

To “whomever...!” Jean-François Chevrier

1.

Many art historians, discussing the origins of abstraction, have studied the symbolist background of modernism. Mallarmé's work seems central to this reconstitution. In the 60's, the tendency was rather to take Mallarmé out of symbolism, showing how his thought went far past the aesthetics or the ideology of the literary and artistic movement situated in the 1880's. Already in the years around 1910, numerous participants in or observers of avant-garde art had attached Mallarméan poetics to the most advanced forms of post-Cézannian art, and cubism in particular. We cannot now reexamine the effects of that poetics upon modern art – the object of this exhibition – without taking into consideration these two moments of the interpretation called “modernist” in the 1960's and 1910. But we have also to take into account what has been omitted or marginal-ized from that interpretation. In order to do this, it is not sufficient to invoke Symbolism as an alternative system. We have to make an attempt to single out the exceptional “cases,” the most significant ones. Odilon Redon, for example, had been almost systematically neglected by the theoreticians of modernism. Yet, Mallarmé was not only a close friend of Manet, he was also very interested indeed by the suggestive art of Redon, whose plentiful echoes can be traced during the entire twentieth century.

2.

The effects of Mallarméan poetics cannot be reduced to the myth or the legend of a poet in search of the absolute, even if this image benefits from a long tradition invented by the nineteenth century in the flush of the first Romanticism. The effect of this poetics depends above all on its extraordinary openness, of which the modernist theory represents only a limited interpretation. Mallarmé is not the herald of the “pure poetry” celebrated by Valéry. However effective, the modernist thesis of a poetry that would have as an essential or exclusive object language itself reduces and stultifies the poetics of Mallarmé. In reality, the force of this poetics has been to reveal, after the great romantic explosion, a tension between the idea and the actuality. This tension is only partially reflected in the opposition between the ideal and the daily. The Mallarméan idea is an interpretation of the power of abstraction of language concretized in poetic writing. It is summed up in the famous saying: “I say: a flower! And besides the oblivion to which my voice relegates any shape, insofar as it is something other than the calyx, there arises musically, as the very idea and delicate, the one absent from any bou-quet.” But we mustn't get it wrong, Mallarmé loved flowers. The poetic flower is not only a rhetorical fact, it is a synthesis of the experience of all bouquets.” Actuality itself we have to understand in the sense in which Émile Zola speaks of “actualism,” referring to impressionism. It is also for Mallarmé a dimension of experience which sends us back to the misunderstanding of the subject and of its own impossibility of defining itself entirely by the conventional forms of the daily. Mallarméan actuality is a criticism of the daily and of the *présence à soi*. “Misinformed, anyone who would proclaim himself his own contemporary.”

3.

The effects of Mallarméan poetics have also had a negative result. The criticism of actualism in the name of the idea could be interpreted in the sense of a going past the present and of a utopia, but it has also appeared as a retreat of the artist into his ivory tower. The avant-gardes (all the “isms” of art since futurism) have been tempered to oppose to Mallarmé the idea of an immediate projection into the future, a sort of transfiguration, a utopian irradiation of the present. These esthetic and political utopias have often developed through an interpretation of the model of the “total work of art “ (the *Gesamtkunstwerk*) Wagner put forth. Mallarmé did not believe in the Wagnerian solution. His scepticism results from his conviction that the nihilism stemming from the death of God cannot be surmounted by the reconstitution of a belief system as the foundation of a new community. This scepticism is the irreducible

condition of a utopian thought which constantly reinvents rupture, against the temptation of an imaginary closure. Mallarméan poetics is thus the critical measure of avant-garde utopias. It implies a viewpoint of anthropological reconciliation (the human community ought to be able to get along without the idea of God) but each human being in his singularity multiplies “a singularity constructed on the multiplicity of internal pulsions”, each individual ceaselessly experiences his own finitude and the dissatisfaction resulting from it. This individual experience is the basis “stripped of its theological foundation” of an interaction between the one and the many, the individual and the crowd. Utopia tends to resolve this interaction in an imaginary community. For Mallarmé, the community remains in the future, the artist glimpses it in the flash of poetry, the “lightning streak” which illuminates the dark depths of the virtual. The great tradition of “concrete art” in the twentieth century, whatever utopias have underlain it, depends on this possibility of actualizing a virtual richness.

4.

The avant-garde utopias never stopped mobilizing the leftover mythologies, or, in a more ambitious mode, the perspective of a new mythology. André Breton sidelines Mallarmé, who inspired him greatly in the beginning, when he was imagining the building of a modern myth. Before surrealism, for Apollinaire and the futurists, the modern myth was summed up by the figure of an Icarus who triumphed over gravity and his destiny. The human being, that is to say, man without woman, was going finally to be able to transfigure his flesh and his finitude by projecting himself into a mechanical Eden. But Mallarmé had already reduced the polytheism of the “Gods of Yore” to a solar drama of death and resurrection. This reduction corresponds to a quest for sobriety opposed to romantic eloquence and great utopian bursts of energy. It is a dissolution of myths, an evacuation of iconography and of the accessories of mythological representation in favor of the fundamental elements of an action limited to the scene of writing. For the attraction of myth there is substituted a table, a sheet of white paper (the model of the “empty paper” where the poem is formed and sketched out), the pen and inkwell (“with its drop, in the depths, of shadows relative to something existing”). This scene of writing is the “theatre of our mind.” It’s the revelation of a maternal emptiness responding to the nothingness of abolished beliefs. After the Second World War, in 1947, Artaud radicalized the Mallarméan position by refusing to participate in the esoteric exhibition organized by Breton. The person who had, in the 1930’s, imagined bringing about the power of revolutionary anarchy in a “theatre of cruelty,” concentrates from now on all his poetic action in what is traced and punched out. Occupied with “remaking a body,” he incarnates the concrete poetry of Mallarmé in an experience of suffering like a travail of the flesh. This actualization of “limited action” separates itself from all the appeals to an irrational depth, formerly evoked by fascist ideologies and Nazi terror. With the precise and specific violence of Artaud, Mallarméan sobriety is accomplished in the exorcism of terror.

5.

Around Mallarméan poetics, there has been a great deal of discussion about art as a substitute for religion or the sketching out of a new communitarian link; about enigma and the occult, the value or legitimacy of “obscurity,” the mysterious and the marvelous, secrecy, circles and secret societies. But modern utopias take into account the great number and individuality of the mass, thinking norms, standards, prototypes. Adapting themselves to the criteria of industrial society and to the triumph of mechanization, utopias have chosen to be constructive and productive. Marcel Duchamp was the one to transpose Mallarméan mystery into the image and the metaphoric circuits of the machine. In so doing, the creator of the Grand Verre, an expert in mystifications of all sorts, never stopped adjusting little anti-utopian machines, proposing an ironic version of fin-de-siècle eclecticism opposed by the ideologues of “Modern Style.” So he has been seen as the father of post-modernism. But he is as ill-fitted to this role as is Mallarmé to that of the ancestor of modernism.

6.

In reality, what lasts, from Mallarmé to Duchamp, but also, in a longer history, from Baudelaire to Jeff Wall passing through Marcel Broodthaers, is this anarchic freedom of art opposed to the search for a collective style. This freedom was affirmed with the great innovation of literary symbolism, the polymorphism of a literary symbolism, the polymorphism of free verse, in a break with the norms of prosodic tradition. In 1967, George Kubler, the author of the *Shape of Time* (1962) said this: “When flow and change are ignored, and when development is disregarded, style remains useful as a taxonomic convenience. But wherever the passage of time is under consideration, with its shifting identities and continuous transformations, the taxonomic notion, represented by the term style, becomes irrelevant.” That explains why modern art consecrated a mysticism of formal innovation, in the idea of rhythm. Going far past the cadence of productive activity, rhythm “organic or mechanical, but also lyric and cosmic” has been celebrated as the alternative to the project of a Modern Style supposed to have the same capacity of synthesis as the great styles of the past. Unlike Modern Style, rhythm permits us to integrate the anarchic diversity of individual freedoms as well as the game of difference, beginning by sexual difference. Associating poetry to dance and music, rhythm is the condition of a space of language overflowing the spatial fixation of the object and the reification of the image. The mobility of reading set to work in *Un Coup de dés* manifests the uncertainty and variation principle that characterizes the public aspect of the modern work. Mallarmé admits that this relation participates in “communication,” but he adds that the work, rather than forcing attention to itself or supposing a public made to order is addressed to whomever...