

Milner's Mallarmé

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Abstract: This article offers a brief overview of Jean-Claude Milner's reading of Stéphane Mallarmé. It hones in on the two tendencies Milner identifies in Mallarmé's work — one utopian, the other nihilist — and compares Milner's reading to those of his most significant peers, from Alain Badiou to Jacques Rancière, Bertrand Marchal to Benoît Monginot.

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In addition to his specialist works on linguistics, modern science, Jacques Lacan and politics, Jean-Claude Milner has devoted a substantial amount of attention to the poet Stéphane Mallarmé. Milner's writings on the poet go back as his 1978 book *L'amour de la langue*. There, in the midst of a discussion of language's irreducible equivocality, Mallarmé appeared in the guise of a poet for whom "verse [...] makes up for language's deficiencies" (Mallarmé, 2007, 205-207) — "deficiencies" that stem from the "Chance" relation both uniting and dividing language's sound and sense (Milner, 1978, 39). Not long after, in his 1983 book *Les noms indistincts*, Milner offered a tantalizing but brief reading of Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*, which he interpreted as an unprecedented attempt to present the Real, Symbolic and Imaginary dimension of language simultaneously (Milner, 1983, 46-47). Many years later, in 1999, Milner published his only book-length study of Mallarmé, *Mallarmé au tombeau* — a book that nevertheless numbered less than one hundred pages and dealt with only one of Mallarmé's sonnets, 'Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui' (Milner, 1999). Since 2003, Milner has published three short articles on Mallarmé: 'The Tell-Tale Constellations', which reads *Un Coup de dés* in the context of post-Galilean science (Milner, 2016a); 2014's 'Mallarmé Selon Saussure', where Milner offers an ingenious interpretation of the 'Sonnet en -yx' (Milner, 2014); and 2016's 'Mallarmé

Perchance', which constitutes Milner's most precise mapping of Mallarmé's œuvre to date (Milner, 2016b). Finally, as he made clear in a recent series of lectures given in Melbourne, Australia, Mallarmé remains at the centre of his concerns, with at least one article currently in preparation on the poet's infamous *Book*.

Despite this plethora of publications, not to mention the trenchancy of his views on the poet, Mallarmé scholars have rarely been forthcoming in responding to Milner's research. As he lamented in a 2017 interview, contemporary works of Mallarmé scholarship have "carefully ignored [his] own" (Milner, 2017, 80). On the rare occasion his interventions have been taken into account, two kinds of responses seem to divide the terrain. On the most extreme side of things, Alain Badiou has dismissed Milner's reading in its entirety, writing: "I do not think that Mallarmé was ever a nihilist. This interpretation is Milner's fable" (Boncardo, Gelder, 2017, 92). Towards the more nuanced end of the scale, scholars like Benoît Monginot or Thierry Roger have praised the precision of *some* of Milner's analyses, yet rejected the conclusions he draws from them on the grounds that they are distortions, made for polemical or dogmatic ends, of Mallarmé overarching poetic vision. Monginot, for instance, applauds Milner for his "extremely rigorous" reading of 'Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui', but in the next moment objects to what he calls Milner's "generalisation" of this reading "to the whole of Mallarméan poetics" (Monginot, 2011, 114-115). Echoing Badiou, Monginot confidently claims that Mallarmé was "certainly not a nihilist" (Monginot, 2011, 115). Instead, as today's critical consensus holds, for Monginot Mallarmé was an entirely positive figure, the inventor of "a new terrestrial religion" (to quote from Rancière this time); a poet who made "the ideals of the Romantic century [...] communicate with those of the avant-garde of the technological century" (Milner, 2017, 56). As such, he was decidedly not a nihilist who sought to "bur[y]" (Milner, 2017, 55) these ideals, as Milner — seemingly all by himself — claims he did. In short, while he might have got some of the details right, for most Mallarmé scholars Milner gets the broader picture very wrong.

In the following article I will attempt to show in what sense these responses to Milner's Mallarmé are mistaken. Leaving local interpretative disagreements aside, what they all miss, in my view, is the fact that Milner sees Mallarmé's work as woven from *two* main threads, not one. One of these threads is indeed a nihilist thread, which Milner claims was present from Mallarmé's earliest works following his "spiritual crisis" of 1866-1869 to his final text *Un coup de dés* (Milner, 1999, 52, Milner, 2017,

68). But it is not the only thread — nor even, at certain stages of Mallarmé’s career, is it the dominant one. The second thread involves Mallarmé’s concerted attempts to “conquer chance” (Mallarmé, 2007, 236) by means of verse. This latter project tends towards a form of utopianism and thus contrasts starkly with the monochrome negativism of Mallarmé’s nihilism. As Milner states, “Mallarmé swayed over several decades” between these two tendencies: “certain texts go in one direction, while others in the opposite. Sometimes within the same text we perceive a fluctuation” (Milner, 2017, 68). Reading Milner’s Mallarmé involves carefully tracking the movement between these two contradictory poles.

To give a sense of the tension between these two tendencies, we can start with Milner’s reading of the final paragraph of Mallarmé’s well-known 1897 piece ‘Crisis of Verse’, where the poet offers a compact expression of his project:

The versified line, which from many expressions makes a total, new word, foreign to the language, as if incantatory, achieves this isolation of speech, negating, in a sovereign sweep, the chance that persists in the terms, despite their repeated reformulations between sound and sense...¹

Milner remarks on a number of crucial points in this passage. First, the “chance” relation Mallarmé identifies between sound and sense refers to the fact that a word’s phonic properties — for instance, the relative lightness or darkness of its sound — fail more often than not to correspond to the properties of the objects they refer to. Implicit, here, is the idea that there *should* be some sort of necessary relation between them: as Milner writes, “Mallarmé’s ‘chance’, like Aristotle’s, imitates intentionality” (Milner, 2016b, 89). The subject who is “disappointed” (Mallarmé, 2007, 205) by the mismatch between sound and sense thus betrays their belief that they should have been joined together in a necessary way.

Second, if the versified line “negates” this “chance” relation, then it does so solely through the work of sound. As Milner very rightly points out, Mallarmé insists, through references to “incantations” and “speech”, on the auditory dimension of verse. If sound diverges from sense, then only sound can make it converge again. As Mallarmé writes in ‘The Mystery in Letters’, “when chance is aligned” — that is,

¹ This translation is by Liesl Yamaguchi and is used in her translation of Milner’s 2016 piece ‘Mallarmé Perchance’. See Milner, 2016, 89.

when chance-ridden words are placed in a versified line — then “chance is conquered word by word”. And if “the blank returns” (Mallarmé, 2007, 236 — *modified trans.*) to undermine poetry’s best efforts at negating chance, it is because the blank belongs to the order of the written page and not to poetry insofar as it is proclaimed. Milner concludes: “the victory is obtained by means of sonorities and sonorities alone” (Milner, 2016b, 95).

This, then, is one of the dominant threads in Mallarmé’s writings: poetry is meant to abolish chance. By clarifying the precise nature of this project, Milner avoids what he considers to be the mistakes of other readers. For instance, it allows him to reject one of the key tenets of Rancière’s interpretation. For Rancière, Mallarmé participated in the Romantic tendency that consisted in seeing a virtual poeticity in all things, including the most modest or anonymous of people or beings. His poetry’s task therefore involved actualising, through “the dialectic of verse” (Mallarmé, 2007, 166), the “common glory” (Rancière, 2010, 37) that was latent in all things. For Rancière, this meant that Mallarmé’s poetry was transitive to the world in its egalitarian essence. For Milner, by contrast, the world for Mallarmé is meaningless: it is a “sterile winter” (Mallarmé, 2012, 164). By negating chance, his poetry constitutes a radical “exception” (Boncardo, Gelder, 2017, 75) to the world, not an expression of it. Certainly, as per Rancière’s account of aesthetic modernity, poetry can have any content it likes; but this content is not the “subject” of poetry, only its “occasion”. As Milner puts it, “the everyday world offers an infinity of occasions, but this is because Literature judges them all to be of equal value since they are all null”. Rancière’s utopian Mallarmé is thus based on “a double confusion” (Milner, 2017, 75).

Milner’s reading of ‘Crisis of Verse’ can also help refute the more linguistically-inflected versions of Rancière’s thesis, such as the one found in Julia Kristeva’s 1974 book *Revolution in Poetic Language*. For Kristeva, Mallarmé participated in the broadening of the definition of “poetic language” that occurred in modernity; a definition that made “poetic language” an intrinsic feature of all linguistic acts, which were henceforth to be distinguished only by the degree to which they actualised this latent poeticity (Kristeva, 1974, 229). When Mallarmé writes that “there is verse as soon as diction calls attention to itself, rhyme as soon as there is style” (Mallarmé, 2007, 202), he seems to be giving his consent to this expanded definition. But as Milner points out, in this passage Mallarmé is in fact describing

Victor Hugo's poetry, not his own (Milner, 2016b, 91-92). For Mallarmé, verse occupies a much more narrow domain; it has none of the properties that Hugo — or Kristeva, following the Russian Formalists — gave it by ranging poetry under the all-encompassing heading of “poetic language”. Mallarmé's verse is not literature, its rhythm has nothing to do with style, and it is radically distinct from prose. In contrast to Hugo's all-devouring definition of verse, Milner writes that for Mallarmé verse always “requires [...] calculations, symmetries, plays of sonority and, running under it all, a design to create, by means of verse, this single word that language lacks, this word whose sound corresponds with its sense” (Milner, 2016b, 94-5). The majority of Mallarmé's most famous — and, incidentally, traditionally-versified — poems are to be understood as part of this project (Milner, 2016b, 102).

I mentioned above that this project of abolishing chance was distinct from Mallarmé's nihilism, and that it tended towards a utopianism much closer to the vision of the poet's work that we find in the works of Marchal, Meillassoux, Rancière or Roger. But for Milner Mallarmé is a utopian in a very specific sense, and even then only at *some* moments in his career. For in fact, Mallarmé's nihilism — his conviction that the world, particularly the modern world, was characterised by “material splendor and spiritual sterility” (Milner, 1999, 42) — is a more-or-less fixed feature of his vision of the universe. If Mallarmé was ever a utopian, it was because he believed that certain practices could help *subtract* us from this universe. Milner argues that Mallarmé's project of the *Book* was for the community what verse was for the individual proclaiming it: a means of abolishing the chance in social relations: “two abolitions may be distinguished”, Milner writes: “verse abolishes the chance in language, and the Book, in creating an organized coexistence, abolishes the chance of the crowd”. By organizing the multiplicity of participants according to “the necessary constraint of calculation”, a new kind of community was to come into being, one no longer riven by the dispersive effects of equivocation. What is crucial to note here, however, is that just as verse achieves the “isolation” of speech in language, so does the Book help its participants “isolate” themselves “in the midst of the crowd” (Milner, 2016b, 99). The Book does *not* express the crowd's communal essence.

This is another point on which Milner distinguishes himself from other of Mallarmé's well-known readers. Badiou, for instance, states that Mallarmé's “famous and unachieved *Book* ha[d] no other addressee than [the] crowd” (Badiou, 2005, 31). But this misses the fact that the *Book* is a way of escaping the crowd, not of gathering

it together so that it may finally actualise its essence. We can also see how Milner's reading undermines a key assumption of Marchal and Rancière's readings, both of which suppose that Mallarmé was committed to constructing a "a new terrestrial religion". As Marchal writes, "[i]t is indeed a public cult — a cult of the State — that Mallarmé [...] envisages; a cult under the auspices of the poet". He continues: Mallarmé "raises a fundamental problem of the time, namely, that of the legitimacy of the State, or of its link to the sacred, as if the purely juridical formula of consent and of the delegation of power by universal suffrage remained insufficient; as if there were no true authority except through a properly religious sanction" (Marchal, 1988, 305-306). It is obvious from the way Marchal formulates this problem that the *Book* is envisaged not only as a supplement — that is, as a practice that *adds* something to existing social relations, which under the modern state and market are too cold and abstract by themselves — but also as something that expresses the community's true essence. Rancière is no different on this point: for him, the poet is tasked with preparing "the celebrations of the future" (Rancière, 2010, 41) where the crowd will finally find a self-representation equal to its immanent grandeur. The human community *requires* solemnity; it is lacking something without it: the poet does nothing but respond to this demand. For Milner, however, this completely misstates the relation between the *Book* and the community. Just like poetry, the *Book* is a pure exception, not a supplement or a phenomenon transitive to the community's true being:

Those who claim to identify a civic religion in the *Book*, inscribed in the ideal operation of the republic, are completely mistaken. If it were to exist, the *Book* would on the contrary enable an escape from the republic and reportage, which are united in what Mallarmé calls the Newspaper (Milner, 2017, 66-67).

But given all of the above — given, that is, Milner's thorough reorganisation of the normative foundations and goals of Mallarmé's project — how do we get from the project of "abolishing chance" in linguistic and social relations to the terminal nihilism of *Un coup de dés*, where it is very clearly stated that "A throw of the dice will never abolish chance"? For Milner, it seems that the impossibility of abolishing chance was a persistent thought throughout Mallarmé's career. The sonnet 'Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui', which Milner hypothesises was written as early as

1865 (Milner, 1999, 11), expresses this thought by way of the swan's renunciation of all action: the swan ends up "paralysed in the cold dream of contempt / put on in [its] useless exile" (Mallarmé, 2012, 161). The task of abolishing chance was therefore always of the order of a desire: a project linked to a regulative idea of what poetry could and should be. If the nihilist hypothesis "wins out" (Boncardo, Gelder, 2017, 68), as Milner says it does, then it is because of the weight of evidence that steadily accumulated in Mallarmé's mind regarding the impossibility of both language and collective forms ever divesting themselves of chance. A number of events in his life brought this evidence to the fore: the crushing of the 1871 Commune (Milner, 1999, 69), the devolution of his famous *Mardis* into what Milner describes as a decadent carnivals (Milner, 2017, 68), and, most affecting of all, the death of his son Anatole (Milner, 2017, 79). Milner is unique in the importance he accords this event. In a brilliant reading of the 'Sonnet en -yx', he argues, unexpectedly, that the seven stars of the constellation that arise at the poem's close match the seven letters of Anatole's name: the poem is a tribute to his son (Milner, 2014, 310). Against Badiou, who reads the constellation as a sign of fidelity to an event (Badiou, 2008, 53), Milner claims it is actually a matter of mourning; more specifically, of mourning in a way that remains faithful to the untranscendability of chance and refuses to reinstate a theological horizon to death.

This is the ideal point to transition to a discussion of Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*, which for Milner marks the climax of the poet's nihilism. Milner's reading of the poem is distributed between a number of different texts, from 1983's *Les noms indistincts* to 2003's 'The Tell-Tale Constellations'. In what follows I will attempt to synthesise these readings to give a sense of Mallarmé's "nihilist hypothesis" (Milner, 2017, 68) in action.

In *Un coup de dés* a ship's master, the soul survivor of his vessel's shipwreck, holds two dice in his hand, raised above the waves in a final gesture of defiance. The action of the poem is entirely reduced to his hesitation as he contemplates throwing or not throwing the two dice. When it seems as if he has finally drowned, there appears "on some vacant and superior surface [...] A CONSTELLATION / cold from forgetfulness and desuetude" (Mallarmé, 1994, 144). With its white stars and black background, the constellation inverts the colour scheme of the two dice. Its seven stars therefore constitute the sum of a successful stellar throw of the dice, which contrasts with the master's failed throw.

In his earliest mention of Mallarmé's poem in *L'amour de la langue*, Milner writes that "the *Coup de dés* is a proposition on language" (Milner, 58n, 1978). His subsequent readings of the poem have drawn out the consequences of this claim. The first and most significant of these is that the "Chance" referred to in the poem — the "Chance" that a dice throw will never abolish — is the same as the "Chance" I referred to above: that which structures the relation between sound and sense. If, then, there are two dice in *Un coup de dés*, it is because one stands for the phonic properties of language and the other for the meanings these properties are arbitrarily — but indissolubly — attached to. In *Les noms indistincts* Milner uses a Lacanian vocabulary to talk about the various levels of meaning in *Un coup de dés*. Thus, the two dice figure the two sides of language's Imaginary dimension: the sensible properties of its sound and the Imaginary ideality of its sense. But they also mark its Symbolic dimension: the numbers on the dices' faces stand for the pure, property-less distinctions that inhere between signifiers, but also for the structures that produce them, including "the arithmetic of verse" (Milner, 1983, 46). Finally, to figure the Real of language, Milner argues that Mallarmé turns to the constellation. And yet, it might be said that a constellation is in fact an exemplarily Imaginary phenomenon: indeed, it exists only for an observer situated on the earth and tracing a pattern between stars that otherwise have no relation to one another. As Milner writes: "The patterns [constellations] form are nothing more than a representation that a disoriented gaze gives itself in order to suspend, for an instant, an uncontrollable sideration. There is no calculable rule in these figures, only the pregnancy of some beautiful form" (Milner 2016a, 31-32). But Mallarmé's constellation in *Un coup de dés* is different. First, it is said to be situated "toward / what must be / the Septentrion or North" (Mallarmé, 1994, 144 — *modified trans.*). Commenting on this passage, Milner remarks that the name "Septentrion" is immediately replaced by "North", a term that refers not to a constellation *per se* — nor even, necessarily, to a point of stellar orientation used by an earth-bound observer — but to what a compass needle points to: namely, magnetic north. And a compass needle "knows nothing" (Milner 2003, 36) of constellations. In fact, it is aligned with the Earth's magnetic field — an intrinsically invisible phenomenon. For all of these reasons, the constellation in *Un coup de dés* disappears as soon as it appears. On this final and resplendent double page of the poem, we are therefore witness to the vertiginous but inevitable slippage of the Imaginary into the Real, "the idea of which is given", Milner writes, "by the

cluster of stars, without properties, without form except as illusion” (Milner, 1983, 46). This is also why the constellation can be a tomb for Anatole: it inscribes his name — indeed it makes its seven letters shine brilliantly — but only insofar they immediately fade.

With *Un coup de dés* the idea of overcoming “Chance” — of the Imaginary triumphing in the form of a perfect adequation between sound and sense — is definitively defeated. Even the fact that the stars of Ursa Major are seven in number speaks of this defeat: seven is one more than six — one more, that is, than the number of syllables making up the hemistich of an alexandrine. Milner notes that the first half of the poem’s central phrase, “Un coup de dés jamais...”, is a hemistich; when one utters it, one anticipates that it will be followed by a second hemistich, like a dice thrower anticipating a perfect throw. And indeed, Mallarmé could easily have made the poem’s central phrase an alexandrine by writing “Un coup de dés jamais n’abolit le hasard”. Yet he chose to conjugate the verb “abolir” in the future tense (“abolira”), thereby giving the second half of *Un coup de dés*’ central phrase seven syllables — a failed alexandrine. If the meter of the alexandrine had been one means of abolishing chance, then the doctrine of *Un coup de dés* states that meter always fails: there is always one count too many. Just as the constellation dissolves into the formless mass of stars, so does Mallarmé’s poem attest to the Real by way of the Imaginary’s failure. Yet on Milner’s reading *Un coup de dés* also preserves a space for the Imaginary as the mark of a subject’s desire. While failure is inevitable, so is the desire that this failure at once provokes and prevents. On the one hand, then, the “CONSTELLATON” is “cold from forgetfulness and desuetude”. But on the other hand, it is not so cold or forgotten that “it doesn’t number / on some vacant and superior surface / the successive shock / in the way of stars / of a total count in the making” (Mallarmé, 1994, 144 — *modified trans.*). For Milner, this “total count” is the one that would abolish Chance; it is therefore the object of the subject’s desire. But if it is a count “in the making” — and not a completed or finalised count — then it is because it will always be *unmade*: the six will always turn into a seven. “The total count is what remains of the Book of yesteryear” (Milner, 2003, 36), writes Milner, and “[i]n the place of the Book that had been demanded” — the Book that was meant to abolish chance in social relations — in his final text Mallarmé strictly limited poetry to the expression of a “desire for Meaning, a desire caused by the seven, that unrelenting symptom of the Real” (Milner, 1983, 47). Milner can thus conclude in

terms that echo, quite paradoxically given the context, Joseph Stalin: “It is not just Revolution, not just the Book, but also Verse that cherished vain aspirations. Poetry alone speaks the truth: in the end, the only winner is chance” (Milner, 2016b, 110).

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