Out of the Néant into the Everyday:
A Rediscovery of Mallarmé’s Poetics

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation, focusing on the Vers de circonstance, takes issue with traditional views on Stéphane Mallarmé’s aesthetics and his positioning on the relation of art to society. Whereas Mallarmé has often been branded as an ivory-tower poet, invested solely in abstract ideals and removed from the masses, my research demonstrates his interest in concrete essences and the small events of the everyday. As such, the Vers de circonstance offer an exemplary entry point to understanding these poetic preoccupations as the poems of this collection are both characterized by their materiality and their celebration of ordinary festivities. Indeed, most of the poems either accompany or are directly written on objects that were offered as gifts on such occasions as birthdays, anniversaries or seasonal holidays. The omnipresence of objects and dates that can be referred back to real events displays Mallarmé’s on-going questioning on the relation of art to reality. As I show, some of these interrogations rejoin the aesthetic preoccupations of the major artistic currents of the time, such as Impressionism in France and the Decorative Arts in England. These movements were defining new norms for the representation of reality in reaction to the changes of nineteenth century society. But as the genetic study of the Vers de circonstance reveals, along with the contextual framing and analysis of his other works, the occasional and the concept of the real play a fundamental role in his poetics at large. On the one hand, the aesthetic concept of the real allows him to draw the attention of his readers to the tension between the concreteness of reality with its elusiveness and ephemerality. On the other hand, the occasional is
a way for Mallarmé to humanize the otherwise anonymous and impersonal quality of print. In an epoch when reality became mechanically reproducible and the distance between an author and its readers became increasingly distant and diffuse, the questions posed by Mallarmé on the relation of art to real objects, people and events were fundamental. As I conclude, therefore, the use of widely accessible quotidian objects, the *mise en abyme* of the visuality of writing, and Mallarmé’s programmatic note to the reader to emulate his poetic project, all combine to validate his postulation of a new poetic art turned towards the everyday and his contemporaries.
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DEDICATION

« Ce qui me tourmente [...], c’est un peu, dans chacun de ces hommes, Mozart assassiné. »

Antoine de Saint Exupéry, *Terre des hommes*

À Kéken (10 ans) et Barbara (5 ans),

*hyperboles de ma mémoire, ... ABANDONNÉS*

je vous garde dans mon souvenir avec ce coucher de Soleil aussi,

d’une belle et silencieuse soirée

ô Xarangua ! pauvre Haïti !

*Il est toujours pour moi le 24 avril 2010, entre cinq heures et cinq heures et demie...*

à vous mes enfants, j’offre ce Soleil Prométhée...
INTRODUCTION

A Questionable Distinction: Mallarmé’s “Major” and “Minor” Works

There exists a long-standing debate regarding the reading and interpretation of the work of the nineteenth century French poet, Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898). As a recent critic, Barbara Bohac, points out in the opening lines of her critical study dedicated to the notion of the everyday in his poetics, “Mallarmé offre plusieurs visages, qu’il n’est pas toujours aisé de concilier.”¹ The manifold faces of the poet to which Bohac refers consist in the tension in his writings between apparently serious works that seem to pertain to high art, and seemingly frivolous works that seem to be simple leisure time pursuits outside the very categories of high or low art. The first works (Poésies, L’Après-Midi d’un Faune, Hérodiade) are recognizable as cultural objects belonging to high art due to three important factors: first, their form – indeed, most poems follow classical poetic forms such as the sonnet written in octosyllabic meters or alexandrins; or they follow the modern genre of the prose poem initiated by Aloysius Bertrand; then, the gravitas of their author’s poetic intentionality expressed by way of letters or of commentaries around his work; and finally, the quality and reputation of the journals and publications in which the poems were first individually and then collectively published. By contrast, the latter works (La Dernière Mode, Vers de circonstance) touch on apparently frivolous topics, such as fashion and the everyday, with an apparent lightheartedness and jocularity that seem foreign to the “lofty” and “elevated” ambitions of his more “serious” works.² Of course, one could have disregarded this opposition between two types of works by stating that his occasional and journalistic writings


² The terms “lofty, elevated and serious” are all used in the Oxford English Dictionary to define the expression “high art.” The exact definition reads as follows: “Of exalted quality, character, or style; of lofty, elevated, or superior kind; high-class.” It is also related to that which is “of great consequence; important, weighty, grave, serious.”
were mere pastimes or *exercices de style* giving him repose between the writing of his more serious works. However, this is a difficult argument to sustain considering the unicity of Mallarmé’s poetic *topoi* and aesthetic preoccupations. As the poet and critic Yves Bonnefoy remarks in his preface to the Gallimard edition of the *Vers de circonstance*, Mallarmé’s poetics is indeed marked by a clear sense of homogeneity. He therefore disputes the idea that Mallarmé’s lighter verses diverged in any way from his main poetic preoccupations. As he writes:

[…] rien […] ne serait plus erroné que de se disposer, une fois encore, à n[e] reconnaître [dans les *Vers de circonstances*] qu’un divertissement sans guère de conséquences, en rupture, pour le repos d’un esprit lassé, avec un plus haut projet, d’essence métaphysique. Penser de cette façon, ce serait d’abord décider que Mallarmé pouvait s’écarter, ne fût-ce qu’un bref instant, de sa préoccupation majeure, alors que *Divagations* et *Le Coup de dés*, puis *Les Noces d’Hérodiade*, enseignent vers la fin de sa vie que ce souci demeura au cœur de sa réflexion – et de son chagrin – jusqu’en ses dernières minutes.

Indeed Mallarmé’s poetics never strayed from his major poetic project that was, as he writes, “d’essence métaphysique.” The exact nature of this metaphysical venture is defined by Mallarmé in 1885, in his *Lettre autobiographique* to Verlaine in which he summarizes his poetic accomplishments and beliefs up to that date. In an oft quoted passage he writes: “L’explication orphique de la Terre, […] est le seul devoir du poète et le jeu littéraire par excellence.” Commenting on Mallarmé’s vision of the poetic mission of the poet, the critic James Lloyd Austin remarked that Mallarmé’s conception of the adjective “orphique” has little to do with

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Orpheus. Instead, it is a synonym for poetry. Thus, Mallarmé’s metaphysical endeavor consists in proposing a poetic explanation of the world. A year before this definition of the poet’s role, he had already defined poetry as the unique mode of expression and justification of the human condition:

La Poésie est l’expression, par le langage humain ramené à son rythme essentiel, du sens mystérieux des aspects de l’existence : elle doue ainsi d’authenticité notre séjour et constitue la seule tâche spirituelle.

In addition to being a rhythm that conveys the mysterious pulse of life, poetry is also an art form that authenticates human experience. For Austin this results in a vision of the universe as a continuously evolving entity that progresses towards an always greater state of self-consciousness thanks to the successive efforts of those who have consigned their experience in writing. This characterization of poetry as the accumulation of individual and collective experiences has deep implications for Mallarmé’s conception of aesthetic hierarchies. If poetry is the articulation of experience and if there is no hierarchy of experiences then there is also no hierarchy in the articulation of it. Therefore, all forms of poetic expression within Mallarmé’s oeuvre are equally constitutive to his poetic enterprise. This is an essential aspect of his oeuvre. Yet, despite this quintessentially Mallarméan logic, even the most open critics to this iconoclastic conception of his work still have trouble accepting the leveling of Mallarmé’s writings onto a single poetic plane. Characteristically, after Bonnefoy’s disclaimer regarding the unicity of Mallarmé’s oeuvre,

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he sets a clear qualitative and hierarchical distinction between two types of poetic productions: one which would be superior or grander than the other. In Bonnefoy’s words:

Rien ne serait plus absurde, […] que de placer ces menus poèmes [Vers de circonstance] au même plan de la qualité poétique que ces autres, les grands, qui comptent parmi les plus ambitieux que l’on ait jamais écrites, si ce n’est parmi les plus admirables.  

Bonnefoy’s claim that one should not equate the Vers de circonstance to Mallarmé’s more serious works touches on this recurring leitmotiv of the apparent dichotomy of Mallarmé’s oeuvre.

The purpose of this dissertation is not to enter into a dispute regarding the qualitative value of the Vers de circonstance over works that have been unanimously regarded as Mallarmé’s masterpieces. It is also somewhat futile to try to assert the superiority of Mallarmé’s occasional poems over the Poésies. What is important however is to understand that despite the differences between these two works they both fall under the larger scope of Mallarmé’s poetics that manifests itself in very different types of poetic projects whether it be his notes for Le Livre, his unfinished tale Igitur, or the elaboration of a fashion review. Thus, what this dissertation would like to achieve is to offer a more united and synthesized view of Mallarmé’s works by placing the study of the Vers de circonstance in relation to a large set of Mallarméan texts: La Dernière Mode, the Poésies, his writings on art, and his correspondence. The belief underlying this cohesive approach to his poetry is that it will greatly shed light on some of the seemingly paradoxical aspects of his oeuvre such as: the opposition between an occasional poetry and a metaphysical poetry, the disparity between a material poetics and an abstract one, and finally the

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tension between an elitist poetic posture and a democratic one. For all these reasons it is necessary to question the distinction between what has been identified as Mallarmé’s “major” and “minor” works, as this has prevented the reading of Mallarmé’s poetry from moving forward.

Indeed, the qualitative distinction between two types of poetic production has produced a tension in critical readings of Mallarmé between works that are considered “major” and are thus well studied and works that are considered “minor” and are thereby traditionally marginalized. As a result, the eclecticism of Mallarmé’s writings has been dominated, for the most part, by one strong critical doxa that privileged the study of his canonical works such as the *Poésies, Hérodiade* or *L’Après-Midi d’un Faune*, 

The first of the so-called minor poetic oeuvres is a woman’s fashion magazine, and thus pertains to the category of his journalistic writings; the second is a collection of very short occasional poems that have been viewed as belonging mostly to the poet’s biographic sphere. But, oddly enough, one of the main oppositions on which the differentiation between Mallarmé’s “major” and “minor” works is founded revolves around one central question; that is, the meaning and understanding of materiality in Mallarmé’s work.

It will be useful to define “materiality” in order to frame the limits of this discussion in relation to Mallarmé’s work. This definition is all the more important because, while the term “materiality” is frequently used in literary and aesthetic debates, there is no proper definition of it. Yet, it is a word that is charged with heavy philosophical and aesthetic implications.

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8 If *Un Coup de Dés* is now considered as Mallarmé’s key work it was not considered so until the late nineteen nineties when Bertrand Marchal’s new Pléiade edition provided a very detailed annotated commentary of the text.

9 The marginal position of the *Vers de circonstance* is exemplified in its poor positioning in the Pléiade edition. Indeed the poems are placed after the *Poèmes de jeunesse*, which themselves come after the *Poèmes non recueillis, Poèmes retrouvés*.

10 Indeed, there is no definition entry for the term “materiality” in any of the following resources: the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms, The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics, The Oxford Companion to Western Art*. 
throughout the modern period. Its root derives from the Latin word, *materia*, meaning matter. It thus refers to the physicality of the external world and as such stands in opposition to the mind and spirit as well as to the abstract and ideal. But, in a figurative sense, the word *materia* also designates the subject or content of a work, as when Michel de Montaigne wrote in the Preface to the first edition of his *Essais*: “Ainsi, lecteur, je suis moi-même la matière de mon livre […].”\(^{11}\) In Montaigne’s usage of the term, matter clearly means substance and form. There is, therefore, a tension surrounding the concept of materiality between a definition of the word that ties it to a physical and corporeal reality and another one that links it to an immaterial reality, whereby materiality designates the essence of a given object.

In the case of Mallarmé’s “major” works the concept of materiality is often used to refer to the materiality of his language. This in turn designates the stylistic devices of his texts, whereby the transparency of language is obstructed by the syntactical complexity of his language. The difficulty encountered when reading the poem transforms the tranquil invisibility of language, its inconspicuous fluidity, into a compact frictional mass against which the steady flow of the reading process is interrupted. This association of materiality to language is filled with positive connotations because it resonates with the major innovative currents of twentieth century literary theory that privileged the analysis of the material properties of language over the study of literature’s symbols and values, which had previously dominated hermeneutic discourse. In such studies, the materiality of the text is highly intellectualized and corresponds to a linguistic ideation of language. By contrast, materiality applied to Mallarmé’s “minor” works simply refers to the literal materiality of the text that imports or references objects of the world. This association of Mallarmé’s poetics with material objects stands in complete opposition to the

\(^{11}\) Italics are mine.
traditional view of the poet. Generations of young readers educated in the classical tradition of the Lagarde et Michard manuals have been used to thinking of him as an abstract thinker such as he is portrayed in this national anthology of literary history:

Sa vie durant, Stéphane Mallarmé pratiqua un seul culte, celui de la Poésie, une seule religion, celle de l’Idéal, entendu non pas au sens moral mais au sens métaphysique de ce terme : l’Essence des choses opposées aux apparences contingentes. A ses yeux, la Poésie exige un don de soi total, un désintéressement absolu : sans parler du profit matériel, le poète ne doit même pas songer à la gloire ; sa vocation entraîne une sorte d’ascèse, un renoncement aux jouissances communes. Mallarmé se reprochait comme des fautes ses échecs, son impuissance passagère à traduire par le verbe la révélation poétique. Cette attitude si noble, cette exigence exaltante et hautaine expliquent la vénération dont il fut entouré, comme un prêtre, un saint et peut-être un martyr de la Poésie.12

Aside from the emphatic tone of the text with its insistent italics, its dramatic repetitions (“un seul culte, celui de la Poésie, une seule religion, celle de l’Idéal”), the theatrical crescendo from priest to saint to martyr, and the deferential use of the quantitative adverb “si,” the authors make it very clear that Mallarmé’s poetics addresses noble ideals precisely remote from the everyday, material objects and all that could be categorized under their expression “[les] apparences contingentes.” As such, the Vers de circonstance are caught in a dual stigma. The first is aesthetic and historical. As will be seen throughout this dissertation, in addition to the stigma attached to the idea of material reality in his work, the actual materiality of physical matter has historically been viewed negatively throughout Western art and thought. The second stigma is intellectual and poetic and

consists in the difficulty of reconciling the traditional view of Mallarmé, “saint” and “martyr” of poetry with the sociable and frivolous image of himself that he gives in the *Vers de circonstance*.

The purpose of this dissertation dedicated to the *Vers de circonstance* is therefore to disentangle the myth of a work that would be purely relegated to the realm of affects and interpersonal exchanges in order to understand how it fits into Mallarmé’s poetics. It will be useful to look more in depth at the reasons for which this collection of poems has been misguidedly read as such. As shall be seen, two important factors have contributed to the marginalization of this work.

First, the occasional nature of the poems seems to contradict the conventional foundation of Mallarméan criticism that rests on the credo of art for art’s sake. This aesthetic movement, which emerged in the mid-nineteenth century in the aftermath of the Romantic movement and under the influence of Parnassian aesthetics, emphasized the self-sufficiency and self-referentiality of literary language. The poet Théophile Gautier was one of the first to react against the increasingly moralizing social and political principles of Romanticism by offering in exchange a vision of art that he believed should be cultivated in and for itself. As a result, he developed an image of the artwork as an object closed off from the external world. The opening poem of his poetic collection *Émaux et Camées* (1852) entitled “Préface” reads as a poetic manifesto of this new artistic creed when he declares having closed his window to the commotion of the world:

> Pendant les guerres de l'empire,
> Goethe, au bruit du canon brutal,
> Fit le *Divan occidental*,
> Fraîche oasis où l'art respire.
> 
> [...]
Comme Goethe sur son divan
A Weimar s'isolait des choses
Et d'Hafiz effeuillait les roses,

Sans prendre garde à l'ouragan
Qui fouettait mes vitres fermées,
Moi, j'ai fait Émaux et Camées.

The symbolic autonomy of art translates itself through the comparison of the artwork to a palpable entity of its own. The title of Gautier’s poetry collection symbolically manifests his vision, for in it he compares the sovereignty of art to the sovereign minerality of stones. This endows language with a form of brute materiality. Thus, as Roy Harris writes, “the ambitious doctrine of “art for art’s sake,” […] can be constructed as an epistemological claim to the effect that the forms of knowledge involved in the creation and appreciation of a work of art are sui generis, and thus set artistic experience apart from all other forms of human experience.” 13

According to this definition, art is removed from concrete references to reality and exists independently from objects exterior to itself.

The emergence of Mallarmé studies coincides with the emergence of a new type of literary criticism that derived much of its critical thinking from the theoretical implications of “art for art’s sake.” This manifests itself in the writings of influential structuralist and post-structuralist critics of the 1960s and 1970s in France. These critics had inherited a view of literature that had been passed on to them by Russian Formalists. Authors such as Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, Osip Brik, Yury Tynyanov, Boris Eichenbaum and Boris

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Tomashevsky formed “a militant, polemical group of critics” who “rejected the quasi-mystical symbolist doctrines which had influenced literary criticism before them, and in a practical, scientific spirit shifted attention to the material reality of the literary text itself.” Under their writings, literature was dissociated from “pseudo-religion or psychology or sociology” and studied as “a particular organization of language.” This attention to the organization of language was favorable to an interest in the materiality of linguistic signs.

Formalism, which had started in Russia in the years prior to the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, flourished in the 1920s, spreading its influence across Europe to France. The significance of Formalism and the ensuing literary theories that derived from it, such as New Criticism (1930-1950), Structuralism (1960s) and Post-Structuralism (1970s), are of great importance to the study of Mallarmé as his poetry and the reading of his work came to fruition under the pen of these critics. The explanation for this is that for them, poetry was the genre par excellence of modern literary theory. As Terry Eagleton writes, “poetry is of all literary genres the one most apparently sealed from history, the one where ‘sensibility’ may play in its purest, least socially tainted form.”

As such, the early years of Mallarméan criticism in the twentieth century were marked by scholars who paid great attention to the formal characteristics of his poems such as the structure and style of his language. In this approach to poetry, the poem is “neither a vehicle for ideas, a reflection of social reality nor the incarnation of some transcendental truth: it [is] a material fact,

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whose functioning could be analyzed rather as one could examine a machine.”  

To paraphrase Terry Eagleton’s assessment of Formalist literary theory, the text is neither made of objects nor of feelings, but of words, and it would be a “mistake to see it as the expression of [the] author’s mind.” Important works on Mallarmé that were published during that period and that epitomize this school of thought where the poem does not refer to reality but to a system of linguistic signs are, in chronological order: Philippe Sollers’s *L’Écriture et l’expérience des limites* (1970),

Paul De Man’s *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (1971), and Michael Riffaterre’s *Sémiotique de la poésie* (1978). Doris Haas’s work entitled *Flucht aus der Wirklichkeit. Thematik und Sprachliche Gestaltung im Werk Mallarmés* (this title could be translated in English as: *Escape from Reality. Themes and Linguistic Configuration in Mallarmé’s Work*) is quite symbolic of this reading of his work. These writings were aligned along Maurice Blanchot’s metaphysics of language that considered Mallarmé as the prophet of the “Livre à venir” and of the *page blanche*. To support this view, Blanchot takes up in *L’Espace littéraire* (1955) Paul Valéry’s distinction of Mallarmé’s differentiation between a “parole brute,” which Blanchot calls transitive, and a “parole essentielle,” which Blanchot calls intransitive. This then allows him to develop his own representation of literature in which literature is its own end. Classic works following Blanchot include Gérard Genette’s “Bonheur de Mallarmé?” (1961), Derrida’s *La Dissémination* (1972) and Kristeva’s *La Révolution du langage poétique* (1974).

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18 Ibid, p. 3.


While these approaches to Mallarmé’s work are valuable and rich in insight - some aspects of which will be particularly useful in the discussion of Mallarmé’s poésie critique - they are partial at times. Furthermore, they have created a literary dogma, that has come to pervade the public perception of his poetry and which in turn circumscribes, to a certain extent, the exploration and understanding of his work. Exemplarily, in 1998, the major Mallarmé centennial exhibit that took place at the Musée d’Orsay commemorated the poet as such:

De ce poète mal connu et pourtant majeur, il nous reste une œuvre inachevée, un projet poétique inédit – mais aussi l’impression, dans le souvenir des lycéens qui l’ont étudié, d’une obscurité insurmontable. […] Professeur d’anglais, il partage son temps entre une vie rangée auprès de sa famille et le combat souvent douloureux d’un créateur en quête d’absolu.\footnote{www.musee-orsay.fr/fileadmin/mediatheque/integration_MO/PDF/Mallarme.pdf. Italics are mine.}

The idea that his poetry is surrounded by an unsurpassable obscurity and that he is in quest for “the absolute” are standard clichés that are circulated about his poetry. While it is irrefutable that his poetry presents a certain difficulty, the formal complexity of his language should neither obliterate the presence and importance of its poetic content, nor the fact that his poetry is not exclusively self-referential. An interpretation of the Vers de circonstance calls for an understanding of the text as a complex entity filled with objects, forms, rituals and conventions whose different interactions give the text its meaning.

Contrary to the previous visions of Mallarmé as an abstract and formal poet, the study of the Vers de circonstance shows a form of poetry that is rooted in the here and now of its artistic production. The meaning of the poem is thus inextricable from the context in and for which it was produced. The immediate consequence of this generic problem is that, contrary to received
discourse regarding Mallarmé’s poetics, the *Vers de circonstance* do not seem abstractly self-referential. The poems of this collection appear to be both thematically and structurally inscribed in a field of material and contextual occasions - thematically because the poems address individual circumstances, and materially because the poems are very concretely inscribed on the surface of things. The poems display their relation to material reality by constantly referring to the objects which they accompany. To prove this point it suffices to think of the numerous instances in which the poems apostrophize the very object on which they are inscribed. In addition to the material accompaniment of this work, the poems themselves display a form of materiality. Indeed, the poems are fancifully handwritten, sometimes in red or gold ink, on physical objects, among which we find photographs, fans, eggs, mirrors, jugs, tea pots and stones.

Second, in addition to this generic gap between accepted readings of Mallarmé and a materialist vision of him - that is, ironically, unorthodox when applied to the relation of the text to external referents as opposed to when it is applied to the materiality of language *per se* - there is another divergence that is both structurally and stylistically problematic to readers. That is the brevity of the poems – for the most part they do not exceed the size of single octosyllabic quatrains. With the exception of epigrammatic forms, brevity, in Western poetry, has traditionally been associated with playful and light verse. The succinctness of the poems thus contradicts the poetic figure that has been constructed of Mallarmé, for readers have not been taught to imagine him engaging either lightly or playfully in poetic verse. On the contrary, he is portrayed as a serious and anguished poet such as he seems to depict himself in “Don du poème.” The reconciliation of the humorous author of the *Vers de circonstance* with the tortured artist of the *Poésies*, whose poems seem to have been written from the high towers of Elsinore, poses an epistemological problem for the systematizing processes of intellectual discourse, which,

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similarly to the Romantics, prefer stormy weather and shipwrecks to clear skies and happy endings.\textsuperscript{25}

With such a challenge to the dominant reading of Mallarmé - which points toward abstraction, \textit{gravitas}, and immateriality - the verdict for the \textit{Vers de circonstance} is clear: they can only be a quirk in Mallarmé’s poetic production, a leisurely pastime to alleviate the poet from the burden of his more serious works. The poems are thus doomed, at best, to biographical marginalia, a bibliophile’s reading cabinet or, at worst, to silence.\textsuperscript{26} Yet, as with most dogmatic rhetoric, Manichean oppositions such as these can easily be dismantled. Before doing so, however, it will prove valuable to identify the essential tension of the two positions outlined above, namely, the relation of art to reality.

Indeed, the fundamental charge that weighs against the \textit{Vers de circonstance} is its material and contextual grounding in reality, whereas Mallarmé’s \textit{oeuvre}, and Symbolism at large, is supposedly ethereal, and spiritually bound. The purpose of this dissertation, then, is twofold. First, it will provide a reading of the \textit{Vers de circonstance}, but ultimately it will disentangle the Mallarméan/Symbolist myth of abstraction in order to show how aestheticizing art forms can be another way of articulating the relation of art to society. Therefore, while Mallarmé is branded as an ivory-tower poet, invested solely in an intransitive use of language removed from the masses, this dissertation explores his investment in the artistic education of the public, and his belief in the necessity for art to adapt itself to the social and economic conditions of democracy. As I demonstrate, the use of widely accessible quotidian objects, the \textit{mise en abyme} of the visuality of writing, and Mallarmé’s programmatic note to the reader to emulate his

\textsuperscript{25} This metaphor stems from the fact that Mallarmé often compared himself to Hamlet.

\textsuperscript{26} See Walter Pater’s work in \textit{The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry}; and \textit{Appreciations, With an Essay on Style}, 1873.
poetic project, all combine to found his politics of art. The result will be a reassessment of the relation of other kinds of avant-garde aesthetics to the political in order to refine issues regarding the simple dichotomy between transitive and intransitive usage of language in modernist works. This inquiry is both grounded in textual analysis and archival examinations of the material and aesthetic properties of this work.

**Synoptic Overview of Mallarmé Scholarship**

This alternative reading of Mallarmé’s work is now supported by a number of recent scholars who, in contrast to the preceding views of Mallarmé’s work, present another vision of the poet. For these critics, Mallarmé stands as the poet of love and friendship, a poet whom Bohac calls “plus souriant, ancré dans la vie quotidienne.”28 These studies have been helpful to my work as they insist on the more marginal aspects of Mallarmé, which help to understand him in a different light.

To take the earliest and most illustrious example, there is Jean-Pierre Richard’s influential work, *L’Univers imaginaire de Mallarmé* (1961). In it, Richard worked against the theories of impersonal intellectuality that were attached to the name of Mallarmé. With his work, Richard enabled readers to view Mallarmé’s poetry under a new light in which his writings could be viewed as a life-long project related to his metaphysical inquiry. This holistic approach to Mallarmé is legitimized by Richard’s close study of Mallarmé’s *Correspondance*. In it he sees the continuation of the poet’s work because, as he demonstrates, there is a great homogeneity to all of Mallarmé’s writings whether it be his prose, poetry, journalistic writings or

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27 This view was strongly disputed by Gérard Genette in his article “Bonheur de Mallarmé?” *Tel Quel* 10 (1962): 60-72.

correspondence. The same vocabulary and themes as well as the use of a destructured syntax, make their way throughout all of his writings, which implies that they are all part of one collective poetic project. And indeed, as Richard shows, Mallarmé’s *Correspondance* is not an explanation of his poetry but a part of his poetic enterprise as a whole. Most Mallarmé scholarship after Richard has thus incorporated an examination of his *Correspondance* as a mode of investigation into his poetics.

Under the influence of Richard several works from the late eighties to mid nineties dealt with the more mundane aspects of Mallarmé’s *oeuvre*. To cite the most pertinent examples I will name Vincent Kaufmann’s *Le Livre et ses adresses* (1986), Jean-Pierre Lecercle’s *Mallarmé et la mode*, (1989) then Roger Dragonetti’s *Un fantôme dans le kiosque, Mallarmé et l’esthétique du quotidien* (1992), and most recently Barbara Bohac’s *Jouir partout ainsi qu’il sied: Mallarmé et l’esthétique du quotidien* (2012). There also exists a very vibrant Anglo-Saxon tradition of Mallarméan scholarship, which this study is equally indebted to. Important studies are Virginia La Charité’s *The Dynamics of Space, Mallarmé’s “Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard,”* (1987), Marian Zwerling Sugano’s *The Poetics of the Occasion, Mallarmé and the Poetry of Circumstance* (1992), Mary Lewis Shaw’s *Performance in the Texts of Mallarmé; The Passage from Art to Ritual* (1993), and Roger Pearson’s *Unfolding Mallarmé, The Development of a Poetic Art* (1997).

To summarize, research on Mallarmé is primarily divided along two lines with, on the one hand, the vision of the poet isolated in his ivory tower and, on the other hand, a poet imbedded in the social fabric of his time as a frivolous esthete and socialite. What will be important to prove is the indebtedness of the former image of the poet to the latter.

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Dissertation outline

The three main axes of this dissertation will examine the ways in which Mallarmé uses a seemingly personal work to pursue his poetic goal of providing “[une] explication orphique de la Terre.” This will be demonstrated by showing the similarities between Mallarmé’s poetic innovations with the major aesthetic changes that took place at the time. The two major aspects of this comparison will be drawn from art history and the decorative arts, due to their influence on Mallarmé’s poetics. The parallels between these two disciplines and the Vers de circonstance will become apparent in the course of the dissertation. But first, it is important to draw out once again the two fallacies that have been constructed around this work. The first concerns Mallarmé’s relation to the occasional, whereby the Vers de circonstance would be a purely private work occasioned by an exclusive social context. The second concerns Mallarmé’s critical reception with regard to his treatment of poetic objects. Traditionally, he is regarded as referring to purely decorative objects in his poems. This, in turn, reinforces the reading of him as a Decadent poet. In contrast with the preceding views regarding his treatment of the occasional and the decorative, this dissertation shows how he uses the notion of the occasional as a stylistic device that enables him to play on all the possibilities offered to him by this poetic genre (Part One). Then, he subverts the decorative function of the objects accompanying his poems in order to explore the relation of writing to external and material referents (Part Two). Finally, the poetic practice that Mallarmé develops in this work suggests a shift in his understanding and politics of art. Whereas he used to be identified as a poet who only addressed himself to a happy few, the apparent simplicity and playfulness with which the Vers de circonstance open themselves to different poetic addressees - such as mailmen, hairdressers, and chamber maids - imply an expansion of his
audience of readers. This, in turn, will be examined in relation to the democratic posture he adopts in his later critical writings on art (Part Three).

As it has just briefly been mentioned, Part One of this dissertation outlines the transformation of a private poetic practice into a public poetic genre. To begin, it will prove useful to outline a description of the Vers de circonstance in order to understand what this work is about (Chapter One). The description of this work shows that there are two main characteristics to this work. The first is that it is a text composed mainly of dedicational octosyllabic quatrains apparently written to celebrate private events, such as birthdays, holidays and other festive occasions. The second is that it is also a work that originated as an aesthetic and material artifact. Indeed, the writing of most of the poems of the Vers de circonstance was prompted by the act of gift-giving, where the poet would offer a poem to accompany a gift such as a box of candies or a flower bouquet. This work is thus densely surrounded by objects that the poems either accompany or are directly written on. The aesthetic qualities of the poems can therefore only be appreciated when looking at the original autograph version of the poems that are elegantly calligraphed onto envelopes, calling cards, or objects. In the past, the occasional and the material aspect of this work have been conflated. This heightened the belief that this work was highly contextual and linked to Mallarmé’s need to divert himself from his more serious poetic works. While there is definitely an element of playful enjoyment to this work, the genetic history of this work demonstrates the unicity of the occasional as a major Mallarméan topos guiding much of his poetic reflexion along with the ambition of his aesthetic choices. The following section of Chapter One thus address the genetic history of the Vers de circonstance in order to explain the context in which it arose and the reasons for which Mallarmé decided to make it public. As shall be seen, there are two fundamental reasons that pushed Mallarmé to publish this work. To begin, Mallarmé positioned this work on par with his major poetic work, the Poésies, and thus wanted to
have it published. This odd juxtaposition of these two bodies of work begs for a critical examination of the notion of the occasional in Mallarmé’s poetics. This in turn reveals the generic aspect of this notion that finds its way into both collections. While the occasional nature of the Poésies may be less apparent than in the Vers de circonstance, a genetic history of the latter reveals that Mallarmé’s occasional quatrains are much less context-bound than they seem. Some of the poems were, as a matter of fact, artificially created for the purpose of this publication. All these elements contribute to decontextualize the poems. But another motivation might have pushed Mallarmé to publish this work. This incentive can be traced back to the dedicatory nature of these poems.

One of the major discoveries of my research on the Vers de circonstance concerns Mallarmé’s progressive awareness of the possibilities offered to him by expanding the mode of reception of his work from traditional avant-garde poetry venues (such as the Cénacle and poetry collections assembled by the Parnasse contemporain) to a personal network of friends and family. While his personal network was at first founded on mostly sentimental and affective ties, the popularity of this mode of reception of his texts soon made him realize that he could use his social connections to diffuse works that otherwise did not find traditional publishing venues, as was the case of L’Après-Midi d’un Faune (Chapter 2).

According to the publication history of this work, Mallarmé started publishing his quatrains at a time when he had difficulties publishing a more significant poetic work: L’Après-Midi d’un faune. As Chapter Two demonstrates, he first published a section from the Vers de circonstance, entitled “Offrandes à divers du Faune” as a gift offering accompanying his poem L’Après-midi d’un Faune that had just been rejected by the reading committee of the Parnasse contemporain. His dedicational quatrains, however, made this work much more acceptable because they transformed the poem into a gift. This made the poem much more difficult to refuse.
as it was now bound by the rules and etiquette of polite social conventions. The reception of *L’Après-midi d’un Faune* was therefore assured to be more favorable as it was now inscribed under the seal of friendship thanks to the dedicatory “Offrandes.” The *Vers de circonstance* thus created an acceptable public platform for Mallarmé to distribute his more problematic work, while enabling him to play on the entire poetic registry of a societal poetic genre. But, more fundamentally, this extension of his circle of readers from a very elitist artistic inner circle to a larger base triggers one of Mallarmé’s most important reflections on the relationship between texts and their mode of reception. From the moment that became apparent to Mallarmé the *Vers de circonstance* were no longer marginal poetic quatrains but an integral part of his poetics, because the genre of the occasional offered him the most interesting and in-depth investigation into the relationship between a text and its readers. What is most fascinating and complex about the *Vers de circonstance* is the way in which this work changed and evolved not only as a poetic opus *per se* but also in Mallarmé’s own conception of their place and status within his works. One of the great lessons of the *Vers de circonstance* is that they were not conceived and set into stone from the outset. On the contrary, as Mallarmé was writing these poems and as he experienced with different modes of reception of his work, he continuously redefined and re-articulated his conception of the place of these occasional poems within his work.

Ultimately, the publication of these poems in an autonomous poetry collection fully demonstrates the evolution undergone by the *Vers de circonstance* from a sort of intimate family album to an open public book. The publication of these poems abolishes the private nature of these poems and assures them a legitimate place among Mallarmé’s poetic works. Having determined the role of the occasional in this poetic work, the function of the object remains to be understood.
Chapter Four addresses the issues surrounding Mallarmé’s relationship to objects. The object in Mallarmé’s poetics has conventionally been viewed as the symbol of his poetic decadence. The quintessential object that readers associate with his poetry is the *bibelot* as it is a decorative object with no apparent use value. This in turn is supposed to represent metonymically Mallarmé’s poetics as a whole: as an ornamental language with no reference to the communicative function of language. A study of Mallarmé’s poem the “Sonnet en x,” collected in the *Poésies*, reveals, however, a much more complex relation of the object to the decorative (Chapter 4). Indeed, in the poem, the object is both ornamental and useful. This leads to a vision of poetry that must at the same time convey a realistic vision of the world as well as the inner vision of the artist. This conception of poetry is surprisingly similar to Zola’s definition of the naturalist novel that he defines as “la nature vue à travers un tempérament.” 30 This rapprochement of Zola’s naturalist aesthetics with Mallarmé’s poetry makes it possible to understand and reconcile the antagonist tensions of the *Vers de circonstance*. On the one hand, this work seems to reject its contextual grounding through all the poetic mechanisms that have been developed in Part One. But, on the other hand, this work is still directly anchored in material reality through all the objects that accompany it. As the study of the objects in the *Vers de circonstance* reveal, Mallarmé fully achieved in this work the project announced in the “Sonnet en x;” that is: to jointly capture a realist depiction of the world with an aesthetic reconditioning of it. This, however, is not a pure Mallarmean invention. It can be explained thanks to the changes occurring in literature and the history of art, where aesthetic innovations were founded on the relation of art to external reality. This manifests itself in art’s general interest in the notion of the real (Chapter 3). Mallarmé thereby translates into poetry what was happening at the same time in

the decorative arts where art was actively inscribing itself on the surface of things and therefore expanding its territory out of the confines of the museum or art gallery into everyday life. In Mallarmé’s *Vers de circonstance*, two objects are particularly worthy of attention with respect to their relation to reality; that is, the handkerchief and the pebble. These objects point to the excess of the real that ultimately exceeds the possibility of fixing it into writing; hence, the abundance of objects that attempt to supplement the immobility of writing by pointing to its shortcomings. This deficiency in writing can only be fully overcome by introducing the object - as a fragment of reality - back into the text. This ultimately results in a reification of writing that becomes its own material. The evolution of Mallarmé’s poetic practice into a visual and plastic aesthetics echoes the avant-garde artistic practices of his contemporaries. While painters were suddenly interested in the stroke of the brush and in the material properties of their canvasses, a poet like Mallarmé was interested in the material properties of writing.

The last part of this dissertation (Part Three) deals with the theoretical and socio-political implications of this work. The material dimension of these poems creates a different dynamic around the reading of the poem that is much less a text than a complex artwork. As such, the reading of the poem loses its fluidity as the reader stumbles on the meta-poetic implications of such an artwork. This reflection is complicated by the fact that the poems are also meant to be read without the object. Ultimately, this means that the work itself is subordinated to the critical impact that its strange play on text versus object, materiality versus immateriality creates (Chapter 5). All the oddities and paradoxes of this work thus generate a new way of thinking about poetry where the poetic innovation consists less in the work itself than in the provocative critical challenges that this work provides. The *Vers de circonstance* thereby concretize Mallarmé’s theoretical concept of a “poésie critique.” But, as demonstrated by this work, this critical reflection on poetry is in-dissociable from the inscription of language and writing in a
social and historical context. Much of Mallarmé’s theoretical thinking on poetry is therefore deeply imbedded in his reflections on the state of literature in his society (Chapter 6).
PART ONE:

POETIC FALLACIES ABOUT THE VERS DE CIRCONSTANCE

113. François Coppée, Quatrain-adresse imité de Stéphane Mallarmé,
Paris, Douzet, n° 233.
Introductory Remarks

In order to appreciate the complexity of this poetic work it is necessary to begin with an ample description of the Vers de circonstance. This will be the foundation to understand what this oeuvre is composed of and how it works. The most obvious element is that it is a poetic text. It therefore needs to be studied as such by examining its poetic characteristics such as its form and rhyme patterns. But, as was already noted in the introduction, the textual quality of this oeuvre is just one aspect of the Vers de circonstance. Another fundamental feature of this work is that it is composed of autographic poems that either accompany objects or are written on them.

In order to understand fully the particularity of Mallarmé’s aesthetic approach, it is important to contextualize it within an artistic tradition that precisely consisted in merging the visual and verbal arts together. Considering the sheer volume of Mallarmé’s poetic objects, it then becomes necessary to take the material objects into consideration in the critical examination of the poems in order to understand whether these visual and material elements are purely ornamental and based on a private social practice or whether they are instrumental to the interpretation of the Vers de circonstance.

To answer this question, it will be necessary to start by questioning the occasional nature of this work. That will be done through the study of the genetic history of this text. As will be seen, the history of this work’s long genetic process reveals that the occasional is mostly a poetic subterfuge that Mallarmé used to advance his own poetic agenda, which consisted on the one hand in creating a certain social buzz around his name, and on the second hand in disseminating his other poetic works.
Chapter 1: The *Vers de circonstance* as Text and as Object

A Textual Object

In 1920, the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (*NRF*) published posthumously a poetry collection by Stéphane Mallarmé and entitled, *Vers de circonstance*. The preface to this work, written by Mallarmé’s son in-law Dr. Bonniot, indicates that these poems served to accompany “les menus faits de la vie.” The diminutive adjective minute (“menu”) evokes the light vein of these poems that touch on small annual events such as birthdays, holidays, invitations and gift offerings. In addition to addressing these relatively selective poetic subjects, the poems were apparently, for the most part, not written for the public at large, but for a private circle of friends and family. Thus, many of the poems are dated and dedicated to specific individuals whose name often appears in the poem itself, as in the following example:

Malgré la neige qui me fouette

Le front, comme aux temps les plus beaux

Je viens en ami qui souhaite,

Chère Madame Seignobos.

This poem is quite representative of the overall style of the *Vers de circonstance*: written in the form of an octosyllabic quatrain, it references both the occasion for which it is written and the addressee to whom it is dedicated. In this case the addressee is Dinah Seignobos - the wife of the Congressman, Charles Seignobos, a friend and protector of Mallarmé - and the occasion is New Year’s greetings. The seasonality of the poem is suggestively evoked through the mention of the snow and the association of winter with the poet’s blessings.

All in all there are one hundred and one New Year’s poems in the *Vers de circonstance*, several of which are addressed to the same group of recipients such as: his friends Madame Whistler, Madame Dinah Seignobos, the photographer Paul and his wife Marie Nadar, the French
composer of Irish descent Augusta Holmès, the extended Manet family including Julie Manet, Paule and Jeannie Gobillard,\textsuperscript{31} the Symbolist Belgian poet Georges Rodenbach along with his wife, Anna; and last but not least, his dear friend and muse Méry Laurent. The reason for cataloging this list of names is to give an idea of the scope of Mallarmé’s creativity in the \textit{Vers de circonstance}. One of the poetic feats of this work consists precisely in Mallarmé’s capacity to multiply poems on similar themes (in this case New Year’s greetings) and for a relatively restrained group of addressees within a limited amount of space without ever repeating himself. The long series of poems to the Dauphin family, whom Mallarmé got to know in his country home in Valvins, is quite revealing of his virtuosity. Here are a few examples of poems written to them only on the occasion of New Year’s Eve:

1

\begin{quote}
Ce papier, comme si Dauphin
Y piquait mainte tache noire!
Pour vous, témoin discret et fin,
Cache le fruit couleur de gloire.
\end{quote}

2

\begin{quote}
Je ne crois pas qu’une brouette
D’espoirs, de vœux, de fleurs enfin
Verse à vos pieds ce que souhaite
Notre cœur, Madame Dauphin.
\end{quote}

3

\begin{quote}
Ces fruits ! Aimez que je les cueille
Désignés par votre doigt fin
Comme ceux dont la verte feuille
Sied au front sacré de Dauphin.
\end{quote}

4

\begin{quote}
Ce même fruit d’aucun automne
Il porte à Madame Dauphin
Encore notre monotone
Souhait et ce n’est pas la fin.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{31} Paule and Jeannie Gobillard were Berthe Morisot’s nieces. Jeannie Gobillard later became Madame Paul Valéry.
Loin d’aucuns palmiers ou de cierge
Que l’aloës érige fin
Ce fruit tombe chez la concierge
Des houris et dames Dauphin.

Berger de deux seules ouailles
Dauphin, ramasse pour leurs jeux
Souriant partout que tu ailles
Ces fruits sur le givre outrageux.

Despite the fact that in five of the six poems the end rhymes (“fin”) are the same and that the name “Dauphin” rhymes four times with exactly the same word, the poems are still impressive exercises in poetic dexterity just by the fact that they decline a similar topos in six different versions. Indeed, aside from the repetition of the rhyme “Dauphin/fin” each poem invents a new rhyme scheme: (fin/oire; ueille/fin; cierge/fin; aite/fin; tone/fin; ailles/jeux). In addition, the fruits, which appear to be the poetic object given as a gift on that occasion, are in each of the five poems presented differently - whether it be in terms of the place they occupy in the poem or whether it be the way in which they are introduced to their recipient. In the third and fourth quatrain for instance the position of the fruit(s) in the first line of the poem draws attention to the act of gift giving and stresses the uniqueness of this object either by displaying it with an element of wonder (“Ces fruits!”) or by showing that despite the repetitive nature of this gesture this fruit is like no other (“Ce même fruit d’aucun automne”). Ultimately, the originality of each of these poems is reflective of the inventiveness of Mallarmé throughout the \textit{Vers de circonstance}. From beginning to end this work is marked by a proliferous amount of original poetic rhymes and images that preserve the singularity of the occasion and person celebrated. Moreover, in each poem and section there is a different poetic difficulty that is added.

In the preceding quatrain to Madame Seignobos, for instance, the allusion to a winter landscape as the ornamental backdrop of his seasonal greetings is brought up three more times throughout the section entitled “Dons de Fruits glacés au Nouvel An” and “Autres Dons de
“Nouvel An.” Yet each poem is clearly different both in terms of tone and content as this example will demonstrate:

Sous un hiver qui neige, neige,
Rêvant d’Édens quand vous passez !
Pourquoi, Madame Madier, n’ai-je
A donner que des fruits glacés…

The tone of this quatrain is notably more dramatic with its emphatic climax on the second line that wistfully evolves into the silence of an unanswered question in the last two lines. The awareness of the somewhat repetitive character of these occasional poems is dealt with from the very opening line of the poem with the rhythmic echo of the word “neige.” Yet, one of the first lessons regarding the notion of repetition in the *Vers de circonstance* is that no utterance can ever be repeated identically. Indeed, while the words may look the same on the page they cannot be pronounced the same as, according to the strict rules of French versification that Mallarmé follows, each line must be equivalent to eight syllables. Thus, while the first “neige” is pronounced with two syllables “nei/ge,” the second is pronounced with only one (“neige”) because the final “e” in French is silent when it is placed at the end of a poetic line. The entire syllabic countdown of the first line thus reads as such:

Sous/ un/ hi/ver/ qui/ nei/ge/, neige,

In addition to demonstrating a certain poetic theory of repetition, the condensation of this word to one syllable instead of two enables Mallarmé to create a full word game between the first and third rhyme. “Neige” becomes completely homophonous to “n’ai-je.” The first word “nei/ge” therefore distinguishes itself entirely from its second utterance. Repetition and difference thus

occur both on a visual and acoustic level thereby initiating the reader to the complex reading process of the Vers de circonstance where the idea of multiple layers of reading is inscribed from the very outset of the poems.

But, generally speaking, the main challenge of the poems reside in their necessity to condense within four poetic lines a patterned rhyme scheme that covers both the name of the addressee of the poem and one or more of the following criteria: the occasion for which the poem was written, the object on which the poem is written, or the object that the poem accompanies. In the latter case, the object is dealt with either on a thematic, or on a structural level. In the postal-quatrains, for instance, while there is a thematization of the act of sending the poem on an envelope, the relation of the poem to the object is mostly structural because the envelope dictates a specific format to the poem: it must formulate, in the same format as an envelope, the address and name of the addressee in such a way that the poem can be delivered as an address to that person.

Leur rire avec la même gamme
Sonnera si tu te rendis
Chez Monsieur Whistler et Madame,
Rue antique du Bac 110.

In the preceding postal-quatrain the name and address of the addressees Monsieur and Madame Whistler reads very legibly in the last two lines of the quatrain. In this example, the relation of the poem to its object, an envelope, is therefore mostly structural. But, in other poems, the relation of the poem to the object can be more thematic. In the following poem the fan exemplifies the way in which the object can be thematized as a poetic topos in the poem:

Spirituellement au fin
Fond du ciel, avec des mains fermes
Prise par Madame Dauphin,

Aile du temps, tu te refermes.

In this case, the movement of the fan becomes a metaphor for “[l]’aile du temps,” and its shape and movement serve to reinforce the winged image of time. In other poems this back and forth movement of the fan becomes a metaphor of reading with the back and forth movement of the eyes running down the page. In both instances, however, the object is integrated into the thematic development of the poem. This thematization of the object into a poetic topos indicates that, in their most accomplished form, the different objects of the Vers de circonstance represent different metaphors of poetry.

The poetic constraint created by the obligation of using real names and addresses seems to have been as important to Mallarmé as it was to his poetic addressees. One source of enjoyment of these poems was the fact that they circulated outside the field of poetry (conventional poetry venues such as literary and artistic journals and magazines) into everyday life (through correspondence, house calls, or simple deliveries). This added a touch of lived spontaneity to the poems to which a lot of addressees were sensitive. In a letter to Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine wrote:

Mon cher Mallarmé,

Votre lettre m’est parvenue, ce qui prouve qu’avec la rime riche, et quelle rime,

Ferlane, Verlaine ! on arrive à tout.33

This letter references a postal quatrain that Mallarmé had sent to Verlaine. Other letters testify that these postal-quatrains reached their addressees. Mallarmé himself prefaced his publication Les Loisirs de la Poste with the following note:

33 Mallarmé, Stéphane. Œuvres complètes. Vol. 1. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade/Gallimard, 1998, p. 1248. The quatrain in question was the following:
Tapi sous ton chaud mac-ferlane,
Ce billet, quand tu le reçois
Lis le haut ; 6, cour Saint-François
Rue, est-ce Moreau ? cher Verlaine.
The successful delivery of the poems was thus part of their appeal. But, perhaps another aspect of their success was the way in which they functioned as what John Searle, on the basis of J.L Austin’s work *How To Do Things With Words* (1962), generically coined “speech act[s].” This term covers all aspects of the performative features of language such as greeting, ordering, wishing, warning, inviting and congratulating. As such, it is a term that is quite descriptive of the dynamic at work in the *Vers de circonstance*, in which most poems include one of the preceding speech acts. There is therefore an active game that is formed between the sender and receiver(s) of the poem that contributes to the particular pleasure, or *plaisir du texte*, that the reader derives from his or her reading.

A common performative aspect of the poems consists in their didactic command, whereby the poems read as instruction protocols on how to handle the object. In Mallarmé’s “Sur des galets d’Honfleur” and “Sur des cruches de Calvados,” the poem gives out instructions expliciting the relationship between its text and its object. In the following distich, written to his student Joseph, the poem apostrophizes the addressee commanding him to skip the object across the water:

*Avec ceci Joseph, ô mon élève
Vous ferez des ricochets sur la grève.*

The demonstrative pronoun “ceci” refers directly to the pebble that Mallarmé is offering to his student. In the poems written « Sur des cruches de Calvados, » the poem tells the addressee to drink from its accompanying receptacle:  

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Ami, bois ce jus de pomme
Tu te sentiras un homme.\textsuperscript{36}

Or :

Ce pot de cidre tu le bois
A la santé d’Ernest Dubois.\textsuperscript{37}

This authorial command of the poetic voice (particularly manifest in the first distich written in the imperative) reveals another aspect of this work, that is, its didacticism. This didactism is mostly notable in the hierarchical relationship that Mallarmé installs between his younger readers and himself. In these poems, the teacher to pupil relationship dictates the reading of the poem. But, the didactic element of some of the poems of the \textit{Vers de circonstance} is mostly a poetic device that contributes to the many playful aspects of this opus.

The notion of play that emerges from this dynamic is an essential component of this work, as much as it is an essential element of Mallarmé’s poetics at large because it enables him to explore different possibilities of language. In \textit{La Dernière Mode}, for instance, Mallarmé took on the role of different fictitious female characters in order to expand the variety of poetic voices at his disposal. He used this same strategy in the \textit{Vers de circonstance} by writing a number of quatrains in Méry’s name, as in the followingquatrain:

\begin{quote}
Avec ce mutin casque blond

c’est votre oubli que je défie

et j’offre à ceux qui déjà l’ont
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{35} There is also a metaphorical reading that can be made of these poems as, in both cases, the poems are written directly on the object.


\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
But, in the *Vers de circonstance*, Mallarmé’s exploration of the possibilities of poetic language seems, at first sight, mostly centered on the notion of the occasional and on the difficulty of writing a poem for recurring events and on similar poetic topoi without replicating the same poem each time.

The first characteristic of the *Vers de circonstance*, as announced by its title, is thus the circumstantial nature of its subject matter. With two hundred and thirty eight addressees and over a dozen occasions commemorated, this work clearly pertains to the genre of occasional poetry. A characteristic of occasional poetry that is important to consider in order to understand the reception history of the *Vers de circonstance* is its status within the hierarchy of poetic genres. Traditionally, occasional poetry has been deemed a minor poetic genre. The ranking of this genre is determined by four criteria that Bohac summarizes as follows: the first is the skill of the artist/practitioner; the second is the purpose pursued by the artist (utility or pleasure) when creating the artwork; the third is the dimension of the object; the fourth is the durability of the object. On the basis of these four criteria outlined by Bohac, the *Vers de circonstance* rank poorly as the playful immediacy of their subject matter seems to suggest a certain ephemerality of the poem itself. This sensation of the transitory nature of the poem is reinforced by its insistence on the present, namely the present of a salon culture that favored and triggered these poems. In addition, there is another dimension to these poems that should not be omitted and that participates in their anchoring in the present; that is, their modernity. The poems indeed evoke numerous subjects that are all evocative of nineteenth century urban modernity; that is, trains,

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trams,\textsuperscript{40} railways, posters ("affiches,"\textsuperscript{41}) coffee shops ("estaminet,"\textsuperscript{42}) along with fashionable designer boutiques. Moreover, the thematic representation of Mallarmé’s contemporary surroundings through a broad urban and social canvas is heightened by the accompaniment of these poems by objects that intensify the sensation of lived experience. These objects place reality at the forefront of this poetic opus. What is modern, therefore, in the \textit{Vers de circonstance} is not only the thematic representation of the present but also the real inclusion of the present through objects. There is thus another aspect to this work; that is, it is both a text and an object with aesthetic and material properties.

\textbf{An Aesthetic & Material Artifact}

\textsuperscript{40} Va-t'en, messager, il n'importe
par le \textit{tram}, le coche ou le bac
rue, et 2, Gounod à la porte
de notre Georges Rodenbach.

Laid faune! Comme passe aux bocages un \textit{train}
qui siffle ce que bas le chalumeau soupire
vas-tu par trop de flamme empêcher ce quatrain
maladroit à la taire ou, s'il la disait, pire.

Plus rapide à tire-d'aile
que lui de prendre le \textit{train}
un heureux baiser fidèle
devancera mon quatrain.

In all three poems the italics are mine.

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Sur un panneau communal désaffecté à la campagne.}
Salut ô passant qui te fiches
de lire en été les affiches!

\textsuperscript{42} À Willy Ponsot qu'on estime
de profil et même de dos
dans l'estaminet maritime
de Honfleur dans le Calvados.
As the reader learns, pursuant to the reading of Bonniot’s preface, Mallarmé engaged in an exuberant poetic practice that the austere appearance of any black and white print edition could never convey.

[ces vers] tracés à l’encre rouge ou d’or sur des éventails, en dédicaces sur des livres, à l’occasion d’envois de bonbons ou de souvenirs au jour de l’an, pour célébrer fêtes et anniversaires.

The lush visuality of the poems calligraphied with red or gold ink onto an object such as a fan draws to mind parallels with older practices of visual poetry that combined writing with objects. The first, and most common form of a visual writing, was the carmina figurata, the ancestor of Guillaume Apollinaire’s calligrams. But, contrary to the Vers de circonstance, the purpose of such poems was to typographically mime the object that it discussed [ill. 1]. The shape of the poem thereby replaced the need to refer to the object and the three dimensionality of the object was subsumed in the two dimensionality of the poem. In Mallarmé’s Vers de circonstance, however, the poem is either drafted directly onto the object or accompanies the object. Instead of mimicking the object and reducing its properties to the two dimensional surface of the poem, Mallarmé creates a much more intricate relationship between texts and objects. Prior to him, the only systematic trace of a poetry written directly on objects would be found in Germany, where poets of the Romantic movement momentarily inscribed their poems in nature, on stones and tree trunks. More importantly, the use of concrete objects in poetry imports a technique practiced in the plastic arts. Thus Bonniot continues to write:

Il souhaitait même que le vers devînt partie intégrante de l'objet, ajoutant par là au décor. Ainsi en mit-il sur des œufs rouges de Pâques, des galets, des cruches

de Calvados. Il orna, entre autres, un grand mirliton destiné à une fête dans une maison amie, les rayons d'une bibliothèque.

Bonniot’s presentation of these poems as visual and material artifacts - thanks to the expression “il souhaitait même que le vers devînt partie intégrante de l'objet, ajoutant par là au décor” - points to the transformation of Mallarmé’s poetics into an aesthetic practice. This innovation merges the visual, verbal and plastic arts together, as the poems touch on all three aspects of these arts. Thus, beyond the attention to the elegant calligraphy of the poems on the page or their visual mise-en-scène with the objects which they accompany, there is also an almost sculptural carving of the poem onto physical matter. This touches on the relation of art to poetry.

For a long time this discussion was limited to the relation between literature and painting, a topic which has supplied a rich critical debate since the Middle Ages. Despite the fact that Mallarmé’s objects are of a different nature than those that nourished the reflection on literature and painting, it is important to recall some of the important ideas of this debate in order to appreciate the novelty of Mallarmé’s approach to the question of the relation between the visual and the verbal arts.

Until the nineteenth century, the relationship between the visual and verbal arts had principally been dealt with through the notion of mimesis. In the Middle-Ages for example, iconography principally served to illustrate religious texts that could thereby fix their ideological affects in plastic forms. During the Renaissance, art as much as letters renewed Plato’s aesthetic ideal by proclaiming the mimetic function of art. The mission of these two disciplines was then to observe reality in order to understand it better. This representative and mimetic function of art could be said to have lasted until the eighteenth century, until the publication of Lessing’s (1729-1781) Laocoon. This work, published in 1776, greatly unsettled the philosophical foundations upon which past aesthetic configurations had been thought because Lessing demonstrated the
mystifying character of the association of painting with literature, by showing the differences between these two art forms. As his work shows, while literature represents a continuous action developing over time, painting represents a fixed moment. Painting is thus an art of space, whereas literature is an art of time. They are therefore two very distinct art forms.

The theoretical repercussions of Lessing’s work made their way into nineteenth century discourses regarding the relation of the visual and verbal arts when this work was translated into French in 1802. Artists started to assert the specificity of their individual disciplines, as if they had retained Lessing’s lessons. However, it is paradoxically during that same period that exchanges between art and literature became more frequent. In reaction against the Classicists perhaps, the Romantics called for an art that would abolish the traditional distinctions inherited from former aesthetic codifications and theories.

All in all, could thus be the running leitmotiv of nineteenth century aesthetics: from the early Romantics to the late Symbolists. Though the understanding of what would be included under the term all was constantly redefined by each consecutive artistic movement, the impulse of literature was to move towards spheres that exceed its domain. During Mallarmé’s artistic lifetime, the two targeted fields were music and painting. But, reciprocally, painters were tempted by writing, and composers by painting. Famous examples are Eugène Delacroix’s (1798-1863) journals and Victor Hugo’s (1802-1885) legacy of drawings. Eugène Fromentin (1820-1876) presents a more complex case of an artist who is both considered a writer and a painter. Charles Baudelaire’s (1821-1867) term “correspondance” serves to express this ideal movement of convergence of the arts to which Richard Wagner (1813-1883) gave the most

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44 Whereas the early Romantics - Germaine de Staël, Benjamin Constant and Chateaubriand - sought to reconcile art with life through their implications in the political and social arena, the generation that had witnessed the failed revolutions of 1830 and 1848 retrieved from the public eye and sought its achievement of unity in its union with other art forms.
significant realization in his creation of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The nineteenth century was thus marked by a profusion of different forms of artistic hybridization whereby the boundaries of art were defined by fluctuating movements of divergence and convergence. Contrary to a certain view that has been constructed of the nineteenth century there was little antagonism between synthesis and fragmentation, high-art and low-art. All contributed to *all*. Or, as Mallarmé writes, in a letter to Emile Zola dated November 6 1874:

> Quant à moi, qui admire une affiche, dessinée et coloriée comme plus d'une, à l'égal d'un plafond ou d'une apotheose, *je ne connais pas un point de vue en art qui soit inférieur à un autre*; et *je jouis partout ainsi qu'il sied.*

As Mallarmé’s assertion shows, this desire to abolish categories was applicable as much to the art world as to literature and poetry. In literature it was the levels of language that were being targeted (register, genre, style). In Hugo’s text, “Réponse à un acte d’accusation” published in *Les Contemplations* (1856), he proudly claimed the honor of having put “un bonnet rouge au vieux dictionnaire.” Hugo thereby positioned himself as a liberator of language, freeing it of the artificial academic constraints of the alexandrine. Another example from Victor Hugo is the infamous line from his play *Hernani* (1830), in which one alexandrine went over its line to the next thus creating an unwelcome *rejet.* But, aside from these distinctions of genre and style it is mostly the compartmentalization of the arts that was being targeted by the general critic of aesthetic categories.

Titles of paintings, such as James McNeil Whistler’s (1834-1903), offer a good illustration of this desire of hybridization of the arts among themselves. His paintings are called

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46 Hugo, Victor. *Hernani*. Act I, Scene 1, Doña Josepha “Serait-ce déjà lui ? C’est bien à l’escalier / Dérobé.” The *rejet* here is the word “dérobé” that is rejected unto the next line.
“Harmony,” or “Arrangement” as if they were musical compositions. Reciprocally, writers started practicing art criticism. The most active of these new art critics were Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), Théophile Gautier (1811-1872), Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907), Jules Laforgue (1860-1887), Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893), Stendhal (1783-1842), and Emile Zola (1840-1902) to name but a few. The times were thus, according to Théophile Gautier’s formulation, to a “transposition d’art.” This notion, which since then has greatly been popularized, allows nonetheless to see the ideal of an artistic creation where each art form (music, painting and literature) lets itself be inspired by the others, while still searching for and developing its own specificity.

The new object created by Mallarmé in the Vers de circonstance belongs and doesn’t belong to this historical framework. Similarly to other artists his poetry tends towards a hybridization of artistic forms. But, simultaneously, he innovates for his time by imposing a new aesthetic dimension to his poetic field; that is, the plastic and material dimension of the object. Indeed, there are over twenty different types of objects used in the Vers de circonstance. The poems can then be subdivided into two categories depending on whether they simply accompany the object or whether they are directly written on the object. Overall, the objects in the Vers de circonstance cover a large spectrum from stationery items to objects pertaining to interior design or architectural spaces.

In all likelihood, the poems started off as simple inscriptions on books and envelopes. They then expanded to calling cards, fans, photographs and albums. This initial selection of objects developed over time and soon included a kazoo, jugs, and pebbles, as well as furniture pieces and architectural structures involving bookshelves, a chimney mantel piece, and an out-house.47

47 This type of poetry belongs to a tradition of anatomical blazons made popular by the sixteenth century poet Clément Marot. He had instigated a poetry competition on the female anatomy. This collection of poems by several
There are also a series of perishable goods among which there are flowers, candied fruit, candies, cakes, and Easter eggs. In addition to the variety of these objects, they cover a very large range from to the most tangible (the poem engraved in stone on a mantelpiece) to the most evanescent (the edible and perishable goods). The spectrum of these objects also goes from the most domestic household ware (glasses, pitchers, plates, teapots, a foot-warmer, and envelopes) to more sophisticated objects (such as books, photographs, fans, paintings and drawings) passing through organic materials as well as minerals (flowers, stones, eggs, and candied fruit.) But a common denominator is that they are all more or less mundane with no apparent material value.

This taxonomy of objects is then divided into different categories that correspond to the relation of the object to the poem.

In its simplest form, the object is not modified at all and is simply presented with an accompanying note on which the poem is written. That is the case of the poems accompanying flowers, candied fruit, candies and cakes. These objects are similar to “ready-mades” because they are presented with no direct modification to the original object. But, paradoxically, these objects were not meant to be preserved as they are all perishable goods. The flowers withered; the...
candy, the fruits and the cakes were eaten. The only trace of the object, therefore, is the poem that bears witness to these objects’ brief existence.

In a second category, there are poems directly written on objects. These poems can be sorted into two different groups. First, there are the poems that are written on objects and used in a similar function as the original object. This is the case of the poems written on envelopes, calling cards, and fans. The poem then participates in the original function of the object whether it be sending a letter, paying a friendly tribute to a friend by sending out a calling card, or giving a lady a fan. In the first case, the poem is a postal-address; in the second case the poem is a cordial poetic accolade; in the last case, the poem is integrated into the decorative pattern of the fan. Then, there are the poems that are directly written on objects, but where the use value of the object is subverted by the poem’s own poetic agenda that is exposed in the poem. This is the case of the didactic poems aforementioned, written on pebbles and jugs for example.

Having described most of these objects and explained their relationship to the poems, it will be useful to understand a bit the status that they have in the poems. To begin, Mallarmé’s objects are not only overwhelmingly present in the poems; they are also presented as animated entities endowed with their own agency and energy. In the following quatrain, for example, the object is introduced as if it were going on its own to meet the addressee:

*Lettre va*, le plus tôt c’est

Le mieux […] 48

The imperative “va” and the fact that the reference to the mailman is omitted suggest that the letter could, of its own accord, go to the indicated address without any mediation. The energetic momentum of the object thus underlines the effervescence of words set in a free floating dynamic

movement between a sender and receiver. The general punctuation of the poems reinforces this sensation of vitality and profusion of objects. The apposition of the object between commas, or the placement of the object at the beginning of the quatrain followed by a comma, for instance, serve to draw the attention of the reader to the object:

Quand s’approchera de son nez
La batiste qu’elle déploie,

Mouchoirs, pour Elisa sonnez

Toute une fanfare de joie. (120, 8)

The use of the imperative in both poems (“va” and “sonnez”) creates an energetic dynamic around the text/object, which in the first case is endowed with movement (“va”) and in the second is attributed a voluble sound (“sonnez”). But, the energy that is contained within these poetic objects is best conveyed by the use of exclamation marks. This gives the reader the impression that the objects are suddenly emerging in the reader’s view, as these fruits being picked from the tree:

Ces fruits! Aimez que je les cueille 49

Ces pommes [...] il faut […] pour vous les cueillir au laurier! 50

ô grappe folle! 51

Or, as a bouquet of flowers that one hides behind one’s back before suddenly presenting it:

Rose! Je deviens Céladon 52

Cette fleur! Il t’est permis 53

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50 Ibid, p. 108.
51 Ibid, p. 159.
52 Ibid, p. 126.
Notre carte à la main, bougeons!  

*Ces roses! As-tu laissé choir*  

This energy and effervescence of the objects is magnified by the concision of the poems to which the exclamation marks give a dynamic impetus. This upward momentum of the object echoes Mallarmé’s poetic appeal for figures of elevation and suspension. In addition, the impetus of the object is heightened by its erotic charge. The eroticism of the object can be partly explained by the fact that most of the poems of the *Vers de circonstance* are dedicated to women. It is therefore a predominantly feminine environment. For Pascal Durand, there is “une érotique des objets” that is epitomized in the figure of the fan. “Chose mobile qui parle et jouit […] l’éventail est, dans toute la chaîne des objets touchant au corps, celui qui exprime le plus ouvertement l’érotisme fétichiste du signataire de *La Dernière Mode* […].” It is revealing that women are omitted from Durand’s analysis of the eroticism of the object because what is fetichicized in reality is the object *per se*. Indeed, what interests Mallarmé in the *Vers de circonstance* is the study of the object in and of itself and not as an attribute of something else. This is visible in the way in which he stages and positions the object in his poems.

A great number of poems place the object on display by using the object as the thematic subject of the poem. Among the objects named in the poems there are the *bel éventail*, *cette théière*, *ce miroir*, *ces mouchoirs*, *ce gâteau*, *ces œufs*, *cette fleur*, *ces roses*, *ce...*  

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54 Ibid, p. 149.
58 Ibid, p. 119.
livre,\textsuperscript{65} ce funeste abat-jour,\textsuperscript{66} ce buvard,\textsuperscript{67} as well as an abundance of fruits (\textit{ces vils fruits},\textsuperscript{68} \textit{ces fruits},\textsuperscript{69} \textit{ce même fruit},\textsuperscript{70} \textit{ce fruit},\textsuperscript{71} \textit{ces pommes},\textsuperscript{72} and candies (\textit{ces bonbons}).\textsuperscript{73} The demonstrative adjectives that introduce the objects emphasize their palpable immediacy that can be pointed at by the deictics “ce, cet, cette, ces.” The pronounced usage of the demonstrative adjective, which appears overall one hundred and sixty one times in this opus, gives the impression that the poems are surrounded by a significant number of real material objects. In addition to the impression of agency that is given by these objects their demonstrative mode of presentation also gives them a palpable sensoriality.

Indeed, all of the objects of the \textit{Vers de circonstance} were meant to be looked at, touched, and played with. The envelopes were meant to be opened (“quand Émile Willaume t’ouvre;”

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid, p. 120.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid, p. 122.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid, p. 127.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid, p. 131.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid, p. 144.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid, p. 159.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid, p. 160.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid, p. 105.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid, p. 106, 107.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid, p. 106.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid, p. 106, 110, 111.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid, p. 108
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, p. 115.
“Que la dame aux doux airs vainqueurs […] t'ouvre”); the fans were meant to be held and vented; the pages of albums and books were meant to be opened and turned; the kazoo was meant to be played; the jugs were meant to be drunk from; the food was meant to be eaten; the flowers were meant to be scented and beheld. The poems thus consistently insist on the tactile quality of the objects by emphasizing the role of the hand that holds and touches, is held or is touched:

Tiens, facteur, ce mot en la main\textsuperscript{74}

Ma lettre, ne t'arrête qu'à

	extit{la main} petite et familière

de Gabrielle Wrotnowska\textsuperscript{75}

À Madame Durand je baise

	extit{la main} […]\textsuperscript{76}

Aile, mieux que \textit{sa main}, abrite

du soleil ou du hâle amer

le visage de Marguerite

Ponsot, qui regarde la mer.\textsuperscript{77}

[...] un fruit d'or tombe \textit{en sa main}.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid, p. 90.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid, p. 82.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid, p. 86.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid, p. 96.
dans cette main qu'on aime à tendre

je dépose le fruit permis.

[…] sur un geste de votre main.

je mets comme le chien eût fait

mon museau sur votre main […]

The importance of the hand (whether it be in the singular or plural) is signaled by its recurrence twenty-five times in the poems making it the single most prominent physical attribute.

In addition to the hand that holds and touches there is the eye that beholds and watches. The lexical field of words related to the verb “regarder” is quite large. There are the imperatives “voyez” and “vois” accompanied by the organs of sight, “[les] yeux,” “[un] œil,” “[une] œillade” that lead to “[des] vision[s].” The word “regard” in and of itself is already repeated nine times. There is thus an imperative in these poems to seize the work as a three dimensional object that is made of both textual signs and material referents. The object in Mallarmé’s poetry is thus neither fully ancillary, neither fully autonomous. It calls for a ramifying interpreting context that exists in relation to something else. The poem, therefore, is fully in a dialectic relationship with external reality, whether it be through its use of material referents or through the apostrophizing gesture of the poem to an addressee. The poem requests its reader to feel the object in the palm of the hand and to feel its contours. It is the materiality of the object that is being evaluated along with its aesthetic appeal.

**Issues associated with this work**
The complex characteristic of the *Vers de circonstance* - as a textual object on the one hand and as an aesthetic and material artifact on the other - positions this work in a paradoxical situation because it suggests that there are *two* different works associated with the title, *Vers de circonstance*. First, there is the print edition that consists of six hundred and ten poems printed black on white. These poems are then separated into twenty different sections that correspond, for the most part, to the particular context for which the poems were written, such as writing a letter, offering gifts on a birthday or celebration, or ornamenting an object with a particular person in mind. The subject-matter and background of these poems appear, therefore, highly context-laden, with an overall structural and thematic unity along the lines of the occasional.

But then, there seems to be a second work involved under the title, *Vers de circonstance*. This is indicated by the saturation of the print edition by a critical apparatus that keeps pointing the reader to another work, that is, the *original*, formed by the initial objects on which Mallarmé started apposing his poems. The reason for distinguishing these two works is that while the focus of the print edition seems centered on the notion of the occasional, the focus of the material objects of the *Vers de circonstance* displaces the question of genre to aesthetic considerations on the relation of art to external reality. This also addresses issues concerning the aesthetic and material properties of poetry as an artistic medium. The occasional nature of the original work is thus diffused by the striking presence of the object that shifts the attention of the poem away from the context to the material properties of the work.

In addition to the dichotomy between the study of this work as a textual object and the study of this work as a material one, there is another difficulty that must be taken into account. That is, the conservation of these objects. To begin, a lot of the original poems of this collection were lost.

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78 This categorization of the poems according to the circumstance for which they were written, works for all poems, to the exception of the final four sections of the *Vers de circonstance* that are arranged according to form rather than context. These sections are called: “Rondels,” “Sonnets,” “Huitain,” “Triolets.”
over time. The only remaining trace of them are the copies that either Mallarmé or his daughter Geneviève made. Then, with regard to the objects that remain, a great number of these originals are nowadays housed by private collectors who treasure the singular originality of this work for its unique combination of the ornamental allure of its calligraphic poem with the playful banality of the objects on which the poet has set his attention: a teapot, a fan, a mirror, a stone, etc.

Finally, in some cases, even when the original poem still exists, the object may no longer be there. The reason for this is not necessarily just the loss of the object or customary problems of traceability due to ownership rights, but the fact that Mallarmé’s objects were in some situations meant to disappear because the poem accompanied a perishable object. In a last instance, there are cases when the copy of the poem still exists, but its original has disappeared because it was directly written on a perishable object. Two striking examples come to mind where the object in question was an edible product that was thus meant to be consumed with the offering of the poem. The first example refers to the category of poems identified as “Dons de fruits glacés au Nouvel An,” where the poem accompanied a box of candied fruit. The second concerns Mallarmé’s Easter poems that were directly written on the eggs. But the same holds true of other consumable goods that were offered and consumed (cakes and candies.) Similarly, the flowers that were offered have by now withered long ago.

There are thus two aspects under which this work must be studied. The first is linked to the notion of the occasional and is, therefore, generic and temporal. It consists in the study of the transformation of a private poetic practice - apparently turned towards individual circumstances - into a publishable poetic genre. The second relates to materiality, and the function of the object in creating a connection between poetry and external reality.

In the past, these two aspects have often been conflated. This has led to a misconstrued vision of the Vers de circonstance as a minor poetic production in Mallarmé’s oeuvre. This was due to
the fact that the reception of the *Vers de circonstance* falsely emphasized the personal and occasional nature of these poems. This reading was reinforced by the appeal of the poems as objects. For the aesthete and collector Robert de Montesquiou, the appeal of the *Vers de circonstance* consists in conveying an intimate access to the mystifying figure that was Mallarmé. A genetic study of the *Vers de circonstance* demonstrates, however, the fallacy of this myth that considers this work purely as a private approach to the individual Mallarmé. Much to the contrary, the intimacy portrayed in the *Vers de circonstance* is very much constructed to a poetic end that echoes Mallarmé’s poetic concerns. This will become clear through the assessment of the value that Mallarmé placed on this work.

**Genetic History of the *Vers de circonstance***

A common misconception surrounding the *Vers de circonstance* must be discarded; that is, the idea that this work merely arose as a posthumous publication due to the desire of Mallarmé’s friends and family to revive the memory of the poet through an intimate approach to his work. The 1920 editorial preface to the *Vers de circonstance* contributed to this myth by justifying the publication of this work as follows:

> Il eût été dommage, croyons-nous, de tenir dans l'ombre ces témoins des heures intimes de la vie du Poète, que la main pieuse de sa fille recueillit au fur et à mesure de leur éclosion.

Contrary to the vision of the *Vers de circonstance* that is presented there - where Mallarmé’s daughter, Geneviève, is credited with bringing these poems to light as a *souvenir* of her father - a

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A study of the numerous manuscript versions along with Mallarmé’s correspondence about this work makes it possible to trace the evolution of this work in Mallarmé’s poetic trajectory. Judging by the chronology of the poems, it seems most likely that Mallarmé started out in the 1870s with a relatively small variety of occasional poems that he developed over time into an extremely rich and diversified poetic practice that reached its apogee in the early-mid 1890s. In 1873, Mallarmé wrote his first occasional quatrain to accompany a watercolor by his close friend, Edouard Manet (132-1883). Subsequently, in 1876 he produced the first substantive occasional poems, identified under the title, “Offrandes à divers du Faune.” He followed up with further dedications when the work was reedited in 1887. In 1884, 1885, Mallarmé wrote his first postal-quatrains along with various other dedications accompanying objects. Then, in 1887 Mallarmé added poems dedicated to birthdays and other special occasions. Two years later, in 1889,
Mallarmé composed New Year’s poems. The following year he wrote poems for Albums,\textsuperscript{80} and in 1891 he wrote poems “Autour d’un mirliton.” In 1893 his field of experimentation expanded to fans and Easter eggs. Finally, in 1898 his poems accompanied or captioned photographs. The progressive opening of this work to such a broad range of occasions and material objects demonstrates the experimental nature of this work. Furthermore, through this chronology the reader senses Mallarmé gradually expanding his field of experimentation throughout his various chosen categories of poems.

However, the originality of this work does not lie solely in terms of the poetic occasions celebrated and the range of objects that were appended to these poems. The novelty of this work also resides in the decision to publish these poems. Indeed, publishing occasional verses was not an ordinary gesture because, before Mallarmé, there was no real precedent for such a transfer of an author’s private works (considered clearly occasional) to the public domain during the author’s lifetime. The same holds true of other forms of intimate writings such as diaries, private journals or even autobiographies.\textsuperscript{81} Aside from a few exceptions, these genres all tended to be differentiated from an author’s works. It was only in the twentieth century that such distinctions started collapsing with the publication, for example, of André Gide’s (1869-1951) private

\textsuperscript{80} Furthermore, in 1890 we find this note by Mallarmé to Méry : “Envois, dédicaces, traits d’esprit/ au Paon/ destinés à accompagner ses étrennes / de 1890 / (humblement recueillis et mis en / ordre / par M[r]. Mallarmé).” Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet MNR MS 1228 1/4. Then we find something that looks like a shopping list with names on the left and gifts on the right. The list ends with this note: “le Secrétaire de l’esprit / du [drawing of a peacock] / M[r] Mallarmé / qui reçoit une plume, d’aigle.” Another note pertaining to this document is signed: « ton vieux page / S. M ».

\textsuperscript{81} While one may cite Rousseau’s Confessions as a counter example to this Manichean assertion, his claim regarding the exemplary nature of his enterprise displaces the question of the particular to the universal. In other words, the story of his life only makes sense within a greater humanistic project, that is, to understand what is shared by the collective human psyche. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, Gustave Moreau started setting the example for the juxtaposition of an artist’s life and work by turning his studio into a museum during his own life-time. Indeed, the Maison-Musée Gustave Moreau was founded in 1896 and Moreau died two years later.
journals in 1939. Although Mallarmé was far from being the only one engaging in occasional poetry as well as writing on objects, none of his contemporaries seemed to have attempted to publish such works either during their lifetime or posthumously as a poetic legacy. The project underlying Mallarmé’s Vers de circonstance is thus completely unique and original because by publishing his occasional works he automatically glorified a marginal genre by assigning to it a public status that it had never had before. But, as if this initial gesture was not enough, Mallarmé did not content himself with publishing these poems. More drastically still, he magnified his decision by aligning this work with his major poetic work, the Poésies. A brief overview of the context in which Mallarmé situated this comparison between the Vers de circonstance and the Poésies helps understand the significance of this occasional work within his greater poetic project.

On September 8th 1898, though Mallarmé was only fifty-six years old, he suffered a severe asphyxiation attack that nearly killed him. The doctor was called to the poet’s side in his country home in Valvins, and after helplessly examining his patient he left him to sleep things off. By the afternoon of the following day Mallarmé had passed away. Overnight, however, he had promptly written a testamentary letter to his wife and daughter. Knowing his health to be fragile and not knowing what the future held in store for him he wanted to ensure that the shaping of his poetic legacy would be done according to his will. The tone of his letter is a balanced mixture of factual determination and nostalgia for he has to admit his failure to complete l’œuvre - l’œuvre rêvée, l’œuvre totale - the relentless obsession that had occupied him for most of the preceding decade. Having failed to accomplish this work he orders his daughter Geneviève and his wife Marie to burn his notes.

Brûlez, par conséquent : il n’y pas là d’héritage littéraire, mes pauvres enfants. Ne soumettez même pas à l’appréciation de quelqu’un : ou refusez toute ingénrence curieuse ou amicale. Dites qu’on n’y distinguerait rien, c’est vrai du reste, et, vous, mes pauvres prostrées, les seuls êtres au monde capables à ce point de respecter toute une vie d’artiste sincère, croyez que ce devait être très beau.  

With bare simplicity, he admits his failure to complete the dreamed work which should have been the summation of his entire poetic career. Now, with death at his heels, he has a more urgent task to accomplish, that is, to organize his completed works. He thus leaves both women clear instructions as to how they should carry out his poetic legacy. At that point, his tone is factual and resolute.

Ainsi, je ne laisse pas un papier inédit excepté quelques bribes imprimées que vous trouverez puis le Coup de Dés et Hérodiade terminé s’il plaît au sort.

Mes vers sont pour Fasquelle, ici, et Deman, s’il veut se limiter à la Belgique :

Poésies et Vers de circonstances [sic]
avec L’Après-Midi d’un Faune
et Les Noces d’Hérodiade.

Mystère.  

83 Italics are mine.

84 He is speaking here of his article “Le Mystère dans les Lettres.”
The order in which he places his poems is fundamental because of the insight it gives his readers into the philosophical arrangement of his œuvre. In his own words, he places four works in equation with each other. On the one hand there is the couple L’Après-midi d’un faune and Les Noces d’Hérodiade; and on the other hand, there is the couple Poésies and Vers de circonstance. The coupling of the first two works is not so unusual. As a matter of fact they are often juxtaposed together because they complement each other. L’Après-Midi d’un Faune is the poem of Mallarmé’s spring awakening, while Les Noces d’Hérodiade is his winter poem about abstinence, silence and solitude. By contrast, the Poésies and the Vers de circonstance form a surprising duo because nothing could seem more removed from the highly aestheticized atmosphere of the Poésies than the latter, which is empirically grounded in the present and in the simplicity and social conventions of everyday life. The parallel alignment of these two works suggests, however, that the immaterial poetics of the Poésies complements the occasional poetics of the Vers de circonstance. But, more surprisingly, the juxtaposition of these two works on a similar horizontal scale - rather than on a vertical one as with the Faune and Hérodiade – implies that these two works are not so much in opposition with each other - as is the case of the Faune and Hérodiade - as they are in a dialectic relation to one another.

The leveling of these two works on the same plane is, however, justified by the place that the occasional occupies in both poetry collections. Indeed, the notion of the occasional is not only reserved to the Vers de circonstance; the occasional plays a fundamental role in Mallarmé’s poetics at large, including in the Poésies. Numerous exegetes have demonstrated the occasional nature of Mallarmé’s œuvre. In truth, the occasional permeates Mallarmé’s poetic work, from the epigraphic poem of the Poésies, “Salut” - written as a toast for a poetry banquet - to Mallarmé’s numerous funerary poems, “Tombeaux” and “Hommage[s].” Fewer readers and critics have
extended this comparison of the poetics of the *Poésies* to the *Vers de circonstance* because of their apparently polar differences.

On the surface, these two works seem radically opposed to one another. First, the latter work plays a far greater emphasis on the occasional than the former through a series of deictics that point to the referential character of the work (dedication and context), whereas the former tends to erase the occasion underlying the poem (i.e: the poems: “Apparition” written at the request of his friend Henri Cazalis for his fiancée, Ettie Yapp; “Feuillet d’album written for Thérèse Roumanille, the daughter of the poet Joseph Roumanille, leader of the Félibrige movement in Avignon). Then, while the occasions celebrated in the *Poésies* have to do with “serious” events that revolve around public commemorations (poems in honor of: Théophile Gautier, Jean-François Raffaëlli, James McNeil Whistler, Edgar Allen Poe, Paul Verlaine, Richard Wagner and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes), the *Vers de circonstance* deal with everyday events and private occasions (birthdays, celebrations, gift offerings).

An analysis, however, of the formal properties of the *Vers de circonstance* along with their genetic history reveal a very different picture. Namely that - contrary to received readings - these poems are not nearly as private as they seem. Sixteen years passed between the writing of *Offrandes à divers du faune* - the first poems that constitute the initial collection of the *Vers de circonstance* - and the time when Mallarmé decided to collect his poems in a red leather bound notebook, in 1892.85 This gesture of turning private poems into a poetry collection marks the official birth of the *Vers de circonstance* as a body of work. Prior to collecting the poems in a notebook, Mallarmé had written short occasional pieces, but he had not systematized them into an autonomous poetry collection. This manuscript is important because it confirms the shift of the

85 This notebook is now preserved at the Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet in Paris.
writing of the *Vers de circonstance* away from a casual poetic exercise to a deliberate poetic practice - as the poems were copied down and reworked in the manuscript after having been sent. The occasional nature of this work serves more as a generic framework for the poet to work in rather than as a contextual matrix. Mallarmé’s interest in this work is thus mostly formal and less context-bound.
Chapter 2: Hyper-context and Erasure

The seemingly private and personal nature of the Vers de circonstance

The occasional nature of Mallarmé’s verses in the Vers de circonstance does not necessarily qualify them for a minor poetic genre as all works are occasioned to a certain degree. Most of English Romantic poetry for instance is occasioned. Exemplarily, William Wordsworth wrote poems that clearly point to the circumstance for which the poems were written and this has not hindered their poetic appeal. His poems are also not considered marginal. A poem such as “Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey,” for example, is considered as one of his finest works. To qualify Mallarmé’s Vers de circonstance as “occasional verses” is, therefore, not a very descriptive term considering the large variety of poetic styles and genres accounted for by that expression ranging from major poetic works to minor ones. The scope of the occasional thus encompasses any type of poem from ones celebrating trivial occurrences to others written for public occasions such as memorial pieces, funeral elegies, sonnets or odes memorializing state occasions or historic events. A famous example in the latter category would be Auden’s poem, “September 1, 1939,” written on the occasion of the outbreak of World War II. Within that spectrum, Mallarmé’s occasional poems of the Poésies present a more complex version of the occasional as they often conceal the occasion for which they were written. This enables the poems to surpass the circumstantial nature of the occasion on or for which they were written in order to address a broader poetic or thematic issue. This is precisely the case of Wordsworth’s occasional pieces. While the poems seem anchored in a specific place in time they use the specificity of the event as an exemplum for the universal validity of their argument. Similarly, in

86 Other visibly occasional poems by Wordsworth are: “Lines left upon a seat,” “Lines written at a small distance from my house,” “Lines written near Richmond,” “Lines written when sailing,” “London, 1802,” “Upon Westminster Bridge,” “Written in London, September, 1802.”
the Poésies, the broad scope of some of the poems exceeds the specificity of their genetic origin. However, when the poems do display the context for which they were written they do not address broad historical events as is the case of Auden’s previously mentioned poem. Nonetheless, Mallarmé’s occasional verses are still definitely situated in the realm of public and collective memory as they address funeral commemorations of important public figures. The two important examples from the Poésies are: “Tombeau d’Edgar Poe” and “Le tombeau de Charles Baudelaire.” The occasional can therefore be redeemed depending on the degree to which its circumstance can be surpassed either by suppressing it or by exceeding the limitations of its occasion to embrace a more general and universal meaning. Finally, the occasional nature of a poem can be transformed into a greater poetic end if the event related in the poem can be linked to important historical events or public figures.

By comparison with the range of occasional verses previously mentioned, Mallarmé’s Vers de circonstance are much narrower in scope. Not only are they centered on events of everyday life; they supposedly aspire to nothing more. What distinguishes the Vers de circonstance, therefore, from major occasional works is that they do not seem to claim anything beyond the immediacy of the present that occasioned them. By contrast, Romantic poetry had used the illusion of personal occasions to tell impersonal truths. Symptomatically, Victor Hugo claimed to center his poetic works on his personal experience, yet the subjectivity of his individual “I” is clearly subjected to his desire to describe the human condition. In his Preface to the Contemplations (1856), for example, he weaves his individual voice into the collective psyche.

Nul de nous n’a l’honneur d’avoir une vie qui soit à lui. Ma vie est la vôtre, votre vie est la mienne, vous vivez ce que je vis; la destinée est une. Prenez donc ce miroir, et regardez-vous-y. On se plaint quelquefois des écrivains
qui disent moi. Parlez-nous de nous, leur crie-t-on. Hélas! quand je vous parle de moi, je vous parle de vous. Comment ne le sentez-vous pas? Ah! insensé, qui crois que je ne suis pas toi!

As this passage demonstrates, Hugo is committed to showing the universal validity of personal experience. To that effect he uses the figure of chiasma to show the necessary bond that ties the particular to the universal: the former being contained in the latter. By contrast, Mallarmé’s *Vers de circonstance* seem confined to their occasions. Their immediacy is reinforced by the offering of most poems as gifts to a poetic addressee. Moreover, this poetic addressee is not an imaginary reader, but the biographical person to whom the poem is literally addressed. The poems, when they are not directly written on envelopes, calling cards or directly on the object, are often enclosed within a letter, as is the case of the following quatrain [ill. 2]:

Feuilletez et, l’un comme l’une,
Avouez que je m’y connais
Moi, personne peu clair de lune,
En très-vieux albums japonais.

Written at the bottom of a letter to Méry Laurent, the quatrain clearly addresses its destinataire who was a great enthusiast of Japanese albums and papers. This brings a new nuance to the poetic intentionality of these poems as the occasional is now inscribed within another literary genre, that is, epistolary poetry.

Mallarmé is well known for having engaged in an extremely prolific correspondence. His sense of epistolary reciprocity and amiability was such that Sartre would write: “Il choisit le terrorisme de la politesse: avec les choses, avec les hommes, avec lui-même, il conserve toujours
une imperceptible distance.” 87 For Sartre politeness is associated with the codified rigidity of the bourgeoisie that translates itself in aesthetic terms in a “distance from the real world.” 88 Christina Howells 89 explains Sartre’s rejection of Mallarmé’s politesse by explaining that for the philosopher, politeness could only result from an “implicit purification of the real.” 90 Sartre “is looking in art for the flux of existence” whereas, according to him, in Mallarmé he comes up against “the permanence of essence.” 91 Mallarmé’s politesse is an undeniable trait of his personality and it comes up continuously in his correspondence in the marks of courtesy and respect that he addresses to his interlocutors. But politesse, civility and decorum are also trademarks of the particular genre that he is writing in: occasional poetry. The private circle of distribution of these poems should, thus, not be attributed to an individualized poetic practice, but to a type of societal poetry.

The reference to occasional poetry in Mallarmé’s Vers de circonstance has often been associated with a generic allusion to the historical genre of the occasional. As such, the poems have been qualified as precious and reminiscent of time past. Proust notably commented on a quatrain by Mallarmé 92 noting the poem’s “couleur d’archaïsme” reminiscent of “la fin du


89 Ibid. pp. 3-24.

90 Ibid. p. 32.

91 Ibid.

92 This anecdote is told by Jean-Yves Tadié in his biography on Marcel Proust. As Tadié recalls, Proust had been given the occasion to comment on a quatrain by Mallarmé just a few weeks after having published his article “Contre l’obscurité.” The quatrain entitled “Méry, l’an pareil sur sa course” had been given to him by a mutual friend of theirs, Reynaldo Hahn. Tadié, Jean-Yves. “Proust et Mallarmé.” Marcel Proust. Paris: Gallimard, 1996, p. 308. Méry, l’an pareil en sa course
Allume ici le meme été
Mais toi, tu rajeunis la source
XVIème et du commencement du XVIIème”93 both in terms of theme and language. To a great extent, the Vers de circonstance express a certain nostalgia for the past primarily through their reference to a poetic genre suggestive of courtly poetry and by-gone times; but also through their staging of certain quarters of Paris that were still associated with the aristocracy.

Two neighborhoods stand out in the poems: the “quartier Monceau” and the “Bois de Boulogne.” These areas evoke the glorious days of the Ancien Régime. The 16ème arrondissement notably, located West of Paris and constiting of the former villages of Auteuil and Passy, had newly been attached to the capital in 1860 by Napoleon III through the enterprise of the baron Haussmann. This neighborhood was dominated by wealthy patrician townhouses conveniently situated near the Bois de Boulogne, an English landscape park designed by Haussmann that had formerly been a hunting ground for French monarchs. The history of this area is therefore marked by a strong aristocratic tradition. Prior to the Second Empire’s rehabilitation of the neighborhood and its integration into the urban fabric of the city, many noble families had frequented the area. It was particularly popular in the eighteenth century when the French were swept by a wave of Anglomania. That is how the jardin and bal du Ranelagh were created, as an imitation of Lord Ranelagh’s garden-parties in the outskirts of London. The reputation of these balls and gardens were such that Marie-Antoinette apparently would have been seen dancing there in the early years of her marriage.

This aristocratic heritage of the neighborhood was not lost on Mallarmé. On the contrary, he underscores the poems of the Vers de circonstance written to those very select quarters by making explicit references to its aristocratic past:

Où va boire ton pied fêté.

Paris, chez Madame Méry
Laurent, qui vit loin des profanes
dans sa maisonnette very
select du 9 boulevard Lannes.

While the use of English words is not uncommon in the Vers de circonstance the selection of the words “very / select” in a poem to Méry, living in the 16ème arrondissement, resonates with the history of the neighborhood that for a long period of time was marked by an obsession and enthusiasm for all things British. Britishness represented then the epitome of style. The fashionable appeal of the English expression “very select” is highlighted by Mallarmé in his choice of italicizing the words. Furthermore, he strategically separated those two words in order to place them in the two central positions of a poetic line; that is, the end rhyme and the opening word of the next line. Another way in which this poem continues to draw attention to the historicity of the landmark is by playing on the idea of elitism and exclusivity. Méry is thus described living far from the madding crowd (“loin des profanes”) and in another poem she is presented as a sovereign princess musing on her grounds:

Que la dame aux doux airs vainqueurs
qui songe 9 boulevard Lannes
t'ouvre, mon billet, comme un cœur
avec ses ongles diaphanes.

The word “dame” has an aristocratic undertone that is echoed throughout the poem thanks to the assonance of “dame” with the words “Lannes” and “diaphanes.” The image that Mallarmé evokes here resembles an Épinal print of courtly poetry with a Lady awaiting the arrival of a love letter from her knight. Accordingly, Mallarmé prescribes a special uniform to the mailman who is to deliver the poem. He is dressed up in costume to give the appearance of a lost epoch.
Ô facteur, il faut que tu vêtes

*ta tunique verte d'Elbeuf*

pour ouïr un nid de fauvettes

chantant boulevard Lannes neuf.

The word “tunique” gives an antiquated undertone to the mailman’s attire that is reinforced by the emphatic apostrophe “Ô facteur” at the beginning of the poem. This image of an aristocratic quarter suggestive of ancient times subsists in most of the poems dedicated to other inhabitants of the 16ème arrondissement, as the Bois de Boulogne was one of the most fashionable addresses of the capital. Madame Hortense Schneider, for example, who was a famous opera singer under the Second Empire - renamed in a recent biography, “Offenbach’s diva”94 - is given an imaginary audience composed of nightingales that are placed on equal footing to kings.

Madame Schneider continue

à charmer non moins que des rois

les rossignols dans l’avenue

de Versailles au cent vingt-trois.

The comparison between the nightingales and kings endows the poems with a regal aura that is simultaneously preserved by the mystique of the Bois de Boulogne nearby. The park is presented as an enchanted and solitary wood towards which the poetic voice yearns:

Madame la propriétaire

du 9 boulevard Lannes, coin

de verdure ample et solitaire

dont mon esprit n’est jamais loin.

The singularity of this park is highlighted by its reference as “le bois.” One of the functions of the definite article is to single out objects either because they are identifiable to the listener or reader, or because they have already been mentioned. But, it can also serve to mark the exclusivity of an object, place or institution such as when we say *L’Ecole normale supérieure*. The use of the definite article “le” as well as the diminutive “bois” to talk about the Bois de Boulogne enhances the Park’s distinctive aura such as in this poem to Madame Eugène Manet (Berthe Morisot):

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Apporte ce livre, quand naît
sur le bois l’aurore amaranthe,
chez Madame Eugène Manet
rue au loin Villejust quarante.
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The echo of the poems to an aristocratic past enables Mallarmé to achieve two aims. First, it allows him to link his poems back to an entire poetic tradition of both courtly and occasional poetry. The atmospheric resonance of the poems with the past thus serves a purely generic and decorative function. Then, it is also a way of entertaining his readers by staging them in a sort of arcane theatrical décor, which would have appealed to the playful *salon* culture existing at the time. This last element played a fundamental role in introducing Mallarmé to Parisian inner circles, as the poems also were written on calling cards [ill. 3]. The poems thus served as a subtle self-promoting campaign.

In that context, celebrating private occasions was not a gratuitous poetic act. As Marcel Mauss demonstrated in his essay on gift-giving, *Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l’échange*

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95 Italics are mine.
dans les sociétés archaïques, gifts are rarely free. 96 Even when it may not be apparent, gifts circulate in an economy of exchange where the reward or return on the gift may be either material or symbolic. In Mallarmé’s case, his compensation for his poetic gifts was symbolic. It was a way for him to achieve some auctorial recognition, while increasing his chances to publish and distribute his work.

Turning Private Occasions into Social capital

Offrandes à divers du Faune

At a time when it was difficult for Mallarmé to find venues to publish his poems, he used his social capital in order to promote himself. He accomplished this by addressing his work to a personal network of friends. Those friends were much more likely to welcome his work favorably. This is illustrated by the genetic history of his occasional quatrains accompanying his work L’Après-Midi d’un Faune. Written for the most part in 1876, the poems collected in Offrandes à divers du Faune served to accompany the dedication of Mallarmé’s newly published poem. The study of these poems reveals how Mallarmé used his social capital, through dedicatory quatrains, in order to create a hospitable public platform for himself and his writing. Moreover, the writing of the autograph quatrains accompanying L’Après-Midi d’un faune was crucial to the future production of the Vers de circonstance since by some accounts they triggered the multiplication of this type of occasional poetry. 97 Finally, these poems mark the definite


rupture of Mallarmé with the platonic ideals of the *Parnasse contemporain* as well as with his allegiance to Baudelaire.

Though the miniature dimension of these poems along with the dedicatory nature of the quatrains may seem peripheral in relation to the size and poetic novelty of the object they are dedicating – *L’Après-Midi d’un Faune* -, a historical understanding of Mallarmé’s critical reception prior to the publication of the *Faun* explains the significance of these poems in relation to Mallarmé’s poetic oeuvre. Indeed, while *L’Après-Midi d’un Faune* is considered today as one of his masterpieces - notably celebrated by Debussy in his symphonic rendition of the poem composed between 1892 and 1894 - the reception history of this poem actually shows that the context in which it was published was highly hostile.

Published in 1876 in only 195 copies, *L’Après-Midi d’un faune* was the first of Mallarmé’s poetic works ever published. The *Poésies* came out much later, in 1887, when Mallarmé was already forty-five years old. In addition, that initial publication of the *Poésies* was by no means a commercial edition as it was only printed in forty copies and was composed of only thirty-five short poems. The second complete edition of the *Poésies* appeared only posthumously, in 1899, a year after Mallarmé’s death. Thus, before the publication of *L’Après-Midi d’un faune* the only full-length publications of Mallarmé were: his fashion review *La Dernière Mode* - which had appeared in 1874 - and two translations published in 1875. The first was the translation of Poe’s poem *The Raven*, and the second was the translation of Beckford’s *Vathek*. Though Mallarmé received some credit in the English speaking world for his translations, he was, for the most part, *persona non grata* in France, where he was mostly known

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through his poetic works for being continuously pilloried by the press. Journalists and writers alike viewed him, at best, as a provocateur, at worst, as a charlatan or a buffoon. These first attacks had started trickling in the press around 1866 after the publication of ten of Mallarmé’s poems in the first edition of the Parnasse contemporain. Though a few reviewers acknowledged him some talent - notably as an imitator of Baudelaire - the vast majority of comments were devastating. Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly wrote, for instance, in Le Nain jaune on November 1866:

M. Stéphane Mallarmé est certainement de tout ce volume du Parnasse contemporain, le contemporain le plus surprenant, et pour les amateurs de la haute bouffonnerie, le plus inespéré.

Most of the criticism Mallarmé received in the following decade was very much along those lines. He was judged incomprehensible and provocative, the later judgment often being related to his friendship with another offensive provocateur, his friend, Edouard Manet. As trivial as these condemnations may seem today, they were violent enough at the time to provoke a public defamatory campaign against Mallarmé. In mid-July 1866, confronted with tremendous parental pressure after the publication of his poems in the Parnasse contemporain, Mallarmé was forced to

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99 Mallarmé, however, had started publishing articles since 1861 and poems since 1862. In December 1861, Mallarmé had published three unsigned articles on theater for the local paper, Le Sénonsais (See Pléiade, vol. 1, p. XLV) and Mallarmé’s first published poem, “Placet,” published in Le Papillon, on February 25 1862, was an early version of the poem that later became “Placet futile.”


101 We find this comment by Hector de Callias in “L’Esprit de la semaine.” Le Figaro littéraire, January 9 1876. It was quoted by Bertrand Marchal in Stéphane Mallarmé: Mémoire de la critique. Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1998. p. 46: “Pour M. Mallarmé, […] nous sommes accoutumés à ses produits : il veut sans nul doute, comme M. Manet, s’amuser de son public […]”
resign from his teaching position in a Lycée in Tournon.\textsuperscript{102} This experience gave Mallarmé a sour taste of the French province. The reference to this period of his life appears in the Vers de circonstance in a quatrain that he wrote to his friend, Madame Seignobos in 1897. In it he writes:

\begin{quote}
Vite renoncez l’Ardèche
Autrefois qui nous fit siens
Le cher vent, la branche sèche
Pour les fruits parisiens.
\end{quote}

The region Ardèche in which Tournon is located does, however, inspire a poetic pun that Mallarmé uses in a letter to his friend, Henri Cazalis: “Demain, je fuirai l’Ardèche. Ce nom me fait horreur. Et pourtant il renferme les deux mots auxquels j’ai voué ma vie: art, dèche…”\textsuperscript{103} In his correspondence he describes his experience of the French provinces as having been damned with “exile” (Tournon: 1863-1866; Besançon: 1866-1867; Avignon: 1867-1870; Sens: 1871). The native-born Parisian thus started aspiring to nothing less than to be transferred to the French capital, then home to an exuberant and burgeoning nest of the newest and most promising talents of his time. Among these artists he hoped to find his niche. His transfer was finally accepted in the course of the year 1871.\textsuperscript{104}

Mallarmé’s anticipation had not been in vain. His whole life and persona drastically changed from that moment on. Mallarmé held an eventful social calendar, multiplying contacts with writers, painters, and poets, and also with high ranked administrative officials thanks to whom he

\textsuperscript{102} The poems that had been published in the Parnasse contemporain were: “Les Fenêtres,” “Le Sonneur,” “A celle qui est tranquille,” “Vero novo,” “L’Azur,” “Les Fleurs,” “Soupir,” “Brise marine,” “A un pauvre,” Epilogue.” An eleventh poem appeared alone on June 30 “Tristesse d’été.”


\textsuperscript{104} Mallarmé was appointed at the Lycéee Condorcet (then Lycéee Fontanes) on October 25, 1871.
gained financial support as well as some recognition for his work as a poet and for his involvement in the art world.\(^\text{105}\) This active social networking is far from anecdotal as without Mallarmé’s inexhaustible socializing and his committed reinforcement of personal social ties through an active correspondence he may have never become the published author that we know today. Indeed, though Mallarmé found a much greater support network in Paris, his reputation of being a difficult and outlandish poet followed him. Therefore, while others were publishing their collections of poetry in book format, Mallarmé was still struggling to find journals that would publish his poems individually. The events surrounding the publication of the *Faune*, however, triggered a change in Mallarmé’s overall approach to publication and writing. Instead of submitting his work for the appreciation of his peers he decided to remove himself from the conventional publication venues of poetry to create his own reception space.

The conditions in which the *Faune* was published are revealing of the place Mallarmé then occupied in the field of letters. Mostly unknown, except in a few select circles close to avant-garde artists and poets where he read his poems,\(^\text{106}\) Mallarmé had submitted his *Faune* under the title *Improvisation d’un Faune* to be published in the third edition of the *Parnasse contemporain*. The reception of his work was quite different from the preceding decade. The reading committee, then formed by François Coppée, Théodore de Banville and Anatole France, rejected the poem - mostly under the lead of the last-named –under the guise that it was completely unreadable. Anatole France apparently said: “le public se dirait qu’on se moque de lui.”

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\(^\text{105}\) The “Bréton” family for example seem to have provided support for Mallarmé to increase his salary from the Ministère de l’éducation nationale. See Mallarmé, Stéphane. *Œuvres complètes*. Vol. 1. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade/Gallimard, p. LII.

in the space of that decade is that Mallarmé had begun developing his own poetic voice that was drastically different from his preceding imitations of Baudelaire. Instead of writing lines that sounded like this:

Las du triste hôpital et de l’encens fêtide  
Qui monte en la blancheur banale des rideaux  
Vers le grand crucifix ennuyé du mur vide,  
Le moribond sournois y redresse un vieux dos, […]

Mallarmé was now writing: ¹⁰⁷

Ces Nymphes, je les veux émerveiller !

   Si clair,

   Leur naïf incarnat qu’il flotte dans tout l’air

   Encombré de sommeil touffu.

   Baisais-je un songe?

Mallarmé had grown out of his mentor, Baudelaire, and had matured into Mallarmé. What had previously been shocking on a thematic level, in other words, the macabre tonality of the Fleurs du mal, became shocking on a structural level, through the total fragmentation of syntax. While, the preceding poem played on the enjambment of the sentence over several lines, the Faune uses concise sentence structures in which most logical connectors have been erased. This was absolutely unprecedented and created an impression of strangeness that extended from the poem to language itself, which under Mallarmé’s pen became a foreign tongue. The poet Charles Coligny, writing for the review L’Artiste in 1865, rightfully noted that if Baudelaire had shocked and provoked readers at the time of the publication of Les Fleurs du Mal at least he did not put into question the articulation of language into a coherent and logical syntax structure. By

¹⁰⁷ This is the 1875 version that Mallarmé submitted to the reading committee.
contrast, Mallarmé’s disarticulated syntax was seen as a threat to the very foundation of poetry. Quoting a distich that was circulating at the time in Parisian salons, Coligny compares Mallarmé to Baudelaire with the following taunting comment:

Mais s’il a fait les Fleurs du Mal,

Il n’a pas fait de mal aux fleurs.108

At any rate, the Jury of the Parnasse contemporain was not ready to accept this new voice.

Mallarmé, however, had quite a few supporters among the other contributors to the revue. So much so that the Parnasse’s chief editor, Alphonse Lemerre, felt under pressure to find a settlement in order to appease Mallarmé’s friends who were threatening to retrieve their poems from the publication if Mallarmé was not published with them. Lemerre, thus found a compromise. He would publish the poem with a prefatory note. He submitted the few lines introducing the poem to Mallarmé. His words were less than flattering:

Le Comité formé par l’éditeur n’a pas admis le poème de M. Mallarmé ; mais à la prière de plusieurs poètes, amis de l’auteur, l’éditeur a consenti à publier ce poème. Il prend le public pour juge.

As a counter provocation to Lemerre’s weak amends, Mallarmé withdrew completely from the Parnasse. Yet, in Lemerre’s words he had found the secret formula to his success: social capital. This conclusion responded to Lemerre’s remark relating to “[les] amis de l’auteur” who took an active role in defending him. Instead of submitting his work to the appreciation of his peers, he would circulate his work on a smaller scale, relying precisely on his strong point: his social network. The quatrains accompanying the Faune thus played a pivotal role in shaping the image of this work along with its reception, because the personal dedications enabled him to place his

work in a circulation realm that would attract kinder regards.\textsuperscript{109} Thus, the target group of readers of Mallarmé’s \textit{Offrandes à divers du Faune} were fellow artists (Henry Dupray [8]; Hérédia [16]; Whistler, Claude Debussy [15]; the poet, Emmanuel Delbousquet [26]; the poet Albert Saint-Paul [27], but also familiar of influential publishing circles (Edmond Bailly, editor and librarian specializing in esotericism and Symbolism; Mademoiselle Lemonnier [2], sister-in-law of the editor Charpentier; Edouard Dujardin, [4,5] future founder of the \textit{Revue wagnérienne} in 1885 and of the \textit{Revue indépendante} in 1886, who became the first editor of the \textit{Poésies} in 1887; Madame Rachilde [19], the wife of Alfred Valette, the director of the \textit{Mercure de France}), bibliophiles and art collectors (Alidor Delzant [21, 22]; Nelly Marras, wife of the curator of the palais de Fontainebleau who later curated the “dépôt des marbres.”) By dedicating each poem to a specific individual, Mallarmé revived an old poetic tradition, whereby the poet would dedicate his poems to a patron in order to create a contractual bond binding his patron to the poet. Similarly, in Mallarmé’s \textit{Vers de circonstance}, the individual dedication of his poems serves to foster a poetic loyalty and allegiance to him. As Marie-Paule Berranger writes, “dès l’époque de François Villon, la ballade a formellement intégré dans son envoi final la clause du don du poème en hommage au prince-mécène. Le poème de circonstance mallarméen se contente du couplet final. Tout poème de circonstance fait ainsi de son destinataire le prince d’un moment. ” \textsuperscript{110} An additional way in which Mallarmé pays tribute to his addressee is by magnifying the reputation of his target audience: Parisians. To some extent, the cityscape disappears behind the listing of its


inhabitants, as if Paris (that is named only seven times in the collection) were less a poetic figure than a condensation of poetic addressees. Writing to his friend Henri Cazalis in 1864, Mallarmé remarked,

Pour nous qu'est Paris? Après les musées et les amis, c'est cinq ou six poètes dont nous avons besoin auprès de nous.\textsuperscript{111}

Paris is thus seen as a catalogue of friends and artists. It is the social dimension of Paris that makes it an interesting poetic figure in the \textit{Vers de circonstance} and not necessarily the city in and of itself. Thus he concludes in \textit{La Dernière Mode}:

\ldots le seul Paris se plaît à résumer l'univers, musée lui-même autant que bazar

\ldots\textsuperscript{112}

This glorification of Parisians reaches its paroxismic expression in \textit{La Dernière Mode} where Mallarmé amusingly mocks British tourists who come to Paris in the summer. Indeed, that is the season when most Parisians have fled the city to their country homes or seaside resorts, for Paris is inhabited by “[des] habitants avides de vagues et du feuillage.”\textsuperscript{113} It is, therefore, impossible for the tourist to get to know Paris, for Paris is not Paris without the Parisians.

Que connaissent-ils, ces nomades, hommes et femmes, même une fois leur voile blanc relevé, pour s'enrouler autour de leur chapeau, comme une tente portative et légère ou leurs lorgnettes, souvenir du pâtre astronome de la Chaldée, remises


soigneusement dans leur étui de cuir: oui, que connaissent-ils de Paris, nous absents?

Désespérés d’avoir tout un jour erré sur l’asphalte abandonné, et se demandant si vraiment il n’y a pas de notre part dans ce fait de nous exiler à l’heure exacte de leur venue, quelque chose de cet esprit parisien, qu’ils sont condamnés à ne pas savoir […]\(^{114}\)

The Parisian mystique is captured in the idea that foreigners are condemned to ignore “[l’] esprit parisien.” In their original form (in other words as objects) the Vers de circonstance emphasize this mystique by addressing themselves to Parisians. But, what is important to understand is that Mallarmé’s creation of a select audience of readers does not stem from a feeling of self-righteousness over others, but as a publication strategy for his work. The private circle of distribution of these poems thus enabled Mallarmé to use his social capital in order to disseminate his work. But, it also created a poetic constraint that allowed him to reunite with a type of societal poetry that prompted him to explore the poetic possibilities of this particular genre and form.

As critics such as Yves Bonnefoy have pointed out, this societal aspect of occasional poetry is present at the core of Mallarmé’s Vers de circonstance, a fact that the poet fully acknowledges in his letter to Méry Laurent - his friend and by some accounts his mistress - when he writes, in the oft quoted letter of September 29 1892, “cela sort de chez toi.” What he is saying in other words is ‘c’est une poésie mondaine qui sort de ton salon.’ An important aspect of Mallarmé’s societal verses is their representation of a certain urban modernity that distinguishes itself from other poetic representations of this topos.

The quintessential poems of urban modernity are Baudelaire’s prose poems in the “Spleen de Paris” and, before that, his verse poems collected in the “Tableaux parisiens” published in the

1861 edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Both groups of poems intimately link Paris to the modern. Though there is a clear Baudelairian intertext in Mallarmé’s modernist evocation of the city in the *Poésies* through his “Tombeau” to Charles Baudelaire, in which he links the Baudelairian topos of death and prostitution to city life, the *Loisirs de la Poste* offer a very different depiction of urban modernity. To begin, the urban geography described by Mallarmé in the *Vers de circonstance* radically differs from the seedy red light districts depicted by Baudelaire. Whereas Baudelaire’s *Spleen de Paris* was that of hospitals, asylums and bordellos - a universe that, according to Baudelaire’s own definition, was populated by “[des] infortunés que le soir ne calme pas” and of individuals possessed by “l’inquiétude d’un malaise perpétuel”\(^{115}\) - Mallarmé’s *Vers de circonstance* are divided between a representation of artistic life and high-life, or what he calls in *La Dernière Mode* “la vie artistique” and “la vie mondaine.” This corroborates a certain view that Mallarmé’s social setting evolved, according to the formulation of Hugo Friedrich, “dans le plus strict cadre bourgeois.”\(^{116}\) This takes the reader on a tour from the left bank’s distinguished quarters surrounding Saint-Germain des Prés and the elegant addresses of the 7ème arrondissement - such as the prestigious rue de Bellechasse - to the aristocratic and artistic center of Paris then located on the right bank. When all these addresses are placed on a map it becomes apparent that there is a geographic disproportion in the representation of both city banks.

Quantitatively, the right bank is far more predominant than the left with forty eight addresses sent in that direction versus eight in the latter. This reflects the modernization of Paris in the nineteenth century which had begun around 1820-1850 with a development of the North West of Paris. As a result, the right bank greatly developed due to the influence of real estate investors.


One example of a neighborhood created during that period is the Nouvelle Athènes. Built around 1830 in the 9ème arrondissement it was conceived as a modern-day Athens that was to group artists, writers and musicians into one neighborhood. George Sand and Frédéric Chopin, for instance, lived in a group of buildings around a square that also housed - at different periods - fellow artists: Alexandre Dumas, Hector Berlioz, Giachino Rossini and Franz Listz. This area then expanded under the Third Republic to the North West, to the Batignolles out of which the Impressionist movement evolved. Famously, the Impressionist painters of the Groupe des Batignolles gathered at the Café Guerbois nearby. The modern center of Paris thus shifted to the West, while the historical and monumental center of Paris located on the Ile de la Cité with such monuments as the Palais de Justice, l’Hôtel de ville and l’Hôtel Dieu were abandoned.

A more precise glance at Mallarmé’s addresses adds another element to the study of Mallarmé’s urban landscape; out of the various poems sent to the right bank four areas stand out. The four single most predominant neighborhoods of Paris represented in the Vers de circonstance are the 16ème arrondissement (with twelve different locations), the 8ème, 9ème and 17ème arrondissements (with ten different locations in each). These neighborhoods correspond for the most part to the elegant and fashionable districts of Paris.

Although the practice of occasional poetry was greatly popular in fashionable Parisan salons, such as Méry’s who used it in her home to entertain her guests, there was more at stake for Mallarmé than the simple entertainment of a popular Parisian socialite. The impersonal nature of the Vers de circonstance becomes quite apparent when we compare the poems with the context in which they were sent. A good example is the previously mentioned quatrain to Méry Laurent.

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117 This conception of poetic activity as a game would need to be explored in a further study as playing is a fundamental concept in Mallarmé’s poetics, along with the idea of Fiction.
that was enclosed in a letter to her.\textsuperscript{118} Whereas the letter addresses Méry with the familiar “tu” form, the poem suddenly addresses her with a “vous.” On the one hand, this could be seen as a mark of chivalry worthy of the occasional mode of the poems. But, on the other hand, it also depersonalizes the bond between the poetic “I” and its interlocutor that could be anyone. Once the poem is taken outside of its context there is no visible sign left that it would have ever been addressed to Méry. As a matter of fact, this impersonal interlocutor is deprived of any gender attributes. Its addressee could therefore be a woman as well as a man. Furthermore, the use of the “vous” form introduces an ambiguity in terms of the poem’s intended audience because it could either designate a second person singular addressed in the polite mode, or it could designate a second person plural, thus opening the reading of the poem to a wider audience. In any case, what remains, beyond the poem’s mysterious poetic destination, is its playful agility that puns on the contraction between the first and third rhyme “l’une” and “lune.”

This type of linguistic play based on constriction and expansion is, in fact, present in all of Mallarmé’s poetry. Examples taken from the Poésies abound: “de la cendre/descendre”, “un frisson/unison”, “la flame/l’àme”, “le plumage est pris/mépris”, “le vide nénie/dénie” “vole-t-il/vil”.\textsuperscript{119} In “Prose (pour des Esseintes)” alone there are six such instances (“de visions/devisions”, “se para/sépara”, “désir Idées/ iridées”, “devoir/ de voir”, “par chemins/parchemins”, “sépulcre ne rit/ Pulchérie.” The mention of this type of visual and verbal word play is alluded to in the Vers de circonstance through the expression “[une] dansante kyrielle” in the following quatraine:

\textsuperscript{118} Feuilletez et, l’un comme l’une, Avouez que je m’y connais Moi, personne peu clair de lune, En très-vieux albums japonais.

\textsuperscript{119} These examples are presented by Virginia La Charité in The Dynamics of Space: “Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hazard.” Lexington: French Forum Publishers, 1987, p. 17.
Mademoiselle Gabrielle

Wrotnowska: menez, ô maris,

votre dansante kyrielle,

rue 8 Barouillère, Paris.

The term “kyrielle” has two meanings. On the one hand, it designates a long series of complaints, a topos that could play on the idea of a domestic comedy between men and women. But, on the other hand, the “kyrielle” is also a game that consists in linking words or groups of words together in such a way that the last syllable of a word becomes the beginning syllable of the next word, etc. The following quatrain offers such an example of a kyrielle:

Ma sagesse vis-à-vis

de vous les deux se condense
toute en ce nouvel avis

riez et même qu'on danse.

In this poem, the kyrielle consists in the word play between the verb “condense” and the clause “qu’on danse” that homophonically rhymes with the verb. The kyrielle thus alludes to a type of speech that is repetitive and in which words form arabesques with each other. This notion of the arabesque is taken up in both poems by the choice of the adjective “dansante” and the verb “danser.” The poems thus experiment with a poetic form in which space is both extended and condensed.

This concision of societal verses mostly served as a platform for Mallarmé to display his poetic dexterity. The tone of his poems is thus both witty and polished while displaying considerable technical competence. In *Offrandes à divers du faune* Mallarmé plays on multiple combinations of rhythm in the limited space of a quatrain or distich. Out of the twenty seven poems of that collection, nineteen are quatrains and eight are distiches, and all explore different
types of verse forms. The more the stanzas are condensed the more varied the poetic meters are. Thus, while the quatrains mostly rely on octosyllabic verses (with the exception of two quatrains in alexandrines), the distichs use five different types of verses (one hexameter, two heptameters, two octosyllabic verses, one decameter, two alexandrines). Out of these seven poems not a single rhyme or rhythmic pattern is repeated. There are thus seven different rhyming couplets and seven different rhythmic motifs. An additional prowess is added by the fact that almost all rhymes are rich, in other words, formed by a minimum of three rhyming phonemes.

Mallarmé reinforces the skillfulness of his verses by creating all sorts of word plays. A striking example of this is his play on the name “Whistler” that he decomposes in the preceding line into the affirmative assertion: “oui c’est l’air.” But there are other creative word games, notably playing on the comparison between music and poetry, such as the rhyme between “accordions” and “cordons,” where the word “cordons” plays on its homophony with the musical cords of an instrument; or the juxtaposition of the rhyme “lire” with “lyre.” But, the main challenge of these poems is always the poetic constraint involved in inscribing the name of the addressee within the poem. This adds an additional poetic difficulty as, in most cases, the name is placed at the end of the rhyme, thereby creating another poetic restriction that is of having to create rhymed ends, or “bouts rimés.”

This poetic constraint is, however, not specific to the Vers de circonstance. It is actually exactly the same composition process that motivated Mallarmé’s composition of the “Sonnet en –x.” There the poem was triggered by Mallarmé’s desire to compose an entire sonnet based only on two rhymes: one in “-x” and the other one in “or.” In the Vers de circonstance, a similar poetic process is used. Over half of the poems of Les Loisirs de la Poste are written with that poetic limitation (seventeen out of twenty-seven poems). Of all those seventeen poems, fifteen use last names and only two use first names as the rhyming couplet (Méry and Berthe [Manet]). The
names force Mallarmé to vary his rhyme schemes as each poem represents a unique combination of rhymes in order to mark the singularity of each poetic offering. But, as a matter of fact, all of Mallarmé’s poetry is composed with that poetic procedure. In his Journal, Charles Du Bos recalls a conversation he had with Valéry who described to him Mallarmé’s poetic process in these terms:

 […] toutes les pièces de Mallarmé ont été faites comme on fait des bouts rimés. Je veux dire qu’il avait toutes ses rimes prêtes et rien que ses rimes […] Le système de Mallarmé dans le vers est un système bloqué […]

The poetic process of the Vers de circonstance is therefore representative of Mallarmé’s poetic process as a whole. But the concision of these poems heightens the tension of this process. Ultimately, therefore, the occasional context of this work is mostly an alibi masking the poetic autonomy of the poems. Aside from securing Mallarmé a regular base of readers, the naming of individuals and contexts in this collection is a poetic convention rather than a circumstantial occurrence.

The Occasional as Genre: Deliberate Erasure and the Production of Artificial Occasions

Furthermore, despite the seemingly occasional nature of the poems, clearly dedicated to specific individuals, Mallarmé erases certain traces of the poems’ occasions by deliberately removing the reference both to the person and the date. The first element is the suppression of the occasion from Mallarmé’s original poetic envois to his retranscription of them in his manuscripts. The second element is the spacing, or, rather, lack of spacing between the poems. The lack of spacing between the quatrains is unusual for Mallarmé who was always very particular about

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creating breaks after each poem. To be convinced, it suffices to read his instructions to his publishers. This is an example taken from his correspondence in which he addresses the editorial revisions that should be done to the *Poésies*. 121

Vous savez combien je tiens à la justesse de l'impression [...] J'ai quelques prières à vous faire. [...] Seconde prière, qui se rapporte, je n'ose pas dire à l'impression, mais à l'imprimerie. Je voudrais un caractère assez serré, qui s'adaptât à la condensation des vers, mais de l'air entre les vers, de l'espace, afin qu'ils se détachent bien les uns des autres, ce qui est nécessaire encore avec leur condensation. [...] je voudrais, aussi, un grand blanc après chacun, un repos, car ils n'ont pas été composés pour se suivre ainsi, et, bien que, grâce à l'ordre qu'ils occupent, les premiers servent d'initiateurs aux derniers, je désirerais bien qu'on ne les lût pas d'une traite et comme cherchant une suite d'états de l'âme résultant les uns des autres, ce qui n'est pas, et gâterait le plaisir particulier de chacun.122

The lack of spacing between the poems of the *Loisirs de la Poste* suggests that they are meant to be read in one breath, as if precisely they were all one poem. By joining the poems together without pause, he creates a thematic affinity between them that is not occasional, but poetic. Thus, a lot of the poems of the *Vers de circonstance* were created artificially by Mallarmé without a real context or occasion in mind. For Marie-Paule Berranger the poem is what she calls a “faux impromptu.” In her words:

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121 According to Bertrand Marchal, however, the poems were classified three by three in the original manuscript edition (cf. *Les Vers de circonstance*. Paris: Poésie/Gallimard, 1998, p. 223). Italics are mine.

Faux impromptu, le poème offert a souvent traversé toute une forêt de ratures et d’essais successifs avant que le poète ne le recopie, soigneusement calligraphié, sur l’enveloppe qu’il va poster ou sur la carte qui accompagne les marrons glacés.  

In addition, sometimes the poems were not even sent. This shows the transformation of an occasional social practice into a standardized poetic genre.

From the very first publication of these poems, Mallarmé indicated that his interest in this work was purely formal. Indeed, he clearly set the tone of his formalistic interest in this work by regrouping all these poems under a generic title. The occasional in this work therefore needs to be treated as a poetic genre and not as biographical data. The choice of such a generic title as the Vers de circonstance reflects first: the larger scope that this work has taken; and second, the poetic problematization of this work. First of all, this work was indeed, no longer limited to the initial three categories: Loisirs de la Poste, Offrandes à divers du Faune and Eventails. Though the original project had started with the idea of compiling “quatrain-addresses,” the poems began deviating from this principle as early as the 1893 manuscript, with this quatrain to Méry Laurent, which is not a postal address:

Méry Laurent ne blame point
Vos eaux, Royat qui la soignâtes
D’avoir complété d’emponpoint
La plus blanche des Auvergnates.

Another similar example can be found in this undated poem dedicated to the poet and essayist, Charles Morice:

Il obtient, ce Charles Morice

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As testified by these poems, which deviate from their original occasional pretext, along with the numerous revisions of the manuscripts, this collection is clearly not a spontaneous private endeavor. It plays on the concept of occasionality, but, only to subvert it. Furthermore, despite Mallarmé’s introductory note paying tribute to the Postal service, not all poems were actually sent because, as has been stated previously, Mallarmé started writing these poems for his own sake because he was interested in the poetic condensation imposed by this type of poetic form.

Indeed, the dense form in which the vast majority of these poems is written (in other words, the quatrains) establishes the Vers de circonstance in a distinct generic literary history. Their extreme condensation into octosyllabic quatrains with cross-rhymes, (abab) clearly situates this work in an epigrammatic vein. Epigrams in the Western tradition have served to formulate pithy satires or criticism in a gamut of tones ranging from biting or sharp to gentle. Voltaire, for instance, was not at a loss for sarcastic epigrams dedicated to his adversaries, as in the following poem, for instance:

L’autre jour au fond d’un vallon,

Un serpent piqua Jean Fréron ;

Que croyez-vous qu’il arriva ?

Ce fut le serpent qui creva.

Mallarmé’s Vers de circonstance pick up on this epigrammatic tradition by poking fun at his addressees, and even, on occasion, at himself.

An important generic aspect of this work is thus Mallarmé’s humorous cheekiness which situates his work in an older poetic tradition. A good example of the poems’ humor is the
equivocal appellation of Jules Wrotnowski (31, 89), and the anonymous mailman (3, 81) distributing his poetic missives, as good old chaps; or, less flatteringly, in French, “bonhomme[s].” The family Wrotnowski, seems to have been endowed with a particularly comic streak in Mallarmé’s view because, in another poem, this one addressed to the doctor, Félix Wrotnowski, Mallarmé depicts this man of science doing ridiculously basic algebra, in his words: “de l’algèbre pour riquiqui” (30, 89). Mallarmé’s family members are not immune to this type of amused mockery. In a poem, to his cousin, the writer, Victor Margueritte, Mallarmé calls him a “cagnard” (5, 74), in other words, an idler. But this could also be translated in modern day slang in less flattering terms (literally in French “qui a la fainéantise du chien."

In Mallarmé’s poem, this attribute is justified by the accusation that Margueritte is feigning a fever at home.

Là-bas numéro cinq, à Sèvres

Reste donc rue, ohé ! Brongniart

A claquer tes menteuses fièvres

Victor Margueritte, cagnard.

Mallarmé was never at a loss for humorous and sometimes biting representations of his poetic addressees. This humorous and witty vein of the poems escalades into an almost farce-like comedy, in which his poetic muse, Méry Laurent, is caught picking her nose, his former student, Willy Ponsot, is depicted as an alcoholic hooked on tobacco (96, 158). Mallarmé’s

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124 Until the XVIIth century the word “cagne” was used to designate a female dog and prostitutes.

125 The rue Brongniart is located in the second arrondissement of Paris, near the Place de la Bourse. It was named after the architect of the Palais de la Bourse, Alexandre Théodore Brongniart in 1844. But in the case of this poem, it designates the rue Brongniart in Sèvres.

126 Soyez, mes yeux, à jamais étonnés
Méry Laurent met les doigts dans son nez.

127 A la propension bachique
Chez Willy, succeed la chique.
teasing spirit does not stop at his peers, towards whom he also shows playful disrespect. In this poem to Verlaine, for example, he plays on the homophony of the poet’s name with the anatomy of the body: “l’aïne,” which designates the groin.

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. 128

In the dictionary, Emile Littré, the etymology of this word goes all the way back to Sanskrit and designates: “[les] parties honteuses.” 129 The result is that, when spoken, it sounds as if Mallarmé were giving Verlaine the boot (Je te lance mon pied vers l’aïne -> je te lance mon pied Verlaine, which can also be read as: je te donne un coup de pied bien placé.) In the intimacy of his acquaintances and friendships Mallarmé even allows himself to describe his addressees as flemmardes, and little rascals (un filou.) But, this sense of playful humor that he displays also applies to himself, when, on behalf of Méry Laurent, he writes a poem addressed to “Mallarmé le pervers.” Beyond the entertaining character descriptions, the humor is often directed at the poem

128 Unfortunately this poem is not dated but we know that Verlaine was interned at the Hospital Broussais on several occasions between November 5th 1886 and November 3rd 1893. In 1891, Verlaine would publish a work called Mes hôpitaux.

129 We find a reference to “l’aïne” in Paul Scarron’s (1610-1660), Recueil des œuvres burlesques de M. Scarron [1654], (Nicolas Oudot, Troyes):

Mimas d’un puissant horion
Fait sauter à Mars la rondache,
Mars lui respond d’un coup de hache,
Et le fend malgré son écu
Depuis la teste jusqu’au cu;
A tropos fit tomber Pallene
D’un coup de quenoüille dans l’aïne […]


Dans l’ombre des couloirs aux tentures moisies,
en passant il tirait la langue, les deux poings
à l’aïne, et dans ses yeux fermés voyait des points.
itself that plays on the fact that it knows that it is a minor poetic vehicle. It is, thus, as if the poet were critiquing the very mechanisms of poetry. The *Vers de circonstance* therefore participate in Mallarmé’s creation of a “poésie critique.” Furthermore, to place the emphasis of the poems on their form is a hyperbolic way of granting them a special poetic status.

Ultimately, the act of publishing these poems fully discloses the poetic fallacy that has been constructed around the notion of the occasional. In Mallarmé’s *Vers de circonstance*, the publication of these poems clearly abolishes the private character of these seemingly personal pieces. Once the poem has been completely decontextualized through its publication and its separation from its original context and material referent what remains is a purely formal work. Yet, this work is incomplete without the mention of the material referents on which the poems were appended. These objects direct the reading of the poems to the relationship between poetic forms and material referents. They are catalysts for a reflection on the relation of art to external reality.
Concluding Remarks

The starting point of this section on the Vers de circonstance was the claim that this work has misguidingly been read as a private occasional work. As such, it is often considered apart from Mallarmé’s major poetic works. Yet, the comparative examination of the Poésies and the Vers de circonstance revealed that the occasional is an essential component of Mallarmé’s poetics. In addition, a close study of the genetic history of this work clearly shows that it is much less context-bound than it seems. On numerous occasions, the context for which the poem was written was either erased or rewritten, implying that the occasional mode of these poems was just a pretext for Mallarmé. A closer look at the poems along with the conditions under which they were produced suggest that the poems served as a promotional platform for Mallarmé to advertise himself at a time when he was otherwise not very well known. The witty and somewhat antiquated charm of his poems touched two hundred and thirty eight addressees who then shared the poems with their circle of friends. Mallarmé’s name thus slowly spread in Parisian milieus. Mallarmé then used the popularity of his occasional verses to disseminate one of his more difficult poetic works, which otherwise did not find any publishing venues. As this study shows, the revelation of the potential of the occasional to establish a different dynamics between a text and its mode of reception transformed Mallarmé’s own conception of the place of the occasional in his poetics. So much so, that by the end of his career, the Vers de circonstance became an intrinsic part of what he viewed as belonging to his poetic legacy. He then not only decided to publish his entire collection of occasional verses; he also set them on par with his major poetic opus, the Poésies. The reason for stressing this comparison is not to vindicatively assert the superiority of the Vers de circonstance over what has always been viewed as Mallarmé’s magnum opus. Rather, it is to understand how the Vers de circonstance may illuminate parts of
Mallarmé’s poetics, notably regarding the status of the object and the relation of poetry to external reality.

Having proved the fallacy behind the critical reception of the *Vers de circonstance* as a purely occasional work, it is now possible to consider the importance of the visual and material aspects of the poems to the reading and understanding of this work. This will be achieved by examining the articulation between the poems and their objects.
PART TWO:

REINSTATING THE OBJECT IN MALLARMÉ’S POETICS

Paul Gauguin
*L’Après-Midi d’un Faune*, circa 1892
Musée Stéphane Mallarmé, Vulaines sur Seine
[…] une fois tout fini littérairement (ce qui n’est pas prêt [sic] d’arriver),

il faudra presque tout commencer, matériellement.130

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**Introductory Remarks**

The object in Mallarmé’s poetics has traditionally been viewed as a simple ornamental device. As such, the ornamental quality of the object has often been regarded as a trivial appendix to Mallarmé’s poetry rather than as a constitutive element of his poetics. In order to grasp the seriousness of the place of the object in Mallarmé’s poetics, it is necessary to draw on Mallarmé’s influence from the decorative arts. Due to his friendship with Whistler - who was, as a matter of fact, one of the very instigator’s of the publication of the *Vers de circonstance* – Mallarmé was very much interested in artistic approaches that sought to define new relationships between art and the everyday. The decorative arts thus held a prominent role in shaping Mallarmé’s view of this relationship as the object in the decorative arts serves as a transition between a utilitarian and an aesthetic sphere. The goal of decorative artists such as Mallarmé’s friend, James McNeill Whistler, was precisely to create an art form in which the distinction between art and the everyday would be blurred. Similarly, Mallarmé’s use of objects in the *Vers de circonstance* shows that he is also interested in aestheticizing the everyday. But, instead of introducing art into the everyday as Whistler did, he elevates the everyday by turning it into a poetic *topos*. Whereas Baudelaire had introduced evil into poetry, Mallarmé introduced the quotidian as a poetic and aesthetic category.

Beyond Mallarmé’s influence from the decorative arts, his interest in the everyday was part of a tradition that questioned the category of the “real.” As will be seen, despite the aesthetic and ideological differences of the various nineteenth century artistic movements they all addressed the issue of the relation of art to the “real.” Mallarmé’s surprising contribution to these debates is that, instead of just addressing the “real” as a thematic subject in the *Vers de circonstance*, he also integrated elements of the “real” into his own artistic practice by sampling and presenting raw objects that had had no aesthetic reconditioning. This exposition of the object
in its immediate simplicity is a far more radical artistic stand than just introducing the “real” as a poetic topos into the text.

Considering the importance of the object in defining a new poetic art in the *Vers de circonstance*, and considering the aesthetic and theoretical shift that a poetry of objects implies, it is impossible not to confront the dominant place of the object in this work with its status in the *Poésies*. The ideal poem to establish this comparison on is the “Sonnet en x,” which is widely regarded as the quintessential poem demonstrating Mallarmé’s poetics based on absence, abstraction and negativity, all of which are fundamentally opposed to the aesthetic of the object in the *Vers de circonstance*. 
Chapter 3: From a decorative aesthetic to an aesthetic of the everyday

The Influence of the Decorative Arts on Mallarmé

Though it may be surprising to associate a sort of material realism with Mallarmé, the totality of his prose and poetic works is marked by an overwhelming abundance of objects from furniture pieces (Venetian mirrors, desks, tables, chairs)\footnote{Furniture takes up an important role in texts such as *Igitur*, *La Pipe*, *Frisson d’hiver*, or *La Dernière Mode* for instance.} through fashion accessories (gloves, hats, scarves, jewelry, etc.) along with a quantity of books (both contemporary and antiquarian) that appear as objects in his texts.\footnote{This is the case for example of texts such as *Igitur*.} While decadent art also lays a claim to objects, an important difference in Mallarmé’s appropriation of objects is that in decadent art the object is seen for its sheer beauty, independent of its utilitarian function; whereas, with Mallarmé the object is seen under the dual aspect of its aesthetic properties and utilitarian function. This will become apparent in Chapter 4 in the reading of the “Sonnet en x.” In the meantime, the most apparent expression of Mallarmé’s dual articulation of aesthetics and utilitarianism prior to the *Vers de circonstance* can be found in *La Dernière Mode*. In the very first issue of this revue he had declared that his aesthetic interest lies in ordinary beauty, and more so in the utility that his contemporaries may find in different objects, whether a book, a play, or an object of the fine arts.

Nous apparaîtrons partout, le même: attentif à la somme de plaisir que peut, de ces usages nouveaux, tirer une personne contemporaine. Exemples: “ce genre, en peinture, semble fait pour la décoration des panneaux ou du ciel de nos appartements. […] Intéresser aux habitudes du *beau ordinaire*, c'est un peu notre
Mallarmé’s attraction to objects can be explained by his strong influence from the decorative arts. Under the influence of his friend Whistler he discovered a new way of thinking about art that was no longer isolated from everyday life, but fundamentally integrated into the social and material fabric of society. This integration of art to the social needs and fabric of society came about through the association of art to architecture, as it is through architecture that materiality made its most triumphant entry into the nineteenth century landscape.

Gottfried Semper (1803-1879) - the architect of the Dresden Opera, and one of the greatest architects of his time - was the first to write a history of art that began to detach itself from the history of forms in order to pay attention to materials and physical matter. His main work, Der Stil in der technischen und tektonischen Kunsten (1860–1862) translated into English as Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics, opened the way to a greater attention paid to materials and techniques. According to Semper, each material possesses its own laws and

characterizes itself by a formal vocational function that allows it to evolve according to its own principles. As such, he favored the display of the materiality of his materials.

Very quickly, however, urban constructions that were originally architectural masterpieces transformed themselves into bleak mechanical constructions that sought, through mass production, to respond to the exponential growth of the urban population. Confronted with the profusion of mechanical imitations in urban constructions, certain art critics, such as John Ruskin (1819-1900) and William Morris (1834-1896), dreamt of a profound structural reform. The purpose of this reform was to recover authentic and conscientious artisanal crafts that would counter mechanical production. These artists and critics aspired to a new art form founded on an original appreciation of decoration and on the respect of the possibilities offered by each material. This desire led to the creation of “Art Nouveau,” which peaked around the 1900s. But, before this new artistic movement fully emerged, it was in the explorations done in the decorative arts that artists and architects drew their inspiration from. That is how they started borrowing new materials from the decorative arts for their own artistic creations.

Mallarmé was not foreign to this influence of the decorative arts. Through his friendship with Whistler he underwent the influence of Japonism and saw the development of a new concept of art in which the distinction between art and life was decreasing. In Whistler’s work, for instance, it was the entire meta-critical dimension of the artwork that was being taken into consideration. Whistler achieved this by incorporating the whole environment in which his paintings were exhibited into the structure of his work. The support of the painting thus expanded from the canvas to the frame which held the canvas, and then to the wall which supported the frame, and finally to the room in which the frame was presented. The entire spatial environment of the

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134 The foundation of “Art Nouveau” comes from England and takes its roots in the Movement of Arts & Crafts that had begun around the year 1869.
painting contributed and participated therefore in its composition. Whistler famously left future generations with a masterstroke demonstration of this aesthetic theory in the installation of his painting, *The Princess in the Land of Porcelain* (1864) [ill. 4].

Originally, the wealthy British industrial patron Frederick Leyland had purchased this painting for his dining room. But when Whistler came to the house to admire his work, invited by his patron’s interior decorator,\(^{135}\) he was scandalized by the way it looked within the dining room, finding that the décor of the room did not suit his painting at all. So, while Mr. Leyland was away, he took the initiative of redecorating the interior of the room in harmony with his painting. In the painting’s new staging, it largely expands out of its canvass onto the frame, the wall and the whole room around it. Rather than being an isolated piece on the wall, it suddenly resonates with its environment. The room thus participates in the conception of the painting and in accordance with any other work of art has its title: no longer “dining room,” but “Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room” [ill. 5].

On some level, the work was conceived as a total artwork because Whistler granted as much importance to the individual elements constitutive of the painting as to the ensemble evolving from the special presentation of his work. He furthermore solicited the full attention of the spectator who could no longer eat his dinner with the same tranquility. Needless to say, Mr. Leyland was appalled by Whistler’s indiscretion and artistic liberties because, instead of having an inconspicuous decorative painting on the wall, his whole dining room was transformed into an exhibition space. Through this work, Whistler exploited the decorative function of the painting to the extreme, and, by extending its limits from the frame to the entire environment in which it was presented, he questioned the notion of a border between hi-art and low-art, art and the everyday.

As shall now be seen, Mallarmé’s enterprise in the *Vers de circonstance* is quite similar to what

\(^{135}\) The decorator in question was Thomas Jeckyll.
Whistler had undertaken in the “Peacock Room,” for indeed, one of the important tensions of this poetry collection is the erasure of the border between work and world, life and text.

As has just been seen, the introduction of objects into Mallarmé’s poetry corresponds to a historical moment when the variety of materials diversified itself in art. Mallarmé thereby demonstrated his understanding of this new way of conceiving an artwork where art can be considered as a three-dimensional object interacting with its environment. Mallarmé thus shared with Whistler a conception of art as a total artwork, in the largest sense of the word. Indeed, similarly to Whistler, Mallarmé’s poems are marked by a generic overflow between what separates the work of art from reality. He thus often plays on the ambiguity between what is intimate and what has an exhibition value. The element in which this generic ambiguity finds its epitomic expression is the object.

It is mostly via his visit to the Annual International Exhibit held in London in 1871-1872 that Mallarmé developed his acute awareness of objects. To say the least, he offered an unusual account of his visit. Far from trying to define new artistic trends by adopting a collective vision of the exhibit, he adopted a highly idiosyncratic and subjective stand by inventorying almost exclusively the intimate objects that are dear to him, among which the clock and the lamp. In addition, instead of organizing these objects into a descriptive catalogue, he transforms this international fair of objects into a chain of poetic sensations. For Michel Draguet, writing about Mallarmé’s visit to London, “alors que les objets apparaissent juxtaposés sans logique unitaire, le

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136 It is not my intention to discuss the similarities and differences between Whistler and Mallarmé’s understanding of the term with Wagner’s. That is why I use the term in its broadest sense as an artwork that makes use of many art forms in a comprehensive manner. In addition, I am interested in the architectural usage of the term, in which the traditional borders that mark the beginning and end of an artwork are blurred.

poète, par son regard, forge un sens dans le rythme de sa promenade. L’accent de sa visite est mis sur l’intimité quotidienne à travers la vocation industrielle des arts décoratifs.”\footnote{Mallarmé, Stéphane. *Ecrits sur l’art*. Ed. Michel Draguet. Paris : Flammarion, 1998, p.18.} Among these decorative objects, decorative sculpture is exemplary in Mallarmé’s aesthetic conception because for him it is more than just an ornamental object. It is also a scenic experience of an object submitted to a space, just as a poem is a visual object subjected to the space and constraints of the page. Mallarmé thus isolates the object visually in order to make of it a sort of “type”\footnote{Mallarmé, Stéphane. “Un spectacle interrompu.” *Œuvres Complètes*, p. 276} and by detaching the object from the chaos of material reality he can constitute it as a sign that is both a material and poetic entity.

Having been exposed to the theory and practice of the decorative arts, and having written about the topic, Mallarmé then appropriates these elements of the decorative arts to apply them to his daily environment. Mallarmé thus transforms his influence from Whistler and the decorative arts into a domestic application to his own personal décor. Gayle Zachman showed in her work, *Frameworks for Mallarmé: The Photo and the Graphic of an Interdisciplinary Aesthetic*,\footnote{Zachman, Gayle. *Frameworks for Mallarmé: The Photo and the Graphic of an Interdisciplinary Aesthetic*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008.} Mallarmé’s attraction to helping his friends with decorating their homes. This was notably the case in his relationship with Méry. What is less known is the way in which he transferred his lessons from the decorative arts to the decoration of his own country home in Valvins. This house, in which he settled in 1874, is his personal demonstration of an alliance between the
everyday and the decorative, which in his appropriation of it becomes synonymous with a poetic
treatment of space.141

This house, like his apartment rue de Rome in Paris, had a privileged geographic
location.142 Situated on the banks of the Seine, not very far from Fontainebleau and facing the
forest, it represented a major stopping point for artists at the time.143 Édouard Vuillard’s (1868-
1940) oil painting on cardboard, realized during his stay in Valvins in 1896 and representing
Mallarmé’s house, pays tribute to the friendship that united painters to the poet in the scenic
countryside of Fontainebleau [ill. 5]. While painters discovered outdoor painting and captured
the freshness of nature into their works, Mallarmé created an indoor artwork that was a
demonstration of his firm belief in the necessary alliance of the beautiful and the useful. While
remaining quite modest, the domestic space he then created for his family and friends was as
much worthy of being inhabited as exposed.144

In Geneviève’s words, “Il avait un goût si sûr. Pour tout. […] Il aimait un intérieur
harmonieux. Le premier, il rechercha les meubles anciens,145 n’en voulant pas d’autres, dès sa
jeunesse. Seuls alors les collectionneurs y songeaient.” 146 This information shows Mallarmé’s
rigor. He did nothing haphazardly, since it is precisely with “les choses les plus simples, avec

141 Mallarmé initially started off renting a few rooms of the house, when he first moved in. It was only after his death
that his family bought the entirety of the house and property in order to turn it into a space dedicated to the memory
of the poet.

142 Mallarmé lived rue de Rome, in the 9ème arrondissement, which was one of the most vibrant neighborhoods of
Paris at the time.

143 Painters used to come paint along the Seine near Fontainebleau and Barbizon.

144 Mallarmé had also been in charge of decorating Méry’s apartment in Paris.

145 According to the furniture inventory of the Musée Stéphane Mallarmé in Valvins, the vast majority of the oldest
furniture pieces are from the XVIIIth century in the Style Louis XVI.

un rien” that one can obtain “un joli aspect […] pourvu que cela soit choisi [sic] avec goût et aille ensemble.” The word “rien,” which appears so often under Mallarmé’s pen, in so many of his letters as well as in his poetry, takes on a very different meaning here. Far from signifying absence or shortage, it opens a large field of action since nothingness governs the whole realm of possibilities.

With regard to his interior, Mallarmé invested materially in the elaboration of a coherent structure, yet with a great economy of means. Two essential principles guided his composition: first, the harmony of the objects among themselves; second, the permeability of the domestic space with the exterior. The dining room, located on the ground floor, is exemplary of his understanding of the coherence of objects with their environment. Furthermore, it reflects Mallarmé’s own poetic theories. The dining room was thus the pivotal room of the house. It was the common foyer around which family and friends gathered. As such, the central furniture piece of the room is a symbolic object that registers the passage of these visits and of time. It is the famous pendulum of Saxony (pendule de Saxe) [ill. 6]. The whole disposition of the room is centered around this object. However, instead of placing this object obviously as the center-piece, the arrangement of the room is subtly done to both conceal and reveal it. This manner of displaying the object recalls Mallarmé’s formula “nommer un objet, c'est supprimer les trois quarts de la jouissance […] suggérer, voilà le rêve.” In this particular instance, it is fascinating to see how Mallarmé can write such seemingly abstract phrases yet understand them in a very literal way. This is exemplified in the subtle positioning of the *pendule de Saxe* which is presented in a suggestive manner rather than an ostentatious one. The room in which it is placed is painted in

\[147\] Ibid.
red, not to make the object stand out, but rather so that it could blend itself into the atmosphere of the room and thereby mysteriously diffuse its presence from one location to the entire space.\textsuperscript{148}

With regard to his second principle, concerning the permeability of the domestic space to the exterior, it manifests itself on the first floor where the bedrooms balance the equilibrium of the house between an outside and an inside thanks to its two exterior views. On the Western façade there is Mallarmé’s grey room. The choice of the color grey symbolizes the view on the Seine and the setting of the sun. On the other side, on the Eastern façade, there is the green room of the two women. Green symbolizes the view on the garden and the rising sun. The element that binds the inside and outside together is color. Color is far from being unimportant. As was seen already in the choice of paint for the dining room, colors have a symbolic function in the house. The use of strong and vivid colors chosen by Mallarmé leads to a very strong aesthetic staging of materiality. Through the green of the women’s room, for instance, it is the foliage and vegetation of the garden that is introduced into the house. But, it is also the alpha, the beginning, the swarming multiplicity of nature and of femininity that contrast with the sad greyness of Mallarmé’s room facing the setting sun.

Having experience with an application of the decorative arts to his own domestic environment, Mallarmé freely merges the aesthetic with the quotidian. This manifests itself on two levels in the \emph{Vers de circonstance}. First, there is a voluntary union of art with the everyday through the sheer number of artists who are introduced into the poems by way of poetic address. Out of the ten categories of poetic addressees of the “Récréations Postales” alone, for instance, six are addressed to artists: poets, painters, writers (this category is repeated twice), young writers and poets, and finally musicians. The fifty-three artists convoked by these poems create a strong

\textsuperscript{148} The room thus functions in the same way as a cameo (\emph{camaïeu}).
alliance and identification between the *Vers de circonstance* and a certain representation of nineteenth century artistic sociability. But, it also places artistic life and the practice of art at the heart of the everyday in the *Vers de circonstance* by entangling the depiction of artistic practices with occasional events. This is particularly noticeable in the poems dedicated to painters where the artist is often represented in a posture symbolizing his activity. To take a few examples, Claude Monet (1840-1926) is depicted painting in his home in Giverny, Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919) is seen grinding colors in front of a nude model, Paul César Helleu (1859-1927) invents a new shade of blue, and finally a glimpse of Georges-Antoine Rochegrosse (1859-1938) painting can be seen from behind the gates of his home rue Laugier.

Monsieur Monet, que l’hiver ni  
Villa des Arts, près l’avenue

L’été sa vision ne leurre  
De Clichy peint Monsieur Renoir

Habite, en peignant, Giverny  
Qui, devant une épaule nue

Sis auprès de Vernon, dans l’Eure.  
Broie\textsuperscript{149} autre chose que du noir.

Au cinquante-cinq, avenue  
Rue interminable Laugier

Bugeaud, le précieux Helleu  
Au soixante-quinze s’exhausse

Peint d’une couleur inconnue  
Une grille de clos ; j’y ai

Entre le délice et le bleu.\textsuperscript{150}  
Vu peindre et songer Rochegrosse.

\textsuperscript{149} The use of the verb “broyer” shows Mallarmé’s awareness of a vocabulary borrowed from the visual arts as he plays on the expression “broyer du noir” (which translates into English as “to brood”) with another expression using the verb “broyer,” which is “broyer des couleurs” meaning to grind colors. The word “noir” then marks a cohesive transition from one expression to the other.

\textsuperscript{150} The end of the poem on the rhyme “eu” naturally allows Mallarmé to rhyme the name of the painter “Helleu” with the color blue (“bleu”). However, more than just an arbitrary rhyme, it so happens that Helleu was a passionate yachtsman who was known for his famous seascapes and the sensibility with which he painted skies and ocean sceneries in subtle shades of blue. The choice of the word “bleu” is thus doubly motivated: first by the rhyme scheme and then by the actual artistic interests and pursuits of the painter Helleu.
Artistic activity is thus at the core of these artists’ everyday and as such it becomes part of the notion of the everyday represented by the *Vers de circonstance*. But, in addition to introducing artists into the matrix of this occasional work, the poems also transform the quotidian into a poetic and artistic *topos*. That is noticeably the case with the poems set in the Bois de Boulogne.

Returning to an example that had been taken earlier regarding the Bois de Boulogne, it is quite apparent in the poems that this location is not just a decorative element that is supposed to remind the reader of a generic echo of the genre of occasional poetry. The Bois de Boulogne also serves as a contemporary reference to the great artistic dynamism that was created by the Impressionists around the notion of outdoor painting. As such, the Bois de Boulogne was an important stopping-point for painters. In 1887, at the time when Mallarmé dedicated one of his Bois de Boulogne poems to Berthe Morisot he knew her quite well. But, more importantly, he was a regular guest at her Thursday evening *salons* during which he had ample time to discover the artistic work and evolution of Morisot’s fellow attendees. Mallarmé’s favorite guests were Renoir, Degas and Monet with whom he shared his views on the major artistic questions of the day. He was therefore well acquainted with the particular significance that the Bois de Boulogne held for these artists. At least seven of Morisot’s paintings are located in the Bois de Boulogne (*Jour d’été*, 1879; *Le Lac au bois de Boulogne*, circa 1884 ; *Automne au bois de Boulogne*, circa 1884 ; *Rivière au bois de Boulogne*, 1886\(^{151}\) ; *Bois de Boulogne*, 1893; *Soleil couchant sur le lac du Bois de Boulogne*, 1894) or in her garden, rue de Villejust (*Femme dans un jardin*, 1882-1883). Instead of just using the reference to the Bois de Boulogne as yet another way of introducing elements of artistic life into the everyday, Mallarmé seems to be brushing his own poetic canvasses. This positions his poems on a par with Impressionist tableaux representing

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\(^{151}\) The previous three works are all housed in private collections.
outdoor landscapes. In the following quatrain to Berthe Morisot, for example, the choice of the word “amaranthe” colors the scene with a particularly aesthetic aura by assigning a velvety red glow to the image of the woods.

Apporte ce livre, quand naît
sur le bois l'aurore amaranthe,
chez Madame Eugène Manet
rue au loin Villejust quarante.

But, more remarkably, the poem calls to mind Monet’s series of paintings of the Cathédrale de Rouen in which he tried to capture the lighting of the façade at different times of day and of the year. This impression of a gradual observation of the effects of light on an object at different moments in time is rendered in Mallarmé’s poem by the use of the temporal conjunction “quand” along with the verb “naître” that suggest the slow and nascent movement of the sunrise sweeping its way over the woods. Moreover, the cumulative effect of the different poems staged in the Bois de Boulogne replicate, to a certain extent, the cumulative effect of Monet’s series. Mallarmé’s play on repetition, which is present in all the poems of the Vers de circonstance, - whether it be the repetition of an address, an event or gift offering – reinforces in this instance the feeling that he is working on a systematic aestheticization of his daily surroundings. The Bois de Boulogne thus does not only capture the Impressionists’ imagination, it also triggers Mallarmé’s aesthetization of the everyday. Another element should be added to Mallarmé’s vision of the everyday; that is, that it is not necessarily embellished or beautiful, as it appears in this poem to Berthe Morisot.

In that respect, the Vers de circonstance are drastically different from La Dernière Mode. This journal also displays Mallarmé’s attentive observation of reality with its inventory of everyday life, its collection of objects and jewelry pieces, its enumerations of make-up sets, and
its home décor lessons. But, the vision of reality that is given in *La Dernière Mode* is very much circumscribed to fashionable events of modern society about which its intended readers expect to be informed about. By comparison, the vision of reality that is given in the *Vers de circonstance* is much more mundane. First, Mallarmé expanded his audience of readers from high society women to men and women of different social classes and backgrounds. His readers thus include maids, a swimming instructor (who was probably a local farmer or fisherman),¹⁵² a hairdresser, a priest, milliners, an undertaker and last, but not least, a collection of postal agents. These characters are then depicted in all sorts of postures and attitudes reminiscent of the casuality of the everyday. His miscellaneous crowd is thus shown: *gazouillant*, *gambadant*, *fumant la pipe*, *pêchant du crabe et de la crevette*, *boustiffaillant des tripes*, *des pruneaux*, *du poisson*, *morue et hareng*, *mangeant des œufs*, *des oranges*, *des pets-de-nonnes*, *bavant* [devant leurs] *assiettes*, *se mouchant*, [et criant] “*ohé*” [à tout bout de champ]. Mallarmé’s portrait gallery greatly resembles the Impressionist tableaux depicting his contemporaries in their leisure time activities such as Renoir would do in his populist painting *Bal du Moulin de la Galette* (1876) [ill. 7]. There, similarly to Mallarmé’s *Vers de circonstance*, a vivacious and joyful crowd is represented in a scene of everyday life.

To conclude, the notion of the quotidian in the *Vers de circonstance* is approached from two different angles: first, through the lense of the decorative arts and through the alliance of the beautiful with the useful; then, through the reversal of the relation of art to the everyday by placing the everyday as a subject of art. As Mallarmé writes the new subjects of art are “close to

¹⁵² The industrialization of France and the development of the railway system connecting Paris to the province and notably seaside resorts, transformed local economies. In order to face the new demands of a leisure-time and consumer-based society many locals changed or diversified their activities by responding to the new demand created by Parisian guests. As such many local farmers or fishermen expanded their professional activities by supplying the needs of this developing tourism.
home, within an easy walk, or in [one’s own] garden.”

Mallarmé’s poetic innovation in the Vers de circonstance thus consists in having elevated the quotidian into a poetic topos, regardless of the beauty of the object or subjects that he describes. By doing so, he progressively emancipated himself from the notion of the beautiful, attached to the idea of the decorative, in order to simply embrace the notion of a truthful representation of reality. His emancipation of the concept of the beautiful and his progressive embrace and conquest of the mundanity of everyday objects corresponds to a shift in nineteenth century aesthetics that can be explained by the evolution of literature as an aesthetic field.

**Departure from the Decorative: The Emancipation from Beauty and the Conquest of Everyday Objects**

Whereas literature had formerly been used as an umbrella term for a very wide range of disciplines such as philosophy, history, sociology, and philology, as well as mathematics, physics, and medicine, literature progressively saw its field of action shrinking in the face of the scientific revolution begun in the early modern period and completed at the term of the Enlightenment. By the nineteenth century, therefore, the space of literature was restricted to three genres: poetry, theater and the novel. Mallarmé was extremely aware of this new delimitation of literature. His usage of the word literature therefore often refers to poetry, as its

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155 Two major works published in 1543 prompted this revolution. There is Nicolaus Copernicus's *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* on the one hand, and Andreas Vesalius's *De humani corporis fabrica* on the other.
overarching category. This becomes quite clear in his formulation: “la forme appelée vers est simplement elle-même la littérature.” Looking at the previous disciplines that had pertained to its field of inquiry the strong scientific bend towards which literature was leaning is quite striking. With the autonomy of science and its specialization into different sub-branches of knowledge - each with its own territory and language - it has been thought that nineteenth century literature was stripped of its claim to say something valid and true regarding the nature of human existence, and was solely left with its decorative and ornamental function: the beautiful. Though, in the words of Keats, “a thing of beauty is a joy forever,” the sole ornamental nature of an object as its legitimate mode of existence competes with the desire to see art as relevant to social reality and as an exploration of new cognitive pathways.

One of the fundamental transformations brought by science to the idea of beauty is that it freed European thought - which, since the Renaissance, had been modeled on Classical Antiquity - of a concept of beauty, whereby beauty was indissociable from an ethical and metaphysical cognition of the universe. For the Greeks, notably, beauty was constructed as a moral and epistemological concept inseparable from the idea of goodness and truth and was a fundamental way for them to decipher the world. Furthermore, the concept of the good and the beautiful, which held the idea of beauty together, did not only refer to the material appreciation of objects which might be called beautiful; they also referred to all things “worthy of approbation.” As such, beauty designated as much material as immaterial objects such as ideas, values or truth. In


157 This is the opening line of his epic poem, Endymion first published in 1818.

158 This idea was sustained by the precept of the καλὸς κἀγαθὸς, that which is both good and beautiful.

that context - in which beauty served truth and knowledge to deliver a greater understanding of
nature, being and art - the aesthetic was instrumental in sustaining the epistemological, ethical
and metaphysical apprehension of the universe. The category of the aesthetic, thereby, held
together the finite human world with the infinite and divine. With the separation of science from
art, however, beauty “faded as a category central to human relations to the world.”

Effectively, the rise of modern science “replaced the vision of a beautiful universe
apprehended in its perfection by an orderly universe apprehended through knowledge of its
laws.” For Stephen David Ross, “in a universe available to be known, approachable through
science, beauty and perfection of form fade in value. Knowledge and reason took precedence
over perfection and resplendence.” By being pushed away from the spheres of knowledge,
beauty lost its claim to the universal. For eighteenth century British writers, such as Joseph
Addison (1672-1719), David Hume (1711-1776), Edmund Burke (1729-1797) and Adam Smith
(1723-1790) for example, beauty was relegated to a matter of taste, and thereby governed by the
whims and prejudices of individual subjectivity. In the words of David Hume: “Beauty is no
quality in things themselves. It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them.”

This subjectivist view of beauty, which thrived throughout the Enlightenment, was overthrown by the

160 For the Greeks science and art existed together. This is illustrated for instance by Pythagoras who considered that
mathematics contributed to an understanding of beauty.


162 Ibid.

163 Ibid.

164 As outlined by Stephen David Ross, this view is also revealing of British society’s highly stratified class system.
Taste being possessed by few, beauty was left to the appreciation of a select group of people.

University of Michigan, 1965, p. 6.
Romantics who aspired to a new theory of the beautiful that could encompass their aspiration towards universals. It is in this quest for a renewed definition of beauty in line with universal values that the Romantics referred to the Longinian and Kantian notion of the sublime. This shift from the beautiful to the sublime is quite symptomatic of a new and relativist vision of the universe.

Whereas beauty had been associated with order, proportion and harmony, the sublime represents a departure from this idea of a controlled and measurable order of things. The sublime is precisely what cannot be contained (the ineffable), what all together exceeds the senses, measure and order. This redefinition of beauty by excess was key to forging a new identity for writers and artists. Emancipated from the socio-economic authority of a patron, and alienated to the cause of science, the artist could claim a new territory for himself that completed the figure of the scientist, that is: genius. Genius is a product of the sublime in that it represents an artist beyond rules, or to paraphrase Nietzsche, it is an individual that is beyond good and evil.

Baudelaire’s projected Preface to Les Fleurs du mal is exemplary in that regard, for in it he single-handedly rejects a whole previous tradition. As he wrote,

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\text{Des poètes illustres s’étaient partagés depuis longtemps les provinces les plus fleuries du domaine poétique. Il m’a paru plaisant et d’autant plus agréable que la tâche était plus difficile, } \text{d’extraire la beauté du Mal.}^{166}
\]

Thus, one of the main topoi of the Romantic aesthetic revolution was the rejection of the Aristotelian idea of beauty. Nineteenth century art therefore reclaimed two fields that had previously been outside of its reach: aesthetic diversity and objection to morality. The acceptable justification for these two new claims was a redefinition of truth, free from the conventions of

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166 Italics are mine.
philosophical ideals. This allowed artists to diversify their selection of subjects worthy of aesthetic attention.

Mallarmé’s interest in mundane, everyday objects becomes clearer in light of this historical development, in which traditionally beautiful subjects were no longer the primary focus of avant-garde aesthetics. But, in addition to introducing the everyday as an aesthetic category into his poetics, Mallarmé also innovates by addressing the “real” not only as a thematic subject, but also as a real material object that has had no aesthetic reconditioning. Mallarmé’s interest in the everyday becomes more understandable within a tradition that questioned the category of the “real.”

The Emergence of the “Real”

The real is a term that seems very remote from the conventional vision that has been passed on of Mallarmé. As Barbara Bohac summarizes in the opening lines of her book on the notion of the everyday in Mallarmé’s aesthetics, the poet’s work has traditionally been viewed as a “texte clos sur lui-même, où toute réalité concrète et individuelle [tend] à se dissoudre dans la notion pure.” But, as Bohac rightly recalls, a different vision of Mallarmé has been emerging in recent years through the study of formerly disregarded texts such as La Dernière Mode and the Vers de circonstance. Through these texts, critics have discovered a poet, whom Bohac calls “ancré dans la vie quotidienne” in which the reference to objects found in concrete reality imposes itself with force. Yet, in order to accept this vision of the poet anchored in everyday life, readers must


overcome an essential dilemma; that is, how to reconcile the former image of the poet with the latter? In other words: how to reconcile the abstract ideals of Mallarmé’s poetics with the materiality of his poetic *topoi* and objects. As had previously been seen in the introduction to this dissertation, this question has resulted in the construction of a dualistic vision of his *oeuvre*.

Bohac summarizes this dualism as follows:

D’un côté, il y aurait les œuvres “majeures” ou profondes, traversés par une visée essentielle et hantées par l’inquiétude de l’absolu: “Hérodiade”, *Igitur*, le sonnet en – *yx*, le *Coup de dés* ou les grands textes des *Divagations*; et, de l’autre, des œuvres superficielles, frivoles, comme *La Dernière Mode*, les articles sur les Expositions de Londres ou les petits vers fugitifs ; de telles œuvres, où la saveur du quotidien émane de la surface séduisante des choses, relèvent de l’éphémère et du contingent. Elles sont consacrées à des objets, bibelots ou articles de mode, qui n’appartiennent pas au “grand art”, des objets ordinaires, prosaïques, relatifs aux besoins les plus élémentaires : fruits, bonbons, mouchoirs, chaufferette ou miroirs. Elles ne pourraient pas, dans cette perspective, comporter de visée essentielle et seraient coupées de l’horizon absolu. 169

In response to this dualism between serious works and frivolous ones, Bohac concludes “nul […] ne parvient à penser de manière nette l’articulation entre les œuvres qui passent pour mineures à cause de leur ancrage dans le quotidien et le reste de la production du poète.” 170 One reason for this difficulty of conciliating two radically different types of aesthetic productions in Mallarmé’s *oeuvre* may be the way in which the narrative of nineteenth century literary history has been constructed. According to this narrative there exists a strong dichotomy between two types of

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aesthetic productions divided along the lines of art’s relationship to external reality. This manifests itself in two types of aesthetic positions. The first rejects art’s relationship to reality. The followers of that creed generally group themselves under the motto of art for art’s sake. The other position consists in adopting reality as the founding principle of art. The followers of that creed generally group themselves under the category of realists or naturalists. This initial dichotomy that lies in the very fabric of nineteenth century literary history makes it difficult to dissociate authors attached to one type of aesthetic movement from the artistic mantra to which they are supposed to belong. This makes it more difficult to read and understand works that would not fall into the category to which the author supposedly belongs. The purpose of this historical overview is to show the common interest of nineteenth century aesthetic movements in the notion of the real in order to situate Mallarmé’s poetics of the object within the aesthetic debates of his time. This will make it possible to dismantle the dualistic vision of his œuvre and enable an aesthetic and critical reflection on the significance of external references in his poetic work at large.

The first aspect of this survey will consist in defining the notion of the real, which, as shall be seen, is a concept that held a strong prevalence in the modern period. While most literary histories emphasize the differences between the various aesthetic movements that dominated the period from Romanticism through Realism and Naturalism to Symbolism - accentuating the strong tension that existed between idealizing art forms (Romanticism, Symbolism) and realist ones (Realism, Naturalism) - the reality of aesthetic production of the time reveals a more nuanced picture of this antagonism. Furthermore, as shall be presently demonstrated, most writers conciliated idealism and materialism in their writing.

To begin, the real is often surrounded by the idea of a dichotomy between objects and subjects, objectivity and subjectivity. This antagonism can be explained by the etymology of the
word, which comes from the Latin root *res* meaning “thing.” The category of the real thus pertains to the thingliness of concrete material objects that, according to this definition, exist independently from a human mind. In the philosophical acceptation of the word, the definition of the “real” reads as follows:

 Qui existe d'une manière autonome, *qui n'est pas un produit de la pensée.*

The real thus indicates actual and objective facts that are free from the deceits and illusions of individual or collective subjectivity. It therefore stands in opposition to what is fictional and imaginative. As such, the lexical opponent of the real (*res, realis*) is *imaginarius* meaning “the imaginary;” or what is simulated and exists as an image through the imagination. The capacity of human beings to use or be manipulated by their imagination puts them at odds with the principle of factual objectivity implied by the term *realis.* Yet, in most nineteenth century realist conceptions of literature, human subjects are seldom excluded from the realist depiction of the world. That is because there has been an etymological shift in the word *realis.* Indeed, as further definitions of this term suggest, the real is caught in an on-going tension between scientific objectivity on the one hand and human subjectivity on the other.

The seventeenth century marked a pivotal moment in discourses on the real. In La Bruyère’s *Caractères,* written between 1688 and 1694, for example, the *real* became an epithet that was detached from a factual observation of reality to be assigned to a human subjectivity. Being *real* for him was associated with being true, genuine and authentic, when he spoke of hidden but *real* sorrows. This association would not have caused much surprise had he spoken of tears or another element that could be attributed to a concrete visual or physiological phenomenon. But

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171 Entry “réel” in the *Trésor de la langue française informatisé.* Italics are mine.

sorrow is different because it does not necessarily manifest itself in a concrete visual manner. It is a moral suffering, linked to a psychological affect whose relation to reality occurs essentially on a subjective and interpersonal level. Using the term real in such a way shows therefore a desire to bridge the gap between reality and experience, between objectivity and subjectivity. Ultimately, it marks the desire to appropriate non-visual phenomena as well as affective and emotional states not only as a sensory experience but also as a field of knowledge. It is not surprising then that this philological shift occurred during the seventeenth century, at a period when scientific development was growing, thus, inviting writers to attempt to appropriate the real into a rational and epistemological category. By the nineteenth century, however, discourses surrounding the idea of realism in art became part of a certain aesthetic doxa. But still, a major dividing factor opposed certain critics; that is, the tension between art’s aspiration towards idealism on the one hand, and the positivist belief that art should compete with science to describe material reality on the other hand. This tension undermines much of the perceived dichotomy between Mallarmé’s greater works (Poésies, Hérodiade, L’Après-Midi d’un Faune, Un Coup de Dés) and the ones that are considered as simple potboilers (mainly La Dernière Mode and the Vers de circonstance). The first easily fall into the category of idealist works, whereas the second give the impression of being grounded into the banality of everyday life that is more easily assigned to a form of materialism. But, as shall be presently seen through the analysis of different authorial representatives of these two aesthetic currents (the idealist aesthetic on the one hand and the materialist one on the other) little of this antagonism stands the test of individual case studies because a common interest in the real equally pervaded nineteenth century aesthetics and intellectual thought.

Indeed, contrary to what is often thought, the nineteenth century is not in complete rupture with the rationalist values of the past. Pierre Moreau’s book Le Classicisme des romantiques
(1932), and René Wellek’s thesis on the endurance of a neo-classical trend in the nineteenth century demonstrate the coexistence of Romanticism’s aspiration towards idealism on the one hand, and a scientific, positivist school of thought, on the other. For Jean Bessière, in *Histoire des poétiques*, this tension translates itself in the conflicting discourses on the real where the idealists try to measure the real “qualitatively;” whereas the materialists believe that the real should be measured “quantitatively.” Yet, these divisions are less stable than they seem. Authors such as Hugo, Baudelaire and Flaubert, for instance, who tend to be classified among the “qualitative” realists, also find themselves in the second category. Conversely, Zola, who would conventionally be placed in the second category, crosses over to the first. The reason for underlining these paradoxes is to understand the complex terrain within which Mallarmé’s poetics arose, and within which he forged his own conception of the relation between art and reality.

For most great realist authors of the century, art was meant to transcend reality. Flaubert was quite violent in expressing his repulsion towards the real. In a letter sent to Louis Bouilhet in 1853 he declared: “Les objets immédiats me semblent hideux ou bêtes.” Three years later, while writing *Madame Bovary*, he reiterated this view even more vehemently: “On me croit épris du réel, tandis que je l’exècre.” His disgust was not idiosyncratic. It resonated with a larger aesthetic mistrust towards the real. Baudelaire, for example, strongly condemned the

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175 Gustave Flaubert, letter to Louis Bouilhet, August 24th 1853.

176 Gustave Flaubert, letter to Edma Roger des Genettes, October 30th 1856. *Madame Bovary* had just started appearing in its serialized form in *La Revue de Paris* at the beginning of the month.
rapprochement of art and reality. In his 1859 Salon on photography, Baudelaire denounced the attraction of painting towards realism. 177

De jour en jour l’art diminue le respect de lui-même, se prosterne devant la réalité extérieure, et le peintre devient de plus en plus enclin à peindre, non pas ce qu’il rêve, mais ce qu’il voit.

In opposition to those copyists of reality, he exalts the imagination, “reine des facultés”178 for in his view, it is only through the work of the imagination that reality can become meaningful. Flaubert echoes Baudelaire’s emphasis on the primacy of art over reality. For him, the artist is a sculptor of the real. He transforms the raw materials that he sees and through his re-arrangement gives them a form. In his words:

Je voudrais écrire tout ce que je vois, non tel qu’il est, mais transfiguré. 179

In another letter, this time to the positivist writer and critic, Hippolyte Taine, he pursues as follows: “On ne peut faire vrai qu’en choisissant et en exagérant.” 180 A decade later he refined his thought to Tourgueniev stating: “Il ne s’agit pas seulement de voir, il faut arranger ce que l’on a vu.” 181 Reality, for Flaubert, is thus envisaged under a qualitative aspect. It is not what you see that matters but how you see it. Whereas Flaubert seems to have inherited Romanticism’s disdain for the real and its claim to the ascendency of art over reality through the use of the imagination, Zola – who is more often seen as a

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177 Realism in painting had fully asserted itself with Courbet’s presentation of his painting Un enterrement à Ornans at the 1850 Salon.


179 Gustave Flaubert letter to Louise Colet, August 26th 1853.

180 Letter to Hippolyte Taine, June 14, 1867.

181 Letter to Tourgueniev, December 8, 1877.
quantitative realist author - finds it difficult to shake off a fundamental concept of nineteenth century aesthetics; that is, artistic genius. Thus, while asserting the scientific foundation of his work, he struggled to maintain the importance of the creative genius of the artist. Jacques Noiray points out the ambivalence of Zola’s scientific project by signaling the tension surrounding his definition of the artist:

[...] le sens du réel implique aussi, pour Zola, le don de “rendre la nature avec intensité”. C’est ici que naît l’ambiguïté, car la question de “l’intensité” fait sortir le travail du romancier du domaine de l’objectivité scientifique pour le faire entrer dans le champ de l’esthétique littéraire ou picturale. [...] Car Zola, tout en se proclamant “savant”, se revendique aussi “artiste”. A côté du sens réel, il installe, comme qualité majeure du romancier, l’ “expression personnelle”. 182

If art is a personal expression, or to quote Zola directly, if art is “la nature vue à travers un tempérament,” 183 then art loses the objectivity of science and in the same movement loses its claim to the real. Could it be that art is fundamentally incompatible with reality? The nineteenth century raises more reasons than one to justify this incompatibility. Two main assertions dominate this debate. The first is that art cannot give the thing itself. The second is that art, contrary to reality, is governed by two fundamental imperatives towards which it must aspire: truth and beauty.

Indeed, art is radically different from the natural world because it is first and foremost, a technique, in other words, an artifice. As Hugo writes in his preface to *Cromwell* (1827):

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L’art, outre sa partie idéale, a une partie terrestre et positive. Quoiqu’il fasse, il est encadré entre la grammaire et la prosodie, entre Vaugelas et Richelet.  

According to this definition, a work of art does not exist without an artificial mise-en-scène or montage that is not only aesthetic but also grammatical. Hence, his assertion, “dans tout grand écrivain, il doit y avoir un grand grammairien.” Language, in that view, is a barrier to the real because it mediates the immediacy of experience, which in order to exist linguistically, needs to be translated through grammar and syntax. In that sense no utterance or written expression can match the da sein of physical matter, which simply is. It is therefore impossible to experience the world with words in the same way that we experience it through living. We may find an equivalent or a translation of that experience, but no original. The difference then between art and reality for Hugo comes down to the idea that art cannot give the thing itself:

La vérité de l’art ne saurait jamais être, ainsi que l’on dit plusieurs, la réalité absolue. L’art ne peut donner la chose même.

Hugo’s argument, here, is a reasoning through the absurd, for if art were the thing itself, then, art would no longer exist. It would be doomed to disappear because, to take Hugo’s example, we would no longer want actors to represent scenes of real life, but we would want to see the people themselves as the actors of their life. What Hugo would have deplored then in our current reality television shows is that through them art disappears because reality dramatically abolishes

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186 The concepts of genius and imagination in Romantic art thus explain themselves as a form of remedy to this impossibility of tapping directly into experience. The solution found was to create another original that could somehow stand on equal footing with the originality of natural creation. Rather than producing copies of copies, they created their own standard of originality.


188 Little did Victor Hugo know that there would one day be such a thing as reality shows.
two fundamental aesthetic concepts of the nineteenth century: genius and the imagination. As mentioned previously, however, there is another apprehension of the real in nineteenth century aesthetics that instead of positing an idealized vision of reality seeks to seize it materially through its objects.

Broadly speaking, the modern period can be defined through its continued dialogue on the relation between art and reality. Within that context the nineteenth century represents a heightened awareness of this dialectic. While it could be tempting to establish a continuation from the eighteenth century’s concept of the *vraisemblable* with the nineteenth century’s concept of *the real* these two aesthetics apprehend reality under drastically different terms.

The very word *vraisemblable* introduces a distance between the work and the world. Indeed this term, which is formed of the two latin roots *verus* (true) and *similis* (similar), indicates that reality cannot be apprehended directly, through what is true, but indirectly, through what is likely to be true. In that framework, the truth can only emerge as a hypothesis deduced from a process of logical reasoning. For the eighteenth century writer, therefore, the real does not directly mean reality, but, what *seems* likely or plausible according to a commonly accepted *doxa*.

[...] l’artiste, défini comme « essentiellement observateur », se concentre pour porter sur la nature un regard doté du privilège de voir se dessiner au-delà de l’objet toute la nature, ainsi que les ordres possibles qu’elle offre comme autant d’esquisses. *L’attention de l’esprit épure pour ainsi dire l’objet réel*, perçoit une loi de reconstruction selon la belle nature, *pour finalement concevoir* ce que Batteux appelle *une idée* et qui est en fait une sorte d’*idéal de l’objet réel*.  

The *vraisemblable* did not refer to reality, but to a system of values, ideas and discourses. In nineteenth century aesthetics, however, reality became a much more palpable entity constituted of the very objects of daily life. According to Jacques Noiray, the distinguishing factor between eighteenth and nineteenth century realism is the shift from ideas to real physical objects:

> […] ce qui distingue le vraisemblable moderne construit par le roman réaliste du vraisemblable classique, c’est […] que celui-ci est une *idée*, alors que le vraisemblable moderne est une *image*. Les choses n’apparaissent plus au romancier réaliste comme des signes conventionnels abstraits et interchangeables, mais comme des *objets concrets*, sensibles, uniques, dont il faudra reproduire l’image visible. Telle est la révolution qui s’accomplit dans la littérature à partir du XVIIIème siècle. La représentation littéraire du monde ne passe plus seulement par un faire comprendre ou un faire rêver, mais par un *faire voir*. ¹⁹⁰

Reality, then, no longer only designates an abstract *ideatum* of reality as it should be, nor does it represent merely social realities; it also designates material goods.

As a result, the novel was filled with an abundance of objects. The overwhelming presence of objects in the novel can be partly explained through a socio-economic perspective. With the advent of the bourgeoisie towards the late eighteenth century, it made sense that the novel would turn towards a mimetic representation of this new social body. But, more importantly, the possibility of describing this class through its material possessions gave further credibility to the truth value of the novel. This was important, because, as a relatively new genre, it was in quest of serious elements that could validate its relevance to a community of readers. It particularly needed to distinguish itself from its prior association with the pejorative term, *romanesque*, that

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seemed to indicate a propensity towards fabled romances. The strength of the novel in the nineteenth century was thus its separation from the *romanesque*, – and, to a certain extent, the imagination - and its affirmation of its capacity to give a truthful representation of real life.\(^{191}\)

The main purpose of the novel, then, became to surpass its previous claim to *create likely* \((vraisemblable)\) scenes (“tableaux”) of human life and instead *show real life* directly through its very materiality. Thus, while an eighteenth century author such as Crébillon may have aspired to represent “l’homme tel qu’il est,” \(^{192}\) his very idea of man was not free from the moral conventions of his society. By contrast, the claim of the novel in the nineteenth century is no longer to represent man *as he should be*, but *as he is*, free from morality. Stendhal’s metaphor of the novel as a mirror is quite emblematic of this change:

> Un roman est un miroir qui se promène sur une grande route. Tantôt il reflète à vos yeux l’azur des cieux, tantôt la fange des bourbiers de la route. Et l’homme qui porte le miroir dans sa hotte sera par vous accusé, d’être immoral ! Son miroir montre la fange, et vous accusez le miroir ! Accusez bien plutôt le grand chemin où est le bourbier, et plus encore l’inspecteur des routes qui laisse l’eau croupir et le bourbier se former.\(^{193}\)

In Stendhal’s depiction, the novel is practically only a recording device aiming to show man as he presents himself on his public records, or, in Balzac’s words, his “état civil.” In that perspective, the detailed record of reality is extremely important to assert the truth value of the novel. Balzac’s forceful assertion at the beginning of *Le Père Goriot* that “all is true,” thus, only finds validity


through the lengthy and meticulous visual description of the Pension Vauquer. The geographic and visual precision of this description legitimizes the veracity of the story that follows:

It is not altogether far-fetched to observe that, semantically speaking, “realism” is distantly connected with “real estate.” That quasi-legal connection is tangibly supported by the bonds of interest that tie so many novelists to the realistic tradition: by Balzac's sense of property, Dickens's inventories and Tolstoy's estates, Henry James's preoccupation with “things.” 194

What is fundamental, however, is that the objects and events described are contemporaneous to the reader’s own historical perspective so that he or she can recognize this experience and story as true. According to Jacques Noiray this mimetic representation of reality that the reader finds in the novel is a source of pleasure. Quoting from Marivaux’s Le Paysan parvenu Noiray sees similarities with the reader’s own experience. In one particularly striking scene, the main character is represented at home watching and marveling over his possessions:

Je restai le lendemain toute la matinée chez moi; je ne m’y ennuyai pas ; je m’y délectai dans le plaisir de me trouver tout à coup un maître de maison ; j’y savourai ma fortune ; j’y goûtais mes aises, je m’y regardai dans mon appartement ; j’y marchai, je m’y assis, j’y souris à mes meubles, j’y rêvai à ma cuisinière, qu’il ne tenait qu’à moi de faire venir, et que je crois que j’appelai pour la voir ; enfin j’y contemplai ma robe de chambre et mes pantoufles. 195

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For Noiray, readers of the nineteenth century are a bit like this character. They recognize themselves in the catalogue-like enumeration of objects, and admire the setting and things that surround them. In Marivaux’s description, however, this narcissistic outlook reaches the point of ridicule.

While it may seem that the history of the novel is quite different from the poetic movements of the nineteenth century, the general changes happening in the field of literature likewise pushed poetry to seek a form of validation through references to external reality.

In the clichéd imagery of poetry, Romanticism is frequently considered as its epitomic form of expression. Because of this association, poetry is often dissociated from external reality. This is partly due to the Romantics’ defense of an autonomous stand for their art over society. But it is also linked to the subject choices of Romantic poetry that privilege the primacy of individual subjectivity. As such, Romantic poetry is often qualified as a sentient poetry, one that expresses the lyric passions and complaints of the heart. Love, nature, the passing of time and the awareness of the precariousness of the human condition are some of its most recurrent topoi. The Romantic poet thus sees himself as a melancholy dreamer burdened by the sufferings of the human condition. The paintings of the German Romantic, Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), notably Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer (“Wanderer above the sea of fog”) (1818) [ill. 8], could easily be seen as a caricature of Romantic lyric in which a solitary figure contemplates the destiny of nature and humankind from the soaring heights of a desolate landscape. Such representations contribute to the collective idea that poetry stands at a distance from real world preoccupations that are associated with the real. This perceived incompatibility between poetry and reality is sustained by a strong collective myth, whereby poetry is supposed to be about the beautiful, the beautiful not necessarily corresponding to a realistic world view.
In addition to these preceding beliefs, with the political dismantlement of a patronage system at the end of the eighteenth century, the modern poet was left to live on his own means. This meant that he was, at times, in a much more precarious economic situation than he had previously been. Though many poets such as the *poètes maudits* of the late 1880s turned their marginalized status in society into an object of pride around which they partly forged their collective identity, the marginal status of the poet reinforced previous stereotypes regarding poetry’s alienation from real world dilemmas. This manifests itself in caricatures representing the figure of the poet as a starving artist. Carl Spitzweg’s (1808-1885) painting *Der arme Poet* (“The Poor Poet”) (1839) [ill. 9], depicting a starving artist living in wretched conditions in a remote loft below a leaking rooftop, epitomizes this familiar imagery. What stands out from this picture is the poet’s indifferent attitude towards his material circumstances. Despite his miserable surroundings, a nightcap firmly planted on his head, a feather pen determinedly pressed between his tightly pursed lips, he pursues his poetic endeavor undisturbed. He is surrounded by newspapers and the remaining books that he has not yet used to warm himself to a fire. While this picture suggests a rather harsh reality, its representation of the poet’s poverty is both playful and humorous. By contrast to this type of Romanticizing of poverty, social realist painters of the early twentieth century would draw out the bleak and inhospitable aspects of that reality. For Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) there is room for neither playfulness nor humor in her representation of social precariousness, which she associates in one of her paintings to “destitution” and “shame” (“Not und Schande der Armut,” 1900) [ill. 10]. As such her characters are stripped bare and the wretchedness of their exposed naked bodies stands for the misery of their impoverished social and psychological condition. It is easy to understand how, by comparison, an artistic posture that consists in depicting a poet’s detachment from his environment would spread the stereotype of a poetry aloof and out of touch with reality. According to this myth, the poet is a dreamer or drifter
whose aspirations towards other worlds rather than those just offered to his sight may set astray from society. This imagery is engrained in the very fabric of language. For instance, the French expressions “être/se perdre/vivre dans les nuages” are often associated with a poetic mind-frame. To the contrary, “descendre de son nuage” signifies returning to a pragmatic world-view.

These stereotypes of poetry and of the figure of the poet are pertinent to the analysis of Mallarmé’s appropriation of the “real” as he himself has been portrayed as eerie and aloof. As accounted by the literary critic Adolphe Racot, rather scathingly, in an article published in Le Gaulois, in March 1875, at a time when Mallarmé was not yet a well established poet, there were two faces to this man. The first was that of a well educated bourgeois, puffing round circles of smoke with his cigar such as he is forever depicted in Edouard Manet’s portrait of 1876 [ill. 11]. The second was that of an eccentric and contemplative poet whom Racot also describes as “extra-terrestrial.” 196 Numerous anecdotes circulated to corroborate this view. Racot chooses two particularly striking ones to share with his readers. In a first anecdote, Mallarmé would have declared at a party that he wanted to bring down the moon. In a second anecdote, invited for the holidays by friends at their sea villa, Mallarmé would have arrived with only two Japanese screens as luggage for his stay. His plan was to place them against the window of his room in order to give him the impression of an “oriental feast” woven into the exhilarating “sentiment of the immensity of the sea.” 197 The extravagance of this gesture along with the well-known obscurity of his poetic language contributed to the cliché that his poetry is radically opposed to reality. Yet, far from the usual poetic stereotypes, these two terms – poetry and reality – are simultaneously opposed and complementary.

197 Ibid.
To say that poetry and reality are in opposition to each other is thus a poetic stereotype that in Mallarmé’s case will be particularly useful to dismantle. As was seen in Chapter Two (“Hypercontext and Erasure”), throughout the Vers de circonstance Mallarmé manifests a keen awareness of the contemporary social and artistic practices of his time. Consequently, the poems appear as fragments of reality taken “sur le vif,” notably with regard to Parisian forms of sociability.

While Baudelaire certainly gave Mallarmé a frame of reference to his poetic writings of the Vers de circonstance set in Paris, Mallarmé was also well acquainted with other more contemporary writings on the subject. His critical reviews of works such as Les Poésies parisiennes by Emmanuel des Essarts (1862) or Esquisses parisiennes by Théodore de Banville (1859) were opportunities for Mallarmé to think about the poetic depiction of Parisian life. As such an idea that appears extremely important in Mallarmé’s appreciation of des Essarts’s work is its sincerity. The adjective “sincère” is repeated three times and serves to anchor the aesthetic validity of this work based on its authenticity. Interestingly Mallarmé writes “[ce] qui vous enivre dans le vers exquis de ce divin maître : c’est un idéal sincère s’élevant au-dessus du réel et le prenant au sérieux.” The idea of transcendence implied by the notion of elevation is set in conjunction with the importance of being faithful to reality by taking it seriously. Later on in the text, Mallarmé congratulates des Essarts by stating:

Jamais non plus de ces divagations qui sont la caricature de la rêverie: ni de passions d’autrui qu’on pâlit en se les appropriant; on sent que l’auteur a vécu son œuvre.  

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199 Ibid.
The idea that the author lived his work becomes important to justify its legitimacy. To conclude Mallarmé writes:

De là, il a senti que toute époque peut être lyrisée, et a compris qu’on pouvait chercher l’idéal hors de l’antiquité, du moyen âge, de la Renaissance ou du siècle Pompadour, dans la consciencieuse étude de son âme et dans la franche observation de son temps.200

From these early observations Mallarmé will mostly retain the second remarks regarding the genuine observation of his epoch. This new aesthetic focus turned towards the study of his contemporaries and of his time conveniently replaced the highly subjective orientation of his poetry prior to his early mid-life crisis of the mid 1860s. In addition what he termed in his letter to des Essarts ‘the consciencious study of his soul’ turned into an impersonal aesthetic that matched the transformation of his poetry into a greater form of exteriorization. The focus of his work then turns to an attention to the present and to the materiality of life, topics which already captured his interests when he wrote “partout éclate quelque chose de sincère, et qui se possède: rien en l’air, rien de vaporeux.” 201

While it remains true that Mallarmé’s poetry radically differs from the aims of realist or naturalist authors it is nonetheless useful to consider his realist preoccupations. At a time when reality became mechanically reproducible through photography the debate and questions regarding art’s relation to the real were no longer theoretical, but empirical. Artist’s and aesthetic movements at large had to position themselves with regard to this new medium. For Jean-Michel Maulpoix “poésie et réalité entretiennent […] – depuis le milieu du XIXème siècle surtout – des


rapports de plus en plus étroits.” 202 While literary histories commonly oppose aestheticizing art forms to realist and naturalist ones, the rejection or endorsement of realism is not that clearly distinguishable. A Symbolist poet like Paul Claudel (1868-1955) thus wrote:

L’objet de la poésie, ce n’est donc pas, comme on le dit souvent, les rêves, les illusions ou les idées. C’est la sainte réalité, donnée une fois pour toutes, au centre de laquelle nous sommes placés. […] C’est tout cela qui nous regarde et que nous regardons. 203

For Maulpoix “la relation du poète au réel va s’avérer partie prenante et décisive d’un mouvement qui conduit la poésie à se retourner sur et contre elle-même, contre le ‘poétisme’ en tout cas et contre les ‘vieilleries’ […]”. 204 What a subtle analysis of nineteenth century aesthetics reveals therefore is a common interest in the real from the novel to poetic art forms. One reason of this common interest in the real lies in the spatial-temporal transformations of the nineteenth century that imposed on all writers and thinkers a new reflection on the relation of art to reality.

In Mallarmé’s case, his interest in the real manifests itself in the Vers de circonstance through his sampling of different material objects.

**Sampling Objects**

The presence of objects in poetry is not a novelty; objects have long been part of the poetic tradition. In the modern period, beginning in the Renaissance, objects have had an exceptionally auspicious fate. Starting in the sixteenth century, the “hymne-blason,” for instance, flourished among the poets of the Pléiade. This genre favored the proliferation of a poetry dedicated to inanimate objects. These poems, written in a light vein, consisted in a detailed praise or satire of a

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204 Maulpoix, Jean-Michel. <http://www.maulpoix.net/poesieetrealite.html>
person or of an object. The range of objects treated by these poems spanned precious stones and other valuable objects to the most mundane. The poet Rémy Belleau (1528-1577) wrote, for example, on such varied entities as time, shadow[s], horns, and brushe[s]. In his poetry collection entitled, *Pierres précieuses* (1576) he wrote poems called: “Le Diamant,” “La Perle,” “Le Rubis.” Maurice Scève (1501-1564) turned towards the practical anchoring of the object in space when he wrote his poem: “Tu es, Miroir, au clou toujours pendant…” Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585) chose much more pedestrian topics when writing about “La Quenouille,” “La Salade” or “Le Gobelet.”

In the seventeenth century, this tradition continued with poets such as Jean Auvray (1580-1624) who wrote a poem called “Le Bonnet” (*Le Banquet des Muses*, 1623). In turn, Nicolas Boileau (1636-1711) wrote about a “Lutrin;” Jean-Baptiste Chassignet (1571-1635) wrote a poem called “Notre vie est semblable à la lampe enfumée;” Louis d’Epinay d’Etelan (604-1644) composed a “Sonnet du miroir”; Jean de La Fontaine (1621-1695) wrote a poem called “La Besace” (*Fables* I, 7); Saint-Amant (1594-1661) wrote on “La Pipe”; Madame de Scudéry (1607-1701) wrote “La Fontaine de Vaucluse” or Frère de Vitre wrote “La Couronne d’épines.” The eighteenth century was not quite as favorable to poetic creativity. But, building on the poetic legacy of his predecessors, Charles-François Panard (1689-1765), wrote two poems, in the spirit of the blason; one is called “Le Verre de vin” and the other “Le Bouteille.”

In the nineteenth century, however, there was a revival of the object as the subject of poetry. From Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) alone it is possible to quote “La Cloche fêlée,” “L’Horloge,” “La Pipe,” “Le Vin de l’assassin,” “Les Fenêtres,” “Le Joujou du pauvre,” “Le Gâteau.” His poems are no exception in the poetic field of the nineteenth century. Tristan Corbière (1845-1875) composed a poem called “La Pipe au poète” in *Les Amours jaunes* (1873); Hérédia wrote a poem on a “Vitrail” in *Les Trophées* (1893); Victor Hugo wrote poems on “Le

But, compared to these previous generations of poets, the greatest originality of Mallarmé’s work is that, to a large extent, the poems either accompany or are written on actual material objects. As has already been seen, the objects therefore are not only thematic; they are also real. This, changes the status of the *Vers de circonstance* as a purely poetic or literary work (in the largest sense of the word – as relating to writing) to a visual and material object related to the plastic arts (in the largest sense of the word – as relating to all the visual, non-literary, non-musical arts).

The incorporation of real material objects into the *Vers de circonstance* corresponds to a change in nineteenth century aesthetics, which has been linked here to two phenomena: the influence of the decorative arts and a general interest of the nineteenth century in the category of the “real.” But, the introduction of real objects in the *Vers de circonstance* also corresponds to a shift in Mallarmé’s poetics. Prior to 1866, Mallarmé’s aesthetic conceptions were very much centered on the notion of the “ideal.” But, throughout the late 1860s, he progressively constructed a new philosophical paradigm that abandoned the inaccessible perspectives of ideal forms and essences to adopt a more materialist approach to art through the appreciation and examination of exterior reality. Mallarmé’s correspondence of that period expresses his change in poetics and perspectives:
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,
mon ami ! que je veux me donner ce spectacle de la matière, ayant
conscience d’elle […] 205

The key fragment of this quotation is Mallarmé’s statement concerning materiality when he says “je veux me donner ce spectacle de la matière.” To look at the spectacle of materiality becomes Mallarmé’s main objective. Mallarmé’s interest and investment in a materialist poetics close to the plastic arts is a main diverging aesthetic choice from his poetic predecessor Baudelaire. Though Baudelaire had qualified modernity by its “domination progressive de la matière,” 206 he viewed this progression in a negative light. Mallarmé to the contrary, embraces this shift to his advantage, as he used it as an opportunity to explore new poetic possibilities based on the materiality of language. This materiality has two main aspects. The most obvious one is the visual materiality of linguistic signs. The second one is the material foundation of language based on external referents. Mallarmé’s poetics thus deals with the totality of the linguistic sign from its oral and written manifestations to its concrete material support. Thus, Mallarmé inaugurates from the late 1860s onwards a metaphysic that escapes the ethereal ambitions of his youth. On the contrary, he dedicates himself to a reflection anchored in reality.

This enables Mallarmé to expand his poetic exploration of the real to ordinary objects and events. As Barbara Bohac shows in her work on the notion of the everyday in Mallarmé’s poetics, the ordinary as an aesthetic category is an important Mallarméan concept.207 On several


occasions he formulates the necessity of art to address all aspects of reality. Not so surprisingly this idea appears in *La Dernière Mode*, where he writes:

Rien n’est à négliger de l’existence d’une époque : tout y appartient à tous. […] Tout s’apprend sur le vif, même la beauté, et le port de tête, on le tient de quelqu’un, c’est-à-dire de chacun, comme le port d’une robe. Fuir ce monde? on en est. 208

But, more unexpectedly, Mallarmé reformulates this idea in a letter to Zola, which has been quoted earlier:

Quant à moi, qui admire une affiche, dessinée et coloriée comme plus d’une, à l’égal d’un plafond ou d’une apothéose, je ne connais pas un point de vue en art qui soit inférieur à une autre ; et je jouis partout ainsi qu’il sied.209

In his reformulation from the *Dernière Mode* to his letter to Zola, he changes his insistence on the idea that everything belongs to art to the more radical notion that there is no hierarchy of genre or subject in art as everything is equally important. This notion of equity is meant to compensate for the former exclusion from the aesthetic canon of certain subjects that were not considered art.

The aesthetic innovation, therefore, of the *Vers de circonstance* in relation to *La Dernière Mode* is that it accomplishes Mallarmé’s statement to Zola of expanding the notion of the real to the banality of everyday life. He achieves this by using ordinary objects with no apparent aesthetic value per se. Through the banality of these objects Mallarmé constructs a poetic work that gives the illusion of the spontaneity and freshness of a fragment of reality taken “sur le vif.” It comes as no surprise then that a section of the *Vers de circonstance* is dedicated to photography.

Cette dame a pour nom Méry


Photographs, albums, fans, pebbles, plates, jugs: such are the many objects that offer him the opportunity to dedicate himself entirely to the study and sampling of mundane fragments of reality. Through this gesture, he confirms his affirmation of *La Dernière Mode* that nothing is to be neglected of the existence of an epoch.

Traditionally two objects have attracted the attention of readers; that is, his poems written on fans and the postal poems. These objects, however, are not exactly ordinary in Mallarmé’s poetic treatment of them. In the first case, the fan is used as a material support to canvas the visual properties of his poems. The fan, therefore, is more an aesthetic artifact than a mundane quotidian object with a utilitarian use value. In the second case, the envelope in the postal quatrains serves as a critical reflection on the relation between the locutor of the poem and its poetic addressee. For the purpose of this discussion on the expansion of the real to banal objects, it will be more pertinent to examine objects that have traditionally been neglected in the study of the *Vers de circonstance*; that is, handkerchiefs and pebbles.

**Handkerchiefs**

As will be seen in the next chapter regarding the analysis of the “Sonnet en -yx,” the mobility of Mallarmé’s poetic objects, between an aesthetic and utilitarian sphere, reflects his need of a truthful poetic vision that embraces the conventional distinction between the utilitarian and the aesthetic. Mallarmé expressed this necessity of truth in art with great strength in an article

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entitled “Sur le Beau et l’Utile” published late in his career in 1896. In this article, Mallarmé dismantled the polar opposition between the *beautiful* and the *useful* by conjuring up the notion of the “true.”

Le Beau et l’Utile, *ayez ce terme moyen, le Vrai*. Le Beau, gratuit, tourne à l’ornement, répudié : l’Utile, seul ou qui l’est, alors, à des besoins médiocres, exprime une inélégance.\(^{211}\)

The *Vers de circonstance* provide such an example of a middle ground between the beautiful and the useful through the choice of handkerchiefs as one of its poetic objects, as handkerchiefs serve both a utilitarian function and an aesthetic one.

Until the wide spread development of industrial paper handkerchiefs, in the course of the twentieth century, the handkerchief was, for a long time, an ostentatious sign of wealth. Depending on the quality of its embroidery, of its contours, or of its motifs it was possible to determine the social status of its owner. Lace and embroidery were the most apparent signs of wealth. Handkerchiefs belonged then to the elaborate panoply of accessories that served to construct an identity based on *appearance* versus *being*. In *La Dernière Mode*, for example, handkerchiefs are presented as the ultimate fashion accessory along with the fan. This is what Mallarmé writes about handkerchiefs in *La Dernière Mode*:\(^{212}\)

\[
\text{Un petit flacon, soit en ors différents, roses, verts ou jaunes, Louis XV ou Louis XVI, à guirlande (ou moderne, en émail avec des feuillages et des oiseaux japonais) étant un objet indispensable à côté du mouchoir de dentelles, nous naurions garde de l’oublier; non plus qu’un éventail: en soie noire avec ganse}
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rose, bleue ou grise pour toilette du matin, en soie blanche avec tableau pour les cérémonies.

The description of the lace handkerchief surrounded by a golden flask and a silk fan illustrate the stylish sophistication of this object. Moreover, similarly to the fan, there was a whole protocol around the handling of the handkerchief that functioned as a language to convey certain secret codes. Consequently, handkerchiefs could be seen as decoders of particular societal norms. There is a thus cryptic use of the handkerchief that can manifest itself by the degree of affectation with which its owner handles it. In the following poem, Mallarmé feigns a form of preciosity regarding the treatment of the handkerchief. This corresponds precisely to the handkerchief’s superficial societal use. In this poem it is as a sign of gallantry:

Quoique à ses pieds une sultane
Ensemble n’en voie autant choir
Lisa, recevez de Stéphane
Mallarmé maint et maint mouchoir. 213

But it can equally indicate the mannerisms or preciosity of a person.

Celle ici qui ne prisa
Que l’amitié simple et franche
Veut pour son nez
Elisa
Une pure toile blanche. 214

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214 Ibid.
However, the handkerchief is also seen under another aspect in the *Vers de circonstance*. Indeed, from an elegant fashion accessory, the handkerchief is just as well viewed as an everyday item of practical utility invested with nothing but the valence of personal interest and affects. Mallarmé’s inspiration for choosing the handkerchief thus might have been the fact that it is a polyvalent object with a rich polysemy. When it is made out of silk and lace or other refined materials its decorative appeal conceals the fact that it can also be used primarily for hygienic functions or other bodily commodities such as blowing one’s nose. In the *Vers de circonstance* this hygienic function of the handkerchief is over-determined and presents itself in great pomp as in the following two examples:

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Quand s’approchera de son nez
La batiste\(^{215}\) qu’elle déploie,
Mouchoirs, pour Elisa sonnez
Toute une fanfare de joie.\(^{216}\)

Lisa
Que votre nez répète
Le salut dans chaque mouchoir
D’une impartiale trompette
A l’an qui se lève va choir.\(^{217}\)
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In both cases, the handkerchief is seen as a utilitarian objects thanks to which its owner will simply be able to blow her nose. In its utilitarian function the object can also have two other functions: one domestic and the other one related to clothing. The handkerchief can thus allow to sponge, humidify, dust, or polish. In its usage as a garment the handkerchief can be worn in different ways: in the hand, in the pocket of an outfit or around the neck. It is a very versatile object. The handkerchief can be knotted and according to the custom or the fold can transform

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\(^{215}\) “Toile fine et blanche de lin ou parfois de chanvre. *Drap, mouchoir de batiste; en batiste.*” Definition given by the *Trésor de la langue française informatisé*.


itself into a band or armband. But, as has been seen, from this utilitarian usage, the handkerchief can also easily leave its utilitarian function to become a luxury object.

The handkerchief, as a piece of clothing, is thus seen in the *Vers de circonstance* under its dual function as a utilitarian object on the one hand, and as a superfluous accessory on the other. It thereby encompasses the two precepts advanced by Mallarmé; that is, the necessity to encompass the beautiful and the useful (“le beau et l’utile”). But, next to this aesthetic position, there is also an even more radical usage of objects in the *Vers de circonstance*, as is the case when Mallarmé introduces objects that have no apparent aesthetic value.

*Galets d’Honfleur*\(^{218}\)

*Le galet est un caillou poli et arrondi par frottement, qui se trouve le plus souvent sur le rivage de la mer ou dans le lit des torrents.*\(^{219}\)

The relation of the *Vers de circonstance* to the *Poésies* is somewhat similar to the relation of a pebble to a stone. In both cases, the former is a miniature version of the latter. First of all, the “galet” is somewhat similar to a stone. Both possess a brute mineral quality and present the appearance of an accomplished form. Their extreme immobility is almost threatening, and reminiscent of death. Stones are therefore used in certain funeral rites to commemorate the memory of a departed.\(^{220}\) But, while stones have the seriousness and *gravitas* of an imperishable or already perished object, the pebble is a much more transient object. Found on the beach, pebbles are composed of little grains of sand (quartz) that through friction group themselves together. The conglomeration of these different grains of sand over time forms the pebble.

\(^{218}\) Out of the twenty-one poems of this corpus, six are preserved in private collections.

\(^{219}\) This definition comes from the *Trésor de la langue française informatisé*.

\(^{220}\) In Jewish funerary rituals little blue stones are often placed on the tombstones of the departed. Paul Celan alludes to this practice in his poetry.
pebble is thus an object produced by a natural metamorphosis; or to speak like Deleuze and Guattari, there is a “becoming” pebble of the grain of sand. But this process of metamorphosis is not static; it is ongoing as long as the pebble lies on the beach in contact with little grains of sand. The combination of sand, water and wind continuously polishes and refines the pebble. In order for this process to stop, the pebble needs to be taken out of its natural environment. The act of picking up the pebble, as one would pick a flower, interrupts its life cycle. As a dried flower that is left in a book, the pebble becomes a commemorative object. In the case of the *Vers de circonstance*, the pebble is used to commemorate the holidays spent by the sea. Placed on the edge of a desk it recalls promenades by the sea shore, the smell of sea salt and the sound of the wind. At least, that is how the poems written on pebbles are conceived in the *Vers de circonstance*. These poems evoke the small pleasures of summer days: the joys of sea baths, the delights of long summer meals shared with friends and family, invitations and encounters by the beach, and the reunion with old friends. They pose a contrast between Paris “le quartier Monceau,” 221 the “Batignolles” 222 and Honfleur with its “grève,” 223 and the visual contrast between its fields and the ocean hue - what Mallarmé calls “[la] verdure et mer tout charme.” 224

For further realism, Mallarmé includes among the actors of these summer games, Catala, the swimming instructor.

Vénus pour nager s’étala

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222 Ibid. p. 349.

223 Ibid. p. 347.

224 Ibid. p. 348.
Entre les bras de Catala.\textsuperscript{225}

As this distich suggests, however, the pleasure of summer days can also be an occasion for poetry. The poems, therefore, are not only amusing pastimes. The games are also a pretext for literature. The combination of the mineral (the pebble) and maritime (the sea) elements is a fruitful combination raising metaphors on the poetic horizon. They are notably an occasion to give out lessons on literature. Thus, Geneviève becomes Venus, the Goddess of Love. This is particularly visible in Mallarmé’s poems to his pupil, Joseph. Joseph was then sojourning with Geneviève at their friend’s house, the Ponsot, in Honfleur.\textsuperscript{226} Mallarmé suggests to him that he should skip pebbles on the water.

\begin{quote}
Avec ceci Joseph, ô mon élève
Vous ferez des ricochets sur la grève.\textsuperscript{227}
\end{quote}

The naming of his pupil Joseph through the solemn apostrophe “ô mon élève” plays on the lighthearted humor of a seasonal poem. But, at the same time, it introduces a form of decorum around the object that represents more than just a pebble that should be skipped on the water. Indeed, there is a form of gravitas in the formality with which Joseph is invited to play. Mallarmé conveys the seriousness of this game through the formal apostrophe to his pupil and through the singularity of the object that is not just any pebble but that one. The attention to the specificity of this object (highlighted by the demonstrative deictic “ceci”) indicates that there is more at stake in this game than first meets the eye. Beyond the pleasant allusion to a summer sport, there is a

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{225} Ibid, p.350.
\textsuperscript{226} July 1893.
\textsuperscript{227} This poem is yet another example of the way in which Mallarmé creates fictional occasions. Indeed, the context in which the poem was written suggests that Mallarmé was not in Honfleur at the time he wrote it. This presupposes that he collected these pebbles in Honfleur and then brought them back to Paris to write on them. Mallarmé, Stéphane. \textit{Oeuvres complètes.} Vol. 1. Ed. Bertrand Marchal. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade/Gallimard, 1998, p. 347.
poetic stake as the deictic simultaneously refers to the pebble and the poem that is directly inscribed upon the object. The demonstrative “ceci” binds the poem to the object and vice-versa. Mallarmé’s invitation to his student to skip the pebble on water is equivalent to a music teacher who would be asking his student to practice his scales on the piano. It is an exercise, a poetic exercise. But, in Mallarmé’s case it is a bit of a perilous exercise as the poem is written on the object. That means that language will be skipped on the surface of the water in a true game of ricochet. Mallarmé’s poem therefore is an implicit meta-critical statement on the nature of poetic language that, similarly to a pebble skipped on water, must sustain itself in a movement of elevation and rebounding for as long as possible before sinking into silence. Such as a throw of dice, the act of skipping a pebble on water is also a metaphorical invitation to play with language, or to turn it into a game that sets the poem in action. The pebble is therefore a metaphorical object that links the elements of the seaside landscape to a poetic adventure. Other readings of these poems draw attention to this conception of the object as a poetic metaphor.

Je vois ma fille Vève

Et le cap de la Hève.²²⁸

Situated north of the Havre, the cap de la Hève is a place strongly imprinted with history because of its privileged geographic situation and its exceptional geological qualities. Both factors are part of Mallarmé’s poetic inspiration. The commercial exploitation of the cliff in the nineteenth century for the extraction of clay, flint, and pebble echoes the poetic exploitation of the pebble in the Vers de circonstance. In order to understand the numerous allusions and word plays that exist in the poems it is necessary to briefly describe the place.

The cape of the Hève dramatically dominates a bay one hundred and fifteen meters above the sea. Thanks to a section of the cliff that regularly crumbles geologists and paleontologists have discovered bones, hewed flint and bronze tools that indicate that this site has been occupied since prehistorical times. Its soil therefore is remarkably rich. A Roman path left from the plateau in the direction of the Tréport, suggests that this site was one of the first in France to have had a lighthouse.\textsuperscript{229} As such, the Cap de La Hève is considered part of France’s cultural heritage. The juxtaposition of these different elements created a favorable terrain for rich legends to form. According to the regional myth, the Hève would be a woman (Heva/Ève) resting in a tomb that has taken the shape of a cliff. The howling of the cliff under the effect of Neptune (god of the sea) would warn sailors of the dangers around them. This legend would have inspired the poet and dramatist Casimir Delavigne’s (1793-1843) inaugural speech for the theater of Le Havre.\textsuperscript{230}

\textit{Eh ! qui de vous, messieurs, quand propice aux vaisseaux,} \\
La Hève, au sein des nuits, allume ses fanaux. \\
Quand la mer vient heurter de ses vagues plaintives \\
Les rivages de Leure et les pointes de Dives, \\
Quand le signal d’alarme annonce à vous nochers\textsuperscript{231} \\
Qu’une nef en débris se perd sur les rochers, \\
Qui de vous, plus sensible aux traits d’un beau génie, \\
Ne voit sur le tillac s’abîmer Virginie ?

In the “Galets d’Honfleur” there is a game between the rich legends surrounding La Hève and the poetic mythologies that Mallarmé carves into stone. Looking back at the distich quoted above

\textsuperscript{229} This site is now classified under the general inventory of French cultural heritage (\textit{patrimoine culturel}).

\textsuperscript{230} \textit{Discours d’inauguration pour le théâtre du Havre}.

\textsuperscript{231} Poetic term designating the conductor of a small boat.
there is a close vision of Geneviève, who represents both the family and the home, with the
distant vision of the cape and what it represents: evasion and journey.

Je vois ma fille Vève

Et le cap de la Hève. 232

But, contrary to the baudelairian topos of a chimérique Icarie that we find in Les Fleurs du mal, the journey here is put on the same level as the family and the domestic sphere by using the coordinating conjunction “et” as well as the rhyme in “ève”, which joins “Vève” to “Hève.” The message of the poem is that there is no need to go elsewhere to find “[une] exotique nature,” 233 since it is present hic et nunc. The quotidian is transformed by the eye of the beholder. In addition, through the homophony between “Hève” and “Eve” it does not take much imagination to rhyme Ève with Vève, Mallarmé’s beloved daughter. But his Ève is on vacation in Honfleur. She is a pagan Ève, not the Ève of the origin of the world, but Venus, a mythological figure, coming out of water, ready to spread herself in the arms of a modern Adonis: Catala, who is none other than her swimming instructor. 234

Through both these objects, handkerchiefs and pebbles, Mallarmé demonstrates parts of his new poetic art. In the first instance, the handkerchief represents the alliance of the beautiful and the useful. In the second, the pebble represents his move away from a vocabulary borrowed from the decorative arts in order to embrace a more truthful vision of reality constituted by the sampling of “real” material objects that have had no aesthetic reconditioning. In both cases,

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232 19, p. 349.


234 Vénus pour nager s’étala
Entre les bras de Catala.
however, the object crystallizes the evolution of Mallarmé’s poetic art towards the external reality. This will become even more explicit in the analysis of the object in the “Sonnet en x.”
CHAPTER 4: Reading the “Sonnet en x”: The Valence of the Insignificant Object

Poetry as “plastic” form

Considering Mallarmé’s aesthetic preoccupations, it is not surprising that the initial poems collected in the manuscript of 1892 were inspired by Mallarmé’s observations on the similarities between certain poetic forms and the form of certain objects. The first object to have caught his attention was the envelope because of its obvious geometrical symmetry with the shape of a quatrain. Mallarmé discloses his finding on the reciprocal relation between text and object in the prefaces that he prepared for the publication of this collection:

1. M. Stéphane Mallarmé […] autorise l’impression [“de ces poèmes spéciaux et brefs”], mentionnant que l’idée lui vint à cause d’un rapport évident entre le format ordinaire des enveloppes et la disposition d’un quatrains et qu’il fit cela par pur sentiment esthétique.235

2. Le poëte ajoute que l’idée [“de cette publication”] lui […] vint à cause d’un rapport évident entre le format des enveloppes et la disposition d’un quatrains – par pur sentiment esthétique. Il les multiplia au gré de ses relations.236

In both assertions the emphasis is placed on the convergence between the form of the object and the “disposition” of a quatrain. In French, the word “disposition” is laden with connotations. It is a term that was frequently used in the Rhetorical tradition inherited from Classical Antiquity. It is a Latin term (dispositio) that referred to the order of discourse and the organization of the ideas


and arguments presented in a text or speech. Mallarmé’s usage of the term, however, breaks away from the Rhetorical tradition and distorts the word from its conventional acceptation by using it in a very literal sense; that is, as the exterior form and appearance of the text, and not as the inner articulation of the text’s ideas. A simple observation of the envelopes on which Mallarmé wrote his poems reveals the degree of veracity of his statement in seeing the quatrain merely as a form. These envelopes were just large enough to fit a visiting card or a short folded note. The quatrain therefore perfectly fits the envelope as if it were just meant for it.\textsuperscript{237} The quatrain is thus seen as an abstract entity, or as a mere block of text, forming a rectangular shape on the envelope. From a purely visual perspective the inner rectangle formed by the quatrain mimics the exterior rectangle formed by the envelope and vice-versa. Mallarmé’s interest in the postal-quatrain is thus, according to his statement, solely formal, and motivated, as he states, by a ‘pure aesthetic sentiment.’ The poem is completely evacuated of its substance and is merely presented as a pattern on a canvas. The canvas in this case is the creamed colored envelope and the pattern is the black rectangular imprint made by the poem. In its most abstract form, the poem resembles a black rectangle on a white rectangular background. The poem thereby visually dramatizes the material properties of writing (\textit{la page blanche} and \textit{l’encre}). But the relation of black and white also represents the relation of the poet to productivity – represented by the filling of the page with the rectangular block of the poem - and impotence – with the threatening presence of whiteness surrounding the black block of text.

In Mallarmé’s postal-quatrails, the \textit{mise en abîme} of the form of the quatrain, as a black rectangle against a white rectangle, concretely addresses one of Mallarmé’s recurring concerns, that is, the opposition between writing and non writing, creativity versus impotence, ink versus a

\textsuperscript{237} Most envelopes are between 120 x 95mm or 110 x 70mm.
blank sheet of paper, blackness versus whiteness. In earlier poems, this antagonism was marked with strife and conflict.

The most noteworthy example of this dissension is in “Don du poème.”\footnote{This poem was initially written in 1865-1866. It was revised numerous times until its final version in 1885-1886.} The poetic metaphor that permeates that poem is the comparison between the act of giving birth to a child and the act of producing a poem. Mallarmé uses that metaphor to describe the agony and violence with which the poem is brought into the world after a night’s intense labor (“Noire, à l’aile saignante et pâle déplumé”). The poem, is both metaphorically and literally the child of the night (“Je t’apporte l’enfant d’une nuit d’Idumée”) as the ink bears witness to the creation of the poem. Yet, when the work is presented to the morning daylight, (“l’aurore”) dawn voraciously throws itself on the poem and crudely reveals its flaws (“elle a montré cette relique”). The poem is drained of life and is assimilated to a stillborn (“une horrible naissance”). This opposition between night and day has been coined by Bertrand Marchal as Mallarmé’s “drame solaire.” This designates the tension in Mallarmé between idealism on the one hand, and poetic practice on the other. In his early poems, this relation was marked by suffering and a feeling of inadequacy with regard to the metaphysical ideal to which his poetry aspired. His idealism is often represented in his poems through the mention of the sky (“l’Azur”) or, in this case, daylight (“l’aurore”).

In the Loisirs de la Poste, however, this antagonistic relationship between black and white, ideal and practice, is resolved through the mutual entanglement of the elements identified with black and white. The white rectangle resembles the black rectangle and vice-versa. This reciprocity between text and object echoes another acceptation of the word “disposition,” which in a philosophical context designates a state of openness and receptivity. Here, the object requests
the writing of the poem just as the poem requests its inscription on the object. There is a mutual availability of text and object that validates their existence. Thus, contrary to “Don du poème,” where the poem dissolves into the light of day, the postal-quatrain presents itself as a solid and compact physical entity that is firmly grounded both on the page and in reality. The poem’s existence and relevance is further guaranteed by the postal services who successfully delivered the poems (“aucune des adresses en vers reproduites ici n’a manqué à son destinataire”). The apparent obviousness between the format of the envelope and the picture formed by the poem grounds the poem into reality and also transforms a gratuitous poetic form into an essential one.

This desire to transform the futile into something useful and necessary traverses all of Mallarmé’s works from the very title of his poem “Placet futile” (1862) to the Coup de dés (1898). On several occasions he formulated his opinion on the topic stating that:

Tout hazard doit être banni de l’œuvre moderne et n’y peut être que feint […]

The poem-object relationship in the Vers de circonstance thus marks a definite turning point in Mallarmé’s “drame solaire” because the gratuitousness of the poem in particular, and of poetry in general, is overcome by the necessary bond of the poem to the physical world. This bond is affirmed by the notion of plasticity that the poem must achieve.

This striking visual contrast between whiteness and darkness, empty spaces and full spaces, seems to exemplify an earlier statement made by Mallarmé regarding his poem, the “Sonnet en x.” Describing this poem to his friend, Henri Cazalis, he wrote, “il est peu plastique,” comme tu me le demandes, mais au moins est-il aussi “blanc et noir” que

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possible.”

By framing the poem in this way as a black and white entity, Mallarmé claims to compensate for the lack of plasticity of the poem. That was the first time that Mallarmé was writing a poem to accompany an artwork. It was the first of much future collaboration with artists. The idea that a poem should somehow achieve a form of plasticity therefore did not abandon Mallarmé. As a matter of fact, the notion of plasticity in poetry came up twice before in his correspondence. Furthermore, it was an idea that was circulating at the time. The term plasticity with which Mallarmé was toying in the “Sonnet en x” hints at a possible anchoring of his poetics in an aesthetic practice. In the case of the “Sonnet en x” this relation of poetry to the visual arts was clearly explicit as the poem was meant to accompany “une eau forte.”

While both the Poésies and the Vers de circonstance are traversed by the concept of the occasional, readers tend to establish a hierarchy between these two works. First, because the referential aspect of the Poésies seems erased and absent in relation to the latter. Second, because the Poésies seem to point to the arduous and labor intensive making of poetry, whereas the Vers de circonstance give the appearance of facility. These two critiques are based on preconceived assumptions. The first concerns the presumed personal and circumstantial nature of the Vers de circonstance. The second concerns literalist readings of the artistic pose adopted by Mallarmé in these two works. In the Poésies he takes on the role of the tortured artist, whereas in the Vers de circonstance he poses as a self-deprecating poet. These are both generic artistic postures that correspond to the genre in which he is writing. The idea of being faithful to the genre in which he is writing dictates the poetic conventions followed by Mallarmé in both works. The Poésies and the Vers de circonstance should therefore not be seen in opposition to each other, but as

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241 Letter to Henri Cazalis in July 1868 describing the “Sonnet allégorique de lui-même.”

complementary works in Mallarmé’s poetic development. With this in mind it is possible to read the *Poésies* in light of the *Vers de circonstance* in order to understand Mallarmé’s relationship to objects and materiality. Conventionally, objects and materiality are seen as antagonistic to Mallarméan aesthetics. Yet, the proliferation of objects in the *Vers de circonstance* forces a new reading of the status and the role of objects in his *oeuvre*. Reciprocally, the decorative object of the *Poésies* forces a new reassessment of Mallarmé’s *Vers de circonstance*.

**The Dialectic of Subjects and Objects in Mallarmé’s Poetry**

Though the presence of objects is generally evidenced in the *Poésies* it usually serves to justify accepted readings of Mallarmé as an ivory tower poet dedicated to the aesthetic of art for art’s sake. According to this reading, his objects are purely ornamental. The canonical example of this is Mallarmé’s reference to the *bibelot* in the “Sonnet en x.” Readings of this poem have emphasized its essentially self-referential nature that is symbolically designated by the poetic allegory of the poem itself as *bibelot*. A close reading of the poem shows, however, that the *bibelot* mentioned in the sonnet is not just a decorative object; it is also a household recipient that is used by the poet to draw tears out of the river Styx. In the context of the poem, therefore, the *bibelot* serves a utilitarian function that contributes to the poetic signification of the poem. The practical function of the object thus redeems the poem of its inutility, and prevents its falling into an echoing abyss of futility (“inanité sonore.”)

In light of these remarks it seems surprising that Mallarmé’s objects continue to be read as purely ornamental items. The reason for this is that Mallarmé’s objects have been constructed in a dialogical relationship to the notion of the subject. Now, in Mallarmé’s reception there exists an undisputed reading of the causal relationship binding his poetic subjects and objects; in a nutshell, the latter is viewed as the outcome of Mallarmé’s poetic treatment of the former.
Considering that his poetics is supposedly based on the notion of impersonality, the decorative object then stands for the vacuity of a world from which even the subjects have disappeared. The dominant perspective on Mallarmé’s objects thus tends to relate them to his absence of subjects that has conventionally been constructed as the characteristic trademark of his poetry.

*Mallarmé and The Myth of the Absent Subject*

Pascal Durand’s 1998 presentation of Mallarméan aesthetics to young scholars preparing the *concours de l’agrégation* captures the essence of this myth established around the centennial of Mallarmé’s death:

Après les hyperboles lyriques des poésies parnassiennes et le repli hérodiadéen sur un “pour moi” spéculaire, les derniers sonnets font entendre une voix blanche. Le “je” s’y fait discret, semblant s’éclipser au profit du discours qu’il profère […]

À cette énonciation par défaut, qui accomplit en l’inscrivant dans l’appareil formel du texte « la disparition élocutoire du poète », répond une mise en scène de la disparition, non de celui qui parle (aucun texte, même le plus impersonnel est sans voix), mais de celui qui est parlé. Le monde épuré des sonnets tardifs s’épure avant tout du Sujet […]

Durand’s exegesis of Mallarmé’s statement regarding the “disparition élocutoire du poète” is less an analysis of the poet’s later poems than it is an endorsement of Mallarmé’s meta-poetic discourse. Though Durand offers, by many accounts, several illuminating readings of Mallarmé’s poetries, his acceptance of the poet’s meta-poetic commentaries seems a bit too compliant with


244 Ibid, p. 125.
the author. It is as though he were consenting to Mallarmé’s pronouncement *verbatim*, rather than with the sort of critical irony that was distinctive of the poet himself. As Paul Claudel, once put it, Mallarmé was:

un Parisien ironique et rusé à la Degas, habitué à comprendre et à se faire comprendre à demi-mot.\textsuperscript{245}

Mallarmé’s sense of witty irony and Parisian detachment should not be undermined; it is with similar reserve that he should be read, especially with respect to his own poetic commentaries. Pursuing Durand’s rationale, however, regarding the erasure of human subjectivity in Mallarmé’s later poems, it is logical that he would conclude with the idea that all that is left in the poem, devoid of subject, is the object.

Le sujet s’étant retiré du monde, que reste-t-il ? Des objets.\textsuperscript{246}

In Durand’s assertion, the “subject” and “object” are not in a parallel relationship with one another. He sees them rather as the opposite face of the same coin, as the presence of objects points to the absence of the subject and vice-versa. In this view, the object is the symptom of the vacuity of a world that has itself become reified.

[chaque objet] vaut, non pour ce qu’il est, mais comme élément d’une série juxtaposant les signes redondants d’un monde réifié, et privé de présence comme ces objets, par conséquent, le sont eux-mêmes d’usager, disant par leur propre inutilité l’absence de celui qui en satura son décor quotidien.\textsuperscript{247}

According to Durand, the object is an empty signifier that only serves to emphasize the emptiness of Mallarmé’s poetry, which, contrary to Romantic lyric, is devoid of individuals and human


\textsuperscript{247} Ibid, p. 127.
subjectivity. In the collective mythology of Mallarmé’s reception, the object has thus been constructed as the archetypal symbol of Mallarmé’s poetics based on absence and negativity.

**Mallarmé and the Myth of the Decorative Object**

As has been previously stated, the canonical poem that has been used to illustrate Mallarmé’s poetics is the “Sonnet en x,” in which readers find the famous line “aboli bibelot d’inanité sonore.” This sonnet has become the prototypical Mallarméan poem because it gives the appearance of being a self-enclosed poetic entity with no relationship to external reality. A first reading of the sonnet seems to corroborate this classical interpretation of this work. To begin, the poem was initially entitled “Sonnet allégorique de lui-même.” This title seems to leave no doubt as to the self-referential nature of its text: first, it mentions the genre of the poem (a sonnet); then it addresses the stylistic treatment of this genre (by allegory); and finally it announces that the subject of the poem is the poem itself (“de lui-même.”) The title thus suggests that the poem is narcissistically turned towards its own reflection. Bertrand Marchal has captured the essence of what makes this poem quintessentially Mallarméan:

> Ce sonnet construit sur deux seules rimes alternativement masculines et féminines, et dont la difficulté est redoublée par l’énigme du ptyx, est devenu pour la postérité, grâce au titre même de sa version initiale [“Sonnet allégorique de lui-même”], l’emblème de la poésie mallarméenne et le lieu privilégié de sa mise en abyme.\(^\text{248}\)

Marchal’s statement thus delineates two fundamental aspects associated with Mallarmé’s poetry. The first concerns the self-containment of his poetic dexterity. Indeed, despite the conventional

alternation between masculine (yx, ix; or) and feminine rhymes (ixe; ore), the phonetic proximity between them is so imperceptible that the sonnet appears reduced to two rhymes only (x and or.) This obsessive recurrence of the same rhyme scheme creates the effect of a tightly knit poetic artifact that accentuates the self-referential nature of Mallarmé’s poetry. The second aspect mentioned in Marchal’s presentation of the sonnet concerns the semantic difficulty of the poem. The feeling of autonomy of the poem is strengthened by the obscurity of Mallarmé’s language that gives the sensation of being totally opaque to meaning. This is exemplified by the supposedly mysterious word “ptyx.”

A long-standing tradition of exegetes has defined this word as a “completely empty signifier” (Burt, 73; Florence 72). The implication of this statement was that Mallarmé’s poem abolishes the link between linguistic signs and external referents. Such a reading heightens an understanding of the poem as a sovereign space that privileges the autonomy of words used for their pure aesthetic and poetic appeal rather than for the communicative function of language. In this view, the Mallarméan poem points to the intense polysemy of aesthetic and poetic productions that cannot be reduced to a single translatable message or meaning beyond the very wording of the poem itself. His poetry would thus be a perfectly contained tautological entity, about which it would be possible to say, paraphrasing the poetic axiom of the contemporary poet, Jacques Roubaud, “[la poésie] dit ce qu’elle dit en le disant.” The function of language in the poem is thus limited to its phonetic trace. Having sacrificed meaning, what remains in the poem is the sheer musicality of words. This is best epitomized by the alliteration “aboli bibelot d’inanité sonore” that seems to abolish the significance of the object through the shallow

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reverberation of sounds. The poem is thus evacuated of both subjects and objects and exists merely as a graphic and melodic line.

This reading of Mallarmé’s poetry, however, can only be sustained under the premise that the mention to all external referents in his poems is null. In the traditional reading of the “Sonnet en x,” it is precisely this type of referential annulling that readers have thought was taking place in the redundant alliterative line: “aboli bibelot d’inanité sonore.” The phonetic homophony of these words, in addition to the reference to a conventionally decorative object, would seem to designate the world outside the poem as meaningless frill. Furthermore, the insignificance of exterior reality appears symbolically designated by the autonomous nature of the poem that would suggest that it is inwardly turned towards itself. All these external signs, at the surface of the sonnet, explain the predominant position that this poem has taken to justify all subsequent readings of Mallarmé.

Yet, despite the fact that the notions of self-referentiality and autonomy have become beacon concepts of modern art and twentieth century literary criticism, it is necessary to measure up these assumptions against individual case studies in order to unleash seemingly familiar works and authors from the authoritative hold of generic narratives of literary history. This is particularly true of readings of Mallarmé’s work where the authority of mainstream criticism forms such a formidable block barring access to the newcomer. Furthermore, as Bertrand Marchal reminds his readers, in spite of all its difficulty, Mallarmé’s poetry, no matter how hermetic, remains a language that must be decoded.251 Considering Mallarmé’s poetic reception in terms of aesthetic autonomy a provocative starting point to a reinvestigation of his poetics

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should begin with the restoration of the valance of the insignificant object, beginning with the canonical “Sonnet en x.”

Reinstating the Subject

Ses purs ongles très-haut dédiant leur onyx,
L’Angoisse, ce minuit, soutient, lampadophore,
Maint rêve vespéral brûlé par le Phénix
Que ne recueille pas de cinéraire amphore.

Sur les crédences, au salon vide : nul ptyx,
Aboli bibelot d’inanité sonore,
(Car le Maître est allé puiser des pleurs au Styx
Avec ce seul objet dont le Néant s’honore.)

Mais proche la croisée au nord vacante, un or
Agonise selon peut-être le décor
Des licornes ruant du feu contre une nixe,

Elle, défunte nue en le miroir, encor
Que, dans l’oubli fermé par le cadre, se fixe
De scintillations sitôt le septuor.252

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The first version of the “Sonnet allégorique de lui-même” came out in 1868. Subsequently, it was significantly modified by Mallarmé until it reached its final form in 1889. In the revised poem Mallarmé decided to erase the title of the sonnet that is now simply introduced by its first line, “Ses purs ongles très haut…” With the erasure of the title, which clearly oriented the reading of the poem towards a self-reflective poetic production, Mallarmé distances himself from a title that reduced the polysemy of the poem to a mere poetic allegory. While, there remains a figuration of an allegory in the sonnet (through the capitalization of the word “Angoisse,”) this stylistic device is no longer structurally imbedded in the poem. It is only present thematically. By leaving out the title of the sonnet, along with its generic branding, Mallarmé voluntarily reopens the field of interpretation of this work. This makes it possible to go beyond the Mallarméan cliché of an impersonal and objectless poetry to examine the real world dilemmas that are posed in the poem.

First of all, contrary to received readings, this poem is far from subject-less. It actually begins with a possessive pronoun (“ses”) that posits the presence of a subject, even if it seems that this subject is, in the very first line of the poem, designated in absentia. But, the subject of the possessive pronoun is rapidly reinstated in the second line of the poem with the capitalization of the noun “Angoisse.” This allegory is more than a stylistic figure. It magnifies the psychological condition experienced by the subject. As Paul Bénichou writes, “l’humanité [qui dans la version antérieure du poème] était formellement absente y paraît sous l’allégorie de l’Angoisse nocturne et du vœu d’un haut ideal.”

L’Angoisse thus stands for a subjectivity under the pressure of tremendous distress and anxiety aspiring to some distant ideal. This transforms the poem from an abstract subject matter to a work progressively infused with affects.

Moreover, the anonymity of the “I,” far from pointing to a faceless and impersonal being, opens the identity of the subject to a collective human experience summoned by the definite article “le” (in “L’Angoisse.”) It is precisely one of the semantic functions of the definite article in French to indicate the general conceptual value of a noun, as in the following expressions: “l’amour,” “la paix,” “l’amitié,” “la liberté,” “la vérité,” but also “la peur,” “la mort,” “la démence,” “le délire,” “l’angoisse.” In this final example, the use of the definite article attached to the word “angoisse” designates the universality of the experience presented in the first stanza of the poem; that is, mankind’s anguish when faced with an image of a setting sun because this image symbolically designates man’s own mortality. Human subjectivity, therefore, is not absent from this poem. Far from that; the first stanza addresses man’s fear of death come midnight. Mallarmé describes this scene in a letter to his friend Henri Cazalis by calling it “une nuit faite d’absence et d’interrogation.” The intensity of this setting is emphasized by the use of the deictic demonstrative pronoun “ce” that transforms the banality of this iterative scene into a frightful singular occurrence. The rising of the sun at dawn – represented by the mythological figure of the Phénix – does nothing to assuage this existential Angst. Hence the strangeness of this nocturnal landscape onto which the poet has projected man’s fears literally clawing at the night. The discreet repetition of the word nails (first in French using the word “ongles,” and then in Greek using the word “onyx”) within the first line of the sonnet is far from superfluous. It gives a completely different meaning to Mallarmé’s poetic treatment of this otherwise hackneyed poetic topos, and changes the direction of Mallarmé’s aesthetics.

Whereas the poetic treatment of man facing his human condition had been strongly marked, in Romantic lyric, by a metaphysical approach to the topic, Mallarmé refutes the idealizing tendencies underlying compositions on this philosophical topos. He even portrays such an idealizing posture with irony. This is conveyed in the very opening line of the poem with his
usage of the verb “dédier.” Normally, one dedicates something to someone or something. This means that it is a verb that is constructed with an indirect object of attribution. But, in the sonnet there is no attribution of the verb “dedier.” This suggests that there is nothing to dedicate this ideal to. Despite the hyperbolic gesture of the prodigious hand extending its lengthy nails into the firmament, the sky is empty. There is no God, nor ideal, nor greater essence to redeem the vanity and uselessness of this gesture of despair. Instead of finding in the sky an alleviating response or echo of the universe to man’s plight, there is nothing but the prevailing silence of the night and the seemingly endless duration of midnight. That doomful hour is drawn out by the slithering alliterations in [s] (“ses”, “angoisse”, soutient”), which form a phonetic echo with the demonstrative pronoun “ce” that points to the specificity of that moment. It is as if time had stopped to prolong the dreadfulness of that ominous hour. Having thus abandoned the hopeless ideals of a world hereafter, or simply of a spiritual response making sense of the cosmos, Mallarmé chooses a materialist optic that is strongly focused at anchoring – even if minimally – the external appearance of the world. That is because, in an otherwise arbitrary and meaningless universe, reality and its objective manifestations serve to anchor the subject back into the world. The odd reference to the nails thus contributes to this materialist aesthetic by giving a very concrete and palpable dimension to a conventionally metaphysical theme. But the most important element in anchoring Mallarmé’s poetics in a materialist aesthetic is the mysterious word “ptyx.”

**Understanding the word “ptyx”**

Despite the emptiness of the living room, mentioned in the second stanza, one object nonetheless is named: the “ptyx.” Generations of readers have been taught to believe that this word is devoid of meaning. As a result the empty signifier “ptyx” has come to illustrate the essence of Mallarméan poetics dedicated to the idea of art for art’s sake.
Le “ptyx”, ce mot-bibelot, met en abyme tout le texte-salon. Terme absent au
dictionnaire, sans signifié donné, il n’a de sens que celui que l’organisation interne
du poème lui prête en s’y réfléchissant. Symbole de l’opacité du texte et de sa
contorsion formelle, symbole de l’écriture […] il est, bien au-delà, à la fois le mot-
énigme et le mot de l’énigme où se résorbe et s’échappe l’ensemble du recueil.
Signifiant creux, désajustant la mécanique surorganisée du poème, le ptyx n’est
peut-être rien d’autre, en définitive, que l’indispensable case vide du jeu
mallarméen.254

These assertions are unfortunately based on a letter that Mallarmé wrote to his friend, Eugène
Lefébure, while writing the first version of the “Sonnet en x.” The views imparted by these
statements are unfortunate because once again they adopt a very literalist reading of Mallarmé’s
meta-poetic commentaries, while the poet is clearly playing with his readers’ horizon of
expectation. Having been mocked and pilloried by the press, Mallarmé was acutely aware of
playing a role that people expected him to play. The letter thus plays on the Mallarméan
stereotypes that circulated at the time when he was depicted as an excentric who composed
poems out of words thrown into a hat. To begin, Mallarmé claims to have invented a completely
empty signifier, the word “ptyx,” for the pure phonetic demands of his rhyme scheme in “ix.”
Then, he asks his friend to verify for him that this word exists in no other language. This would
thereby assure him the full right to the word as if he were claiming to own its lexical patent.

“[…] comme il se pourrait que […] je fasse un sonnet, et que je n’ai que trois
rimes en ix, concertez-vous pour m’envoyer le sens réel du mot ptyx, ou m’assurer

qu’il n’existe dans aucune langue, ce que je préfèrais de beaucoup afin de me
donner le charme de le créer par la magie de la rime.”

Mallarmé is a phony and he knows it because both claims are false. First, it is odd that
Mallarmé would have found only three rhymes considering that there exist at least forty-six rich
rhymes in “x.” While it is true that an end rhyme in “x” is a challenging poetic feat – after all in
the literary database Frantext there are only two poetic works with ending rhymes in “yx” –
the river “Styx,” being a frequent Romantic topos, Mallarmé would not have been the first poet to
resort to esoteric words to complete this particular rhyme pattern. Without resorting to
neologisms, he could have referred to Jules Michelet’s word “bombyx” for example, (used in his
poem “La Métamorphose” collected in his work L’Insecte, published in 1857); or, for the
purpose of the rhyme, he could have brought in mount “Eryx,” referred to in Lamartine’s poem
“L’Enthousiasme” published in his Méditations poétiques (1820). Mallarmé’s intention behind
drawing the attention of his letter to this particular rhyme is to justify using the word “ptyx.”

While it is true that the word “ptyx” is a rare word, it is not foreign to any language. It is
precisely the fact that Mallarmé draws attention to the fact that it should not exist in any language
that should make the reader suspicious. The critic Emilie Noulet seems to be one of the few
readers to have seized the whimsical tone underlying Mallarmé’s letter. She writes:

Letter dated May 3, 1868.

The word “Styx” is an end rhyme in two major poetic works of the nineteenth century, preceding the composition
of Mallarmé’s sonnet. The first work is Lamartine’s poem “L’Enthousiasme” in Méditations poétiques (1820) and
the second is Paul Verlaine’s poem “Caprice sérénade” in the Poèmes saturniens (1866).

A “bombyx” is a type of nocturnal butterfly. Among other Romantic writers, it appears in the writings of George
Sand.
Rappelons d’abord la lettre de Mallarmé à Lefebure où il feignait de ne pas connaître la signification du mot. Pure coquetterie de celui qui, pendant ce temps, recueillait les mots d’origine grecque !

Indeed, Mallarmé was a fine linguist who had even been tempted to do a dissertation in linguistics; he would therefore not have been fooled by the roots and etymology of words. A word like “ptyx,” with its suffix in “yx,” very clearly indicates the Greek origin of the term. Thus, the word “ptyx” is neither invented, nor is it a poetic hapax. It exists in Greek and can be found in the writings of authors such as St. Basil, Homer and Pindar. The meaning of this word, however, varies. For Emilie Noulet, the “ptyx” is a “conch shell,” a definition that gets picked up by other commentators such as Henri Mondor, Georges Jean-Aubry, Charpentier and Henri Nicholas. The word conch comes from the Greek, κοχχη, and designates a ‘shell; vase or recipient in the shape of a sea-shell.’ It refers in other words to a hollow recipient that could very well fit the description of any type of ornamental crockery. This word, therefore, makes perfect sense within the meaning of the line, as the ptyx is supposed to be an ornamental object located on the credenzas. The “ptyx,” then, belongs to these furniture pieces, and its description encompasses both its functional side (hollow recipient) and its decorative allure. This makes perfect sense with regard to its display position on the credenzas. However, upon a first reading it may seem that this object is considered futile as it is missing from the shelves. Promptly many


259 While Emilie Noulet and Gretchen Kromer suggest that Mallarmé would have known this word from Victor Hugo who used it in his poem, “Le Satyre,” they seem to willfully ignore that Hugo’s work, published in La Légende des siècles in 1877, is posterior to Mallarmé’s composition of this poem by a little less than a decade. For discussions on the origin and usage of the word “ptyx” see: Gretchen Kromer, “The Redoutable PTYX.” MLN 86.4. French Issue (May, 1971): 563-572.

260 Definition given in the Trésor de la langue française informatisé: “coquillage; vase, récipient, en forme de coquillage.”
readers assumed that it has disappeared because it has been abolished due to its inutility (aboli bibelot d’inanité sonore.)

**The Valence of the Insignificant Object**

What has not been underlined in this stanza is the fact that the *bibelot* is missing not because it is an unnecessary or trivial object, but on the contrary because of its utility and value for the host of the house (the *Maître*) who took it with him in order to draw tears from the Styx (“puiser des pleurs au Styx / Avec ce seul objet dont le Néant s’honore”). The uniqueness of this object is underlined by the emphasis on the words “seul” and “s’honore.” While most readers have focused on the word play between the two end rhymes, “sonore” and “s’honore,” - that only reinforce the Mallarméan stereotype regarding the self-referentiality of language as a continuously self-reflecting mirror - it is actually far more relevant to draw out the etymologies of both words. In the first case, “sonore” comes from the Latin *sonorous* and indicates a resounding sound. In the second case, “honorer” comes from the Latin *honorare* that not only means to honor and gratify, but also to embellish or decorate. What is abolished in this stanza, therefore, is not the *bibelot*, but the futility of the decorative object that is transformed into something essential since the *bibelot* accompanies the poet on his mission to the underworld.

The centrality of the *bibelot* in the poem is underlined by its position towards the middle of the poem, on the sixth line. Moreover, the reference to this object is repeated twice within the same stanza. The first mention of the *bibelot* is the reference to the “ptyx.” The second is the reference to “ce seul objet.” Thus, the *bibelot*, which was a trivial and unnecessary object in the domestic sphere, becomes essential in helping the poet in his mission. Paradoxically, it is when the “ptyx” is taken out of the utilitarian sphere that it serves a utilitarian function in the symbolic creation of the poem.
The missionary dimension of the poet going down to the Inferno is, however, somewhat played down in the poem through the framing of this action in parentheses. Though the parentheses are supposed to banalize the poet’s actions they actually serve to dramatize the scene as they oddly marginalize the only named individual in the poem. This heightens the dramatic tension of the scene. For Pascal Durand, objects in Mallarmé’s poetics have a dramatic value as they stand for events that have taken place, but that have long passed. The object thus bears witness to some sense of loss. In the words of Pascal Durand,

De ces objets la plupart décoratifs, […] il faut […] souligner l’utilité symbolique, c’est-à-dire signalétique. Tous sont des signes et encore plus des indices. D’un côté ils marquent le lieu, […] (sans eux, pas d’espace représentable, donc pas de mouvement possible ni de temps […] ) De l’autre ils indiquent, à la façon de traces ou d’empreintes ou encore d’épaves, que quelque chose a peut-être eu lieu, dont ils auront été les témoins, ou que quelqu’un peut-être était là, qui n’y est plus. […] Quelque chose se passe, s’est passé, « a dû » peut-être se passer, dont les objets conservent – peut-être – la trace […] 261

The emptiness of these credenzas thus comes to represent a fundamental void that encompasses - as the credenzas do - both the essential and the ephemeral, content and container. From such a scene even hope has been evacuated because behind the word credenza lies a whole system of belief, the etymology of the word drawing its origin from notions of faith.262 The emptiness of these shelves thereby prefigures the image of the poet, “le Maître,” discontent with the hopeless


262 The word “crédence” in French comes from Medieval latin “credential” that is itself derivated from the verb “credere” that means “to believe.” As a result, this word initially indicated the tablet that was placed next to the altar at church where the cruets would be placed. For more information on the etymology of this word, see Trésor de la langue française.
meaninglessness of life. Almost didactically, the poem then summarizes the *raison d’être* of this deserted landscape by explaining - through the parenthetical clause beginning with the causal adverbial phrase: “Car le Maître est allé puiser des pleurs au Styx” - that the poet has left this strange world to draw new life and inspiration from the Inferno. His dissatisfaction with the world is dramatically heightened by the fact that his first gesture consists in collecting the tears of the dead as if he had none left of his own. Thus, as a mythological hero, the poet undertakes an initiatory journey to the underworld.

But, while the image of the poet going down to the Inferno is a well-known poetic topos, a fundamental shift has taken place in this initiatory voyage. Instead of returning from the land of the departed with newly acquired wisdom, the poet, in Mallarmé’s sonnet, vanishes into thin air. His appearance in the text was purely parenthetical and what the reader is left with, once again, is the strange landscape of the home.

**The centrality of the “Home”**

The reader is once again in a house, and more specifically, in a *salon*. But, the warmth and comfort expected by the image of a home are shattered; for this space, which should have conveyed some sense of life and animation through the presence of its inhabitants, is vacant and bare. Indeed, aside, from a few remaining credenzas, the living room is completely empty (“salon vide”) and no one seems to inhabit this space. As a matter of fact, this house may not be so much a house as a ruin because only the living room is mentioned as if it were standing on its own on some devastated landscape abandoned by all. This sensation of a room floating into empty space is accentuated by the choice of the preposition “sur” that introduces the stanza as if there were no
safe ground to anchor the room in. This impression is reinforced by the fact that the only other space mentioned in these lines is the Inferno. But, as a matter of fact, the entire stanza is constructed around an extended metaphor referring to nothingness. This is manifest in expressions such as “vide”, “nul”, “aboli”, “inanité” and “Néant.” This empty room is then standing as a hollow carcass lying on some nameless piece of earth somewhere between a nocturnal sky and hell. The strangeness of this barren domestic décor thus echoes the existential discomfort laid out in the first stanza of the poem. But here the metaphysical theme previously developed on the relation of man to his destiny turns into a reflection on the role of the artist in dealing with these same issues. Therefore, despite the fact that the poet disappears from the poem, the fact that Mallarmé sets this stanza in a domestic sphere indicates the poet’s desire to root his poetic topos in concrete reality. Furthermore, the cohabitation of the words “salon” and “Maître” in the same stanza creates a poetic rapprochement that points to the idea that the poet’s vision of the world is not as abstract and hollow as the empty salon would lead the reader to believe. Much to the contrary, the fact that the poet shares the same poetic space as the home reveals the fact that his vision of the world is not devoid of an artistic reconditioning of it through the poet’s individual standpoint. The description of this reality is, therefore, not nearly as realistic as it is surreal because it is seen through the eyes of the poet.

The home, thus, serves as a transition space that links the outside world to the individual and the poet’s experience. This is reinforced in the poem by the mediating position of the living room between the cosmos (l.1-4) and the naming of the central character of the poem, “le Maître.” This protagonist is strategically designated at the exact center of the sonnet, (l.7.) But the living room is not only a metonymy for a home; it is also a reception area, a space of sociability within the home. It is a place for dialogue and exchange, or as Madame de Staël put it,
“[c’est un] lieu de réunion et de conversation.” Depite the fact that this living-room is not a space of conviviality it serves to project and announce a greater collective drama, of which the host (“le Maître”) is the main protagonist. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the central rhyme of the poem, the figure “x,” symbolizes both the crossing of rhymes and the foundational building block of the poem that is figuratively built around the image of a central space, the “salon” (l.5). Just as there are two rhymes in the poem, the poetic image of the salon is double. The image of the salon is revisited twice in the poem and the second time (stanzas 3 and 4) the landscape has changed.

From the ghostly stage-set of the living-room, an architecture and form has suddenly emerged. There is now an open window and a gold-framed mirror. The orientation of the text, at this point, engages the reader to feel the depth of the room that is contained within the image of the window on the one hand, and of the mirror, on the other. The one dimensionality of the original salon has been restored to a three dimensional space that could be inhabited. This notion of expanding space is emphasized by the direction of the poem. The last two stanzas lead the reader’s attention back to the outside world, onto the sky and then back through the open window, across the living-room onto the mirror where the scintillating stars - amongst which, the Great Bear (analogically designated by the image of the “septuor”) - reflect themselves. The experience recollected here is close to a pragmatic naturalist aesthetic. Perhaps, that is why the poet does not return from the underworld; having renounced the philosophical approach to his oeuvre he embraces instead the pure reality of physical matter. As Orpheus he returns empty handed, but in exchange for his loss the outside world is no longer filled with Angst. Instead, the poet finds the assuring certainty of reality under the hospitable auspices of a starry night.

Coincidentally, this theme was similarly dealt with at the same period by Mallarme’s friend and contemporary, the painter, Vincent Van Gogh (Nuit étoilée sur le Rhône, 1889). The comparison between these two artworks is quite illuminating as Van Gogh also composed his work at a time when he was, to his own avowal, in a “terrible need of—shall I say the word—yes, of religion.” But more significantly, both artists approached their work as a philosophical challenge that they then refused to tackle as an intellectual dilemma. Instead, they focused their composition on a visual lens. While it may be more apparent that Van Gogh’s work is rooted in his own subjective observation of nature, Mallarmé’s auctorial subjectivity does not recede behind an objectified description of reality. To the contrary, he engages reality on his own terms, in other words according to his own visual optic that is no longer an intellectualized contemplation of the world, but a simple gaze with all the phantasmagoria that this implies.

Indeed, whereas, the images in the first two stanzas of Mallarmé’s poem were clearly erudite and scholarly finding their inspiration in Greek mythology (Phénix, Styx), and even using learned Greek etymologies (ending in “yx”: “onyx, ptyx, Styx), the last two stanzas of the poem are purely imaginative, drawing their images from the collective imagination that commonly glorifies unicorns (“licornes”) and mermaids (“nixe”). Furthermore, the vocabulary of these last two stanzas is clearly more prosaic, renouncing scholarly Greek etymologies and suffixes. What is understood therefore by Mallarmé as an objective and impersonal description of the world does not mean that representation should be devoid of the imagination or of a subjective experience of the world. It simply implies that the topics will no longer be dealt with as philosophical and erudite subject matter, but merely as visions, unmediated by the intellect.

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265 The word “nixe” is quite different from the preceding “yx” rhymes as its etymology derives from German and not from Greek.
Hence, the fundamental importance of abandoning the notion of allegory in this poem because an allegory is yet another form of intellectualized discourse. The first and last two stanzas of the poem thus look at the same landscape, but with a different optic. The first was through the lenses of the intellect, the second was through the eyes.

Contrary to what has been glossed on Mallarmé’s poetics - as a poetics of whiteness, silence, space and void, emerging from his metaphysics of impersonality - what Mallarmé discovers at the term of his spiritual crisis of 1866 is a form of counter Cartesian philosophy: the affirmation of physical matter over the intellect. The work of art for Mallarmé is thus paradoxically both beyond individual subjectivity - due to the autonomous immediacy of physical matter - and yet deeply rooted in the subjective apprehension of that reality.

It is in Mallarmé’s writings on Impressionism that he best described this new visual and material epistemology. As he writes, this antithesis between an intellectualized subjectivity and an impersonal or physical one could only be realized by the substitution of a subjective “I” for a material “eye”; an “eye” that has forgotten all that it has seen and abstracted from itself the memory of all things past.266 It is only through this paradoxical process of abstraction that new truths can be formed thanks to “the steadfast gaze of a vision restored to its simplest perfection.”267 Hence the importance of the mirror in capturing the pure sign of the outside world. While mirrors have played different roles in literature, the mirror in this poem renounces the magical symbolism that can be associated with mirrors to be a true mirror on the world. For Pierre Brunel, “‘la défunte nue dans le miroir’, tendant à devenir constellation au ciel, correspond à une tentative pour triompher du Néant et de la Mort.” But, Brunel continues “La poésie n’a pas


ici la prétention de triompher. Elle cherche seulement à fixer des scintillations.” However, there are still two images reflected in the mirror: the first is the poet’s reappropriation of the image of the setting sun through his own eyes and imagination (“licornes ruant du feu contre une nixe”). The second is that of the stars fixing their own reflection in the mirror. There is both space for the natural world and the singular vision of the artist. One does not exist without the other.

In the “Sonnet en x,” the bibelot stands for the ambivalent relationship of poetry to the external world. On the one hand, the object has a decorative function, but on the other, it also serves a utilitarian purpose. This reverses traditional hierarchies of value by turning futility into utility. The fact that this conception of the object finds its way into the Poésies proves the overarching unity of Mallarmé’s poetic concerns. Furthermore, by leveling the Poésies with the Vers de circonstance it is possible to understand the evolution of Mallarmé’s poetics towards objects and the notions of aesthetic futility and utility. The preliminary premise of the Vers de circonstance, thus, seems to take up the challenge of the “Sonnet en x” by anchoring Mallarmé’s idealist aesthetics in the materiality of real physical matter.

The Counter-active Movement of Music Against Abstraction

In this study of Mallarmé’s relation to external reality, there is another conception that must be addressed, that is, the idea that abstract and aestheticizing art forms are removed from references to the world. We could start by quoting Picasso, who once said that “there is no abstract art. You must always start with something. Afterwards you can remove all references to reality.”

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Mallarmé is often described as a musical poet, one for whom the sound of words is far more important than the meaning of the words themselves. This association of Mallarmé to music further strengthens the stereotype that he is an abstract thinker, for music has traditionally been considered as the most abstract and ethereal art form. This idea has been justified by the fact that the materials of music being non-semantic its elements and forms have been considered less tied to representations of material reality than those of the visual arts. For that reason, music has also been deemed superior to painting because, as will be seen in the following chapter on the discussion of the history of materiality in Western thought, traces of the material world are considered inferior to that which relates to a spiritual realm. At least, that is how Western music historiography was constructed until the early 18th Century. Until then, music was mostly dominated by Christian theory, which claimed the divine origin of music. What has not been considered in the discussion of Mallarmé’s relation to music is that music in the nineteenth century is at a turning point when it is precisely breaking away from previous musical historiography linking it to abstraction. Indeed, the nineteenth century marks the beginning of a new musical tradition. It is the epoch when program music is invented (best epitomized by Hector Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique*, 1830) and when composers start thinking about the relation of music to the outside world. Two distinguishing factors explain this transformation. First, music starts borrowing from fields exterior to itself and thus begins a process of visual materialization. Second, music starts becoming aware of its own material properties, which it exposes as a way of affirming itself. It is thus a time when music thinks its relation to its own material properties as well as its relation to the outside world.

One process of the materialization of music is its discursive association with the visual arts, whether dance or painting. On the most basic level, some composers began to look at painting as a trigger for inspiration. Richard Strauss (1864-1949), for example, needed images to inspire his
compositions and challenge his intellect to creativity. His *Alpensinfonie*, for instance, composed in 1915, is clearly inspired by the stunning spectacle of the Bavarian Alps, which he was surrounded by in his mountain residence in Garmisch-Partenkirchen. But there are more profound ways in which composers became ‘pictorial composers’ in the nineteenth century. Claude Debussy (1862-1918), for instance, was keen on discussing music with a vocabulary borrowed from the visual arts, talking about a score as if it were a picture. The very titles of his works are indicative of his closeness to the visual arts. Among them we find *Arabesques*, *Nocturnes*, *Images* and *Estampes*. Critics were thus justified to compare him to Claude Monet, Henri Le Sidaner or even Gustav Klimt. His visual references, however, are not only discursive; they are also technical.

Indeed, Debussy was not only an admirer of painting, he was also very much a visual composer. For Roy Howat, “the spatial or visual element in Debussy’s musical thinking, and on a smaller scale his musical shapes are often visually driven.” 270 The examples he gives are “the rising layers of arabesque in bar 4 of *Pagodes,*” that resembles the layers of a pagoda roof; or bars 2–4 of *Feuilles mortes*, which suggest “a breath of wind followed by leaves fluttering to earth.” 271 A more striking example of Debussy’s visual materialism is his use of space, whereby he exceeds the restrictive boundaries of the musical score to stretch out onto the musical instrument.

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269 The concept of “Nocturnes” existed prior to Debussy, if we think of Frédéric Chopin for instance, but it is also a term and topos that has a strong prevalence in nineteenth century painting.


271 Ibid.
Still according to Howat, his piece entitled *Brouillards* is exemplary in that matter as the fogginess and confusion suggested in the title is replicated on the piano through an alternation of the left hand on white keys overlaid by the right hand on mostly black keys. For Howat, “here the musical language is again sensuously driven, combining auditory, visual and tactile elements.”

Debussy introduces a form of visual mimesis in music that expands to other art forms. Arthur Wenke observed that when adapting Mallarmé’s faun poem, *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*, he mimicked the structure of the poem by composing his piece with the exact same number of bars as Mallarmé’s poem has lines. The importance of Debussy’s inter-art relation with the visual arts is important because it means, as stated by Lockspeiser, that conventional tonal analysis becomes insufficient to understand Debussy’s musical thinking.

Another extra-musical import that contributes to the materialization of music is literature. Literature impacts music in two ways: first, by introducing a textual fabric to the musical score; second by introducing a communicative project to music. This is most exemplified in opera. The very term ‘opera’ underwent an important transformation during the eighteenth century. Whereas the term previously designated a type of spoken theatre, opera changed with music becoming a more dominant element of the work. As opera became a more musical genre, it came in competition with ‘pure’ instrumental music, which was considered superior. Two operations then took place in order to endow the opera as a musical genre with greater dignity. On the one hand, opera started competing with ‘pure’ instrumental music on its own grounds. One such example is

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272 This piece is the opening to his second set of piano *Préludes* composed between 1912 and 1913.

273 Ibid.


its use of symphonic elements, which are considered to be part of the more noble components of instrumental music. But, on the other hand, it also sought to enhance the external, non-musical aspects of the work, by appealing to notions such as the Gesamtkunstwerk, by publishing librettos as independent literary works, and by developing the idea of Literaturoper, a type of opera that strives to preserve a pre-existing literary source more or less intact. In this new context, music became a circulating text.

The textual fabric that was introduced into the work contributed to a new desire for operatic realism or verismo. This can be seen in the choice of plots and subjects. Verdi’s original staging of La Traviata (1853) was to take place in almost contemporary Paris. In terms of characters, Bizet in Carmen (1875) stages contemporary types: factory girls, common soldiers and criminals. There is a shift away from historical plots towards the observation of individual subjects, psychological dramas (i.e Debussy’s Pelléas et Mélisande, composed between 1893 and 1898; Schönberg’s Erwartung, composed in 1909, or individual passions (e.g the entirety of Puccini’s works). There are, however, obvious objections to this neatly packaged narrative, as there a quite a few operas that do not fit this pattern. Verdi’s Don Carlos staged in the sixteenth century and performed in 1867 is just one example. There are also the nationalist gestures of operas coming from Russia and Eastern Europe in which the epic style and historical canvassing of the plots continued to occupy center-stage for ideological reasons.

Along with the narrative and contextual inscription of the opera in a more realistic style, technical changes were made that brought the opera closer to reality. Singers adopted a more natural style of acting and the range of voices was also toned down to reach a more genuine style of singing. Out of operatic realism, the opera came closer to the communicative codes of spoken drama and the singing voices of characters came closer to their vocal differenciation in a stage play (shift away from soprano voices for men and rise of the baritone). Furthermore,
communication was integrated into the opera in a more realistic mode than the previous form of *recitatives* that had dominated the classic eighteenth century genre of *opera seria*. Nineteenth century opera introduces dialogue as a central aspect of its communicative project. The duet replaces the aria as the opera’s normative mode of discourse. Musicologists call this called the “dialoguizing process.”  

Another element that contributed to the increased materiality of the music was the strengthening of the lower brass and the gradual addition of various wind instruments. They made the music more palpable and the opera houses became noisier. This was brought about by the acoustic improvement of theater architecture and the increased size of the venues. In terms of staging, considerable attention was then being paid to the total effect of the theatrical performance. This is a vision of art in which the social and material fabric of the aesthetic experience is taken into account. The new Paris opera house built by Charles Garnier is certainly one of the most extraordinary examples of these technical and architectural developments. But for Garnier architecture was more than the construction of a building. It was also about creating an artwork of its own that was a form of exterior mirroring of the artwork being performed inside the theatre.

On each floor, the spectators leaning on the balconies garnish the walls, rendering them alive, as it were, while those going up and down the stairs themselves added to this impression. In adding materials and hanging draperies, chandeliers and candelabra, and with the marble adorned with flowers, a sumptuous and brilliant

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277 Gas lighting appeared in the theaters around 1820 and then electricity in the second half of the century. Installation of electric lighting appeared in the Palais Garnier in 1881.
composition will result, recalling in real life one of those scenes which Veronese captured on canvas. 278

As can be seen from this quotation, Garnier’s vision of the building incorporates art and the tableau vivant as he views the opera goers as an integral part of his construction. But, the prototype of the modern director is certainly Richard Wagner, whose staging of his operas in Bayreuth between the late 1870s and early 1880s pioneered a new conception of the relation of music to the outside. While in Wagner’s conception there is clearly a metaphysical aspect to music, this does not exclude the fact that certain elements of his artistic directing participate in a materialization of music. With him, the lights were completely dimmed and the orchestra, buried in a pit beneath the stage, literally disappeared from the audience’s view. On the one hand, his desire to conceal the musicians was his attempt to sacralize the music by detaching it from a physical presence. But on the other hand, the music then becomes physical matter emanating directly from the stage and embodied in the singers. Furthermore, Wagner's programmes of operatic reform participated in the textualizing process of the operatic score by calling for a renewal of the relationship between music and words. He also adamantly supported a return to ancient narratives as the basis for his dramas. Though others had written and defended similar ideas before him, the significant difference he introduced was that he endorsed non-musical and external aspects of music, whereas the dominant aesthetic dogma at the time considered ‘absolute’ or ‘pure’ music to have total ascendancy over opera. This was the standpoint he attempted to challenge. Opera, with all its extrinsic musical factors thus became an embodiment of music.

The preceding overview of the evolution of music in the nineteenth century shows how music was far from representing the abstract essences that are often attributed to it. On the contrary, it was a complex construction of music as idea, form and image. Going back to Mallarmé, there is therefore a need to challenge the view that his musical language is a manifestation of the “néant,” or of a form of zen abstraction. Though Mallarmé never used the term “poésie pure,” for early critics such as Brémond, this term came as a convenient way of designating the musicality of his language, in which the musicality of words suffices to enchant the reader.\textsuperscript{279} For James Lawler, however, in his evaluation of Poe’s influence on Mallarmé, he finds that Mallarmé, in the footsteps of Poe, is one of the great listeners (“auditifs”) of his language.\textsuperscript{280} Furthermore, Lawler says we could apply Mallarmé’s designation of Verlaine’s language to himself, when he writes that with Verlaine language becomes “de primitives épellations.” That is precisely what Mallarmé’s poetry is about: a spelling out of words like the enumeration of objects. In “Le démon de l’analogie,” writes Lawler, “le moi passe les seuils de la sensation, du sentiment, de l’abstraction en un effort pour réduire la séquence diabolique des analogies, et cela jusqu’à ce qu’enfin un signe visible et matériel se dégage du rien et de l’oubli […]” (37). The music of sound and words in Mallarmé is therefore not a vain abstraction. On the contrary, it marks the attempt to conquer « le néant, » to extract music from abstraction by giving it the material weight of a visual sign and of an oral vocalization. Mallarmé’s “phonétisme incantatoire” is thus not a passive act but an active reclamation of agency, a call to enchant, in other words, to sing. Whereas, it has been said that poetry, in Symbolist poetics, mostly competed with music, Mallarmé lays claim to the visual and plastic resources of music. Literature under Mallarmé’s


pen, then becomes the apogee of the fusion of all aesthetic categories: from the most seemingly abstract (music) to the most visibly concrete (art).
**Concluding Remarks**

Having demonstrated the importance for Mallarmé of an alliance between an aesthetic and utilitarian art in the *Vers de circonstance*, and having expanded this demonstration onto the most representative poem of the *Poésies*, it is now possible to conclude that the object is a fundamental element of Mallarmé’s poetics. In addition, the contextualization of Mallarmé’s interest in the “real” with the evolution of music against abstraction points towards a similar evolution of Mallarmé’s poetic language towards a form of materialization. Thus, contrary to what has so often been said and written about Mallarmé, his poetics are not abstractly self-referential. On the contrary, his poetry is grounded in an objective and empirical understanding of art and of its relationship to external reality.
PART THREE:

MALLARMÉ’S NEW *ARS POETICA*
L’armature intellectuelle du poème se dissimule et tient – a lieu – dans l’espace qui isole les strophes et parmi le blanc du papier : significatif silence qu’il n’est pas moins beau de composer, que les vers.\textsuperscript{281}

Bye and bye, if [the artist] continues to paint long enough, and to educate the public eye – as yet veiled by conventionality – if that public will then consent to see the true beauties of the people, healthy and solid as they are […] then will come the time of peace.\textsuperscript{282}


Introductory Remarks

Throughout the different forms that the Vers de circonstance take (as a text written on an object or as a text accompanying an object, but also as a text referring to an absent object), Mallarmé demonstrates an important attention to visuality: first, with the visuality of the object; then, with the visuality of the text subsequent to the object’s disappearance. In the second instance, the visuality of the object is displaced onto the visuality of language. For Mallarmé, the visuality of language was extremely important because it underlined the fact that, before being a text that articulates ideas and concepts, language, in its written form, is first of all an image. Mallarmé demonstrates this visuality of language throughout the Vers de circonstance thanks to his elaborate visual display of the poems on the page. Ultimately, however, the image of the text, whether it be typographic or calligraphic, appears as the trace of a dissolved materiality. The text then functions as a compensatory substitute for the missing object with all the nostalgia that this loss involves.

To understand Mallarmé’s interest in the question of the visuality of language it is important to situate this issue within his own critical theories regarding the relationship of poetry, and more generally literature, to society. The reason for contextualizing the visual effects of his poems with his critical theories is that all of Mallarmé’s efforts to obstruct the readability of his texts (whether it be through his unidiomatic arrangement of syntax, or whether it be through the difficulty of reading the text due to its visual display on the page or on an object) deal with his underlying critique of what he views as a problematic relationship of late nineteenth century culture to language. As a point of departure, it is useful to look at the effect that the visuality of language has on the reading of the poem, as the result of this effort to read the text through its image is revealing of Mallarmé’s critic of the reader/text relationship.
The first point that can be observed is that the visuality of the text in the *Vers de circonstance* serves to slow down the reading process of the poem by obstructing the text’s legibility. As has just briefly been touched upon, this movement away from the readability of the text, or at least the slowing down of the digestive process of the reading and assimilation of the poem, is comparable to other forms of deliberate obstruction that are found elsewhere in Mallarmé’s poetry. This barrier that Mallarmé creates to access his poems serves a critical function, as the visuality of the poems must be seen as a socio-political questioning about the place of literature in a democratic and consumer-based society. This critique stems from Mallarmé’s fear that literature could become a consumable good as a result of the public’s broader and indiscriminate access to it. His various efforts to obscure his language - whether it be through syntax or the decomposition of his poetic lines on the page or on an object - mark his attempt to recreate a special aura around the very concept of literature in general, and of poetry in particular.

Surprisingly, however, while Mallarmé offers a critique of a certain nineteenth century culture, notably oriented towards mass consumerism, he paradoxically manifests an interest in educating the public. As his writings on Impressionist art reveal, as well as his programmatic note to the reader at the beginning of the *Récitations Postales*, Mallarmé was interested in the relationship between art and democracy. He was notably concerned about art’s potential to transfigure the image of a depersonalized and uneducated public into an educated and individualized reader.
Chapter 5: The Emergence of materiality in the 19th century

Mallarmé’s Materialism

Before examining the visual properties of Mallarmé’s *Vers de circonstance* it is important to note that the visuality of his language is strongly based on the materiality of this work. It will be important, therefore, to pause for a while on the concept of materiality because, as has been seen in the introduction to this dissertation, materiality underlines one of the fundamental tensions in the reception of Mallarmé’s poetic works; that is, the conception of a positive materiality on the one hand, when it is linked to the linguistic analysis of the poems (such as is the case of the reading of much of Mallarmé’s poems from the *Poésies*) and a negative materiality on the other hand, when it is simply linked to the physical materiality of objects (such as is the case in the *Vers de circonstance*). Yet, what the various approaches to the study of Mallarmé’s objects has proven in Chapters 3 and 4 is that even the most seemingly abstract mallarméan poem must be situated and read in relation to Mallarmé’s theories regarding the necessity of art to address the question of the everyday, and therefore anchor itself in a certain materiality. As such, the materialism of his poetic approach is at the heart of his poetic project. The term materiality associated with the name of Mallarmé should therefore no longer resonate curiously to the readers’ ears that have been used to discourses on the supposedly ethereal poet of the “Sonnet en x.” As has been seen in the preceding chapter, not only does the heavy alliterative line “aboli bibelot d’inanité sonore” actually point to a form of aesthetic materialism that gives the words a three dimensional palpability; there is also a whole affirmation of matter in the text through the assertion of objects and the physical world. The term materiality thus makes it possible to understand a different aspect of Mallarmé: his aesthetic materialism. Moreover, the very concept of materiality can be contextualized within a shifting aesthetic horizon in which the interest in the question of the materiality of art was growing.
In *La Recherche de l’absolu* (1834), Balzac defined materiality in these terms: “intérêt pour les choses concrètes et le monde physique, état d’esprit matérieliste.” 

For Thibaudet, an attentive reader of the poet, this definition corresponds quite well to the description of Mallarmé’s poetic interests. As a matter of fact, he took an even more radical stand by affirming that every line written by the poet can be read with “un sens réel, objectif.” The radicality of his thesis can be understood in the context in which Thibaudet was formulating his assertion. Caught in between the critique of Ferdinand Brunetière who affirmed that the poems have no tangible meaning and that of Rémy de Gourmont for whom the poems have all meanings possible, Thibaudet was searching for an exit out of this antagonistic debate in order to give concrete and logical analytical tools allowing to situate the study of Mallarmé within a critical (scholarly) poetic discourse. Today, mallarméan exegeses, however, are no longer camped in these kinds of Manichean dichotomies. The diversity of titles dedicated to the poet reflects the widening horizon of his reception. Among those titles there is a recent work by Damian Catani called, *Poet in Society: Art, Consumerism, and Politics in Mallarmé.*

Considering this work, it is possible to dare to apply the term materiality to the poet. But, if this term pleases because of its dissonance with the readings that have dominated Mallarmé’s critical reception, it is advisable to question the relevance of this term in relation to Mallarmé’s poetics.

The term materiality applies itself remarkably well to a thought that belongs to the realm of socio-economics. It is therefore a term that matches Damian Catani’s work on Mallarmé’s social horizon. The preoccupation of this dissertation belonging more to the question of Mallarmé’s aesthetics at stake in his work on material objects it will be important to define the

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283 Definition found in the *Trésor de la langue française informatisé* under the entry « matérialité »


term materiality in the sense of an aesthetic manifestation. Rather than searching for a new
expression, or coining a term, it would be pertinent to find an expression taken from Mallarmé
himself that could serve as paratext to the Vers de circonstance. This can be found in his texts
dedicated to art and artists.

Among those there are four major categories: 1) the article published on September 15th
1862 in L’Artiste called “Hérésies artistiques. L’art pour tous” 2) articles grouping his reflexion
on objects and fashion (Lettres de Londres 1871-1872, and notes for the journal La Dernière
Mode) 3) articles on painting and painters (Manet, Whistler, Morisot) 4) and finally articles on
music (“Richard Wagner, rêverie d’un poète français,” “Hommage” and the conference
pronounced at Oxford and Cambridge intitled La Musique et les Lettres). Among the texts by
Mallarmé dedicated to painters, the densest one is probably the one dedicated to his friend,
Berthe Morisot. This text is all the more important inasmuch as, written in 1896 for a catalogue
paying tribute posthumously to the painter, it constitutes Mallarmé’s last contribution to a
reflection on Impressionist art. This text is therefore particularly important. Moreover, in his
tribute to Morisot, Mallarmé uses a word that fully conveys the poetic enterprise of the Vers de
circonstance. It is the formulation, “poétiser, par art plastique.” 286 The term plasticity is
fundamental because it creates a connection between Mallarmé’s poetic practice and his aesthetic
conception. It shows mostly that Mallarmé envisaged a relation between poetry and a plastic
practice. This link manifests itself in the most systematic and resounding manner in the Vers de
circonstance in which he “poetises” by the plastic play of poems to objects. As will be seen, the
poem-object relationship in this work transforms the textual properties of the poem into a
material entity, as if the poem were itself becoming an object.

There is often an ambiguity in the poems as to what object the poem is referring. On the one hand, it could be referring to the object that accompanies the poem, such as a bouquet of flowers, or a box of candies. But, on the other hand, when the poem is directly written on the object, it is then much more difficult to determine what is referred to by the object: is it the poem, or is it the object? In the following postal-quatrain to Verlaine, for instance, the object accompanying the poem is a note that is enclosed within an envelope on which the poem is written.

Tapi sous ton chaud mac-ferlane,

*Ce billet, quand tu le reçois*

Lis-le haut ; 6, cour Saint-François

Rue, est-ce Moreau ? cher Verlaine.

The object given, in this case a note, is enclosed within the poem. Logically, the postal-quatrain should be inviting its recipient, Verlaine, to read the note contained in the envelope. A note, however, is a very brief message that could just as well apply to the quatrain as to the accompanying note. It is not entirely clear, therefore, what the deictic “ce billet” is referring to; it could be the poem *per se*, or the note accompanying the quatrain. As these postal-quatrains were meant as addresses, they often accompanied a private note that was written inside the envelope. Yet, the note in question would have usually been banal prose announcing an event, thanking for a gift, or sending an invitation. From a purely poetic perspective, the value of the message contained within the envelope therefore would have been inferior to the poetic value of the envelope containing the quatrain. The identity of the text worthy of being read out loud is thus by no means self-explanatory. Furthermore, the act of assimilating the object of the gift offering to a text reifies the poem. There is then a shift in the conception of the poem from text to object.

This materialization of poetry manifests itself in other poems, where the poem adopts the subjectivity of the object. In the *Récréations postales*, for example, some of the poems directly
address the situation in which they are inscribed either by mentioning the address (cette adresse: 79, 4), the message (ce message: 80, 5, 6; 88, 27), the letter (cette lettre: 82, 6; 83, 3, 4; 86, 16; 88, 29; 73, 1), the note (ce mot: 74, 9; 84, 7; 87, 23; 90, 38; 72, 7; ce billet: 63, 3), or the writing (cet écrit: 88, 25). In these instances, the poem no longer designates an object exterior to itself, but designates itself as object. The object-poem then speaks in the first person “en la disparition élocutoire du poète.” 287 This turns the object into the subject of enunciation of the poem. This is particularly visible in the poems entitled “Sur des cruches de Calvados” where the jug-poem starts speaking in the first person:

*Je* fais le vœu que ma liqueur

Vous coule douce jusqu’au cœur. (179, 2)

*Je* tiens secret ce que pense

L’homme qui vida ma panse. (179, 3)

But, more importantly, the object does not only give a physical reality to the poem; it also often structures the reading of the poem. In Mallarmé’s Easter egg poems, for example, the quatrain was fragmented into four lines, each corresponding to a different egg. Each egg was then numbered from one through four. The recipient of the Easter eggs could then recompose the poem by ordering the eggs from one to four. In one instance, in a poem to his daughter, Geneviève, Mallarmé increased the amusement of this game by omitting the numbers on the eggs. The poem could then be read in four different ways because each rhyme could be inversed twice:

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287 Crise de vers
Pâques apporte ses vœux  
Toi vaine ne le déjoue  
Au seul rouge de ces œufs  
Que se colore ta joue

One egg could thus trigger four different readings and poems. But, beyond the plastic play between the poem and the object, the Vers de circonstance also address the material properties of writing.

Mallarmé’s interest in the material properties of paper are manifest in his correspondence to his editors. But, he also shares this interest with his readers when he initiates them in La Dernière Mode to the different types of paper that will be used for printing.

Mainte surprise prochaine a été annoncée par M Marasquin dans son résumé des trois mois précédents de La Dernière Mode : la première, c'est l'emploi, pour une gazette de toilettes et mondaine, de caractère elzévirien, réservé jusqu'ici à l'impression de livres luxueux et rares. Type des belles éditions d'autrefois subitement, comme la guipure et les bijoux anciens, revenu à la mode, il faut pour l'accompagner, un papier d'autrefois: ce n'est pas à ce goût archaïque et répandu aujourd'hui que nous avons cédé seulement, en dotant le papier, fabriqué pour le texte, de sa teinte jaunie et spéciale, mais au désir que nos belles gravures noires jouissent d'un ton chaud et riche. Satins, velours et toutes les étoffes du soir, prennent là un chatoiement ou une profondeur, qu'une autre nuance, employée comme fond, serait inhabile à y apporter.288

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It is revealing that Mallarmé writes that the paper is made for the text (“le papier, fabriqué pour le texte”) as it shows the importance he gives to the materiality of paper, not only as a support of writing, but also as a constitutive element of the text that participates in its shimmering poeticity. Independently from the type of luxury paper that Mallarmé talks about in the preceding article, his interest in paper is general because of the versatile qualities that this material presents. Indeed, paper is a chameleon material capable of numerous remodeling possibilities and transformations. Too often its material properties are overlooked for the poetic dimension of the text. But, in Mallarmé’s poetry there is a completely different relation to the material support of writing. In order to appreciate the value of the Vers de circonstance the aesthetic and technical aspects of paper must be taken into consideration because paper is more than a simple receptacle of form. It also imposes its own characteristics on writing. The writing of a text therefore greatly differs depending on the size, thickness, volume, absorption of ink and luminosity of the paper on which the text is written. With those few means, paper offers rich possibilities to those who try to appropriate it. The sole resources of paper sufficed to Georges Seurat (1859-1891) for example to experiment his theory of contrasts and to concretize his research on the chiaroscuro. Henri Matisse (1869-1954) used to say that his work consisted in adapting itself to the light of the sheet of paper. He also talked about paper in terms of its « qualité de blancheur attendrissante. » In the realm of literature, Mallarmé was the literary echo of those plastic experimentations.

In the Vers de circonstance the materiality of writing takes on an aesthetic dimension that is an integral part of the appreciation of the poems. To that effect, there are two fundamental materials in Mallarmé’s work: paper and books (Le Livre). It is justified to pay the greatest


attention to these materials as it is with the greatest seriousness that Mallarmé incorporated a reflection on these elements in his work. Furthermore, the materialization of the devices of writing systematically enunciated in the *Vers de circonstance* surpass the frame of this work by finding other visible traces in the principle of organization of *La Dernière Mode* as well as in projects such as *Le Livre*. In this last work Mallarmé’s writing fans itself out throughout the pages that leaf themselves as flying sheets of paper. In another work, *Pages*, published in 1891, this plastic conception of writing with all its functioning principles - from the cover to the internal organization of the book - becomes even more apparent. The very title of this work, *Pages*, evokes Mallarmé’s attention to the very materiality of paper.

Paper is a very old invention. It appeared for the first time in China in the First Century AD. But, for a long time, it was not a well regarded material. The nineteenth century, however, rediscovered the material qualities of paper. Contemporaries praised it, as this account by an erudite enthusiast can testify:

> Eh bien, une feuille de ce beau papier blanc et lisse - que vous négligez, ingrats, que vous salissiez sans motif et déchirez sans regret, tandis que nos ancêtres l'eussent considérée avec admiration et ménagée comme une chose précieuse ! - cette feuille, dis-je, est tout à fait comparable à du feutre. Si vous regardez la surface avec une loupe ou verre grossissant, vous y distingueriez alors des milliers de petites fibres, blanches, minces, tortillées, dont les fibres de la ouate blanche vous donneront très bien l'idée; mais ces fibres excessivement déliées, foulées, feutrées enfin, se tienne en masse avec une certaine résistance.  

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As this account describes, the interest in paper partly stems from the organic complexity of its vegetal composition. In the description of this bibliophile, the reader feels the scientific fascination of a microscopic observation. At a time when science developed, it is natural that literature also claimed a certain degree of scientificity, particularly in its approach to its own materials. Understanding the material properties of paper supposes, however, exploring its history and origins. It is through the intermediary of Asian papers brought back by travelers from China and Japan that Westerners interested themselves in the physical qualities of paper.

Les rayons lumineux semblent rebondir à la surface du papier d’Occident, alors que celle du hôsho ou du papier de Chine, pareille à la surface duveteuse de la lumière neige, les absorbe mollement. De plus, agréables au toucher, nos papiers se plient et se froissent sans bruit. Le contact en est doux et légèrement humide, comme d’une feuille d’arbre.²⁹²

Japanese papers, white, or slightly tinted in yellow, were particularly well valued. Composed with the fiber and bark of mulberry trees, they possessed a great resistance. In addition, they have an agreeable surface that feels like a silky and satiny fabric with a rare transparent quality. Among other valuable papers there were also Chinese papers that are characterized by their slightly grey shade. They are made with herbs, fibrous plants such as hemp, jute, leafy branches (that are particular to Chinese herbs), rattan, bamboo, reed, rice and wheat stems and fibers of grain such as cotton. This type of paper possesses a beautiful luminosity that is heightened by its surface in Mother of pearl. In addition to their physical properties, the printing qualities of

Japanese and Chinese papers are so famous that passionate bibliophiles refer to their printing quality as “l’amour de l’encre.” But, bibliophiles were not the only ones who discovered the usage of these papers. Nineteenth century artists fully appropriated these two types of paper and started a vogue around their beautiful and inimitable properties. In the early twentieth century, the first Dadaists and Cubists pushed this trend even further. The techniques of the collage led them to discover all sorts of new ways of playing with and transforming paper. This expanded into an overall fascination with paper from ordinary newspapers, to cardboard paper, wrapping paper and more.

Similarly, in the Vers de circonstance there is a real display of the materiality of paper. In the manner of the bibliophile previously mentioned, Mallarmé praises the materiality of his material that is far from being relegated to the background of the poem. On the contrary, in a gesture of mise-en-abîme, the poems incessantly address the materiality of their support. In the poems written on fans, for example, the background motif often represents a panoply of wild herbs that seem to mimic the fibrous texture of the fan [ill. 12]. Accordingly, the graphic motif of the object points to the herbal origin of paper. The poems thus mirror the materiality of their material support. Mallarmé’s poetic materialism did not wait for Roland Barthes to assert the herbal origin of paper:

… Des papiers de mille sortes, mais dont beaucoup laissent deviner, dans leur grain moulu de pailles claires, de brins écrasés, leur origine herbeuse.

In addition, through a play of apostrophes and the use of demonstrative deictics, Mallarmé paints all the qualities of his object that is then rendered to its palpable dimension. The paper caresses, deploys, bats its wings. But it also lets itself be folded, unfolded, read, thrown, sent, crumpled (chiffonné) and crossed out (raturé).
À ce papier fol et sa
Morose littérature
Pardonne s’il caressa
Ton front vierge de rature.\textsuperscript{293}

Aile que du papier \textit{replie}
\textit{Bats} toute si t’initia
Naguère à l’orage et la joie
De son piano Missia.\textsuperscript{294}

The accumulation of these descriptive elements unfolds all the steps of the paper’s existence: from having been written on, sent, opened and then read. It is worthy to note that the object is never torn, or thrown away. The paper is always in some way preserved. This preservation of the material trace of the message points to the essential communicative function of the poem that serves to maintain an I-thou relationship between the transmitter of the poem and its receiver. As such, the material is apostrophized not only to put it on display but also to show that reading and writing are mediated by this object. The apostrophe thus allows Mallarmé to insist on the presence of the object and on its plastic qualities, while emphasizing the fact that the object is always in a movement through space going from one person to another. The development of the materiality of paper and the description of its mobility thus allow Mallarmé to reflect on the destination of the poems and on their mode of reception.

\begin{align*}
\text{Lettre va, le plus tôt c’est} & \quad \text{Papier, si tu ne te repais} \\
\text{Le mieux, sans que l’on t’égare} & \quad \text{Des espoirs les plus décevants,} \\
\text{Chez Monsieur Pierre Sosset,} & \quad \text{C’est rue, au quinze, de la Paix} \\
\text{Rue, Belgique – en gare.}\textsuperscript{295} & \quad \text{Qu’on te dépliera, chez Evans.}\textsuperscript{296}
\end{align*}

\textsuperscript{293} 9, 275
\textsuperscript{294} 12, 275
\textsuperscript{295} 29, 269
\textsuperscript{296} 14, 266
In the first poem, the use of the imperative verb « aller » gives an air of urgency to the poem. The poem must be sent because it must be read. The poem is in a situation of essential communication with its destinator. In the second poem, however, the announcement of the destinator is perceived as a peril or a punishment. The paper is placed under the threat of being unfolded as if it were going to be devoured by the one who reads it. However, if the addressee is presented as a carnivorous reader the same holds true of the paper that cannot satisfy or satiate its thirst for ink. The use of the verb “se repaître” used in a conditional “if” clause in the present tense reads voluntarily in the first sense of the word. The reader is thus projected into a zone of desire beyond what can satisfy the aspirations of writing and the need to read. In the act of displaying the material properties of writing, the postal quatrain addresses a tension that cristalizes itself in the simple sheet of paper. The materiality of paper is staged in the *Vers de circonstance* to signal metaphorically that there is an erotic tension in the act of writing and reading that is channeled by the object that provokes the reader’s desire.

Sometimes this zone of desire is symbolically designated by addressing a female destinator. Indeed, a number of poems are dedicated to women because then the poem can fully play on this erogenous tension. This is most notable in the poems addressed to his friend, Méry Laurent. But it can also be noted in other poems. The offering of many of these poems as gifts suggests a certain sexual tension, as can be seen in the following examples that use the traditional trope of women and flowers:

    Mademoiselle Ponsot, puisse

    Notre compliment dans sa fleur

    Vous saluer au Châlet-Suisse
In another poem, this time to the young Doctor Edmond Fournier, doctor of Méry Laurent, Mallarmé warns him of the charms of his patient who is already his father’s mistress.

Au fond de Saint-James, Neuilly,
Le docteur Fournier n’a d’idée,
Songeur, prudent et recueilli,
Que de courtiser l’orchidée.

In addition to the delicate sensual undertone of the poems that points to the erotic tension in the act of reading and writing, Mallarmé develops the different semantic fields of words to tie the objects to their material possibilities. In the following poem he plays on the polysemy of the word “pli” that designates at the same time a letter and a material attribute of the letter that can be folded.

Ris, poste ! et ne sois pas bourrue
En jetant ce pli hasardeux
Chez Eugène Geneste, rue
Du Chemin Vert, quarante-deux.²⁹⁸

And indeed with Mallarmé, the paper folds (fait pli). To be convinced, it suffices to think of his poems written on fans. But folds also bear with them a theoretical significance that deals with an epistemological understanding of the world. For Gilles Deleuze, « les microperceptions ou représentants du monde sont ces petits plis dans tous les sens, plis dans les plis, sur plis, selon plis, un tableau d’Hantaï, ou une hallucination toxique de Clérambault. Et ce sont ces petites

²⁹⁷ Eva Ponsot was one of Geneviève’s friends in Honfleur. She was the daughter of Margueritte Ponsot, their hostess.

²⁹⁸ 41, 272
perceptions, obscures, confuses, qui component nos microperceptions… » 299 A fold (pliure) corresponds indeed to an opacity of matter. Because folded and refolded, added to itself, all transparency becomes opaque. Matter functions as the domain of micro perceptions where reality becomes obscure, confusing, plural. The white page, therefore, a topos that traverses Mallarmé’s poems through and through, is not the same from beginning to end of his work. In his first years, it is the romantic topos of impotency, but little by little this space transforms itself into a space of creation and creativity. That is how Mallarmé declares that “devant le papier, l’artiste se fait” 300 and that “l’homme poursuit noir sur blanc.” 301 

The material practice of writing initiated by Mallarmé would have long echoes after him thanks to artists inspired by the possibilities of paper. Hneri Michaux (1899-1984), more particularly, developed the technique of the Frottages (1944-1947), executed with Conté crayon. This technique reveals not only the texture of the various materials pressed upon the paper (wooden floors, tapisteries, etc.) but also the granularity and texture proper to paper itself. Michaux experimented as well with different papers as supports for his aquarelles – thick grained paper, Japanese or Chinese paper.

But beyond the material properties of paper, it is the conception of the totality of his work as a book that is important to Mallarmé. His poetic ambition is thus best known in relation to his long-dreamt project Le Livre. This text best explains Mallarmé’s interest in redefining his conception of a poetic work. The idea of Le Livre that took root in 1866 at the time of his discovery of the “néant” defines a whole other conception of a poetic work. This one is no longer

300 Letter to Eugène Lefebure dated of 1865.
defined in terms of a unique individual work but, as Bertrand Marchal writes as: “[une] limite de la littérature universelle.” 302 Le Livre oscillates then between a promise to come and an object that would have always already been there. Despite Mallarmé’s assertion in Divagations that “tout, au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre” 303 it is necessary to understand what he means by this book. For Bertrand Marchal, in the notes on Le Livre as well as in his texts on Divagations, through which Mallarmé kept redefining his idea of literature, one could not insist enough on the relationship of Le Livre with music and notably with Wagner, because the relation of Mallarmé to Wagner defines a whole new way of thinking about literature. 304 That is how, with regard to Wagner, Mallarmé considers the traditional model of the book outdated, and abandons this conception of the book to go towards the model of a total art book (art livresque total) in order to rival the Wagnerian model of the Gesammtkunstwerk. Still, according to Bertrand Marchal, the conception of Le Livre for Mallarmé equals defying music, theater and religion. But, to this trilogy there is a fourth element that must be added. That is the plastic element. This one is essential for Mallarmé.

In a text written during his youth, Hérésies artistiques. L’Art pour tous (1862), Mallarmé established a stern condemnation of the relation of literature to the alphabet. In his equation of art to the sacred and the mysterious, the alphabetic nature of literature, at the time of the emergence


304 Once again, it is important to note that Mallarmé’s knowledge of Wagnerian aesthetics was rather instrumental than profound as Mallarmé did not understand very much about music in general. Despite the number of musical interpretations of his work both from contemporaries and from twentieth and twenty-first century composers, Mallarmé was much more a painter’s poet than a musician’s. To give an amusing ananecdotal example of his musical talent, when he first met his future wife Maria Gerhard he thought - after hearing her speak in French - that she was British due to her accent. In reality Maria Gerhard was born and raised in Germany from a German speaking family. This is obviously just a humorous anecdote, but it is quite telling of Mallarmé’s musical ear.
of mass readers, destroyed the magical value of literature. Mallarmé deplored the fact that contrary to the enigmatic traits of painting and of music, the graphic signs of the alphabet are deprived of mystery. The totality of the poet’s work can therefore be read as an attempt to get out of the alphabet and of the book in order to resituate poetry in the field of art. This can be demonstrated by examining Mallarmé’s relation to art. In addition, this will help to understand the trajectory that led him to the Vers de circonstance. To convince oneself of the desire of plasticity of Mallarmé’s oeuvre, it suffices to examine the plastic metaphor used by Mallarmé himself to talk about Le Livre.

Hier, he wrote to his friend Eugène Lefèbure, j’ai fini la première ébauche de l’œuvre, parfaitement délimité, et impérissable si je ne péris pas. […] La Vénus de Milo […] ; la Joconde du Vinci ; me semblent, et sont, les deux grandes scintillations de la Beauté sur cette terre et de cet Œuvre, tel qu’il est rêvé, la troisième. 305

It is not certain that Mallarmé is referring to these two works so much for his aesthetic appreciation of them as for his acknowledgement of their incontestable prestige in the aesthetic canon among the community of connoisseurs and specialists. Furthermore, the integrity of his notes on Le Livre bears more on the definition of the format and matter of the text than on the elaboration of the content of the work. What is more important to underline is the fact that Mallarmé wishes to use the material resources of language in order to position it as a plastic artwork. Matisse once said eloquently that he did not distinguish between the construction of a

305 Letter to Eugène Lefèbure 27 May 1867.
painting and that of a book. This formula could apply just as well to Mallarmé who collaborated with painters and illustrators on the elaboration of his texts.

Mallarmé counts among his works a certain number of illustrated books. In 1874 he published his “Gazette du Monde et de la Famille,” *La Dernière Mode* [ill. 13]. The following year, in 1875, he published his translation of Edgar Allan Poe’s *Corbeau*, illustrated by Manet [ill. 14]. Similarly, a year later, Manet illustrated *L’Après-midi d’un faune* [ill. 15]. In October 1887, he published a photolithographic version of the *Poésies* with an illustration by Félicien Rops on the frontispiece [ill. 16]. In 1888, he collaborated again with Manet on an edition of the *Poems of Edgar Poe*. In 1891 *Pages* was published with a frontispiece by Renoir. In 1892, *Vers et prose* (dated in 1893) appeared with a frontispiece by Whistler. In 1897, Mallarmé started an illustrated project of *Un Coup de dés* by Odilon Redon. That same year, he had another illustrated project of *Hérodiade* by Vuillard. Conversely, he was also solicited by painters who invited him to participate in revues as is the case of his poems written for *Types de Paris*, at the demand of the painter Jean-François Raffaëlli [ill. 17]. This brief trajectory makes apparent that Mallarmé’s *oeuvre* tends towards the illustrated book become object in the *Vers de circonstance*. From the simple book sometimes sumptuously illustrated by an artist, the quasi mythical importance of the book does not cease to grow in his work. For that matter, the history of the book as an object and material shows that it is culturally overdetermined. It suffices to think of book censorship or the books burned under the Spanish Inquisition and more recently under totalitarian regimes to grasp that it is a fantasmatic object that captivates both dreams and terrors. It is comprehensible that this stimulating tension along with the the book’s physical and material properties would have attracted Mallarmé’s attention.

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306 Matisse’s work entitled *Jazz* remains one of his most celebrated « livres-peints ». 
Art, materiality and form: The Philosophical Status of Materiality

As was mentioned earlier in this chapter, Mallarmé’s musings on the question of materiality, which are playfully at work in the Vers de circonstance, derive from the progressive interest of nineteenth century art on the topic. While one would think that art history is for a large part the history of its materials, for a long time Western art had stayed confined to a relatively restrained sphere of materials. Until the nineteenth century, the evolution of these materials was twofold. The first phase began in prehistorical times and was characterized by the use of “primitive” materials such as bones, sculpted reindeer wood, engraved and or painted stones. The Paleolithic Lascaux cave in Southwestern France bears witness to the artistic practices that used those materials. The second phase was marked by the passage from the use of those “primitive” materials to “noble” materials. Among these were bronze, wood, marble, stone and precious metals. But, in this same phase several discoveries and innovations took place that allowed artistic endeavors to develop and gain amplitude. A major innovation for instance was achieved in the fabrication of colors and pigments, the creation of different bindings and the development of various finishings and supports. However, contrary to what could have been imagined, considering the rapid evolution of the diversification of materials from the first to the second phase, this latter one did not pursue the same process of expansion of materials. What is striking is precisely the fact that, instead of continuing the momentum of diversification of materials, the second phase became more rigid in order to follow a strict formal aesthetic subjected to an ideological codification that valorized form over the exploration or exploitation of matter. For

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307 My findings in this section are very much indebted to Florence de Mèredieu’s work Histoire matérielle et immatérielle de l’art. Paris: Larousse/Séjer, 2004 [1994].
centuries artists thus radically obliterated matter to privilege form. This preeminence of form over matter stems from deeply grounded philosophical beliefs.

Within the realm of the philosophical tradition, materiality has generally been very poorly considered. Art history is, for that matter, dependent on the Aristotelian and Kantian heritage on the one hand, and the entirety of Hegel’s reflections on art on the other. These philosophies place value on spirit over physical matter. In Hegel’s formulation, the mind seeks in art “la présence sensible […] débarrassée de l’échafaudage de sa matérialité […].” 308 This somewhat Cartesian vision of an aseptized materiality brought forth a dramatization and diabolisation of matter in the collective Western consciousness. All the most basic human instincts were projected onto matter. In an article entitled “Le Gros Orteil,” Georges Bataille described this Manichean dialectic whereby men value what is elevated and thus closer to the sky and the realm of ideas, and antagonize what is low and therefore seems closer to animality. As he writes: “[…] l’homme qui a la tête légère, c’est-à-dire élevée vers le ciel et les choses du ciel, […] regarde [son gros orteil] comme un crachat sous prétexte qu’il a ce pied dans la boue.” 309 The opposition he underlines between “[une] tête légère” and the vileness of the human body, notably the foot, is however paradoxical, as it is thanks to his “gros orteil” that man distinguishes himself from animals by standing in a fully upright position. Man should therefore be grateful for this ungraceful appendix and embrace his humanity that is rooted in physical matter. Yet, as Bataille writes, man misleadingly lingers on the belief that his verticality propels him to more elevated spheres:

Bien qu’à l’intérieur du corps le sang ruisselle en égale quantité de haut en bas et de bas en haut, le parti est pris pour ce qui s’élève et la vue humaine est erronément


regardée comme une élévation. La division de l’univers en enfer souterrain et en ciel parfaitement pur est une conception indélébile, la boue et les ténèbres étant les principes du mal comme la lumière et l’espace céleste sont les principes du bien : les pieds dans la boue mais la tête à peu près dans la lumière, les hommes imaginent obstinément un flux qui les élèverait sans retour dans l’espace pur.

The tragedy of human ideals thus lies in the fact that men are grossly bound to the earthiness of physical matter, thus reminding mankind of the words of Genesis (3:19): “Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” By contrast to this devaluation of physical matter, form has always been valued because it is associated with the idea of a mastery over the disorder of the physical universe. It was also seen as a way of rationally appropriating the real. The quasi exclusive preeminence of form over matter – which takes its roots in Platonism – eradicated the confusing diversity of the sensorial universe that was associated with animality in man. Contrary to physical matter, which proliferates and is volatile, form puts a shape to things, thereby unifying the real.

As a consequence, for centuries the representation of physical matter in art remained purely metaphorical or simulated. The only justifiable use of materiality was the simple transfer of the forms and contours of an object (also appearances and secondary qualities) to the artwork. That is what art historians call “le rendu des matières.” The fabric, textures, pigments and material supports functioned as mere signs and were in no instance considered for themselves.

This was particularly notable in the history of canvasses in art. The materiality of this physical support was purely and simply denied as if it had neither materiality nor substance in order to be a simple window on the painting. It is the famous parete di vetro (glass wall), dear to Leonardo, which allows the spectator to gaze directly and without mediation into the core of the

\[^{310}\text{King James Bible.}\]
work as into “un espace extérieur imaginaire […] qui ne serait pas limité mais seulement découpé par les bords du tableau.” 311 This conception of painting as a transparent window open on the spectacle of the world finds its acme – paroxysmal and deliberately caricatural - in René Magritte’s (1898-1967) work, notably in paintings such as La Condition humaine (1933), or the Key to the Fields (1936). Both paintings play on different levels of mise en abîme of the canvas within the canvas [ill. 18].

The entirety of art had thus only been tackled under the angle of form. From Wölflin and Riegl to Greenberg passing through Émile Mâle, Warburg’s school, Worriinger, Panofsky and Ehrenzweig, the history of art had been the history of forms, styles, aesthetic movements and schools that underlaid the question of form. It is thus within the vigilantly reglemented field of the art academies (i.e: l’Académie des Beaux Arts) and other art institutions that materiality in Western art deployed itself until the nineteenth century. But, starting with that period, art could no longer do business as usual. As Gombrich formulated it in his History of Art, too many upheavals agitated the old tenants of order. Art, in confrontation with industry and the new technological developments that defied its prior mimetic function, had to free itself of its role of representing reality by finding new ways with which to deal with the real. It is from that perspective that the emergence of materiality in art is understandable. As Mallarmé writes in his letter to the editor in chief of the National, “l’art moderne tout entier [tend vers] – une fusion de l’art et de l’industrie.” 312 As the preceding section of this dissertation has shown, for Mallarmé the alliance between art and industry was not viewed negatively, as it encompasses his desire to


unite “le beau et l’utile.” As such, his interest in a decorative aesthetic was an important expression of his commitment to making this alliance possible.

Returning to the evolution of nineteenth century art, it is very visible how fundamental the introduction of materiality was to the development of the visual arts. With Impressionism, for example, the stroke of the brush as well as the density of the paint were finally considered in and of themselves. This led Manet to develop an art that, by the thickness and turn of the stroke, gave a new corporality to the otherwise glistening flatness of the canvas. Later on with Matisse and the Cubists it was the canvass and paper that finally became more than just simple supports or receptacles of illusion. In that context, in which artistic novelty flourished from all directions, it is not surprising that Mallarmé, inspired by his interactions with fellow artists, sought out his own artistic innovations within the field of literature, searching for what materiality could add to his poetic inquiry. Stimulated by the profusion of artistic innovations, Mallarmé’s contribution to an aesthetic renewal in the verbal arts was that, for almost the very first time in Western history, the materiality of writing was at last considered in the aesthetic and critical appreciation of literature.

Mallarmé achieved this transformation in the way readers perceive literature on two levels. First, by showing that writing is a material entity. To that end, the proliferation of different material supports (pebbles, envelopes, plates, jugs, fans, etc.) serves to address the fact that writing references objects of the world. But these objects also serve to draw attention to the simple fact that writing is itself supported by the materiality of ink and paper. This explains that the poems are charged with solid material objects that intensify the volume of writing. Simultaneously, however, the poems are accompanied by ephemeral organic and immaterial objects (candies, fruits, cakes, flowers) that were meant to disappear. In that case, the disappearance of the object displaces the question of materiality from the object to the text that then can be appreciated both as a substitute for the object and as a material trace in and of itself.
The second way in which Mallarmé demonstrates the materiality of writing is by displaying the calligraphic aspect of writing itself. The autographic dimension of this work is therefore fundamental to its aesthetic and critical understanding. So much so, that before being a poem, a text that can be read, the poem in the *Vers de circonstance* is a material and visual object that must be looked at. Mallarmé’s conception of writing as a visual object is best represented by his comparison of writing to dance, and more precisely, Ballet.

According to Mallarmé, ballet is the quintessential form of poetry; or as he writes it is “la forme théâtrale de poésie par excellence” 313 because it is a type of physical writing (“écriture corporelle”). As such, the dancer is an incarnation of the linguistic sign unmediated by the materials of writing (pen or paper).

[…la danseuse n’est pas une femme qui danse […] mais une élémentaire puissance […] suggérant, par le prodige de raccourcis ou d’élans, avec son écriture corporelle ce qu’il faudrait des paragraphes, en la rédaction: poésie dégagée enfin de tout appareil du scribe. 314

Dance therefore belongs, in Mallarmé’s aestheticized conception of art, to the realm of literature, as it is a visual scriptural sign. Consequently, it requires a reader to decipher it.

L’unique entraînement imaginatif consistera […] à se demander devant chaque pas, chaque attitude si étranges, et pointes et taquetés, allongés ou ballons “Que peut signifier ceci ?” ou mieux, d’inspiration le lire.315

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314 Mallarmé Stéphane. *La Revue indépendante* 2 (December 1886): 249. Italics are mine.

This kind of ‘reading’ of dance is also present in Mallarmé’s description of it as a “hiéroglyphe.”

The choice of the word “hiéroglyphe” is important to note because it ties once again the aesthetic innovations of the Vers de circonstance to the historical discoveries of Mallarmé’s contemporaries.

Effectively, the nineteenth century could not contest the fact that writing, the graphic vehicle of speech, is born of images. The Précis du système hiéroglyphique, written by Jean-François Champollion (1790-1832) in 1824 revealed the lost trace between writing and images. Champollion’s major breakthrough in the understanding of Egyptian hieroglyphs is a discovery that Mallarmé could not have ignored considering his long friendship with the Egyptologist Eugène Lefebure (1838-1908). Lefebure was one of Mallarmé’s main correspondants throughout the 1860s and 1870s at a determining period in Mallarmé’s poetic evolution. The typographic inventiveness of Mallarmé’s poetic works ranging from The Vers de circonstance to Un Coup de dés was therefore not a creation ex-nihilo. This aesthetic innovation was made possible by several important events, among which the birth of Egyptology as a scientific discipline. A second event to which Mallarmé would have been particularly sensitive, considering his interest in journalism was the sudden and continuous development of a whole typographic art emerging from the press and advertising. Mallarmé’s graphic curiosity led him, for example, to explore new typographic tools in La Dernière Mode. His visual research with regard to the display of words on the page came from his regret of the physical evidence of the graphic character of words that reveal the word in its immediate nudity. Ironically empowered by his incapacity to read a musical score, Mallarmé wished that writing could have the same poetic hermetism as that of a musical score.


317 Mallarmé had met and started holding a regular epistolary relationship with Lefebure starting 1862.
He thus sketched a language in which the reading dynamic resembles a mysterious plastic presence. Talking about the preparation of his edition *Un Coup de dés*, Mallarmé wrote to his editor,

[…] pour les planches que Redon fera pour mon ouvrage, il importe qu’il y ait un fond dessiné : sinon, si le dessin se présente sur un fond blanc comme dans cette planche, cela fera double emploi avec le dessin de mon texte qui est noir et blanc.\(^{318}\)

Mallarmé considered therefore the alphabetic letter as a trace of drawing on the page. He thus viewed the value of alphabetic signs similarly to a work of art that has a plastic and exhibitional value. If we think of his poems written on fans, for example, this exhibitional value of writing is very clear, for, contrary to the secret intimacy which we would have expected from these poems, they are written on the visible exterior face of the fan. The poem therefore feigns an act of intimacy and complicity with its destinatory by inscribing itself on a very personal and intimate object. Yet, in reality, the poem is exposing itself to all except its addressee.

Returning to the comparison between writing and dance, it is significant to note that while references to dance do not abound in the *Vers de circonstance*,\(^{319}\) dance was present in the preliminary poem of the opus, from which the long series of occasional quatrains emerged. The poem in question is the one that Mallarmé wrote in 1873 to illustrate a watercolor by Manet [ill. 19].


\(^{319}\) There are four references to dance throughout the *Vers de circonstance*. 
Polichinelle danse avec deux bosses, mais
l'une touche le sol et l'autre l'empyrée:
par ce double désir âme juste inspirée,
vois-le qui toujours tombe et surgit à jamais.

Contrary to censors who viewed Manet’s work as a political satire because of the resemblance of his Polichinelle with the Général MacMahon, - known for his severe repression of the Commune in 1871 - Mallarmé saw the figure of the Polichinelle as a symbolic representation of art in its continuous movement of rise and fall that emblematizes art’s tension between an aspiration towards elevation on the one hand, and the material realities of the everyday on the other. This tension, however, is no longer displayed as antagonistic since it becomes, in the final line of the quatrain, the very movement by which art defines itself in a sort of hiccuping stasis. The fact that art, and more particularly, poetry, must incarnate itself in a physical being whether it be the figure of the dancer or the Polichinelle demonstrates Mallarmé’s preoccupation with defining poetry in terms of a poetic space. But this embodiment of art also emblematizes Mallarmé’s interest in bridging the gap between the concrete and the completely abstract, which for him must materialize in a visual form.

Examination of the Aesthetic Properties of the Vers de circonstance

To support the claim that Mallarmé’s poems are visual objects, one need but think of his poems artfully handwritten in red or white ink onto silver leaf fans, black tulle, ebony or mother of pearl to convoke the image of an artist working in his studio. Setting his poetic canvasses against Morisot’s or Degas’ painted fans he could have very well exclaimed like Correggio facing a painting by Raphael: “Anch’io son’ pittore!” (I too am a painter!) [ill. 20]. There is, however, a fundamental difference between the Impressionists’ fans and Mallarmé’s, because
contrary to some Impressionist fans which were done with refined and expensive materials, Mallarmé’s are cheap ready-made objects on which he simply appended his poems. But that would be missing the point of Mallarmé’s visual materialism. Comparing his handwriting to his autographed fans, manuscripts, or even other contemporary fan-albums, we immediately realize that, in the Vers de circonstance, there is an aesthetic mise en forme of writing itself that to some extent trumps the banality of the object on which it is appended [ill. 21]. Mallarmé’s visual materialism thus does not consist in drawing like François Coppée [ill. 22], or painting like the Impressionists. Instead, he is showing his readers that writing itself is an image, or even a type of painting.

A first way in which Mallarmé demonstrates the primacy of the visual elements of writing is through the framing devices he uses around his texts. Indeed, almost all his poems of the Vers de circonstance are in some way or other framed by the material support on which they are canvassed. In addition, contrary to Mallarmé’s usual typographic preference for white space around the printed version of his poems, the autographic poems of the Vers de circonstance seem to have a different relationship to space and writing. In the case of the postal quatrains, for example, the envelope functions as a frame to the poem because the poem is literally encased by the envelope on which it is written. Looking at these objects, it is extremely surprising to see how the choice of envelope seems tailored to fit the dimensions of the quatrain, leaving little space for the postal services to add their stamp on to the envelope. The envelope thus tightly frames the quatrain. This is not the only example of such a practice. Mallarmé’s poems on calling cards function in a similar way. The poems always seem to occupy the full space of the card, and when

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320 I had a surprising conversation with the curator of the fan museum in Paris, who scoffed me for daring to compare Mallarmé’s fan poems with the extraordinary collection of fans she has on display in the museum, precisely because Mallarmé’s fans were made of very poor materials.
they do not, it seems that Mallarmé deliberately changes the disposition of the quatrain to fit it to the proportions of the card, as in this example [ill. 23]. This particular disposition of the quatrain is quite common to the poems of the *Vers de circonstance* and allows Mallarmé to draw closer attention to the visuality of writing. In addition, Mallarmé, as a painter, signed most of his autographic quatrains. Imitating Whistler with his original butterfly signature at the bottom of his paintings, Mallarmé signed his quatrains using an elaborate juxtaposition of his initials. But, as has previously been mentioned, the visuality of the text ultimately serves to underline the fact that writing itself is a visual imprint or image on the page. Frames are thus both a material aesthetic device and a poetic trope for poetry as a genre.

Indeed, poetry, for Mallarmé, is seen as a frame through the use of versification. Versification for Mallarmé is important precisely because it also serves as a framing device to the text.

Je crois que c'est bien là vous: une si nette pureté que toutes les autres émotions que susciterait le poème (profondeur, richesse, par exemple), loin de s'émaner séparément en l'esprit, concourent encore à cette pureté, arrêtée, unique, et que rien ne rayonne comme autour de l'œuvre des gens qui pensent à côté, ni même ne s'extravase en cadre, mais se fige en le contour coupé là où il cesse d'être. (Selon moi, il n'y a pas d'autre poésie maintenant.) Le hasard n'entame pas un vers, c'est la grande chose.\(^{321}\)

Mallarmé’s expression “le hasard n’entame pas un vers, c’est la grande chose” explains why, contrary to some of his contemporaries who explored the poetic possibilities of free verse,

\(^{321}\) Letter to François Coppée. Wednesday 5 December [1866].
Mallarmé maintained versified poetry. Versification guaranteed for him a form of order that abolishes the somewhat arbitrary nature of language. Indeed, poetry - when it is versified - becomes a highly organized linguistic structure where no element is left to chance. It is also a way of visually arranging language by cutting. As Mallarmé clearly demonstrates, each poetic line is visually and rhythmically cut.

Un mot, au coin, que j’avertisse. (2/2//4)

La dame qu’ici vous voyez, (8)

Dans les fresques du Primatice (8)

A des cheveux blonds déployés.\(^{322}\) (4/4)

Versified poetry thus distinguishes itself from prose or free verse through the interruption of the line, and the segmentation of language into different linguistic and visual units. This effect is greatly dramatized in some of the poems of the Vers de circonstance by the diagonal layering of the verses over several lines:

Palpite,

Aile,

mais n’arrête

Sa voix que pour brillamment

La ramener sur la tête

Et le sein

en diamant.\(^{323}\)

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\(^{323}\) Ibid, p.95.
While this visual effect of the quatrain may appear fully unmotivated and purely aesthetic, this visual *découpage* is entirely calculated and premeditated. First of all, it corresponds to the visual fluttering of a fan and of its different movements of folding and unfolding. But, in addition, there is a mathematical symmetry between the number of layers in which the first and last lines of the poem are cut up and the number of rhythmic patterns contained in each line. Here, the quatrain is layered over seven lines. Each line is also seven syllables long. The first line is then broken into three rhythmic patterns (2/2/3) that are displayed over three lines. Similarly, the last line is cut into two rhythmic patterns that are displayed over two lines (3/4). This pattern can be repeated with another poem previously mentioned for its visual display.

Ce bon Dauphin ne s’embarrasse

Deux peignent

Une chante

Mais

Leur maman partage la grâce

A table comme un entremets.\(^{324}\)

Here, the second line of this octosyllabic quatrain is cut into three rhythmic patterns (3/4/1) that are spread over three lines. This perfect interior coherence between the visual display of the poem and its poetic mechanism demonstrates the inseparability of form and substance. Once again, the poems demonstrate that they are clear-cut linguistic objects that leave an image of themselves on the page.

In Mallarmé’s fan poems, a further element is added; that is: the disposition of the text. Depending on the positioning of the poem on the fan the text plays with the material properties of

\(^{324}\) Ibid, p. 107.
the object - either its horizontal movement of unfolding or, less frequently, with the vertical structure of its monture. In the first instance, the poems accompany the movement of the printed motif of the fan. This is the case of the fans to Madeleine Roujon, Madame Léopold Dauphin and Nelly Marras. In all three fan poems, the poem reads from left to right in accordance with the object’s decorative pattern. But in two poems dedicated to Augusta Holmès, the text is written instead on the vertical structure of the fan [ill. 24]. Each line is then individually written on the part of the fan called the rib. What is interesting about these two objects is that they reverse the conventional visual image of writing as black on white because here the poems are written in white ink on completely black tulle fans. The reversal of the relationship of the text to its material support - whereby the text recedes into the background by being assimilated to whiteness, whereas the dark tulle of the fan advances to the foreground by being associated with the text - gives the writing a palpable visual depth. In addition, the combined effect of this inversion of black on white, along with the inversed horizontality of the lines into vertical columns, evacuates the identification of writing to language and thus to the realm of abstract ideas and grounds language instead as an imprint that is outlined and cut out by black space. Instead of representing abstract ideas, words are rendered to their concrete visual identity as images.

Among all the fans which are known to readers today, the most unusual one is the one Mallarmé made for his daughter, Geneviève, because this is the only fan on which there is no printed motif. The only visual effect, then, is the poem itself [ill. 25]. It could be tempting to say that this is an example where the poem appears first and foremost as a text that needs to be read. Yet, that is not quite as easy as one would think due to the way in which the five quatrains are arranged on the fan. Instead of following the diagonal opening movement of the fan, the five stanzas are symmetrically disposed around the sticks, made of mother of pearl. Although this gives a visual effect of harmony to the fan, it greatly destabilizes the reading of the poem that in
order to be read, as we read from left to right, must be continuously turned on its head. The image of reversal and turning over that is evoked by this gesture is an important figure in Mallarmé’s poetics as it suggests the necessity to question previously held customs and beliefs. Similarly, to his image of the “sirènes maintes à l’envers” in his sonnet *Salut*, whereby he invited future generations of poets to embark on a new conception and understanding of poetry, Mallarmé reinforces here his idea that readers should have a different grasp of poetry by seizing the text’s visuality prior to its textuality.

Writing thus rendered to its figural quality leads, beyond Symbolism, to the material practices of early twentieth century artists for whom the poetic sign becomes a plastic presence. Through Mallarmé’s serial logic of the “pli selon pli” writing gains in density and becomes volume. By contrast, the continuity of writing – its narrative length – underlines its eventful quality (quality as an event). The conceptual explosion of the calligraphic field goes from an apparent superficiality to the radiance of a presence materialized in an object. Once again, Mallarmé anticipates the poetic and plastic practices to come. From Paul Klee, Van der Leck, Léger or Michaux, to Warhol or Jasper Johns; from Cubism to Constructivism and Futurism; from Cobra and the Lettrisme of the 1960s, modern art is traversed by a double instantiation of the letter and writing. This last one participates in the pictorial fabric and density of the work. The letter is at the same time a material and a perceptible sign, as well as a form that designates the abstract and immaterial dimension of the sign. Alphabetic signs thus have a liminal and border line position in literature, situated between two worlds: materiality and concept; the letter being capable of being used as a *material* or as a *sign*. The more the letter imposes itself on the scene of art and of artistic practices the more it explores the modalities of presentation. First painted, then cut and introduced in the painting under the form of a collage, the function of the
letter expanded. In Cubism, for example, it presents itself under a heterogenous form and plays on its particular status in between an abstract and concrete presence.
Chapter 6: Mallarmé’s Poésie Critique

In the preceding Chapter, “The Emergence of materiality in the 19th century,” Mallarmé’s assertion of materiality has been contextualized by explaining the philosophical and epistemological shift that caused materiality to appear at the forefront of nineteenth century aesthetic debates. Furthermore, as was demonstrated, the materiality of the Vers de circonstance was not a unique occurrence, neither in Mallarmé’s poetic production, nor in the larger aesthetic of his time. Now, having fully analyzed both the material and visual properties of his poems, it is necessary to question their critical relevance in Mallarmé’s poetics. As will now been seen, the visual materiality of language participates in Mallarmé’s critic of a consumer-based society.

Considering the artful way in which the Vers de circonstance articulate the manipulative game of private versus public spheres, it is therefore not surprising that rather than asking ‘what is literature?’ Mallarmé asks, ‘what is it to write?’ He thereby shifts the attention of his readers away from the field of production of the aesthetic category “literature,” to the activity of writing itself. His question therefore becomes more dynamic because instead of looking at literature from the outside as a finished product as a consumer would, he involves his reader in the creative process of writing that touches on many more aspects of language than just literature. Indeed, writing is an activity that may or may not be “literary,” in the way that when we write a grocery list, our text is usually not considered literary, while when we ‘compose’ a poem, this text stands higher chances of being considered literary. Furthermore, if the person writing the poem is recognized as an “author,” such as let’s say, Allen Ginsberg, then even though he may also be writing a type of grocery list, the use of a title “A Supermarket in California,” along with a certain stylization of content, and the status of the person writing as an “author,” all guarantee that we are in the presence of a literary work. What this last juxtaposition reveals is that in our present day context it is more difficult to assign an ontological definition to art. The recognition
of a work as a work of art greatly depends on the combination of certain extrinsic factors that are associated with the idea of art, and not with art itself. Amongst these extrinsic factors are: the presence of an authorial intentionality, and more importantly a certain aesthetic mise en forme that is recognized by the outside field of reception as aesthetic. Through this arrangement, the field of reception can then pontificate on the value of the work as a work of art.

Such insights have mostly been made possible by the phenomenal changes brought about the art world in the wake of early to mid twentieth century avant-garde aesthetics. The radicality of the works displayed in that period caused art historians and sociologists alike to challenge the Ur-alt notion of the ontological status of art. We might think, for example, of how influential to aesthetic discourses Marcel Duchamp’s provocative gesture of introducing “ready-mades” to the art world has been. It is, however, towards the start of the nineteenth century that, to quote Gombrich’s Story of Art, this “break in tradition” happens. For him, the rest of the century is but a spiraling revolution in quest of new standards upon which art could re-define itself. It will therefore be important to look at the ways in which the question of ontology in art presented itself to Mallarmé during his lifetime.

Towards a conceptual poetic

Il parle du poète moderne, du dernier qui, en fait “est un critique avant tout.”

Whether it be in his fashion revue, or in his writings on art, in the evocation of objects in the Poésies or in his prose writings such as Frisson d’hiver, everywhere we find the omnipresence of the object that finds its most complete expression in the Vers de circonstance.

325 In the case of conceptual art, such as the “ready-made” for instance, authorial intentionality combined with the exhibition of the object in a space assigned to art, supplant the need of an aesthetic mise en forme.

As has been seen, the objects that Mallarmé put to light in this work are essentially mundane everyday objects. But, progressively, throughout the reading of the poems the reader understands that art as much as poetry is the story of an eye that extracts fragments of reality out of the shade. In Mallarmé’s case, he extracts out of the shadow pieces of everyday life: a handkerchief, a teakettle, a jug, a cup, a glass. His conception of art in light of the banality of the quotidian reminds us a posteriori of the artistic proposition of Marcel Duchamp for whom “chaque seconde, chaque respiration” can become “une oeuvre qui n’est inscrite nulle part, qui n’est ni visuelle, ni cérébrale.” In this definition of the artwork there no longer exists a clear and traditional demarcation line between the world of art and reality, art and life. Mallarmé, prior to Marcel Duchamp and all of the artistic avant-gardes of the early twentieth century shared this desire to transgress these two worlds. He achieved this by prolonging the totality of his activities to a poetic possibility or proposition whether it be through the decoration of his country home in Valvins, or through the creation of an epistolary poetics in the Vers de circonstance. He thereby questions the relation of the spectator to the work of art by transgressing both the limits of what his epoch considered to be “art” and “poetry.” He accomplished this by introducing new and incongruous materials (glass, air, eggs, pebbles, jugs) into poetry. But he also transformed the relation of writing to language, space and time. His artistic practice shows the other side, or the conceptual verso of a work of art, by suggesting the mechanisms that underlie any artistic proposition: its program, project, intention, etc. Materiality then becomes not only a place of plastic manifestation of reality, but also the depository of a critical proposition vis à vis the work of art.

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There is always, therefore, a play in the *Vers de circonstance* on the material and immaterial possibilities of art. The object is elevated to the status of an artwork, but, it is also the victim of a process of vanishing and dematerialisation that allows Mallarmé to reflect on the life and status of his work. This process is exemplified in his poems written on ephemeral objects: candies, cakes, eggs, etc. The intrusion of the object in Mallarmé’s poetry recalls the introduction of the object in art. It is the revolution of Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades: the *Roue de bicyclette* in 1913, the *Sèche-bouteilles* in 1914, the *Fountain* in 1917, etc. What is surprising in the comparison of Mallarmé’s plastic practice to that of Marcel Duchamp is that both artists use materiality not only as a material, but also as a conceptual support. According to Duchamp’s formula:

[…] que Mr. Mutt ait fabriqué la fontaine de ses propres mains, ou non, est sans importance. Il l’a choisie. Il a pris un élément ordinaire de l’existence et l’a disposé de telle sorte que la signification utilitaire disparaîsse sous le nouveau titre et le nouveau point de vue – il a créé une pensée nouvelle pour cet objet.

That is precisely what Mallarmé is doing: he is creating new ideas and concepts not only about the object, but also, and especially about poetry.

The object is itself disturbing because it does not allow to vehicle the poem or rather the poem is forced to circulate in a commercial sphere without its object. This opens the question of the relation between writing and its lost referent. The absence of the object complicates the reading because it begs the question, do we really know what object the poem is talking about? The editor is obliged in order to facilitate the reading to add complementary notes to the poem. The poem thus plays on the totality of its editorial context by overriding the frame of the poetic line and by inscribing itself as well in the margins of the work. It is a poetry that cannot do without its paratext. This object, however, is also disturbing for those who receive it. Who wants
it? The bibliophile doesn’t necessarily want it because it is not a book. Similarly, the plastician or art collector does not necessarily want it because it is poetry. What is to be done with it? Is it worthy of a museum, a private collection or is it an archival piece? Where should it be categorized? The intrusion of the poem-object in the *Vers de circonstance* creates a breach in the highly sacralized sphere of arts and letters. It is from then on the whole meaning of art that is put into question. This questioning of art expresses itself in Mallarmé by a precise critique of poetry as much as a form as a genre. That is how the form of the object and the genre of occasional poetry allow him to begin a generalized critique of art and more particularly of poetic art.

**“Art as Idea as Idea”**

“Art as idea as Idea” is the name given by the American conceptual artist, Joseph Kosuth (born in 1945), to the entirety of his artistic practices since 1965. Despite the fact that Mallarmé’s artistic practice is anterior to the advent of conceptual art, and despite the fact that this new practice is essentially Anglo-Saxon, it is necessary to make a little detour into this movement because it can offer an interesting retrospective light on Mallarmé’s conception of poetry.

The expression “conceptual art” appeared for the first time in 1961 as the title of a text on music in a collection entitled *Fluxus: Anthology*. The expression was then recuperated by the artist Joseph Kosuth and the members of the group Art-Language to designate artistic practices in which the canvass, the painting and the object have disappeared. The means of expression of the artist are essentially reduced to language that is used as an analytical tool. The artists transform the exhibit spaces into real archival rooms in which the spectator finds amateur photographs, dactylographied sheets of paper, telegrams, folders, etc. Each work was reduced to an idea that was expressed without aesthetic *mise en forme*. Conceptual art is therefore an investigation of the concept of “art” independently from any anecdotal or expressive consideration. The object (the
object of art) disappears to give way to its analysis (psychoanalytical comparison; yet here the subject has disappeared). The main question that the artists ask themselves is “What is art?” This very same question is at the heart of the Vers de circonstance.

Lawrence Weiner’s practice consisting of suggestions through writing to achieve a determined action (such as throwing a ball down the Niagara Falls) echoes certain artistic acts proposed by Mallarmé who suggests to his readers different ways of using such and such an object. The most notable example is the one mentioned earlier on where Mallarmé suggests to his pupil Willy Ponsot to skip pebbles on the water. Furthermore, each object is susceptible of many different usages. Going back to the examples mentioned previously, the handkerchief can be used to blow one’s nose, dry tears, say goodbye, or as a simple gesture of galantry. By listing all these different usages of the object, Mallarmé deciphers the minute gestures of daily life that, once presented by him in a poetry collection, suddenly become poetic propositions. Another poetic practice of the Vers de circonstance that resembles the theoretical preoccupations of conceptual artists is the choice of autodefinition of the works themselves. Joseph Kosuth, for example, entitles one of his works “Neon electrical light English glass letters red eight” and the work is exactly the description of the title. It is indeed composed of letters written in red neon. In the Vers de circonstance there are similar autodefinitions of the poems in the title of the collections: Éventails, photographies, Oeufs de Pâques, Albums, Sur des galets d’Honfleur, Sur des cruches de calvados, etc.

Mallarmé, however, contrary to the precepts of conceptual art, considers that his practice substitutes itself for discourse and does not try therefore to elucidate his practice through a theoretical discourse. His work consists rather of a work on language itself, and of its usage within a certain context. For Mallarmé the context of art and of the status of the object are important for the appreciation of the work and to a new definition of poetry. If the Vers de
**circonstance** are about a conceptualization of art or are about an art of ideas, then these poems are the early precursors of the systematized avant-garde practices undertaken by artists of the twentieth century. My intention however is not to confuse the term “conceptual” applied to Mallarmé with the meaning that it would acquire later on, but, rather to search for what in this intellectualized practice of art stimulates Mallarmé’s work.

As has been discussed earlier, in a certain way, all of Mallarmé’s poetry is occasional. The importance of the occasional is as a matter of fact announced in the liminary poem of the *Poésies*: in his sonnet “Salut.” Considering the fact that Mallarmé’s criticism is concentrated in his poetry, it will be appropriate to linger a little on this poem in order to evaluate the critical function that the notion of the occasional played in his elaboration of a new poetic art.

Rien, cette écume, vierge vers
À ne désigner que la coupe;
Telle loin se noie une troupe
De sirènes mainte à l’envers.

Nous naviguons, ô mes divers
Amis, moi déjà sur la poupe
Vous l’avant fastueux qui coupe
Le flot de foudres et d’hivers;

Une ivresse belle m’engage
Sans craindre même son tangage
De porter debout ce salut
Solitude, récif, étoile
À n’importe ce qui valut
Le blanc souci de notre toile.  

This poem was written on the occasion of a poets’ banquet organized on the 13th of February 1893 by the journal *La Plume*. This journal had been founded four years earlier. During that banquet, where Mallarmé presided, he read his sonnet with a cup of Champagne in hand. Later on, Mallarmé asked his Belgian editor, Deman, to place the poem as an epigraph to his *Poésies*. That is how this poem now figures at the head of the *Pléiade*. This privileged position of the poem is revealing of the aesthetic and symbolic value that underlies the whole collection. The sonnet is first a poetic manifesto addressed to Mallarmé’s peers, in the form of a “toast” to poetry. In a symbolic way, the poem opens on the word “rien.” This opening on nothingness, the void (*le néant*), exposes the situation of the poet. He has nothing. His materials of writing are poor for he only has a pen and paper. The page, which in the beginning was blank, is this nothing (*rien*) against which the poet must fight in order to inscribe himself, in order to write, to become a writer, a poet. This void is therefore the first step of the writing process. It must be tamed, domesticated in order for the poet to progressively be able to make his niche onto the page. The poet at first is shy. The task is hard. He therefore starts with one word, almost nothing, then, he catches his breath at the comma and starts off again, more confident this time, with two words; he catches his breath at the second comma and continues with two other words. To employ a naval metaphor, the poem, as a boat, slowly leaves the harbor in order to throw itself off into the horizon. The horizon shows at the same time the present moment – that of the distance with the El Dorado – and the moment to come – moment of extasy since the goal would

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have been reached. The horizon is at the same time the figure of one’s life line and the projection of an insatiable ideal.

Life in the poem is therefore integrated to art, to poetry, until little by little they merge and coincide. The poem, furthermore, starts with a certain ambiguity. Mallarmé plays on the homophony of the word “vers” (l.1) that represents as much the glass of the cup of Champagne (verre) as the poetic verse or line. This combination of the motif of intoxication - that of the banquet, and the euphoria of poetry, and of words – opens the door to Mallarmé’s enigmatic and hermetic world. The last two tercets dedicated to the toast, and to a homage to poetry, are particularly ambiguous. The “ivresse belle” (l.9) of which Mallarmé speaks is both an allusion to the festivities taking place, to the Champagne that the poets are drinking in honor of their art, and a way of speaking about poetry itself, and of the intoxicating exhilaration that poetry produces. This intoxication is almost a sign of religious and amorous fervor. As indicated by the last lines of the poem, writing is a difficult labor; it is marked by “solitude,” and strife (récif) (l. 12). This solitude recalls a theme dear to Baudelaire, and illustrated in “L’Albatros.” It is the human solitude of the poet, “exilé sur le sol au milieu des hués.” This solitude is also an attribute of the poet because it is often the necessary condition of artistic creation. The “récif,” stands for the image of a shipwreck, and the possible failure of the poet’s poetic quest. This reef thus represents the pitfall that threatens the poet at all times; in other words: impotence, and paralysis in front of the white page. The poem, however, ends on a rather bright and hopeful note since writing is also a star “étoile.” This means that there is also potentially a redeeming ideal guiding the creation of the poet. If the notion of the Idéal – another baudelairian topos – appeared in a recurrent fashion in Mallarmé’s early poems, this notion slowly lost its meaning when around 1866-1867, Mallarmé renounced the idea of a beyond related to the notion of an ideal. It is therefore surprising to find the word “étoile” under his pen towards the end of his poetic career, especially
given the important place in which this word figures at the end of the strophe as the rime entity of the line. Thus another reading of the word étoile imposes itself.

**The Minor Versus the Major**

If the star does not symbolize a propensity towards an absolute, it becomes then a pure physical referent reminiscent of the ending of the “Sonnet en x” on a starry constellation. But, the star could also be an aesthetic reference designating a huge and incommensurable spatial entity, in other words, the sublime. The sublime, as it has been theorized by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgement* (*Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 1790) is precisely that by which its proportions are infinitely big. This definition then allowed Kant to ask how man, whose understanding is limited, and who cannot grasp what is incommensurable, can apprehend the sublime. Mallarmé asks the same question, but, as with his *sirènes maintes à l’envers*, he reverses this initial postulation by asking then how man, whose understanding is limited, can apprehend what is infinitely small. This problem of scale happens to be one of the essential problems of modern art that works at the frontier of the visible and the invisible. A central focus of interest of modern art consists precisely in seeking out the difficulties, but also the impossibilities of perception. That is what Picasso’s miniature theaters question. They are cut and painted inside a cigar box with cardboard characters as big as needles.\(^329\) The miniature size of this work does not prevent, however, the cosmic aspiration of its endeavor. Similarly, the concentration of Mallarmé’s poetics in the *Vers de circonstance* to the minimal unit of the quatrain and sometimes the distich allows him to tighten and to refine his poetic expression to the extreme. By cultivating occasional poetry, a genre

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qualified as minor in the traditional classification of poetic arts, Mallarmé rebrands in a way this brief form by inviting his readers to take a new look at the concept of brevity and scale.

… Il ne faut pas trop s’approcher des Pyramides, ni en être trop éloigné, pour ressentir toute l’émotion que donne leur grandeur…

In the same way as with the observation of the Pyramids, there is in the Vers de circonstance a reflection on the right distance and relation to have between things. This is dealt with through the use of adjectives and adverbs such as “proche” (2), “presque” (2), “loin” (9), “lointaine” (1), “ici” (23), “éloignait” (1), “éloigne” (2), “éloignés” (1) that give an idea of the measure between people and things, art and reality. But, distance is not always dealt with in the same way. There is an affective vision of distance that depends on the poetic “I”’s relation to his poetic addressee. In the following poem, the distance of the locutor to the addressee is bridged by the affective tie that bonds them together:

Madame la propriétaire

Du 9 boulevard Lannes, coin

De verdure ample et solitaire

Dont mon esprit n’est jamais loin.

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331 A moins qu’il ne hante la nue,
Ne vogue où mûrit le letchi,
Monsieur Léon Dierx, avenue
Ci proche, 13, de Clichy.

Les notes que vers le ciel proche
Emet Madame Degrandi
Me semblent de cristal de roche
Plutôt que de sucre candi.

In a different poem, the word “loin” is used emphatically to lament the distance between locutor and addressee:

Toute, et son rire, disparue
Gabrielle Wrotnowska fuit
Comme dans un souvenir rue
Si loin de la Barouillère, huit.333

But, in other instances there is an overlapping of the distinction between a « here » and a « there. » In those cases the “here” is both a “here” and “there” as in the following examples:

Monsieur le maire Beurdeley
Très rare esprit et aimable home
Au soixante-quatre se plaît
Rue ici la mienne de Rome.

Or in another poem:

Un mot, au coin, que j’avertisse.
La dame qu’ici vous voyez,
Dans les fresques du Primatice
A des cheveux blonds déployés.334

It suffices sometimes that the objects change scale by becoming very big or very small to lose all sense of orientation. Jonathan Swift’s tale *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) beginning with the protagonist’s encounter with the tiny inhabitants of Lilliput, illustrates this idea quite well.

Mallarmé continuously bets on the ambiguity of scale that allows him to insist on the microscopic


334 Ibid, p. 103.
and the almost nothing. But the small scale of an object should not induce readers into thinking that its importance is equivalent to its size. Much to the contrary, Mallarmé takes an ironic pleasure in elevating to the rank of a monument the most ephemeral piece of paper or occasion. In his poem to Hector Giacomelli for instance, the letter is compared to a voluminous book:

   Clermont-Ferrand du Puy-de-Dôme-
   Matin, discrètement mets-l’y,
   Cette missive presque un tome
   Pour Hector Giacomelli.

In the *Vers de circonstance* the adjective “petit” appears a number of times (“petit” 9; “petite” 8; “petits” 3) whereas its opposite, the adjective “grand” appears significantly less (“grand” 2; “grande” 1). As with his work on pedagogical tools for children, the *Nursery Rhymes*, his objects end up by having a “taille affective.” This recalls Kant’s formulation stating that “[…] rien n’est si petit en comparaison avec des mesures plus petites encore.” 335 The model of the miniature can allow the artist to summarize and condense his work by bringing it back to the proportions that would be that of a Japanese garden or haïku. The aesthetic of the miniature also recalls Proust’s analogy of involuntary memory with a Japanese paper being dipped into a cup of tea.

   This desire to put one’s work – and world – in a box, culminated in the famous realization of the *Boîte-en-valise* (1941) by Marcel Duchamp. This piece is a true portable museum that the artist made for his friends, along with a number of collectors. This work regroups his different works (*Broyeuse de chocolat, Fontaine, Grand Verre*, etc.) It is a reduction of his work that condenses itself as a totality. Reproduced in a limited number of models, this box reiterates, repeats and vehicles Duchamp’s work in a form that is called – in the toy industry as well as in

technological research institutes – the “modèle réduit” or “small scale model” Certain elements of this box are constituted of photographic reproductions. Photography appearing as the “modèle réduit” par excellence. Similarly, in the Vers de circonstance Mallarmé also condenses his work through the objects that preserve or accompany the poem. But, in his particular poetic practice the purpose is to vehicle another idea of poetry. The object-poem is a vessel through which Mallarmé condenses and disseminates new propositions for new practices and subjects for poetry. As Marian Swerling Sugano writes, in Mallarmé’s postal quatrains “poetry is emblematized not as that which is communicated but rather as the vehicle of communication.” As such, language is seen as a mobile entity. For Virginia La Charité, Mallarmé’s vocabulary based on motion is “the first step to ceding the initiative to words […] as though the word choices themselves can unblock the immobility of the writing.” In the Vers de circonstance, the object plays a fundamental role in the creation of his vision of language in which writing would be mobile.

Mallarmé’s New Poetic Art

A critic once noted that “Mallarmé s’adonne à la poésie de circonstance dans le temps même où il écrit les poèmes les plus intemporels, […] : il n’y a donc rien dans cette activité poétique qui relève d’un tarissement de l’inspiration.” In this judgment we see a system of values where occasional poetry is associated with an inferior and minor genre whereas atemporal poetry is associated with positive values. This system of hierarchies corresponds to a desire to install normative generic categories that allow the perpetuation of the dominating reading codes.


On the contrary, the originality of Mallarmé’s occasional poetic enterprise is that he reverses the usual taxonomies in order to produce new modalities of reading. By choosing to write in a minor mode, Mallarmé shows that his poetics, far from relying on stable, fixed and hierarchic relations determined in advance, situates itself in a dynamic of inversions and reversals where, as in the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave – such as it has been transmitted in France through Kojève’s teaching – the power dynamic can at any time be overthrown. The notion of genre is thus subject to a reevaluation of the notion of value. Yet, what masks its true grandeur, what under-estimates itself, begs through this self-mocking gesture, a more attentive reading.

Occasional poetry therefore is a sort of call to read. That goes to show that there is a whole new relation of the text to the reader. The poem plays on its own reading. It covers up the tracks of its understanding by putting into question its definition and existence. Coming from the poet, it is an invitation to a journey. No longer a baudelairian poetic journey towards immaterial and exotic essences, the journey points to a concrete questioning of the definition of poetry itself.

The Vers de circonstance displace the borders of poetry by exchanging the textual support for organic (fruits, and other comestible goods), and material ones (letters, envelopes, fans, photographies, albums, jugs). Poetry no longer writes itself on a material support easily mechanically reproducible (such as a book), but inscribes itself on perishable objects (12% of the poems). In other words poetry leaves the field of publication and by going out of its domain asks for a new taxonomic reading. For Mallarmé, the purpose is to define the poetic domain by extracting it from the alphabet in order to inscribe poetry in the field of Art. The true mallarméan revolution therefore is to have the reader think of poetry as a work of art, in other words as a mobile object that exists in space. But that also means that the reader is no longer only a reader, but also a spectator of the object: poetry. The spectator must turn the object, in order to make it
move and set it into action (deliver the postal poem, eat the “fruit permis,” vent the fan). Poetry, then, becomes a space (lieu)\(^{339}\) of action, of experience and of performance.

This theatrical aspect of poetry that moves in space is clearly perceptible in the case of the postal poems. In those poems it is not the destinator who participates in the first moment of reading and deciphering of the poem, but the mailman and the concierge, who in order to deliver the card or letter must decrypt the poem to find its address and addressee. Some of these postal poems open precisely on a deictic that apostrophizes the mailman. This supposes a fundamental revolution in the way of thinking the poetic space and its destination. Poetry is no longer limited to readers of poetry because the poems contaminate heterogenous demographic zones. It is a way of finding and approaching new readers. For Marie-Paule Berranger:

Mallarmé construit donc une fiction littéraire autour de ces petits poèmes-adresses, qui vise à les réinscrire dans la situation de la communication utilitaire, à multiplier les destinataires secondaires et les lecteurs intermédiaires du poème qui, pour arriver à destination, entre bonnes mains, doit d'abord être déchiffré avec bienveillance par le lecteur non prévenu.\(^{340}\)

The poem is therefore no longer an object towards which the reader goes, but an object that comes to the reader and surprises him. It is an object that is set in motion, towards another. What is most interesting in Mallarmé’s movement of the poem towards others in the Vers de circonstance is the way in which he opens his poetic opus to a diversified audience of readers.

Though the bourgeoisie (including a large artistic bourgeoisie, such as the extended Manet family for example) is the main group represented in this work, it exists next to an eclectic array

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\(^{339}\) The concept of space recalls Mallarmé’s formula in Un Coup de Dés “Rien n’aura eu lieu que le lieu.”

of different social bodies. Other than the well-known littérateurs, poètes, peintres, and compositeurs that compose the photographic album of this work - such as Huysmans, Verlaine, Manet, and Debussy - the portrait gallery of this work also includes characters from different walks of life, and emanating from very different socio-economic backgrounds. They can be grouped into three different socio-economic horizons in order of their quantitative importance: in a first category there are artists, writers, men and women of letters - including editors and journalists; in a second category there are aristocrats and grand-bourgeois; finally, in a third category, there are working-class men and women. In terms of activities, professions and social statuses represented there are, to give a few examples: two princesses, a countess, several journalists and editors, lawyers and doctors, engineers and a dentist; but also, a canon (chanoine), operetta singers, actors, school children, a swimming instructor, maids, milliners, and a hairdresser.

All these characters contribute to the representation of a new democratic social body to which Mallarmé pays great attention in the Vers de circonstance, because while he is wary of the masses, he is sincerely interested in individualizing the undifferentiated individual from the multitude. The impulse of some of his poetic addresses in this work resembles therefore his poems for Jean-François Raffaelli (Types de Paris) [ill. 17], in which he isolated certain urban figures in order to capture the uniqueness of their activity into an individualized type. This is the case in the Vers de circonstance with his poems addressed to milliners and his hairdresser. While both professions are somewhat symptomatic of late nineteenth century urban modernity, notably with regard to its cultivation of fashion, Mallarmé isolates these two figures in order to distinguish them from the impersonal and unidentified masses of milliners and hairdressers that filled the capital. In addition to opening his poetic opus to a more populist base of readers and individualizing these characters, who otherwise would have been lost in the anonymous
interchangeability of modern life, these contemporary characters enable Mallarmé to address certain issues of modernity that are important to his critique of contemporary society. This in turn enables him to draw out two distinctive critical postures regarding his relationship of art to society.

As has just been said, the milliner and the hairdresser hold a particular place in the depiction of nineteenth century life, as they represent a new and significant social body that expresses a particular aspect of modernity: its cultivation of fashion. Fashion is indeed a characteristic trait of modernity and of Parisian life in particular. Commenting on des Essarts’s *Poésies Parisiennes* Mallarmé wrote:

> [ce livre] eût été incomplet si le poète ne l’avait enrubanné de strophes en falbalas, et ne s’était fait parfois le Watteau de la mode. Pour que sa Muse fût Parisienne, elle devait savoir parler chiffons au besoin, et chanter la ceinture régente et les petits chapeaux de velours azuline.\(^{341}\)

As such, the *Vers de circonstance* reference several fashion accessories such as: fans, canes, hats, handkerchiefs, and certain fashionable clothing items such as tailcoats and a *pelisse*. Amidst the elements of city life, fashion epitomizes the impetus of modernity towards rapid changes. While these professions in and of themselves were not new, they became symptomatic manifestations of modernity with its obsession with keeping up with the rapid changes of style and of being up-to-date. Modern life is thus characterized by the ephemerality of the instant. As in Degas’s painting “At the Milliners” [ill. 26] in which he focuses on a moment between two women in a hat shop, Mallarmé creates many detailed small scenes of modern life that allow him to focus on the specificity of certain moments and activities rather than on the diffuse and impersonal canvas of

an emergent society. In his poem to Madame Virot, a famous milliner working rue de la Paix, Mallarmé situates the poem in a hat shop and simultaneously exposes the values attached to fashion.

Rue unique de la Paix, douze
Ceci pour Madame Virot
Qu’à Paris l’Europe jalouse.
Il faut aller d’un joli trot.

The adjective “unique” is important not only because it draws attention to the exclusivity of fashion, but mostly because it singles out the uniqueness of its recipient. This adjective complements Degas’s attentive depiction of the conscientious mundane activity of trying on hats and the latest fashion. Similarly, in Mallarmé’s poem to his hairdresser Emile he plays on the singularity of fashion with the singularity of its addressee:

Mon cher Emile
On s’attache
A qui longtemps vous tondit
Ou frisa votre moustache
D’un coup de fer inédit.

The word “inédit” reinforces the notion of originality and novelty attached to fashion. Yet it also demonstrates the unique prowess of the hairdresser whose cut is inimitable. But, the importance stressed on fashion also points to the sensation of urgency that it produces. This is well noted in the poem to Madame Virot. The syntax of this poem is unusual because there are two sentences instead of one. This makes the final line of the quatrain stand out with its one sentence: “il faut aller d’un joli trot.” This emphasizes the urgency of the situation that conveys the immediacy of fashion. The emergence of fashion in the nineteenth century is an indicator of a new type of
affluence of society. The presence of a swimming instructor in this work precisely represents this other aspect of modern society; that is, the emergence of leisure. This is particularly visible in the opposition between town and country where the Parisians go to relax.

The seaside resorts and thermal towns mentioned in this work represent a new development of leisure time activities triggered by the development of tourism under the Second Empire. The development of leisure resorts was made possible by the development of railroad transportation that made it easier to leave Paris for a coastal destination. As Zola noted:

Dès que le soleil de juillet commence à brûler les pavés, tout le monde se sauve.

Seuls les gens qui ne se respectent pas restent à Paris. ³⁴²

The importance of this movement of a large number of Parisians from the city to the outskirts is emphasized by Mallarmé in *La Dernière Mode* through his importance given to trains and travel:

III les gares. Tels sont nos plaisirs ressuscités; mais, tant que s'obstinent à briller sous les premiers nuages le soleil et la verdure à ne point partir aux premiers souffles, il est des citadins réfractaires à tout projet de retour. Libres, maint casino fermé, ils profitent de ceux qui restent d'entre les trains d'excursion inaugurés, pendant l'été par nos chemins de fer; et vont s'emplir, pour une année, les yeux de montagnes, de champs ou de bouquets d'arbres, voir de lacs et de glaciers. Voyager! Il leur faut cela après la plage, avant la rue. Signalons, quand la saison va se clore, quelques-uns de ces voyages mais rapidement et au hasard, sans avoir la prétention, à cause de notre peu de place, de les indiquer tous ni presque tous.³⁴³


Bathing and spas were new ways of enjoying free time while restoring the body. It was also another opportunity for socializing. Just as Renoir’s painting *Le Déjeuner des canotiers* (1880-1881) presents the social mixture of the modern day *fête galante*, Mallarmé’s *Vers de circonstance* displays some forms of social diversity, notably in the way that he links the *bourgeoisie* to the labor market formed by its domesticity.

This multiplication of the space of reading and of readers shows a will to break open the compartmentalization of poetic spaces. This is all the more noteworthy in Mallarmé’s inscription of poems on different mediums. “Les vers de circonstance, selon l’objet qui les supporte, inventent [ainsi] un nouvel espace au texte et de nouvelles modalités de lecture.” The most probing example of this is the fans given to women, most often his wife, his daughter, and his friend, Méry Laurent. These poems are interesting because they suggest that there is another way of thinking about the relation of the text to its material support. The latter is no longer a stable support, but polymorphous and changing. Indeed, in it “[le poème s’]ouvre et s’[y] déplie comme une aile” thus figuring a certain conception of a poem as an object “qui vente l’esprit et dispense ses souffles […] au gré du destinataire.”

Having envisaged a certain reflection of the postal poems to space, it is necessary to examine another type of poem, those accompanying comestible goods, such as candied fruit or Easter eggs.

Avec mon souhait le plus tendre,

Comme il sied entre vieux amis,

Dans cette main qu’on aime à tendre

344 Ibid, p. 220.

345 Ibid.
Je dépose le fruit permis.346

The poem, in this occasion, accompanies a consumable good. But it is done in a mocking gesture. The poem plays on the biblical image of the forbidden fruit, yet it also inverses this image in the poem since the fruit is “permis.” The unexpected word choice forces the reader to rethink this linguistic cliché of the forbidden fruit. The irony of that line is that there is something self-devaluating to say that one’s own poetry not forbidden but accessible. That suggests that there is nothing in that poetry that is worthy of temptation, interest, excitement, desire, and nothing that challenges one’s individual freedom of choice. Yet, occasional poetry with Mallarmé is very different. The very fact that he repeats in this poem the same rhyme twice shows that he is alerting his readers of the trap that he is setting, or as is said in French “le piège qu’il veut nous tendre.” In order to understand the thematic framework that governs the entirety of these “consumable” poems, it is necessary to rethink the concept of consumption and to re-problematize that concept in the framework of the period.

Mallarmé’s Social Critique

The end of the nineteenth century was the beginning of the modern capitalist age of mass consumption. Yet, it was not only material products that were being consumed. There was also an abrupt and important consumption of artistic and cultural products. It was mostly in the verbal arts (notably, the novel) that this new phenomenon was most manifest. The reason for this is simple. The development of the techniques of printing made it possible to reproduce printed texts at an industrial scale. Simultaneously, new educational policies were put through that favored the education of the masses. Consequently, writing increased voluminously itself and took on an

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important role in society as well as in the economy. The press was the first beneficiary of this change. As Martyn Lyons recounts in her work on literacy in the nineteenth century, whereas only 90% of men and 80% of women were capable of signing their name at the wake of the French Revolution, by 1890 almost 90% of the population was completely literate in big metropolitan centers such as Paris. In her own words “c’est l’âge d’or du livre.” As a result, the number of revues, magazines, journals and newspapers published augmented. In the field of literary creation new questions were being raised in relation to the greater access of texts to the public. More than the authors it was the censors who were worried about this new and massive development. As a result, justice often intervened in order to arbitrate who could read and what they could read. The most probing examples of this type of censorship are the two cases analyzed by Elisabeth Ladenson in her work on Madame Bovary and Les Fleurs du mal. More importantly than barring access to books, one of the most important dangers of the commodification of culture in the late nineteenth century was that it also reified individuals. For many authors writing on this topic, a possible cause, among others, of this depersonalization of the individual was produced by the transformation of modern temporality and the feeling that the changes of modern life were happening too fast. This acceleration of the notion of time was happening, for certain critics, at a pace that was too sudden to be processed by a human affective dimension of time. The very difficulty of assigning a name to the nineteenth century emblematizes the rapid momentum of this period.


Indeed, contrary to centuries past, the nineteenth century is not easily coined by a unifying phrase. For earlier periods literary histories refer to the “The Middle Ages,” “The Renaissance,” “The Classical Period” - with incursions into the Baroque - and the “Enlightenment” to signal that a common intellectual and aesthetic ground defines the essence of that period. It is much more difficult, however, to reduce the essence of the nineteenth century to a synthesizing phrase. The difficulty to arrive at a definition of this period is due to the social and political diversity of an era that saw the rise of such momentous historical changes as the development of industrialism and urbanism, the rise of capitalism, and the advent of Republican political regimes. This historical and political diversity of the nineteenth century manifests itself in the multiplicity of literary movements that succeeded themselves throughout the period. In the novel, Romanticism (1800~1850) diverged into Realism, and Realism (1850~1880) expanded into Naturalism; in poetry, Romanticism (1820~1850) developed into Parnassianism349 (1867~1886) that grew into Symbolism (1886~1900).350 The swift gait at which these different aesthetic movements followed each other corresponds to the profound and accelerated changes of the nineteenth century.351 History, which until then had been relatively slow-paced, suddenly became incredibly tumultuous. The speed at which drastically different political regimes (two empires, three monarchies, two republics) succeeded themselves partly emblematizes this momentum.


In poetry, Baudelaire captured the quick-paced tempo of this new historical era in a sonnet of his “Tableaux parisiens,” entitled “A une passante.” This poem is emblematic of modern temporality and city-life as it recollects the fugitive encounter between a first person narrator and a woman “passer-by.” This woman is anonymous and destined to remain so due to the transactional nature of urban life that depersonalizes individual encounters. The dedicatory nature of the sonnet’s title is therefore ironic as dedications usually imply a form of intimacy based on a personal inter-subjective relation, such as love or friendship. Here, however, the dedication is impersonal, addressed to “une passante,” and not “la passante.” The indefinite article “une” suggests that this woman is interchangeable with any other woman “passer-by.” As a result, the only real individualized character that remains in the poem is the city, which comes to life through a thread of onomatopoeias. The opening line with its resonating alliterations in “r” and slithering alliterations in “s” translates the buzzing atmosphere of city-life with its perpetuous noise and commotion.

La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait.

The all-encompassing urban clamor, intensified by the use of the action verb “hurler,” personifies the city. But, more than an individual, the city is viewed as a monstrous machine that spews out people at a mechanical pace. This can be seen in the very rhythmical pattern of the line: 2/4//4/2. The speed of this metropolitan center is rendered through the accumulation of asyndetons (emphasized by the enjambement of the first stanza onto the second) that decompose the passer-by’s movement into a series of images. The fragmentation of the individual’s spatial


353 Italics are mine.

354 Emile Zola used that trope a couple years later in Le Ventre de Paris (1873).
trajectory into an accretion of disjointed visual snapshots conveys the transient aspect of modern life and urban encounters.

Longue, mince, en grand deuil, douleur majestueuse,
Une femme passa, d’une main fastueuse
Soulevant, balançant le feston et l’ourlet ;

Agile et noble, avec sa jambe de statue.

In the preceding first line, the woman’s identity is completely lost by the ambiguous designation of her through a series of nouns and adjectives that could just as easily apply to the description of the street, “la rue.” Individual identity is thus suspended through a process of reification that culminates in the depiction of the woman as a statue. This poem thus portrays modernity as a transformative experience in the constitution and perception of the self as well as in the possibility of personal inter-subjective relations. This is ultimately signaled by the punctuation of the poem itself, which is impacted by the temporality of modern life that requires a different syntaxic rhythm. The poem ends on two stanzas that are marked with suspension marks, dashes, a rhetorical question, two apostrophes and five exclamation points. This sonnet thus sets into practice Baudelaire’s vision of modern life that he had previously theorized in his essay “Le Peintre de la vie moderne.” In this essay, Baudelaire characterized modernity by its transience and its impossibility to hold on to the present. In a famous formulation, he summed up the temporality of modernity as follows:

La modernité, c’est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l’art, dont l’autre moitié est l’éternel et l’immuable…

As such, Mallarmé’s *Vers de circonstance* seem to pick up on Baudelaire’s definition of modernity by investigating the possibilities of a drastically fugitive and transitory art form: occasional poetry. Yet, while he accumulates in this work a collection of short-lived snapshots of modern life that may seem to point to the ephemerality and transactionality of the moment, the accumulation of these ephemeral instants into a collective volume serves to surpass the futility of the present by magnifying and memorializing it. In the following quatrain the expression “tant de premiers Janvier” has a cumulative effect that expands the occasion beyond the specificity of that New Year ’s Eve.

> Grâce aux fruits humble stratagème  
> Amie on peut nous envier  
> Un souhait proféré le même  
> Depuis tant de premiers Janvier.

As this quatrain indicates, the poem, given as a gift offering, allows to repeat an event: in this case New Year’s Eve celebrations. While the repetition of similar events points to the inexorable passing of time, the constant capture of the event by the occasional poem has the effect of attempting to stop time.

> Aujourd’hui l’amitié triche  
> Comme un crabe nous voulons  
> Que cet An de la bourriche

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Pour vous sorte à reculons.

This is demonstrated throughout by the vocabulary pertaining to frost, cold and freezing that serve to immobilize time.

Un an qui succède à l’autre

Toujours nous tend

pensez-y

Ce fruit par le froid saisi

Comme mon cœur ni le vôtre.

The temporality of the *Vers de circonstance* thus goes counter current to the accelerated movement of time of the nineteenth century and thereby displays an individualized notion of time that is highly subjective and affective. As such, Mallarmé’s occasional poetry - a poetry centered on the concept of time - is impossible to conceptualize in isolation from the whole historical context by which it is surrounded. The occasional is therefore a metonymy; it designates part of an event or of a sequence of events in order to recall the whole. Though occasional poetry celebrates the quotidian through a poetic language that assimilates itself to a game and invention, it is, however, also a serious poetry that poses certain meta-critical reflections on the relations of art to its historical context either in a movement of embrace (the embrace of materiality in the arts and of an aesthetic of the everyday) or rejection (the rejection of a commodified relation to language and human subjectivity).

As has been seen, Mallarmé, as a poet, was particularly sensitive to the question of the consumption and commodification of language. But what worried him most was the loss of aura and prestige of language through its massive instrumentalization by the press. Language seemed to loose for him much of its symbolic and referential value. It would be possible to object to that by saying that occasional poetry is in a similar situation to journalistic writing, since both are
anchored in an immediate relationship to reality. That would be true, if Mallarmé did not cleverly reverse the hierarchical relation of language to the world. In its usual usage, language is marked by a relation of subordination to a message or effect that it tries to convey. In the Vers de circonstance, however, there is a dual articulation of writing and ontology. This becomes most visible in the poems that accompany comestible goods. Indeed, in those poems, the mouth symbolically represents the digestive process of both the food that is offered as a gift and of the poem that is meant to be read outloud. There is thus a dual articulation of the organ that also implies a certain seriousness in the juxtaposition of eating and speaking. As such, occasional poetry becomes the privileged space for an experience shared between life and writing, seen through a language articulated around objects. There is therefore a certain gravitas of the occasional mode that shall now be examined with respect to the relation between poetry and experience.

The seriousness of the occasional can be found in this definition given by the philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in his work on poetry as experience. In his work he returns to the etymology of the word experience that comes from the Latin ex-periri, and signifies a crossing through danger. Expressed in those terms, occasional poetry is far from the banality of the everyday. Its inscription in the present, far from reflecting an absence, a lack of historical perspective and of transcendence, is on the contrary a way of thinking about what is unique and singular about experience. To quote Derrida, the occasional allows us to think about all that “une fois peut offrir de résistance à la pensée.”358 This quotation invites us to think about the concept of singularity. In the context of fairy tales for instance, the reader is conscious of the fact that the expression “once upon a time” is a pure rhetorical formula without any specific temporal

reference. The expression rather designates a moment of atemporal exchange that could be repeated *ad infinitum*. This impersonality of language sets a challenge to the poet to address any sort of singularity. Occasional poetry, however, by setting into place a system of gifts creates very personal relations and breaks away from the impersonal aspect of language.

Mallarmé creates indeed through his poems on gift-giving a highly personalized space. But, actually it is the entirety of his poetic work that is highly personalized since his *Poésies*, which appeared posthumously in 1899, had already circulated in fragments in the framework of public commemorations or private commands. There are no “inédits.” Mallarmé had furthermore taken precautions in that respect by writing in his last letter to his wife and daughter, on September 8th 1898, that they should burn any writing that hadn’t yet been published. The next day he passed away in the night. The demanding nature of his work shows the importance that he granted to the poetic space he had created. His conception of a poetic space was marked by its transformation by a community of intimate readers and friends. Mallarmé brings a familiarity to writing that turns it into a habitable space, not like a house, but like the canvas of a tent rooted in the grass and resting underneath a starry sky as in the staging of the Sonnet en -x.

**Mallarmé’s Poetic Language: A Language for his Contemporaries**

There has been much talk in scholarly discourses about the solar drama in Mallarmé, but there is another one that is at stake in his work, and which is all the more dramatic as it touches on the very technique of Mallarmé’s art. It is against the remark that « la musique étant pour tous un art, la peinture un art, la statuaire un art, - et la poésie n’en étant plus un” 359 that Mallarmé protests throughout his work. This act of insurrection manifests itself on two levels: first, through

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the restructuring of the very organization of language; second, through a work on the arrangement of the graphic signs of writing. If we take up one of the main tenants of Julia Kristeva’s thesis, published in 1974 and entitled *La Révolution du langage poétique*, revolutions are not only social or political, they can also be linguistic. In other words, to be revolutionary, to create a revolution in the literal sense of the term – as in an orbital movement leading to a profound transformation – can also consist in working on one’s language. This operation leading to the production of a new language is a way of critiquing the usual usages and foundations, not only of language, but also of the world.

There is thus a necessity for Mallarmé to re-construct the French language in a historical context in which writing, because of its dissemination and popularization through the press, has lost its aura. According to him, in order to re-endow language with an aura it is necessary to re-rewrite the French language that has suddenly become relative. Mallarmé sets the path for the next generation of writers to invent their own idiolect and, contrary to what has been thought, it is not to become hermetic, but paradoxically to be understood. Why? Because, in the face of the loss of meaning that language suffered in the era of the birth of public media the only possibility according to Mallarmé to give back meaning to language was to recreate it all together. That is how, for example, he attempts to find archaic definitions for words in the dictionary Littré in order to make all the etymological and polysemic richness of the language come out. Furthermore, this activity is not a solitary activity; it is integrated in a community.

In the *Vers de circonstance*, Mallarmé encourages this communal aspect of writing and reappropriation of one’s language by encouraging his readers to imitate his gesture of writing poetry. Thus, at the beginning of the “Récitations postales” he writes:
Cette petite publication […] aidera à l’initiative de personnes qui pour leur compte voudraient s’adonner au même jeu.\(^{360}\)

His call to the reader, inviting him or her to participate in an artistic activity, parallels his political thoughts on the participation of the public to the democratic process. In Mallarmé’s own words:

[…] the participation of a hitherto ignored people in the political life of France is a social fact that will honour [sic] the whole close of the nineteenth century.\(^{361}\)

The apparent idiolectal dimension of his writing and poetic language, therefore, is neither a solitary activity, nor an alienation from others. On the contrary, given that society alienates us – by disappropriating us from our language – it is by exploiting the full individual potential that language offers us that we can come back to others through a work of rediscovery of our language and of the language of others. Thus, according to Mallarmé, the greatest asset of Impressionism is not necessarily the “material portion of it,” but the agency it gives people to create their own artform that is “imperishably their own.”\(^{362}\) Mallarmé therefore mocks the image of the “picture buyer” who is “disturbed by the after-thought that such light productions might be multiplied ad infinitum”\(^{363}\) thereby decreasing the monetary value of their investment. All this shows that what fundamentally interests Mallarmé is the coming together of an educated public with a modern art form, turned towards contemporary issues, which it addresses in various guises through its interest in the real. While Mallarmé recognizes that this shift in artistic preoccupations

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\(^{362}\) Ibid, p. 469.

\(^{363}\) Ibid, p. 463.
may happen at the cost of greater artistic productions, the gain obtained by this new art form - both in terms of truth and sincerity - is invaluable. As he writes:

The noble visionaries of other times, whose works are the semblance of worldly things seen by unworludy eyes, (not the actual representations of real objects) appears as kings and gods in the far dream-ages of mankind; recluses to whom were given the genius of a dominion over an ignorant multitude. But to day [sic] the multitude demands to see with its own eyes; and if our latter-day art is less glorious, intense, and rich, it is not without the compensation of truth, simplicity, and child-like charm.\textsuperscript{364}

This child-like charm is precisely what readers find in the Vers de circonstance. It is a poetry collection that, as has been said earlier, does not claim to rival with the beauty of the Poésies. But, it is a poetry collection that nonetheless has its complexities in its apparent simplicity because it attempts to capture the intangible immediacy of life in its continuous and inexorable movement of rise and fall that is indifferent to the brevity of our lives. Within that context all that matters are the human exchanges that we would have had and the traces that we leave behind. The words of Lamartine, thus resonate behind many of the objects of the Vers de circonstance, when he writes: “Objets inanimés, avez-vous donc une âme qui s’attache à notre âme et à la force d’aimer?”\textsuperscript{365}

Mallarmé’s poetic difficulty must be read in this context, as a way of reappropriating the world as we appropriate objects. His conscientious work on his maternal tongue to appropriate it and make it his own is what Susan Hanson, in her work on Samuel Beckett, calls “M/Other


\textsuperscript{365} Lamartine, “Milly ou la terre natale.” Harmonies poétiques et religieuses (1830).
This expression – clearly derridian – expresses the relationship of the individual to language, which is no longer in a relation of transparency between words and things. To remedy this “défaut de la langue” Mallarmé worked on establishing the resemblance of words to things. His conception of poetic activity is thus partly archaic and artisanal. Yet this archaism is sustained and revindicated by Mallarmé who, in the *Tombeau d’Edgar Poe*, proclaimed the need to give back “un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu.”

To give a purer meaning to the words of the tribe is to recreate a way of being at home in language, as it allows “l’individu jadis humain” to find lost links of fraternity, which through the artifice of the occasional poems no longer limit themselves to a community of friendly and intimate readers, but spreads to a whole network of literate people, shaping a new community of readers.

To summarize: to write a poem for an event that is supposedly occasional, is in the same time to attach the poem to a date. Yet, who says date also says repetition. There is thus a poetic challenge to repeat the same differently, in order to mark the singularity of the event that inscribes itself in a circle of repetition. It is an interesting quest that Mallarmé takes on, because he shows his will to specify and preserve the singular originality of the present moment, but also of the past and future. For Derrida, writing about the notion of dates in Paul Celan’s poetics, “Ce qui devient ainsi lisible, ne croyons pas que ce soit la date elle-même, seulement l’expérience poétique de la date, […] celle-ci ordonne notre rapport à elle, une certaine recherche poétique.”

Hence the importance of the dual articulation of eating and speaking that organizes our vision

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of the world and allows every human being to think his relation to his birth, death and his own incidentally, in short all that makes his life.
Concluding Remarks

As has just been seen, there is a tension in the *Vers de circonstance* between materiality on the one hand and immateriality on the other. Following the demonstration of how the dematerialization of some of the objects that accompany the poems serve to center back the discussion of this opus on language, and notably on the state of poetry in Mallarmé’s time, it was seen that the meta-critical dimension of Mallarmé’s poetry (what he calls the development of his poetic art towards “[une]poésie critique”) was not absent from this work. Much to the contrary, the *Vers de circonstance* offer rich insights into the philosophical implications of the visuality of writing as well as into the evolution of nineteenth century aesthetics towards a visualization and materialization process of its own materials. As such, these poems are a fruitful reservoir to reflect on the becoming of poetry in the nineteenth century, leading the way to the more innovative aesthetic inquiries of avant-garde artists of the early twentieth century. It is tempting therefore to see the *Vers de circonstance* as Mallarmé’s trial and error with a poetic art that approaches a form of conceptual art.

But, there is another critical function of the visualization of writing in this work that is linked to Mallarmé’s critique of a consumer-based society. Indeed, as the analysis of his visual techniques reveals, they tend to create a distancing effect between the reader and the text. This causes the reader to pace his reading in order to make meaning of it. The act of breaking down the reading process into smaller units, enabling the reader to piece the text back together, almost as in a puzzle, serves to counter a consumerist approach to reading. In a sense, Mallarmé’s posture towards consumerism and the democratization of the access to reading that characterized late nineteenth century culture is elitist, and corroborates the discriminatory vision that has been made of him. But that would be ignoring the reasons for which he was against the commodification of literature. In his view, literature, and all the more so poetry, are essential art
forms, for, as has been said in the introduction to this dissertation, poetry represents for Mallarmé:

[...] l’expression, par le langage humain ramené à son rythme essentiel, du sens mystérieux des aspects de l’existence : elle doue ainsi d’authenticité notre séjour et constitue la seule tâche spirituelle.\textsuperscript{369}

As such, Mallarmé believes that the uniqueness of this art form should be preserved by distinguishing it from all other undifferentiated forms of writing where there is no poetic intentionality. This would be the case of what he calls “l’universel reportage.” \textsuperscript{370} By contrast, he would like to signal to his readers that, though poetry relies on the same vocabulary and words as transactional usages of language, poetry establishes an entirely different relationship between its reader and the world. As was demonstrated throughout this dissertation, poetry - notably in the case of Mallarmé’s \textit{Vers de circonstance} - is a way of reappropriating the environment and thereby grounding man’s agency into the world. For Mallarmé, a way to achieve this was through a material practice of poetry that consisted on the one hand in merging artistic practices with the everyday (Part II). He accomplished this alliance - between what he also coins as the beautiful and the useful - through his usage of occasional poetry. This poetic genre fully epitomizes the evolution of his poetic art as it enabled him to address the notion of the quotidian through the continuous reference to dates and celebratory everyday events. But, it also enabled him to play on a more dynamic and creative interaction between art and the everyday by introducing real objects into his poems. On the other hand, Mallarmé found another way of grounding man’s agency into


the world through a material practice of poetry that consisted in creating a critical space of reflection on man’s relation to language (Part III). He achieved this by alienating to a certain extent his readers from his texts. This estrangement of the reader from the poem is what is commonly identified as his poetic obscurity, a concept that was extended in this study to the processes of obfuscation of reading produced by the visuality of his writing in the *Vers de circonstance*. The alienation of the reader from the text is what enables Mallarmé to confront the question of commodification in his society. This question is essential because it deals not only with the commodification of literature, but also with the commodification of individuals into an undifferentiated labor force. Mallarmé’s refusal to participate in this process is marked by the difficulty of consuming his texts as one would consume a newspaper or magazine. Instead, the poem in Mallarmé’s poetics must remain mostly indigestible in order to mark its silent protest against the reification of language. This is important as language is the fundamental tool through which man can express himself and take agency over the otherwise arbitrary nature of his destiny. The difficulty of Mallarmé’s texts is thus a signal that the crucial critical tenants that underlie the philosophical grounding of his *oeuvre* - in other words the questions regarding man’s provenance and fate - are never over. Just as man’s questions concerning his human condition will always remain open, the mallarméan poem remains an always open text. The only redeeming gesture through which man can gain a form of control over the capricious hazards of his existence is by inscribing himself into the world and thereby taking an active role in the creation of his destiny. Thus, Mallarmé’s will to limit the access of poetry is much less an anti-democratic posture than a way of glorifying an art form through which individuals, in a commodified and atomized democratic society, could regain their individuality. The dedicational gesture of occasional poetry plays an important role in creating this habitable and personalized poetic social sphere.
What is truly remarkable and new about the Vers de circonstance, therefore, is that they enable Mallarmé’s readers to see him in a totally different light. Indeed, the opening of the poems to a larger audience (*des flemmardes, un filou, une écolière, une métayère, une géôlière, un greffier, des bonnes, une patronne, un coiffeur, une chanteuse, un chanoine, un avocat, un médecin*, etc.) as well as Mallarmé’s reflections on the relation between modern art forms and a democratic society suggest that he was not quite the elitist, decadent poet that he has been portrayed to be. Quite on the contrary, his interest in the decorative arts, his desire to merge the aesthetic with the utilitarian, his appropriation of the quotidian, and the integration of real material objects as aesthetic categories all point to a certain social impetus underlying his poetic art. While he is obviously no Victor Hugo, politically and socially active, there is, nonetheless, a form of social and moral engagement in his poetry through which he both addresses some of his contemporaries’ issues as well as he tries to educate and transform the public by redefining a poetic art turned towards shared experiences and the materiality of the everyday.
CONCLUSION

"Pour parler d’elle [la date], on doit aussi l’effacer, la rendre lisible, audible, intelligible au-delà de la pure singularité dont elle parle. […] ce n’est pas le simple effacement de la date dans une généralité, c’est son effacement devant une autre date, celle à laquelle [le poète] parle, la date d’un autre ou d’une autre qui s’allie étrangement, dans le secret d’une rencontre, un secret de rencontre, avec la même date.”

The itinerary of this dissertation, which began with a problematization of the concept of the occasional in Mallarmé’s work, has now shown that, contrary to popular belief, occasional poetry is an extremely complex genre. It would therefore be false to continue seeing occasional poetry as a poetry that would merely be a stylistic exercize in a playful relation to itself. This poetry reveals on the contrary a desire to communicate that manifests itself not so much in the emission of a meaning than in the quest of multiple relations between the author and the reader/spectator whom Mallarmé integrates in the very elaboration of the poem. Mallarmé’s belief in implicating his readers in his work - whether it be to follow his poetic initiative, as he writes: “[cette publication] aidera à l’initiative de personnes qui pour leur compte voudraient s’adonner au même jeu;“ or whether it be to enter a dynamic relationship with the reading process of the poem – is founded on his desire to personalize the deeply impersonal experiences of modern life. According to this poetic and social conviction, it is therefore fundamental to write the present moment for another, to another, because in the act of giving that person the poem and communicating with him, the scriptor multiplies the readers and destinators who from simple voyeurs become voyants by deciphering the poem. This exegetic activity is all the more unique


that it is singular to each destinor who becomes “le prince d’un moment”373 by the dedicatory nature of the poem. The creation of the occasional poem is produced, therefore, through a rich and complex matrix of different historical and subjective layers that allow to think about the specificity of the present against the monotony of time past and to come, in a relation that is always on way towards another who, in the act of reading or replicating the poem, appropriates and completes it by giving it a history. Within that context, the object cristalizes this form of exchange while addressing the main critical issues of art at the end of the nineteenth century.

ILLUSTRATIONS
O Bouteille
Plaine toute
De misteres,
D'une aurille
Let'escoutte
Ne differes,
Et le mort proferes,
Auquel pend mon coeur.
En la tant divina liqueur,
Baccus qui fut d'Inde vainqueur,
Tient toute verité enclose.
Vint ant diuin loin de toy est forclose
Toute menlonge, & toute tromperie.
En joye soit l'Aire de Noach close,
Lequel de toy nous fit la temperie.
Sommme le beau mort, je le prie,
Qui me doit offir de miliere.
Ainsi ne se perde vne goutte.
De toy, soit blanche ou soit vermeille.

O Bouteille
Plaine toute
De mysteres
D'une aurille
Let'escoutne
Ne differes.
Stéphane Mallarmé

[Autograph quatrain in a letter]

III. 3
Stéphane Mallarmé
[Autograph quatrain on a calling card]
Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris
Ill. 4
James McNeil Whistler
*The Princess in the Land of Porcelain*, 1863-1865
Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Ill. 5
James McNeill Whistler
*Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room, 1876-1877*
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Ill. 6

[Pendulum of Saxony]
Musée Stéphane Mallarmé, Valvins.
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Auguste Renoir
*Bal du moulin de la Galette*, 1876
Musée d’Orsay, Paris
Ill. 8
Caspar David Friedrich
Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer, circa 1817
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Ill. 9
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*Der arme Poet*, 1839
Neue Pinakothek, Munich
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Käthe Kollwitz
Not und Schande der Armut, circa 1900
Käthe Kollwitz-Museum, Berlin
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Stéphane Mallarmé
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Stéphane Mallarmé
La Dernière Mode, 1874
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Edouard Manet
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Frontispiece for Mallarmé’s Poésies, 1887
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*Types de Paris* with an autograph quatrain by Stéphane Mallarmé, 1889
René Magritte
La Condition humaine, 1933
National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C

René Magritte
La clé des champs, 1936
Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Madrid

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*Polichinelle*, 1874
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Edgar Degas
_Danseuses_, 1879
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Mallarmé’s regular handwriting

Mallarmé’s autograph distich in the Vers de circonstance

Ill. 21
Ill. 22
François Coppée
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Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris
Ill. 23
Stéphane Mallarmé
[Autograph quatrain]
Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris
Ill. 24
Stéphane Mallarmé
[Autograph quatrain on a fan]
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Ill. 25
Stéphane Mallarmé
Eventail de Mademoiselle Mallarmé
Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris

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Ill. 26
Edgar Degas
*At the Milliners*, 1882
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