v—treated in earlier in “Sainte Cécile”—is probably related to these v-shaped diagrams.

100 Mallarmé, Notes en vue du “Livre”, OC I, 948: “Le Dr. est causé par le Myst. de ce qui suit – l’Identité du Théâtre et du Héros à travers l’Hymne – Le Héros – L’Hymne (maternel) qui le crée, et se restitue au Th. que c’était – du Mystère où elle est enfoui.”

101 This is the only diagram in the Notes in which every term is connected by rhyme.
made. For the present purposes, two more examples should suffice to establish the relational pattern of Mallarmé's thought.

**Figure 1.3. Diagram from Mallarmé's “Notes en vue du Livre,” OC I, 572.**

Here, Mallarmé refocuses several of the terms from the first diagram while adding new ones. Now it is the Symbol which meets Music to become the Idea (or the Idea which splinters into Symbol and Hymn—this reversal is completely typical of Mallarmé's mature thought), while Poetry and Theater find common ground in Drama.

**Figure 1.4. Diagram from Mallarmé’s “Notes en vue du Livre,” OC I, 578.**

In this diagram, the lines are absent, but can certainly be inferred from the physical layout of the terms themselves. Here, Drama (not contemporary theater, but the drama that Mallarmé intends from the reading and/or performance of *Le Livre*) emerges from the intersection of Theater/Figure (actor), Mystery/Verse, hero/man and music. All of this is summed up in
Poetry, an alternative to the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* which truly operates a fusion of the arts.\textsuperscript{102}

Robert Greer Cohn has suggested that Mallarmé’s thought is a modification of a Hegelian dialectic. Essentially, he argues that to the traditional dialectic triad:

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{c c c c}
\textbf{Synthesis} & \textbf{Becoming} \\
\textbf{Thesis} & \textbf{Antithesis} \\
\textbf{Being} & \textbf{Non-Being} \\
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

\textbf{Figure 1.5. Schematic of a Hegelian Triad}

Mallarmé added a fourth pole, which Cohn terms “antisynthesis”:

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{c c c c}
\textbf{Synthesis} & \textbf{Becoming} \\
\textbf{Thesis} & \textbf{Antithesis} \\
\textbf{Being} & \textbf{Non-Being} \\
\textbf{Antisynthesis} & \textbf{Non-Becoming} \\
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

\textbf{Figure 1.6. Schematic of Cohn’s tetrapolar representation of Mallarmé’s epistemology}

This new fourth pole acts as a counterbalance to the teleology of triadic thinking. In this new scheme, every synthesis is provisional; antisynthesis constantly threatens to undermine any apparently stable relationship. For Cohn, this explains both Mallarmé’s linguistic practice (since there is no longer a univocal connection between words and meaning) and his more

\textsuperscript{102} This becomes especially apparent in the term Orchestre which can mean “orchestra” in the instrumental sense, or refer to “the portion of Greek theater consecrated to dance and to the evolutions of the choir.” See Littre, s.v. “orchestre.” I am indebted to Dr. Richard Semmens for this observation.
abstract thought patterns. With these thought patterns in place, I now turn to their application in Mallarmé's late poetry.

**Music in the Mature Poetry**

While Mallarmé worked, patiently and secretly, on *Le Livre*, he continued to apply these ideas to shorter poems, which he began to see as studies for this more ambitious work. Individual poems began to explore provisional meaning for particular sounds, discovered in a series or constellation of words and deployed, shaped and reinforced in a particular poem. A significant portion of the constellation shown in Figure 1.2 above is featured also in "Quand l'Ombre menaça."

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Quand l'Ombre menaça de la fatale loi  
Tel vieux Rêve, désir et mal de mes vertèbres,  
Affligé de périr sous les plafonds funèbres  
Il a ployé son aile indubitável en moi.

Luxe, ô salle d'ebène où, pour séduire un roi  
Se tordent dans leur mort des guirlandes célèbres,  
Vous n'êtes qu'un orgueil menti par les ténèbres  
Aux yeux du solitaire ébloui de sa foi

Oui, je sais qu'au lointain de cette nuit, la Terre  
Jette d'un grand éclat l'insolite mystère  
Sous les siècles hideux qui l'obscurcissent moins.

L'espace à soi pareil qu'il s'accroisse ou se nie  
Roule dans cet ennui des feux vils pour témoins  
Que s'est d'un astre en fête allumé le génie.

When the Shadow menaced with the fatal law  
Some old Dream, desire and affliction of my vertebrae,  
Tormented to perish under the funereal ceilings  
It folded its unshakable wing in me.

Luxury, o ebony hall where, to seduce a king  
Celebrated garlands twist in their death,  
You are but a pride fooled by the shadows  
In the eyes of the solitary dazzled by his faith.

Yes, I know that far off in this night, the Earth  
Throws a great flash of unprecedented mystery  
Under the hideous centuries which obscure it less.

Space, its own image whether it grows or denies itself  
Rolls in this boredom, vile fires as witnesses  
That the genius of a festive star has illuminated.

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103 Cohn, *Mallarmé's Un coup de dés*, 14-18. Cohn has coined the terms "tetrapolar" and "polypolar" to describe Mallarmé's new epistemology. His initial argument was made several years before the notes for *Le Livre* were published by Schérer, though they seem to confirm his ideas. Cohn does not explore the musical nature of thought that I have outlined here, and his conclusions are somewhat different than mine—he argues, for instance, that despite this epistemological pattern, each of Mallarmé's poems still has a principal and discoverable meaning. Derrida, using Cohn's theories, argues the opposite: that Mallarmé's poetry is not reducible to a singular, stable collection of meanings.


105 Mallarmé, *OC* I, 36.
The topic of this poem—the poet’s struggle to write—is by now a familiar one. The “vieux Rêve,” whether understood as the Great Work or more generally as his effort to remake language, is once again threatened by doubt (“l’Ombre”) with the “fatale loi” (the constraints of grammar and syntax, the limits of meaning, etc.). In the face of this opposition, the Dream lays down its pen (“il a ployé son aile”), its flight denied once again by the darkening skies. The ebony hall with its twisting garlands calls to mind the empty room of the “Sonnet en yx,” but can also be seen as the night sky, the garlands representing stars enchained into constellations. Their seduction, suggesting alternative paths of meaning and analogy, is a conceit of the faithful man (the poet who continues to believe in their potential despite his inability to grasp it in its totality: he is blinded by his faith). Far off into the night, the Earth casts its own light (like the stars which illuminate the night sky) which will not darken with the passage of time. Space (unchanging and eternal) wanders in boredom, while the stars (now vile fires, taunting the poet) are witnesses to the poetic inspiration which one bright star inspires.

Five of the six rhymes on /wa/ from the sketches for Le Livre appear also in “Quand l’Ombre menaça”:

loï – moi – roi – foi – soi

The first four of these are particularly emphasized as end-rhymes in the first and second stanzas. From these rhymes, the phoneme /a/ is detached, and comes to particular prominence in the first line of the poem, where six /a/s in close proximity suggest the sterility of the situation:

menaça de la fatale loi

106 Cohn, Toward the Poems, 121.
107 The omission of “toi” is curious. The idea is certainly picked up in the Vous of line 7. Perhaps Mallarmé could not find a convincing way to work it into the poem, which would certainly fit in with the pessimistic tone of the opening.
108 Cohn, Toward the Poems, 120.
From this constellation, the phoneme reaches across the poem to other key words:


It cannot be mere coincidence that these sounds, themselves the product of a poetic constellation, here connect words which mean “sky,” “star,” and “light.” It also helps to explain Mallarmé’s choice of *plafond* rather than *ciel* for sky, and the metaphorical reading that it necessitates.\(^{109}\)

Written only a few years after “Quand l’Ombre menaça,” “Le vierge, le vivace, et le bel aujourd’hui” represents the most abstract stage of development in Mallarmé’s exploration of the sound-sense relationship in poetry.\(^{110}\)

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Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui
Va-t-il nous déchirer avec un coup d’aile ivre
Ce lac dur oublié que hante sous le givre
Le transparent glacier des vols qui n’ont pas fui!

Un cygne d’autrefois se souvient que c’est lui
Magnifique mais qui sans espoir se délivre
Pour n’avoir pas chanté la région où vivre
Quand du stérile hiver a resplendi l’ennui.

Tout son col secouera cette blanche agonie
Par l’espace infligé à l’oiseau qui le nie,
Mais non l’horreur du sol où le plumage est pris.

Fantôme qu’à ce lieu son pur éclat assigne,
S’immobilise au songe froid de mépris
Que vêt parmi l’exil inutile le Cygne.

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The virgin, enduring and beautiful today
Will it tear for us with a drunken wingbeat
This hard, forgotten lake that haunts beneath the frost
The transparent glacier of flights not flown!

A swan of former times remembers that it is he
Magnificent but who without hope of saving himself
For not having sung the region in which to live
When sterile winter shone its boredom.

His whole neck will shake off this white agony
By space inflicted on the bird who denies it,
But not the horror of the ground where the plumage is caught.

Phantom whom to this place his pure brilliance assigns him,
Immobile in the cold dream of scorn
Which is worn amid the useless exile by the Swan.

A swan is trapped in the ice of a frozen lake, fixed, unable to take poetic flight or dive into the water. He is a victim of his own inaction; he did not take flight with the other birds in autumn (“n’avoir pas chanté la région où vivre”) and his impotence has frozen around him as has the lake. He hopes that the rays of a new dawn might melt the ice, free him from his earthly

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\(^{109}\) Of course, “plafond” resonates with “ployé” and “périr.” The implication of enclosure in “plafond” is also relevant here.

\(^{110}\) Mallarmé, *OC* I, 36-37. It should be noted that Pierre Boulez set this poem, along with “Une dentelle s’abolit” and “À la nue accablante tu” in his *Improvisations sur Mallarmé*. 
prison and let him spread his wings skyward once more. He shakes the frost from his neck but his feathers remain caught; there will be no salvation today. Instead, the swan remains in the prison of his own making, his proud plumage stilled, awaiting the day when freedom will come.

A conventional reading of this poem, which is no less plausible for that fact, would equate the poet with the swan, and to read the poem autobiographically as another instance of Mallarmé turning his poetic impotence (in the face of the Great Work) into poetry, as he did with countless other poems. The plumage which is caught would then be a metaphor for the poet’s immobile pen, the feather or wing which awaits the promise of a new dawn. When this new day brings no new flight, the poet covers himself in scorn (for conventional uses of language) and reconciles himself to wait for another day and another time.

An alternative reading would take the “Cygne” as a homonym for “signe” (and it is no coincidence that Mallarmé expressly rhymes these two sounds in the final tercet of the poem). It would then be the sign—the word—and not the poet who is hoping that the new day brings a poetic flight, that it would enter the poetic Jeu suprême and find liberation from its use in the language of commerce.

The high concentration of /i/ phonemes in this sonnet has led some to refer to it as the “Sonnet en i,” a counterpart to the “Sonnet en yx.” The inclusion of this phoneme in each of the sonnet’s fourteen rhymes, and the extreme concentration of /i/s in the final tercet of this poem leaves little doubt that Mallarmé was consciously exploiting this sound. The brightness of this sound is related to the dawn of the new day and the promise that it brings. It also

111 Mallarmé often uses a component of one or several words to create unexpected rhyme. See for example “tristement dort une mandore” from “Une dentelle s’abolit” – where “—ment dort” and “mandore” form an unexpected rhyme. OC I, 42-43.
112 I see no reason why these two analogical interpretations (and others) can not coexist. After all, it is the simultaneous presence of two meanings that drives analogy and metaphor in the first place.
113 See page 80 of the present study.
represents the “pur éclat” of the swan, a good example of Mallarmé reinforcing an individual /i/ phoneme in “Cygne” (itself a mot juste) by surrounding it with other words that contain the same phoneme, even at the expense of clear semantic meaning and some twisted syntax.

As in “Saint Cécile,” there is also a particular concentration of /v/ phonemes, here signifying both the swan’s now immobile wing and the poetic flights (“vols”), both those formerly unflown and those promised by the new day. The /v/ constellation in this poem is significantly longer than that in “Sainte Cécile,” and even if allowances are made for fortuitous coincidences (such as va and avec), this constellation includes many of the poem’s most important images:

vierge - vivace - ivre - givre - vols - souvient - délivre - vivre - hiver - vêt

It is not merely the number of Vs in the piece, but their distribution that is significant here. In the octave, where the possibility of the new day is still uncertain, there are 13 /v/ phonemes, reinforcing the semantic suggestion of flight. In the sestet, where it is evident that today will not bring the desired flight, the V virtually disappears, with only a single instance in the final line of the poem.

As in “Sainte Cécile,” many of the key words in the poem are united by the unordered pair of phonemes /v/ /i/. If the /v/ is suggestive of flight and the /i/ of both the promise of the new day and the brightness of the swan in this poem, it may well be motivated by their convergence in the word “Cygne” itself, where the /i/ phoneme is represented graphically by the v shape of the letter y.

The four end-rhymes on /ivr/—ivre / givre / délivre / vivre—are particularly striking here, as much for what they contain as for what they omit.114 In his perceptive commentary, Robert Greer Cohn has noted that these four rhymes are reinforced in the words “vierge” and

114 Mallarmé uses the same four rhymes in the unpublished “Éventail de Méry Laurent,” OC 1, 68.
"hiver" through the unordered quartet of letters v, i, e, r. Following the customs of French prosody, there are only eight rhymes available on /ivr/: cuivre – délire – givre – guivre –ivre –ivre –ivre –ivre. Some of these are semantically unsuitable for this poem, like “guivre,” a heraldic term meaning serpent. But the absence of “livre,” a word so close to the heart of Mallarmean poetics cannot be simply by chance. Semantically, this absence is fitting, since the swan’s earthly prison is fashioned precisely by the fact that he has not been able to sing of the Great Work. The absence of “livre” in the text of the poem is thus made present, a common theme in Mallarmé’s works. This presence-through-absence is reinforced through phonetic echoes of “livre” scattered through the text:

d’aile ivre délivre le givre stérile hiver
/de l ivr/ /délivr/ /l girv/ /l ivr/

Several of these phonetic echoes are accompanied by anagrams of “livre” (present also in “Le vierge”) in the text that are also richly suggestive. Like the swan, these letters are trapped inside their constituent words, awaiting a “coup de livre” (“coup d’aile ivre”) to free them.

THE CASE OF WAGNER

In the summer of 1885, responding to a request from Edouard Dujardin, Mallarmé wrote his first and most important essay on Wagner. It is significant, given the frequency with which Mallarmé’s aesthetic is seen as a response to Wagner, that this essay comes relatively late in Mallarmé’s life and only in response to a request for an article. By his own

115 Cohn, Toward the Poems, 125.
116 Mallarmé does in fact use this word in “Mes bouquins refermés,” OC I, 45.
117 Mallarmé famously described Le Livre as the “expansion totale de la lettre, doit d’elle tirer, directement, une mobilité et spacieux, par correspondances, instituer un jeu, on ne sait, qui confirme la fiction” (“total expansion of the letter, must draw from it, directly, a mobility and spacious, through correspondences, to institute a game, one does not know, that confirms the fiction”). See “Le Livre, instrument spirituel,” OC II, 226.
118 Dujardin was a founding editor of the Revue wagnerienne and an important figure in the spread of French wagnerisme.
admission, Mallarmé had never seen any of Wagner’s works in performance. However, he heard excerpts of Wagner at the concerts spirituels, and counted some prominent Wagnerians as close friends, notably Villiers de l’Isle Adam and Eugène Lefèbure. In the spring of 1885, he read Quatre poèmes d’opéras traduits en prose français, précédés d’une lettre sur la musique par Richard Wagner (1861), and the numerous critical commentaries and translated extracts of Wagner’s theoretical works in contemporary Parisian journals likely exposed him to the dramatic ideas of Opera and Drama in summary form. Half article, half prose-poem, Mallarmé’s “Richard Wagner, rêverie d’un poète français” is at once appreciation of Wagner’s music dramas and a warning against using Wagner as a model for French poets to follow. Written at the beginning of the most fervent period of French wagnerisme (1885–1900), Mallarmé’s essay anticipates many of the criticisms raised by later French writers, notably Debussy.

Throughout the essay, Mallarmé modulates between genuine admiration of Wagner and a deep-seated suspicion of the Gesamtkunstwerk as a viable way to achieve the union of the arts to which both men aspire. Ultimately, and predictably, the foundations of Mallarmé’s critique of Wagner are based on the idea that Wagner does not go far enough in his effort to reconcile music and language. So while praising Wagner’s effort as one of the best in contemporary theater, Mallarmé is also eager to show that Wagner’s music dramas do not in fact achieve the original fusion of the arts that they intend.

Mallarmé sees Wagner as the “singular challenge of poets, whose rights he has usurped with the most candid and splendid bravery.” This is really the crux of the case against Wagner, and the foundations of Mallarmé’s position vis-à-vis contemporary music in general:

120 Mallarmé, Corr., II, 289. Letter to Kahn, 17 April 1885.
122 Ibid., 154: “Singulier défi qu’aux poètes dont il usurpe le devoir avec la plus candide et splendide bravoure.”
that music has infringed upon poetry. Music presents itself as if it were the originator of mystery, when in fact it is merely a derivative (no matter how compelling) of language. The challenge to poets, therefore, is not to make their poetry more musical, not to make a copy of a copy, but instead to carry the union of the arts back further than Wagner, and in a somewhat different direction.

In contemporary theater, Mallarmé sees Wagner as the one whose effort goes furthest towards reuniting the arts under the direction of Poetry. For him, Wagner understands that in the process of reunification, traditional elements of the individual arts will be transformed from their current status, and put to a different purpose. The essay “Solennité”—written in 1887 after the failed revival of *Lohengrin*—clarifies this position:

In Wagner, even, [...] I do not find, strictly speaking, theater (surely one will find more, from the dramatic point of view, in ancient Greek theater or Shakespeare), but legendary vision which suffices under the veil of sonorities and mixes there; nor are his scores, compared to Beethoven or Bach, simply, music. Something special and complex results: situated at the convergence of the other arts, issuing from them and governing them, Fiction or Poetry.

This is the source of Mallarmé’s genuine and abiding respect for Wagner’s genius. In the “Rêverie,” Mallarmé praises Wagner for revitalizing the theater, and credits his music for liberating it from a strictly representational function. After Wagner, the dramatic action of theater was more abstract, and therefore more likely to be read as independent allegory. This paves the way for art to replace religion, a goal common to both Wagner and Mallarmé. He also lauds Wagner for representing the onstage dramatic action in the orchestra through the
leitmotive. For him, Wagner’s orchestra is the source of the actor’s movements and emotions on stage, and this degree of integration is an important development in contemporary drama.¹²⁴

Yet Mallarmé also has serious, philosophical reservations about the Wagnerian project. He admits that “of the two elements of beauty that exclude each other and, at least, ignore one another, personal drama and ideal music, [Wagner] created a hymen.”¹²⁵ While this seems to be a valorization of Wagner’s achievement, Jacques Derrida has argued persuasively that Mallarmé’s use of the word “hymen”—signifying both virginal membrane and the Greek god of marriage in French as in English—is an intentional syllepsis that speaks of admiration and doubt in the same sentence.¹²⁶ In Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk, there is not, as many would claim, a union of the arts, but merely a juxtaposition of music and drama.

In Wagner, Mallarmé argues that “everything has been made, rather than irradiated, by a direct game, from the literary principle itself.”¹²⁷ Like literature (and particularly poetry), Wagner’s music dramas attempt to reconstruct the essential unity of the arts. However, instead of tracing this unity all the way back to a common original language as Mallarmé outlined in Les mots anglais, Wagner is contented with an assemblage of the various arts on stage. This juxtaposition of the arts is a constructed simulation of literature insofar as it attempts to bring the arts together. But it does not emanate from a central source (language) and therefore is a simulacrum of poetry. The true union of the arts is only possible, for Mallarmé, when united under the rubric of language, their unique source. This is the ultimate duty and the sole province of the poet.

¹²⁴ It is unlikely that Mallarmé would have understood Wagner’s more subtle symphonic techniques. His criticism is largely based on the one-to-one relationship that he sees between the leitmotive and the characters onstage.
¹²⁵ Mallarmé, “Richard Wagner,” OC II, 155: “des deux éléments de beauté qui s'excluent et, tout au moins, l'un l'autre, s'ignorent, le drame personnel et la musique idéale, il effectua l'hymen.”
¹²⁷ Mallarmé, “Richard Wagner,” OC II, 154: “que tout soit fait, autrement qu'en irradiant, par un jeu direct, du principe littéraire même.”
As such, Wagner never actually changes anything fundamental about the theater; he merely fuses its disparate elements into a simultaneous, multi-media presentation. From this philosophical position, Mallarmé argues, ironically, that despite his monumental effort, Wagner fails to unite the arts because the very principle on which his effort is based fundamentally misunderstands Music.\textsuperscript{128}

This why Mallarmé sees Wagner’s effort as returning “to the waters of the primitive stream: not all the way to the source,” and the temple of Wagnerian art as merely “halfway up the saintly mountain.”\textsuperscript{129} For him, the Wagnerian project cannot be completed on the stage, but only through poetry. In place of Wagnerian legend, he proposes:

\begin{quote}
Fable, virgin of everything, place, time and person also, [which] reveals itself borrowed from the latent meaning in the concourse of everything, the one inscribed on the page of the Heavens and of which History itself is only the interpretation, vain, that is to say a Poem.\textsuperscript{130}
\end{quote}

In order to reach the kind of abstraction that Mallarmé sees as necessary, the physical trappings of Wagner’s music dramas must be cast aside (“virgin of everything, place, time and person also”). The Poem which springs forth from “the latent meaning in the concourse of everything” is nothing other than the Music which Wagner misunderstands. This Music is the “hymn, harmony and joy […] of the relations between all things” that Mallarmé would later insist on as a fundamental characteristic of \textit{Le Livre}, a kind of personal and abstract drama that would rise to the challenge of Wagner’s pseudo-Greek spirituality and embody Music par excellence.

Shortly after publishing Mallarmé’s “Rêverie,” Dujardin solicited another contribution from the poet, this one a poem. Mallarmé was not particularly enthusiastic about the project, desiring above all not to add a banal epilogue to “the many suggestive things written on

\textsuperscript{128} Mallarmé, “Richard Wagner,” \textit{OC} II, 156.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 157; 158.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 157: “A moins que la Fable, vierge de tout, lieu, temps et personne sus, ne se dévoile empruntée au sens latent en le concours de tous, celle inscrite sur la page des Cieux et dont l’Histoire même n’est que l’interprétation, vaine, c’est-à-dire un Poème.”
Wagner.” Despite his reservations, the sonnet was published, along with several others, in the edition of the Revue dated 8 January, 1886.

Hommage

Le silence déjà funèbre d’une moire
Dispose plus qu’un pli seul sur le mobilier
Que doit un tassement du principal pilier
Précipiter avec le manque de mémoire.

Notre si vieil ébat triomphal du grimoire,
Hieroglyphes dont s’exalte le millier
À propager de l’aile un frisson familier !
Enfouissez-le-moi plutôt dans une armoire.

Du souriant fracas originel haï
Entre elles de clartés maîtresses a jailli
Jusque vers un parvis né pour leur simulacre,
Trumpettes tout haut d’or pâmé sur les vêlins,
Le dieu Richard Wagner irradiant un sacre
Mal tu par l’encre même en sibyllins.

The sonnet opens in an abandoned room where the silks covering the furniture act as a funeral shroud for a theater mourning the death of the Master. The folds of the cloth itself, and the hollows created by its hanging on the furniture, suggest the yawning chasm of a tomb. The “principal pilier”—presumably Wagner himself—is in the grave, and yet the weight of his

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132 A variety of cloth that “communique un éclat changeant, une apparence ondée et chatoyante,” so that “la beauté de la moire résidant dans la variété des dessins changeant avec la position du spectateur.” Surely this refers also to the variety of French perspectives on Wagner mentioned in the “Réverie.” See Émile Littré, Dictionnaire de la langue française (Paris: Redon, 1998) CD-ROM, s.v. “moire.” This work was Mallarme’s favorite dictionary, and is one of the best sources of information on contemporary meaning and pronunciation. Hereafter, all references to this work shall use “Littré” and the relevant entry.

133 Littré gives two relevant meanings here: a sorcerer’s book used to conjure demons and, figuratively, any difficult or obscure writing. See Littré, s.v. “grimoire.”

134 According to Littré, a courtyard in front of the main door of a church, particularly a cathedral. s.v. “parvis”
influence is still felt in contemporary theater, as he casts down the trappings of an outmoded theater “le mobilier” into oblivion.\textsuperscript{135}

In the second quatrain, Mallarmé contrasts this with his own going concern: poetry, and his ongoing struggle with the Great Work. References to the grimoire and its hieroglyphic writing designed to uplift the masses are meant to contrast with the quasi-religious demagogy of the Wagnerian cult. The “frisson familier” of the wing is probably the movement of the pen, which Mallarmé frequently equates with bird imagery, owing to the dual meaning of “plume” as both “feather” and “pen.” The closing request to stow the long-awaited book in an armoire speaks to Mallarmé’s patient approach to his own work. The negative connotations of “enfouissez-le-moi” are tempered somewhat by the fact that an armoire is not merely another piece of furniture but, etymologically, an armory, and the book that it contains a weapon as powerful as a bomb, but without the collateral damage.\textsuperscript{136}

Untwisting the syntax of the tercets, we may read the following: “From the smiling original fracas of master lights, among these one [Wagner] has flashed towards a parvis born for their simulation.”\textsuperscript{137} Here we find the same mixture of admiration and criticism that characterized the “Rêverie.” If Wagner is indeed the god of a renewed religion, then his pulpit stands outside the temple itself, a kind of sideshow along the road. Yet Wagner is one of the supreme lights (or truths) of the “original fracas,” the generative musical language that furnished the world’s idioms and created instrumental music in its splitting apart. Wagnerian trumpets swoon on the pages of his scores, their gold referring at once to their sound, their physical colour and the illuminated manuscripts on which Mallarmé imagines all music to be

\textsuperscript{135} The identity of the “principal pilier” is a matter of some debate. Lloyd James Austin suggests Victor Hugo, noting that Hugo died on Wagner’s birthday, 22 May. Cited in OC I, 1198. The reading is tantalizing, given Hugo’s importance to French theater and Mallarmé’s respect for his poetry. However, the main sense of the passage—renewal of the theater—is not really affected by the identity of the one doing the renewing.

\textsuperscript{136} See Mallarmé, “La Musique et les Lettres” OC II, 72.

\textsuperscript{137} See Cohn, Toward the Poems, 181.
written. These trumpets—and Wagner’s music in general—are badly silenced both by the ink with which they are inscribed on his scores, and by the ink of the poet’s pen whose efforts may be overwhelmed by the Wagnerian tide.

The semantic opposition that Mallarmé sets up between Wagnerian art and the Great Work—represented in “Hommage” as the grimoire—is essentially an opposition between music-as-instrumental-sound and the music of language. It is hardly a coincidence, therefore, that “grimoire” derives etymologically from the Latin *gramma*, meaning “letter.” For if the music of language is played out in the relationships between its constituent letters, then Mallarmé’s “Hommage” to Wagner enacts its own criticism of his music dramas through the very fabric of its own diction.

As Graham Robb has shown, much of Mallarmé’s *vers de circonstance* (which by definition includes all the tombeaux and hommages) draws its inspiration from the names of the persons to whom they are dedicated. In the quatrain which decorates the copy of “L’Après-midi d’un faun” which Mallarmé gave to Debussy, the unordered phoneme /si/, taken from the last phonemes of his name, appears with surprising regularity:

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Sylvain d’haleine première
/si/ /i/
Si ta flute a réussi
/si/ /y/ /y//si/
Ouïs toute la lumière
/is//u/ /y/ /i/
Qu’y soufflera Debussy
/is//u/ /y//si/
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138 See Mallarmé’s description of orchestral scores in “Hérésies artistiques,” *OC* II, 360.
139 Robb, *Unlocking Mallarmé*, 84.
If we consider the independent /i/ in “première” and “lumière,” then each line of verse both begins and ends with sounds drawn from Debussy’s name. Likewise, the numerous /y/ and /u/ phonemes pick up on the penultimate syllable of “Debussy.”

Returning to “Hommage,” all eight lines of the octave end with the unordered letter cluster /i, e, r/, which is drawn from the first and last letters of Wagner’s name. The cluster here may well be motivated by the graphic shape of the W, which suggests a redoubling or folding in on itself. However, unlike the Debussy example, these letters are connected to Wagner’s name by their graphology alone: there is no phonetic similarity here. From Mallarmé’s point of view, this gesture posits the superiority of poetry over music, since it has this additional dimension of meaning readily available to the reader. In his response to a survey on the topic of graphology, Mallarmé claimed that writing was an index, a transcription of the poet’s thought set down in a permanent form, analogous to a gesture of the body. Therefore, his writing is amenable to a graphic analysis as much as a semantic or phonetic one.

This play of letters is intimately connected to Mallarmé’s notion of the grimoire: the Great Work which will eventually rise to the challenge of the Gesamtkunstwerk. So the old struggle with the grimoire (“notre si vieil ebat du grimoire”) is, at least in part, a struggle with letters and their relationships, hieroglyphs whose true meaning is revealed only to those who

140 The /y/ and /u/ phonemes are close enough on the French vowel scale to make the phonetic similarity plausible here.

141 See Mallarmé’s commentary on the letter w in Les mots anglais, OC II, 980. He argues that the multiplicity of meanings which w seems to convey may be the result of the letter’s unique graphology.

142 Given Mallarmé’s expertise in English, it is possible that there is a phonetic echo of Wagner’s last name (pronounced /wa/ rather than /va/, but evoking the English graphology. While this may seem fanciful, echoes of English are sometimes evoked in Mallarmé: for example, the echo of “I’ll be none” in the title “Igitur ou la folie d’Elbehn.” It does seem more than coincidental that a letter — w — which does not exist in French proper should be invoked through the French letters oire. It seems to me that Mallarmé would have been struck by the fact that “this foreigner” Wagner is marked graphically as such.

143 Of course, musical notation offers a comparable procedure in the play of enharmonic spellings. However, the average person consumes music through the ear primarily (as in listening to a performance), and only a trained musician can understand the enharmonic respellings of Beethoven, etc. By contrast, nearly everyone consumes poetry through the eye first, and then through the mind’s ear. Although this is a disadvantage, Mallarmé turns this into an advantage through a careful sensitivity to graphology.

are willing to look past the semantics of language for additional layers of meaning. That Mallarmé describes this struggle as “triomphalement” may have less to do with his actual success in writing the book than in the letter cluster m, o, i, r which unites the grimoire with its three other rhymes, and with the ultimate triumph of language:

\[ \text{moire} - \text{mémento} - \text{grimoire} - \text{armoire} - \text{triomphalement}^{145} \]

These additional ways of meaning are, in Mallarmé’s mind, unique to poetry. They are the tools with which he will mount his ultimate challenge to Wagnerian music drama in *Le Livre*.

**Music in the Late Critical Works**

The sound-sense relationship continues to be a powerful one in Mallarmé’s later writings, especially in the essay “Crise de vers” (1887–1895).\(^1\)\(^4\)\(^6\) “Crise de vers” is an extended reflection on the nature of contemporary poetry. It is here that Mallarmé makes some of his most audacious claims about the primacy and ubiquity of poetry, and about its relationship to music. Here again, but in a more mature form, Mallarmé insists on the supremacy of the sound-sense relationship in poetry, and on the musical basis of this phenomenon. What is new here is the confrontational tone that Mallarmé adopts towards actual symphonic music. This, no doubt, is another response to *wagnerisme*, and to the increasing valorization of music as the art to which all others aspire. But the ideas are not fundamentally different from those put forward in his earlier writings; they simply show an evolution born of maturity and experience.

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\(^{145}\) Mallarmé pairs these letters in the opening quatrain of “Prose pour des Esseintes,” a work supremely concerned with the poetic techniques that will lead to the Great Work:

Hyperbole! de ma mémoire
Triomphalement ne sais-tu
Te lever, aujourd’hui grimoire
Dans un livre de fer vêtu:

\(^{146}\) Mallarmé, *OC* II, 204-213. The article is constructed from various fragments published between 1887 and 1895. A complete chronology of the independent parts is contained in *OC* II, 1643.
Mallarmé writes of the fracturing of language into “a thousand simple elements” (letters and their corresponding phonemes) that are “similar to the numerous cries of an orchestra, which remain verbal.” The suggestion here is not, as it is sometimes taken, that contemporary poetry should try to capture the sounds of contemporary music, but rather that poetic music—the play of letters and semantics—is comparable to symphonic music in its play between sound and meaning. Mallarmé writes:

Certainly, I never sit on the concert tiers, without perceiving amid the obscure sublimity a certain sketch of one of those poems immanent in humanity or their original state, all the more understandable since it is silent and that in order to produce the vast line the composer tested his ability to suspend himself on the edge of the temptation to explain himself. I imagine, no doubt through an ineradicable writer's prejudice, that nothing can endure without being uttered; that we are there, precisely, to seek out, before a fracturing of the great literary rhythms [...] and their scattering into articulated shivers near to instrumentation, an art of completing the transposition, to the Book, of the symphony or simply to take back our own for it is not from the elemental sonorities of brass, strings and woodwinds that Music results, but undeniably from the intellectual word at its apogee, with totality and evidence, as the ensemble of relationships existing in all, Music.  

Mallarmé hears a kind of latent poem underneath symphonic music, one which seeks its own completion in a kind of transposition into language. This transposition of the symphony to the Book depends on the fragmentation of language into its phonemic components (its “articulated shivers near to instrumentation”) in which sound and sense are reconciled in an effort to contain the “ensemble of relationships existing in all.” The “intellectual word”—literature in its highest form—can accomplish this transposition since it can mean both phonetically and semantically. Symphonic music, for Mallarmé, has only a “phonetic”

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147 Mallarmé, “Crise de vers,” OC II, 205.
148 Mallarmé, “Crise de vers,” OC II, 212: “Certainement, je ne m’assieds jamais aux gradins des concerts, sans percevoir parmi l’obscur sublimité telle ébauche de quelqu’un des poèmes immanents à l’humanité ou leur origine, d’autant plus compréhensible que tu ne pour en déterminer la vaste ligne le compositeur éprouvait cette faculté de suspendre jusqu’à la tentation de s’expliquer. Je me figure par un indéfinissable sans doute préjugé d’écritain, que rien ne demeurera sans être proféré; que nous en sommes là, précisément, à rechercher, devant une brisure des grands rythmes littéraires [...] et leur épiplement en frissons articulés proches de l’instrumentation, un art d’achever la transposition, au Livre, de la symphonie ou uniment de reprendre notre bien car, ce n’est pas de sonorités élémentaires par les cuivres, les cordes, les bois, indéniablement mais de l’intellectuelle parole à son apogée que doit avec plénitude et évidence, résulter, en tant que l’ensemble des rapports existant dans tout, la Musique.” Emphasis mine.
149 Mallarmé attended the Lamoureux concerts regularly beginning in 1885. He was often seen sketching in notebooks during the concerts, as if making a transliteration of the music that he heard in poetic terms. These sketch books have not yet been positively identified.
meaning: the sonorities of its instruments suggest mood, emotion, basic meanings (light, dark, etc.). But because music lacks a semantic dimension it cannot play between the two levels as poetry can. This is why the word is, for Mallarmé, the highest and purest form of music.

If the word is music, then the voice must be its instrument. This idea, which we encountered earlier in "Le démon de l’analogie" resurfaces here:

Languages, which are imperfect due to their multiplicity, lack the supreme language: thinking being to write the immortal word without accessories, nor whispering but still silent, the diversity, on earth, of languages prevents anyone from proffering words that, otherwise would find themselves, by a unique stroke, materially the truth. This prohibition rages expressly, in nature (one stumbles upon it with a smile) so that there is no worthy reason to consider oneself God; but, at present, turned towards aesthetics, _my feeling regrets that discourse fails to express objects through keys that respond to them in colour or appearance, those existing in the instrument of the voice, among languages and sometimes inside one_. Beside _ombre_, _opaque_, _ténèbres_ darkens only a little; what deception, before the perversity conferring to jour as to nuit, contradictorily, timbres dark for the former, the latter light. The wish for a term of brilliant splendor, or if it extinguishes itself, the inverse; as for simple luminous alternatives—_Only_, we know, _verse would not exist_: it, philosophically pays back the defect of languages, _superior complement._

Here, in perhaps its most famous formulation, is Mallarmé’s mature position on music and poetic language. We see again the idea that the plurality of modern languages obscures an originary one in which sound and sense would be in accord (“words that ... would find themselves, by a unique stroke, materially the truth”). The old dream—of rediscovering this generative idiom—returns here, but now accompanied by the realization that if it did, poetry would be non-existent, for all language would be in itself inherently poetic, and the poet would be Mr. Everyman. _It is precisely in the failings of modern French that the poet finds his_...
calling, to find or manufacture "keys in the instrument of the voice" which correspond to the semantic meaning of the words it pronounces when chance and the passage of time have corrupted or fragmented them.

Once the poet has found (or approximated through analogy) the mot juste, the poem will create itself as its component letters call forth other words which rhyme (in the most expanded sense of the word), bringing ever more unusual analogies to mind. The poet's task is then to notate these impressions, to weigh their symmetries, to find their common meaning:

"The poetic act consists of a sudden vision that an idea splinters in a number of motives equal in value and in grouping them; they rhyme: as an external seal, their common measure that the final throw relates."

Mallarmé's proud vision of a new language also endures here. Mallarmé now understands that recovering a generative language is not possible, but that a poetic approximation of this can be its equal, and may indeed be superior. This language, removed from common usage, is a fiction, an artificial and modern representation of a language which, if it ever existed, has vanished. Mallarmé describes it thus:

The verse which from several vocables remakes a total Word, new, foreign to the language and as if incantatory, achieves this isolation of the word: denying, by a sovereign stroke, the chance remaining in terms despite the artifice of their alternative re-tempering in sense and sonority, and causes you this surprise of having never heard such an ordinary fragment of speech, at the same time that the memory of the named object bathes in a new atmosphere.

La Musique et les Lettres

Perhaps the most important of Mallarmé's writings on the relationship between music and poetry was "La Musique et les Lettres," which occupied Mallarmé between 1892 and

152 Mallarmé, "Crise de vers," OC II, 209: 
"[L']acte poétique consiste à voir soudain qu'une idée se fractionne en un nombre de motifs égaux par valeur et à les grouper ; ils riment : pour sceau extérieur, leur commune mesure qu'apparente le coup final."

153 Ibid., 213: "Le vers qui de plusieurs vocables refait un mot total, neuf, étranger à la langue et comme incantatoire, achève cet isolement de la parole : niant, d'un trait souverain, le hasard demeuré aux termes malgré l'artifice de leur retrempe alternée en le sens et la sonorité, et vous cause cette surprise de n'avoir ouï jamais tel fragment ordinaire d'élocution, en même temps que la réminiscence de l'objet nommé baigne dans une neuve atmosphère."
1894. He delivered it as a lecture at Oxford in March 1894, and published it upon his return to Paris in the summer of that year. The first half of the lecture chronicles recent developments in French verse, including free verse and the prose poem. Mallarmé poses what is, by now, a familiar proposition: that the enchantment of writing lies, precisely, in its ability to approximate in notation """"(""""the volatile dispersion that is the mind, which has to do with nothing besides the musicality of everything""""). He continues:

The *entire available act*, forever and alone, consists in seizing the relationships, between beats, rare or multiplied; according to some interior state and that one wants to spread to his liking, simplifying the world.

*This equals creation:* the notion of an object, escaping which causes lack.

*Such an occupation is sufficient,* comparing the aspects and their number as they strike our careless thought: *awakening there,* for decoration, the ambiguity of some beautiful figures, at the intersections. *The total arabesque, which links them,* produces dizzying leaps in a recognized terror; and anxious harmonies. Warning through such a leap, instead of disconcerting, in other words that their similarity is removed in their confusion. A silenced melodic calculation, of those motives which compose a logic, with our sinews. What agony, then, that shakes the Chimera pouring from its golden wounds the evidence that the whole creature exists, no vanquished twist either falsifying or transgressing the omnipresent Line spread out from every point to every other to institute the Idea.

This passage outlines Mallarmé's conception of thought as a process of recognizing pre-existing relationships between phenomena. He sees this as a simplification of the world, a reduction of thought to its essential rhythms (comparable to the geometric diagrams in the notes for *Le Livre*). Mallarmé's entire creative process is encapsulated in this passage. One relationship, one analogy provokes another and another, the passage between one thought and

\[\text{\textsuperscript{154}}\text{This essay was not published in } Divagations (1897). A preliminary version was published as "Vers et Musique en France" in The National Observer (26 March, 1892). See OC II, 299-302.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{155}}\text{Mallarmé, "La Musique et les Lettres," OC II, 65: "la dispersion volatile soit l'esprit, qui n'a que faire de rien ou la musicalité de tout." This passage also appears in "Crise de vers."}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{156}}\text{Ibid., 68: "Tout l'acte disponible, à jamais et seulement, reste de saisir les rapports, entre temps, rares ou multipliés; d'après quelque état intérieur et que l'on veuille à son gré étendre, simplifier le monde. / À l'égal de créer; la notion d'un objet, échappant qui fait défaut. / Semblable occupation suffit, comparer les aspects et leur nombre tel qu'il frôlent notre négligence: y éveillant, pour décor, l'ambiguïté de quelques figures belles, aux intersections. La totale arabesque, qui les relie, a de vertigineuses sautes en un effroi que recouvre; et d'anxieux accords. Avertissant par tel écart, au lieu de déconcerter, ou que sa similitude avec elle-même, la soustraire en la confondant. Chiffrement mélodique tue, de ces motifs qui composent une logique, avec nos fibres. Quelle agonie, aussi, qu'agitée la Chimère versant par ses blessures d'or l'évidence de tout l'être pareil, nulle torsion vaincue ne fausse ni ne transgresse l'omniprésente Ligne espacée de tout point à tout autre pour instituer l'Idée." Emphasis mine.}\]
another tracing an “arabesque” which links these successive ideas in the mind. The arabesque that Mallarmé evokes here is the essential pattern of thought that we first encountered in the diagrams from the notes for Le Livre and which will be developed in Chapter Three. The analogies which the arabesque produces are ambiguous, suggestive, as increasingly remote ideas find their place in the constellation of thought. As thought leaps to connect these more distant ideas, their relationships (harmonies) become more tenuous, until in the process of comparison the whole thing becomes absurd, collapses under its own weight. This is what Mallarmé means when he claims that “their similarity is removed in their confusion”—the mind cannot withstand the proliferation of images that analogy offers and eventually the thread which connected the whole constellation is lost.

Mallarmé calls this kind of poetry “a silenced melodic calculation” that illustrates one facet of the total Idea, the Chimera, whose totality is beyond conscious understanding. Some particular arabesque of thought approaches the Idea, traces a portion of the omnipresent line which links the various parts of the whole creature. This total arabesque, which connects “one point to all others,” is nothing other than the Idea. Here, the connection between thought, music and poetry is explicitly drawn.

Mallarmé expresses a similar sentiment in a letter to Edmund Gosse. He praises Gosse for having truly understood his poetry, and particularly his use of words to suggest that which remains unsaid in the text. Mallarmé then explicitly connects this with music:

I make Music and name as such not that which one can extract by the euphonious grouping of words, this primary condition is self-evident; but that which lies beyond magically produced by certain dispositions of the word, these remaining only as a means of material communication with the reader, like the keys of a piano. Truly, between the lines and above the gaze this happens, in all purity, without the intervention of gut strings and the pistons as in the orchestra, which is already industrial; yet it is the same thing as an orchestra, but literarily or silently. Poets throughout the ages have never done otherwise and today it is amusing to be conscious of it, that’s all. Use Music in the Greek sense, meaning basically Idea or rhythm between relationships; there, more divine than in its public or symphonic expression.157

157 Mallarmé, Corr. VI, 26. Letter to Edmund Gosse, 10 January, 1893: “Je fais de la Musique, et appelle ainsi non celle qu’on peut tirer du rapprochement euphonique des mots, cette première condition va de soi ; mais l’au-delà
Mallarmé repeats his conviction that music is “basically Idea,” the process of thought bringing together various objects (physical, written, sonorous) and holding them in a momentary cohesion of the mind in order to uncover their hidden relationships. As thought brings images together and tears them apart, a rhythm is produced, a kind of oscillation of thought, an original rhythm from which music and poetry draw meter. This rhythm outlines the Idea in some particular aspect, and proves the existence of the whole.

To illustrate this, Mallarmé evokes a new image: the piano. In his poetry, words are not chosen for their euphony alone, but in such a way that their interconnections (both semantic and sonorous) suggest meanings beyond what is literally stated in the text, or what could be inferred from simple analogy. Instead, these words are emptied out somewhat, bringing a particular significance to their arrangement (formal, phonetic, ideographic, etc.). These words remain, then, like the keys of a piano in the sense that, isolated, they are nearly meaningless. However, when they are skillfully arranged by some inventive poet, they call out to one another, institute a game or a fiction, and create a mental music of relationships which takes place beyond the text. This is, for Mallarmé, the essence of music, which the material quality of instruments reproduces imperfectly. Even the material quality of the words (their phonetic dimension) must align itself with this more basic “music” of thought.

Mallarmé returns to the image of a verbal piano in “La Musique et les Lettres” in order to connect the Idea with his poetic practice through music. He claims that it is the poet’s duty to habitually surprise the reader with the arabesques of his thought: “whose rhythm, among the
keys of a verbal piano, gives way, as if under the interrogation of a fingering, to the use of words, apt, commonplace.”

This leads Mallarmé to his clearest statement of the relationship between music, thought and poetry: “I pose, at my aesthetic risk, this conclusion [...] that Music and Literature are the alternate faces here stretching out towards obscurity; there scintillating, with certainty, of a phenomenon, the only one, I will call it the Idea.” Here, Mallarmé suggests that Music and Poetry are equals in a supplementary relationship. This appears to be confirmed elsewhere in the essay:

Then, one possesses, rightly, the reciprocal means of Mystery—let’s forget the old distinction, between Music and Literature; it was only the splitting, desired, for their ultimate reunion, in the first place: one evocative of magic situated at the abstract limit of hearing and almost that of vision, becoming understanding; which, spacious, grants to the printed page an equal capacity.

Yet here, Mallarmé is invoking less a true union of Music and Literature than a subsuming of Music by Literature, which grants to language the evocative power of music and transforms it into understanding, displayed on the printed page.

THE MUSIC OF READING

After “La Musique et les Lettres,” music becomes less prominent as a subject in Mallarmé’s writings. Some of this must be attributed to his continuing work on Le Livre and a new project that would become Un coup de dés—not Le Livre, but a significant move in that

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159 Ibid., 69: “Je pose, à mes risques esthétiquement, cette conclusion [...] que La Musique et les Lettres sont la face alternative ici élargie vers l’obscur; scintillante là, avec certitude, d’un phénomène, le seul, je l’appelai l’Idée”
160 Ibid., 69: “Alors, on possède, avec justesse, les moyens réciproques du Mystère — oubliés la vieille distinction, entre La Musique et les Lettres, n’étant que le partage, voulu, pour sa rencontre ultérieure, du cas premier: l’une évocatoire de prestiges situés à ce point de l’ouïe et presque de la vision abstrait, devenu l’entendement; qui, spacieux, accorde au feuillet d’imprimerie une portée égale.”
In Un coup de dés, Mallarmé claimed to have invented a new genre, a kind of symphonic blend of free verse and prose poem, a realization of his ambition to achieve a "transposition of the symphony to the book," a repatriation to poetry of its essential characteristics, of which instrumental music is merely a simulacrum.

Whatever else it may be, Un coup de dés is an enactment of a strategy of reading that had been latent in his works since the 1860s. As his syntax became increasingly fragmented in an effort to mimic the fragmentation of a single idea into innumerable facets and to allow the phonemic elements of the poem to speak of their own accord, Mallarmé made increasing demands on the reader to scan and rescan his writings to reconstruct a syntax that allowed for an understanding. By exploding the page as he did for the first time in Un coup de dés, he makes this reading strategy explicit and, strangely, more simple. Now, typeface and grouping on the page defined a space of reading that was not simply linear, but instead required the reader to try certain combinations of words, to consider their relationships in an enactment of the thought process.

This new reading strategy in Un coup de dés is inherently musical, since it is a byproduct of tracing the "prismatic subdivisions of the Idea." Yet it is a latent feature of virtually all of his mature writings, and this fact is not lost on Mallarmé. In 1896, the year before Un coup de dés was initially published, Mallarmé wrote an impassioned response to Marcel Proust, who had lambasted the poet for his supposed obscurity. "Le Mystère dans les lettres" argues that writing must maintain an air of mystery if it is to be raised above a common usage. This is the inner treasure of writing—his writing in particular—that his critics miss.

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161 In the preface to Un coup de dés, Mallarmé made the curious, and as yet unexplained, claim that this poem, when read aloud, would result in a musical score. See OC I, 391.
162 Mallarmé, "Crise de vers," OC II, 212. Mallarmé referred to Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk as a simulacrum in "Hommage."
163 The mid-alexandrine breaks in "L'après-midi d'un faun" are an early precursor of this.
164 Part of this, of course, is Mallarmé's desire to create ideograms in this poem.
165 Mallarmé, OC I, 391.
because they "do not know how to read—except for the newspapers."\textsuperscript{166} To this, Mallarmé proposes an alternative strategy of reading, one in which:

Words exalt themselves through several recognized facets most rare or valid for the mind, the centre of vibratory suspense; which perceives them independently of the ordinary sequence, projected, on the walls of a grotto; as long as their mobility or principle lasts, being that which is not said in discourse: all ready, before extinction, for a reciprocity of distant fires or presented at an angle like a contingency.\textsuperscript{167}

The practice of reading is precisely to allow the words to coalesce in the mind, regardless of their actual sequence on the page, or their usual disposition in language itself. So if thought is musical by nature, then reading is a kind of performance of thought, a particular expression of it: "A solitary silent concert is given, through reading, to the mind which regains, with a lesser sonority, the signification: no mental medium exalting the symphony, will be lacking, rarefied and that's all—in fact of thought."\textsuperscript{168} This musical reading will find signification even in the blank spaces between the words (especially in \textit{Un coup de dés}), and stands as a metaphor for the open mind with which the reader must approach the text. This practice of reading vanquishes chance one word at a time, reveals the relationships between the words in whatever capacity they may appear. A reader educated in this way will have no trouble reading Mallarmé:

Virginité qui solitairement, devant une transparence du regard adequat, elle--meme s'est comme divisee en ses fragments de candeur, l'un et l'autre, preuves nuptiales de l'idée. / L'air ou chant sous le texte, conduisant la divination d'ici là, y applique son motif en fleuron et cul-de-lampe invisibles.\textsuperscript{169}

\textsuperscript{166} Mallarmé, "Le Mystère dans les lettres," OC II, 234: "ne savent pas lire—sinon dans le journal"

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 233: "Les mots, d'eux--mêmes, s'exaltent à mainte facette reconnue la plus rare ou valant pour l'esprit, centre de suspend vibratoire; qui les perçoit indépendamment de la suite ordinaire, projetés, en parois de grotte; tant que dure leur mobilité ou principe, étant ce qui ne se dit pas du discours: prompts tous, avant extinction, à une réciprocité de feux distante ou présentée de biais comme contingence."

\textsuperscript{168} Mallarmé, "Le Livre, instrument spirituel," OC, II, 226: "Un solitaire tacite concert se donne, par la lecture, à l'esprit qui regagne, sur une sonorité moindre, la signification: aucun moyen mental exaltant la symphonie, ne manquera, rarefîé et c'est tout—du fait de la pensée."

\textsuperscript{169} Mallarmé, "Le Mystère dans les lettres," OC II, 234: "Virginité qui solitairement, devant une transparence du regard adequat, elle--meme s'est comme divisee en ses fragments de candeur, l'un et l'autre, preuves nuptiales de l'idée. / L'air ou chant sous le texte, conduisant la divination d'ici là, y applique son motif en fleuron et cul-de-lampe invisibles."
The virginity here refers both to the reader who abandons preconceptions in order to enter the text afresh, and to the Idea itself, which is similarly pure. The Idea on the page is divided into fragments (actual fragments in *Un coup de dés*, virtual fragments in other texts) which call out suggestively to one another. An adequate reader sees the connections between the individual elements—the one and the other—which are fragments of the Idea. The process of reading these poetic constellations brings the fragments together in a series of marriages, providing an image of the Idea, some proof that the Chimera actually exists. This reading acts like a song beneath the text, leading the reader from image to image, word to word, gradually revealing a larger truth. This movement inscribes a fleuron on the space of writing, an arabesque which, though invisible, traces the patterns of musical thought across the text.

POETRY AS MUSIC

For Mallarmé, the ultimate superiority of poetry over music rests on the inherent differences between language and music itself. Unlike some *fin-de-siècle* poets, who sought to imitate and recreate the effects of instrumental music in their verses, Mallarmé was never willing to give up the primacy of poetry. Despite the musical nature of the Idea, language was better suited to representing its essential patterns because, unlike language, music has no specific semantic aspect. Although music (like dance) enacted the basic patterns of thought, traced its arabesques in sound, these could not be related to specific thoughts except through language. This is why Mallarmé always sees latent poetry in any musical performance, “one

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170 It seems significant here that Mallarmé chooses “nuptiales” rather than “hymen” to designate the marriage of images in *Le Livre*.
171 A fleuron is an ornament used to fill the empty spaces of a book’s pages. It is usually in the form of a flower. See Littré, s.v. “fleuron”
172 This is a basic condition of all music criticism. Without recourse to language, musical meaning cannot be transmitted from person to person, whether through the text of vocal music, or an extra-musical description (however technical that may be).
of those poems immanent in humanity or their original state” which simply awaits its transcription in language, into a more suitable music.\textsuperscript{173}

Mallarmé makes all of this explicit in “La Musique et les Lettres.” After claiming that literature is a mental pursuit carried out in discourse to establish a connection between that external reality (the poem) and an imaginative understanding of it (thought), Mallarmé argues that concert music conceals the same ambition. However, concert music is not capable of a similar connection. Despite the fact that it traces the same abstract patterns of thought in its play with timbre and range, it lacks the semantic dimension that literature has:

> On the contrary, in the tracing, a minute ago, of the sinuous and mobile variations of the Idea, which writing claims to fix, there may have been, possibly, in some of you, reason to compare such phrases to a memory of the orchestra; where returns into the shadow are followed, after a concerned stirring, by a sudden multiple eruptive leap of clarity, like those radiations near daybreak: vain, unless language, through the re-forging and purifying flight of song, does not confer a meaning on it.\textsuperscript{174}

Concert music enacts the Idea in outline, but is vain on its own, unless and until it borrows a semantic dimension from language. In “Le Livre, instrument spirituel,” Mallarmé claims that “Poetry, close to the idea, is Music, par excellence—admits no inferiority.”\textsuperscript{175} This is Mallarmé’s final position on the relationship between music and poetry.

\textbf{CONCLUSION}

The musical nature of poetry and thought was indeed a lifelong obsession for Mallarmé. Though he always reserved the highest honor for poetry, he saw music as a challenge. Much more than painting and even dance, Mallarmé returned again and again to the

\textsuperscript{172} Mallarmé, “Crise de vers,” \textit{OC} II, 212.
\textsuperscript{173} Mallarmé, “La Musique et les Lettres,” \textit{OC} II, 68-69: “Par contre, à ce tracé, il y a une minute, des sinueuses et mobiles variations de l’Idée, que l’écrit revendique de fixer, y eut-il, peut-être, chez quelques-uns de vous, lieu de confronter à telles phrases une réminiscence de l’orchestre; où succède à des rentrées en l’ombre, après un remous soucieux, tout à coup l’érupitif multiple sursautement de la clarté, comme les proches irradiations d’un lever de jour: vain, si le langage, par la retrempe et l’essor purifiants du chant, n’y confère un sens.”
idea of music as a metaphor for his poetic technique and his more basic epistemology. This was not merely the result of his contact with the ideas of Wagner, although his efforts were certainly focused by his contemporaries’ enthusiasm for the German composer. Nor was it merely a public stance, restricted to published essays and letters that he could reasonably expect to be published in the future. It permeated his aesthetic, and was one of the founding principles of his poetic technique. Reading the music of Mallarmé’s poetry, therefore, is a twin process of reading the music of language itself—the phonetic structures of the poetry and the letters that express them—and the ideas, semantic and metaphoric, which the poetry contains.

Mallarmé’s conception of a musical language is, to a certain extent, the same concern that all poets have and have always had: how to find significant relationships between words that also express something beautiful. But Mallarmé’s search through language was much more profound than that of many poets. He tried to find, in the French language, fragments of an original language in which sound, sense and even the shape of letters were all related. To discover and play with these elements, to cede the initiative to them and follow where they lead, this constitutes what Mallarmé called the charm and the music of language in *Les mots anglais*. It became a cornerstone of his poetic vision, a Chimera that he could not engage head on, but only at right-angles, one linguistic coincidence at a time. He hoped that by sketching its boundaries, attacking it one piece at a time, he could prove that the whole monster actually exists, and thereby uncover the essential unity of the universe. The Great Work remained unfinished by necessity, since the totality of the project is more than any one person could reasonably hold together.

In August 1898, less than three weeks before the poet’s death, he penned a response to a literary survey. The question posed was “What was your ideal at age 20, and has maturity seen it to fruition?” Mallarmé’s response was typical of the poet’s late correspondence, at once
humble and proud. He claimed that his ideal, simply, was to write, and that the judgment as to whether this ideal had been fulfilled belonged to those who had maintained an interest in him.

To this response, he added an epigraph, an "unedited thought" that was probably intended as an apology for not launching into yet another complicated discussion of his aesthetic. He wrote:

> No thought ever presents itself to me, detached, I have none of this kind and remain here in a difficult position, my thoughts having the features, musically situated, of a whole and, isolating them, I feel them nearly losing their truth and ringing false: after all, this confession, perhaps, represents another one, belonging to the white sheet of an album.\(^{176}\)

This was the final piece of writing that Mallarmé intended for publication.\(^ {177}\) It would be naïve to suggest that Mallarmé, in a clairvoyant moment, envisioned his own death and included this epigraph as a specific image-making gesture. Rather, it needs to be seen as an example of Mallarmé's daily aesthetic, the kind of comment that he made almost without thinking of it. All of the essential features of his musical thought and practice are here—the interconnectedness of all things in the mind, the near absurdity of these ideas in relative isolation, and the belief that all of this would be better expressed in a poem, on the white sheet of an album.

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\(^{176}\) Mallarmé, "Sur l’Idéal à vingt ans," *OC* II, 672: "Jamais pensée ne se présente à moi, détachée, je n’en ai pas de cette sorte et reste ici dans l’embarras; les miennes formant le trait, musicalement placées, d’un ensemble et, à s’isoler, je les sens perdre jusqu’à leur vérité et sonner faux: après tout, cet aveu, peut-être, en figure-t-il une, propre au feuillet blanc d’un album."

\(^{177}\) A few weeks later, on his deathbed, Mallarmé left instructions to his widow Marie to burn his notes. Some of these survived; what was lost may never be fully known.
CHAPTER TWO
DEBUSSY’S FIRST CONTACT WITH MALLARMÉ: APPARITION

The details of Debussy’s life before winning the Prix de Rome in 1884 have only recently begun to emerge from obscurity. François Lesure’s biography Claude Debussy avant Pelléas, ou les années symbolistes sheds unprecedented light on Debussy’s activities and relationships in this period, expanding on the ground-breaking work of Marcel Dietschy and Edward Lockspeiser.1 With this wealth of information, it is now possible to trace the initial point of contact between Debussy and Mallarmé in greater detail than before.

The first record of Debussy’s exposure to Mallarmé’s poetry is his setting of Apparition, the manuscript of which bears the date 8 February 1884.2 Debussy composed the work for Marie-Blanche Vasnier, an able singer with a prodigious range who gave the first public performances of many of Debussy’s early songs. The manuscript indicates that Apparition was written at the Ville d’Avray, where the Vasnier family spent their summers. Debussy’s connection to the Vasniers was of critical importance to his artistic development in these years.3 Eugène-Henri Vasnier, Marie-Blanche’s husband, provided the young Debussy with financial support, and the use of their piano. Henri Vasnier was everything that Debussy’s own father was not: successful, educated and passionate about the arts. Through their

1 Lesure, Debussy avant Pelléas; Marcel Dietschy, A Portrait of Claude Debussy, trans. William Ashbrook and Margaret Cobb (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Lockspeiser, Debussy: His Life and Mind. Debussy’s activities at the Conservatoire have also been the focus of recent study, though the distance between Debussy’s academic study in the 1870s and early 80s and the innovations in the early songs makes this less relevant here. See John Clevenger, The Origins of Debussy’s Style, Ph. D. Diss. (Eastman), 2002.
2 Lesure, Debussy avant Pelléas, 56. Mallarmé was relatively unknown before 1885, and had published little poetry. So while it is certainly possible that Debussy had encountered Mallarmé’s verse before 1884, the scarcity of his works in print, combined with the virtual absence of a traditional liberal arts education in Debussy’s formative years, makes this unlikely.
3 It has been argued, in the absence of compelling evidence either way, that Debussy and Blanche Vasnier were lovers from 1882 through his departure for the Villa Medici in 1885. James Briscoe gives an account of the arguments for and against this position. See Briscoe, “Debussy’s Earliest Songs” College Music Symposium 24/2 (Fall 1984): 81–85.
conversations on literature and aesthetics, Debussy gained access to the liberal education that his childhood, both at home and at the Conservatoire, had sorely lacked. It may be, as James Briscoe suggests, that it was Vasnier who lead Debussy to Mallarmé's poetry. At any rate, Vasnier provided an aesthetic space (and the financial wherewithal) for Debussy to pursue his interests in contemporary poetry and theatre, and a sounding board for the young composer's views on art.

The years in which Debussy was associated with the Vasniers were particularly productive in terms of song. Aside from his studies at the Conservatoire, he set at least 38 poems between 1879 and 1883. His predilection for "modern" poets is immediately evident: eleven settings of Théodore de Banville and five settings of Verlaine predate the composition of Apparition. Surely, Henri Vasnier was among those instrumental in exposing Debussy to modern authors—they can hardly have been required reading at the Conservatoire—but it was likely through Verlaine's essay "Les poètes maudits" that Debussy came to know the poetry of Mallarmé in detail.

Mallarmé's "Apparition" was first published on 30 November 1883, as one of the poems included by Verlaine in the third installment of "Les poètes maudits," a serialized set of articles that brought controversial, neglected or otherwise marginalized authors to the attention

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4 Briscoe, "Debussy's Earliest Songs," 85.
5 In a series of letters written from Debussy to Vasnier while the former was at the Villa Medici in 1885, it seems that Vasnier acted as something of a surrogate father, encouraging Debussy to stick with his studies in Rome and admonishing him for his poor attitude towards life there. See Debussy, Corr, 21-30; 32-33; 36-37; 38-40; 42-45; 47-50.
6 This count is taken from the list of work in New Grove; since many of these songs remain unpublished, and the collected edition of Debussy's works has not yet appeared, a comprehensive study of these works remains to be undertaken. A sense of Debussy's early style can be gleaned from Briscoe, "Debussy's Earliest Songs," 81-95.
7 Banville was an important Parnassian poet particularly valued by Mallarmé. His work has not aged particularly well. Neither Debussy's complete Banville settings, nor the complete Verlaine settings have received a comprehensive treatment. Some of the later settings are analyzed in Wenk, Debussy and the Poets, 22-63; 105-147. He does not discuss the earlier settings.
of the Parisian public. This third set of essays was dedicated exclusively to Mallarmé’s poetry. As the only published source for “Apparition” between November 1883 and Debussy’s manuscript date (8 February 1884), it can be safely assumed that Debussy first learned of this particular poem by reading Verlaine’s article. Aside from the seven Mallarmé poems included by Verlaine, there is a lengthy introductory essay on Mallarmé himself, providing essential biographical details, plus information on Mallarmé’s aesthetic, critical reception, and references to other major works not included in Verlaine’s collection but readily accessible in print. Verlaine’s essay is one of the earliest critical discussions of Mallarmé’s aesthetic and, despite his penchant for hyperbole, is a remarkably perceptive appreciation of works that, at the time, were considered virtually incomprehensible.

The potential effects of this essay on Debussy’s understanding of Mallarmé have not yet been treated. But because it is the only likely source for “Apparition,” we can now be reasonably certain that Debussy read it along with the poems fully three years before the 1887 edition of Poésies made Mallarmé’s work more accessible. The poems contained in Verlaine’s essay were: “Placet futile,” “Le guignon,” “Apparition,” “Sainte,” “Don du poème,” “Quand l’Ombre menaça” and “Tombeau de Edgar Poe.” Besides the text of the poems, Verlaine’s essay offers some critical commentary on them, and an introduction to some central features of Mallarmé’s aesthetic:

Preoccupied, certainly, with beauty, [Mallarmé] considered clarity to be a secondary charm, and given that his poetry was rhythmic, musical, rare, and, when it was necessary, languid or excessive, he mocked everything to please the delicate souls, of which he was, himself, the most difficult. Also, as he was badly received by the critics, this pure poet will remain so long as there is a French language to testify to his gigantic effort!

Verlaine recognizes that the twisted syntax of Mallarmé’s poetic language sacrifices a degree of semantic clarity to highlight the beauty of the poetry. He also asserts, right from the

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8 The article was serialized in the journal La Lutece in 3 installments, published between 23 November 1883 and 5 January 1884. “Apparition” appears in the second installment, dated 30 November.

beginning, the musical quality of Mallarmé’s verse, and implies that the desire to pursue poetic beauty through the music of language is the cause of the semantic disruptions. Verlaine praises the poem “Placet futile” as an example of Mallarmé’s early poetry, created while the poet was still “trying out all the tones of his incomparable instrument.” Verlaine takes care to point out the “colour and music” of the poems “Apparition” and “Sainte,” and argues that the musical qualities of these poems form an essential part of Mallarmé’s mature style also. After mentioning several other important poems by name—including “L’après-midi d’un faune” and “Hérodiade,” Verlaine closes the essay by mentioning Mallarmé’s linguistic studies (Les mots anglais), his translations of Poe’s verse, and the Great Work (Le Livre) which Mallarmé has promised, but which had not yet seen the light of day.

Verlaine’s essay is a surprisingly comprehensive survey of Mallarmé’s work through 1883. To this point in time, Mallarmé had published relatively little poetry and the few critical essays that had appeared in print were mostly published in smaller journals that may well have escaped Debussy’s notice entirely. Aside from “L’après-midi d’un faune” which was published independently in 1876, there were no collections of Mallarmé’s poetry in print—the 1887 edition of Poésies was his first in this regard. Published at the end of 1883, Verlaine’s essay even predates the mention of Mallarmé in Joris Karl Huysman’s novel À rebours (1884), which transformed him from a relatively unknown poet to a central figure in the “Decadent” and, eventually, “Symbolist” movements. Verlaine and Mallarmé had corresponded since the 1860s, allowing Verlaine to solicit unpublished material from the poet for this installment of “Les poètes maudits.” Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that Verlaine’s essay represents

11 It may be that this article is also Debussy’s first exposure to Edgar Poe, whom Debussy was to list among his favorite writers. See Debussy, Corr., 67. Charles Baudelaire had introduced French readers to Poe by translating his prose works in the 1850s. Mallarmé was among those who translated Poe’s poetry in the 1870s and 80s. See Mallarmé, OC II, 723–87.
12 Michaud, Mallarmé, 102–3.
Debussy’s first contact with Mallarmé, and an important source of the twenty-one-year-old composer’s first ideas about him.

The image of Mallarmé that Verlaine’s essay paints must have struck a chord with Debussy. In his portrayal of a relatively unknown poet who has been condemned by a conservative press for flaunting the traditional rules of syntax and grammar in pursuit of an artistic ideal, Debussy must have seen a kindred spirit. Debussy’s own willful disregard for certain traditions of musical syntax and his conflicts with the conservative faculty at the Paris Conservatoire is well documented. Beyond this, Verlaine’s numerous references to the musicality of Mallarmé’s poetry would surely have made an impression on Debussy, even if they are made in passing and not fully explained.

More important, though, is the opposition Verlaine sets up between the pursuit of poetic beauty and the “ideal” of clarity, as though the two were mutually exclusive. In so doing, Verlaine unwittingly perpetuates one of the central misunderstandings of Mallarmé’s aesthetic, one which has continued to plague much Mallarmé criticism in the century after his death. For Verlaine, Mallarmé’s unusual grammar was a necessary by-product of his fascination with the purely formal aspects of rhythm and rhyme. Yet Mallarmé always maintained that his poetry was absolutely clear to anyone who knew how to read, suggesting that those who were put off by the surface complexity of his works simply did not understand how to read him. As we saw in Chapter One, his interest in the aural similarity of words and phrases was motivated by his belief that common letters and phonemes were one method through which the original unity of language could be reconstructed. The poet’s task was to explore these relationships as they exist inside a language, and trace them as they wind their way from word to word, image to image. The complexity of Mallarmé’s syntax is therefore a deliberate feature of his poetry, designed to foreground the relationships between words and the way that they illustrate and
indeed prefigure relationships in the real world. It is only in the dialogue between the semantic and phonetic elements of a Mallarmé poem that its full significance emerges. As we shall see, Debussy seems to share Verlaine’s ideas about the motivations behind Mallarmé’s syntax.

There is no mention of Mallarmé in Debussy’s correspondence of 1883–4, but very few letters from this period have survived, so the record may simply be incomplete. The setting of “Apparition” is the only hard evidence that remains of Debussy’s encounter with Mallarmé at this time. However, Debussy’s early compositions were not well preserved, and settings of or sketches for other Mallarmé poems from that time may yet come to light. Therefore we are left to judge Debussy’s opinion of Mallarmé from the poem which he chose to set and from the setting itself. In choosing “Apparition,” Debussy selected arguably the least fully Mallarméan of the poems in “Les poètes maudits.” “Apparition” is not only the least complex of these from a grammatical point of view (although “Placet” and “Sainte” are not significantly more difficult), it is also the closest to Verlaine’s own style, a style with which Debussy was already familiar. At 21 stanzas, “Le guignon” is prohibitively long, and was probably not given serious consideration. The other three poems, while shorter, are considerably more complex both in terms of syntax and symbol, and it is likely for these reasons that Debussy chose not to set them. By choosing the most semantically (and syntactically) clear poem in the set, Debussy shows at this stage of his career a preference for Mallarmé’s less complex earlier style, and at

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13 It is also likely that, if Henri Vasnier was Debussy’s primary aesthetic sounding-board, that Debussy would not have needed to write of Mallarmé, since he saw Vasnier regularly. In the flood of letters which Debussy wrote to Vasnier from the Villa Medici, he regularly complains that he misses his regular conversations with Vasnier which “ouvert l’esprit sur bien des choses.” See Debussy, Corr., 22–3.

14 Given its subject matter, it is somewhat surprising that Debussy chose to set “Apparition” rather than “Sainte,” a beautiful poem which engages music explicitly. Debussy was influenced, perhaps, in this decision by Verlaine’s preference for the former. “Sainte” was set by Ravel in 1896.
no point would the composer ever explicitly engage one of the more complicated late poems in a musical composition.¹⁵

**Mallarmé's “Apparition”**

*Apparition*¹⁶

1 La lune s’attristait. Des séraphins en pleurs
2 Rêvant, l’archet aux doigts, dans le calme des fleurs
3 Vaporeuses, tiraient de mourantes violes
4 De blancs sanglots glissant sur l’azur des corolles.
5 —C’était le jour bénéd son premier baiser.
6 Ma songerie aimant à me martyriser
7 S’envivrait savamment du parfum de tristesse
8 Que même sans regret et sans déboire laisse
9 La cueillaison d’un Rêve au cœur qui l’a cueilli.
10 J’errais donc, l’œil rivé sur le pavé vicilli
11 Quand avec du soleil aux cheveux, dans la rue
12 Et dans le soir, tu m’es en riant apparue
13 Et j’ai cru voir la fée au chapeau de clarté
14 Qui jadis sur mes beaux sommeils d’enfant gâté
15 Passait, laissant toujours de ses mains mal fermées
16 Neiger de blancs bouquets d’étoiles parfumées.

The moon was becoming sad. Seraphim in tears
Dreaming, bows in hands, amid the calm of vaporous Flavors, were drawing from dying viols
White sobs gliding over the azure of corolles.¹⁷
—It was the blessed day of your first kiss.
My reverie loving to torment me
Was becoming knowingly drunk on the perfume of sadness
That even without regret or vexation the gathering
Of a Dream leaves in the heart that gathered it.
So I was wandering, eyes fixed on the old cobblestones
When with sun-filled hair, in the street
And in the evening, you appeared to me laughing
And I thought I saw the fairy with the cap of light
Who once through my beautiful slumbers of a spoiled child
Passed, letting always from her poorly closed hands
Snow down white bouquets of perfumed stars.

Like many of Mallarmé’s poems, “Apparition” deals with loss, specifically the absence of a loved one and her presence through the faculty of memory. The poem is cast in two sections which are by turns opposed and conflated, centered on the multifaceted images of a feminine symbol. In the first section, lines 1–9, the poet recalls the blessed day of the beloved’s

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¹⁵ With the exception of “Éventail,” which dates from 1884, all of the poems that Debussy set date (in their initial forms) from the 1860s. “L’après-midi d’un faune,” despite its reputation to the contrary, is not really as complex as it is generally made out to be. This may point to a degree of literary conservatism in Debussy that has not been fully recognized.


¹⁷ A corolla is the inner whorl or ring of petals on a flower, situated between the calyx (green outer whorl of petals) and the stamen(s), which in turn surround the pistil. The corolla is usually the most colorful part of the flower. Mallarmé is using synecdoche here; basically, he imagines blue flowers, but his image is striking.
first kiss, set in a Baudelarian garden full of seraphic musicians and vivid flowers. But everything is wrong: the moon was sad, the seraphim weeping, the viols sobbing. It is as if they know beforehand that the joy of this day was not to last, that the act itself (whether a true kiss or a kiss-as-metaphor) could never equal the poet’s anticipation of it. This section is balanced, and somehow redeemed, by the memory of the fairy, who blessed the dreams of a spoiled poet-child’s slumbers in years long past. The figures of the beloved and the fairy are conflated in the apparition that assails the poet as he wanders the streets.

As Gordon Millan has shown, Mallarmé’s poems often begin as reactions to biographical events which are then abstracted in order to efface their original inspiration. “Apparition” was probably inspired by Ettie Yapp, the English girlfriend of Henri Cazalis, one of Mallarmé’s closest friends in the 1860s. Much of the descriptive language used in the poem also occurs in reference to Yapp in Mallarmé’s letters to Cazalis: “Thank you for the charming portrait of Ettie. It is truly her; look at those eyes, soft and yet strong: the seraphic countenance, with hair that, unbraided, shivers down the length of her back like two wings of light.” The striking image of hair filled with light is essentially the same as the poem’s “avec du soleil aux cheveux.” The fairy who is evoked behind (or through) the image of Ettie is likely a reference to Maria Mallarmé, the poet’s sister, who died in 1857 at the age of 13. Her

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18 The image of angel musicians was important for Mallarmé in the 1860s. See for example the poem “Sainte Cécile jouant sur l’aile d’un chérubin” (1865), Mallarmé, OC 1, 127. This poem is discussed in Chapter One, page 66.

19 In its confusion of different temporal states, “Apparition” resembles the early prose poem “Le démon de l’analogie.”


21 Marie Rolf includes Mallarmé’s fiancée Marie Gerhard among the women who inspired this poem, based on his references to both women in a series of letters dated between April and June 1863. See Rolf, “Semantic and Structural Issues,” 183. However, by this point in time, the romance between Mallarmé and Marie had cooled, to the point where he writes—in one of the letters to which Rolf refers—the following: “If I married Marie to make myself happy, I’d be a madman. [...] No, I’m marrying Marie solely because she couldn’t live without me and I would have poisoned her limpid existence. So if I suffer in the future [for marrying her] ... don’t say to me: You were wrong, despite my wise recommendations.” Lloyd, Selected Letters, 20.

22 Mallarmé, Corr. 1, 34. Letter to Cazalis, 1 July 1862: “Merci, charmant, du portrait d’Ettie, merci. C’est elle; voici ces yeux doux, et forts pourtant: ce galbe séraphique, avec des cheveux qui, dénoués, frissonneraient le long de son dos comme deux ailes de lumière.”
death had a profound impact on Mallarmé, and the figure of Maria, either literally or through allusion, is scattered across the early poetry (“Plainte d’automne” and “Soupir” are two nearly contemporary examples). That Maria and Ettie were connected in Mallarmé’s mind is evident in the above-quoted letter:

She [Ettie] will set herself in my dreams beside all the Chimènes, the Béatrices, the Juliettes, the Reginas, and, which is better, in my heart beside this poor young phantom, who was my sister for thirteen years, and who was the only person that I had loved, before knowing all of you: she will be my ideal in life, as my sister is in death.²⁵

The connection of these two girls in Mallarmé’s mind is reinforced in the poem through pairs of images in the two sections of the poem. As Bertrand Marchal has noted, the “symbolic opposition between the moon and the sun, sadness and laughter, the weeping seraphim and the light-capped fairy, the blue corollas and the white bouquets of perfumed stars” do clearly separate the two figures, one living and one dead.²⁴ Yet there are also continuities that connect the two sections and, indirectly, the two women: the dreaming seraphim and the beautiful childhood slumbers, the calm flowers and the white bouquets, the white sobs and the snowy stars. These images, drawing the two halves of the poem together and driving them apart, mimic the relationship between the two girls in the poem and the way that their images are superimposed in the mind of the narrator.²⁵

Mallarmé’s desire to fuse the semantic and formal elements of his poetry extends past the level of the words and into the phonetic fabric of the poem itself. The notable concentration

²³ Mallarmé, Corr. I, 34: “[E]lle [Ettie] se rangera dans mes rêves à coté de toutes les Chimènes, les Béatrices, les Juliettes, les Regina, et, qui mieux est, dans mon cœur à coté de ce pauvre jeune fantôme, qui fut treize ans ma sœur, et qui fut la seule personne que j’adorasse, avant de vous connaître tous: elle sera mon idéal dans la vie, comme ma sœur l’est dans la mort.”
²⁴ Mallarmé, OC 1, 1149.
²⁵ Mallarmé’s penchant for superimposing and confusing images is treated by Guy Michaud. He refers to this technique as a polyvalent image. I examine this idea in Chapter One, page 67. As Rolf suggests, Marie Gerhard may indeed have a role in all of this, if only because her name sits at the phonetic intersection of Maria and Ettie, beginning like the former and ending like the latter.
in the poem with “e” vowel sounds may be inspired by the name Ettie. In Mallarmé’s early style, the sound of a word is often used as a generative element for an entire poem. Examples abound, including the contemporary prose-poem “Le démon de l’analogie,” where the sound of the word “pénultième,” and particularly the syllable “nul,” generates virtually the entire poem. Mallarmé’s similar obsession with the word “Hérodiade” and its importance in generating the poem of the same name has been well-documented. Here, while the figure of Ettie provides much of the visual imagery (the seraphim, the hair filled with light, etc.), it is her name which provides the sonorous material of much of the poem. A phonetic transcription of “Ettie” yields /eti/; however, when the opening two letters are split off from the rest of the word, as Mallarmé does in lines 12 and 13 (“Et”), the phoneme changes to /e/. It seems no coincidence that Mallarmé places this word at the beginning of these lines, necessitating the capital letter that makes this everyday conjunction (“Et”) look more like the beginning of “Ettie” than if it were placed elsewhere. This connects both the /e/ and /e/ phonemes to “Ettie;” the former acoustically, the later potentially. Figure 2.1 transcribes all of the “e” phonemes (both /e/ and /e/) in the poem for easy reference:

26 Marie Rolf notes the presence of these vowel sounds in lines 14–16. She suggests that they contribute to the musical qualities of the poem. See “Semantic and Structural Issues,” 184.
27 For a more detailed discussion of “Le démon,” please see Chapter One, page 77.
28 The “e” phonemes are present in 48 of the 192 syllables in “Apparition,” roughly 25 percent of the poem. Compare this with contemporary poem “Soupir” at 9 percent (11 of 120).
La lune s’attristait. Des séraphins en pleurs
/e/ /e/ /e/
Rêvant, l’archet aux doigts, dans le calme des fleurs
/e/ /e/ /e/
Vaporeuses, tiraient de mourantes violes
/e/
De blancs sanglots glissant sur l’azur des corolles.
/e/
—C’était le jour bénì de ton premier baiser.
/e//e/ /e/ /e/ /e/ /e/ /e/
Ma songerie aimant à me martyriser
/e/
S’enivrait savamment du parfum de tristesse
/e/ /e/
Que même sans regret et sans déboire laisse
/e/ /e/ /e/ /e/ /e/ /e/
La cueillaison d’un Rêve au cœur qui l’a cueilli.
/e/
J’errais donc, l’œil rivé sur le pavé vieilli
/e/ /e/ /e/ /e/ /e/
Quand avec du soleil aux cheveux, dans la rue
/e/ /e/
Et dans le soir, tu m’es en riant apparue
/e/ /e/
Et j’ai cru voir la fée au chapeau de clarté
/e/ /e/ /e/ /e/
Qui jadis sur mes beaux sommeils d’enfant gâté
/e/ /e/ /e/ /e/
Passait, laissant toujours de ses mains mal fermées
/e/ /e/ /e/ /e/
Neiger de blancs bouquets d’étoiles parfumées.
/e//e/ /e/ /e/ /e/ /e/

**FIGURE 2.1** “e” phonemes in Mallarmé’s “Apparition”

These “e” vowels provide a basic acoustic unity for the poem. It is likely that this is the quality Verlaine has in mind when praising the “musical” quality of Mallarmé’s verse in “Les poètes maudits.” Certainly, some of these vowel sounds are the incidental by-products of
writing in the French language, but most of the main images in the poem are connected by these vowel sounds in the following constellation:  


The common vowel sounds create a sonic link between words that refer to Ettie ("jour béni," "premier baiser") and those that refer to Maria ("fée au chapeau de clarté"), both reinforcing and prefiguring the semantic link between them that is not made explicit until line 11, where the image of the former triggers a vision of the latter. The presence of the “e” vowels also reinforces the formal divisions of the poem. Notice the relative concentration of “e” in the first five lines of the poem and their corresponding scarcity in lines 6–9. The attenuation of “e” sounds in these lines enacts the absence of the beloved ("Ettie") phonetically. It also points the pain that the gathering of her memory ("la cuellaison d’un Rêve") causes the poet, since the /e/ sits at the heart (literally) of the Dream ("Rêve" /REV/) that he struggles to recall. As the poet wanders, “e” become more frequent, an aural insistence that overflows at the appearance of Marie in the last four lines, where “e” is sounded sixteen times in forty-eight syllables (i.e. one-third of the syllables contain that sound).

The proliferation of “e” rhymes in “Apparition” encourages a prosodic reading that informs, and is informed by, the semantic content of the poem. Words call out to other words based on purely sonorous qualities independent of their syntactical position in the poem. In “Apparition” the treatment of Es, their disappearance in the middle of the poem and their saturation in the final lines, is a quasi-mimetic representation of the image of the feminine symbol around which the poem is constructed. One of the women (Ettie) is present at the

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29 Chapter One details the idea of a phonemic constellation in Mallarmé’s poetic practice.

30 This /e/ is conspicuous in lines 6–9, since it seems to endure even as the other e’s disappear.
beginning of the poem, but her image fades from the poet’s mind as he wanders the streets. Suddenly, her image returns and brings with it the powerful memory of another (Maria), signalled by the return and transfiguration of “e” phonemes (here, the /e/ has been definitively replaced by /e/). It is not surprising, at this point in time, to find the phonemes of her name scattered beneath the returning image of the beloved:

Quand avec du soleil aux cheveux, dans la rue
Et dans le soir, tu m’es en riant apparue
/ty//me řiā/
approximately: “Tu, Maria, apparue”

By surpressing the names of the women from the poem, Mallarmé erases the evidence of its biographical inspiration from its text. In this way, the poem becomes more abstract, and therefore more amenable to the kind of prosodic reading that ultimately reveals its inner treasure. Mallarmé holds these two elements in a constant tension in “Apparition,” the formal suggestive of the semantic and vice versa. Here, the name “Ettie” provides the “e” sounds which, fragmented from the larger idea, scatter themselves across the surface of the text, in much the same way that Mallarmé theorized later in “Crise de vers.”31 The reader, after the poet, must simply follow the “reciprocal reflection” of these aural elements in order to read the poem’s full message.

31 Mallarmé, “Crise de vers” OC II, 209; 211: “[L’]acte poétique consiste à voir soudain qu’une idée se fractionne en un nombre de motifs égaux par valeur et à les grouper ; ils riment : pour sceau extérieur, leur commune mesure qu’apparente le coup final. [... Le poète] cède l’initiative aux mots, par le heurt de leur inégalité mobilisés ; ils s’allument de reflets réciproques comme une virtuelle trainée de feux sur des piergeries, remplaçant la respiration perceptible en l’ancien souffle lyrique ou la direction personnelle enthousiaste de la phrase.” See Chapter One for a commentary and translation.
DEBUSSY’S *APPARITION* 32

In *Apparition*, Debussy responds to certain images and poetic techniques in Mallarmé’s poem by constructing musical analogues for them. Other significant elements of the poem find no specific musical expression. Yet these elements are not wholly effaced by their setting in song. Instead, the poet’s voice is still discernable alongside the composer’s, regardless of the nature of their interaction at specific moments in the song. 33 By examining both those moments where Debussy creates musical analogies for Mallarmé’s poems and the instances where Debussy’s setting is at cross-purposes with Mallarmé’s text, we can begin to get a more complete picture of music-text relationships in Debussy’s œuvre. In the process, we can also begin to sketch the extent of Mallarmé’s actual influence on Debussy’s compositional style.

In Debussy’s setting of *Apparition*, the contrast between the voice and the piano accompaniment is immediately obvious. 34 Notated in ⅜ and ⅜ time respectively, the voice and the piano seem to inhabit two different sound worlds in the opening measures. Their meters maintain the same barlines but organize their internal material differently. This makes explicit a fundamental condition of song, in that the same acoustic space is organized in one configuration by the text and in another by the music itself. The voice, marked *rêveusement*, is nearly an incantation, designed to foreground the sonic and semantic qualities of the words themselves, while the lush texture of the piano’s sparkling arpeggiated figure pulls against the static quality of the vocal line, despite their common pitches. This draws attention away from the text and toward the piano’s own inherently musical processes. Although the voice does eventually get something more like a traditional melody (from mm. 13–16, for example), it often returns to the restrained character of the opening (mm. 29–32, 50–53). In these restrained

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32 My analysis of Debussy’s *Apparition* considers only the 1884 version of the piece, and not the sketches that Marie Rolf has identified as possible revisions (or an alternative setting) around 1913. See Rolf, “Structural and Semantic Issues,” 179.

33 I borrow the idea of discernible “voices” from Edward T. Cone, *The Composer’s Voice*.

34 Please refer to the score of *Apparition* in Appendix D.
places, Debussy creates interest by crafting musical passages that enact (or reenact) semantic elements of the poem in the piano part, while the voice typically preserves and displays the “formal” elements of the poem (its rhythm and scansion) very closely.

In the more lyrical passages, Debussy’s vocal line occasionally distorts the prosody or disrupts the syntax of Mallarmé’s original in order to create its own effects. His setting of “Que même sans regret et sans déboire laisse / La cueillaison d’un Rêve au cœur qui la cueilli” in mm. 22–28 is one such passage. Mallarmé clearly intends these two lines to be read together, as the syntax demands an enjambment. Debussy’s vocal line disrupts the syntax more emphatically than Mallarmé’s enjambment, separating the verb “laisse” from its subject “La cueillaison” by changing the rhythm, contour and tonal center of the melody. Here, Debussy seems to rely on the notion that an able singer, sensitive to the syntax of the poem, will bridge the gap created by his phrase structure. So where Mallarmé’s poem emphasizes continuity over a formal break through syntax, Debussy’s response enacts the formal break inherent in the poem, and depends on the syntax of the words themselves to create the implied enjambment. It is one of the most remarkable moments in the song, and demonstrates that even when a composer attempts to craft a musical response to a poetic element, it is impossible for this response to exactly reproduce the effect of the original. Instead, Debussy’s musical “enjambment” makes much more of this moment than Mallarmé’s text does on its own.

Likewise, the vocally effusive setting of “apparue” from mm. 37–40, with its rhetorically repeated word, virtually obliterates the pacing of Mallarmé’s original text, and refocuses the listener’s attention on the word “apparue.” This is probably motivated by a response to the meaning of “apparue” in the context of the poem: it is in many respects the poem’s semantic center. However, in the process the phonetic “apparition” of “Maria” that Mallarmé hides in the poem passes without any significant musical response, and is very nearly
effaced by it. In both cases, Debussy’s setting rewrites the original poetic text, brings out its own nuances and meanings in addition to those inherent in the poem itself. Because the logic of the musical setting and the logic of the poem itself cannot be fully reconciled, the significance of the song as a unit emerges only from the intersection of these two systems.

One compelling way to understand the disjunction that Debussy sets up at various points in the song between the quasi-recitation of the voice and the more lyrical piano part is to see this as a reversal of typical roles. The vocal line in a standard mélodie, and in other contemporary works by Debussy, is expected to be lyrical, whereas the piano part is often relegated to a more accompanimental role. So by investing the piano part with the more interesting musical texture at the beginning of the song, Debussy opens up a second “voice” which runs in tandem with the singer. To a certain extent, these voices can be associated with a dramatic (diachronic) presentation of the poetic je in the voice accompanied by a more narrative je in the piano. In other words, the singer seems to discover her emotions only at the moment where she sings them—indeed, it is hard to see any other way for this to happen. But the piano can anticipate the singer’s emotions or respond to them in a gesture that is roughly analogous to the “she said” that belies the presence of the timeless narrative voice. By simultaneously invoking a musical “present tense” in the voice and a musical past tense in the piano, Debussy nicely illustrates Mallarmé’s use of the imparfait in the way that it situates itself between the immediate present and specific past events.

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35 Debussy’s method of text setting moves significantly towards a declamatory, recitative-like style in the later works. This may be motivated by a desire to let the poems speak more clearly than in more overtly lyrical models of text setting.

36 Here, I do not mean a second musical “voice” as in another contrapuntal line. This happens to some extent with the E–F in the left hand, and the semitone voice-leading is important, as I argue later. But here, I mean simply that the piano seems to play a larger narrative role in the work than in some contemporary songs by Massenet, or even Duparc, where the piano basically plays chords.

37 The technique at work here is related to Wagner in the sense that the characters on-stage give a performance in “real time” while the orchestra provides a narrative frame for the audience.
As the song progresses, the singer becomes increasingly aware of her emotions (or, more precisely, Debussy’s vocal line finds its lyrical wings) when her song takes its emotional cue from the piano, as in the music from mm. 33–40, where a long B♭ pedal tone triggers the singer’s most expressive music. An exception to this reversal of roles is the sudden outpouring of vocal melody at mm. 13–16, setting the text “C’était le jour béni” and the repeat of this material at mm. 41–44, setting “Et j’ai cru voir la fée.” This makes explicit in musical terms the resemblance between (or identity of) the two women evoked by Mallarmé’s poem.

At first glance, Debussy’s *Apparition* stands out as an early and atypical (for the composer) example of directional tonality: a work whose tonal structure involves a progression from one key to another, rather than a return to the home key at the end of the piece. Here, the piece appears to begin in E major and progress to G♭ major in m. 13, the key in which it ultimately ends. However, the entire twelve bar span of “E major” that opens the piece is an elaborately conceived tonal illusion, an “apparition” of a key that is not really there. This is probably conceived in imitation of or in response to the subject of Mallarmé’s poem, but it is worked out in music in such a way that it is perfectly readable through the harmonic processes themselves.

The song begins with an E major triad whose root is immediately deflected up one semitone, resulting in an enharmonically respelled F diminished triad. Most listeners (and virtually all score readers) would initially consider the E major triad as primary, relegating the F diminished triad to a secondary role. But E fails to establish itself as a tonic through a conventional harmonic progression anywhere in the first fourteen measures. As Example 2.1

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38 The degree to which the sense of E major depends on seeing the score, rather than listening to the music, is certainly debatable.
39 Marie Rolf treats this F as a neighbour tone. See “Semantic and Structural Issues,” 185–6.
illustrates, the initial E–F semitone deflection is the catalyst for a series of semitone shifts in the piano and voice from mm. 4–7, ending up ultimately on a B♭⁷ in m. 7.

EXAMPLE 2.1. *Apparition*, mm. 1–14 reduction.

This chord is almost the dominant triad on B that would lend E major some legitimate status in the piece: all that is required is a repetition of the semitone voice-leading that connected major triads on E and F in mm. 3–4. However, as it stands the tritone relationship E–B♭ merely points up the functional poverty of chords in the piece so far. The B♭ harmony is followed by an extended digression to D major harmony in mm. 9–10 which lends no further credence to the perception of E major. A passage of parallel dominant seventh chords in m. 11 comes to rest on a G♯⁷ in m. 12, the point of an apparent enharmonic modulation (as ii) to G♭ major, a “move” confirmed in the following two measures through an emphatic perfect cadence.

In order to understand the passage, we need to question the status of the “ornamental” F diminished triad which dominates mm. 1–2. Unlike a diminished seventh chord, whose potential harmonic vagaries were well-known and often exploited in the nineteenth century, the diminished triad here has two standard functional harmonic implications: it is either ii° of E♭ or vii° of G♭. The first of these implications goes a long way towards explaining the presence of the B♭ harmony in mm. 7–8 as the most typical resolution (to V) of ii°. However, this dominant fails to achieve a cadence to E♭ anywhere in the piece. Instead, Debussy ultimately treats this diminished triad as vii° of G♭, subsuming it into the D♭⁷ chord in m. 13, after a considerable digression designed to propagate the illusion of E major. At first hearing (or viewing) the
resolution to G♭ is probably the least expected turn of harmonic events, which makes it perfect for creating the kind of illusory tonality in question here.

Following this line of reasoning, it becomes possible to understand Debussy’s sudden move to an F♯₇ chord at m. 11; in its own, unexpected fashion, this harmony prepares the arrival of the tonic G♭ through its enharmonic equivalent (it can hardly be a coincidence that, despite the chromaticism of the opening section, F♯ has not yet been sounded). It also allows us to understand the D major harmony in mm. 9–10 as ⅤⅥ in G♭ major, prolonged by the passage of parallel dominant seventh chords in m. 11.⁴⁰ From this point onwards, Debussy writes a standard, if unusually spelled and highly decorated, VI–II–V–I progression in G♭, cadencing in m. 14.⁴¹ Casting further backwards, it becomes possible to understand the entire first section as a chromatically-inflected circle of fifths progression in G♭ whose surface features have been distorted to resemble E major on the surface.

Example 2.2. Apparition, m.1–14. Derivation from G♭ major.

Example 2.2 makes this interpretation explicit. The triads rooted on E (mm. 1–3) and D (mm. 9–11) are borrowed from G♭ minor in a typical example of mode mixture, while the B♭₇ at m. 7 acts like a common-tone augmented sixth chord to the following D major harmony (it

⁴⁰ According to Rolf, Debussy’s manuscript lacks D♭s in both the piano and voice parts in m. 11–12. She suggests that the accidentals may have been accidentally omitted. I believe that the D♭ is probably correct, connecting it with the harmony in m. 9. However, a D♭ would not fundamentally change my interpretation of the passage. For this reason, the score in Appendix D places the (♭) in parentheses.

⁴¹ Debussy’s spelling here, for the most part, reinforces the illusion of E major in this passage. The issue of Debussy’s idiosyncratic spelling has never been adequately addressed, in either musical or literary spheres.
keeps the D, while the G♯ and B♭ resolve by step to A and the F resolves in the piano right hand to F♯). The extensive chromatic alterations from G♭ major simultaneously allow for the illusion of E major and the prevalent voice-leading by semitone that are the key components in the tonal illusion at work here.

Debussy makes the precise mechanics of the illusion explicit at the end of the song (mm. 47–59) by spelling out the procedures by which he arrived at the opening progression. First, he shows the enharmonic relationship between G♭ major and F♯ minor through semitone shift in m. 47, and how the D major harmony in the following measure comes about through a similar semitone shift. Then, in a series of prolongations, he links the tonic G♭ major first with F♭ (E) major in mm. 51–52, and then with E♭ major (D major) in mm. 54–56. The accented half notes in the tenor voice (piano left hand) from mm. 54–57 (F♭–E♭–C–B♭) adumbrate the important harmonic areas of the opening 14 measures, exposing the apparent E–B♭ progression as an illusion. This series of enharmonic relationships are essentially musical apparitions: they enact in musical terms the semantic images of the poem, where the actual sight of the beloved in the street suggests another image (of the fairy) in the background. Yet they are not specifically dependent on the poem in order to be understood (as in word painting or other kinds of simple mimesis, where a musical gesture becomes more significant in light of the semantic dimension that it borrows from the text).

This harmonic link between the opening and closing measures of the piece demonstrates Debussy’s awareness of the connections between the paired images of the poem: those describing the evening surrounding the first kiss with the beloved and those describing the snowy stars of the childhood fairy. In composing music for each section that has the same...
essential tonal significance (i.e. defines G♭ as tonic) despite their individual surfaces, Debussy has created a musical equivalent of the variously congruent and opposed pairs of images in the two halves of Mallarmé’s poem in purely musical terms.

The link between the opening and closing of the song also parallels Mallarmé’s arrangement of “e” sounds, which are most prominent at the beginning and ending of the poem. However, since in this instance the semantic and acoustic aspects of the poem are related, in that both suggest the presence, absence, then reappearance and transfiguration of a central figure, there is no way to tell whether Debussy’s musical response was motivated by the former or the latter. It is impossible to know whether he was inspired by the twin appearances of feminine images in the poem’s narrative, or whether he actually hears the way that this presence – absence – presence pattern is enacted by the aural structure of Mallarmé’s poem.

The arch design suggested by the linking of the opening and closing measures is borne out through the remainder of the piece (Figure 2.2). As mentioned above, virtually identical music at mm. 13–16 and mm. 41–44 explicitly connects the figures of the beloved and the fairy as Mallarmé did through sound and image. The status of these passages as specific memories (as opposed to the essentially descriptive ones of the outer sections) is reinforced by the conventional tonal language of these measures which point to a musical past analogous to the memories of the poem’s narrator, and the fact that they are in G♭ major, the “real” tonic of the piece. The remaining measures (mm. 17–40) are bisected by a strong motion to C major at m. 25 that cadences in m. 28.
In the first of these remaining sections (mm. 17–28), Debussy's music refers strongly to the odd whole tone collection in m. 17 before touching on F minor in m. 22 en route to C major which is reached at m. 25. The abrupt change of pitch materials and the return of the triplet eighth-notes in the piano are designed to set off the "gathering of a Dream" in Mallarmé's text from the surrounding lines. The music from mm. 25–29 is beautiful in its simplicity, but the transition from m. 24 is somewhat odd, and does considerable violence to the grammatical structure of the text, as mentioned above, by separating stylistically "laisse" from its subject "La cueillaison." The passage beginning with "La cueillaison" acts as a musical memory, referring to the simpler style of the traditional *mélodie* and its slightly sentimental lyricism. This is certainly intended as a response to the semantic meaning of Mallarmé's exquisite image, but the collateral damage done to the verse itself is a necessary byproduct of its setting as song. It fundamentally alters the sense of Mallarmé's poem, which treats "La cueillaison" as a descriptive clause referring to the "parfum de tristesse" on which its speaker intoxicates himself. In Debussy's song, "La cueillaison" is detached from the rest of the poem and placed in the foreground.

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Throughout this dissertation, I refer to the two whole tone collections as "odd" and "even" based on the pitch class numbers contained by each mod 12. The "odd" whole tone scale contains all of the pitches with odd pc numbers [1, 3, 5, 7, 9, e] (i.e. C♯-D♯-F-G-A-B) while the "even" scale contains its complement [0, 2, 4, 6, 8, t] (C-D-E-F♯-G♯-A♯).
The music from m. 29 to 40 is a different matter. In its texture, its melody, and its preference (at least initially) for voice-leading by semitone, these measures recall mm. 1–7. Particularly significant here is the voice, which returns to the quasi-recitative style of the opening, picking up also the E–F pitch structure of the piano left hand (hence the label A’ in Figure 2.2.). This section traces the essential surface outline of the opening, from E (here a single pitch rather than a triad) to B♭, leading to a prolonged B♭7 chord that stretches from mm. 32–39. Although this B♭ harmony remains unresolved, as in m. 7, the sense of urgency here is much greater. The text in this section speaks of the moment of the appearance of the fairy, before it can be understood or rationalized, and Debussy’s music nicely captures this feeling of anticipation or intuition before conscious, rational understanding.

This section also contains some style elements of Debussy’s youth that would eventually be purged in the later works. Specifically, the effusive vocal line, with its high C (designed, no doubt, to highlight Blanche Vasnier’s prodigious range) and the repetition of “apparue” belong to the tradition of the French mélodie of Massenet and, to a lesser extent, Duparc, which Debussy would soon leave behind.

It is worth noting here the importance of two tritones: the E–B♭ tritone that controls the voice-leading in mm. 1–7, and 27–40, as well as the tenor line in the piano at mm. 54–57; and the G♭–C tritone highlighted by the three main cadences in the piece and summarized in Figure 2.2 (mm. 13–14 and 41–42 in G♭, mm. 27–28 in C). In this piece, the tritone serves as a kind of inviolable boundary—a substitute for the more normative perfect fifth relationship that would be expected in each of these places. Soon, however, Debussy would begin to use harmonies separated by a tritone in a more immediate and intentional way to create musical meaning. These sonorities are often found paired with texts that speak of reflection (see for example the opening of L’ombre des arbres) or of connection between two people (mm. 40–41 of C’est
The full significance of tritone relationships will emerge in Chapter Three, as their systematic use in the Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune is central to understanding the piece.

In Apparition, Debussy constructs musical responses to many of the semantic elements of Mallarmé’s poem. Although he is often sensitive to the syntax and prosody of Mallamé’s text, Debussy occasionally overrides these elements in pursuit of an essentially musical idea. These ideas, like the “illusory” E major tonality meant to enact a similar illusion in the poem, do not match up with the text in a one-to-one relationship. Instead, the poem and the music interact across the same sonic space in performance and read across one another in interesting ways. However, I see little musical response in this particular song to the phonetic aspects of Mallarmé’s poem. In part, this is owing to Debussy’s choice of text, which is more univocal than virtually all others shown in Verlaine’s essay. For more significant expressions of the influence of Mallarmé’s aesthetic on Debussy’s music (whether positive or negative), we must turn to the point of their closest personal contact: the theatrical project which spawned the Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune.

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44 These two songs are the third and first, respectively, of the Ariettes oubliés, written on poems of Paul Verlaine.
CHAPTER THREE
THE FAUN'S ARABESQUE

Most critical approaches to music and text relationships in Debussy’s Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune begin from the premise that the music of the Prélude was conceived in response to his encounter with the 1876 edition of Mallarmé’s “L’après-midi d’un faune.” This supposition is reinforced by the interesting coincidence that the poem (in its 1876 version) contains 110 alexandrines while Debussy’s Prélude contains 110 measures, suggesting some formal correspondence between individual measures and poetic lines. The piece is then explicated as an example of nineteenth-century symphonic poem: program music, despite Debussy’s explicit denial of such a motive in the composition of the work. Although many fine insights have been gained through this kind of analysis, there has never been a wholly satisfactory formal pairing of musical measures and poetic lines, and I doubt there ever will be.

It is a recognized fact that Debussy’s Prélude was initially conceived as part of a theatrical production. Mallarmé himself sought Debussy’s collaboration after the poet had heard a performance of the composer’s Cinq poèmes de Charles Baudelaire in 1890. While

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1 This text was reprinted in 1887 by the Revue indépendante and again by Leon Vanier the same year. The text of these three editions are invariant; see Mallarmé, OC I, 1168. François Lesure notes that Debussy owned a copy of the work that same year. See Lesure, Debussy Avant Pelléas, 81.
2 Nearly every commentator has mentioned this coincidence. Some, like Siglind Bruhn, see it as a basis for a kind of structural isomorphism, a one-to-one correspondence between poem and piece. Others are more cautious: Arthur Wenk is tempted by this, but restricts himself to formal relationships “within the two works,” rather than between them. Even William Austin, whose analytical work on the Prélude remains the standard reference, uses this evidence as a starting point for his rightly tentative comparisons. See Bruhn, Musical Ekphrasis: Composers responding to poetry and painting (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2000), 514-23; Wenk, Debussy and the Poets, 148-70; Austin, ed., Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun (New York, W. W. Norton, 1970).
3 See Austin, Prelude to The Afternoon of a Faun, 12-14.
4 Consider, for instance, the more recent article by Code, which tries to locate the relationship between the poem and the Prélude through a paradigm of reading, where shifts in Debussy’s orchestration respond to semantic changes in the poem. Code offers new insights, but also considers the Prélude’s relationship to the actual printed edition of the poem. See Code, “Hearing Debussy Reading Mallarmé,” 493-554.
5 This has been definitively established by Lesure in Debussy Avant Pelléas, 98-99.
this fact is mentioned by most of the prominent critics writing on the *Prélude*, there has been relatively little work done that considers exactly how the *Prélude*’s theatrical origins may have shaped the composition of the work itself. Given the importance of the theatre to Mallarmé’s larger aesthetic, and the number of critical writings that he devoted to the topic, it is likely that he would have discussed these issues with Debussy at some point during their brief collaboration. Therefore, an examination of the *Prélude* that considers the work’s theatrical origins as an overture should provide some new insights.

Mallarmé’s theater, like his poetry, gives a significant and structural role to music. This role, as we shall see, is not primarily concerned with music as a sounding force, but rather in the “musical” disposition of ideas and words in the work which outline the Idea. This notion, which I treated extensively in Chapter One, is an essential part of Mallarmé’s aesthetic. It is manifested as a series of figures in the notes for *Le Livre* whose interwoven lines represent the interconnectedness of Theater, Drama, Music and Poetry. In the critical prose, the Idea is expressed in similar terms, except that instead of the “equations” of the notes for *Le Livre*, the critical prose uses a host of images to represent the same essential shapes. Thus Mallarmé writes of the “symphonic equation” that would form the intellectual armature of the Great Work, the “omnipresent line” that connects every point to every other, the “fleuron” that the “adequate gaze” of the reader inscribes across his texts. These images are made to serve as representations of the Idea because it is otherwise inaccessible to conventional language. His most complex poems—such as *Un coup de dés* and the nine similar poems that Mallarmé planned—bend language nearly to its breaking point in trying to describe the Idea. As we have seen, they require a total commitment to the semantic, phonemic and ideographic structure of the poem. In the present chapter, for reasons that will become abundantly clear, I summarize
Mallarmé’s Idea, which is the essence of his poetic music, in the figure of the arabesque, an image he often uses for the same purpose.

Given the importance of these ideas to Mallarmé, it is likely that he would have imparted some of them to Debussy during their conversations regarding the project. Indeed, there is evidence that Mallarmé had thought about the kind of music that he wished to use for the performance, as we shall shortly see. In light of this, it seems likely that Debussy may in fact have incorporated some of these insights into the composition of the music itself. Therefore, this chapter outlines the essential nature of Mallarmé’s ideas about theater, music and the arabesque, and shows how these structures are present in “L’après-midi d’un faune.” I then turn to Debussy’s own conception of the arabesque, articulating the similarities and differences with Mallarmé’s ideas, before showing how the arabesque structures Debussy’s Prélude in ways comparable to the poem. The music which Debussy ultimately published thus shows itself to be more closely connected with Mallarmé’s general aesthetic than with the representation of particular passages from the poem itself.

A FAILED THEATRICAL PROJECT

In the fall of 1890, Mallarmé had been revising “L’après-midi d’un faune” for the stage. He announced the project in these terms:

It has been suggested to me that there be a stage presentation of “L’après-midi d’un faune,” which was, in effect, originally written as a scenic intermezzo. The very rare and curious manner in which I intend to produce this small work will give it some new repercussions. ... I am preparing a definitive republication, with some reflections of my own on poetry and theater, the recitation of this poem and the exact point of view of a stage presentation. A color picture representing this, if needed; and perhaps some indications on the brief musical overture.6

The project was conceived for Paul Fort’s fledgling Théâtre d’Art, for which Mallarmé served as a director. The performance was to take place on 27 February 1891, but Mallarmé withdrew the work, suggesting in its stead a dramatic presentation of his poem “Le Guignon” which did, in fact take place. Mallarmé seems not to have abandoned the Faune project despite this setback, because the Belgian edition of *Pages* (1891) announces a forthcoming edition of the Faune for the theatre.\(^7\)

Part of Mallarmé’s interest in this theatrical presentation of the Faune rests on the fact that, as stated in the letter, the work was initially conceived for the theater. In the summer of 1865, Mallarmé began work on a piece for the Comédie-Française, a “heroic intermezzo” whose subject was a faun.\(^8\) In an oft-quoted letter to Henri Cazalis, Mallarmé claimed that this poem “contains a very lofty and beautiful idea,” and that the verses were being created in such a way that they required the theatre while at the same time maintaining the qualities of his lyric poetry.\(^9\) By the following October, the Comédie-Française had rejected the play, claiming that, although they enjoyed the poetry immensely, the plot would be of no interest to the general public, only to other poets. Mallarmé set his manuscript aside, to revise it at some later time. Nearly ten years later, the piece resurfaced as lyric poetry; first in 1875, as “Improvisation d’un Faune,” which was rejected for publication by the third *Parnasse contemporain*, then again as “L’après-midi d’un faune” in 1876, the final version published by Derenne.\(^10\)

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\(^7\) *Pages* is the first collection of Mallarmé’s writings, consisting mostly of the theatrical criticism written for the *Revue Indépendante* in 1887, the essay “Richard Wagner, Révérence d’un poète français” and some of his poetry. See Austin, *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, 9.

\(^8\) Mallarmé, *Corr.* 1, 165. Letter to Henri Cazalis, 15 or 22 June 1865.

\(^9\) Ibid.: “Ce poème renferme une très haut et très belle idée, mais les vers sont terriblement difficiles à faire, car je le fais absolument scénique, non possible au théâtre, mais exigeant le théâtre. Et cependant je veux conserver toute la poésie de mes œuvres lyriques, mon vers même, que j’adapte au drame.”

\(^10\) The fragments which remain of the 1865 “Intermède Héroïque” show three characters—the faun and two nymphs—each with dialogue and stage directions. By 1873–4, the work had evolved into a monologue for the faun alone, though the stage directions are still present. In the 1875 “Improvisation d’un faun,” the stage directions are removed and the poem resembles the final text in many significant ways. Henri Mondor has chronicled the various drafts of the Faune poem in *Histoire du Faune* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948).
In light of this, the opportunity to present the Faune in the theater must have seemed an opportunity for vindication, a chance for Mallarmé to prove that his verse could hold (or transform) the stage without selling out to modern commercial practices. It would also have given him a vehicle with which to incorporate several new ideas about theater that he had developed during the 1880s, ideas which were ultimately destined for incorporation in *Le Livre*. Finally, it would be a chance to answer the call that he himself had made several times in the previous decade to provide a French answer to the challenge of Wagner, one which would put both the French spirit and the French language in a privileged position.

From the letter quoted above, it seems that Mallarmé intended some involvement in the creation of the music for the overture itself, rather than simply entrusting its composition wholly to Debussy. Since Mallarmé had no practical experience with music other than his regular attendance at the Lamoureux concerts, his ideas about the music would necessarily be aesthetic rather than technical. Therefore, the role of music as discussed in essays on theater from the 1880s—particularly “Richard Wagner, rêve de l’un poète français” and the essays grouped under the title *Crayonné au théâtre*—are particularly relevant. In these essays, Mallarmé outlines a radically new conception of theater, one whose inherent musicality could not only rise to the challenge thrown down by Wagner, but surpass it.

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11 There is no further evidence of precisely how Mallarmé envisioned the actual performance in relation to music, whether he imagined incidental music in the traditional sense—an overture and a series of interludes to cover scene changes or mark the structural divisions in the poem—or something else.

12 This title, taken from the lead article in the group, was given in the 1897 edition of *Divagations*. It contains revised versions of the theater essays Mallarmé published in the *Revue indépendante* and some other works dating from the 1890s. See Mallarmé, *OC* II, 153-159 (“Richard Wagner”) and 160-203 (*Crayonné au théâtre*)
MALLARMÉ’S IDEAL THEATER

As Haskell Block has shown, Mallarmé’s essays on theater are less an evaluation of contemporary plays than “a rich and complex statement of a highly original theory of drama.” As such, Mallarmé’s ideal theater bears little resemblance to the works of Zola and Scribe that dominated the French stage at that time. His main objection to contemporary theater was its preoccupation with the representation of reality, its emphasis on scenery, costume and specific narrative which obscured a more essential truth. Therefore, Mallarmé’s dramatic theory greatly reduces the physical aspects of the theater, removing characters, scenery and even the audience (almost) to arrive at bare essentials whose true significance would thus be revealed. Ultimately, Mallarmé argues for a theater that is basically a representation of the basic patterns of thought, much like his conception of music and the way it structures his poetry.

Like Wagner, Mallarmé believed that contemporary theater required “a concordance of all the arts arousing the miracle, otherwise inert and empty, of the stage!” But whereas in Wagner the Gesamtkunstwerk is played out on the stage with real actors, real costumes, real scenery and real music, for Mallarmé this concordance of the arts is largely subsumed by the actor’s verses themselves. Mallarmé envisages a theater “virgin of everything, place, time and character,” a drama with no setting and no names. The plot of this drama would be equally abstract, a narrative freed from description that would represent the collective unconscious truth of the audience attending its performance, and not the allegorical presentation of myth on which Wagner relied. From this impersonal drama, the actor would emerge as a “Type without previous denomination,” a “Figure who is Nobody,” in whose speech and gestures the

13 Haskell Block, Mallarmé and the Symbolist Drama (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963), 83.
14 Ibid., 84.
15 Ibid., Mallarmé and the Symbolist Drama, 89.
16 Mallarmé, “Richard Wagner,” OC II, 154: “du concours de tous les arts suscitant le miracle, autrement inerte et nul, de la scène!”
17 Ibid., 157: “vierge de tout, lieu, temps et personne sus.”
18 Ibid.
audience would see the fundamental drama of humanity without the usual theatrical accoutrements.\textsuperscript{19}

Stripped of these physical elements, Mallarmé's ideal theater "reveals itself borrowed from the latent meaning in the concourse of everything, the one inscribed on the page of the Heavens and of which History itself is only the interpretation, vain, that is to say a Poem, the Ode."\textsuperscript{20} So, at its core, his ideal theater is little more than the dramatic reading of (his) poetry by an abstract figure on stage whose character, gestures and attitudes match the abstract quality of his poetry. Further, this poem is "borrowed from the concourse of everything," made of a series of relationships (both linguistic and semantic) that is modeled on the reading of constellations both celestial and poetic ("inscribed on the page of the Heavens"). Lastly, this theatrical poetry provides a glimpse into the true history of the race (a reconstruction of a pure, original speech and therefore of the history of a people), a task which historians have attempted to outline in vain.

Mallarmé returns to this stellar image in the essay "Crayonné au théâtre." Here, he decries the compromises inherent in contemporary theater. In its place, Mallarmé desires a "theater which shows only a representation, for those not having to see things in themselves! of the play written on the page of the heavens and mimed with the gesture of his passions by Man."\textsuperscript{21} So the ideal theater, like his poetry, is meant to be read as a constellation, with the mental faculties of the audience/reader engaged to draw out connections between words and images. This kind of theater does not tell stories. It is rather designed "for those not having to see things in themselves," for an audience capable of sufficient imagination and abstraction. In

\textsuperscript{19} Mallarmé, "Richard Wagner," 157. "Type sans dénomination préalable," "la Figure que Nul n'est."
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid. Similar comments appear in a letter to Paul Verlaine, where Mallarmé describes the Great Work as an Ode which would be "the orphic explanation of the Earth" and "the sole duty of the poet." See Mallarmé, Corr. II, 299. Letter to Verlaine, 16 November 1885.
\textsuperscript{21} Mallarmé, "Crayonné au théâtre," OC II, 161: "théâtre qui montre seulement une représentation, pour ceux n'ayant point à voir les choses à même! de la pièce écrite au folio du ciel et mimée avec le geste de ses passions par l'Homme."
this way, theater reveals its superior essence as a representation of the basic condition of humanity, rather than the moral lessons that might be drawn from Wagnerian legend or Zola's realistic portrayals.

In “Planches et feuillet,” Mallarmé further refines his theories of drama, making their connection to literature explicit. In opposition to “the magnificent instrumental polyphony, the living gesture or the voices of the characters and gods, [and the] excess brought to the material decoration” in a Wagnerian music drama, Mallarmé sees the poet—one “who holds himself to the humble and sacred artifice of words”—mounting a challenge:

Yes, like an opera without accompaniment or song, but spoken; now the book will try to suffice, to open up an interior stage and whisper there its echoes. A versified ensemble encourages an ideal representation of motives of exaltation or of dream entangling and detaching themselves, by an ordinance and their individuality. Some portion inclines in a rhythm or movement of thought, to which is opposed some contradictory design: the one and the other, to end up and ceasing, where would intervene more than halfway like sirens confused by their dorsals with the foliage and the scrollwork of an arabesque, the figure, which remains the idea.

As before, Mallarmé describes his vision of a new theater as a reduction of the physical elements of contemporary theater. He goes much further here, however, in suggesting that the whole of the theater—staging, characters, music, and song—will be contained in the book. In place of representational theater, Mallarmé's theatrical book will contain “an ideal representation of motives” through a “versified ensemble.” No longer will the audience need to read the play as allegory: in this impersonal theater the essential patterns of thought will be presented “entangling and detaching themselves” according to their own essential nature.

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23 Ibid.: “Oui, en tant qu'un opéra sans accompagnement ni chant, mais parlé; maintenant le livre essaiera de suffire, pour entr'ouvrir la scène intérieure et en chuchoter les échos. Un ensemble versifié convie à une idéale représentation des motifs d'exaltation ou de songe s'y nouent entre eux et se détachent, par une ordonnance et leur individualité. Telle portion incline dans un rythme ou mouvement de pensée, à quoi s'oppose tel contradictoire dessin : l'un et l'autre, pour aboutir et cessant, où interviendraient plus qu'à demi comme sirènes confondues par la croupe avec le feuillage et les rinceaux d'une arabesque, la figure, que demeure l'idée.”
24 By 1893, when this essay was written, Mallarmé thought on the relationship of music and poetry had crystallized somewhat. From this point forward, his basic attitude is that a book—Le Livre—was capable of subsuming all of the other arts. See for instance “Solenitude” OC II, 201: “a book, in our hands, if it announces some august idea, supplants all theaters, not by causing them to be forgotten but by recalling them imperiously.” (“un livre, dans notre main, s'il énonce quelque idée auguste, supplée à tous les théâtres, non par l'oubli qu'il en cause mais les rappelant impérieuusement”).
one and the other,” polar opposites in relationship, trace a figure that represents pure thought: the idea.\textsuperscript{25}

\textbf{MALLARMÉ’S ARABESQUE}

It is not by accident that Mallarmé invokes the term arabesque in “Planches et feuillets” to represent the patterns of thought that his ideal theater would trace. In its evocation of a series of crossed and interconnected lines, the arabesque is part of a larger series of decorative figures that recur throughout Mallarmé’s œuvre.\textsuperscript{26} Other related images include spider webs, lace, constellations, knots, and the thyrsus.\textsuperscript{27} As Rae Beth Gordon has persuasively argued, Mallarmé uses these figures as structural principles for his works, rather than ornaments which are essentially peripheral.\textsuperscript{28} For the purpose of the present chapter, I shall use the term “arabesque” to represent all of Mallarmé’s figures that evoke the image of interwoven lines.\textsuperscript{29}

As Jean-Michel Nectoux has recently argued, the idea of arabesque has a long history in the visual arts in France, stretching back to the Renaissance.\textsuperscript{30} Originally referring to the stylized representation of plants and animals through a series of interwoven lines typical of Islamic art, Nectoux traces the development of the figure through the painting of Watteau in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, and its infiltration into musical discourse through Schumann’s \textit{Arabeske} Op.

\textsuperscript{25} Chapter One details the musical nature of Mallarmé’s thought and the “tetrapolar” epistemology proposed by Robert Greer Cohn which represents it. See page 94 of the present study.
\textsuperscript{26} These figures have been treated extensively by Rae Beth Gordon in \textit{Fantasy, Ornament and Desire in Nineteenth Century French Literature} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), passim., but especially 147-200.
\textsuperscript{27} Some instances of these images can be found in the following works: spiderwebs (Letter to Aubanel, 28 July 1866, \textit{Corr.} I, 224); lace (ibid., “Une dentelle s’abolit” \textit{OC} I, 42-43.); constellations (“Ses purs ongles,” \textit{OC} I, 37-38, \textit{Un coup de dés}, \textit{OC} I, 363-87 (the constellation is named on 387)); knots (“La Musique et les Lettres,” \textit{OC} II, 64); thyrsus (“La Musique et les Lettres,” \textit{OC} II, 64.)
\textsuperscript{28} Gordon, \textit{Fantasy, Ornament and Desire}. She locates Mallarmé as part of a larger movement in French literature that used ornamental figures as structural principles.
\textsuperscript{29} Although Mallarmé’s use of the word arabesque is basically interchangeable with several other words evoking intersected lines, there are nuances of meaning associated with several similar terms that I will not consider here. I hope that this serves the interest of clarity. McCombie has treated several of these figures in \textit{Mallarmé and Debussy}, passim.
18 (1838) and the *Quatre arabesques* of Stephen Heller (1844). He also shows how important the notion of arabesque was to the Nabis (especially Maurice Denis), Henry Lerolle and Mallarmé.

Throughout Mallarmé’s critical prose, the figure of the arabesque is evoked to represent the discernable physical trace that the mental tracing of relationships leaves on the surface of a text or drama. In the example from “Planches et feuilllets” quoted above, Mallarmé describes this process through the image of a siren whose dorsal fin becomes confused with the “scrollwork of an arabesque.” As Robert Greer Cohn has shown, the siren figure in Mallarmé is a symbol for the convergence of opposed ideas, represented graphically in the “y” shaped figure of the siren’s tail. As these opposed ideas come together, their particular relationship suggests another more distant one, and then another, creating an arabesque of thought stretching out in a myriad different directions. In this way, the arabesque blurs the distinction between the figure and the background, places the semantic narrative of the drama on equal footing with the means of its construction.

The arabesque returns in “La Musique et les Lettres.” There, Mallarmé claims that:

> [t]he entire available act, forever and alone, consists in seizing the relationships, between beats, rare or multiplied; according to some interior state and that one wants to spread to his liking, simplifying the world…. Such an occupation is sufficient, comparing the aspects and their number as they strike our careless thought: awakening there, for decoration, the ambiguity of some beautiful figures, at the intersections. The total arabesque, which links them, produces dizzying leaps in a recognized terror; and anxious harmonies…. What agony, then, that shakes the Chimera pouring from its golden wounds the evidence that the whole creature exists, no vanquished twist neither falsifying nor transgressing the omnipresent Line spread out from every point to every other to institute the Idea.

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32 Ibid., 133.
33 See Cohn, *Mallarmé’s Un coup de dés*, 83.
34 Gordon, *Fantasy, Ornament and Desire*, 147-150.
35 Mallarmé, “La Musique et les Lettres,” *OC* II, 68: “Tout l’acte disponible, à jamais et seulement, reste de saisir les rapports, entre temps, rares ou multipliés; d’après quelque état intérieur et que l’on veuille à son gré étendre, simplifier le monde…. Semblable occupation suffit, comparer les aspects et leur nombre tel qu’il frôle notre négligence: y éveillant, pour décor, l’ambiguïté de quelques figures belles, aux intersections. La totale arabesque, qui les relie, a de vertigineuses sautes en un effroi que reconnue; et d’anxieux accords…. Quelle agonie, aussi, qu’agite la Chimère versant par ses blessures d’or l’évidence de tout l’être pareil, nulle torsion vaincue ne fausse ni ne transgresse l’omniprésente Ligne espacée de tout point à tout autre pour instituer l’Idée.”
As in the previous passage, Mallarmé imagines the process of "seizing the relationships" between words and ideas as a series of interconnected lines ("some beautiful figures, at the intersections"). Here, however, the arabesque is invoked more explicitly as a structural principle, linking the various figures produced at random by "our careless thought" into a larger pattern of "dizzying leaps" and "anxious harmonies." Thus, the arabesque is "total": the "omnipresent Line" that shows the interconnectedness of all thought. This is the Idea, the Chimera: Mallarmé's vision of the complete interdependence of things. The figure of the arabesque traces the Idea, which resists description in language. Yet no matter how hard the Chimera struggles, no amount of thrashing can "falsify nor transgress" the lines that outline the shape of the creature. Mallarmé imagines this as a battle (the "si viel ébat du grimoire" of the Wagner sonnet) where each expression of the Idea wounds it, thus making visible its contour.

The arabesque is specifically connected with Mallarmé's notion of poetic music as outlined in Chapter One. Elsewhere in "La Musique et les Lettres," Mallarmé charges the poet with "marking the arabesque, ... whose rhythm, among the keys of a verbal piano, yields itself ... to the use of words, apt, commonplace."\(^{36}\) The arabesque is the "symphonic equation belonging to the seasons": a natural tetralogy in place of Wagner's constructed one, where the winter-summer and spring-fall pairs provided the opposed poles.\(^{37}\) The poet will use this equation to transfigure the twenty-four letters of the French alphabet "into the supernatural, which is verse."\(^{38}\) In "Crayonné au théâtre," Mallarmé argues for "a use of Music [that] holds it predominantly as a sorceress given that it tangles and breaks or conducts a divining thread...: [this use of Music] would enlighten prodigious composers toward chance and without the exact

\(^{36}\) Mallarmé, "La Musique et les Lettres," OC II, 68: "le [arabesque] marquer,... dont le rythme, parmi les touches du clavier verbal, se rend... à l'emploi des mots, aptes, quotidiens."

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 66.

\(^{38}\) Ibid.
meaning of their sonority.” In “Le Mystère dans les lettres,” Mallarmé invokes arabesque-like figures—the fleuron and cul-de-lampe—to represent the essential patterns of vision required to read his poetry. The Idea, fragmented on the page, offers itself to the “adequate gaze” of the reader, for whom “[t]he air or song beneath the text, leading the divination here and there, applies there its motive as a fleuron and cul-de-lampe, invisible.”

The arabesque also figures prominently in *Le Livre*, Mallarmé’s ultimate dramatic project, which was conceived both for private reading and theatrical performance. The numerous diagrams in the notes which remain for *Le Livre* (discussed also in Chapter One, page 87) make explicit use of arabesque-like figures to represent relationships between terms.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 3.1.** Diagram from “Notes en vue du Livre,” *OC* I, 572.

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39 Mallarmé, “Crayonné au théâtre,” *OC* II, 164: “Pareil emploi de la Musique la tient prépondérante comme magicienne attendu qu’elle emmêle et rompt ou conduit un fil divinatoire.... il éclairerait les compositeurs prodigues au hasard et sans le sens exact de leur sonorité.”

40 These two figures are mentioned also in Chapter One. For convenience, I reproduce the definitions here: a fleuron is a typographic ornament in the shape of a flower used to fill the empty spaces in books, while a cul-de-lampe, taking its shape from the base of a lamp, has the same purpose as a fleuron.

41 Mallarmé, “Le Mystère dans les lettres,” *OC* II, 234: “L’air ou chant sous le texte, conduisant la divination d’ici là, y applique son motif en fleuron et cul-de-lampe invisibles.”

42 Mallarmé makes this point in “La Musique et les Lettres,” where the Great Work is imagined as a twin process, a fusion of Music and Literature to institute the Idea that would be performed “[t]heatrically, for the crowd who attends, unconsciously, the hearing of its grandeur: or, for the individual requiring lucidity, an explanatory and familiar book” (“Théâtralement, pour la foule qui assiste, sans conscience, à l’audition de sa grandeur: ou, l’individu requiert la lucidité, du livre explicatif et familier”). *OC* II, 69.
Elsewhere in the Notes, Mallarmé writes, by way of clarification: “Mystery and Drama, Drama and mystery are only the same thing reversed and presenting the one on the surface while the other is hidden inside.”

Likewise:

Drama is in mystery from the following equation (made from a double identity equation or idea if this one is also that one, that one is this one) that the theater is the development of the hero or the hero the summary of the theater—mistakenly split into two

as Idea is hymn
from whence Theater = idea
and one may draw from this hero = hymn
to compensate for this scission
and this forms a complete Drama or Mystery merging the one and the other also.

From the foregoing, the essential patterns of thought in Mallarmé, the temporary unification of terms and words and the mobile dialectic patterns that force them together and wedge them apart are visible. This pattern is represented by the arabesque, and is thus a central component of Mallarmean theater.

THE ARABESQUE IN “L’APRÈS-MIDI D’UN FAUNE”

The “very lofty and beautiful idea” that Mallarmé claims to be at the heart of “L’après-midi d’un faune” is a preliminary version of the Idea, the “total arabesque” of “La Musique et les Letters.” In the Faune poem, the arabesque is represented on an immediate level through the music of the Faun’s flute. At more fundamental levels, the arabesque traces the faun’s patterns of thought as he tries to remember his encounter with the two nymphs through a series of opposed images that are brought together and forced apart.

The “Faune” is a reworking of the Ovidian myth of Pan. The basis of the plot is well-known: the forest demi-god Pan pursues the nymph Syrinx, eager to possess her. Syrinx, who

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43 Mallarmé, Notes en vue du Livre, OC I, 573.
44 Ibid., 550: “le D[e] est en le métier de l’équation suivante <faisant d’une double identité équation ou idée si ceci est cela, cela est ceci> que th est le développement du héros ou héroï le résumé du th – à tort scindés en deux / comme Idée est hymne / d’où Th = idée / et on en tire héros = hymne / pour racheter cette scission / et cela forme un tout D[r]ame] ou Mystère rentrant l’un en l’autre aussi.”
45 See the text of “L’après-midi d’un faune,” with accompanying translation, in Appendix E.
has sworn to remain chaste, flees. As she runs past a river, she implores the water nymphs to turn her into a stand of reeds. As Pan reaches her, her wish is granted, and Pan is left clutching the reeds. He sighs, and his breath, passing over the reeds, produces a sorrowful melody. He cuts the reeds and fashions an instrument, content to possess the nymph in melody if not in body.

Like so many of Mallarmé’s poems, the Faune deals with fundamental issues of memory and desire (or dream). Here, the faun wakes with the memory of two nymphs (one chaste, the other less so) whom he may have loved. The poem unfolds as a series of attempts to uncover the truth of his encounter with the nymphs. With each attempt, some details emerge from the faun’s memory, assert themselves as fact, and then unravel into uncertainty. The faun is constantly led and misled by analogy, making connections between the nymphs and his physical surroundings that seem promising at first but end up revealing nothing but his own confusion. He finally uncovers a hazy memory of a rape, or at least an attempted one. Terrified at his crime, he remembers the moment of penetration before losing himself again in fantasies of possessing Venus herself. Finally exhausted by the effort, the faun lies down in the afternoon heat and returns to the sleep from which he (probably) emerged at the poem’s opening.

The faun’s attempts to recall the nymphs in the poem can be divided into two basic groups: those which invoke the nymphs through musical performance, and those which use vocal performance to the same end. In the first half of the poem, it is the music of the faun’s flute that generates the images of the nymphs. While the flute’s melody calls several images of the nymphs to mind, they evaporate with the notes of the flute itself. The faun then casts aside

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46 Marchal, *Lecture de Mallarmé*, 70.
the flute in disgust, resolved to speak his way to truth through poetry. This is ultimately more successful, as language gives a more permanent form to the images first suggested by the flute.

The poem is thus, on its most basic level, an account of music and poetry working together to express the Idea, to explicate the process of thought (here embodied as memory) as a series of musical analogies in the mind which seek out an enduring expression through poetry. The faun gains his first memories of the nymphs through musical performance, and then tries to speak them into existence, to perpetuate them through language ("je les veux perpétuer"). The arabesque is present in the poem not only through the faun's flute solos, but also in his mental effort to re-member the nymphs in verse. Some examples will help to clarify this.

The faun wakes (ll. 1–7) with the specific memory of nymphs, a memory which quickly fades in the light of day. He remembers their pink flesh fluttering in the air, but can recall nothing further. The certainty of this memory is replaced by dark doubt—that perhaps this was all a dream—so much that the faun nearly dismisses the memory. This initial opposition of light and dark, certainty and doubt acts as a generative rhythm in the poem, an initial dialectic to which the poem constantly returns in order to move forward. In this dialectic, images and ideas are brought together momentarily in comparison and then separated, tracing the musical arabesque of thought. The faun considers the nymphs, but as he tries to hold them in his mind, their image fades.

In the final version of the poem, this dialectic of light and dark is also represented phonetically in the words Mallarmé settled on to express his ideas. The concentration of bright /i/ and dark /u/ phonemes in

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Si clair, } & \text{Leur incarnat léger, qu'il voltige dans l'air} \\
& \text{Assoupi de sommeils touffus}
\end{align*}
\]
reflects the semantic implications of the passage, creating another kind of arabesque that crosses the text, complementing and completing the one described by the poem's narrative.\(^{47}\)

The remainder of the poem chronicles the faun's various attempts to understand this initial vision. As the faun continues to reflect on his original memory of the nymphs, disembodied details begin to surface (ll. 8–22). He recalls the blue eyes of one and the warm breath of the other in his fleece, comparing the former to a clear spring and the latter to a warm breeze. At first, the faun believes that these natural features—the water and the wind—may have been transposed in his half-conscious state to become the nymphs. Yet as he looks around, he sees that there is no spring, nor any breeze. Instead, the wind and the water are flowing from the flute which he now realizes that he is playing.

In fact, the flute has generated all of the images in the passage (ll. 8–22). From the twin pipes of the flute, a musical water flows into the surrounding grove, while the wind rises towards the heavens. This produces the image of the spring and the breeze, which in turn suggests the eyes and breath of the nymphs. This chain of analogies, inherently musical as thought, is set into motion by actual music. The opposed pairs which it generates echo the initial light/dark dialectic that opened the poem, and are an expansion of it, like the geometric expansion of an arabesque from a central point outwards across the work.

The phonetic opposition of the opening passage also echoes through this section, taking its cue from the imperative command "Réfléchissons."\(^{48}\) From the initial "ou si" of line 8, whose sonorous qualities are highlighted by virtue of its grammatical non-sense, the /u/ phoneme is particularly associated with the more willing nymph

l'autre tout soupirs

\(^{47}\) Cohn, Toward the Poems, 14-15.

\(^{48}\) Roger Pearson has suggested a homophonic reading of "Réfléchissons" as "réfléchi, sons," a self-reflexive call for the poem to create its own rhymes. See Pearson, Unfolding Mallarmé, 124.
whose breath is a

brane du jour chaud

in the faun’s fleece. This, combined with the sibilants /s/ /z/ /ʒ/ and /ʃ/ create a phonetic link between the nymph, the breeze and, by extension, the flute, whose music is described with its own cluster of sibilants:

Le visible et serein souffle artificiel / De l'inspiration, qui regagne le ciel.

The chaste nymph is also associated with sibilants, though her modest nature leaves a significant number of these letters unvoiced:

l'illusion s'échappe des yeux bleus
Et froids, comme une source en pleurs, de la plus chaste.49

The /i/, associated with clarity in lines 1–7, is also specifically connected to the flute’s music through the extreme concentration of this sound in the last four lines of this section:

Qu'il disperse le son dans une pluie aride,
C'est, à l'horizon pas remué d'une ride
Le visible et serein souffle artificiel
De l'inspiration, qui regagne le ciel.

Each layer of meaning here, semantic, phonetic and analogical, is tied to the faun’s flute, and traces the arabesque of thought at the heart of Mallarmé’s poetics in its own way.

In the following section of the poem (ll. 23–37), the faun calls on the shores to aid his memory, but it is his own voice which recounts a more specific tale of the nymphs. The quotation marks and italic typeface in this section set the text off visually from rest of the poem, reinforcing the idea of memory as distinct from the waking thoughts of the protagonist.

49 The phonetic similarity between the nymphs dates from 1865. In a fragment of the original manuscript, the nymphs are named lane and Ianthe. See Mallarmé, OC I, 156-58.
The faun is in the process of fashioning his instrument ("les roseaux domptées par le talent") when he sees "une blancheur animale" reclining in the distance. As he begins to tune his instrument ("qui cherche le la"), the animals scatter. At first he believes them to be swans, and then naiads, which fly, run or plunge.

That the naiads scatter at the sound of the flute's "prélude lent" is symbolic of the previous section, where the sound of the flute conjured the image of the nymphs and then vaporized it. As the flute is transformed from its natural sonority—the voice of Syrinx—to become a recognizable musical instrument, its power to evoke the nymphs is diminished. This is all summed up in the difficult phrase "trop d'hymen souhaité de qui cherche le la." "Hymen" here is polyvalent, producing multiple readings which cannot be completely reconciled. It can mean "marriage" as a metaphor for conjugal union, referring to the faun's physical desire for the nymphs. It can also refer figuratively to more abstract unions, between seasons or objects.50 In this way, "trop d'hymen" refers to the faun's excessive desire to create analogies, to uncover his memories through the music of his flute. Here, the "trop" intimates the failure of the union, both physically and figuratively, of the faun and the nymphs.51 So in the passage from the ideal music of nature to the industrial music of actual musical instruments, some of music's evocative powers are lost. This is, of course, the basis by which Mallarmé locates "real" music in the mind, in relationships between objects, while actual music is an allusive mime of these ideas, and therefore somewhat less than poetry.

The faun abandons language and returns to the flute once more in the next section (ll. 38–51). Here, the faun recalls not only the kiss of the nymphs, but a bite which, despite the

50 Littré cites the following as examples: "Toute l'année n'est qu'un heureux hymen du printemps et de l'automne, qui semblent se donner la main" and "La terre, après tant de désastres, Forme avec le ciel un hymen, Et la loi qui régît les astres Donne la paix au genre humain." See Littré, s.v. "hymen."

51 Derrida's notion of "hymen" as suggesting both marriage and separation here is implied in the "trop" – his syllepsis (which is certainly operative in the other passages he cites, particularly from "Crayonné au théâtre"). See "The Double Session," 209-16.
remaining sensation, has left no mark on his chest. Seeing that he can go no further, he abandons this mystery, since the flute ("le jonc vaste et jumeau") alone knows the answer to the riddle. As he plays another long solo, he begins to realize that the music of the flute had tricked him, creating the false analogies of the previous section by confusing "la beauté d'alentour" with "notre chant crédule," blurring the distinction between the figure and the ground which is a fundamental characteristic of the arabesque. He now sees that the proof offered by the flute—the wind and the water which became the nymphs in ll. 8–22—is nothing more than a beautiful deception, transforming the memory of the nymphs (his "songe ordinaire de dos / Ou de flanc pur") into inarticulate music: "Une sonore, vaine et monotone ligne."

Thus the faun's flute is both the source of the nymphs and the cause of their disappearance. This paradox of priority is a chicken-and-egg question, which is ultimately unanswerable. It can be summarized in a diagram similar to those in the notes for Le Livre. Here, the Flute is at the center of a four-poled dialectic which it has in fact generated. Its twin pipes have produced the twin nymphs and the elements (wind and water) which call them to mind; yet at the same time, the flute has caused the nymphs to scatter in all directions (horizontal and vertical):

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blue-eyed nymph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brown-eyed nymph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory\textsuperscript{52}</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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\textbf{Figure 3.2.} The arabesque of the flute in "L'après-midi d'un faune."

\textsuperscript{52} The disposition of this diagram is not meant to represent "absolute" categories: up = positive, down = negative, as Cohn's concept of tetrapolarity often does. I see this as a cluster devoid of priority. Perhaps the memory of a sexual encounter with the nymphs would pale in comparison to a dream of it, perhaps not. The terms of the dialectic are completely reversible.
Having reached the conclusion that the flute's music is incapable of giving him a straight answer, the faun casts it aside, asking it to grow once more in the soil of the riverbank. More than a simple taunt, the faun naively asks the flute to regress, hoping that if it could turn back into a plant, perhaps it might go one step further and become the nymphs of his fantasy again. Now, the flute is an “instrument des fuites,” both in the sense that its music drove away the memory of the nymphs in the previous section, and that its genesis owes to another flight, that of Syrinx. Instead of music, the faun will now speak his memories into being, transform the uncertainty of the flute’s melody into semantic language.

Yet language, which the faun now believes will lead him to a clearer image of the nymphs, is perfectly capable of its own “confusions fausses.” Chief among these is rhyme, which constantly suggests relationships between words and image through sound. The truth value of these relationships, as we have seen, is the domain of the poet, but a thousand false starts await even the most patient one. Perhaps this is why the faun stutters awkwardly over the plosive Ds of “Des déesses” at the very moment of his proud declaration to speak the nymphs into reality; it is an enactment of the pitfalls of language in language. For the poet (or the reader) who is patiently attentive to rhyme, one who has “sucé la clarté” or found linguistic enlightenment, the high is better than regular wine: those drunk on poetry can blow their own instrument (“soufflant dans ses peaux lumineuse), and see not only “au travers” but also “autre vers.”

The second half of the poem does indeed reveal a clearer picture of the encounter with the nymphs through the faun’s monologues. He addresses them directly, exhorting them to “regonflons des SOUVENIRS divers.” But the voice that speaks in response belongs to the

53 Among many who have treated the homophonic possibilities of Mallarmé’s verse, and the more general issue of Mallarmé’s rhymes (as opposed to semantic explication), both Roger Pearson and Graham Robb have made significant contributions. See Pearson, Unfolding Mallarmé and Robb, Unlocking Mallarmé.
faun himself. The italics and quotation marks that set off ll. 62–74 recall those of ll. 26–32, but whereas the former was clearly marked as a memory through Mallarmé’s use of the *imparfait*, this section is in the present tense, blurring the temporal distinction between the encounter and its recollection. It is as if the faun lives the experience first-hand, rather than remembering a past event. He catches a glimpse of the nymphs through the reed stalks and rushes over to them. When he arrives, he finds the two nymphs sleeping “parmi leurs seuls bras hasardeux.” (l. 70). He picks up their tangled bodies, “sans les désenlacer” and carries them off to have his way with them. Here, the entangled form of the nymphs is another form of arabesque, a physical manifestation of the crossed lines of the earlier flute melody.

The rape itself is recalled most clearly (if indeed that term applies at all) in ll. 80–93. This section is the final one marked by italics and quotation marks. Here, the narrative slips back into the *imparfait*. On one level, the faun remembers that “à peine j’allais cacher un rire ardent / Sous les replis heureux d’une seule” when both nymphs slip from his grasp, “défaits par de vagues trépas.” However, the crime he confesses to is less the attempted rape itself, than having “divisée la touffe échevelée / De baisers que les dieux gardaient si bien mêlée.” So if the entangled nymphs are understood metaphorically to represent patterns of thought, then the faun’s efforts to pull them apart in order to possess them more fully is a violation of their essential interconnectedness. By trying to understand the reality of each nymph in isolation, the faun tries to tease a single line out of the arabesque, make a distinction between the figure and the ground that Mallarmé’s epistemology does not allow. So when the nymphs flee the faun’s grip, their disappearance can also be read as a moral lesson, since disentangling the lines which the gods themselves had woven together is a Promethean act of sacrilege. This is the basis for the faun’s terror at his “crime.”

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54 “scarcely had I gone to hide an ardent smile / Under the happy folds of one,” “undone by vague deaths.”
55 “divided the disheveled tuft / Of kisses which the gods kept so well mixed”
After the nymphs flee, the faun is in no mood for further philosophical reflection. He imagines the conquest of other entangled pairs ("vers le bonheur d’autres m’entraîneront / Par leur tresse nouée aux cornes de mon front").\(^{56}\) These fantasies culminate in the faun’s desire to possess Venus herself, and in the process to become a kind of god himself, one capable of untangling both the arabesques of mortal bodies and of thought itself. Yet for this blasphemy, the faun will surely be punished, as much for the metaphysical crime as the physical one. Suddenly, the faun has run out of words, and the mystery of the nymphs has not yet been revealed. Exhausted with the effort, the faun returns to his dreams in order to continue the pursuit.

This perpetuates the dialectic of memory and desire (or dream) that Bertrand Marchal posits as central to the poem.\(^{57}\) The basic structure of “L’après-midi d’un faune” therefore enacts essentially the same relational pattern as Mallarmé’s arabesque. In the first half of the poem, the faun tries to use the flute to trigger his memory; in the second half, the semantic references to music disappear. The nymphs become physical symbols of the flute’s arabesque, or perhaps it is the other way around. This, too, is uncertain. Yet neither music nor poetry can ultimately provide a concrete answer to the faun’s questions about the reality of his encounter with the nymphs (although the poetry section does come closer to the mark). So the reader is forced to draw (admittedly provisional) conclusions by uniting the two halves of the poem (music and poetry) in a temporary cohesion of the mind that ultimately retains no reality beyond its own processes. Is the memory of the nymphs generated by the flute, or represented by it? Is the faun’s crime (disentangling the nymphs) essentially sexual or intellectual? Or both? These questions are left unanswered, and the poem simply stops, rather than truly ending.

\(^{56}\) "Towards happiness others will lead me / By their tresses knotted to the horns of my forehead"

\(^{57}\) Marchal, \textit{Lecture de Mallarmé}, 70.
Mallarmé’s Ideal Overture

While his critical essays often speak of replacing actual concert music with the ideal music of poetry, it is clear that Mallarmé intended a sounding musical overture for the 1890 theatrical presentation of “L’après-midi d’un faun.” Presumably his ideal overture would conform in significant ways to the aesthetic presented in the theater essays: a music which traced in its own gestures the same patterns that he so often identified in his own writings. Above all, though, the overture would do what, for Mallarmé, all music inherently did: to mark the abstract arabesques of thought through patterns which suggest analogies to it. If his later conception of music and poetry as “the alternate faces ... of the Idea” is to be believed, then he would not have wanted the music to represent the text of the poem, but rather to represent the idea of the text. This Idea is not some distilled version of the narrative of the poem, but a reduction that exposes the essential rhythms of thought, which the music would trace across the same intellectual space as the poem or its theatrical presentation, without reference to the materiality of the words (or of the music itself).

Debussy’s Prélude

There is no written record of the Mallarmé-Debussy collaboration on the 1891 theatrical production of the Faune beyond the letter from Mallarmé to Deman quoted above: no additional letters or sketches have been identified in either Mallarmé’s or Debussy’s hand that shed light on the specifics of the initial project. It is likewise unclear exactly when Debussy began to work on the Prélude though it was likely begun in 1892. Therefore, any further

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58 See the letter to Deman, quoted above.
59 Although this bears a superficial relationship to Schopenhauer’s concept of music and the general will, there is no firm evidence of causal connection between the two. The proliferation of Schopenhauer’s theories in France basically coincided with the spread of wagnerisme, which antedates the development of Mallarmé’s aesthetic.
61 This is the date on the manuscript. See Wenk, Debussy and the Poets, 151.
evidence of the collaboration must be drawn from the Prélude itself, to see whether indeed the music relates in any demonstrable way to Mallarmé’s theatrical aesthetic. Before considering the music itself, however, we must deal with the arabesque as Debussy understood it.

**Debussy and the Arabesque**

On 20 December 1894, just two days before the premiere of the Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune, Debussy wrote the following letter to Mallarmé:

Dear Master,

Need I tell you the joy that I will have if you wish to encourage with your presence, the arabesques that a perhaps culpable pride makes me believe to have been dictated by the Flute of your Faun.

Your respectfully devoted

Claude Debussy

Many critics have noted that the elaborate syntax of the letter, so different from Debussy’s contemporary prose style, is certainly in imitation of Mallarmé’s own prose. This gesture is probably meant to curry favor with the poet in order to convince him to attend the premiere of Debussy’s Prélude. Mallarmé’s presence would surely boost the public profile of the relatively unknown Debussy, who had not found significant success in the decade since winning the Prix de Rome. It is likewise easy to imagine that Debussy genuinely wanted Mallarmé to hear the finished orchestral version of the Prélude, as both a gesture of homage and perhaps of subtle rebuke, since, in this case at least, a present music was meant to represent (on some level or other) an absent poem, an exact inversion of Mallarmé’s own formulation.

Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger has argued that Debussy’s use of the term “arabesque” in the invitation is particularly significant. He claims that it reads like a Symbolist password, one

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62 Debussy, Corr. 228. Letter to Mallarmé, 20 December, 1894: “Cher Maître : / Ai-je besoin de vous dire la joie que j’aurai si vous voulez bien encourager de votre présence, les arabesques qu’un peut-être coupable orgueil m’a fait croire être dictées par la Flûte de votre Faune. / Votre respectueusement dévoué / Claude Debussy.”
used by Debussy to capture the poet’s attention.\textsuperscript{63} For Eigeldinger, Debussy took the notion of the arabesque from his contact with Mallarmé in 1890, and he follows Debussy’s use of the term through various letters, critical writings and compositions which all date from after 1890.\textsuperscript{64} He concludes that, for Debussy, the arabesque refers to a melismatic, melodic shape of the kind exemplified in the right hand of the first \textit{Arabesque} and the \textit{Prélude}’s opening flute gesture.\textsuperscript{65}

Eigeldinger is right, I think, to argue that Debussy conceives of the arabesque as an actual melodic line, a sonorous shape that moves in musical space and time.\textsuperscript{66} Likewise, his argument that Debussy’s use of the term probably derives from his exposure to it in the writings of Mallarmé, his attendance at the \textit{mardi} gatherings, and from prominent Symbolist poets and painters seems completely plausible. Finally, as will become evident, I think he is right to connect the arabesque specifically to the opening flute solo. However, Eigeldinger does not really consider what Mallarmé means by the term “arabesque” in the various citations he provides, except to say that the term occurs prominently in several essays that are also concerned with music. Furthermore, Debussy uses this same term to refer to the \textit{Prélude} in a letter to Nijinsky in 1913, suggesting that he thought that the arabesque was a fundamental aspect of the \textit{Prélude} itself, and not only a Symbolist buzzword craftily employed by a young composer with a personal agenda.\textsuperscript{67}

\textsuperscript{64} Eigeldinger argues that the \textit{Deux Arabesques} for piano, composed in 1888, were edited and given this title only in 1891.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 8-9.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 9-12.
\textsuperscript{67} Debussy, \textit{Corr.} 1585. Letter to Nijinsky, 20 February 1913: “Thanks to your particular genius for gesture and rhythm, the arabesques of my \textit{Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune} have been marked with a new beauty.” (“Grâce à votre génie particulier pour le geste et le rythme, les arabesques de mon \textit{Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune} ont été marquées d’une beauté nouvelle.”) The comment was made in response to Nijinsky’s telegram concerning the successful performance of the ballet he had choreographed to the music of the \textit{Prélude} which had been given at Covent Garden in London, 17 February 1913.
Given the importance of the arabesque in Mallarmé’s thought and published writings, it seems likely that Debussy would have known about it. From the end of 1886, Debussy read *Revue indépendante* regularly, the very journal which published Mallarmé’s theater essays in 1887. From these, he would have been exposed to many of the fundamental characteristics of Mallarmé’s theatrical vision. He may also have been struck by Mallarmé’s ambivalence toward Wagner at a time when the composer was, admittedly, a fervent Wagnerian. During his occasional visits to Mallarmé’s *mardi* salon beginning in 1890, he would certainly have heard many of the same ideas discussed, along with new ideas that were destined for publication in the later critical essays. Beginning in 1891 (with the publication of the *Arabesques* for piano), the term arabesque occurs sporadically in Debussy’s correspondence and critical writings, always with the most positive value attached. Therefore, articulating the similarities between Mallarmé’s and Debussy’s concept of the arabesque, and their differences, is a significant step towards understanding how the music of *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* relates to Mallarmé’s aesthetic.

The first recorded instance of Debussy using the term arabesque comes in a letter to André Poniatowski dated February 1893. After lamenting the premiere of Charpentier’s *La vie du poète* for its realistic portrayal of Parisian life in terms comparable to Mallarmé’s objection to Zola’s naturalism, he describes a performance of a Palestrina mass conducted by Charles Bordes at Saint-Gervais:

> It is wonderfully beautiful, this music, although it uses very strict writing, appearing completely white, and the emotion is not translated (as it has become since then) by cries, but by melodic arabesques made precious, to some degree, by their shape, and by arabesques crossing one another to produce, this thing which seems to have become unique: melodic harmonies!

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70 Ibid., 116: “C’est merveilleusement beau ; cette musique qui pourtant est d’une écriture très sévère, paraît toute blanche, et l’émotion n’est pas traduite, (comme cela est devenu depuis) par des cris, mais par des arabesques mélodiques, cela vaut, en quelque sorte, par le contour, et par des arabesques s’entrecroisant pour produire, cette chose qui semble d’être devenue unique : des harmonies mélodiques!”
Here, Debussy's use of the term arabesque is designed to describe Palestrina's vocal polyphony, the interweaving of lines which produce harmonies as a by-product of their individual melodic motion. There is no sense that Debussy is describing anything more metaphysical than this, and although it could be argued that an essential quality of music is that it enacts its structuring principles more directly than language, there does seem to be a tangible distinction between Debussy's use of the word here and Mallarmé's use elsewhere.\footnote{71}

Debussy's critical discussions of the arabesque are found in a pair of articles written in the early 1900s. In both cases, the concept of the arabesque is tied to pre-classical music: Bach, Palestrina, Victoria, Lasso, etc. in order to contrast it with the German symphonic development from Beethoven to Wagner. Bach, Debussy contends, understood the "musical arabesque, or rather the principle of ornament which is the basis of all modes of art."\footnote{72} The earlier composers availed themselves of this divine "arabesque." They found its principle in Gregorian chant, and they supported its frail interlaced design with hardy counterpoints. In taking up the arabesque, Bach made it more supple, more fluid, and despite the severe discipline that this great master imposed on beauty, the arabesque could move with this unrestricted fantasy which is constantly renewed, and which still astonishes in our own time. In the music of Bach, it is not the character of the melody that moves us, it's the curve; more often even, it is the parallel movement of several lines whose meeting—whether by chance or by design—rouses our emotions. From this ornamental conception, music gains the certainty of a mechanism to impress the public and cause images to surge forth.\footnote{73}

The similarity to Mallarmé's conception of the arabesque as a collection of lines whose intersection or fusion is responsible for the emotional impact of the work is more evident here.

\footnote{71}{It is interesting to note that Mallarmé also attended the performances of Palestrina at Saint-Gervais; indeed, he and Debussy may have attended the performances together, or discussed them at length in private conversations. See Debussy, \textit{Corr.} 116, n.5.}

\footnote{72}{Debussy, \textit{Monsieur Croche}, 34: "« arabesque musicale » ou plutôt ce principe de « l'ornement » qui est la base de tous les modes d'art." The article was originally published in \textit{La revue blanche}, a leading symbolist journal, 1 May 1901.}

\footnote{73}{Ibid.: "se servirent cette divine « arabesque ». Ils en trouvèrent le principe dans le chant grégorien et en étayèrent les frêles entrelacs par de résistants contrepoints. Bach en reprenant l'arabesque la rendit plus souple, plus fluide, et, malgré la sévère discipline qu'imposait ce grand maître à la Beauté, elle se mouvait avec cette libre fantaisie toujours renouvelée qui émeut encore à notre époque. / Dans la musique de Bach, ce n'est pas le caractère de la mélodie qui émeut, c'est sa courbe ; plus souvent même, c'est le mouvement parallèle de plusieurs lignes dont la rencontre, soit fortuite, soit unanime, sollicite l'émotion. À cette conception ornementale, la musique acquiert la sûreté d'un mécanisme à impressionner le public et fait surgir les images."}
Debussy locates this emotional power in plainchant, music’s own “original language” (at least from a nineteenth-century point of view), and that he sees the historical progression of the arabesque running through the musical languages of the Renaissance and Baroque is comparable to Mallarmé’s contention that all literature, essentially, works towards the same abstract idea of thought, whether conscious of it or not.

The difference, which is also important, is that where Mallarmé sees the arabesque as a trace of the patterns of thought which is, ultimately, invisible, intellectual and silent-because-written, Debussy values the sonorous curve of the music itself. For him, its physical materiality is essential, and not to be merely inferred as an unsounded structural principle. Likewise, Debussy makes no reference to any larger philosophical or aesthetic concepts which the path of the arabesque might trace. So Debussy’s understanding of the arabesque is more firmly rooted in the ornamental than Mallarmé’s, at least in this essay.

The following year, again praising Bach, Debussy takes a step closer to the Mallarmean conception of the arabesque when he writes, “[The time of Bach] was the age in which the ‘adorable arabesque,’ when music thus took part in the laws of beauty inscribed in the total movement of Nature.” This calls to mind various passages of Mallarmé’s critical prose. For instance, in referring to the Ode (which was to replace Wagnerian music drama), Mallarmé claims that it “reveals itself borrowed from the latent meaning in the concourse of everything, the one inscribed on the page of the Heavens.” The “concourse of everything,” the interconnectedness of thought, is precisely what the arabesque traces, which takes its cue from the constellations in the night sky.

74 Debussy, Monsieur Croche, 65: “[L’ère du Bach] était l’époque ou fleurissait « l’adorable arabesque », et la musique participait ainsi à des lois de beauté inscrites dans le mouvement total de la nature.” Initially published October 1902 in Musica.
So although there is a distinction to be made between Mallarmé and Debussy regarding the exact significance of the arabesque, there is common ground in that both men conceive of the arabesque as a geometric shape inscribed in physical space (whether sonorous or written) which sits at the heart of great artworks. Where Mallarmé sees this physical arabesque as a manifestation of the Idea, Debussy sees in it an artistic principle, a way to valorize melodic gesture without the metaphysical baggage. Both see the arabesque as a naturally-occurring phenomenon, which art simply recognizes and incorporates.

THE COMPOSITION OF THE _PRÉLUDE_

Even after Mallarmé apparently abandoned the theater project in 1892, Debussy, obviously intrigued, continued to work on it. In 1893, Debussy announced a forthcoming _Prélude, interludes et paraphrase finale pour l’après-midi d’un faune_ in the published score of _La Damaoselle Élue_. This reinforces the connection with the failed theatrical production in 1891, which could have required interludes to cover scene changes or merely to fill space between the various sections of the poem. It also suggests that the memory of the theatrical production was in Debussy’s mind long after he knew that Mallarmé had abandoned the project two years earlier. In March 1894, a work with the same title was advertised on a concert programme, although the work was not performed on that occasion.\(^ {76}\) The _Prélude_ was not premiered until 22 December 1894, fully four years after the initial conception of the project.

William Austin concludes that, despite Debussy’s indication of the date 1892 on the manuscript, the piece was probably only worked out in 1894; otherwise it would have appeared as promised in 1893. However, Debussy claims that he played through “L’après-midi d’un

\(^ {76}\) Austin, _Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun_, 11.
faune” for the poet Henri de Régnier sometime before 3 September 1893. This suggests that the piece was complete in some form by this time. It also seems unlikely that, in the midst of his feverish work on *Pelléas et Mélisande*, begun in 1893, he would have had time to devote to the *Prélude*. Indeed, there is no mention of him working on this piece at all, even though he is careful to announce the completion of smaller works like movements from *Proses lyriques*. More likely, the essential work on the *Faune* was done in 1892, as Debussy claimed, and with the possibility of a theatrical presentation still alive in his mind. When the theatrical project was finally abandoned, the idea of presenting the *Prélude* as an independent work may have arisen spontaneously, or it may have been spurred by more practical considerations.

Given the theatrical genesis of the *Prélude*, the work is naturally allied with opera overtures that had become successful independent concert pieces, in the mold of the preludes to Wagner music-dramas—*Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Tristan* particularly—that were so popular in the Lamoureux and Colonne concerts in Paris from the middle of the 1880s. In the absence of full-scale productions of these works, the extracted chunks served as the musical focal point for the debate over Wagnerian aesthetics and philosophy which was sweeping through France at the time. The explicative programs often distributed at these events, which identified leitmotives and explained in some detail the symphonic structure of the work, only solidified the notion that these pieces encapsulated in a distilled form the larger works from which they were drawn. These preludes came to function as synecdoches not only for the larger works which they prefaced, but also, and more importantly, for the abstract aesthetic and

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79 Although no mention of it is to be found in the letters, there are so few remaining from this period that the record is substantially incomplete.
80 It would be interesting to find some evidence of how Mallarmé and Debussy originally planned to deploy the music and the poem. This might shed further light on the *Prélude*’s relationship to the text itself.
81 Even in the 1880s, Wagner’s association with Schopenhauer’s ideas was common knowledge in France, and more generally the association between music, theater and philosophy was wide-spread. Perhaps the most significant organ for the dissemination of these ideas was *La revue wagnérienne* (1885-88), a journal to which Mallarmé contributed twice, and Debussy surely read.
political categories which they invoked. They were also, literally, supplements of these works (as Derrida defines the term), doubles which both represented and de-presented the larger works for a public who had little opportunity to know these works otherwise.

The idea of the supplementary double as two works which interact uncomfortably across the same space bears significant similarities with Mallarmé’s conception of music and poetry, an aesthetic to which Debussy was probably exposed. If, indeed, the Mallarmé-Debussy collaboration on the Faune went as far as the letter to Deman suggests, then Debussy’s Prélude and Mallarmé’s poem could be seen as reading one another across the same intellectual space, or as Mallarmé later coined, as “the alternate faces of the Idea.” This Idea presents itself as an arabesque, an abstract pattern of thought linking the component parts of each work through a series of imaginary lines, a “divining thread” which can be retraced. In the poem, the arabesque is traced both semantically in the apparent meaning of the text and phonetically across its surface. In the Prélude, the arabesque is a constellation of pitches which, once exposed, echo through the work in significant ways. In both the poem and the Prélude, the arabesque is introduced by the faun’s flute.

DEBUSSY’S FLUTE

The prominence of the flute in Debussy’s Prélude is surprising. For a composer who resisted program music as vehemently as Debussy, it is a strange gesture to have lifted the flute so directly from Mallarmé’s poem. Surely, he would have known that such a move would

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82 Jane F. Fulcher has chronicled the politicization of various musical styles and genres in fin-de-siècle Paris in French Cultural Politics and Music: From the Dreyfus Affair to the First World War (New York, Oxford University Press, 1999).
83 This is confirmed by the fact that, despite numerous performances of excerpts, the first production of a Wagner opera in Paris since the fiasco of 1861’s Tannhäuser was 1887’s short-lived Lohengrin in 1887.
84 See for example Debussy, Corr., 59. Letter to Émile Baron, 9 February, 1887: “Tout cela [Printemps] naturellement sans programme ayant un profond dédain pour la musique devant suivre un petit morceau de littérature qu’on a eu le soin de vous remettre en entrant.”
invite a close reading of the rest of the *Prélude* as further representations of specific lines and images from the poem. But Debussy consistently identifies the flute as the main source of his inspiration for the *Prélude*, both in the letter to Mallarmé quoted above, and in an explanatory note to Henri Gautier-Villars, where he calls the *Prélude* “that which remains of the dream at the tip of the Faune’s flute.” He claims that it presents merely the “general impression” of Mallarmé’s poem, and traces its “ascending movement” through the successive scenes described in the text. If we take Debussy at his word, then, the music of the *Prélude* will not follow the poem line by line, but rather abstract some essential ideas from it and present them in music.

Exactly what the “ascending movement” of the poem is has been a source of confusion for many critics. William Austin suggests that this rising motion is either a reference of Mallarmé’s unusual treatment of rhythm in the poem, or of a tripartite formal rhythm which both the poem and piece share. Austin also credits scholar Hans-Jost Frey with the observation that the opening flute solo is a representation of the down and up motion mentioned in the poem, where the music pours (downwards) from the flute before ascending towards the heavens. David Code sees the “rising motion” as responding to the flute’s ability to distill a musical line from the form(s) of the nymph(s).

In addition to these plausible readings, I propose another, namely that the “ascending motion” that Debussy claims to follow represents his understanding of Mallarmé’s arabesque, and that the flute’s melody is an embodiment of these essential patterns of thought as Mallarmé

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85 Suzanne Bernard describes a *Glose* on “L’après-midi d’un faune” (1887) for piano by Victor Emmanuel Lombardi which includes excerpts of the poem written into the score in the manner of Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*. See *Mallarmé et la musique* (Paris: Nizet, 1959), 165.

86 Debussy, *Corr.*, 278: “ce qui est resté de rêve au fond de la flûte du Faune.”

87 Code interprets this denial as Debussy’s attempt to obfuscate the close reading of the text that he attempted. See Code “Hearing Debussy reading Mallarmé,” 508.


89 Code, “Hearing Debussy reading Mallarmé,” 517.
conceives them: as a series of intersecting lines, or better as a single line connecting all things which crosses itself at various points. According to Littré, *ascendant* can mean not only “rising” but also “lineage,” referring to genealogical origins.\(^9^0\) Therefore, Debussy’s “rising movement” could refer to the theatrical origins of Mallarmé’s poem and the generative movements of thought which Mallarmé’s poem also traces through the dramatic relationship between images and words. This is the arabesque which the faun’s flute traced in the first half of Mallarmé’s poem, and which was taken up by poetic language in the second. It is also one of the essential features of Mallarmé’s theater, as we have seen. In this context, the opening measures of the *Prélude* take on a new significance. The opening flute solo, which seems intended to stand in place of the faun’s flute, can be seen as a musical arabesque, a quasi-melodic line that traces an abstract shape through pitch space (rather than words and images). It does not intentionally imitate the specific contour of any image in the poem, but rather represents the essential patterns of thought that underlie great art, both for Mallarmé and Debussy. Debussy’s arabesque is therefore the sounding face of Mallarmé’s silent arabesque, whose acoustic presence compensates for the fact that, in Debussy’s final version of the *Prélude* at least, we do not hear the words of Mallarmé’s poem.

**The Faun’s Arabesque**

The opening measures of *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* have posed problems for several analysts. One of the most enduring difficulties is that the monophonic flute line is composed of a series of pitches that do not easily conform to a single implied harmonization. This type of opening, visible in several other works by Debussy, is not always employed with

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\(^{90}\) Littré, s.v. “ascendant” Among the other meanings listed by Littré, two are suggestive here. The first, *harmonie ascendante*, refers to harmony born from a series of rising fifths. The second refers to mathematical equations in which the terms are crossed.
the same ambiguous quality. For example, the opening of *La fille aux cheveux de lin* from *Préludes* features a similarly contoured line which is merely an arpeggiation of an E₃m⁷ chord, a reading which is quickly confirmed by the ensuing cadence. The opening of the *Prélude*, by contrast, features chromatic motion between the two poles of a tritone C♯-G. With no clear tonic represented by this arrangement of notes, the melody simply repeats before surging up to E in m. 3. The arrival on E provides a moment of repose, situated symmetrically (philosophically, not registrally) as a midpoint between the initial tritone pitches. This E is further strengthened by an arpeggio through the E major triad, whose sustained B eventually gives way to A♯ through an escape tone in m. 4.

A traditional reading of this melody assumes that the global tonic, E major, is operative by implication from the beginning of the piece. In such a reading, the initial, prolonged C♯ would be seen as an upper neighbor to a more structural B, the possible beginning of a Schenkerian 5-line. Example 3.1 represents this reading graphically:

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measure: 1 3 4 5

EXAMPLE 3.1. *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. Schenkerian graph of a “typical” reading of mm. 1–4.
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91 James Hepokoski has provided an excellent classification of Debussy’s typical opening gestures. See Hepokoski, “Formulaic Openings in Debussy” *19th-Century Music* 8 no. 1 (1984), 44-59.

92 Obviously, in the score, the E is higher in register than the C♯ - G tritone, but in pitch-class terms (which set aside octave equivalences), E is three semitones from both C♯ and G. The E thus represents an axis of symmetry between the two tritone poles on a philosophical level.
The validity of this reading depends to a large extent on hearing the B as a structural tone, which fits Schenkerian theory rather neatly but is difficult to defend when listening. Rather, I hear the B in m. 3 as an upper neighbor to the following A♯, which assumes a more structural role here. This A♯ forms a tritone of its own with the preceding E, answering the initial C♯–G melodic tritone. This is represented graphically below:

![Musical Example 3.2](example.png)

**Example 3.2. Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune, alternative reading of mm. 1–4, exposing the two contrasted tritones.**

The four pitches highlighted in Example 3.2 are emphasized in Debussy’s score through durational accents, as is the neighboring B. As they are presented, these four pitches parse into two tritones separated by a minor third; taken together, of course, they form a diminished seventh chord. It may be tempting to invoke the traditional harmonic ambiguity of the diminished seventh chord, with its polyvalent possibilities for resolution, as the cause of the ambiguous tonal implications of the passage as a whole. In a more clearly defined harmonic context, a diminished seventh chord would not be particularly troubling, even if its multivalences were to be exploited later in the work, as Beethoven or Schubert might do. But here, it...
is the unknowability of a "correct" harmonization for the flute solo, not a harmonic plurality, which gives these measures their particular poignancy. In the absence of traditional tonal reference points, it becomes possible to think of the two tritone pairs here creating an unstable nexus or constellation comparable to the kind that Mallarmé diagramed in the "Notes en vue du Livre:" the initial tritone C♯–G cannot find its customary resolution by semitone, and must instead settle for a provisional, symmetrical resting point exactly midway between the two pitches on E. This E is, for its part, only one of two equidistant possibilities, the other being its own tritone A♯, to which the melody moves rather quickly. As regards this passage, then, these four pitches can be visualized on 2 tritone axes, as follows:

![Example 3.3. Two tritone axes, one possible parsing for the four pitches emphasized in mm. 1–4.](image)

So the opening flute solo can be seen as an arabesque in the Mallarmean sense of the word because of the way that it unites opposed elements in a tetrapolar dialectic. The four pitches given above are maximally even in pitch space, and therefore represent in musical terms the same kind of ideological opposition that also characterizes Mallarmé’s tetrapolar diagrams.  

Truly, then, this opening solo is an example of musical undecidability that does not rely on a conventional relationship between the object itself and the thing represented (as with several of Wagner’s leitmotives). Instead, it is a musical representation of pure and irreducible thought.

When visualized in this way, certain features of these pitches come more prominently to the forefront. First, the disposition of the pitches on the page explicitly privileges A♯, and not

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97 By "maximally even" I mean simply that these four pitches are as far apart from one another as they possibly could be.
E, as the true symmetrical resting place between C# and G as they appear in the *Prélude*. Second, the decision to dispose the pitches in this way counteracts the emphasis on E that its status as global tonic for the piece gives it, as though Debussy were trying to anticipate and discourage various reductive listening strategies through his spacing. Lastly, given the symmetrical arrangement of these pitches, this or some similar disposition could be repeated infinitely without any resolution. Any of the four poles of this musical cross could be employed in the initial position to yield analogous results.

As if to confirm the relative importance of A# contradicting an implied E tonality, the flute’s A# is immediately harmonized by a half-diminished seventh chord on the same root in m. 4. This is accompanied by a harp glissando of the A#7 that covers nearly four octaves. This harmony is essentially a verticalization of the opening horizontal flute line, containing three of the flute’s four main pitches (A#–C#–E). This initial sonority’s E–A# tritone is “normalized” as F–B♭ in the B♭7 chord that follows in m. 5. This is followed by a one-measure rest, as the potential implications of B♭7 take shape. The previous two measures are then repeated, newly scored, in mm. 7–8, whose last measure is itself repeated before trailing off into near silence.

This pitch arrangement exploits ambiguities inherent in the tonal system. It takes the tritone—the traditional motivator for harmonic closure in various cadential progressions—and re-reads it as a force working outside the tonal sphere. As such it suggests relationships between individual pitches that may not be related by the syntax of tonality. It is thus a kind of musical equivalent to Mallarmé’s arabesque, the “symphonic equation” representing the basic dialectic of thought, comparable to the diagrams from the sketches for *Le Livre*:
Debussy’s flute solo enacts in musical terms what the faun’s flute attempts with the nymphs in Mallarmé’s poem: it tries to “re-member” itself; to reassemble its original harmonic structure by a searching exploration of its own psyche. The provisional arrival on E major in m. 3 is undone by the A♯7 harmony in m. 4. This harmonic uncertainty is then transformed enharmonically into B♭7 which reaches out in unexpected tonal directions. The situation is directly comparable to the poem, where the faun’s quest for memory of the nymphs is plagued by doubt and then transformed into the branches of the surrounding trees. Yet it would be folly to pair these measures and those poetic lines too closely. Rather, they trace the same idea, which could be uncovered in various parts of the poem and the Prélude.

The remainder of the Prélude struggles to fit this arabesque scheme into some harmonic framework, to find the ur-harmonization that the initial presentation of the theme lacks. Example 3.4 shows the main recurrences of this theme, plus their successive harmonizations, for easy reference.
Example 3.4 f) is a transposition of e) up a minor third. However, Debussy does not spell his harmonies this way. The chord labels in the example reflect Debussy’s spelling rather than the transpositional equivalence, which is given in parentheses.
Example 3.4. Various versions and harmonizations of the first theme of the *Prélude*.

Although this theme undergoes several modifications, especially in the intervals that frame its essential movement, it is instructive to note that in each case, at least one of the boundary pitches from the initial tritone pairs (C♯–G / E–A♯) is retained, as though the music were trying
to come to grips with the individual pitches of the opening theme, re-examining them to find a way forward.\textsuperscript{98}

The return of the main theme at m. 11 is the same melody as m. 1, but here the cadence on E major that was expected before does in fact occur at m. 13. However, the cadence here is in the “wrong” spot, bisecting the main theme rather than closing it. This draws increased attention to E as the tonic of the work, but this is quickly undone as the music moves to A\#7 in m. 14. The melody in the winds at m. 17 picks up on the A\#–C\#, en route to the much-discussed Tristan chord at m. 19.\textsuperscript{99} The main theme returns beginning on C\# twice more in succession, at m. 21 and again at m. 26. In both of these instances, the A\# is removed from its expected place in the melody, replaced in both sections with flute flourishes that can easily be understood as ornamental (rather than intellectual) arabesques. The A\# reappears momentarily in m. 29, where it acts as a leading tone to the cadence on B at m. 30.

At m. 31, the main theme is transposed down to start on G, thus reversing the original order of the pitches. The C\# does not appear in its expected place in the melody, but it is present in the bass, thus rendering harmonically a pair that originally appeared melodically.\textsuperscript{100} The wholetone scales which follow in m. 32–33 contain both the C\# and the G, while excluding the other tritone pair.\textsuperscript{101} At m. 34, the melody begins on B\# while the accompanying harmony contains Es in the harp. Essentially, the music from m. 31 is transposed so that the E–B\# tritone takes over the role played by the C#–G in the earlier example. The wholetone scales which follow in m. 35 confirm this.

\textsuperscript{98} William Austin mentions this pitch-narrative in conjunction with 3 of the 4 pitches I highlight here. See Austin, \textit{Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun}, 79-82.
\textsuperscript{100} Wenk, \textit{Debussy and the Poets}, 164.
\textsuperscript{101} John Crotty has written on the importance of the wholetone collection in the \textit{Prélude}. See Crotty, “Symbolist influences in Debussy’s Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun” \textit{In Theory Only} 6/2 (February 1982): 17-30.
The "new" melody at m. 37 has important consequences for the form of the work. These will be discussed later. For now, let us note simply that the oboe begins on C#, thus tying it somewhat to the opening theme, while E major is again reached through a purposefully-misplaced cadence in m. 38–39. This interrupts the new oboe theme and sends it off in a new direction which leads to the next major section of the work.

Much has been made of the music at m. 55. As William Austin notes, for some listeners this represents the start of a distinct section, creating a large ternary form for the work as follows:  

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
A & B & A \\
\text{mm.} & 1-54 & 55-78 & 79-110
\end{array}
\]

Others, like Arthur Wenk and Denis Dille prefer a ternary form beginning at m. 37 that features a two-part middle section:  

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
A & B & A \\
\text{mm.} & 1-36 & 37-54; 55-78 & 79-110
\end{array}
\]

This approach depends on hearing a structural similarity between the oboe tune at m. 37 and the lyrical melody in the winds at m. 55 (see Examples 3.5 and 3.6)  

\begin{example}
\end{example}

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103 Wenk, Debussy and the Poets, 161-2. Wenk’s scheme is based on Dille’s.
As a third alternative, Austin suggests that the music at m. 55 is “not really a new theme, but a culminating expansion of the principal theme rather like the refrain or chorus of an aria or song that releases the flow prepared by a less tuneful stanza.”\textsuperscript{104} Therefore, the form of the work is something akin to a series of variations on the main theme whose successive transformations away from and back to the initial flute tune trace a kind of arch form, the parts of which are organically related.

Austin’s idea is compelling. For if the music at m. 55 is indeed a transformation of earlier material, then the opening tritones should play a prominent role here also. This is indeed the case. Here, the opening C♯ is transformed enharmonically into D♭ and promoted to the rank of local tonic for this section, a move confirmed by the presence of a new key signature. Yet the C♯–G tritone is still present enharmonically in the bass, and the chord supported by the G in the bass can be understood as a whole tone dominant to the F♯ minor harmony in m. 59, which is part of an implied modulation back to E major that is never fully realized: the B\textsuperscript{7} harmony of m. 60 is left unresolved. So whereas the opening section (m. 4) presented a B\textsuperscript{7} harmony in place of the more normative B (as V of E major), here the “correct” dominant seventh is present, while the tonic it implies is absent.\textsuperscript{105} When this material is repeated in mm. 63–75, D♭ major is projected more strongly, achieving a perfect cadence in mm. 73–74.

\textsuperscript{104} Austin, “Toward an Analytical Appreciation,” 75.
\textsuperscript{105} This does, of course, reach an eventual cadence in the closing bars of the work, but the open-ended feeling of m. 60 is comparable to that of m. 4.
The retransition to the opening material at m. 79 is also significant in this regard. Until this point, the texture of the Prélude has been largely homophonic. But mm. 74–78 are constructed contrapuntally as a combination of three themes (from m. 39 (horn, m. 74), m. 55 (solo violin, m. 75–78) and 62 (clarinet, flute and oboe, mm. 75–78) respectively). Debussy highlights the counterpoint here by reducing the orchestra to a single solo violin and the winds over a long D, pedal in the basses. These three themes resemble, in both their individual melodic shapes and in the way that they freely cross one another in register, Debussy’s description of the arabesque as a series of interwoven melodies that imply a harmonic structure (here an octatonically tinged D,7) in the letter to Poniatowski quoted above. This arabesque dissolves the “middle” section and prepares for the return of a more recognizable version of the main theme at m. 79. Here, E major finally emerges as a viable tonic, picking up on the implications of the opening measures, though it is debatable whether the listener can actually connect these two moments separated by several minutes of music.

The next two presentations of the main theme, at m. 79 and 86, begin on E and E♭ respectively. Here, the accompanying harmony, an E6 chord, is much more stable than in previous versions. The nervous transformation of the theme in the oboe at m. 83 spans G–E. This is then essentially repeated down a semitone at m. 86–93. In this way, Debussy ensures that the main theme of the work, in some variation, has begun on each of the four pitches of the arabesque that were initially foregrounded by the opening flute melody.

Of all the later variations that make up the second half of Debussy’s Prélude, the one at m. 94 most closely resembles the twin versions from m. 1 and m. 11. The C#–G tritone returns to the flute melody, while the E and B♭ are prominent pitches in the accompaniment. However, the A♯ is again missing from the melody, replaced by a triplet figure first introduced in m. 28. This prepares the final variation at m. 100 and the end of the work.
The Prélude ends in E major, confirming a tonality which has been projected, even if weakly, from the opening measures. Example 3.1 suggested one possible graphic representation of this reading, in which the "structural" B, weakly projected as it was, functioned as the beginning of a Schenkerian 5-line whose ultimate descent to the tonic provides structural closure for the work. The easiest place to locate such closure would be at m. 106, the spot which most easily conforms to expected notions of tonal closure in the Prélude. After a return to the opening melodic gesture at m. 94 (the initial C♯-G tritone, notably without its expected E-A♯ complement), and its varied representation at m. 100, the second half of the theme appears transposed down a semitone in measure 103, with some intervals adjusted to maintain the E-A♯ tritone, now enharmonically respelled as B♭. This B♭ functions, as one might expect, as a chromatic neighbor to A, which proceeds by step down to E in m. 106. Example 3.7 graphs this reading:

Example 3.7. Graph of tonal closure in the Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune.

In this reading, the potential kinetic energy of the initial A♯ as a pitch pulling away from the global tonic E major has been diffused here through its enharmonic respelling as B♭ in m. 103, in the proper Germanic tradition that extends from the works of Beethoven across the
nineteenth century. The material from m. 107 through 110 that follows this strong cadential gesture is a coda in this understanding.

I do not wish to argue that the cadential gesture at m. 106 has been exaggerated. There are few passages in the Prélude which conform so nicely to expected harmonic/formal gestures as this one. I do wish to point out, however, that the strength of this cadential gesture is significantly undermined, even undone to some extent, by the material that follows in mm. 107–110. This “coda,” which should be a gesture of tonal confirmation, instead acts to subvert the closure of m. 106 by the reappearance of A♯ in m. 108, restored to its original spelling, along with its original harmonization as the root of A♯7 in mm. 108 and 109. This immediately follows yet another presentation of the opening theme, in the horns, spanning the third from G♯–E. The dual harmonic progression (A♯7–E) which closes the work echoes the initial twin statement of the C♯–G tritone pair. This gesture threatens to undo the closure of m. 106 and begin the process all over again. Thus, a kind of provisional ending is created, one which requires another reading and another, always in search of a closure promised but impossible to achieve. This process is comparable to Mallarmé’s relational epistemology in the sense that there, too, apparent closure is undone by an unstable language that works against its own goals.

The successive harmonizations which the theme passes through also regularly involve the opening four pitches, often as harmonic roots. Sometimes, these harmonies are near-syntheses of the four pitches, as in the half-diminished seventh chords in m. 4 (A♯–C♯–E), m. 32 (G–B♭–D♭), m. 34–35 (E–G–B♭). The half-diminished seventh sonority is liberated from its usual functional harmonic context (as a predominant harmony), and meant to stand as a symbol of the thought process which the melodic motion of the tritone pitches represents. Rather than

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106 The graph here is not intended to evoke the full range of Schenkerian tonal associations, particularly the notion that the music between m. 4 and 104 is somehow less relevant because it conforms less well to expectations than those measure shown in the graph. However, I do hear a strong and very traditional closing gesture at m. 106, of the kind that reductive graphs illustrate well.
using the diminished seventh chord, which would unite all four pitches simultaneously and therefore imply some sort of harmonious co-existence, the half-diminished seventh requires one of these four pitches to be absent. So much like Mallarmé’s arabisque, in which opposed images are provisionally brought together only to be pulled apart in another temporary cohesion of the mind, Debussy’s harmonic choices here suggest only one of the two available symmetrical mid-points of the tritone, leaving the other to undo the provisional marriage of the other three. Debussy alludes to this kind of symbolic understanding of harmony in a letter to Ernest Chausson dated 3 September 1893 (the same letter which mentions playing through a completed draft of the *Prélude* for Henri de Régnier) when he says:

As [Régnier] was speaking to me of certain words in the French language whose gold was tarnished by going out to frequently in the wicked world, I thought to myself that it was the same situation for certain chords whose sonority has been made banal through mass-produced music, this reflection has no poignant novelty, unless I add that they have lost their symbolic essence at the same time.  

This entirely novel conception of harmony as having a symbolic nature in addition to (or instead of) a tonal function suggests that part of Debussy’s harmonic practice in the *Prélude* was to find harmonies whose inherent qualities bore an inherent relationship to those of the melody, regardless of their traditional harmonic implications. The prevalence of harmonic motion by thirds, which has been treated in detail by Nicholas Méeus, can likewise be related to this symbolic use of harmony, in the sense that harmonic motion by thirds creates maximal pitch invariance between triads.  

By retaining a significant number of pitches from one harmony to another (rather than the single common tone afforded by traditional harmonic motion by fifth), Debussy relatively creates static and non-traditional pitch fields within his pieces. The logic of his harmonic progressions often depends, therefore, on a common pitch-

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107 Debussy, *Corr.*, 155: “Comme [Régnier] me parlait de certains mots de la langue française dont l’or s’était terni à trop fréquenter du vilain monde, je pensais en moi-même qu’il était de même pour certains accords dont la sonorité s’était banalisée dans des musiques d’exportations, cette réflexion n’est pas d’une nouveauté poignante, je n’ajoute qu’ils ont perdu en même temps leur essence symbolique.”

class content more than the function of the chords themselves. This process is comparable with
Mallarmé’s basic poetic techniques, where clusters of concentrated phonemes in various poems
connect with one another independently of the rules of syntax and grammar, and suggest their
own paths of meaning and continuity. In tracing this movement, we can recognize the
arabesque operating at deeper levels in Debussy’s Prélude.

So in its basic structural rhythm, Debussy’s Prélude follows the same essential shape as
Mallarmé’s poem, in that a series of conscious efforts to “remember” (in the sense of
reconstruct) an encounter with two nymphs in one case and the “correct” harmonization of a
musical line in the other stand as metaphors for the process of thought and the limits of
knowability. However, their intrinsic processes are different. In Mallarmé’s poem, the faun
proceeds from music to language, from the vague to the more specific. Even though his
memory of the nymphs is never fully actualized, it is language and not music that comes closer
to the idea. In Debussy’s Prélude, the opening flute solo is its clearest presentation, and the
successive variations that characterize its form are attempts to normalize this initial vision into
a more traditional harmonic framework. The two works thus approach the Idea from two
different sides, recalling Mallarmé’s claim about music and poetry as the opposite faces of the
Idea. They read across this shared space, their relationship marked by a constant difference of
means. Whereas Mallarmé’s arabesque is, necessarily, silent and uncovered only through
analytical thinking, Debussy’s arabesque is palpable, physical and present, though its
significance is likewise hidden.
CONCLUSION

William Austin argues, in reference to the Prélude, that “Debussy was no mere disciple of Mallarmé, or translator of his ideas into the language of music.” While I certainly agree that Debussy was never a disciple of Mallarmé, one of the many acolytes that gravitated to the mardis at the Rue de Rome as if attending a religious service, the second part of Austin’s comments seem to miss the mark somewhat. Debussy did, after a fashion, translate Mallarmé’s ideas into musical sound. If this were not the case, then Debussy’s repeated comments on the difficulty of matching up poetic and musical ideas (whether in song, opera or instrumental music) would be little more than a boldfaced deception, one which has fooled critics for nearly one hundred years.

Debussy’s Prélude is not a transcription of Mallarmé’s poem (and perhaps that is what Austin had in mind): there is no meaningful correspondence between individual musical measures and individual lines in the poem. Debussy asserted as much when he claimed that the Prélude was the general impression of Mallarmé’s poem “for to follow the poem more closely, the music would run out of breath like a carriage horse competing for the grand Prize with a purebred.” Instead, his Prélude is the audible trace of the idea of the poem, an enactment of the “nothingness” essential to Mallarmé’s thought: an invisible shape that connects the various parts of the poem and makes of it a true drama in the Mallarmean sense.

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109 Austin, Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun, 11.
110 Debussy, Corr., 278: “car à le suivre de plus près, la musique s’essoufflerait ainsi qu’un cheval de fiacre concourant pour le grand Prix avec un pur-sang.” There is a possible punning reference here. The “cheval de fiacre” may be intended to evoke the phrase “chanter comme un fiacre” which means, basically, to sing very badly. Therefore, a piece of music which follows its literary counterpart too closely sings out of tune. See the epigram which opens the Introduction.
CHAPTER FOUR

LE CHANT SOUS LE TEXTE: DEBUSSY'S *TROIS POÈMES DE STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ*

After the 1894 premiere of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, it would be nearly twenty years before Debussy composed music for another Mallarmé text. The span of years that separates the *Prélude* and the *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* (1913) encompasses the bulk of Debussy's mature output in every genre save song. Most remarkable in this period is Debussy's departure from working with texts as such, towards more autonomous musical forms of expression: symphonic music and piano pieces in particular.¹ With the notable exception of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, the major works of this period are predominantly instrumental, furnished with descriptive titles that invoke specific literary texts relatively rarely. *La mer*, the *Nocturnes*, the works for piano (two books of *Images*, plus the two books of *Préludes*), and even the late ballet scores *Jeux* and *Khamaare* are conceived and executed within the frame sketched out by the *Prélude* on one side and the *Trois poèmes* on the other.

The specific event which triggered Debussy's return to Mallarmé's poetry was probably the republication in 1913 of the Deman edition of Mallarmé's *Poesies*, first released in 1899, one year after the death of the poet.² From this slim volume, Debussy selected three poems: "Soupir," "Placé futile," and "Autre éventail (de Mademoiselle Mallarmé)." His settings were published later that same year, marking Debussy's final encounter with Mallarmé.³

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¹ Of course, there were several vocal projects during this, but Debussy seems to have lacked the conviction to see them through.
² Debussy was not the only composer so inspired by this event. Unbeknownst to him, Ravel was also working on a Mallarmean trystitch for voice and small chamber group. In an odd coincidence, both Debussy and Ravel chose to set *Soupir* and *Placé futile*; Debussy learned of this only after attempting to secure the rights to the text - he was not amused, as can be seen in a letter to Jacques Durand, 8 August 1913. See Debussy, *Corr.*, 1651.
³ Marie Rolf has noted that some of the sketches for *Soupir* also contain revisions of *Apparition* (1884), which was unpublished. Ultimately, no published work came of this revision, and therefore I have chosen to omit it from this study. See Rolf, "Semantic and Structural Issues in Debussy's Mallarmé Songs" in *Debussy Studies* ed. Richard Langham Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 179.
The choice of these three texts is telling. Debussy consciously avoids Mallarmé’s most complex poems, selecting instead two early poems “Soupir” and “Placet futile,” which date from before 1865. The third poem, “Autre éventail (de Mademoiselle Mallarmé)” comes from the mature period (1884), but this poem stands decidedly apart from the more progressive contemporary poems, leaning instead towards the style of the vers de circonstance.

The selection of these three poems seems to confirm Debussy’s ambivalence towards Mallarmé’s later poems. Of the three texts he chose, none exhibits the virtuosic complexity of Mallarmé’s late sonnets. In fact, the only sonnet Debussy selected was “Placet futile” (1862); Mallarmé’s first published work, written fully three years before the crisis which so profoundly altered his poetic practice and aesthetic. Although a charming example of eighteenth-century galanterie, “Placet futile” has relatively few of the characteristics of Mallarmé’s mature style. “Soupir” (1864) represents a first step towards the more mature style, but the most critical of his innovations are still at least a year away. “Autre éventail,” though it shares some formal characteristics with the quintessentially Mallarmean “Prose (pour des Esseintes),” is quite different from the latter poem in both its subject matter and in the way that its rhymes are constructed. I do not mean to suggest that the poems Debussy selected to set are poor. Indeed, that they were published by Mallarmé at all is a testament to his belief in their relative perfection, even if they are less ambitious than other works. However, it is significant that Debussy’s final encounter with Mallarmé is intentionally staked out on a poetic ground

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4 All three poems deal with “princess” figures, and from that point of view could be considered to form a cycle. However, I do not see large-scale musical continuities that connect the three songs as continuously as one might expect in a cycle. For this reason, I have chosen to treat them independently.

5 The third poem set by Ravel was “Surgi de la croupe et du bond,” a sonnet from 1887, and fully in line with Mallarmé’s mature and complex style. Although there were not many settings of Mallarmé at this time, settings of the late poetry did occasionally take place.

6 This was covered in Chapter One.

7 Rosemary Lloyd shows how sensitive Mallarmé was to the difference between the value of the poetic project as a whole on one hand, and the relative success of its realization on the other. It is this quality that allowed Mallarmé to genuinely praise the publications of a poet like François Coppée while acknowledging the relative simplicity of Coppée’s vision in relation to his own. See Lloyd, Mallarmé: The Poet and His Circle (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 53–65.
significantly simpler than “L’aprèsmidi d’un faune,” a ground where perhaps the balance between music and poetry that were both sounded might be more equally struck.

Debussy’s settings of these three Mallarmé texts expose the same dialectic of union and disjunction between music and text that also characterizes *Apparition* and the *Prélude*. Even though the texts of *Trois poèmes* are not overtly complex, they still show Mallarmé’s concern for internal symmetry and mimesis at both phonetic and semantic levels. The dose of poetic “music” which they contain, which Mallarmé argued makes an actual musical setting somewhat redundant, gives them a more closed quality than poems by contemporaries like Verlaine, whose texts are generally more amenable to musical settings. Debussy’s musical settings are carefully crafted to preserve to an extraordinary degree the rhythms and pacing of the poems. In this way, they allow Mallarmé’s poetic voice to speak inside the setting to a degree uncommon in the nineteenth-century song tradition. The interaction between these two elements, one poetic and one musical, cannot be reduced to a simple mimesis where the music is an imitation of the text, nor to simple appropriation where the text is remade in the image of the music. Instead, the results are a series of inter-artistic crossings, a set of readings which flow in both directions. From these readings, fragments of meaning, momentary connections and provisional unions are continuously being made and then undone. This chapter traces some of the moments of accord and disjunction produced in this joining of poem and music, examining each of the three songs in turn.

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8 Debussy certainly seems to have thought along these lines, in light of the fact that his settings of Verlaine outnumber those of Mallarmé significantly.

9 It has been, since Edward T. Cone at least, fashionable to speak of a musical setting being a “reading” of the text, a response to its formal parameters, its images and tropes, etc. The mimetic model which underlies this thinking is explicitly questioned by both Mallarmé’s poetry and Debussy’s music.
PART ONE
UN SOUPIR QUI MIRE: REFLECTION IN SOUPIR

MALLARME’S “SOUPIR”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soupir</th>
<th>Sigh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mon âme vers ton front où rêve, ô calme sœur</td>
<td>My soul toward your brow where dreams, o calm sister,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Un automne jonché de taches de rousseur,</td>
<td>An autumn scattered with freckles,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Et vers le ciel errant de ton œil angélique</td>
<td>And toward the wandering sky of your angelic eye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monte, comme dans un jardin mélancolique,</td>
<td>Climbs, as in a melancholy garden,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fidèle, un blanc jet d’eau soupire vers l’Azur!</td>
<td>Faithful, a white fountain sighs toward the Azur!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—Vers l’Azur attendri d’Octobre pâle et pur</td>
<td>—Toward the Azur, made tender by pale and pure October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qui mire aux grands bassins sa langueur infinie</td>
<td>That mirrors in great pools its infinite longing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Et laisse, sur l’eau morte où la fauve agonie</td>
<td>And allows, on the dead water where the tawny agony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Des feuilles erre au vent et creuse un froid sillon,</td>
<td>Of leaves wanders in the wind and carves a cold chasm,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Se trainer le soleil jaune d’un long rayon.</td>
<td>The yellow sun to drag out a long ray.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In her work on the poem, Elizabeth McCombie writes that “[a]t the heart of ‘Soupir’ lurk echoes of the Romantic topos in which the poet desires to reach the inaccessible/dead woman and needs to organize the poetic self, as a function of this desire, around the sexual deferral caused by the absence/death of the beloved.” While I do not share her opinion of the sexual undercurrents in this poem, she is certainly right to point out the importance of death, absence and longing here. She also perceptively notices the degree to which Mallarmé’s “poetic self”—which I equate with the lyrical “je” of the poem—is organized to reflect this longing in semantic terms. Taking her approach one step further, I will argue that this longing can be traced right down into the fabric of the poem itself, into its prosody and syntax as well.

The departed “calme soeur” of the poem is likely a reference to Maria Mallarmé, the poet’s sister, whose death in 1857 was to haunt him, especially during the 1860s. As

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10 Mallarmé, OC I, 15–16.
11 McCombie, Mallarmé and Debussy, 164.
12 See, for instance, the prose poem “Plainte d’automne,” published 2 July 1864, OC I, 414–15 (the same year as the initial drafts of “Soupir”), or Mallarmé’s letter to Henri Cazalis, 1 July 1862, Corr. I, 34. Charles Mauron has
mentioned earlier in regards to "Apparition," much of Mallarmé's poetry was initially inspired by, or related to, events in his life, from which he extracted some poetic essence. Typically, Mallarmé's successive revisions serve to abstract the poem from the specific biographical event to which it relates, leaving a more impersonal utterance, onto which more universal experiences can be mapped. However, in the case of "Soupir," even in its final and most abstract state, I think that arguing for sexual undertones is an act of violence on the text. If any nineteenth-century topos is relevant here, it would seem to be the fascination with death and childhood, as they meet in the poetry of Rückert and the music of Mahler, for example.

"Soupir" is a poem about reflection. The living poet reflects (and reflects on) the absent sister through poetry, much as the fountain's calm pool reflects the sky against which it is continually opposed. The poem is an attempt to recapture the sister, to fix her in a body of writing and thus give her a permanent form. To that end, Mallarmé directs all of his poetic energies: semantic, syntactic, phonetic, and structural.

The poet's soul seeks communion with the "calme sœur" by moving towards her, metaphysically. This longing is reflected in the poet's surroundings through the sighing movement of the fountain. As is typical of Mallarmé's images, the fountain's sigh towards the Azur quickly becomes more than merely a metaphor for the movement of the poet's soul. The two images, the soul and the fountain, become confused. In part, this results from the use of sky imagery to describe the sister; her angelic sky-eyes dovetail nicely with the image of the Azur, Mallarmé's favored word for the purity of the summer sky. Beyond this, though, is the detailed Mallarmé's obsession with Maria in Introduction to the Psychoanalysis of Mallarmé, trans. Archibald Henderson and Will L. McLendon (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963), 23–52.


14 When he wanted to write erotic poetry, Mallarmé had no trouble doing so. See "Petit Air I", "La chevelure vol d'une flamme." Mallarmé, OC I, 34; 26.

15 I do not mean to suggest that Mallarmé had any exposure to Rückert's poems.

16 See Mallarmé's poem 'L'Azur', OC I, 14–15, and in the present study, page 54.
speed with which Mallarmé connects the idea of the sister to nature. The autumn that dreams on her brow is at once a strikingly elegant description of her freckled forehead and a vaporization of her physical being, the freckles themselves a metaphor for the russet leaves of the autumn scene.

The poet, by contrast, is associated with the water of the fountain which, after failing to reach the Azur through its jets, must be content with simply mirroring its “infinite longing” in its pool of dead water. Thus the poet as mirror, an image common in Mallarmé’s thinking. As a passive agent, the water can only become the site of reflection, an enactment “down here” of what goes on “up there.” Slowly, another image of the sister emerges, as the tawny leaves, a metaphor for her russet freckles, begin to swirl over the pool’s reflected azur—the sister’s eyes.

The simile which forms the fundamental structure of “Soupir” doubles the poet and the sister as the fountain and the Azur, and the sigh of the water towards the heavens matches the implicit rise of the speaker’s soul at the beginning of the poem. These twinned images are not mimetic, at least not in the Platonic sense that designates an original and a copy. Instead, they always mark a duality characterized by uncertainty. Although we know that the “grands bassins” must mirror the infinite languor of the Azur, reflecting the sky on the surface of the water, in “Soupir” it is the Azur that does the reflecting, mirroring itself in the water below. Or, perhaps it is that the Azur is a reflection of the water, its tender blue taken from the basin below. This cannot be (since the sky cannot reflect), and yet Mallarmé’s text seems to say that it is, or at least that it could be. Metaphorically, then, is it that the poet reflects the sister or the

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17 In Mallarmé, as Derrida has noted, there is an attempt to overcome “Platonic” mimesis – the particular approach to imitation which distinguishes between originals that are good and copies that are degenerate. Platonic mimesis fixes the truth value of the object according to this distinction: originals are true, while copies are not-quite-true. Instead, Mallarmé’s images tend to pose no clear original and no clear copy. See Derrida, “The Double Session,” 184–98. As such, the truth value of poetry is irrelevant (see the famous letter to Cazalis, 28? April 1866, Corr. I, 206, where Mallarmé characterizes his poetry as a “glorious lie.”)
other way around? For if the poet-as-fountain aspires to the sister-as-sky, then perhaps she can mirror herself in him by way of memory. However one chooses to interpret the image, there is no way to assign priority to a reading without ignoring some essential aspect of the text itself. These images enter into a relationship of identity and difference like any other, but their undecidability is new in Mallarmé. The images aspire towards unity, and it is this aspiration which belies the unbridgeable gap between them. The process of writing momentarily suspends the distinction between the fountain and the Azur, the poet and the sister. It brings them together and keeps them apart at the same time, a uniquely Mallarmean technique.

Mallarmé’s syntax, in this poem as in others, is consciously manipulated to play a role in reinforcing and indeed creating poetic meaning. Arthur Wenk begins his analysis of “Soupir” by noting that it “consists of a single sentence ... [which] departs considerably from the word order of ordinary speech.” For him, the poem’s unusual syntax is a surface complexity which must be pared away, leaving the kernel sentence, “Mon âme monte vers ton front comme un blanc jet d’eau soupire vers l’Azur.” For Wenk and others, this kernel sentence constitutes the essence of the poem; the remaining clauses are subordinate to this basic meaning. Following Wenk, we might perform a syntactic repair on “Soupir” that would transform the poem into a single prose sentence:

Mon âme monte (ô calme sœur) vers ton front (ou rêve un automne jonché de taches de rousseur), et vers le ciel errant de ton œil angélique, comme (dans un jardin mélancolique) un blanc jet d’eau soupire vers l’Azur (Vers l’Azur attendri d’Octobre pâle et pur, qui mire aux grands bassins sa languer infinie et laisse se trainer le soleil jaune d’un long rayon sur l’eau morte où la fauve agonie des feuilles erre au vent et creuse un froid sillon).

Here the parenthetical and digressive clauses are set off by parentheses. This kind of syntactic repair is a critical first step in reading Mallarmé, and becomes more important as the poems become more complex. However, this kind of reconstruction risks treating Mallarmé’s syntax

18 Wenk, Debussy and the Poets, 246.
as an ornamental, rather than structural, feature. On the contrary, Mallarmé’s syntax is a crucial supplement to the semantic level of meaning discussed above.

If we agree instead that poetry depends on language for the transmission of its meaning, and that language conveys meaning only imperfectly, then tensions arise between any purported meaning of a poem and the particular instance of its expression in language. In other words, there is usually a distinction between what a poem is trying to say and the way that it tries to say it, including its syntax and prosody. Mallarmé’s poetry consistently tries to bridge this gap, and his difficult syntax and diction must be seen in this light. In “Soupir,” the opening text “Mon âme vers ton front” is not missing the verb “monte,” in the sense that it should be subconsciously or even retrospectively read as “Mon âme monte vers ton front.” Rather, the text longs for “monte” as a word which is implied (as the verb of the subject) but effaced by the poet, painfully absent (and therefore eerily present through this absence) like the sister. By the time the expected word actually arrives in line 4, it both fulfills the earlier phrase’s longing and is made impotent by it. Our need to hear “monte” as something ripped out of the first line is so powerful that its presence in line 4 is rather hollow, the sounding echo of a word that the mind simply supplies somewhere in line 2. By separating the verb so far from its subject, Mallarmé allows the intervening text of lines 2–3 to speak of the sister, of the autumn which dreams as freckles on her forehead, of her sky-blue eyes and angelic countenance, within that sense of loss, a loss which is both semantic and syntactic. The duality of absence and presence is critical for both the poem and the song, as we shall see.

A similar syntactic process can be seen in line 8–10. Semantically, the Azur reflects itself in the poet-pool down below and allows the sun to stretch out its long yellow ray over the

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20 By “diction” I mean simply Mallarmé’s typical vocabulary, and its specific deployment in this poem.
dead water. The syntax of the poem enacts this by creating a space for the poet to linger, much as the sun does. A typical syntactic ordering of line 8–10 might read as follows:

et laisse se trainer le soleil jaune d’un long rayon sur l’au morte où la fauve agonie des feuilles erre au vent et creuse un froid sillon.

By splitting the infinitive complement “se trainer” from its verb “laisse,” Mallarmé opens up a physical space poetically, charged with the same longing that characterized the earlier treatment of “monte.” In effect, his syntax hollows out its own chasm in the text as the words of the poem do the same thing semantically.

For Mallarmé, the reflection in imagery and syntax is merely a first step in the poetic process; if the poem itself is to have any value, then its own processes must reflect its imagery. To this point, Mallarmé’s mirror images have been semantic and syntactic, but a closer look at the poem reveals structural reflections that extend to the level of the words themselves. Between lines 5 and 6, the poem shifts its focus from earthly objects to their reflection of the divine, the ideal truth towards which the earthy images aspire but ultimately fail to reach. This shift is marked by a hyphen in the poem; a structural blank around which the text folds itself, setting the two halves against one another graphically much as Wenk’s kernel sentence idea had done through its syntax. Many of the paired images noted earlier can be seen as reflections around this structural mirror. Initially, one notices the repeated words that span the two halves of the poem. Most locally, the repetition of “Azur” at the end of line 5 and the beginning of line 6 highlights this symmetry. Pushing further back, the “errant” in line 3 is mirrored by “erre” in line 9, and, as mentioned above, both are connected with the sister.

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21 The mimetic capacity of language has been hotly contested for more than two millennia. For an excellent history of this, and some illuminating comments about Mallarmé’s mimetic language, see Genette, *Mimologics.*

22 Roger Pearson has noted the predominance of symmetrical binary constructions in several Mallarmé poems. See *Unfolding Mallarmé.* The notion of the structural blank owes something to Derrida’s treatment of the blank and the fold in “The Double Session,” 227–55.

23 If we consider the hyphen as a kind of structural blank, around which the poem folds, these symmetries come out more strongly.
The four-fold repetition of "vers" in line 1, 3, 5, and 6, finds its phonetic reflection in the "rêve" of line 1, as well as "erre" and "errant." Although this sound is clearly important in this poem, it never forms an end-rhyme in any line. The semantic connotations of "vers" meaning "toward" is seriously undercut by the echo of "erre"—"wanders,"—an early confirmation that the poet's soul may be merely wandering, rather than moving, towards the ideal of the sister. On another level, "vers" meaning "line of verse" or, more generally "poetry" is certainly relevant here. For it is, precisely, through the "vers," the poetic lines, that the poet's soul searches for the sister.²⁴

If we think of phonetic similarity as a kind of aural reflection, then Mallarmé's poem explodes with sonic mirrors besides those found in conventional end-rhyme. As was detailed in Chapter One, Mallarmé suggests that rhyme traces a secret kinship between words, and this has lead some scholars to construct signifying constellations of words that share a sonic affinity and some semantic element.²⁵ These constellations are often used to explicate Mallarmé's more difficult texts. However, even a relatively early and semantically clear poem like "Soupir" can benefit from this kind of reading.

As explained in Chapter One, constellations are constructed from the fortunate circumstance that words in a language use a limited number of letters and phonemes in combination. These coincidental resemblances are traces of the original unity between sound and sense, music and language that Mallarmé mentions constantly in his critical writings. Remembering that the purpose of poetry is to compensate for the disjunction between sound and sense in language, let me now turn to more concrete examples. In the first line of the poem,

²⁴ Derrida uses a similar kind of zeugma in his deconstructive reading of Mallarmé's "Mimique." See Derrida, "The Double Session," 174–203. While I agree with Derrida's general premise, I find Mallarmé's use of this technique significantly more hopeful in this, admittedly less complex, poem.

²⁵ Two of the best approaches are Robert Greer Cohn's, whose work to reconstruct Mallarmé's "Letter Table" traces the connection between sound and sense sporadically throughout his work on the poet. Roger Pearson's work focuses on Mallarmé's use of homophony to create a multivalent text. See Cohn, Toward the Poems, passim., and Pearson, Unfolding Mallarmé.
the word “vers” /ver/ in the first hemistich of the alexandrine is mirrored chiastically by “rêve” /rev/ in the second. This coincidence of language makes it possible (and indeed tempting) to read “rêve” in place of “vers,” providing an alternative verb to the subject “Mon âme;” instead of rising towards the sister’s face, the soul dreams it into existence. Here, “rêve” doubles the missing verb as the dream doubles the sister’s face. So the displacement of the verb “Monte” not only enacts the longing described by the text but opens it up for unexpected grammatical possibilities. Of course, this reading is provisional, since an aural trace of the missing verb “Monte” is also present in the first line of the poem, dispersed in the phonemes of “mon” and “ton.” “Monte” is also present anagrammatically in “automne,” whose phonemes are similar enough to be relevant here. So, from this point of view, the verb “Monte” is phonetically “present” though semantically absent from this part of the poem, which reflects the alternating presence-through-memory and absence of the “sœur.” Right from the beginning of the poem, Mallarmé’s text enacts its message of loss and longing in the very fabric of its own language.

“Mon,” “ton,” and “monte” are part of a larger phonetic constellation in “Soupir” uniting all of the words containing the phoneme /œ/. They are:


These sounds are reinforced by the presence of several related sounds in “automne,” “comme,” “Octobre,” and “morte.” Certainly, this is the kind of aural patterning that Mallarmé had in mind when he wrote that in a poem the words should “reflect upon each other to the point of appearing not to have their own colour anymore, but to be merely transitions within an entire

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26 This is in part due to the semantic relationship that Mallarmé sees between “Dream” and “Verse,” a common theme in his writing.
Beyond simple phonetic similarity, however, there are semantic relationships to be traced through these phonemic connections, ones that Mallarmé exploits in “Soupir.” First and perhaps most basically, is the coincidence that the possessive pronouns “mon” and “ton” should reflect one another in sound, much the way that Mallarmé sets up their reflection in the semantic and syntactic aspects of the poem. It is also interesting that the phonetic union between “mon” and “ton” in the verb “monte” should be, precisely, the proposed vehicle for their semantic connection in the poem. The futility of this desire, already stated in the poem and enacted syntactically, finds a further resonance in the phonemic echo of “sillon;” the cold chasm caused by the errant wandering of the leaves, which we have already seen are metaphors for the poet’s sister. Beyond this, the temporal setting of the poem in “automne” and “Octobre” both pick up on the phoneme at issue here, and connect it more explicitly to “morte,” both semantically (since autumn is a season of death and decay in nature) and phonetically.

In constellations, a limited number of phonemes are grouped and regrouped in several word clusters in the poem. Their relationship to one another and to their surroundings transform otherwise chance occurrences of language into meaningful, if provisional, relationships. I have already suggested a conflation of the image of the freckled sister with the image of the leaf-scattered sky. Mallarmé reinforces this image acoustically by recomposing a phonemic sequence originally used to refer the sister, and repeating it each time the notion of wandering returns in the text. The first line reads:

[Mon âme] vers ton front

Compare this with the opening of the third line, which exhibits a kind of half-rhyme, reinforced by a similar accent pattern:

[Et] vers le ciel errant

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and the opening of the ninth

[Des feuilles] erre au vent

The aural similarity of these line openings suggests that Mallarmé consciously rhymes these sounds here. The rhymes are not strong enough to merit placement at the end of the lines, but rather function as internal rhyme in the way that Mallarmé often described the “hidden” rhymes of artistic prose. The opening text refers to the sister’s freckled forehead, the second to her wandering sky-eyes, the last of the agony of leaves wandering in the wind. Semantically, we have already seen the freckles mirrored as the leaves swirling against the sky/eye. Here, Mallarmé enacts these mirrors in sound. By the ninth line, he has not only managed to detach the /v/ from the first word and transfer it to the second (tracing the relationship between the freckled brow and the leaves), he has also created an answering phrase in which the first and last words each rhyme. It seems no coincidence, therefore, that the ninth line includes the /f/ from “front” in line 1 in its opening phonemes.

This kind of large-scale phonetic enactment of semantic meaning is most evident in “Soupir” in line 7, where the mirror image of the pool/poet and sky/sister is most concretely presented: “Qui mire aux grands bassins sa langueur infinie.” Mallarmé enacts this mirroring in the line of verse by creating a phonemic palindrome: its own mirror image in another medium:

Qui mire aux grands bassins sa langueur infinie

i i R g ā as s a ĝ R i i

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i i R g ā as s a ĝ R i i

FIGURE 4.1.1. Phonemic palindrome in “Soupir,” line 7.

28 Mallarmé, “La Musique et les Lettres,” OC II, 64.
29 Granted, “front” and “vent” are only a near rhyme, rather than a perfect phonetic reflection.
It is a testament to Mallarmé's craft, even in this early poem that the phonemic mirror turns precisely around "bassins," the semantic mirror of the text, and around the caesura typically expected in the classical alexandrine.\(^{30}\)

By having the phonetic structures of his poem enact significant details of its semantic meaning, Mallarmé aims at a remarkable consistency of form and content. We must now turn to Debussy's setting to see how he treats these elements in his setting of the poem.

**DEBUSSY'S SOUPIR**

The piece is in A\(_b\) major, and projects this tonality fairly clearly both at the beginning and the end of the work.\(^{31}\) The piano figure that opens the piece is built from a pentatonic collection on A\(_b\), disposed as a series of ascending and descending fifths, traces the contour of the fountain's water jet in musical space. At the same time, the opening four pitches (Eb–B\(_b\)–F–C) imply an Eb\(^{13}\) chord that finds some resolution in the low A\(_b\) in the piano left hand in m. 4. The return of this figure at the end of the song provides some rounding, but the song is essentially through-composed. Although there are several important pitch relationships between the various parts of the piece, there is no significant return of earlier material aside from the piano introduction.

An important feature of *Soupir* is the way that Debussy treats certain recurring pitches in the song. These pitches seem to be associated in the voice part with specific images in the text, and can therefore be seen as analogous to Mallarmé's manipulations of phonemes and letters. I do not contend, in what follows, that Debussy is consciously imitating Mallarmé's phonetic structure in all cases. Instead, the two approaches to sound exist simultaneously in the

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\(^{30}\) Roger Pearson has uncovered several of these phonetic palindromes in Mallarmé's poetry, though he does not identify this one specifically. See Pearson, *Unfolding Mallarmé*, 47 for a similar palindrome in "Les fenêtres."

\(^{31}\) Please consult Appendix F for a score of *Soupir*. 
song, sometimes in accord and at others unrelated or even at cross purposes. For this reason, I will consider the vocal line first, and then expand the analytical frame to include the piano part as well.

Consider the augmented triad outlined in the voice at m. 14–15 on the word “Fidèle.” The leap of a minor sixth from E to C (by far the largest so far) and the longer note values highlight this moment as significant. The A♭ here is posited as an axis of symmetry between E and C, upper and lower major thirds. Furthermore, by choosing to set the word “Fidèle” with this sonority, Debussy associates these three pitches (A♭–C–E) with the departed sister and the desire to perpetuate her memory. Like the image of the “sœur” which is scattered and recomposed across the phonetic surface of the poem, these focal pitches are recomposed in several ways.

The voice’s opening phrase, which is unaccompanied at mm. 7–10, is a diatonic collection on A♭ that emerges from the piano introduction. This music sets the first two lines of the poem. These lines, it will be remembered, illustrate the poet’s longing for the departed sister, semantically, syntactically and phonetically. The next phrase, mm. 11–12, shifts to a diatonic collection on E (though it is missing the A), and although it locally illustrates the “wandering” sky-eyes, on a deeper level it is a musical enactment of the central message of presence-through-absence which sits at the heart of Mallarmé’s poem. For if A♭, as tonic, is a tonal metaphor for fulfillment, it follows here that the listener’s struggle to maintain a sense of A♭ in this section parallels the poem’s attempt to perpetuate the memory of the sister. In this context, G♯, as the third of E major, is an acoustic and visual sign of both the displacement of A♭ as a tonal center and its somewhat veiled presence.\(^{32}\) By setting the word “Monte” to the pitches G♯–E, Debussy emphasizes both the aspiration for the departed (G♯ is equivalent to

\(^{32}\) I am less interested in the enharmonic respelling of A♭ as G♯ per se, than the way that this visual sign stands also for an aural displacement of tonal center.
A♭ as a pitch-class) and the separation from her. Although A♭ is present through the G♯, it no longer sounds like the root of the tonic triad that the listener expected earlier. So much like “Monte,” which arrives too late in the poem, the A♭/G♯ at m. 12 likewise arrives only after the tonal center has shifted to E. Rather than satisfying the listener’s longing, this gesture confirms and prolongs it.

Also important in this regard is the semitone shift from E♭ to E♮ that Debussy initially associates with the repetition of the word “vers” in m. 7 and m. 11 respectively. By setting “vers” in this way, Debussy seems to respond to the semantic shifts that Mallarmé’s poem introduces with the repetition of this word. This displacement of E♭ to E♮ can therefore be understood as a musical representation of the separation of the poet and the sister, even as the desire for A♭ indicates some kind of continued presence.

The opposition of A♭ and E is further complicated in the voice at mm. 16–17 by the introduction of elements of the C major triad (particularly the G), accompanying the description of the sighing fountain. The augmented triad which underlies this passage is the same one from m. 15 and is a semitone away from major triads on A♭, C, and E. That a C major triad emerges here is striking. Where we might expect a conflict between two triads a major third apart to play out as part of a heroic effort at transcendence in the mold of Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries,” the introduction of a third triad here, mediating between the others, creates a more static, circular tonality unconcerned with conquest and subordination. The symmetrical division of the octave into major thirds weakens the sense of tonal center here considerably. By associating this more neutral tonality here with the fountain (Mallarmé’s symbol of contemplative reflection), Debussy demonstrates that transcendence will not come

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33 Wenk, Debussy and the Poets, 247. This idea is also explored by Wheeldon, “Debussy's 'Soupir': An Experiment in Permutational Analysis,” 134–160.
34 There are only four augmented triads. Given the symmetrical arrangement of the pitches, if any one of these pitches is shifted down one semitone, a major triad would result.
about through a confrontation with E major that redeems A♭ from G♯, since C major makes the whole notion of G♯/A♭ temporarily irrelevant. Of course, these are the same pitches that set the word “Fidèle,” making an explicit musical connection between the sister and the fountain through their shared pitches that Mallarmé’s poem intimates but does not make phonetically explicit. Rather than imitating some feature of Mallarmé’s poem, as in the introduction that mimes the motion of the fountain, Debussy’s music here enacts the poem’s emotional stasis, its impotent longing and lack of resolution. But this is done through expressly musical procedures, and does not depend on the listener understanding the music only in light of the poem. Its longing is a property of the music itself, which engages the same ideas as Mallarmé’s poem through a different means and in a different medium.

The following phrase (m. 18), which begins the second half of the poem, moves towards D♭ major, marking the repeat of “Vers l’azur” and the shift in the poem from the terrestrial to the celestial through the agency of reflection. The next phrase, stretching from the second quarter of m. 20 through m. 23, sets the line “qui mire aux grands bassins sa langueur infinie” and the enjambed “et laisse.” Where Mallarmé chose a phonetic palindrome to illustrate the semantic reflection of the text, Debussy bases his melody on a the “-1” octatonic collection, the only instance of such a collection in the song’s vocal line. The inherent

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35 In Beethoven, for example, the struggle for the “correct” enharmonic identity of a pitch class is often central to the musical discourse of the work, as in the Razumovsky Quartet Op. 59, no. 1. At some critical point in such works, one of the spellings is demonstrated as “correct” in order for the tonal logic of the piece to work its way back to the tonic. Debussy’s procedure here runs counter to this aesthetic, and is part of his larger antipathy towards Beethoven and the German symphonic tradition.

36 There are many systems to designate the three distinct transpositions of the octatonic collection. For simplicity, I will consider three arrangements which all feature a semitone between the first two pitches. These three transpositions begin on C, C♯ and B respectively. If C = 0, then the scale beginning on C, semitone first, will be the “0” octatonic scale; the transposition beginning on C♯ will be the “+1” octatonic scale; the one beginning on B
symmetry of the octatonic collection can be heard as a musical symbol for Mallarmé’s palindrome, and suggests that, at least in this instance, Debussy actually heard and responded to one of Mallarmé’s phonetic techniques in his settings of the poet’s work. However, he uses an E₃ on the first beat of m. 22 (the last syllable of the poetic alexandrine) instead of the E♭ projected by the octatonic collection.

Example 4.1.1. Soupir, mm. 20–22, Octatonic setting of Mallarmé’s phonemic palindrome.

This alteration (E₃ for E♭) recalls the disjunction on the word “vers” at mm. 7 and 11. It also allows a reinterpretation of the preceding octatonic melody as interlocking dominant seventh chords rooted on A♭ and E respectively: the G♭–A♭–C setting “qui mire aux grands bassins” comes from A♭⁷, while the A♭ (G♯)–B–D–E make up E⁷. This picks up on the octatonic music in the piano at m. 9 which will be treated shortly. Finally, this gesture allows the voice to sing an E major triad (note the A♭ in place of G♯) for the text “et laisse,” which links up with the

the “-1” octatonic scale. Accidentals apply only to the notes which they precede:
A♭ for “se trainer” later on. In this way, the passage is more fully integrated into the discourse of the musical argument, and the octatonic melody seems less conspicuous here.

The following vocal phrase (“sur l’eau morte...” m. 23) is set in a quasi-recitative style, emphasizing the stagnant water in the fountain’s bassin. Debussy’s setting highlights the word “creuse” both as the highest and longest pitch in the phrase, and through the harmonic progression, which sets this word as a particularly unstable major seventh (B) over top of a seventh chord on C, giving “creuse” a peculiar, swooning quality. The return of C major as a focal sonority here recalls its emergence in the melody at m. 16–17.

As Arthur Wenk and Marianne Wheeldon have noted, the A♭ with which Debussy sets “se trainer” at the beginning of the final vocal phrase of Soupir connects to the A♭ which was used for “laisse” in m. 22. This clarifies Mallarmé’s grammar, reuniting “laisse” with its infinitive complement “se trainer,” and sets off the intervening text—and by extension the music of mm. 23–26—as parenthetical.

The piano, unlike the voice, has no direct contact with the text, making its relationship to the poetry more ambiguous. However, in Soupir the piano part shows some affinities with techniques in the voice part, including the use of A♭, C and E as focal pitches. After the introduction, the piano is silent in mm. 7–8. Nothing in either the piano part or the voice so far prepares the harmonies of m. 9, constructed from 2 sets of interlocking dominant seventh chords, as shown in Example 4.1.2:
EXAMPLE 4.1.2. *Soupir*, reduction of piano chords, mm. 9–15

The first chord combines dominant sevenths on E₉ and C. While these harmonies can be separately understood in terms of common practice tonality (as V⁷ and V⁷/vi respectively) their combined presentation suggests an expansion (and weakening) of dominant function to include chords rooted a minor third apart. This is due to the fact that they are both drawn from the "0" octatonic collection. Octatonically-related dominant seventh chords (i.e. those whose roots lie a minor third apart) can function as expanded dominants, in addition to implying a bitonal focus. The dominant function of this chord is made more explicit in the second half of m. 9, where Debussy transposes the entire harmonic complex down a whole step, shifting to the "+1" octatonic collection. This acts as a dominant to the A₉ in the right hand that, detached from its harmonic context, ascends through three octaves, implying a resolution that is not fully achieved here, since it is merely the pitch A₉ and not the full triad that is given. Of course, this polychordal dominant introduces E natural into an A₉ major context and gives C a much more prominent position than its mediant status would normally warrant. It also introduces octatonic collections in preparation for the second half of the song. At m. 13, the piano part can be understood as an embellished V⁷ on E₉, with the E₉ pedal tone acting as 9 and the A₉ in the bass functioning as a tonic pedal. Yet when the G₉ enters in the second half of the bar the pentatonic collection that results sounds like a V⁷ on A₉, somewhat disturbed by the E pedal.
tone. This harmony returns to E₉ on the downbeat of m. 14, bracketing the A₉⁷ chord as a prolongation, intimating no change of function. Hence, E₉ is an axis of symmetry for upper and lower minor thirds, in contrast to the major thirds in the voice part noted earlier. The C major and A₉ major triads in m. 15–17 reinforce the circular harmony mentioned in connection with the vocal line above.

The E pedal tone that runs throughout this section disturbs what could otherwise be seen as a large-scale cadence in A₉, with the octatonic dominants on C and E₉ of the first half of m. 9 and the pentatonic dominants on E₉ in m. 13 and 14 finding their resolution at m. 16. But the E pedal seems to insist on an augmented triad, in place of the A₉ major we anticipate as a tonic. The simple shift of E₉ to E₉ thus represents on some level the inability of the poet-fountain’s sigh to make significant contact with the Azur.

The piano music of mm. 18–22, with its motion towards D₉ major, never actually arrives there and the piano slips into a series of half-diminished seventh chords by m. 20. The chord on the second quarter of m. 20 is a C₉⁷, though the spelling suggests the possibility of an augmented sixth chord in E₉ major also. Reading this harmony as an enharmonically respelled V⁷ of E major, it becomes possible to hear the music from the second beat of m. 20 through the second beat of m. 21 as a prolongation of B⁷ (the A₉⁷ that follows is octatonically related to the B⁷ as in m. 9) that moves by fifth to a V⁷ chord on E. See Example 4.1.3:

Example 4.1.3. Soupir, piano, mm. 20–21.
This $E^7$ chord, which implies A (and by extension C, $E_b$ and $G_b$ as possible resolutions), remains unresolved here. This repeats in the next bar, and invokes a kind of submerged $E$ tonality in the piano. This, combined with the $E$ major arpeggio in the voice at m. 22, can be seen as a musical enactment of the reflection in the water, distorting the $E$ tonality explicitly associated with the voice in mm. 11–12.

Similar treatments of minor-third related dominant chords can be seen from mm. 27–31 (Example 4.1.4), where a $C^7$ chord is decorated with an $F_b$, giving it also the three essential tones of a $G_b^9$, a harmony which follows it immediately in a more conventional spelling. Separated by two minor thirds ($C$–$G_b$), these two chords share the same tritone ($E$–$B_b$), and therefore have the same function. After these two harmonies are repeated in m. 28, the $G_b^9$ chord alternates with $E_b^9$. In the example, I have marked these chords $\flat$VII and V respectively. All three of these harmonies ($C^7$, $G_b^9$, $E_b^9$) are related as members of the "0" octatonic collection, and so the entire section can be seen as a prolongation of the dominant of the $A_b$ chord that arrives in m. 30, a reading which the example makes explicit.\footnote{The ninths of the $G_b^9$ and $E_b^9$ chords ($A_b$ and $F$) are not members of the "0" octatonic collection, but the seventh chords that they decorate are. I do not think this obscures the harmonic function.}
Debussy’s harmonic choices also have an impact on the listener’s perception of the vocal line. If Wenk and Wheeldon are right about the $A_b$ of “laisse” in m. 22 connecting to the $A_b$ of “se trainer” in m. 27, the harmony destabilizes this connection in interesting ways. At m. 22, the $A_b$ is part of a larger arpeggio of an enharmonically respelled E major triad in the voice, while the $A_b$ of “se trainer” is the ninth of a dominant ninth chord on $G_b$. So although these pitches are “the same,” they are not expressly heard that way (by anyone without absolute
pitch, at any rate), and the connection is only revealed to those who could actually see the score. Moreover, the status of the vocal A♭ seems to have little to do with the alternation of tritone-related dominant chords on C and G♭, a procedure common in Debussy to suggest reflection, particularly of water. It is as if the voice and the piano are engaging the notion of reflection at the same time but in two different tonal spheres.

The feeling of closure at m.30 is created by the return of the introductory piano material at m. 30, the presence of its dominant and its oscillation between upper and lower minor third-based dominant sonorities that prolong it. Yet this is not quite A♭ major. Like the opening, it is a pentatonic collection on A♭, and the E♭ in the voice and the F in the piano part trail off into silence rather than completely resolving, leaving the listener with a sense of provisional closure that matches the sense of enduring sadness at the end of the poem.

In Soupir, Debussy seems to understand the central semantic issues of Mallarmé's poem, and his setting is crafted to allow its phonetic elements to speak of their own accord through the frequent use of recitative and unaccompanied singing. The music enacts these issues in the discourse of the song through various procedures that relate to and refocus those of the text. Some, like the piano introduction, are straightforwardly mimetic of images in the poem. Others, particularly the pitch narratives that embody the search for the missing sister, respond to the general mood of the poem. These musical procedures do not depend entirely on the text in order to be understood, nor are they temporally aligned with it in a way that would suggest a systematic reading. Instead, Debussy extracts the main theme of reflection from the poem and uses that idea—rather than a direct imitation of poetic images or technique—to shape most of his musical ideas. The augmented triad (A♭–C–E) and the way that these pitches are alternatively employed as focal pitches in the melody or harmony are purely musical ideas

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38 See the song Ombre des arbres (1885), published in 1903 as one of the Ariettes oubliées in 1903.
whose explanation needs no recourse to the text for its understanding. Yet, at the same time, it is related to Mallarmé's poem. The two inhabit the same musical space in Debussy's song and sing of the same subject in two different languages.

PART TWO
INVOCATIONS OF A PASTORAL PAST: PLACET FUTILE

MALLARMÉ'S “PLACET FUTILE”

In early 1862, a young and as yet unpublished Mallarmé sent a carefully crafted sonnet to Olympe Audouard, editor of the Parisian literary journal Le papillon. Initially titled “Placet,” the poem is indeed a plea for an aspiring author’s first publication, somewhat concealed by its rococo imagery and its allusions to the French courtly love tradition (or at least a nineteenth-century understanding of that tradition). Mallarmé himself called the poem a “sonnet Louis XV,” and various trappings of eighteenth-century poetry are present: the cherubim, the shepherd, even the lady’s lapdog. “Placet” was published in Le papillon in February 1862, and then was shelved for more than 20 years before reappearing in revised form in Verlaine’s “Les poètes maudits” in 1883. Further revisions were made before the sonnet took its final form (now titled “Placet futile”) in the photolithograph edition of 1887; the definitive source for most of Mallarmé’s published verse in his lifetime.

Like so many of Mallarmé’s poems, “Placet futile” takes its initial inspiration from an event in the real world—in this case, an opportunity to win both a first publication and, perhaps, the favor of Le papillon’s young blond editor—and abstracts them from these

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39 This is unlike certain compositions by Berlioz or Mahler, whose compositional choices often force the listener to look beyond the musical techniques themselves for extra-musical explanations.
40 Pearson, Unfolding Mallarmé, 28.
41 The three variants are all reproduced in OC I, 124 (1862), 111 (1883), 8 (1887).
mundane beginnings. Since the earlier versions of the poem offer occasional clarification for
the final 1887 version reproduced below and since, as I will argue later, it is likely that
Debussy knew the 1883 version; these earlier texts will be referenced when necessary.

Placet futile

1 Princesse! à jalouer le destin d’une Hébé
2 Qui poinç sur cette tasse au baiser de vos lèvres,
3 J’use mes feuks mais n’ai rang discret que d’abbé
4 Et ne figurerai même nu sur le Sèvres.

5 Comme je ne suis pas ton bichon embarbè,
6 Ni la pastille ni du rouge, ni jeux mièvres
7 Et que sur moi je sais ton regard clos tombè,
8 Blonde dont les coiffeurs divins sont des orfèvres!

9 Nommez-nous … toi de qui tant de ris framboisés
10 Se joignent en troupeau d’agneaux apprivoisés
11 Chez tous broutant les vœux et bélant aux délires,
12 Nommez-nous … pour qu’Amour aile d’un éventail
13 M’y peigne flute aux doigts endormant ce bercail,
14 Princesse, nommez-nous berger de vos sourires.

Futile Plea

1 Princess! jealous of the destiny of a Hebe
2 Who blossoms on this cup at the kiss of your lips,
3 I spend my passions but have only the discrete rank of abbot
4 And will not even appear nude on the Sevres.

5 Since I am not your bearded lapdog,
6 Neither your lozenge, nor lipstick, nor pretentious Games
7 And that on me I know your glance has fallen closed,
8 Blonde whose divine hairdressers are goldsmiths!

9 Name us … you from whom so many raspberried laughs
10 Gather in a flock of tamed lambs
11 Grazing on everyone’s hopes and bleating with delight,
12 Name us … so that Cupid winged with a fan
13 Paints me there, flute in hand, lulling the flock,
14 Princess, name us shepherd of your smiles.

In the first quatrain, Mallarmé presents his poetic self as a supplicant to the idealized
“Princesse.” He envies the depiction of Hebe, the goddess charged with pouring the nectar at
Jupiter’s table, on her cup because it is regularly blessed by the (incidental) kiss of her lip.
His own abilities (“mes feux”) have so far come to very little, and so he remains chaste (“n’ai
rang discret que d’abbé”), without hope of bettering his situation.

The mixture of self-deprecation and sexual innuendo contained in the poet’s desire to
be the beloved’s cup is also wrapped up in French poetic tradition stretching all the way back
to the troubadours. However, Mallarmé’s imagery in line 3 is considerably more subtle,
bringing this early work somewhat more in line with his later poetry. To claim for himself the

42 Littré, s.v. “Hébé.”
rank of abbot reinforces the poet’s impotence: his failure to be published and his failure to win the affections of his “Princesse.” In calling himself an abbot, the poet tries to put a positive face on this failure by making the “choice” to remain celibate, despite the fact that celibacy is forced on him by his beloved’s inattention. This gesture also subtly betrays a certain, stubborn pride that Mallarmé carried with him throughout his career. Aside from the conventional meaning of “Abbé” (referring not only to the head of a monastery, but more generally to any cloistered man), the word can also mean “head of a confraternity of artisans.”

To be the discreet head of a group of poets who saw themselves as wordsmiths (and therefore craftsmen of language) was, by 1887, exactly what Mallarmé had become, and this positive valence of “Abbé” rankles with the less flattering self-image of the previous two lines. Indeed, line 3 in both the 1883 and 1862 versions reads: “Mais je suis un poète, un peu moins qu’un Abbé,” (“but I am a poet, somewhat less than an Abbot”). In the fourth line, the cacophonous rhythm of “Et ne figurerai même nu,” whose unaccented syllables and densely packed consonants dramatically accelerate the reading until the stressed “nu” provides some relief, enacting in sonorous terms the desperation described in the entire stanza.

The remainder of the octave and the entire sextet should be considered together, disregarding the exclamation point that ends the second quatrain. If this does not happen, the quatrain makes no sense, as the antecedent-consequent phrase “Comme...nommez-nous”

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43 Littré, s.v. “abbé.”
44 It may be that Mallarmé is simply poking fun at the church, and at a society that values religious ritual more highly than poetic ritual. In his later years, Mallarmé would write often about the need to renew religion through art. Mary Lewis Shaw has examined the role of music in Mallarmé’s renewal of religious ritual. See Shaw, “Music: Le dernier et plénière culte humain” in Performance in the Texts of Mallarmé: The passage from art to ritual (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 29–50.
45 It important in this regard to note that Mallarmé’s exclamation points do not always indicate the end of a sentence, as would be the case in English. Therefore, the end of the second quatrain must be read as a kind of emphatic enjambment with the first line of the sextet. Of numerous examples that could be cited, consider the following: “Je dis : une fleur ! et, hors de l’oubli où ma voix relève aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose d’autre que les calices sus, musicalement se lève, idée même et suave, l’absente de tous bouquets.” (“Crise de vers, OC II, 213.”); “Mon doute, amas de nuit ancienne, s’achève / En maint rameau subtil, qui, demeuré les vrais / Bois mèmes, prouve, hélas! que bien seul je m’offrais / Pour triomphe la faute idéale de roses.” (“L’après-midi d’un faune,” OC I, 23.”)
would be ruptured into two incomplete fragments.\textsuperscript{46} Although Mallarmé’s syntax is challenging, complete sentences can usually be uncovered in his poems (with \textit{Un coup de dés} as a significant exception). From a semantic point of view, these ten lines might be condensed as follows: “As I am nothing to you, and as you spread your charms (“ris framboisées”) around so freely, then at least appoint me shepherd of your smiles,” where in the best pastoral traditional shepherd is understood to be a lover, whether of the physical or intellectual variety. The actual poetic lines unfold around this basic semantic message as a series of digressions and parentheses, an enactment of the reluctant poet who cannot seem to bring himself to ask for the thing he truly wants.

The catalogue of rather ridiculous things which the poet is not (lapdog, candy, lipstick) adds a certain rococo flavour to the second stanza, and helps to set the “Jeux mièvres” apart as something not explicitly physical. In earlier versions of the poem, “jeux” was left un-capitalized, and perhaps referred only to the pretentious games going on between the poet and his Princess. The addition of the capital in the final version invokes Mallarmé’s concept of the poetic “Jeu suprême,” the play of intention and chance that characterizes all language.\textsuperscript{47} In this case, the game is a relatively straightforward allegory on two levels: first, the game which requires the reader to capture the sexual implications of patently non-sexual content; and second, the process whereby all of this becomes a metaphor for attaining his first publication.

Line 7 is certainly the most difficult in the poem, and approaches in some measure the typical obscurity of Mallarmé’s later writing. The 1862 version of the poem reads “Et qu’avec

\textsuperscript{46} Littré mentions this kind of construction with “comme” as a comparison where the second term may be introduced by another “comme,” by “ainsi” or “aussi” or, as in the present case, by nothing at all. See Littré, s.v. “comme”

\textsuperscript{47} Mallarmé’s concept of \textit{Jeu} as it relates to poetry is as complex as it is essential. The relationship of a word (in its sonorous essence) to its spelling, its meaning(s), and the pathways through which one word connects with or calls forth another, whether motivated or by chance, and the relationship of all of this to the external world (or more properly the external world’s relationship to this phenomenon) is, for Mallarmé, the supreme literary game. All writing, conscious or not, plays this game, describes some small subdivision of its all-encompassing totality.
moi pourtant vous avez succombé" ("And that with me nevertheless you have succumbed"). According to Littré, “succombé” denotes “a woman who has given in to a seduction,” leaving little doubt about Mallarmé’s original intentions with the poem. By 1883, after twenty years, his ardor has cooled somewhat: “Et que sur moi pourtant ton regard est tombé” ("And that on me nevertheless your gaze has fallen"). As for the 1887 version, I see two possible readings. In the first, the “regards clos” refers to her looking at him and yet not seeing: not seeing either his love for her or his intrinsic worth. The other follows from the explicit 1862 version, referring to eyes closed (or half closed) in pleasure, as in the following:

Tes beaux yeux sont las, pauvre amante!
Reste longtemps sans les rouvrir,
Dans cette pose nonchalante où t’a surprise le plaisir.

Baudelaire, “Le jet d’eau,” lines 1–3

Fondons nos âmes, nos cœurs,
Et nos sens extasiés,
Parmi les vagues langueurs
Des pins et des arbousiers.
Ferme tes yeux à demi,
Croise tes bras sur ton sein,
Et de ton cœur endormi
Chasse à jamais tout dessein.

Verlaine, “En sourdine,” lines 5–12

Let our souls, our hearts,
And our enraptured senses mingle
Amid the vague languor
Of pines and arbutus.
Close your eyes halfway,
Fold your arms on your breast,
And from your entranced heart
Chase away all plans, forever.

Regardless of which meaning we ascribe, this is really the heart of the problem: either she has given herself once (in haste, perhaps) and now thinks better of it, or she has not given in because she is, metaphorically speaking, blind.

In line 8, Mallarmé resumes the gallant pose, praising the handiwork of the divine goldsmiths who craft the beloved’s hair. The rather unusual image of “orfèvres” is doubly
motivated here: once by the need to find a rhyme for “mièvres,” the other as a valence of her blonde (read: gold) hair.

The sestet is much more straightforward. The image of her raspberried laughter, no doubt a reference to her red lips, assembling as a flock of sheep that go grazing on the hopes of many men carries with it a reference to the Song of Songs (“Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn”), a text with its own long tradition of allegorical, multi-leveled interpretation. The sheep’s delirious bleating is a strikingly apt metaphor for the woman whose casual laughter threatens to destroy the men who have pledged themselves to her.

In the last tercet, Mallarmé finally brings himself to make the plea promised in the poem’s title. The 1883 version reads:

Nommez-nous... et Boucher\(^{49}\) sur un rose éventail
Me peindra flûte aux mains endormant ce bercail,

(lines. 12–13)

(Name us... and Boucher on a pink fan
Will paint me, flute in hand, lulling the flock.)

To rein in her wayward smiles, lest they wander too freely or too far, Mallarmé asks to be painted on her fan, its gentle beats calming her laughter. The reference to Boucher reinforces the rococo atmosphere, but does not survive into the final version. The flute he holds here is much more than a pastoral convention for Mallarmé; it is a key symbol of the poetic act.\(^{50}\) Likewise, the fan is not merely a lady’s accoutrement, but a metaphor for the poem itself,

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\(^{48}\) *The Holy Bible*, Song of Songs 4:2.

\(^{49}\) François Boucher, French rococo painter known for his pastoral scenes.

\(^{50}\) The flute in “L’après-midi d’un faune,” the flute, viol and mandolin in “Sainte,” and the viols in “Apparition” attest to the importance of musical instruments in Mallarmé’s poetry. Later on, the specific references to musical instruments are found in the critical work. See “Crise de vers,” OC II, 207–8: “The remarkable thing is that, for the first time, in the course of the literary history of any people, concurrently with the great general and centennial organs, where orthodoxy is praised, in the manner of a latent keyboard, anyone with his individual play and hearing can compose an instrument, as soon as he blows, strums it or strikes it with science; use it exceptionally and dedicate it also to Language... Every soul is a melody, that it is a matter of renewing; and for this purpose is the flute or the viol of each person.”
working its magic despite the fact that its bearer is unaware of its importance. In this way, the poem would be the fan, a barrier between the woman and the world, guardian of her chastity.

The final version is much more ambiguous. "Boucher" has been replaced by "Cupid," and now the fan, on which the shepherd was to be painted, has become the wing of the cherub. Likewise, the declarative statement "sur un rose éventail" ("on a pink fan") has been replaced with the more ambiguous "y" ("there"), which opens up another possibility: namely, that in the final version, the "sheep" of her smiles are also painted on the cup alongside Hebe. In this reading, the poet asks Cupid to paint him into that pastoral scene, both so that he can assert some power over her sheep-smiles and, as before, that he may receive her incidental kisses. Certainly, this arrangement is more in keeping with Mallarmé's later poetic principles, uniting the two halves of the poem unexpectedly.

In Mallarmé's poem, there is a constant tension between the formal layout of the poem on the page and the psycho-acoustic experience of an imagined reading. Both the Petrarchan sonnet form and the use of alexandrines create rhythmic expectations for semantic and sonorous elements of the work: one expects a semantic shift between the octave and the sextet on the large scale, and verse lines which scan in a 6 + 6 syllable pattern. These expectations are produced primarily by the substantial literary tradition of sonnets on one hand and classical French verse on the other. They are further confirmed by the visual layout of the poem on the page, and the actual organization of the text itself is heard and read against this paradigm. For example, the typical layout of a sonnet would call for a full stop at the end of the eighth line which, as mentioned above, Mallarmé runs over into the ninth line without either a caesura or any real semantic shift. So in the reading process there is a simultaneous awareness of the

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51 As we will see in dealing with the following song, Mallarmé associated poems and fans, and wrote several vers de circonstances on fans as gifts for the women in his life. See OC 1, 273–77.
purely formal aspects of the poem, signified primarily through the poem’s spacing, and the way the text weaves itself around the form.

When the poem is set as a song, however, this situation is changed. There is no musical corollary to the purely formal aspects of the sonnet form that is separable from its content. While the inseparability of form and content was typically valorized in the nineteenth century as evidence of music’s special, transcendent quality, it is one of the primary ways in which music and poetry differ. So even when a composer consciously endeavors to follow the form of a poem in song composition, by respecting its semantic aspects, or its punctuation, or the distribution of its stanzas, the process of translation invariably changes the poem. The visual gaps that separate line from line and stanza from stanza are particularly important to Mallarmé, in part because they force the reader to jump back and forth between various blocks of text in order to reconstruct his syntax, thereby reproducing the essential patterns of thought that, for him at least, the poems trace. Music has no correlative structure, mostly because it is usually accessed by listening. Even in the case of a person reading the score, however, the visual layout of the information is not generally regarded as significant. So if a composer follows the syntax of an enjambment, for example, the sense of ending that is marked by the rhyme at the end of the verse line is written over to a large extent, and the effect is usually lost.

52 While it is certainly possible, and indeed essential, to hear music against various paradigms in order to understand it more fully (genre paradigms, harmonic syntax and phrase construction, etc.) there is no situation in which a formal structure exists independently of its realization in sound that would be comparable to the situation in a sonnet.

53 The situation is particularly important in the case of sonnets, since their structure is strictly regulated by tradition, but more generally, the situation is the same regardless of the poetic form chosen. Even in examples of extreme typographic experimentation, such as Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés*, the disposition of text on the page produces formal expectations independent of content elements in a way that music simply cannot match. It is ironic that Mallarmé saw that work, more than any other, as a musical score.

54 The graphic scores of modern composers like R. Murray Schafer challenge this notion somewhat.
Debussy’s treatment of the voice in *Placet futile* respects Mallarmé’s punctuation throughout. Figure 4.2.1 shows Mallarmé’s text as scanned by Debussy’s vocal line: each discrete box represents a self-contained musical section bounded by rests. This respect for punctuation is usually interpreted to mean that a composer has been faithful to the text, even if that fidelity is on a rudimentary level. It is also often taken to mean that the structure of the music is somehow mimetic of the text which accompanies it, that it follows the form of the poem in some sense. Yet a closer look reveals a more complex situation.  

**Figure 4.2.1.** Debussy’s scansion of the text in *Placet futile*

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55 Please consult the score of *Placet futile* in Appendix G.
At times, the lengths of the rests which separate the various sections reflect the formal hierarchy of the poem. For example, the rests separating “Princessé!” from “à jalouser” in line 1 (a quarter rest plus an eighth rest), and “lèvres” from “J’use mes feux” in lines 2–3 (an eighth rest plus a sixteenth rest) are shorter than the 3½ beats between “Sèvres” and “Comme je ne suis,” in lines 4–5. This marks the division from one stanza to another more strongly than internal divisions. However, the division between the last quatrains of the octave and the first of the sextet (lines 8–9) is marked with a quarter rest, exactly the same value as between lines 7–8 or between “Nommez-nous” and “toi de qui tant de ris.” In fact, if the relative value of rests is taken into account, then a different structural picture emerges, one that is less concerned with the form or punctuation of the work than with semantic concerns. Figure 4.2.2 adjusts the spacing between the lines to illustrate the effect that Debussy’s rests have on Mallarmé’s text. By grouping lines 5–13 more closely together, Debussy follows the semantic, or perhaps syntactic, meaning of Mallarmé’s text. But the actual form of the poem, by which I mean not only the visual layout of the poem on the page, but also the way that this layout creates meaning for the reader by imposing formal constraints from the outside, is fundamentally changed in the process.
Princesse! à jalouxer le destin d'une Hébé
Qui poinç sur cette tasse au baiser de vos lèvres,
J'usè mes feux mais n'ai rang discret que d'abbé
Et ne figurerai même nu sur le Sèvres.

Comme je ne suis pas ton bichon embarbé,
Ni la pastille ni du rouge, ni Jeux mièvres
Et que sur moi je sais ton regard clos tombé,
Blonde dont les coiffeurs divins sont des orfévres!
Nommez-nous... toi de qui tant de ris framboisés
Se joignent en troupeau d'agneaux apprivoisés
Chez tous broutant les vœux et béant aux délires,
Nommez-nous... pour qu'Amour ailé d'un éventail
M'y peigne flûte aux doigts endormant ce berceau,
Princesse, nommez-nous berger de vos sourires.

FIGURE 4.2.2 Adjusted scansion in Placet futile.

Like many of Debussy's songs, the text setting in Placet futile shows great care to preserve the rhythms of the original poem. Even more than Soupir or Éventail, here Debussy allows Mallarmé's text to speak of its own accord; note values are short and designed to approximate the rhythm and contour of actual speech. Most striking in this regard is Debussy's handling of Mallarmé's line 4, reproduced in Example 4.2.1.

EXAMPLE 4.2.1. Placet futile, mm. 9–10, voice.
Here, Debussy amplifies the rhythmic cacophony of “figurerai” to include the following “même” by setting these six syllables as sextuplet sixteenth notes. By jumping from G to D before “figurerai” is finished, he treats this passage as pure sound divorced from any denotative meaning (the new “word” that seems to result—“rai-même”—is what Mallarmé would undoubtedly call an “aboli bibelot d’inanité sonore”). In similar fashion, “même” is disconnected from the “nu” that it qualifies. The trill on “nu” perfectly captures the playful, almost mocking treatment of the text, somewhat ironically marked “à l’aise” despite the vocal gymnastics it requires. There are some instances of word-painting, as in the descending minor sixth for “tombé” in m. 15 and the excited bleating of the lambs, reproduced in Example 4.2.2.

In setting the final line of the poem, however, tension between Debussy and Mallarmé rises to the surface. Mallarmé’s final line is set up as the moment of the definitive request, the transformation from aspirant “Hébé” to appointed “berger.” The rhyme is critical here, despite the fact that “berger” does not occupy the same metrical position (end-rhyme) as “Hébé.” In this last line, the poem leaves behind the “Jeux mièvres” that have served as so many digressions in the preceding sections and claims his place as poet and lover. Debussy’s setting calls all of this into question by refusing to set the last line with a closed, confident gesture. Instead, the upwards sweep of the vocal melody and its failure to achieve the tonic G (nor even

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56 From the “Sonnet en yx,” describing the new “word” ptyx. See Mallarmé, OC I, 37–38.
57 The proliferation of rhyme, in its various incarnations, across the formal structure of Mallarmé’s poetry is continually striking. The consequent balancing of metrical positions in his poetry gives his poetry a richness unique among the Symbolists.
a note in the G aeolian pitch collection which serves as referential sonority for the song) sets
the line as a question, implying its impending rejection (see Example 4.2.3).

\[ \text{EXAMPLE 4.2.3. Placet futile, mm. 30–3, voice.} \]

In choosing to end the song in this open fashion, Debussy implies the impending denial
of the plea contained in the poem’s title (“futile” was added to the title only in the 1887
dition; both the 1862 and 1883 editions are titled simply “Placet”).\(^{58}\) It is extremely unlikely
that Debussy would have known the 1862 edition, but it is probable that he knew the 1883
publication. Aside from Debussy’s keen interest in literature during the 1880s (which
practically assures that he would have read Verlaine’s “Les poètes maudits” in its entirety), he
certainly read the installment published in the same journal one week after “Placet” (30
November 1883), since this was the first publication of (and the composer’s only likely source
for) Mallarmé’s “Apparition,” which Debussy set in 1884. Assuming that Debussy was
familiar with both versions, it is reasonable to suppose that he would be particularly sensitive
to revisions, especially if he found them to be superior to the original. Perhaps Debussy was
concerned that the connection between the title and the song itself might not be noticed as
strongly in performance as the connection between title and poem would certainly be during a
private reading. Whatever the reason, his setting, which preserves the slightly frivolous tone of
the rest of the work, contradicts the poem’s conclusion as Mallarmé actually wrote it. In the
poem, the tone achieved by the ending is a sort of compromise between the poet and the

\(^{58}\) See Mallarmé, \textit{OC} I, 111, 124.
Princess, where she probably consents to having him painted on her cup in lieu of a more substantial relationship.

When considering the piano part, a clearer picture of Debussy’s musical thinking in response to Mallarmé’s text emerges. Gone is the purely harmonic accompaniment of his earlier Mallarmé setting, *Apparition*, replaced by writing reminiscent of the *Preludes*.\(^{59}\) Despite the fact that the piano occasionally doubles the voice (e.g. m. 8, 9, 20–23), the two parts are remarkably independent in their conception, as if the piece were speaking with two distinct voices that happened to converge on a common idea by some fortuitous circumstance.

Much like the poem, the piano part can be understood as a series of digressions which continually depart from a central motive. To respond to Mallarmé’s eighteenth-century sonnet, Debussy chooses a musical genre comparable in history and tradition (if not in specific expectation): the menuet.\(^{60}\) Appearances of the main motive in mm. 1–10, its absence from mm. 11–18, and its return from m. 19 through the end of the piece allow for the perception of an A–B–A form underlying the song, although some of the materials and procedures from the B section can also be seen in the final A section. This, along with the \(\frac{3}{4}\) meter, places the song in dialogue with French musical tradition, as Mallarmé’s sonnet engages with French literary tradition.\(^{61}\)

This main motive is presented in m. 1 (Example 4.2.4). Its resemblance to conventional, eighteenth-century phrase models makes this motive sound already like a variation on an unsounded original:

\(^{59}\) Particularly *Voiles* and *Canope*, for reasons which will become apparent as the analysis progresses.

\(^{60}\) Debussy writes “Dans le mouv’ d’un Menuet lent” at the head of the score.

\(^{61}\) Like Mallarmé’s sonnet, Debussy’s song is filled out with material that has little in common with traditional menuets – in this case, both the phrase structure and the harmonic language are essentially modern.
Dans le mouvement d'un Menuet lent $\frac{1}{2} = 36$

Example 4.2.4. Placet futile, mm. 1–3, piano.

The missing original that I have in mind is a rather standard two-measure cadential gesture resolving to F major, B♭ major, or G minor as posited in Example 4.2.5; a completely typical eighteenth-century progression of the distinctly forgettable variety.

Example 4.2.5. Three possible versions of Debussy’s “unsounded” original gesture.

The only unusual aspect of such a progression such as those in Example 4.2.5 would be its placement at the opening of a composition, rather than at the end of a phrase or period. The music that Debussy actually wrote initially denies all three of these possibilities. Nothing in the opening measure prepares the listener for the D♭⁹ chord which begins m. 2, with its strong implication of the “odd” whole tone collection, or the G♭ major scale that ensues.⁶² The opening two measures, when considered individually, are typical of tonal music. They become

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⁶² Assuming that C=0, the “even” whole tone collection has the following pitches [0,2,4,6,8,1] while the “odd” whole tone collection contains only odd numbers [1,3,5,7,9,♭1]
significant here in the way that multiple key areas (B♭ major, F major, G minor, G♯ major) are simultaneously implied and juxtaposed in the mind of the listener.

If we briefly disregard the diatonic implications of the left hand scale passage in Example 4.2.4, it is possible to hear the opening chord of m. 2 as an “odd” wholetone dominant (D♭–F–C–E♭). This sonority would be answered by the “even” wholetone dominant (B♭–C–D–F♯) sounded on beat 2 of m. 3. This dominant is normalized on the following beat when the left hand B♭ falls to D, creating the appearance of a D7 chord. Taken as a whole, some sort of G minor / Aeolian collection emerges as a referential sonority for the song, whose primary status is blurred somewhat by the wholetone dominants that threaten to turn Debussy’s pastiche of eighteenth-century univocal tonality into an early twentieth-century example of bitonality.64

Nearly all of this takes place before the voice has sung a single note. As such, its relationship to any particular image in the poem’s text is uncertain, particularly for the listener.65 It is perhaps best understood as a kind of musical commentary-cum-introduction on the idea of the poem as Debussy reads it. For Debussy, the idea of the poem is inherently nostalgic. He sees Mallarmé’s sonnet referring to a forgotten past and sees in this his own concern with an eighteenth-century French musical tradition (Rameau in particular), which has been forgotten. So his natural musical response is to introduce the poem with music that both evokes this style and foregrounds its distance from compositional reality in the early twentieth century. Mallarmé’s poem, by contrast, uses the references to the eighteenth century as a sign of his literary good breeding, initially intended to win favour from a potential publisher and

63 Taken as a whole, the “even” and “odd” wholetone collections can function as altered dominants to every member of the other collection. Likewise, various subsets of the collection can function as dominant to one member of the other collection. This possibility is latent here, but exploited by Debussy later on in the song.
64 Perhaps Debussy had the music of Richard Strauss or Stravinsky in mind here, since both of these composers, whose music was regularly performed in Paris, often evoke multiple simultaneous tonal centers.
65 Wenk suggests that the material in m. 1 might be associated with the poem’s “placet.” Although he is careful not to use the word “represent,” he basically claims that this piano theme acts as a kind of leitmotif for the plea, reappearing in various guises throughout the work. See Debussy and the Poets, 263.
retained for its inherent charm. It is as if poem and music were each engaging the idea of the eighteenth century from opposite sides, and the relationship between music and text (both their congruence and their disjunction) is a by-product of this simultaneous engagement, rather than a conscious effort at mimesis.

Following the tonally ambiguous opening, the piano continues to evoke the sounds of the past. Debussy writes a $G^7$ chord at the beginning of m. 4, which is prolonged through a series of parallel major triads until it reaches the C minor triad on beat 3 of m. 5 (Example 4.2.6). This prolongation lasts through the end of m. 6, where the music returns to G minor through plagal motion from C minor to G minor triads in m. 7. The pitch collection of the entire passage is C minor melodic, but the actual effect is closer to G Phrygian.

This is due in part to the sustained G–F dyad in the right hand part (which plays a significant role in the piece), as well as the disposition of parallel perfect fifths in the left hand. In addition to the essentially archaic sound of the fifths, there is a kind of *musica ficta* reference at work here, “correcting” potential diminished fifths. The full significance of this will emerge later in mm. 20–21, where a similar passage is built from a series of diminished triads. For now, it is

\[ \text{Pitch collection: C minor melodic (G Phrygian)} \]

**Example 4.2.6.** Debussy, *Placet futile*, mm. 4–7, piano.

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66 The different notehead sizes in Example 4.2.6 are designed to draw attention to sonorities I consider basic in the passage. Any further, Schenkerian implication is not intended.
enough to note that this passage accompanies lines 1–2 of the poem, which relate the poet’s desire to be a figure on the cup, kissed incidentally while the Princess drinks her tea.

The section from m. 7 through m. 10 realizes each one of the potential resolutions posited for the opening measure in Example 4.2.5: first to G minor in m. 7 and again in m. 8 (through another kind of plagal motion, rather than the perfect cadence suggested in the example), then to B♭ major in m. 9 and F major in m. 10. This last progression is strengthened by a traditional perfect cadence (albeit inverted), and coincides with the end of the first quatrain of the poem.

Retrospectively, it then becomes possible to hear the entire first section as a vastly expanded cadential gesture in F, as shown in Example 4.2.7. The G harmony that has been prolonged from m. 4–7 acts locally like ii (or V⁷/V, depending on whether one hears the B♭ or the B♭ as primary) to the C⁷ chord at m. 9 which cadences on F in the following measure.

\[ \begin{array}{ccccccc}
  & & & & & & \\
  & & & & & & \\
  & & & & & & \\
 F: & V⁷/V & ii & V & I \\
\end{array} \]

**Example 4.2.7.** Debussy, *Placet futile*, mm. 3–10, harmonic reduction.

A similar gesture follows in mm. 10–13, except now it is the F major triad that is prolonged by its own Phrygian progression. As with the G harmony in m. 4–7, here the F major triad in m. 10 shifts to minor in m. 12. This is followed by a completely traditional perfect cadence in E♭ major in m. 13. However, this time the cadence does not coincide with the end of the second quatrain, nor even with the end of a poetic line or thought, although it

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67 It may be significant that the cadence could be understood through Rameau’s theories as a variety of perfect cadence where an added sixth (C–E♭–G–A) chord progresses to the tonic. Debussy’s respect for Rameau is well documented, and it is likely that Debussy would have thought of him in a piece so consciously in relationship with eighteenth-century French tradition, both musical and poetic.
does at least respect Mallarmé’s punctuation. The cadence rips Mallarmé’s second quatrain in half, leaving the poetic fragment “ni Jeux mièvres” in a quandary: poetically, “mièvres” continues the rhyme of “lèvres” and “Sèvres” established in the first quatrain, and as such the expectation is that it would be set at the end of a (preferably antecedent) phrase. However, Debussy’s cadence clearly sets these “Jeux” apart from the other items that the poet is not (a lapdog or a lozenge). The emphatic nature cadence can thus be understood as expressing the poet’s sudden realization, in the midst of these games, that he has been wasting his time (and humiliating himself in the process).

The cadence on Eb is quickly undercut by an “even” wholetone dominant accompanying the text “Jeux mièvres.” This picks up on sonorities first introduced in m. 2, and makes of the intervening music (mm. 4–13) a musical digression comparable to that in the poem’s text. It also brings a particular focus on these words, one meant to highlight not only the poet’s momentary uncertainty about his fate, but also the richly allusive complexity of the following line (“Et que sur moi je sais ton regard clos tombé”), which both evokes the possibility of winning her favour and the realization that it will never actually happen. The poet’s uncertainty is expressed in a series of wholetone dominants based entirely on the “even” wholetone collection. The chords are notated as altered dominant sevenths on C, B♭, A♭ and G♭ (see Example 4.2.8), over a G♭ pedal, producing a wholetone dominant on G♭.

\[ \text{Example 4.2.8. Placet futile, m. 14–5, piano.} \]
This section calls to mind mm. 2–3, where both the "even" and "odd" wholetone collections are presented in the context of extended or altered dominant seventh chords, as a continuation of the D\textsuperscript{13} chord that concludes m. 3 and sets the text "Princesse!" Thus, Debussy creates a sonic connection between the female subject of the poem and the poet's most intimate statement addressed to her: "et que sur moi je sais ton regard clos tombé." Since Debussy was probably familiar with the 1883 version of the poem where the Princess does in fact succumb to her suitor, and with the French poetic tradition equating closed eyes with sexual pleasure (he set both Baudelaire's "Le jet d'eau" and Verlaine's "En sourdine" in the 1880s), it is likely that the static quality of the wholetone harmonies here are designed to represent a longing for physical ecstasy.\footnote{Wenk contends that this passage "most clearly expresses the futility of the entreaty," which seems somewhat mistaken to me. His position assumes that standard, functional tonality would somehow represent the assent of the Princess, and that Debussy's novel harmonic resources would represent the frustration of such a desire. Whereas if Debussy were trying to represent this through musical means, would he not use his most characteristic innovations in service of the desired, the unique? Read this way, the wholetone passages would be seen as an extension of tonality, a fantasy projection of the "what if?" variety that equated standard tonal progression (m. 1) with the mundane state of affairs (she will not love me), and the wholetone passages with an imagined sexual bliss, whether or not it actually came to pass. See Debussy and the Poets, 265.}

The wholetone dominant of mm. 14–15 resolves temporarily to C\textsuperscript{b} major in m. 16, which begins the setting of the final line of the second quatrains, "Blonde dont les coiffeurs sont des orfèvres!" The playful mood of mm. 10–13 returns here. C\textsuperscript{b} moves to E\textsuperscript{b} in m. 17, which trails off, unresolved for the moment. During all of this, the voice basically sings an arpeggiated E\textsuperscript{b} major triad. The bitonal focus created thus between C\textsuperscript{b} and E\textsuperscript{b} recalls the piano music from m. 1 in gesture if not in specific key relationships.

The voice's hanging D\textsuperscript{b} in m. 18, which is the seventh of an E\textsuperscript{b} harmony, transfers down an octave and is reinterpreted as C\textsuperscript{b} (if not in the notation, then certainly from a harmonic standpoint) for the beginning of the sestet, setting the words "Nommez-nous." The three pitches involved here (D\textsuperscript{b}–D\textsuperscript{#}–G) are a retrograde inversion of the pitches that set "Jeux
mièvres” in the previous section (B♭–E♭–E♯). As such, they enact musically what is going on semantically in the text. For if the “Jeux mièvres” stands for all of the things the poet is willing to endure in order to have a chance to love the Princess, then the “Nommez-nous” invocation that closes the poem represents some sort of compromise, something that replaces (more or less) the desired sexual encounter. By setting one as the retrograde inversion of the other, Debussy intimates both the semantic connection between these two bits of text and the substitution that they contain. After all, a retrograde inversion of the thing sought for is not quite the same as the thing itself.

The piano music from m. 1 returns at m. 19, slightly altered to once again suggest a two-measure progression in G minor that does not arrive (see Example 4.2.5c), before moving to music that picks up the rhythm and essential contour of the parallel triad passage at mm. 4–5 (see Example 4.2.6). A closer look reveals a more intimate connection. If we remove the highest pitch from each right hand chord (as a simple doubling of the vocal line) and make one small enharmonic adjustment to the spelling of the fourth chord, then a passage made entirely of parallel diminished triads emerges (Example 4.2.9).

![Example 4.2.9](image)

**Example 4.2.9.** *Placet futile*, mm. 20–1, piano.

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69 Although the vocal pitches are usually contained in the piano part, Debussy does not typically double the voice in the piano as directly as he does in this case. Perhaps it is simply a practical concern designed to help the singer find the correct pitches in the absence of more traditional harmonies.
The sheer number of diminished sonorities gives this passage an octatonic flavour, somewhat obscured by the dominant ninth chords produced by the addition of the piano left hand and the voice pitches. Despite this, every pitch in the piano part from the first chord through the fourth (excepting those that double the voice) is a member of the “0” octatonic collection. Since any transposition of the octatonic collection contains four distinct dominant seventh chords (built on the first, third, fifth and seventh pitches), any presentation of the complete collection (as in mm. 20–21) implies each of the four chords to some extent. Here, E♭7 and C7 (picked up from mm. 16–18) are privileged because of the spelling, but G♭7 and A7 are also implied (picking up on the whole-tone dominant on G♭ in mm. 14–15 and functioning as V of V to the global G minor tonic respectively). For this reason, the entire “0” octatonic collection in the first four chords of m. 20 functions locally as an altered dominant to the F9 chord on the third beat of that bar. This chord, with the F in the bass and the G in the soprano, inverts the G–F dyad first introduced in m. 4, and alludes to the cadence in F at m. 10. However, the F harmony is here denied the stability it enjoyed in the former case. A literal repeat follows in m. 21 before the music veers off towards a D♭9 chord in m. 23.

There are important consequences for the text in all of this. First, and most immediately, the implied cadence to F described above marks the end of line 9 (“framboises”), but the subsequent repetition produces a parallel cadence in the middle of line 10 (on “d’agneaux”), leaving the end-rhyme “apprivoisés” sounding like an afterthought, belonging neither to the previous section or to the following music that sets line 11.70 This recalls the treatment of “Jeux mièvres” in m. 13–14. Secondly, the use of similar technical procedures (the use of non-diatonic pitch collections to imply and prolong dominant harmonies) to set lines 1,
7 and 9–10 invites a comparison of these lines, for which there is no particular motivation in the poem itself. In this way, Debussy’s music performs a “reading” of the text that writes over Mallarmé’s lines, reorganizes them for a different and ultimately unknowable purpose.

The music with which Debussy sets line 11 (mm. 22–24) is essentially a transformation of m. 1 in E♭ major, modified to end on a D♭⁹ (see Example 4.2.10). The persistence of G and F here in the piano right hand and the voice confirms that this pitch duality has not yet been resolved. The text at this moment speaks of bleating with delight, and the music reinforces this, hitting a fever pitch as the D♭⁹ chord emerges in m. 23:

![Musical notation](example.png)

**Example 4.2.10. Placet futile, mm. 22–23, piano.**

This chord resolves to G♭ major in m. 24, accompanying the beginning of line 12. A version of the piano music from m. 1 returns here also, leading to the final wholetone section in the piece at mm. 25–6. As in m. 2, the “odd” wholetone collection is used here to imply an expanded D♭⁷ chord. This also resolves to a pentatonically-inflected G♭, in m. 27, and the trills and closing flourish in the piano part are certainly intended to mimic the sound of the flute mentioned in the text.

Several independent elements come together between mm. 24–28. It is tempting to interpret the twin cadential progressions to G♭ (one traditional, the other from a wholetone dominant) as emblematic of the interaction of traditional scales with synthetic collections in the
piece as a whole; regardless, it actualizes a progression that has been implicit in the music since the whole tone dominant in m. 2. It cannot be a coincidence that this is the first moment where the poet tries to claim a positive position for himself, rather than dwelling on the Princess’s physical characteristics or his own shortcomings. In this context, the key of G₉ emerges here as a provisional, symmetrical resolution to the G–F dyad that has persisted since m. 4. This reading is supported by the poet’s offer of compromise in the text: he asks to be painted on the cup in order to be close to the beloved. After all, G₉ is either almost G or nowhere near G, depending on how you measure musical distance (i.e. one semitone vs. five keys on the circle of fifths). Likewise, it is one step closer to G than F (a half-step really). The whole section is doubly marked: positive in one sense, negative in another. This is reinforced by the whole tone harmonies in mm. 25–26, which imply here, as before, both the desire for union with the Princess and its frustration. No wonder Debussy chooses to end this section with a flourish and simply begin again: there is no convincing way out of this harmonic space.

The final line of the poem is set to essentially the same music as the beginning, although the whole tone dominants are gone and the passage moves somewhat more confidently in G. Debussy marks the passage “au movement un peu retardé” and this, in combination with the open-ended questioning in the vocal line mentioned above, set the text “nommez-nous berger de vos sourires” in the context of its impending rejection. The piano picks up the voice’s ascending line and repeats it in a series of gallant flourishes in the same spirit as the flute gesture at the end of m. 28; as if the poet’s plea finds its echo and provisional resolution in the piano part, which is to say in the music itself. The final D–G open fifth, implies traditional cadential closure and therefore suggests that her answer might turn out to be yes. But the G–F dyad, which has served as a symbol of the poet’s separation from the Princess throughout the song, returns here, permeating the harmony of m. 31, the vocal line at m. 32 and
its subsequent echoes in the piano part. This gesture denies true tonal closure, and in the process exposes the Princess’s impending answer as yet another denial as well. The song ends as it begins, with a faint but enduring hope.

Debussy’s *Placet futile* crafts musical responses to many of the semantic elements of Mallarmé’s poem. Sometimes, these responses are congruous with the text, while at other times they read across the text in surprising ways, as in the cadence at m. 13. However, by setting the voice part with such respect for the rhythm and punctuation of Mallarmé’s poem, Debussy allows the poet’s voice to speak more clearly in this song than in the more overtly melodic songs of other composers. There are places here, and in *Soupir* also, where the texture approaches melodramatic recitation. It seems that Debussy wants to allow the text to speak its own message alongside that of the music. This strategy allows the piano part to carry the majority of the musical weight in the song, enacting a split between music and text in its own organization that reflects the basic condition of music and language itself.

PART THREE
THE SONG OF THE FAN: ÉVENTAIL

Of all the Mallarmé poems that elicited a musical response by Debussy, the poem which he set as *Éventail* is the only one that does not trace its origins back to the 1860s. As such, it is closer to Mallarmé’s mature and challenging style than any of the works previously discussed in this chapter.71 The image of the fan spreads out across Mallarmé’s mature verse, resonating in different genres of writing, from poetry to prose and back. Meanings and texts

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71 “L’Après-midi d’un faun” was extensively revised before 1876, as detailed in Chapter Three, and in its final form it does approach Mallarmé’s late style in isolated passages. However, as an extended work, it sits somewhat outside the concentrated style of the Mallarmé’s final decades.
begin to overlap and blur, and the multiple valences of words and images create alternating patterns of symmetry and diversion, bringing them together and drawing them apart. Given Debussy’s marked preference for setting relatively straightforward poems (“Apparition”, “Soupir”, “Placet futile”), and his ambivalent view of the late sonnets, the setting of “Autre éventail” is the only opportunity we have to evaluate the extent to which Debussy understood and responded to Mallarmé’s mature style.\(^\text{72}\)

### Mallarmé’s “Autre éventail”

Some time around the beginning of 1884, while Debussy was hard at work setting *Apparition*, Mallarmé purchased a fan for his daughter Geneviève and inscribed it with a poem.\(^\text{73}\) The poem was published in revised form in *La revue critique* in April of that year, and again with further revisions in *Poésies* (1887) with the title “Éventail.”\(^\text{74}\) The definitive title, “Autre éventail,” appears only in the Deman edition of 1899, though the text of the poem remains unchanged. Figure 4.3.1 presents the final version the poem, with the variants in the third quatrain of the first and second version for easy reference:

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\(^\text{72}\) Laurence Berman has suggested that Debussy’s true understanding of Mallarmé’s late style is evident in the complexity of a work like *Jeux* which attempts to mimic the productively unusual syntax of Mallarmé’s late poems. While his ideas are interesting, a comparable complexity between a poem or poetic style and a composition or compositional style does not, on its face, prove a relationship between the two as a matter of creative intention. I think that this kind of claim needs to be based on a more concrete comparison, such as the setting of a poem as song, or some compelling paratext. See Berman, “Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun and Jeux,” 225–238.

\(^\text{73}\) It may be, as Pearson has suggested, that the poem was a birthday gift (19 November) or an offering for her name-day (3 January). See Mallarmé and Circumstance: The Translation of Silence (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 199. His contention that the poem’s 20 lines (5 quatrains) are in honor of her upcoming 20\(^\text{th}\) birthday (she had just turned 19) is a stretch.

\(^\text{74}\) Mallarmé, *OC* 1, 1178–79.
**Autre éventail**  
(de Mademoiselle Mallarmé)\(^75\)

O rêveuse, pour que je plonge  
Au pur délice sans chemin,  
Sache, par un subtil mensonge,  
Garder mon aile dans ta main.

Une fraîcheur de crépuscule  
Te vient à chaque battement  
Dont le coup prisonnier recule  
L'horizon délicatement.

Vertige! voici que frissonne  
L'espace comme un grand baiser  
Qui, fou de naître pour personne,  
Ne peut jaillir ni s'apaiser.

Sens-tu le paradis farouche  
Ainsi qu'un rire enseveli  
Se couler au coin de ta bouche  
Au fond de l'unanime pli!

Le sceptre des rivages roses  
Stagnants sur les soirs d'or, ce l'est,  
Ce blanc vol fermé que tu poses  
Contre le feu d'un bracelet.

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**Another Fan**  
(of Mademoiselle Mallarmé)

O dreamer, that I might plunge  
Into pure pathless delight,  
Know, by a subtle deception,  
How to keep my wing in your hand.

A twilight freshness  
Comes to you with each beat  
Whose imprisoned stroke pushes back  
The horizon delicately.

Vertigo! see how space  
Shivers like a vast kiss  
That, mad at being born for no one,  
Can neither gush forth nor be appeased.

Do you feel paradise fierce  
As an entombed laugh  
Flow from the corner of your mouth  
To the bottom of the unanimous fold!

The scepter of pink shores  
Stagnant in the golden evenings, is this,  
This closed white wing which you pose  
Against the fire of a bracelet.

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**Version 1**  
Eventail de Geneviève Mallarmé, early 1884.

Chaste jeu! voici que frissonne  
L'espace comme un grand baiser  
Qui, de n'être éclos pour personne,  
Ne peut jaillir ni s'apaiser.

**Version 2**  
La revue critique, 6 April 1884.

Vaste jeu! voici que frissonne  
L'espace comme un grand baiser  
Qui, fier de n'être pour personne,  
Ne peut jaillir ni s'apaiser.

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**Figure 4.3.1.** Mallarmé’s “Autre éventail (de Mademoiselle Mallarmé)” and its significant revisions.

Although this poem is placed after a similar fan poem dedicated to Madame Mallarmé (but written much later in 1891) in the scheme that Mallarmé prepared for the Deman edition of *Poésies* (1899), Geneviève’s fan is the first of Mallarmé’s fan poems, and its position in his *œuvre*—roughly contemporary with “Proses (pour des Esseintes),” but before the late

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\(^75\) Mallarmé, *OC* I, 31.
sonnets—all point to this poem as the inception of a new and important category in Mallarmé’s thinking around 1884.

In “Autre éventail,” the fan is personified, speaking directly to the girl (“reveuse”) who holds it in her hand. In the first stanza, the fan is static, not moving. It contains the potential for delight, both its own and hers, if only she will keep a tight grip. The pure delight that the fan promises comes through the purposelessness of its path through the air, its existence “fou de naître pour personne.” The fan’s flight will reveal a new, shimmering world to her (“recule / L’horizon”) even if she is only aware of the cool evening breeze that the fan’s beating delivers. Later, after the fan’s flight has flown, she holds the fan to her mouth, hiding a laugh (“un rire enseveli”) that gathers in the folds of the fan as she closes it (“Au fond de l’unanime pli”). Closed, the fan becomes a sceptre held against her rosy lips (“rivages roses”), as the “princess” surveys the evening scene, blissfully unaware of the power of the fan that she holds (although her bracelet seems to understand).  

76

The idea that the girl may be unaware of the importance of the fan, of what its flight through space represents, is a recurring theme in the poem. Likewise, the unexpected significance of everyday objects and events characterizes Mallarmé’s thought in general. His essays on dance and mime, and even musical performance as ritual, are saturated with the notion that the key to understanding the mysteries of existence lies in properly interpreting everyday phenomena. The mime who mimes nothing but his own actions (“Mimique”), the dancer whose actions create momentary relationships between her body and a mimed object (“Crayonné au théâtre”), the chandelier in the concert hall whose refractory qualities model the fragmentary nature of relationships in the world (“Plaisir sacré”); all of these occur in the real

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76 Pearson has suggested that the “rivages roses” refer to the outer blades of the fan, which were indeed an iridescent pink, Mallarmé and Circumstance, 200. However, I think that Cohn is closer here in invoking the sunset and lips as likely referents; Toward the Poems, 115.
world, unsuspected by the vast majority of the audiences who view them. This significance, that Mallarmé repeatedly claims lies unconscious in the heart of the crowd, is the essence of Music itself in his thinking, the “ensemble of relationships existing in everything.” So to understand the importance of “Autre éventail,” and to evaluate Debussy’s setting of it as Éventail, we must begin with the importance of the fan.

Jean-Pierre Richard has identified the importance of fan imagery in Mallarmé’s thought and poetic practice. For him, the fan represents an artificial wing, a potential flight which has not yet taken place. The fan creates its own horizons, delimits its own space, and enacts essential patterns of departure and return through its beating. It is these patterns that Mallarmé’s fan poems trace or enact. Through its movements the fan creates the illusion of substance and purpose, which constantly strives toward an undefined, and indefinable, ideal. For Richard, the fan is an “instrument fictive,” in the double sense that it both resembles a wing physically, and imitates its flight in its movements.

The analogy between the wing and the poem stems from the word “plume,” meaning “feather,” “pen” and, metaphorically, “writing.” Robert Greer Cohn has convincingly demonstrated the importance of the plume in Mallarmé’s œuvre, tracing it from his earliest, unpublished works through Un coup de dés. It is a key image in the prose poem “Le démon de l’analogie,” where the cursed fragment of language that haunts the poet is first suggested by a wing (bow) drawing a limpid tone from a violin. The poet realizes the connection between the violin sound and the phrase only when it is drawn from him by the wing of Memory. The

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78 Mallarmé, “Crise de vers” OC II, 212.
79 Richard, L’univers imaginaire de Mallarmé, 310.
80 Ibid., 311
81 Ibid., L’univers imaginaire, 310.
82 Littre, s.v. “plume”
83 Cohn, Mallarmé’s Prose Poems, 9–17. Despite the somewhat restrictive reduction of feather images to a male-female polarity, Cohn’s numerous examples establish the feather and its associated images as one of the most important Mallarmean themes.
phrase returns to him “detached from any prior fall of plume (pen) or branch (bow),” and endures as language alone. Separated from writing and instrumental music, the phrase becomes “virtuelle,” a sound that the poet repeats silently to himself in order to understand it better.\(^8^4\)

Yet at the end of the poem, the poet finds himself in front of a luthier’s window, behind which hang several violins with their \textit{ailes} (bows) hidden in the shadows on the floor. His hand is reflected in the window, making a caressing gesture over the strings of the instruments behind. In this moment, the poet realizes that his own hand is the wing/bow, and the source of the first violin sound that began the poem. One also thinks of the “plumage instrumental” of “Sainte,” where Cecilia seems to draw the silent music of the stained glass window by strumming the wing of an angel.\(^8^5\) This silent music, with which Mallarmé is so obsessed in his later works, is nothing other than the network of relationships that poetry traces.

While it is true that the wing is a common Mallarmean symbol for the act of poetic creation, it is typically invoked in his poems as an image of failure rather than one of accomplishment. The immobility of the swan’s wing (“plumage”) in “Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui,” frozen in the ice, causes the poet to dream of poetic “vols qui n’ont pas fui,” the flights that might have been.\(^8^6\) In “Don du poème,” the poet brings a new poem born from a long night’s labour, represented as an “aile saignante et pâle, déplumée” (“wing bleeding and pale, featherless”), to his wife in the hopes that she might nurse it to health as she nursed their daughter Geneviève.\(^8^7\) At the height of the spiritual crises, the featherless wings are symbols of the poet’s impotence: in “Les fenêtres”, the poet wonders whether a flight on his “ailes sans


\(^{8^5}\) Mallarmé, \textit{OC} I, 26–7. See also page 66 of the present study.

\(^{8^6}\) Mallarmé, \textit{OC} I, 36–7. See also page 99 of the present study.

\(^{8^7}\) Mallarmé, \textit{OC} I, 17.
plume” (“featherless wings”) might cause him “de tomber pendant l’éternité?,” (“fall for all eternity”) like a post-Baudelairean Lucifer cast out of heaven.  

Jacques Derrida has rightly pointed out the limitations of Richard’s thematic criticism, particularly the difficulty of assigning any stable meaning to an image which is constantly in flux, pulled by semantic, contextual and even phonetic considerations towards other words and images. As an image of failure, the wing is but one component in a long chain of words that lead ultimately to the Néant (Nothingness), an aspect of Mallarmé’s thought that has a long and detailed critical tradition. However, Mallarmé has provided his own, positive counterbalance to the negative image of the wing in his œuvre in the numerous and productive fan poems in the vers de circonstances. In these poems, rhyme is freed from the larger, metaphysical concerns of his serious poetry and given free reign to delight in language itself. It is more to this tradition than to the more philosophical world of Poésies, that “Autre éventail” ultimately belongs, and it is in this tradition that Debussy probably encounters and understands the poem.

VERS DE CIRCONSTANCES

Poetry is everywhere in language where there is rhythm, everywhere, save in public notices and certain pages of the journals. In the genre called prose, there is poetry, sometimes admirable, in every imaginable rhythm. But, in truth, there is no such thing as prose: there is the alphabet and then verse, more or less condensed: more or less diffuse. Every time that there is an attempt at style, there is versification.

Nowhere is Mallarmé’s assertion that verse lies at the heart of all writing better exemplified than in the vers de circonstances, the numerous poems that Mallarmé wrote on the

88 Mallarmé, OC I, 9-10.
90 Perhaps the bleakest treatment of the subject is Jean-Paul Sartre, Mallarmé, or The Poet of Nothingess, trans. Ernst Strum (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988).
surface of everyday objects: envelopes, calling cards, Easter eggs, photographs, dedications and fans. Freed from the existential baggage of his passionate and lifelong struggle with pure poetry, the vers de circonstances take an unashamed delight in the proliferation of rhyme, and show a witty and playful Mallarmé to counteract the image of the solitary and tortured artist that he worked so hard to mold for himself, and that the modern critical tradition has, by and large, preserved and amplified for him.

If the ultimate goal of Mallarmé’s literary career was Le Livre, a book whose contents would be a systematic understanding of the world as revealed through language, then the vers de circonstances was its Doppelgänger: a gathering of all the happenstances of language that are both fascinating and essentially trivial. At the core of each is the consideration of relationships through various kinds of rhyme, but the proliferation of occasional poems that flowed from Mallarmé’s pen was not subject to the same rigorous self-criticism as his Poésies. Unconcerned with metaphysics, the vers de circonstance are an attempt to leave something beautiful, a small part of himself, perhaps, to the people he knew and loved.

For a long time, the vers de circonstances received virtually no critical attention, despite the fact that they far outnumber the published poems. This has recently begun to change, and volumes by Marian Zwerling Sugano and Roger Pearson have taken steps to examine this body of work and relate it to Mallarmé’s larger aesthetic.92 My interest in this corpus, as far as the present study goes, is to relate the strategies of rhyme in these works to the poem that Debussy set as Éventail, and how the rhyming strategies in these works are related to Mallarmé’s more ambitious poems. I will also consider what exposure Debussy may have had to these poems.

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By far, the most numerous of the vers de circonstances are the quatrains with which Mallarmé replaced the standard addresses on letters and postcards.\(^{93}\) Taking their cue from the proper names and addresses of those destined to receive the letters, Mallarmé takes a particular delight in creating rimes riches, often verging on or exploiting total homophony (i.e. the complete phonetic similarity of two words with different grammatical functions and meanings). Consider the following, for Claude Monet:

\begin{table}
\begin{tabular}{l}
\textit{Monsieur Monet, que l’hiver ni} \hspace{1cm} \textit{Monsieur Monet, that neither winter} \\
\textit{L’été sa vision ne leurre} \hspace{1cm} \textit{Or summer his vision deludes,} \\
\textit{Habite, en peignant, Giverny} \hspace{1cm} \textit{Lives, painting all the while, at Giverny} \\
\textit{Sis auprès de Vernon, dans l’Eure.} \hspace{1cm} \textit{Situated near Vernon, in Eure.} \(^{94}\)
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

Putting aside the obviously playful nature of the quatrain for a moment, the density of reference in the verse is striking, and relatively easy to apprehend. Particularly important are the rimes riches “l’hiver ni” / “Giverny” and the homophones “leurre” / “l’Eure” that provide the structural pivots of the stanza. The internal rhymes “Monet” and “L’été” further saturate the short poem with rhyme, almost threatening to disintegrate into nonsense. But the careful choice of “leurre” as the first half of the second rhyme picks up on the frequent criticism of Monet’s paintings (and Impressionism in general) as being the product of deluded vision. And, of course, it does give his correct mailing address, after a fashion.

In the vers de circonstances, Mallarmé’s desire to pursue rhyme in language is not constrained by grammatical boundaries as they are in the more serious poems. Words decompose into their component phonemes, and these elements are exploited in dialogue with the semantic aspects of the poem:

\(^{93}\) As Marchal has pointed out, many of these addresses were never actually sent, but composed especially for collections that were either published or projected. Despite this, the ones that were sent must have been a source of amusement, and occasional frustration, for the local postal service. The poems are collected in \textit{OC} I, 241–73, Marchal’s commentary is on page 1245–47.

\(^{94}\) Mallarmé, \textit{OC} I, 248. Vernon is the closest town to Giverny in the French département of Eure. It is impossible to translate the nuance of Mallarmé’s “leurre” here. At its most literal, “leurer” means to lure, as in to lure a bird to its master. Figuratively, it means to delude or dupe. Mallarmé plays on both of these meanings.
Si vous voulez que je ne meure,
Porteurs de dépêche allez vi-
Te où mon ami Montant demeure,
C'est, je crois, 8 rue Halévy.

If you wish that I not die,
You telegram couriers, go qui-
Cky to where my friend Montant lives,
It is, I believe, 8 rue Halévy.95

The quatrain is not nonsense, exactly, despite the phonetic enjambment that creates the homophonic relationship between “allez vi” / “Halévy.” And although these lines play only a minor role in the poetic Jeu suprême, they conform in surprising detail to Mallarmé’s aesthetic as laid out in the essay “Crise de vers,” where he advocates a kind of poetry that “out of several vocables remakes a total word, new, foreign to the language.”96 This approach would deny “the chance remaining in terms,” and through this “re-tempering in sense and sonority” purify language.97 The difference in these occasional poems is that there is no need to obsess over the ultimate significance of the total message. Freed from his usual concern about the monumentality of his works, the quatrains of Mallarmé’s vers de circonstance use the rhyming techniques of the Poésies in an uncritical celebration of sound.

Mallarmé’s desire to follow the lead of rhyme, to give up a measure of his own ego and let the relationships between words play themselves out often results in homophones that are unexpectedly funny (and for all of his careful self-imaging, Mallarmé was not above the occasional crudity):

Je te lance mon pied vers l’aïne
Facteur, si tu ne vas où c’est
Que rêve mon ami Verlaine
Ru’ Didot, Hôpital Broussais

I’ll launch my foot at your groin
Postman, if you do not go to
The place where my friend Verlaine dreams
Ru’ Didot, Hôpital Broussais

These poems, which are only beginning to receive the scholarly attention that they deserve, reveal much about Mallarmé’s conceptions of language and poetry. They also help to explain the numerous éventails, to which I now turn.

95 Mallarmé, OC I, 268.
96 Mallarmé, “Crise de vers,” OC II, 213: “Le vers qui de plusieurs vocables refait un mot total, neuf, étranger à la langue.”
97 Ibid.: “niant […] le hasard demeuré aux termes.” ; “retrempe alternée en le sens et la sonorité.”
MALLARMÉ’S ÉVENTAILS

The preference for octosyllabic quatrains, *rimes riches* and homophones that characterize the envelope-quatrains discussed above are also typical of the *Éventails*, 18 quatrains and a single couplet written on actual fans, and presented as gifts to Mallarmé’s female friends (apart from the two larger works included in *Poesies*). Some feature the same fascination with constructing rhymes for the names of people as was explored above. But the majority of these poems are taken with the figure of the fan itself, exploring the image of the open *éventail* as *aile* (wing), no doubt motivated by the eye-rhyme between the words as much as by the physical resemblance. For example:

Là-bas de quelque vaste aurore  
Pour que son vol revienne vers  
Ta petite main qui s’ignore  
J’ai marqué cette aile d’un vers.

Down there from some vast dawn  
So that its flight returns toward  
Your little hand that knows not  
I have marked this wing with a poem.

The flight of the fan, its departure from and return to the hand which holds it, and the girl blissfully unaware of the significance of it all are strikingly reminiscent of “Autre éventail.” The homonym here ("vers" as "towards" and "poem") suggests a semantic substitution, as though the fan itself were going to return as verse ("revienne vers"). The concentration of */v/* phonemes ("vaste," "vol," "revienne," "vers") in the first two lines of the poem certainly strengthens the effect, and it may be, as Robert Green Cohn suggests, that the resemblance...

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98 Mallarmé’s views on the significance of meter can be deduced from his poetry. There is a preference for alexandrines, which he valued as a vestige of the French literary tradition. However, many of the important late sonnets are written in octosyllabic meter: “À la rue accablante tu,” “Une dentelle s’abolit,” “M’introduire dans ton histoire.” There is then, on some level, a connection between the *vers de circonstances* and these more ambitious poems, as if the play with rhyme without consequence allowed Mallarmé to take a break from his more philosophical phonetic investigations.

99 See for instance, the rhyme “Madeleine” / “a de laine” in no. 3 or the rhyme “Seignobos” / “vain bobos” in no. 10, Mallarmé, *OC* I, 274, 275.

100 Eileen Souffrin-Le Breton has shown that the comparison between a fan and a wing is a stock image in French *éventails*. Nevertheless, Mallarmé’s obsession with the image, and the importance of the wing in his poetic thinking, merits consideration.


102 Sugano, *Poetics of the Occasion*, 165.
between the wing and the shape of the letter "v" is exploited poetically by Mallarmé, both in this poem and more generally throughout his œuvre. Beyond this, the orthographic near-palindrome of "revienne vers" (revien-nevers) is suggestive of the illusory flight to and from the horizon, and may be motivated by the phonetic palindrome "rêve" / "vers" which was mentioned above in "Soupir" and figures prominently in other poems also.

The fan also embodies a central paradox of absence and presence in its opening and closing. Open, the fan reveals its inner treasure—the verse with which it is inscribed—while hiding (potentially) the smile of the woman who holds it. On closing, the reverse is true; the poem is hidden while the face emerges:

Fermé, je suis le sceptre aux doigts
   Et, contente de cet empire,
   Ne m'ouvez, aile, si je dois
   Dissimuler votre sourire.

Closed, I am the scepter in your hand
   And, content with this empire,
   Do not open me, wing, if I must
   Hide away your smile.

Ce peu d'aile assez pour proscrire
   Le souci, nuée ou tabac
   Amène contre mon sourire
   Quelque vers tu de Rodenbach.

This slight wing enough to banish
   Care, cloud or tobacco
   Brings against my smile
   Some stilled verse of Rodenbach.

"AUTRE ÉVENTAIL" REVISITED

Returning to "Autre éventail," it is easy to see the formal and thematic relationships between this poem and the éventails in the vers de circonstances. The use of self-contained octosyllabic quatrains in this poem—each one is its own discrete sentence—mirrors

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103 Cohn, Toward the Poems, 114.
104 "Rêve" /Rev/is not explicitly present here, but can be heard approximately in the opening phonemes of "revienne."
105 Mallarmé, OC I, 276. The homophone "aile" / "elle" explains to some extend the oddity that the fan ("je") appears to address itself ("aile") in the third person. I think that here, "aile" is meant to stand for "elle," and means something like “Do not open me, girl, if I must / Hide away your smile.”
106 Mallarmé, OC I, 275. Certainly, we are meant to hear "quelque vertu" ("some virtue") of Rodenbach in Mallarmé's "quelque vers tu." Georges Rodenbach (1855-98) was a Belgian Symbolist poet and novelist. The fan was dedicated to his wife. OC I, 1269.
Mallarmé’s mania for such constructions in the occasional verse. Likewise, the *rimes riches* and play with homophony are comparable to the works discussed earlier. In its larger architecture, however, there is a concern with poetic “representations” of the fan (semantic, structural, phonetic, and formal) that makes this *éventail* unique in Mallarmé’s œuvre.

Roger Pearson has argued persuasively for the importance of the physical shape of the fan in the composition of the poem. Pearson suggests that the 32 folds of the fan are mirrored in the 32 syllables of the octosyllabic quatrains, while the gold edging of the fan itself suggests the path of the sun in the heavens. He then traces the proliferation of “gold” in the poem itself, charting the path of “or” graphically in the poem through words like “horizon,” “pour,” “farouches,” “roses,” en route to the arrival at “les soirs d’or” in the final quatrain. While his attempt to chart relationships in the poem and relate these to some aspect of the poetic structure (either semantic or physical in this case) is essentially the same as the approach I advocate, the examples adduced here are not compelling. Typically, Mallarmé would reinforce an intentional connection like the one Pearson is seeking with some phonetic resemblance. In the constellation that Pearson suggests, the phonemes rarely support his orthographic panning for gold; the argument is even less convincing when he claims that this is set in motion because the first two letters in the poem spell “or” (“O rêveuse”).

Turning to the phonetic makeup of “Autre éventail,” we can get a better sense of the relationship between the subject of the poem and the textual weave through which Mallarmé presents it.

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107 And may well have inspired them. While it has been shown that Geneviève’s *éventail* was the first of the fan poems, the larger corpus of occasional verse will probably never have a definitive chronology. Also interesting, though not under consideration here, is the similarity in poetic structure (octosyllabic quatrains) between this poem and the *Prose (pour des Esseintes)*, and the use of octosyllabic meter in several late sonnets as well. A comprehensive critical appraisal of Mallarmé’s rhythms would be a welcome addition to the critical canon.


109 Pearson, *Mallarmé and Circumstance*, 199. For a critic who is usually sensitive to the phonetic aspect of Mallarmé’s art, Pearson’s insights offer relatively little here.
SOUND IN “AUTRE ÉVENTAIL”

In the vers de circonstance, the dialectic of sound and sense is particularly pronounced because Mallarmé allows himself to explore rhyme without the concern for internal cohesion that is such a vital part of Poésies. In these playful stanzas, words are allowed free play, even when the images and relationships they suggest border on absurdity. The individual stanzas of “Autre éventail” feature a similar play of images.

Certainly, the concentration of sibilant consonants, particularly /ʃ/, /s/ and /ʒ/ in the opening two quatrains of “Autre éventail” seem to pick up on the sound of the fan as it scans space.110 These sibilants form a constellation of similar sounds:


that are reinforced by the /z/ phonemes in “rêveuse,” “prisonnier” and “horizon.”111 Particularly important in this regard is the cluster “sans chemin, / Sache,” whose 4 sibilants combine to produce the near homophone “sans che” / “sache.”112 The palindromic arrangement of phonemes here straddles the midpoint of the first stanza, creating a structural blank around which the first stanza folds and in so doing enacts opening of the fan, revealing its potential for flight.

So far, the phonetic structure of “Autre éventail” seems designed to reinforce the semantic elements of the poem: the swishing sound of the fan in the sibilants in general and the unfolding through rhyme in “sans chemin / Sache” in specific. But how then should one understand the complementary, and certainly intentional, concentration of sibilants in the final quatrain (“Le sceptre des rivages roses / Stagnants sur les soirs d’or, ce l’est,”)? By this point in

110 Cohn, Toward the Poems, 113.
111 The term constellation refers to a group of words with a constant phonetic element across the surface of a poem or even a series of poems; a cluster restricts the scope of the constellation to close proximity in a poem, within the same formal division – stanza, tercet, couplet, etc.
112 See similar homophonic patterning in the “tristement dort une mandore” in “Une dentelle s’abolit,” OC I, 42.
the semantic narrative of the poem, the fan is folded, its “vol fermé” has become the sceptre which rules the evening scene. Perhaps the sibilants function as a memory of the fan’s flight, as an acoustic symbol of its temporarily suspended power. Or, perhaps the relationship is purely formal, an acoustic image of the opening stanzas to enact the arc of the fan itself, an expansion of the “sans che” / “sache” chiasm on a larger scale. No matter which option we ultimately decide upon, it is clear that there is no simple mimesis here; the sounds do not simply represent images in the poem. They operate independently to create a layer of meaning that occasionally overlaps with the semantic level before exposing this mimesis as a diversion.

As Figure 4.3.1 shows, the three major versions of the poem preserve not only the images of the original fan, but the phonetic structures as well. Comparing the original éventail (Version 1) with the version from La revue critique (Version 2), the changes are few but significant. The opening of the third quatrain (“Chaste jeu!”) has been replaced by the nearly homophonic “Vaste jeu!,” but the sibilant /ʃ/, so important to the first two quatrains, has been erased in the process. The removal of this consonant further emphasizes the third quatrain’s curious lack of phonetic support for the shivering space it describes: one might expect a significant concentration of sibilants here to represent the idea of shivering. The final version merges the key phonemes of “Vaste jeu!” into the “Vertige!” of the 1887 version. The “vers” of “vertige” immediately resonates with the “rêve” in “rêveuse,” connecting Geneviève more explicitly with the dizzying sensation of the fan’s flight than in the earlier versions. It also brings to mind the “rivages roses” of the final quatrain as a reordering of the component phonemes and letters of “rivages.”

113 Cohn suggests that the “ss” of frisson are “graphically shivery,” but this does not really account for the importance of the sibilants here. See Toward the Poems, 114.

114 See Mallarmé’s use of the “vers” – “rêve” pairing in “Soupir.”

115 The phonetic resemblance between “rêve” and “Veve” – Mallarmé’s nickname for his daughter, may also be in play here.
exactly parallel, all three of these words are placed in the first lines of their respective stanzas, suggesting the possibility of folding the poem around “Vertige,” creating mirror images in the first and last stanzas and an implicitly pallindromic structure that is comparable to the physical disposition of the poem on the original fan. The desire for this kind of phonetic reflection may indeed be the reason that Mallarmé tinkered with the beginning of the third stanza in each version of the poem, trying to find a mot juste that would link to important images in the first and last stanzas both semantically and phonetically.

The dynamic relationship between sound and sense in “Autre éventail” is characteristic of Mallarmé’s late style. At times it seems as though the “formal” elements of the poem are disposed to reinforce the poem’s narrative; at others, these elements seem to play freely, making their own commentary on the semantic structure of the poem, or pursuing their own interests without regard to their poetic surroundings. This is the case with the “naître” / “n’être” homophony that exists in the third quatrain between the original and final versions of the poem (See Figure 4.3.1). The phonetic connection between these two words with such opposed meanings—birth and non-being—does not really relate to the subject matter of this poem in any substantial way. Instead, it exfoliates into the larger world of Mallarmé’s poetic universe, towards the more metaphysical implications of Un coup de dés and his obsession with the figure of Hamlet (whose famous “to be or not to be” poses essentially the same paradox). These dual layers of meaning, semantic and formal, find their analogues in interesting ways in Debussy’s Éventail.

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116 On the original fan, the first stanza of the poem is written on the lower left hand corner, and the remaining stanzas follow an arch, with the middle stanza being also the highest on the fan. This physical arch suggests mirror images implicitly, and the idea is more compelling when one imagines the fan closed, which would bring stanzas 1 and 5, and 2 and 4 into closer proximity.

117 This connection is comparable to the homespun bit of wisdom that sees a deep, metaphysical connection between the English words “live” and “evil,” expressed in their palindromic relationship. Frankly, there is something slightly cheesy about this kind of mystical relationship, of a kind that Mallarmé was usually able to sidestep and which cripples the works of lesser Symbolist poets.
DEBUSSY’S ÉVENTAIL

The extent to which Debussy knew Mallarmé’s poetry, and how well he may have understood those works, is central to any discussion of the relationship between the composer and the poet, or their works. This is particularly true here, where the works in question were seen somewhat peripheral to the poet’s main œuvre, and largely unpublished. Chapter Two identified the particular poems that Debussy would have encountered in the process of setting his first Mallarmé song Apparition in 1884. Beyond this, it has been established that Debussy knew “L’après-midi d’un faune” as early as 1887, when he gave a copy of it as a gift to Raymond Bonheur. Furthermore, he must have consulted it from time to time while composing the Prélude that it inspired. His comments on the “last sonnets” in a letter to Chausson suggest that he had read everything in the 1887 edition of Poésies.118 It has often been assumed that Debussy’s exposure to Mallarmé’s mardis would have brought him into contact with the poet’s critical outlook, and perhaps spurred him on to read some of the late poems and critical prose in the 1890s. It has likewise been long established that the copy of “L’après-midi d’un faune” that Mallarmé sent to Debussy after the première of the Prélude was inscribed with a quatrain of occasional verse, giving him at least a glimpse of this largely unpublished side of Mallarmé’s creative work.119 But François Lesure’s discovery of a gift that Debussy gave to Yvonne Lerolle in 1893 suggests that Debussy was much more familiar with the fan poem tradition in Mallarmé’s vers de circonstances. According to Lesure, he gave her “a beautiful Japanese fan on which he had copied some bars from Pelléas.”120 This gesture, which Lesure identifies as “très mallarmaean,” can be taken as evidence that Debussy knew enough about the

118 The 9th cahier of the 1887 edition of Poésies presents 12 sonnets under the title “Derniers Sonnets.” See Mallarmé, OC 1, 96–102.
119 Many of the address quatrains were published in The Chap Book, but it is highly unlikely that Debussy would have had access to this journal.
120 Lesure, Debussy avant de Pelléas, 124.
importance of the fan poems in Mallarmé's thought to want to appropriate this gesture, replacing the verses with an inscription of his own music. The erasure of the poem, replaced by an extract of the work that Debussy was convinced would be his masterpiece, speaks to the tensions between music and poetry in the mind of the composer. 121

In her discussion of *Eventail*, McCombie claims that in contrast to the "repressed desire in Mallarmé's poem, Debussy's song is bare and altogether spikier. The atonality gives a strange sense of the music being unmotivated yet at the same time highly driven, disorientated but too restless to luxuriate or lose its way altogether." 122 Although her desire to articulate the differences between music and poetry in this song, and in musico-poetic relationships in general, is a welcome counterbalance to the more traditional mimetic relationships that are often invoked to turn Debussy into the "Mallarmé of music," her discomfort in dealing with the combination of tonal and non-tonal elements in *Eventail* limits the connections she can draw between the poem and Debussy's musical techniques. The "strange sense" that she identifies as a property of the music comes from an aural perception of logical organization that requires different analytical tools for a more exact description. A closer reading of the musical text, along with some reference to the available analytical literature on the topic (by Arthur Wenk, Richard Parks and Avo Somer) will help us to conceptualize the competing levels of significance in the musical text of *Eventail*: the interaction of a tonal framework with regions of non-tonal pitch relationships. 123

While a comprehensive theory of Debussy's compositional techniques has not yet been advanced, there is general agreement that in the late works a personal approach to tonality and

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121 Debussy could have chosen to inscribe some of his own poetry, recently completed for the *Proses lyriques*, or some favourite quatrains penned by someone else. The fact that he chose to write musical notation instead of language seems significant to me.
some engagement with non-tonal techniques work in tandem to explain Debussy's selection of pitch materials. Since tonal music now has an accepted grammar and a pedagogical history, it is reasonable to compare tonal materials in Debussy's *Éventail* with the semantic layer of Mallarmé's poem. Not that Debussy's choice of pitches, harmonies or key areas is meant as a literal representation of Mallarmé's poem (like a leitmotive), but that the tonal implications of a harmony have fundamentally the same grammatical function as a noun or verb in a piece of writing: the expectations that it engenders can be fulfilled or denied to varying degrees. The power of "language" to suggest likely paths of continuation is also present in tonal harmony. Non-tonal pitch relationships, although certainly used intentionally by composers for the last hundred years or so, have not yet developed their own grammar to the extent that modes of continuation can be accurately predicted across a wide variety of styles and genres of music. Instead, tools have been developed to describe the function of these pitch materials in particular pieces, and in relatively small collections of similar works. I see an essential relationship between the way in which the non-tonal elements that permeate the surface of *Éventail* relate to its tonal structure on one hand, and the way in which phonemic resemblances relate to the narrative structure of Mallarmé's poem on the other. At times, the way that non-tonal materials are used suggests a connection with the tonal underpinnings of the work; at others, the surface delights in exploiting its own inherent qualities, which make an independent, non-mimetic commentary on the tonal structure. These two layers of meaning, which operate in the poem and in the music, relate to one another in a similar way: for every suggestion of mimesis between music and text (or "reading" or whatever critical category one wishes to invoke) there is a counterbalance, a point at which the mimesis breaks down and is
exposed as an illusion. It is this series of meanings and relationships, their congruence and crossing, which will be explored in the remainder of this essay.\textsuperscript{124}

The varied return of the musical material from mm. 1–3 at mm. 12–14 and 47–49 creates the impression of a kind of lyric form (A–A–B–A) for Debussy’s Éventail. This parses Mallarmé’s poem into four main units: quatrain 1, quatrain 2, quatrains 3 & 4 and quatrain 5. There is no particular justification for this kind of parsing of the poem, no narrative or phonetic consideration that motivates Debussy’s choice here. In fact, the symmetrical arrangement of the poem’s stanzas seems rather evident, exactly the kind of thing that a composer might latch onto when setting a text.

The opening measures of Debussy’s Éventail are filled with symmetrical motives in the piano that take their inspiration from the mirror images in Mallarmé’s poem. They enact the opening and closing of the fan, though they are not connected with specific words in the text. The symmetrical structures are not tied to any abstract notion of motivic unity; indeed, it is difficult to believe that anyone could actually hear all of these structures, given the speed at which they pass. Instead, they show Debussy’s thought process in this piece, his desire to find expressive resonance with the text and then obscure that inspiration through his own “subtil mensonge.”

Examples 4.3.1 and 4.3.2 summarize the “fan” motives in the first section of the work:

\textbf{Example 4.3.1. Éventail, m. 1. Symmetrical disposition of the pentatonic collection.}

\textsuperscript{124} A score of Debussy’s Éventail is given in Appendix H.
Debussy highlights the symmetrical disposition of the pentatonic collection by dividing between the hands into two 0357 sets related by inversion (Example 4.3.1.) This motive recurs at mm. 12 and 47, reinforcing the lyric form of the piece. The motives in Example 4.3.2 are more complex. The primary pitches (represented by larger noteheads in the example) are designed and notated to suggest a triadic interpretation (as augmented triads on D and E respectively), and form a subset of the “even” wholetone scale: the significance of this will be discussed later.125 The grace notes which fill in the gap frustrate this hearing, composed of overlapping 014 sets (set off by braces in the Example). They enact the fan’s “pur délice sans chemin;” fluttering in a momentarily uncertain tonal context, they seem to exist for their own sake alone.

The ideal of symmetry can be traced through several other passages in Éventail. Consider, for example, the chords in the piano accompaniment formed by the lower voice of the right hand and the left hand between mm. 19 and 23, shown in Example 4.3.3.

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125 Wenk, Debussy and the Poets, 270.
EXAMPLE 4.3.3. Éventail, mm. 19–23, piano, reduction. Symmetrical arrangements of 026 sets.

These 026 trichords, like the sets in the earlier example, are arranged to highlight the symmetrical possibilities of the whole tone collection from which they are drawn. Likewise, the arrangement of the dominant seventh harmonies in the piano left hand at mm. 2–3, 13–16, 36–39, and 48–49 are arranged to be maximally symmetrical, the central minor third bounded by a perfect fourth above and a tritone below.

TONALITY IN ÉVENTAIL

Most critical evaluations of Éventail approach it as an atonal work, representing one of Debussy’s first fundamental breaks with the notion of extended functional tonality that governs the harmonic background of earlier works. While several features of the pitch organization of the song can be usefully explained by post-tonal analysis, the work is essentially tonal. The challenge here is that the tonal centers that the piece evokes are rarely confirmed by cadences: in other words, they are alluded to rather than stated. Nevertheless, understanding the

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126 In the current example, it is not the inherently symmetrical nature of the collection that is at issue; it is rather the particular way that Debussy makes this symmetry a feature of the composition here, compared with the way that other 026 trichords ([D–E–G♯] [D♯–E–A] [E–F♯–A♯]) that could be drawn from the same measures are not made explicit by Debussy’s writing.
127 Whether or not there is a “functional” basis for these chords, the inversions here do not conform to any standard voice leading pattern, suggesting that it is their physical shape under the hands—and by extension on the page—that is at issue here.
128 See Parks, The Music of Claude Debussy, 196–99, who uses pc set theory to explain pitch materials in the song, and McCombie, Mallarmé and Debussy, 183–97. McCombie’s approach is less specifically analytical, but her assumptions about the atonal nature of the music are made clear in the course of the discussion.
underlying tonal features of Éventail is an important part of evaluating its place in Debussy's Mallarmé songs.

The opening G_{b} pentatonic collection in the piano in m. 1 presents itself as a potential tonic for the piece, one quickly denied by mm. 2–3. In these measures, dominant seventh chords on G_{b} and C in the piano left hand (drawn from the "0" octatonic collection) function collectively as a dominant to an F chord that never arrives. This is reinforced by the piano right hand, whose pitches (C–A–G) likewise imply a missing F that, if present, would complete a retrograde of the opening four pitches transposed down a half step. Instead of an F harmony, however, Debussy writes a B_{b}^{13} chord that functions like IV, a kind of deceptive resolution that contains F but surrounds it with unexpected pitches.

The following section (mm. 4–12) is built from the "even" wholetone collection, as mentioned above. These measures evoke no clear tonal center, but the pitches D and E are singled out for special attention as the "roots" of the augmented triads that the piano part implies. The chromatic wandering of the vocal line in this section weaves in and out of the wholetone music in the piano, and can be seen as illustrating, on a local level, the pathless delight of the fan.

When the music of mm. 1–3 returns at m. 12 (Example 4.3.4), the implication of F major returns with it. This time the piano right hand does actually sound the F, but its placement in the middle of the text phrase, the return of the B_{b}^{7} harmony in the piano left hand at m. 14, and its alternation with A_{b}^{7} in the following two measures does not allow the listener a significant sense of arrival here. It is interesting to note that the alternating B_{b}^{7} and A_{b}^{7} chords, along with the melody, ensure that F is sounding continuously here. The vocal melody from mm.14–17 is built around an F major triad, reinforcing the sense of F as a tonic here. However, in mm. 17–18, the piano music shifts to imply D_{b} major briefly. Example 4.3.4
shows how an octatonic Ebm\(^{13}\) chord in m. 17, drawn from the same "-1" octatonic collection as the G\(_b\)\(^7\) and C\(^7\) chords from m. 2–3, functions as ii in D\(_b\), moving to A\(_b\)^{13} in m. 18. Like the F, D\(_b\) does not arrive. It is also important to notice that the F major triad that has been sounding throughout this supposed tonal shift in the voice and the piano right hand, as if there was not really a modulation going on here, but rather another facet of F being revealed.

After this failed cadence, Debussy returns to the "even" wholetone collection, with interlocking D\(^7\) and E\(^7\) chords in m. 19 moving to E\(^{13}\) in m. 20. The F\(_\#\)–A\(_\#\)–C\(_\#\) in the piano right hand, which forms the ninth, eleventh and thirteenth of the dominant chord on E, can be seen as related to the G\(_b\) pentatonic collection that opens the piece, and helps to explain the presence of C\(_\#\) instead of the C\(_\#\) projected by the "even" wholetone collection. This harmony implies A major here, a tonal center implied until m. 24. Like the other projected tonics, A is not realized, and the sense of A simply evaporates in the chromatic shiver of mm. 25–26.
Example 4.3.4 Éventail, mm. 12–24.
After the non-tonal music of mm. 25–35, which will be discussed presently, a sense of tonal center returns at m. 36, where a C⁹ harmony drawn from the “0” octatonic collection once again implies a resolution to F. This is followed by an A♭¹³ chord drawn from the “-1” octatonic collection, the only one of the three collections to contain all 3 pitches of an F major (or minor) triad. Now, I do not intend to suggest here that the A♭¹³ chord can be heard as a resolution of the previous C⁹ harmony. But in light of the arrival on F at m. 39, it does seem more than a fortunate coincidence. Additionally, the piano right hand outlines an F major triad in m. 37 (and again at m. 39).

The music from mm. 40–43 is perhaps the clearest in terms of its tonal focus. The F pentatonic collection that Debussy uses here in both the piano and the voice picks up on the pentatonic music that opened the song. The E♭ harmony that follows sounds like bVII, as both the piano right hand and the voice continue to sound notes from the F major chord. From this point forward, E begins to emerge as a more important sonority in the song, picking up on the important Es in the previous sections. At m. 44, the pentatonic F chord (the A is in the voice) is treated like the Neapolitan of E major, moving to an unconventionally spelled B⁹ chord in the second half of the measure. The F returns at m. 46, leading to the final reprise of the opening music at m. 47.

The sudden clarity of harmony in mm. 40–43, along with a significant texture change in the piano accompaniment, divides the text of Mallarmé’s fourth stanza into three sections, each with their own particular harmonic associations. This is summarized in Figure 4.3.2:

1. Sens-tu le paradis farouche: mm. 37–39, octatonic dominants on C and A♭
2. Ainsi qu’un rire enseveli
   Se couler au coin de ta bouche: mm. 40–43, F pentatonic
3. Au fond de l’unanime pli!: mm. 44–45, F–B⁹

**Figure 4.3.2. Éventail, parsing of stanza four.**
The way that Debussy’s music parses stanza four makes it difficult to follow the syntax of the poem. Instead, the listener is encouraged to hear the middle group “Ainsi qu’un ... ta bouche” as an isolated fragment of text. I think Debussy is punning here, in the spirit of Mallarmé’s *vers de circonstance*. Why else would he choose to pair the clearest evocation of F major—a key implied since the opening measures of the work—with text that speaks of a hidden laugh flowing from the corner of one’s mouth? If the fan reveals its inner treasure as it conceals the face, and vice versa, then it is only fitting that the music give up its most sought-after tonal area at the point where the poem is hiding things.\(^{129}\) It is likewise no coincidence in my mind that the music moves away from F and toward E at the precise moment that the text speaks of unanimity.

The music from mm. 47–49 is essentially the same as that of mm. 1–3 and 12–14, except that the final chord of m. 49 (F\(^7\)) no longer contains an F. It does contain an E, however, the pitch on which Debussy chooses to center the remaining measures of the song.\(^{130}\) Example 4.3.5 presents the score of *Eventail* from mm. 50–65, along with a harmonic reduction on the lowest staff. The whole-tone dominants in mm. 50–52 oscillate chromatically between chords based on the even and odd whole-tone collections (labeled “even” and “odd” in the example). This functions essentially as a prolongation of the D\(^{13}\) chord in m. 50 that finally settles on an unusually spelled B\(^{13}\) chord at m. 53. The D\(^{13}\) can be seen as VII\(^{13}\) in E, functioning locally as a dominant of the B\(^{13}\) chord. The resulting progression VII\(^{13}\)–V\(^{13}\) therefore is comparable to V/V–V. The chord “resolves” momentarily to an E\(^9\) chord in the sixty-fourth note flourish, but the inversion of the chord and the extremely quick note values

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\(^{129}\) Presumably, the laugh flows into the fan because the girl holds it (open) over her lips.

\(^{130}\) In his excellent article on chromatic third cycles in Debussy’s songs, Avo Somer describes the directional tonality of *Eventail*, though he does not discuss the music from mm. 47–65 in detail. See “Chromatic Third-Relations,” 215–41.
make it difficult to sustain any sense of E, especially once the harmony shifts to an F chord as the arpeggio descends at the end of the measure.

en retenant peu à peu jusqu'à la fin

Le sceptre des rivages roses

pp doux et lointain

"even" "odd" "even" "odd" "even" "odd"

E: VII\textsuperscript{13} \hspace{1cm} V\textsuperscript{13} \hspace{1cm} (I\textsuperscript{9})

toujours en retenant

Stagnants sur les soirs d'or, ce l'est.

"even" "odd" "even" "odd" "even" "odd"

VII\textsuperscript{13} \hspace{1cm} V\textsuperscript{13} \hspace{1cm} i7
Example 4.3.5. Eventail, mm. 50–65, with harmonic reduction.

The progression repeats in mm. 54–58. The final two right hand chords of m. 56, F♯ major and G major respectively, differ from the chords at m. 53 (E↑Ⅶ and E↓Ⅶ), but are drawn from the same wholetone collections and therefore “function” in the same way. The spelling of the B↑Ⅶ chord at m. 58 clarifies its function somewhat, and the chord resolves in a more traditional fashion to an E minor triad decorated with an unresolved D♯, suspended from the B↑Ⅶ chord. From this point through the end of the work, the E sonority dominates, oscillating with an A major triad in a kind of modernist plagal extension.

Example 4.3.6 summarizes the basic tonal plan of Eventail. The upper system of the example gives the root movement of the important harmonies, while the lower system gives the basic tonal areas, F and E respectively, in whole notes. Notes in parentheses (and their accompanying labels) indicate tonal areas that are projected more locally. The two wholetone areas—from m. 4–11 and 27–35—are represented on the lower staff with square brackets,
since I cannot hear a stable tonal center evoked by these measures. The dashed slurs evoke notions of prolongation at various structural levels.

EXAMPLE 4.3.6. The tonal scheme of Éventail.

The basic tonal structure of Éventail is therefore a large-scale progression from F to E. The chromatic pitches that decorate the surface of the music obfuscate the implied tonics in various ways. The octatonically related dominant seventh harmonies are a good example of this, since they evoke tonal centers within a non-diatonic framework. Yet the octatonic segments of the piece do not seem to break free of their tonal associations in this piece. This is the case for sections of the music built on the wholetone collection.

THE WHOLETONE COLLECTION IN ÉVENTAIL

The use of harmonies drawn from the wholetone collection to prolong more traditional, functional harmonies has already been addressed above, as has the latent symmetrical nature of
the wholetone collection that Debussy makes explicit as enactments of the fan’s symmetry. However, the wholetone collection has a more fundamental role in the middle section of Éventail, one that is not based on the functional nature of triads or progressions, but one that celebrates the essential qualities of the collection itself.

Example 4.3.7 reproduces mm. 25–36, which set the middle stanza of Mallarmé’s poem. The example makes explicit the derivation of the piano music in this section from the two wholetone collections. The initial material in the piano begins on C#, a member of the A major harmony implied in mm. 19–24, then cascades down through an octave, though the pitches do not evoke any connections with other important collections in the work. This triggers a series of symmetrical 0246 sets that weave their way around a non-tonal melody exposed in the piano left hand, marked doucement en dehors in the score.

This melody bears no significant relationship to any other melody in the piece, although its chromatic wandering offers a superficial one to the opening vocal melody. The foregrounding of the wholetone tetrachords makes it difficult to hear a tonal progression at the heart of this passage. Indeed, Arthur Wenk makes a convincing case that the chromatic and wholetone elements here are a musical enactment of the “frisson” in the text, suggesting that the harmonic progression here is “sans chemin.”

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131 Wenk, Debussy and the Poets, 267.
le chant doucement en dehors
C/F(I) 0246
(even)

voici que frissonne
L'espace comme un grand bâti

D/G(I) 0246 (even)
E/G(I) 0246 (even)
C/F(I) 0246 (odd)
C/F(I) 0246 (even)
B/F(I) 0246 (odd)

chante un peu

qui, fou de naître pour personne.
However, the voice-leading by semitone of the bounding tritones is related to traditional tonal practice. Example 4.3.8 presents a two standard circle-of-fifths progressions on the top staff, arranged to highlight each dominant seventh chord’s tritone as the lower voices (in large noteheads). The lower staff presents a reduction of the 0246 sets in the piano at mm. 28–30 and 32–33, with the tritones highlighted. The semitone voice-leading here reinforces the capacity of either wholetone collection to function as a “dominant” of the other collection, and demonstrates how the passage, far removed from tonality on the surface, is based on conventional tonal progressions.

**EXAMPLE 4.3.8. Éventail, mm. 28–33 reduction.**
The point here is not to downplay the chromatic surface of this music, nor to suggest that the passage is somehow more valid because it can be related to traditional voice-leading principles. The point is precisely that, like Mallarmé, Debussy never really abandons the syntactic outlines that make his language comprehensible. He exploits the paradoxical status of the tritone here—its place at the heart of conventional dissonance treatment and its desire to break free from this mold—in the same way that Mallarmé plays games with phonemes inside language. By bringing these sonic games into the foreground, they expose the arbitrary nature of language itself. So Wenk is essentially correct to see this section as a musical response to the pathless delight of the fan, if we recall that this freedom is only apparent, a "subtil mensonge" betrayed by the imprisoned nature of the fan's (or music's) flight.

These wholetone materials are integrated back into the tonal structure of the later sections of the work at m. 34, where the 0246 sets are reintegrated into a more chordal context, first within a wholetone dominant on G (drawn from the “odd” collection), then one on C (m. 35, from the “even” collection), which is then transformed into an octatonic one in m. 36, as described above. This suggests that Debussy sees some connection between the wholetone and octatonic collections, at least as they imply tonal functions. An illustration of this can be seen in mm. 13–14 (refer to Example 4.3.5), where the roots of the dominant seventh harmonies in the piano left hand (Gb, C, Bb, Ab) outline a 0246 wholetone subset, creating an underlying unity to the three octatonic collections implied therein. It can hardly be a coincidence that the boundary pitches of this set (Gb–C) are the same as those which begin the series of 0246 sets beginning in m. 27, or that these very pitches figure so prominently in the transition from the opening pentatonic “fan motive” in the piano right hand in mm. 1–2, and its repetitions in mm. 12–13 and 47–48.
In *Éventail*, the non-tonal elements are contained within an essentially tonal framework. Yet they constantly liberate themselves from this frame and demand to be heard for their own sake as wholetone sets or other pc constructions. These non-tonal elements read across the surface of the song, making connections between otherwise tonally unrelated sections. In other words, they provide a reading of the song that is by turns in accord with and opposed to the one offered by its tonal structure. Since the non-tonal elements do not possess the same kind of signifying properties as tonal harmonies, the musical meaning that they create is allusive rather than denotative. This is analogous to what happens in Mallarmé’s “Autre éventail” and in his poetry more generally when individual phonemes which are contained inside the grammar and syntax of the French language transcend these boundaries and call attention to themselves in constellations. Like the non-tonal elements of Debussy’s song, Mallarmé’s phonemes have an unstable signification that reads across its more traditional elements: words, sentences, grammatical constructions and the like.

It is tempting to see mimesis at work in all of this, but mimesis of what, exactly? It cannot really be said that Debussy’s song mimes Mallarmé’s poem, since its technical processes are common to many works not expressly related to Mallarmé’s poetry (or composed by Debussy, for that matter). Nor can it be said that there is no relationship at all, since song places these two artworks into a relationship that demands comparison. Perhaps the best conclusion to be reached is that the two works engage one another on a number of levels at the same time. On the most abstract level, Debussy’s song and Mallarmé’s poem are art works that question their respective “languages” in order to discover unexpected paths forward. For Debussy, the realization that tonal music contained all the seeds of its own undoing was as profound for his development as the same realization was (with radically different consequences) for Schoenberg. Mallarmé also explored relationships inherent in language, and
although his interest was in reconstructing an imagined past language, there is no questioning the importance of his example on future generations of poets who continued to liberate sound from sense, going far beyond what Mallarmé probably envisioned. One might say that the song and the poem engage the same idea of self-referential "language" from opposite and only partially congruous sides. Yet at the same time, the poem and the song exist in the same sonic space in performance, whether that performance is heard acoustically in the world or in the mind of the able reader.

CONCLUSION: ÉVENTAIL AND APPARITION

The publication of Éventail marks Debussy’s final musical response to a specific text. Certainly, he had other text-based projects planned (Crimen Amoris, Ode à la France), but none of these were ever completed. It also marks the end of his artistic relationship with Mallarmé’s poetry, a relationship that had begun nearly 30 years before with the composition of Apparition. While it is impossible to know with absolute certainty whether Debussy considered the Trois poèmes to be his final word on the subject (or his final music on the word), a brief comparison of the tonal structures of Éventail and Apparition suggests that Debussy saw this piece as the conscious end of his engagement with Mallarmé’s poetry. Chapter Two demonstrated the large-scale tonal motion of Apparition from an illusory E major opening to the main key of G major. As we have just seen, the essential tonal motion of Éventail begins with a potential tonic sonority on G that is an illusion in its own sense (as V of F). This moves eventually to a final cadence on E, reversing the tonal motion of Apparition.

Given the importance of symmetrical relationships of various kinds in Mallarmé’s poetry,

132 The late song, Noël des enfants qui n’ont plus de maison, written for a wartime fundraising effort, can not be given the same consideration here. The song was written as a fundraiser for the war effort, and the choice of text was not motivated by purely artistic concerns.
Debussy's gesture seems specifically intended to enact a comparable, large-scale symmetry in his Mallarmé songs. This becomes even more likely when we consider that, as Marie Rolf has established, *Apparition* was also in Debussy's thoughts at the time he wrote these songs.\(^{133}\)

\(^{133}\) Rolf, "Semantic and Structural Issues," 191–2. She has identified drafts of a revision of *Apparition* on the same pages as drafts of *Soupir* that must date from approximately the same time (1913) as the later songs were written.
CONCLUSION

In the preceding pages, I have argued that the relationship between Debussy’s music and Mallarmé’s poetry is not a simple case of mimesis, one in which the innovations of Debussy’s compositional techniques can be reduced to a simple imitation of Mallarmé’s poetic ones. Instead, I have suggested that the relationship is more complex: the series of meetings between Mallarmé’s poems and Debussy’s pieces is characterized by moments of accord and discord in alternation. There are certainly moments in these works where the music is crafted in response to images in the text, as in the sighing piano introduction to Soupir or the symmetrical fan motives of Éventail. These places are counterbalanced by moments in which the music and the text each represent an abstract Idea from opposite sides. Examples can be seen in the Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faun, where the music and the poem are both, in their own ways, representations of the arabesque, or in Placet futile, where both the poem and the music engage the idea of the eighteenth century, its modes of expression and symbols. The significance of these moments may be essentially the same in both music and text, but their relationship to one another is asynchronous. The two media move at different speeds, and are motivated ultimately by a different logic.

In his Mallarmé songs, Debussy crafts a vocal line that is specifically designed to allow the poet’s voice to be heard alongside the composer’s. In many cases, the speech-rhythms of the original text are preserved or even amplified by the musical setting. This reinforces the notion that, on some level, Debussy conceives these songs as utterances of the poems they set. His concern at these moments is to find a suitable rhythm for the words, one which fuses the essential qualities of the poem—sonic, syntactic and semantic—onto a musical line that is also in accord with the composer’s intentions. If he follows too closely, the inspiration is lost,
leaving only a mimetic echo of the text. If his musical inspiration is not in tune with that of the text, then there is merely a juxtaposition that is hardly worth the effort.

Yet there are also important moments in these songs when the logic of the music writes over the accompanying text and remakes or refocuses it. Likewise, there are places where the text, through enjambment, syntax or phonetic connection, writes over the music and recasts its meaning. When this happens, the songs exhibit a kind of counterwriting that is less concerned with an imagined audible performance of the work as an utterance per se and more concerned with their mutual status as cognitive acts, as inscriptions of thought that occupy a shared space. At times, these are incidental byproducts of the connection between music and poetry engendered by song, collateral damage produced when a musical line represents an idea that the text also represents. Here, the various ideal representations are simply out of specific alignment in the song: the music demands a particular parsing in order to be understood, while the text requires another. There are also times when the confrontation seems more intentional, where the musical logic (phrase length, cadence, harmonic progression, etc.) is in direct conflict with the text, as in Placet, where Debussy’s cadence to E♭ major creates a sense of closure in the middle of Mallarmé’s verse line. The meaning of this moment in the song is found neither wholly in the text, nor in the music itself, but in the way that the music demands an explicit recognition of something that is implicit but unstressed in the text.

As for the Prélude, this piece appears to be a product of Debussy’s most intimate personal contact with Mallarmé. It seems to be constructed not as a representation of the text of the poem itself, but rather to engage the central aesthetic issues raised by Mallarmé’s larger œuvre: the theater, the book, the Idea and its musical nature. It does this through the use of musical symbols that represent the idea of the poem in purely musical terms, rather than through some sort of denotative association akin to a leitmotive. This has important
implications for Debussy’s larger œuvre, since there are several instrumental works that also explicitly engage an absent literary work through descriptive titles, such as the piano preludes *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir* (Baudelaire) and *La fille aux cheveux de lin* (Leconte de Lisle). There are also instrumental pieces that began their existence as responses to poetry, such as the *Six épigraphes antiques*, which had their genesis in songs for Pierre Louÿs’ *Bilitis*. If Debussy’s approach to these absent texts is likewise constructed as a representation of their central ideas, rather than as a representation or reading of their texts, then my reading of the *Prélude* might provide a useful methodology for further study of these works as well.

In tracing the mutual attraction and disjunction that characterizes each of these works, I see the basic patterns of Mallarmé’s arabesque, the Idea whose alternate faces are music and poetry. The same uneasy relationship between music and poetry that exists in Debussy also permeates Mallarmé’s aesthetic. Debussy seems willing to concede, at least on certain occasions, the joint presence of music and poetry as song. The difficulty then is placing the two in the proper relationship, regulating the degree of similarity and difference between the two. Mallarmé, on the other hand, seems much less willing to grant an equal status to sounding music. For him, the power of music is best expressed only when it has been subsumed into his poetry. Mallarmé sees concert music as inarticulate sound that needs the signification of language in order to focus its energy. He sees the phonetic elements of language in essentially the same way. Many of his poems are constructed around a cluster of words that share a common phonemic element, but the exact significance of the particular phoneme is not, *pace* Cohn, a stable element. Rather, the significance of the sound is produced only through its interaction with the semantic dimension of the poems that contain them.

The essential differences that I see between Debussy and Mallarmé are brought together around this issue. It is difficult to imagine that Debussy’s skeptical nature would allow
him to give much credence to Mallarmé's cabbalistic reconstruction of language. Even if Debussy had known about it in its entirety and understood it all, a claim for which there is no reliable evidence, he does not share Mallarmé's conception of musical sound as basically devoid of meaning. For him, as for most musicians, music generates its own meanings. These can be manipulated and deployed by the composer just as a poet manipulates meaning in language. That musical meaning does not work in the same way as linguistic meaning does not render music meaningless.

It is this descent into meaninglessness that Mallarmé's poetry is, somewhat paradoxically, designed to prevent. Although his basic poetic techniques are crafted to highlight the "music" of language, he is never willing to relinquish some measure of syntactic and semantic control over the text. In this way, the poems are poised on the edge of meaninglessness, meant to enact the essential peril that all language faces: of becoming an "aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore."\(^1\) But this peril is merely an illusion. The poem is tethered to meaning through language. Its syntax provides a system of invisible guy wires that stabilize the poem and allows its meaning to emerge, even if this meaning is only provisional.

In contrast to this, Debussy seems to conceive of both music and poem as having significance. For him, the presence of the poem does not rescue the music from meaninglessness any more that the presence of the music saves the poem from being subsumed by the hyper-semantic quality of everyday language. The two arts exist on a more equal footing, and although their interaction is complex, it is not, as in Mallarmé, a question of priority or supremacy, but one of mutual respect. So ultimately Debussy's understanding of Mallarmé's aesthetic and his ability to translate this into musical terms is less important than his willingness to allow that aesthetic to emerge relatively unscathed in his works.

POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

It seems logical to study Debussy's settings of other poets in order to see whether the approach to text setting exemplified by the Mallarmé songs is unique to those works, or a more fundamental characteristic of his aesthetic. A careful examination of Debussy's Verlaine settings in tandem with an examination of Verlaine's particular poetic aspirations (or Banville, or Baudelaire) might reveal a similar pattern. If so, then the issue of Symbolist influence in Debussy's mature style may be revealed as less a matter of transforming their syntactic eccentricities and allusive meanings into musical techniques (harmonic or otherwise) than a matter of ensuring that the texts are allowed to speak for themselves. It also may reveal a consistent pattern of representational figures that extend across Debussy's œuvre, and which could be used in conjunction with non-texted works also.

Another productive avenue for further research would be into the large body of Debussy's early songs, many of which remain unpublished. There is very little critical work done on these songs, in part because they have been inaccessible to scholars for some time. However, a systematic examination of these early songs should allow us to trace the development of Debussy's song aesthetic. It may be discovered that Debussy applies these techniques to songs written before any contact with Mallarmé's poetry or ideas can be definitively established.

The methodology used in this dissertation could usefully be applied to other poet-composer pairs, particularly in France. A great deal of the existing secondary literature on song deals with composers and texts rooted in German musical and literary traditions, which is not surprising considering the song outputs of Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Wolf, Strauss and Schoenberg. It seems to me, however, that the existing musico-analytical tools developed to describe this repertoire apply somewhat less successfully to composers like Fauré, Ravel and
Duparc, both in terms of how the musical language works on its own, and how these composers view their relationship to the text. This kind of work might eventually lead to a greater understanding of the cultural and aesthetic differences between these two traditions as they relate to song.

The ideas about Mallarmé’s poetry introduced in Chapter One on could be applied to other settings of his poetry. There are four settings by Ravel that are basically contemporary with those by Debussy, including Sainte (1896) and a set of three poems (Soupir, Placet futile, and Surgi de la croup et du bond) written in 1913 and therefore exactly contemporary with Debussy’s Trois poèmes. It would be interesting to see how two composers working in similar musical traditions responded to Mallarmé’s poems, especially in the case of the two poems set by both composers. Darius Milhaud set the “Chansons Bas” in 1917 and the two “Petits Airs” in 1918; Paul Hindemith set Sainte (1944) and composed an instrumental response to one of Mallarmé’s most challenging poems in the ballet Hérodiade that same year.

Pierre Boulez has set several of Mallarmé’s challenging late poems, including the three Improvisations sur Mallarmé (setting “Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui,” “Une dentelle s’abolit,” and “A la nue accablante tu” respectively), plus unpublished settings of “Don du poème” and the “Tombeau” to Poe. Given the significant differences in musical language between Boulez and Debussy, it is possible that Mallarmé’s phonemic manipulations may find a different and more technical expression in the serialist techniques of Boulez’s music. It is also possible that these techniques have found their way into the purely instrumental works such as the second Piano Sonata, inspired by Un coup de dés.

Beyond its usefulness in explicating other composers’ approaches to Mallarmé’s poetry, it seems potentially fruitful to investigate whether or not Mallarmé’s attitudes towards music and language were generally shared by those poets and writers who regularly attended
the *mardis*, which was more or less the French Symbolist movement. One potentially fruitful path of inquiry would be to study the treatment of music and poetry in the leading Symbolist journals of the day: the *Revue indépendante*, the *Revue wagnérienne*, *La revue blanche* and others. In so doing, the poetry and aesthetic of the *Instrumentistes* led by René Ghil could play a significant role, since Ghil’s poetry attempted to represent musical timbres (and visual colors) through vowel and consonant sounds in the French language, thus taking the Mallarmean project in a new and more representational direction.

Ideally, interdisciplinary work should offer something back to each of the disciplines from which it draws its method or inspiration. Those with interests in Mallarmé’s poetry should find some of the ideas in Chapter One useful for their own purposes, even if these do not include music in a significant way. Likewise, those with analytical interests in Debussy’s music ought to be able to take something away from the musical analyses in the final three chapters, even if they are unconcerned with the relationship between the music and the text. Finally, for those whose primary interest is in music and text relationships more generally, they should find an interesting example in Mallarmé and Debussy: a poet concerned at a fundamental level with the musicality of his texts paired with a composer whose musical responses to these texts sought above all to place music and poetry on equal, if distinct, footings.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


———. *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé: Pour chant et piano.* Paris, Durand, 1913.


APPENDIX A

CHRONOLOGY OF MALLARMÉ’S WRITINGS CITED

The exact chronology of Mallarmé’s writings is often difficult to pin down, since many poems from the later periods seem to have their genesis in the 1860s and 70s. The essays published in *Divagations* in 1897 were assembled from a series of articles and prefaces written in the 1880s and 90s. In the following table, I summarize the chronology given by Bertrand Marchal in the *Œuvres Complètes*. The date given in the left hand column indicates the likely date of composition; the date that follows the title indicates the date of publication.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date of Publication</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1862</td>
<td>“Hérésies artistiques: L’art pour tous” (1862)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Placet futile” (1862)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1864</td>
<td>“Hérodiade” (1869, portions posthumous)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Soupir” (1866)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1865</td>
<td>“Brise marine” (1866)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“L’après-midi d’un faune” (1876)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Sainte Cécile” (1883)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1866</td>
<td>“Une dentelle s’abolit” (1887)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1867</td>
<td>“Le démon de l’analogie” (1874)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1868</td>
<td>“Sonnet allégorique de lui-même” (1887, revised as “Ses purs ongles” (“Sonnet en yx”))</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1869</td>
<td>“Notes sur le langage” (posthumous)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1875</td>
<td><em>Les mots anglais</em> (1877)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1883</td>
<td>“Autre éventail (de Mademoiselle Mallarmé)” (1884)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Quand l’Ombre menaça” (1883)</td>
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1885  “Hommage” (1886)
“Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui” (1885)
“Prose (pour des Esseintes)” (1885)
“Richard Wagner, rêverie d’un poète français (1885)

1886  “Crise de vers” (1886, rev. 1886-1895)
“Le genre ou des modernes” (1887; rev. 1897)
“Mimique” (1886)

1887  “Crayonné au théâtre” (1887; rev. 1897)
“Parenthèse” (1887; rev. 1897)
“Solennité” (1887; rev. 1897)

1890  “Éventail (de Méry Laurent)” (posthumous)

1892  “De même” (1892; rev. 1897)
“La Musique et les Lettres” (1892; rev. 1894)

1893  “Plaisir sacré” (1893)
“Planches et feuillets” (1893)

1895  “Le Livre, instrument spirituel” (1895)
“Le Mystère dans les lettres” (1896)

1898  “Sur l’Idéal à vingt ans” (1898)
## FRENCH PHONEMES AND IPA SYMBOLS

### FRENCH PHONEMES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VOWELS</th>
<th>CONSONANTS</th>
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<tr>
<td>/i/  ami, vie</td>
<td>/p/  père, cap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/e/  côté, aimer</td>
<td>/t/  terre, net, vite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɛ/  lait, merci</td>
<td>/k/  qui, cou, bec</td>
</tr>
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<td>/a/  plat, patte</td>
<td>/b/  bon, robe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɔ/  mort, corps</td>
<td>/d/  dans, aide, chaude</td>
</tr>
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<td>/o/  beau, mot, eau</td>
<td>/ɡ/  gare, bague</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/u/  genoue, loup</td>
<td>/ʃ/  ça, tasse, passe</td>
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<td>/y/  élu, rue, vêtu</td>
<td>/v/  rêve, vol</td>
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<td>/ø/  deux, peu</td>
<td>/z/  zéro, maison, rose</td>
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<td>/œ/  peur, meuble</td>
<td>/ʒ/  je, rivage</td>
</tr>
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<td>/ɔ/  le, petit, premier</td>
<td>/l/  lent, bal</td>
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<td>/ɛ/  matin, plein</td>
<td>/ʁ/  rue, venir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɑ/  sans, vent, temps</td>
<td>/m/  main, pomme</td>
</tr>
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<td>/ɔ/  mon, son, ombre</td>
<td>/n/  nous, bonne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/œ/  lundi, brun</td>
<td>/ŋ/  agneau, vigne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>/h/  hop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>/'/'  haricot, haut</td>
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</table>

### SEMI-CONSONANTS

| /j/  yeux, brille  |
| /w/  oui, nouer    |
| /ɥ/  huile, lui, nuire |
APPENDIX C

MALLARMÉ’S “LE DÉMON DE L’ANALOGIE”

LE DÉMON DE L’ANALOGIE
1867?
15 février, 1874, Revue du monde nouveau

Des paroles inconnues chantèrent-elles sur vos lèvres, lambeaux maudits d’une phrase absurde ?

Je sortis de mon appartement avec la sensation propre d’une aile glissant sur les cordes d’un instrument, traînante et légère, que remplaça une voix prononçant les mots sur un ton descendant : « La Pénultième est morte », de façon que

La Pénultième

finit le vers et

Est morte

se détacha
de la suspension fatidique plus inutilement en le vide de signification. Je fis des pas dans la rue et reconnus en le son mul la corde tendue de l’instrument de musique, qui était oublié et que le glorieux Souvenir certainement venait de visiter de son aile ou d’une palme et, le doigt sur l’artifice du mystère, je souris et implorai de voeux intellectuels une spéculation différente. La phrase revint, virtuelle, dégagée d’une chute antérieure de plume ou de rameau, dorénavant à travers la voix entendue, jusqu’à ce qu’enfin elle s’articula seule, vivant de sa personnalité. J’allais (ne me contentant plus d’une perception) la lisant en fin de vers, et, une fois, comme un essai, l’adaptant à mon parler ; bientôt la prononçant avec un silence après « Pénultième » dans lequel je trouvais une pénible jouissance : « La Pénultième » puis la corde de l’instrument, si tendue en l’oubli sur le son mul, cassait sans doute et j’ajoutais en manière d’oration : « Est morte. » Je ne discontinuais pas de tenter un retour à des pensées de prédilection, alléguant, pour me calmer, que, certes, pénultième est le terme du lexique qui signifie l’avant-dernière syllabe des vocables, et son apparition, le reste mal abjuré d’un laboureur de linguistique par lequel quotidiennement sanglotte de s’interrompre ma noble faculté poétique : la sonorité même et l’air de mensonge assumé par la hâte de la facile affirmation étaient une cause de tourment. Harcelé, je résolus de laisser les mots de triste nature errer eux-mêmes sur ma bouche, et j’allai murmurant avec l’intonation susceptible de condoléance : « La Pénultième est morte, elle est

THE DEMON OF ANALOGY
1867?
February 15, 1874, Revue du monde nouveau

Have unknown words ever sung on your lips, cursed fragments of an absurd phrase?

I left my apartment with the specific sensation of a wing gliding over the strings of an instrument, limpid and light, which was replaced by a voice pronouncing these words in a descending tone: “La Pénultième est morte,” so that

La Pénultième

ended the line of verse and

Est morte
detached itself from the fateful suspension more uselessly in the void of signification. I stepped into the street and recognized in the sound mul the taut string of the musical instrument, which was forgotten and that glorious Memory certainly had come to visit with its wing or a palm and, my finger on the artifice of the mystery, I smiled and implored from intellectual voices a different speculation. The phrase returned, virtual, freed from an anterior fall of feather or branch, henceforth heard through the voice, until finally it articulated itself alone, living from its own personality. I went on (no longer content with a perception) reading it at the end of the line, and, once, as an experiment, adapting it to my speech; soon pronouncing it with a silence after “Pénultième” in which it found a painful pleasure: “La Pénultième” then the string of the instrument, so taut in forgetfulness on the sound mul, snapped no doubt and I added in the style of a prayer: “Est morte.” I did not cease to attempt a return to some pleasant thoughts, pleading, to calm myself, that, certainly, the penultimate is a lexical term which signifies the next-to-last syllable of speech, and its appearance, the poorly renounced remnants of a linguistic labour by which daily sobs my noble poetic faculty at being interrupted: the sonority itself and the air of deceit assumed by the haste of the facile affirmation were a cause of torment. Harassed, I resolved to leave these sad-natured words to wander on their own in my mouth, and I went murmuring with an intonation open to sympathy: “La Pénultième est morte, elle est
morte, bien morte, la désespérée Pénultième», croyant par là satisfaire l’inquiétude, et non sans le secret espoir de l’ensevelir en l’amplification de la psalmodie quand, effroi!—d’une magie aisément déductible et nerveuse—je sentis que j’avais, ma main réfléchie par un vitrage de boutique y faisant le geste d’une caresse qui descend sur quelque chose, la voix même (la première, qui indubitablement avait été l’unique).

Mais où s’installe l’irréfusable intervention du surnaturel, et le commencement de l’angoisse sous laquelle agonise mon esprit naguère seigneur c’est quand je vis, levant les yeux, dans la rue des antiquaires instinctivement suivie, que j’étais devant la boutique d’un luthier vendeur de vieux instruments pendus au mur, et, à terre, des palmes jaunes et les ailes enfouies en l’ombre, d’oiseaux anciens. Je m’enfuis, bizarre, personne condamnée à porter probablement le deuil de l’inexplicable Pénultième.

But where the irrefutable intervention of the supernatural settles in, and the beginning of the anguish under which my mind suffers, formerly master, it was when I saw, raising my eyes, in the street of antique dealers I had instinctively followed, that I was in front of a luthier’s shop, a vendor of old instruments hung on the wall, and, and the ground, some yellow palms and wings hidden in shadow, of ancient birds. I fled, bizarre, one probably condemned to wear mourning for the inexplicable Pénultième.
APPENDIX D

DEBUSSY'S APPARITION

Andantino

La lune s'attris-

Des séraphins en

Pleurs Rélevant, l'archet aux

(tait,)

pleurs Révant, l'archet aux
Un peu retenu

doigts, dans le calme des fleurs Vapoureuses,

tiraient de mouvantes violes De blancs songlots glissants sur l'azur des cœurs.

a Tempo

C'était le jour banni de ton premier bai-
Ma songerie aimant à me martyriser
S'en vrait savamment,

ment du parfum detristesse
Que même sans regret et sans déboire laisse

La cueil-laison
d'un Rêve au cœur qui l'a cueilli.
J’erre donc, l’oeil rieur sur le pavé vieilli. Quand

Animez peu à peu cresc. et toujours plus animé

avec du soleil aux cheveux, dans la rue. Et dans le soir, Tu

m’es en riant apparaue apparaue.
Et j'ai cru voir la fée en se calmant

Et j'ai cru voir la fée en se calmant

au chapeau de clarité Qui ja-dis sur mes beaux sommeils d'enfant gâ-

Puis- 
cet Pas - sait, lais - sant tou - jours de ses mains mal fer -

Puis- 
cet Pas - sait, lais - sant tou - jours de ses mains mal fer -
mées. Nei - ger de blancs bou - quets d'é-

toi - les par - fu - mé - es, d'é - toi - les parfu-
mé - es.
APPENDIX E

MALLARMÉ’S “L’APRÈS-MIDI D’UN FAUNE”

L’APRÈS-MIDI D’UN FAUNE
ÉLOGUE.

LE FAVNE

Ces nymphes, je les veux perpétuer.

Si clair,
Leur incarnat léger, qu’il voltige dans l’air
Assoupi de sommeils touffus.

Aimai-je un rêve?
Mon doute, amas de nuit ancienne, s’achève
En maint rameau subtil, qui, demeuré les vrais
Bois mêmes, prouve, hélas! que bien seul je m’offrais
Pour triompher la faute idéale de roses.

Réfléchissons...

ou si les femmes dont tu gloses
Figurent un souhait de tes sens fabuleux!
Faune, l’illusion s’échappe des yeux bleus
Et froids, comme une source en pleurs, de la plus chaste:
Mais, l’autre tout soupirs, dis-tu qu’elle contraste
Comme brise du jour chaude dans ta toison?
Que non! par l’immobile et lasse pâmoison
Suffocant de chaleurs le matin frais s’il lutte,
Ne murmure point d’eau que ne verse ma flûte
Au bosquet arrosé d’accords; et le seul vent
Hors des deux tuyaux prompt à s’exhaler avant
Qu’il disperse le son dans une pluie aride,
C’est, à l’horizon pas remué d’une ride
Le visible et serein souffle artificiel
De l’inspiration, qui regagne le ciel.

O bords siciliens d’un calme marécage
Qu’à l’envi de soleils ma vanité saccage
Tacite sous les fleurs d’étincelles, CONTEZ
« Que je coupais ici les creux roseaux domptés
Par le talent; quand, sur l’or glauque de lointaines
Verdures dédiant leur vigne à des fontaines,
Ondoye une blancheur animale au repos:
Et qu’au prélude lent où naissent les pipeaux
Ce vol de cygnes, non! de naiades se sauve
Ou plonge... »

Inerte, tout brûle dans l’heure fauve
Sans marquer par quel art ensemble détała
Trop d’hymen souhaite de qui cherche le la:
Alors m’éveillerait-il à la ferveur première,
Droit et seul, sous un flot antique de lumière,
Lys! et l’un de vous tous pour l’ingénuité.

THE AFTERNOON OF A FAUN
ECLOGUE.

THE FAUN

These nymphs, I want to perpetuate them.

So clear,
Their light rosy flesh, that it flutters in the air
Drowsy with dense slumbers.

Did I love a dream?
My doubt, heap of ancient night, ends
In many subtle branches, which, remaining the true
Woods themselves, proves, alas! that indeed all I offered myself
For triumph was the ideal fault of roses.

Let us reflect...

or if the women which you gloss
Represent a hope of your fabulous senses!

Faun, the illusion escapes from the eyes blue
And cold, like a spring of tears, of the more chaste:
But, the other all sighs, say you that she contrasts
Like a hot day’s breeze in your fleece?
Oh no! through the immobile and weary swoon
Suffocating the cool morning with heat should it struggle,
No water murmurs which does not pour from my flute
Into the grove sprinkled with harmonies; and the lone wind
From these two pipes quick to exhale before
Dispersing the sound in an arid rain,

Is, on the horizon unmoved by a ripple
The visible and serene artificial breath
Of inspiration, that regains the sky.

O Sicilian shores of a calm marsh
That in envy of sunbeams my vanity plunders

Silent under the spark-flowers, TELL
“That I was cutting here the hollow reeds tamed
By talent; when, on the sea-green gold of distant
Greeneries dedicating their vines to the fountains,
Ripples an animal whiteness at rest:

And that at the slow prelude where the pipes were born
This flight of swans, no! of naiads runs off
Or dives...”

Inert, all burns in the tawny hour
Without showing by what art together fled
Too much hymen desired by whomever seeks the A:
Then I’ll awaken to the initial fervor,

Upright and alone, under an ancient stream of light,
Lilys! and one of you all for my naivety.
Autre que ce doux rien par leur lèvre ébruité,
Le baiser, qui tout bas des perfidies assure
Mon sein, vierge de preuve, atteste une morsure
Mystérieuse, due à quelque auguste dent;
Mais, bast! arcane tel elût pour confident
Le jonc vaste et jumeau dont sous l’azur on joue:
Qui, détournant à soi le trouble de la joue,
Rêve, dans un solo long, que nous amusions
La beauté d’alentour par des confusions
Fausses entre elle-même et notre chant crédulé;
e de faire aussi haut que l’amour se module
Évanouir du songe ordinaire de dos
Ou de flanc pur suivis avec mes regards clos,
Une sonore, vaine et monotone ligne.

Tâche donc, instrument des fuites, ô maligne
Syrinx, de refleurer aux lacs où tu m’attends!
Moi, de ma rumeur fier, je vais parler longtemps
Des déesses; et par d’idolâtres peintures
A leur ombre enlever encore des ceintures:
Ainsi, quant des raisins j’ai sué la clarté,
Pour bannir un regret par ma feinte écarté,
Rieur, j’élève au ciel d’été la grappe vide
Pour bannir un regret par ma feinte écarte,
De larmes folles ou de moins tristes vapeurs.

O nymphes, regonflons des SOUVENIRS divers.
« Mon aul, trouvant les joncs, dardait chaque encoûrure
Immortelle, qui noie en l’onde sa brûlure
Avec un cri de rage au ciel de la forêt;
Et le splendide bain de cheveux disparait
Dans les clartés et les frissons, ô pierretries!
J’accours; quand, à mes pieds, s’entrejoignent (meurtries
De la langue goûtée à ce mal d’être deux)
Des dormeuses parmi leurs seuls bras hasardeux;
Je les ravis, sans les désenlacer, et vole
Des dormeuses parmi leurs seuls bras hasardeux;
Qui delaisse à la fois une innocence, humide
Des pieds de l’inhumaine au cœur de la timide
Qui délaisse à la fois une innocence, humide
De larmes folles ou de moins tristes vapeurs.
« Mon crime, c’est d’avoir, gai de vaincre ces peurs
Traîtresses, divisé la touffe échevelée
De baisers que les dieux gardaient si bien mêlée:
Car, à peine j’allais cacher un rire ardent
Sous les replis heureux d’une seule (gardant
Où notre ébat au jour consumé soit puré.
Je t’adore, courroux des vierges, ô délice
Farouche du sacre fardeau nu qui se glisse
Pour fuir ma levre en feu buvant, comme un eclair
Throat, which drowns its burning in the wave
With a cry of rage to the top of the forest;
And the splendid bath of hair disappears
In the light and the shivers, O jewels!
I run up: when, at my feet, entangled (bruised
By the languor tasted in this miserable duality)
Sleepers, women amid their random arms:
I take them up, without disentangling them, and fly
To this bank, hated by the frivolous shadow,
Of roses yielding their perfume to the sun.
Where our struggle may be consumed like the day,”
I adore you, wrath of virgins, O ferocious
Delight of the sacred nude burden which slides
To flee my burning lip drinking, like a flash of
Lightening! the secret terror of the flesh:
From the feet of the inhuman to the heart of the timid
Who is deserted at once by an innocence, damp
With mad tears or less sad vapors.
“ My crime, it is having, gay at vanquishing these traitorous
Fears, divided the disheveled tuft
Of kisses which the gods kept so well mixed:
For, scarcely had I gone to hide an ardent smile
Under the happy folds of one (keeping
By a simple finger, so that her feathery candor
Might be colored by the emotion of her sister which ignites.
The small, naive and unblushing one:)
When from my arms, undone by vague deaths,
This prey, forever ungrateful, frees herself
Without pity for the sob from which I was still drunk.”
Tant pis! vers le bonheur d'autres m'entraîneront
Par leur tresse nouée aux cornes de mon front:
Tu sais, ma passion, que, pourpre et déjà mûre,
Chaque grenade éclate et d'abeilles murmure;
Et notre sang, épris de qui le va saisir,
Coule pour tout l'essaim éternel du désir.
A l'heure où ce bois d'or et de cendres se teinte
Une fête s'exalte en la feuillée éteinte:
Etna! c'est parmi toi visité de Vénus
Sur ta lave posant tes talons ingénus,
Quand tonne une somme triste ou s'épuise la flamme.
Je tiens la reine!

O sûr châtiment ...
Non, mais l'âme

De paroles vacante et ce corps alourdi
Tard succombent au fier silence de midi:
Sans plus il faut dormir en l'oubli du blasphème,
Sur le sable altéré gisant et comme j'aime
Ouvrir ma bouche à l'astre efficace des vins!
Couple, adieu ; je vais voir l'ombre que tu devins.

Too bad! Towards happiness others will lead me
By their tresses knotted to the horns of my forehead:
You know, my passion, that, purple and already ripe,
Each pomegranate bursts and murmurs of bees;
And our blood, in love with whomever will seize it,
Flows for all the eternal swarm of desire.
At the hour when this wood is tinted with gold and ash
A celebration exalts in the extinct foliage:
Etna! It is among you visited by Venus
On your lava placing her candid heels,
When a sad sleep thunders or the flame is exhausted.
I hold the queen!

O sure punishment ...
No, but my soul

Empty of words and this heavy body
Succumb to the proud silence of midday:
Now I must sleep in forgetfulness of blasphemy,
Lying on the thirsty sand and delightfully
Opening my mouth to the wine-making star!

Couple, farewell; I go to see the shadow that you became
DEBUSSY'S *SOUPIR*

**APPENDIX F**

*Calme et expressif* $d = 50$

Mon âme vers ton front où rêve, ô calme

sœur, Un automne jonché de taches de roussur, Et vers le ciel errant
12

déton œil an-gé-li-que Mon-te, com-me dans un jar-din mé-lan-co-

16

un blanc jet d'eau sou-pi-re vers l'A-zur!
en animant un peu

Vers l'A-zur atten-dri d'Oc-to-bre pâle et pur Qui mire aux grands bas-

sins sa lan-gueur in-fi-nie: Et lais-se,

sur l'eau morte où la fauve a-go-nie Des feuil-les erre au vent et
APPENDIX G
DEBUSSY'S PLACET FUTILE

Dans le mouvement d'un Menuet lent $J=56$ cédez mouv't

Prin-ces-se! à ja-lou-

$p$ deux et gracieux

$p$

$p$ pp expressif, sans lourdeur

J'us-me mes

$p$

più $p$

À l'aise

feux mais n'ai rang discret que d'ab-bé Et ne fi-gu-re-rai même nu sur le
Comme je ne
suis pas ton bichon emmêlé,
la pastille ni du rouge,
Et que sur
moi je sais ton regard clos tombé,
Blonde de dont les coiffures divines sont des orfèvres! Nommez-nous...
toi de qui tant de ris framboisés Se joignent en troupeau d'agneaux aprivoisés.
serrez un peu // cédez // mouv't

sôs Chez tous broû-tant les vœux et bé-lant aux dé-li-res, Nom-mez-nous... pour qu'A-

mouà lé deun é-ven-tail My peigne flûte aux doigts en-do-rrant ce ber-

au mouv't un peu retardé

cail, Prin-cèse, nom-mez -
nous berger de vos sourires.
APPENDIX H

DEBUSSY’S ÉVENTAIL

Scherzando, delicat et leger $\frac{3}{4} = 76$

rubato

O réveuse, pour que je plonge

pp

Au pur délice sanschemin, Sache, par un subtil men-

pp
mouv't

songe,

Garder mon aile dans ta main.

Une fraîcheur de crépuscule Te vient à chaque battement

Dont le coup prisonnier recule L'horizon
le chant doucement en dehors

zon délicatement.

serrez

voici que frissonne L'espace comme un grand bai-

 Vertige!

rapide
mouv't sempre legg.

le chant doucement en dehors

cédez un peu-

voici que frissonne L'espace comme un grand bai-
Qui, fou de naître pour personne,

Ne peut jaillir ni s'apaiser.

Sensuel parvis farouche
Ainsi qu'un rire enseveli.
cèdez, très peu -

li Se cou - ler au coin de ta bou - che 

Au fond de l'u -

$mouv't$

ra - ni - me pli!

en retenant peu à peu jusqu'à la fin

Le

$pp$ doux et lointain
Sceptre des rivages rosses Stagnants

sur les soirs d'or,

toujours en retenant

c'est, Ce blanc vol fermé que tu poses
serrez ----------- // retenu ----------- : //

Con-tre le feu d'un brac-e-let.

à peine