The Theme of Sterility in the Poetry of Mallarme: Its Development and Evolution.

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VIDRINE, Donald R., 1932-
The Theme of Sterility in the Poetry of Mallarmé: Its Development and Evolution. [Portion of Text in French].

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, Ph.D., 1968
Language and Literature, modern

University Microfilms, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan
THE THEME OF STERILITY IN THE POETRY OF MALLARMÉ:
ITS DEVELOPMENT AND EVOLUTION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Foreign Languages

by
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January, 1968
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to Dr. Elliott D. Healy for the assistance and encouragement which he provided during the preparation of this study.
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The theme of impotence, or sterility, is a recurrent one throughout the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé. In his poetry written prior to the year 1865, this theme is expressed in terms of the hantise de l'azur, which represents a kind of Platonic ideal which he struggles to comprehend in order to give expression to it in his poetry. Failing to comprehend it, he seeks to escape it through love, through eroticism, through concentration on the material aspects of life. The years 1864-1869 bring a metaphysical crisis, from which Mallarmé emerges with his Dream, i.e., the old Platonic Ideal, destroyed. It is replaced by a perception of the Void, which brings, rather than a negative attitude on the part of Mallarmé, an existentialist assumption of that Void, and the determination to make something positive of it. Under the influence of Hegelian thought, he views this Void, not as an end but as a beginning, as an absence from which something positive must be made to issue. This something positive is the poet's work, for only one thing survives the Void—the work of artistic creation. This conviction is expressed throughout the "Tombeaux" poems commemorating such luminaries as Poe, Baudelaire, Wagner and Verlaine. But for himself, Mallarmé could only derive limited consolation from this conviction,
for ever the idealist, he conceives his poetic task to be the production of a "Grand Oeuvre," a Book that would synthesize the Truth of the universe, an "orphanic explanation of the Earth."

Against this Ideal Work, Mallarmé must now measure the poetry he produces, and he is never entirely satisfied with what he sees. Once again there is the danger of an impasse, for he must face the possibility of not being able to achieve the Work. He lives with this fear, realizing to what degree the accomplishment of the Work is governed by chance, which cannot be negated despite the best efforts of the poet, as is demonstrated in Un Coup de dés. The only hope lies in patient endeavor, as expressed in Prose pour des Esseintes; by means of language and constant application, perhaps he will be able to wrest from the Void at least a part of the Work that he hopes to achieve.

Mallarmé's correspondence reveals his awareness of the fact that he has set too large a task for himself. Mentions are frequent in both his correspondence and his critical writings that his poetry falls short of the desired objective. Nonetheless, Mallarmé works assiduously until his death, in total dedication to his art and to his vision. But on his death-bed he feels constrained to request that his family burn all his notes accumulated over a period of almost fifty years. The "Grand Oeuvre" has
remained simply an Ideal. The poet's death-bed wish is but one further bit of evidence of the frustration of that Ideal.
INTRODUCTION

The study of the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé may easily prove to be a baffling and frustrating experience, defying even the most persistent efforts to comprehend. Respected critics who have spent years in deciphering (the word is used advisedly) his poetry, must admit to uncertainties about the meaning of certain segments of his work. A survey of criticism about the writings of Mallarmé reveals frequently wide divergence of opinion as to the interpretation of given texts. Mallarmé has been criticized from numerous angles, and yet for all the extensive bibliography in his name, he remains one of the most difficult and mysterious poets of all time.

This mystery in the art of Mallarmé is no coincidence. It is rather the result of several complex factors which will be considered in this introductory chapter as a means of entry into a study of the theme of artistic sterility in the poetry of this chief of the Symbolist school. It is, first of all, the product of a life-long endeavor on the part of the poet to remove his art from the grasp of the casual reader and to avoid simple interpretation. It is a deliberate and consistently sought effect, born of the poet's conviction that art must be aristocratic in
its nature, that it must be reduced to the level of the vulgar medium for the communication of idea alone, that poetry has as its most sacred calling the conveyance of a mystery that transcends our physical universe, that language, as the principle vehicle of poetry, may be stripped to its bare base and induced to suggest this higher reality which was the source of such constant preoccupation for the poet. These convictions, ironically enough, led Mallarmé through a lifetime of anguished labor as he sought to put his theories into practice. Mallarmé suffered by his own hand, so to speak: the realization of his goals in poetry cost him long years of grueling labor, seldom free of the anguish of possible failure, of the fear that he might not be able to give expression to his particular vision, of an overriding concern with sterility.

Mallarmé has provided a large number of essays and critical writings which express his views about his esthetic of poetry. The foremost expression of his opinion about the need to keep poetry an aristocratic art form and about the need for mystery in art is found in his essay entitled "Hérésie artistique: L'Art pour tous," written at Sens in 1862 when he was only twenty years old. Its importance cannot be over-estimated for, although overlooked by his contemporaries and critics, it serves as something of a key to his entire art, as Madame Emilie Noulet observes: "Fidèle pendant trente ans à cette page
Mallarmé admires in religion and in music the very qualities which function as boundaries beyond which one does not penetrate. This early statement foreshadows not only a basic idea but a technique that will characterize his poetry; religion is inspirational for its mystery, music for its abstractedness. The latter is a particular source of fascination for the poet's mind. The sight of a sheet of music, filled with its rows or ordered, abstract signs, suggests to him something approaching the supernatural: "...ces processions macabres de signes sévères, chastes, inconnus," whereupon, in the grip of a kind of religious astonishment, he once again closes the music book, destined now to remain "vierge d'aucune pensée profanatrice." These mysterious signs are responsible for lifting this
particular art form, through their very technical nature, above the level of the layman, filling the latter with awe before their incomprehensibility.

Poetry, the greatest of the arts in Mallarmé's view, must suffer "the grimaces of the ignorant and the inimical" because it has become in his time a status symbol for the masses to read poetry; people learn poetry in order to appear educated. With all the advances of printing technology, it is the sad fate of nineteenth-century poetry that such a work as Les Fleurs du mal is printed alongside the verse of rank amateurs, in the same sort of print that fills the morning newspapers, and in the same book format as a lot of poetry destined to fail the test of time. Mallarmé laments the fact that no one has invented, in order to keep intruders out of this sacred region, "une langue immaculée--des formules hiératiques dont l'étude aride aveugle le profane et aiguillonne le patient fatal..." This is strong language indeed, but Mallarmé will in his own way undertake to produce that immaculate language intended to appeal to those predestined to communicate with him: "le patient fatal". The result of this conviction as it concerns his poetry is an increasing tendency toward hermeticism, a development borne out by the progressive development of his works, for it is a well-documented phenomenon in his poetry that the initial versions of his poems seldom prove to be the definitive
versions. Many of them are subjected to constant scrutiny and revision, the outcome invariably being a progression into the abstract. The titles of Mallarmé's early works, for example, reveal a significant part of the meaning of the poem as a rule; one of these titles serves as a significant case in point to illustrate in broad terms the tendency toward abstraction: the poem originally entitled "Sainte Cécile jouant sur l'aile d'un chérubin," in 1865, has become simply "Sainte" by the date of its publication at Verlaine's behest in 1883, and is thereby stripped of any specific reference that might provide a meaningful context. It is surely this same desire to avoid the specific, the "mould" of the title, which deters Mallarmé from providing titles for his most hermetic poetry dating from the latter half of his lifetime.

Lest he be considered an unmitigated snob, however, Mallarmé adds in this early essay that the mob is not to be scorned for its lack of comprehension. The mob develops an admiration (without real comprehension) for poetry and gets the mistaken idea that it must be taught in school, whereupon this sacred form is reduced to the level of a science, and profaned by so much. Poetry, opened to the scrutiny of the masses by virtue of their having learned the alphabet, loses that awesome quality still enjoyed by the other principal art media such as music, painting, sculpture. But, "Sérieusement avons-nous jamais vu dans
la Bible que l'ange raillât l'homme, qui est sans ailes?...
Il faudrait qu'on se crût un homme complet sans avoir lu
un vers d'Hugo, comme on se croit un homme complet sans
avoir déchiffré une note de Verdi." The philosopher, he
continues, may feel free to vulgarize his "truths", but
the poet is a worshipper of beauty which is inaccessible
to the mob. To attempt to popularize this art form through
cheap editions of the poet's works is a blasphemy and a
profanation. If there must be popularization of anything
at all, make sure that it is "celle du bon, non celle de
l'art... Que les masses lisent la morale, mais de grâce,
ne leur donnez pas notre poésie à gâter."
The tone of
this work is so dogmatic and adamant that Mallarmé aban-
dons it almost entirely, but there is no question about
his faithfulness to the attitude basic to the text. Forty
years later, near the end of his life, he re-states his
fundamental dislike for the uncomprehending mob in another
essay, "Le Mystère dans les lettres":

Il doit y avoir quelque chose d'occulte au fond de
tous, je crois décidément à quelque chose d'abscons,
signifiant fermé et caché, qui habite le commun: car,
sitôt cette masse jetée vers quelque trace que c'est
une réalité, existant, par exemple, sur une feuille
de papier, dans tel écrit--pas en soi--cela qui est
obscur: elle s'agit, ouragan jaloux d'attribuer les
ténèbres à quoi que ce soit, profusément, flagramment...
Sa crédulité vis-a-vis de plusieurs qui la soulagent,
en faisant affaire, bondit à l'excès: et le suppôt
d'Ombre, d'eux désigné, ne placera un mot, dorénavant,
qu'avec un secouement que ç'ait été elle, l'énigme,
elle ne tranche, par un coup d'éventail de ses jupes:
"Comprends pas!" -- l'innocent annonçât-il se moucher.
The note of scorn is unmistakable. The mob ("le commun" and "cette masse") is depicted as eager to pounce upon any poor poet so indiscreet as to be obscure, blaming the poet and not itself for its failure to comprehend. Thereafter, of course, the mob is distrustful of anything the poet writes: it cries out that it does not understand, even if the poet has simply announced that he is blowing his nose.

In all fairness to Mallarmé, however, it must be recognized that the emphasis on hermeticism and the resultant density of style that characterize the major body of his works are not so superficially motivated as this essay would seem to indicate. He is convinced of the aristocratic nature of his art medium, to be sure, and would like to guard this sacred trust from the intrusions of the uncomprehending and the idly curious, but the difficulties inherent in his style undoubtedly stem as well from the esthetic of suggestion that he develops in an effort to make his art larger than life, to endow it with a far greater dimension than that achieved through the objective esthetic associated with the Parnassian school of poets. Haunted as he was by a fear of remaining incapable of producing worthwhile poetry, Mallarmé felt compelled to exhaust those words at his disposal, to wrest from them the utmost that each had to give. Student of languages that he was, Mallarmé had particular insight into word values; he became interested in word history and frequently used
vocabulary not in its current acceptance but with its etymological connotation in mind. Charles Chassé contends that Mallarmé owes a considerable debt to Littré's etymological dictionary for many of the facets of meaning incorporated in his verse, in keeping with a tendency well-established among his contemporaries, particularly Huysmans.  

An extensive study of the mechanics of Mallarmé's poetry by Jacques Schérer bears out that the poet's basic vocabulary is that of everyday speech, but with a difference! The following quotation attributed to Mallarmé by René Ghil and quoted in Schérer's study is illuminating:

Il convient de nous servir des mots de tout le monde, dans le sens que tout le monde croit comprendre! Je n'emploie que ceux-là. Ce sont les mots même que le Bourgeois lit tous les matins, les mêmes! Mais, voilà (et ici son sourire s'accentuait), s'il lui arrive de les retrouver en tel mien poème, il ne les comprend plus! C'est qu'ils ont été récrits par un poète.

The poet makes the difference. The words appear unusual because of the context in which they appear, the words against which they are juxtaposed, the "ensemble" of word clusters which stretch the word, and the mind with them, into new realms of thought and feeling. It is to a large extent through the use of vocabulary in this manner that the poet creates an aura of vagueness and imprecision so closely identified with the Symbolist movement.

Word clusters lead logically into a consideration of syntax, which remains the single most puzzling element
in the poetry of Mallarmé. From special liberties with clusters of words, it is but one step further to the exercise of liberties with syntax in order to obtain new extensions of meaning. Schérer's detailed syntactical studies of Mallarmé's poetry lead to the following conclusions: Grammatical order is not rigidly observed; parts of speech may be used in very liberal ways, e.g., a noun may be replaced by an adverb, an adjective or a verb, and an adjective or a preposition may become adverbs; connectives may be deliberately chosen to convey vague rather than precise relationships, as in his frequent use of selon, en tant que, or tel que; an element of surprise is often attained by displacing adjectives or adverbs from their expected position; ellipsis is often employed when normal grammatical usage would forbid it, particularly the ellipsis of a noun that should normally follow an indefinite article; inversion, especially of subject and verb, is widely used, although other types of inversion abound for creation of special emphasis; generally, the noun and its satellites play a considerably more important role than the verb clusters, which tends to minimize movement in the sentence; punctuation differs greatly from the norm, disappearing almost entirely; prepositions are used very loosely, and appositions are frequently made in such a manner as to relate to two possible antecedents. These form but a partial listing of the devices employed by Mallarmé,
undoubtedly in the hope of setting up "resonances of which he himself had not originally been aware."12

A re-ordering of the various elements of Mallarmé's lines along normal syntactic patterns frequently dispels ambiguities, although not always, and the syntax yields to analysis only with extremely careful and persistent effort. Mallarmé provides his view of one of the functions of syntax in "Le Mystère dans les lettres," where he defines its function as a guide to intelligibility, a force to hold in check and neutralize stylistic coloring, which should be neither too dark nor too brilliant:

La Syntaxe--

Pas ses tours primesautiers, seuls, inclus aux facilités de la conversation; quoique l'artifice excelle pour convaincre. Un parler, le français, retient une élégance à paraître en négligé...13

Here is a very special interpretation of syntax, one to be kept distinct from the more ordinary acceptance of the term, i.e., the banal structures and twists that one finds in conversation or rhetoric. This is not what the poet must seek, says Mallarmé, but rather a syntax that will enhance and evoke. The French language "en négligé" suggests the wispy, evocative and ephemeral aspects of Mallarmé's language, the elusive and suggestive quality that constitute the essential difference between his esthetic and that of his Parnassian predecessors. Syntax serves to soften the sharp contours of objective reality; it adds
another dimension of meaning through what it reserves for the power of suggestion.

Thus, from an early statement on the need to emphasize mystery in art, the poet moves toward a technique designed to capture that mystery: the technique of suggestion. Mallarmé's most celebrated statement on the value of suggestion in art is found in "Réponse à des Enquêtes: Sur l'évolution littéraire," in effect an interview granted to Jules Huret in 1891, in which the poet sums up his attitudes. The context of the following remark is a discussion on the relative merits of the Parnassian poets and the "young poets", i.e., those who will later be known as Symbolists:

Je crois... que, quand au fond, les jeunes sont plus près de l'idéal poétique que les Parnassiens, qui traitent encore leurs sujets à la façon des vieux philosophe et des vieux rhéteurs, en présentant les objets directement. Je pense qu'il faut au contraire qu'il n'y ait qu'allusion. La contemplation des objets, l'image s'envolant des rêveries suscitées par eux, sont le chant: les Parnassiens, eux, prennent la chose entièrement et la montrent: par là, ils manquent de mystère; ils retirent aux esprits cette joie délicieuse de croire qu'ils créent. Nommer un objet, c'est supprimer les trois quarts de la jouissance du poème qui est faite de deviner peu à peu: le suggérer, voilà le rêve. C'est le parfait usage de ce mystère qui constitue le symbole: évoquer petit à petit un objet pour montrer un état d'âme, ou inversement, choisir un objet et en dégager un état d'âme, par une série de déchiffrements.14

This dense paragraph places Mallarmé's work in sharp perspective; from it emerges the view of the reader as the real creator, for through the process of suggestion, the
poet affords an opportunity to the reader to accomplish a creative act of his own. To name, to objectify, to deal with the externals of reality is to destroy for the reader the opportunity to experience this delight of creativity. In another essay, "Crise de vers," a composite of excerpts from several works written over a period of years, Mallarmé further defines the role, or limitations of the role, of the poet in the act of poetic creation:

L'oeuvre pure implique la disparition élocutoire du poète, qui cède l'initiative aux mots, par le heurt de leur inégualité mobilisés; ils s'allument de reflets réciproques comme une virtuelle trainée de feux sur des pierreries, remplaçant la respiration perceptible en l'ancien souffle lyrique ou la direction personnelle enthousiaste de la phrase.15

This word chemistry, thus, is nothing but a transcendence of the ordinary role of the poet, a replacement of the poet's "personal and enthusiastic" control of the line. The initiative is yielded to the words themselves, which will be set in motion, as it were, through their juxtaposition, through the shock of collision. Symbolism, to Mallarmé's mind, is nothing more than the perfect application of this system to poetry.

In this same essay, Mallarmé speaks of the "Decadent or Mystic Schools" in terms which could well serve as another manifesto of his own artistic creed, so well does it reflect his thought on the primacy of the Ideal, i.e., matters of the spirit or intellect, and of the art of suggestion.
This "Idealism that rejects the materials in nature, avoiding any thought that might arrange them in too precise an order, retaining only the suggestiveness of things," will become the cornerstone in the structure of content in Mallarmé's poetry. This "Idealism" he will seek to capture by establishing a "precise relationship between two images, from which a third element, clear and fusible, will emerge and be presented to our imagination." It is not difficult to detect the Parnassian school as the butt of his reproach for its erroneous esthetic that would have the poet fill his pages with the "bois intrinsèque et dense des arbres," the real, palpable texture of wood. Monuments, seas, the human countenance, these have an abiding and transcendant beauty, he implies, to which description cannot do justice. This task must more properly be consigned to the powers of evocation, allusion, suggestion. Mallarmé is encouraged
in that he thinks this trend in modern literature (toward the evocative) may well be a decisive one, for this is the magic quality of art: that beyond the reality of dust or book or page, a volatile dispersal of the spirit occurs through its machination.

Mallarmé's kaleidoscopic view of the evocative power of language is clearly defined in the following passage from the 1896 essay, "Le Mystère dans les lettres."

Les mots d'eux-mêmes, s'exaltent à mainte facette reconnue la plus rare ou valant pour l'esprit, centre de suspens vibratoire; qui les perçoit indépendamment de la suite ordinaire, projetés, en parois de grotte, tant que dure leur mobilité ou principe, étant ce qui ne se dit pas du discours: prompts tous à une réciprocité de feux distante ou présentée de biais comme contingente.17

These multiple facets of words become a point of fascination for the poet, leading him into long and tortured considerations of vocabulary and syntax as he seeks to express himself in the densest of all possible manners, to achieve that juxtaposition of words on the printed page that will unlock in the reader's mind the largest possible number of associations and evocations—of yielding meanings on as many levels as possible. The effect he hoped to achieve with words was very similar to that achieved by the turn of the knob on the kaleidoscope: new combinations of lines open up fantastically large numbers of new visual images for the viewer. But it is the mechanical contrivance of the kaleidoscope that shapes and determines these
visual images; in Mallarmé's poetry, it is of course the individual mind, the reader, this "centre de suspens vibra-toire" which is in control of these oscillations. These new radiances are projected (in a figure that recalls Plato's cave image) above the ordinary arrangements of words; the meaning obtained is transcendant—touching upon that part of speech which is not spoken. Language becomes much more than a simple control vehicle for the communication of idea; language is rather a "potentially live material, which in certain combinations could bring into existence what had not existed before."18

A basic distinction thus arises for Mallarmé between the language of everyday reality and this evocative new language of poetic suggestion. In "Crise de vers" he taxes speech with being no more than "a commercial approach to reality," so to speak: "Parler n'a trait à la réalité des choses que commercialement..."19 In literature, on the other hand, he finds that allusion is sufficient; it is the role of language to extract essences and suffuse them into Idea. He wishes upon the word, and seeks to derive from the word, that degree of abstraction that is common to musical notation. Abstraction in idea is pushed to a very high point in Mallarmé's poetry; affective values are of secondary importance to him. Speaking wistfully of the mystery inherent in music, he claims a share of this mystery for poetry as well. Listening to music one feels
that words would be jarringly out of place; and yet the
written word, which the poet terms an "envol tacite d'ab-
straction," i.e., the silent upward surge of the ideal,
regains its rights "en face de la chute des sons nus." Musical
notes dazzle for a moment then fade away; what is
written remains affixed to the page; the experience of the
printed page can be repeated indefinitely.

Joseph Chiari aptly summarizes Mallarmé's concept
of language when he states: "For Mallarmé, language was
a means to free the real, the true cosmic vision." This
observation brings into focus yet a third, and surely the
most important, factor which makes for the difficulty of
Mallarmé's poetry: his metaphysical anguish and quest.
This "real, the true cosmic vision" that Mallarmé sought
was his most abiding source of frustration and anguish in
that it brought him face to face with the Void, and held
out the constant threat that his work would ultimately be
engulfed by this same Void. He was a man torn—by his de-
sire to conquer the Void, by the desire to express that
Void in his works, by the fear that the Void would ulti-
mately triumph over man and work as well. Comparing Mal-
larmé to Blake, Chiari finds that the faculty in Mallarmé
that transcends the real world in quest of the ideal world
is not the faculty of imagination but rather "... a kind
of abstracting and neantising power, which does not aim at
creating any concrete aesthetic experience, but on the
contrary, at creating the evanescence of an experience, or what one may describe as the experience 'neantised,' emptied of itself, for in the end, the aim of Mallarmé is to reach nothingness, source of all things." The word itself Mallarmé will tend to view as an absence: the word "flower," once uttered, emits the idea of the flower, the Ideal Flower, and as such, negates the particular in regard to flower. "Je dis une fleur! et, hors de l'oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose d'autre que les calices sus, musicalement se lève, idée même et suave, l'absente de tous bouquets." Thus the flower, "absent of all perfume," de-particularized, is removed from the objective world to an abstract plane; existent reality has transcended unto an essential plane. In the words of Chiari, "reality has been evaporated, transformed into its essence in a process similar to music in which the musical instruments represent reality in their own way." This fascination with abstraction was Mallarmé's particular genius and at the same time his special burden. His essays and correspondence are replete with mentions of the agony he endured in his efforts to compose. And throughout his work, there is a major preoccupation that manifests itself, a preoccupation with nothingness, the void. Bradford Cook says of this nothingness that it is Mallarmé's metaphysical constant, and because it is that,
it becomes his esthetic unity.\textsuperscript{25} The concept of the void
did in effect become the engrossing preoccupation in Mal-
larmé's life and hence in his works, a preoccupation de-
veloping out of a metaphysical crisis which he entered
into in the mid-1860's, while in his early twenties. Guy
Michaud notes the radical thematic changes that are re-
lected in his poetry subsequent to 1866, the peak of the
crisis—abandonment of the great lyrical themes. He ceases
to express directly the deep-seated yearnings of his heart
and his soul; he seldom uses the verb to love. Numerous
elements of sensuality (perfume, skin, the flesh, woman)
are all minimized. There is an almost complete disappear-
ance of the haunting concerns of his youth and young
manhood—digging a grave for his dream, e.g., or wandering
in search of this dream, or seeking forgetfulness of the
dream. Azure disappears almost entirely, as do the angels
and the seraphim.

What fills the void created by these departing
ghosts? There is a noticeable increase in abstractions,
e.g., numbers, midnight, space, immobility, exile, mystery,
as well as words with the ring of negativity about them,
e.g., néant, manque, rien, nul, absence, and especially
the verb abôlir. The poet who was so fond of water imagery
prior to 1866 now abandons this element in favor of fire
under its many manifestations.\textsuperscript{26}

Mallarmé's earliest poetry, that is, his verse
dating from his childhood, shows no preoccupation with the
themes of absence and nothingness. They reveal no clear
delineation between earth and sky; the universe is one.
The soul of the child lives in close contact with the
spiritual reality that gives it substance and meaning. As
he matures, however, he undergoes some kind of crisis
which deprives him of his "child's view of the universe."
The implications of this crisis for the verse of Mallarmé
are discussed by Jean-Paul Richard in L'Univers imaginaire
de Mallarmé, in which he holds that a split develops in
this overall unified structure—a fissure of religious re-
volt which finds expression through blasphemy, anticleri-
calism and by the exile of God. Critics have speculated
at considerable length about the nature of this crisis.
Ayda, Mauron and Cellier look to the biography of the poet
for the answer, concluding that it lies in several traum-
atic deaths in the circle of family and friends of the
young Mallarmé—the death of his mother when he was five,
the death of his sister when he was fifteen, the death of
a close friend, Harriet Smith, in the year 1859. Richard
seems inclined to think this rupture attributable at least
in part to feelings of guilt deriving from some form of
sexual activity (Mallarmé did speak in retrospect to a
friend of a certain "priapisme de ma jeunesse,"27 although
there are no documents which substantiate this insinua-
tion).28 Whatever the reason for the rupture, it is real,
and assumes a metaphysical bent. Absence consequently becomes a constant in his verse. Critics and scholars of Mallarmé and his works speak freely of his "metaphysical crisis" of 1864-1868, from which he emerges to accentuate hermeticism and the theme of the Void as never before. It is during this period that Mallarmé begins to write one of his major works, Hérodiade, about which he confides in a letter to his friend Cazalis in the summer of 1866:

Je te dis que je suis depuis un mois dans les plus purs glaciers de l'Esthétique—qu'après avoir trouvé le néant, j'ai trouvé le Beau,—et que tu ne peux t'imaginer dans quelles altitudes lucides je m'adventure. Il en sortira un beau poème, auquel je travaille, et, cet hiver, (ou un autre) Hérodiade, où je m'étais mis tout entier sans le savoir, d'où mes doutes et mes malaises...29

"After having found the void, I have found Beauty." It may well be that Mallarmé felt compelled to find beauty in that nothingness as an escape from insanity, or perhaps suicide. From this time on, Mallarmé would seem to have his works recreate the very Void which so preoccupied him, to embody in each poem a glimpse, however partial, of the overall fabric of the Void which had become the center of his universe. This hantise will shape not only the content but the form of his work. The extent to which the poet is obsessed by the Void is borne out by the closing lines of the essay "Le Mystère dans les lettres," where the very materials with which the poet must work defy the poet's effort to create.
Lire... Cette pratique... Appuyer, selon la page, au blanc, qui l'inaugure son ingénuité, à soi, oubliée même du titre qui parlerait trop haut: et, quand s'aligna, dans une brisure, la moindre, disséminée, le hasard vaincu mot par mot, indéfectiblement le blanc revient, tout à l'heure gratuit, certain maintenant, pour conclure que rien au-delà et authentifier le silence.30

The blank space of each page is an expression of the Void which surrounds everything, defying the poet's endeavour, resisting his every effort to offend the "virgin space" of the page.

To recapitulate, as Mallarmé achieves intellectual and emotional maturity, he manifests a marked tendency to incorporate the abstract and the abstruse into his poetry, whether from the conviction that poetry must remain an aristocratic art form, beyond the reach of the masses, or from his intellectual probings into the deeper meanings of life, with their resultant perceptions of the Void. Abstraction and abstruseness are attained in numerous ways, as has been indicated in this chapter. It has been asserted that Mallarmé's poetry was a source of anguish to him. This is no doubt partially true because of the sustained effort to make his poetry so abstract, to arrive at those combinations of words and lines that would most effectively produce that effect of "spontaneous combustion" that he sought in accordance with his views on poetic creativity. His anguish is surely equally attributable to his fear of having to yield to the power of the Void,
of finding himself impotent before what he considered the Herculean task of translating his vision onto the page. Implied in this view of the Void is the concept of the poet's sterility, his inability to cope successfully with the problems of creating something lasting, of giving expression to his vision in a form communicable to his intellectual and aristocratic elite (le patient fatal). And it is in this perspective that Mallarmé's poetry is now approached--with a view toward a thematic analysis of the multiple elements which communicate his fear of impotence before his task, of his preoccupation with artistic sterility.
Notes


3. *Ibid*.

4. *Ibid*.

5. *Ibid*.


18. Brereton, p. 204.


22. *Ibid*. 
23 Mallarmé, Oeuvres, p. 857.

24 Chiari, p. 143.


29 Mallarmé, Correspondance, I, 220.

30 Mallarmé, Oeuvres, p. 387.
CHAPTER I

HANTISE DE L'AZUR

Mallarmé's concern with artistic sterility was revealed very early both in his poetry and in his critical writings. As reflected there, it is a phenomenon operable on an intellectual plane, with ramifications into the realm of both metaphysics and esthetics. Its most salient expression occurs in terms of an obsessive fear of being unable to accomplish what he as a poet feels he must accomplish. This is a well-documented phenomenon in Mallarmean criticism, thanks principally to the untiring and monumental efforts of his biographer, Henri Mondor, whose Vie de Mallarmé and Mallarmé plus intime sketch in impressive detail the thoughts and deeds, aspirations and anxieties of this most enigmatic of poets. Mondor's comments on the sterility of Mallarmé are confined solely to the intellectual implications of this problem, although this is not the case with more recent criticism. For Mondor, that "impuissance dont souffre Mallarmé est celle d'un artiste visant trop haut."¹ He affirms, and no contemporary critic would disagree, that Mallarmé was by no means a sterile poet, although Mallarmé's contemporaries frequently goaded him with criticism to this effect: "Ses adversaires les
plus sarcastiques se sont emparés du mot *impuissance* pour le lui jeter."\(^2\) Mondor, without delving into the psychological implications of impotence for Mallarmé, derives obvious pleasure in remarking that the poet's detractors have now lapsed into the oblivion of history, whereas Mallarmé himself remains eminently alive through his excellent poetry. Mondor summarizes his attitude toward Mallarmé's obsessive concern with sterility or impotence in the following manner: "Ce que l'on a appelé l'impuissance de Mallarmé, c'est cette admirable exigeance d'art pur et le fier mépris d'un jeune homme pauvre contre toute improvisation hâtée et peu fructueuse."\(^3\)

Subsequent to the year 1950, however, Mallarmean criticism increasingly dwells on the sexual implications of the theme of sterility in Mallarmé. Ayda, Cellier, Chassé and Mauron, among others, have paid particular attention to this facet of the poet's problem, but none more significantly or more thoroughly than the last mentioned, Charles Mauron, who in his *Introduction à la psychanalyse de Mallarmé*, arrives through psychocriticism of the poet's works at the conclusion that his fears of non-productivity actually stem from an Oedipal complex caused by the traumatic loss of his mother when he was five years old, and reinforced by the loss of his sister Maria when he was fifteen. According to this view, the latent meaning of Mallarmé's poetry, of which the poet was unaware, stems
particularly from the second of these deaths, which finds the adolescent "in full pubertal crisis, suffering from a recent sorrow and groping for social or spiritual sublimations." It leaves him with a multiple crisis—bereavement over the loss of a sister, which reopens the wound caused by his mother's death ten years earlier, and also "the choice of social and spiritual sublimations." These grave occurrences intervene, moreover, when the youth is in the midst of the pubertal crisis, which re-evokes the Oedipal crisis experienced at the death of his mother. Mauron contends that the poet was never able to recover from his mother's death, and that he transferred his affections primarily to his sister Maria. With the death of the latter, the religious idealization in which he had affixed the mother is replaced by musical and poetic idealization. A religious crisis occurs deriving from the loss of these two persons whom he held dear, and the burgeoning erotic drive causes him to seek real love-objects. These many elements find expression in the works of fantasy which Mallarmé produced in his youth, and which Mauron analyzes in detail, finding in them certain clusters of images and associations which pervade the work of the mature poet. This is what Mauron terms the "shimmer below", the undercurrent of images "attracting and eliciting each other in such a way as to produce harmonics which are repeated from poem to poem," and a major inducement to the application
of psychoanalytical principles in an effort to probe the latent content, "the inner significance of the symbolic rebus." Mauron hopes in this manner to establish a new dimension in the appreciation of Mallarmé's poetry--the unconscious depth. He is quick to point out, however, that this latent meaning of the poem is not necessarily its true meaning, but simply one facet of it. Nor does the subconscious reality actually inspire the poem, although it is intimately connected with it; what it does is this: "... it raises suggestions which readily become obsessive. It proposes and whispers the words." Mauron seems thereby to have limited the scope of his probings into Mallarmé's subconscious, restricting them to the "shimmer below," defining a secondary role for the latent content of the work. He in no way detracts from the manifest content which, in his view, has been fairly accurately determined through the efforts of many exegetists over the years since the poet's death. The present study will deal exclusively with this manifest content in order to trace the development of the theme of sterility, and its ramifications, through the poetry of Mallarmé.

Mallarmé first saw himself in print in the year 1862, in February, when the revue Le Papillon published "Placet futile" and again in March when L'Artiste published "Le Guignon." The former, an innocuous love sonnet that
any young gallant might address to a lady whose affection he hoped to win, has no bearing on the present study. The second one, however, along with two other poems whose composition dates from the same year but which were published only later, i.e., "Le Sonneur" and "Renouveau," does provide the first indication in his *Oeuvres Complètes* of the poet's abiding fear of sterility. "Le Guignon," which was revised and hermeticized in 1887 in a manner quite characteristic of the poet, deals, as the title implies, with those who are down on their luck, and more specifically, with those poets who cannot reconcile their art with their quest for the Ideal. The first stanza introduces the subject of the piece: "les mendieurs d'azur"—in an image suggesting the manes of wild horses, flashing occasionally above the herd symbolizing humanity. Significantly, however, these "mendieurs d'azur" are lost in the by-ways of the land; their course is strictly land-bound. The only standard borne by the troupe is the dark wind which flagellates them, literally ripping into their flesh. These travellers, whatever their nature, travel "avec l'espoir de rencontrer la mer," the sea here evidently an early expression of what will later become *l'azur*, the haunting Ideal in the Mallarmean lexicon. As they travel, appetite is not whetted but rather heightened, for we see them advance, "mordant au citron d'or de l'idéal amer" (line 9)—that is, the golden lemon that symbolizes the Ideal and
which is characterized for the first time as bitter. But the tribulation they endure is not without its compensations: "La plupart râla dans les défilés nocturnes,/ S'enivrant du bonheur de voir couler son sang...."

(11. 10-11) This evokes the posture of the sentimental Romantic poets who tear their breasts in anguish and then make poetry of this very sensiblerie. That Mallarmé had such sentimentality in mind is confirmed by the line: "Ils têtent la douleur comme ils têtaient le rêve." (1. 16)

Adversity provides the milk of their inspiration, as the dream of an Ideal had done before. Their defeat in the quest for the Ideal is assured by "un ange très puissant/ Debout à l'horizon dans le nu de son glaive." (1. 14) The force that overcomes them is represented by an angel, the figure that moves in the blue and who is perceived on the horizon, undoubtedly because the horizon is always elusive, always beyond. They are rent asunder by the sword-thrust of this obstructing angel, and they, the poets who succeed in turning grief to profit in a facile way, are grateful for the thrust: "Une pourpre se caille au sein reconnais­sant." (1. 15)

Humanity acclaims these poets: "Et quand ils vont rythmant des pleurs voluptueux/ Le peuple s'agenouille et leur mère se lève." (11. 17-18) Thus, those who have set out with a dream, with the hope of finding the sea (la mer), find instead the mother (la mère), the doting and
acclaim of the masses, which in effect creates them. These have found consolation.

But for each one who is consoled, there are hundreds more who remain bandied about by a vulgar and clownish fate, "dérisoires martyrs de hasards tortueux." (l. 21) These too could well have emulated the others, playing on "la servile pitié des races à voix ternes," (l. 26) like some Prometheus without a vulture (without a real source of anguish), but: "Non, vils et fréquentant les déserts sans citerne,/ Ils courent sous le fouet d'un monarque rageur,/ Le Guignon, dont le rire inouï les prosterne." (ll. 28-30) Theirs is a harsh lot, driven by the Jinx through a waterless desert. They are presented as the playthings of cruel chance in many aspects of their existence. Down-trodden, they are stripped of their pride "qui sacre l'infortune" (l. 46), imparting nobility to the victim suffering reversal. Lesser poets, in their scorn of these more stoical ones, "ne connaissent le mal de ces dieux effacés." (l. 53) The use of the term "effaced gods" to evoke those poets who persevere in their quest of the Ideal despite failure suggests that Mallarmé conceived of the Ideal as something enjoyed by the gods, as well as a force that would deify once apprehended. However, reduced to nothing at the end, these poets "vont ridicûlement se pendre au réverbère." (l. 64)

It is made clear by Mallarmé's correspondence that
he identified with the second category of poets described in the poem, for he writes to his friend Henri Cazalis in 1862 concerning "Le Guignon," "... je suis, hés; parmi les seconds," i.e., among those poets who suffer and die without achieving glory or distinction. Many of the themes subsequently to become prominent in Mallarmé's poetry are announced in this early work—the Ideal, the azure (of both sea and sky), the angel, dream, fate or chance, self effacement. It reveals very clearly the attitude of the poet before the facile lamentations of the Romantic poets, who could turn their suffering into the subject of their poetry, as an end in itself. The anguish implicit in the Dream is effaced for the first group by the adulation of the masses, but those who cannot compromise in order to win over "les races à voix ternes" have no peace except in death.

"Le Sonneur" offers an equally pessimistic perspective. The poet, in his struggle to grasp the Ideal, is likened to the bellringer who, far below the bell, at ground level, scarcely hears the distant chime of the bell he rings. Ironically, the bird that skims over the bellringer in its flight is more uplifted by this clear voice rising into the pure, limpid morning air. The poem begins with a note of brilliant clarity—the clear peal of the bell resounding through the sparkling morning air. In its clarity, the bell-voice appears to be one with this limpid
atmosphere, indeed its very expression, as though the bell were the voice of that distant azure. The motif of light airiness is accentuated by the appearance of the bird, which serves as a link between the bell and the ringer, and it is also brightened by the sound of the bell: "Le sonneur effleuré par l'oiseau qu'il éclaire." (l. 5) This link is extremely tenuous, however, for the bird only grazes the ringer. The bird, creature of the sky, participates intimately in the union of the bell-sound and the ether; its touching of the ringer in its flight reinforces the idea of the separation of the ringer from the bell-bird-ether complex. This separation is further emphasized by the weightiness of the imagery in the remainder of the stanza: "Le sonneur.../ Chevauchant tristement en geignant du latin/ Sur la pierre qui tend la corde séculaire,/ N'entend descendre à lui qu'un tintement lointain." (ll. 5-8) The posture of riding the rope bespeaks heaviness; the moaning of Latin is in marked contrast with the airy peal of the bell; the rope used in ringing the bell is laden with a burden of time. The sound of the bell is but a distant carillon to him below.

The tercets develop Mallarmé's identification with the earth-bound ringer of the bell: "Je suis cet homme. Hélas! de la nuit désirée,/ J'ai beau tirer le câble à sonner l'Ideal;/ De froids péchés s'ébat un plumage feal...." (ll. 9-11) The bell-rope here belongs to the
anxious night—the night filled with yearning, the night that Mallarmé finds most difficult to endure. There is no issue from this action; it is fruitless endeavor since he, the poet, remains burdened, impeded from transcendence by a "faithful plumage of cold sins," this constant reminder of human limitations separating him from the Ideal. The bell remains just a distant peal for him too: "Et la voix ne me vient que par bribes et creuse!/ Mais, un jour, fatigué d'avoir en vain tiré,/ O Satan, j'ôterai la pierre et me pendrai." (ll. 12-14) The prospect of living within his limitations is painful to the poet; he threatens to remove the stone weighting down the rope and to hang himself from it. The last utterance seems as much a promise as a threat; addressed to Satan, the prince of darkness, this line raises the possibility of his yielding to the forces of darkness. The airiness and lightness of the opening lines find a counterpoise in the darkness and heaviness of the closing verses. The impact of the poem issues in large part from the irony of the poet-bellringer taking his life with the very instrument which serves to ring (and therefore to summon) the Ideal. The poet is thus, in this final image, compared to the stone weight which keeps the bell from ringing. This irony is sharply reminiscent of that expressed in the closing line of "Le Guignon," where the effaced gods, overwhelmed by adversity and yearning, hang themselves on the lamp post,
symbol of the light which pushes back the darkness. The implications are dark; in both cases the result is suicide.

Yet a third poem on the subject of impotence issues from this, Mallarmé's twentieth year. Unlike the two previously discussed poems, which were undoubtedly written in the preceding winter months, this poem was published in May of 1862, and can only have been written in the spring. In its initial version, it was entitled "Vere Novo," only to be changed later to "Renouveau" for the definitive version, in an effort to heighten the irony of the situation depicted in the poem.

Irony, because this is a spring poem, and spring is the season of regeneration and of hope, yet here it serves only as a mocking background to heighten the poignancy of the poet's inertia. On two occasions in this spring of 1862 Mallarmé speaks of sterility in his correspondence to Henri Cazalis. On May 5, he writes: "...je sors à peine d'une série de jours brumeux et stériles, et mon premier sourire est à vous." In early June he writes again to his close friend:

Emmanuel t'avait peut-être parlé d'une stérilité curieuse que le printemps avait installé en moi. Après trois mois d'impuissance, j'en suis enfin débarrassé, et mon premier sonnet est consacré à la décrire, c'est-à-dire, à la maudire. C'est un genre assez nouveau que cette poésie, où les effets matériels, du sang, des nerfs, sont analysés et mêlés aux effets moraux, de l'esprit, de l'âme. Cela pourrait s'appeler "Spleen printanier".

Spring is sickly in this poem because the poet
projects upon the external scene the misery of his own interior landscape. There is vivid contrast in the two landscapes: the one refugent and teeming with life, the other inert and dismal: "Le printemps maladif a chassé tristement/ L'hiver, saison de l'art serein, l'hiver lucide,/ Et, dans mon être à qui le sang morne préside/ L'impuissance s'étire en un long bâillement." (ll. 1-4) Spring is sickly because it reflects the poet's inner poverty. Contrary to the spirit of revivification and hope usually associated with the season, the poet's blood flows lethargic in his veins, and impotence stretches in a lazy yawn. The physiological discomfort of the poet is clear: "Des crépuscules blancs tiédissent sous mon crâne/ Qu'un cercle de fer serre ainsi qu'un vieux tombeau/ Et triste, j'erre après un rêve vague et beau,/ Par les champs où la sève immense se pavane...." (ll. 5-8) His skull is bound by an iron band like an old tomb; the improductivity of the mind is experienced as a kind of death, no doubt for the vision that he cannot express. Spring has returned, bringing light and warmth to the outside world, but these offer no consolation to the poet, who experiences them internally as white (or blank) twilights which cool to lukewarm beneath his skull. The image translates a total reversal as the transition is made from external to internal reality. The poet wanders sadly in search of some vague dream, but
overwhelmed by the call of the forces of life all about him, calls which he cannot heed, he falls face downward: "Puis je tombe énervé de parfums d'arbres, las,/Et creusant de ma face une fosse à mon rêve,/Mordant la terre chaude où poussent les lilas...." (ll. 9-11) He falls, not in an effort to absorb into himself some of this life-giving soil in which grow these pure lilacs (symbols of ideal beauty), but rather in order to bury his dream in the earth. Digging suggests the turning of the earth by the plow in the springtime, that necessary first step before any planting and growth is possible, but here there is no life associated with the process, only death. In anguish he bites into this fertile earth which provides sustenance for the pure lilac, much as the poets of "Le Guignon" bit into the golden lemon of the bitter ideal, a gesture of anguish and longing which is self-defeating.

Held captive, face downward, by Ennui, the poet waits—for this Ennui to dissipate: "J'attends, en m'abîmant que mon ennui s'élève.../—Cependant l'Azur rit sur la haie et l'éveil/De tant d'oiseaux en fleur gazouillant au soleil." (ll. 12-14) This waiting is projected beyond the confines of the poem in the last two lines. The laughter of l'Azur is a sardonic disavowal of the poet's purpose. Thus, as early as 1862, Mallarmé brings himself to the admission (or realization) that the Ideal, by definition, will remain above the grasp of man. He indicates his inability
to realize his dream, and yet paradoxically, it is this very inability which will take him as close as it is possible to go in the attainment of his dream. He transforms his quest for the Ideal, and the inevitable fear of failure in its realization, into the driving force for the accomplishment of that work.

Probing into the biographical aspects of the phenomenon of Mallarmé's so-called sterility, Mondor finds numerous factors which could have contributed to a general depression in this period of the poet's life.\(^{13}\) There was, of course, his extreme penury, which often deprived him of the pleasurable outings and social activities enjoyed by his young friends. He was dissatisfied in general with his living conditions in Sens; he had failed his first exam for the Bachelor's degree in 1860, which created a delicate situation in his family. His grandmother confessed to an acquaintance her anxieties about Stéphane's social adaptations and his job opportunities. It was decided that the young man would remain with his father and stepmother in Sens to fill a clerical position in a tax collector's office. All of this could but contribute to general dissatisfaction with his situation; he was very sensitive and studious, preferring to be enclosed with a book, in the company of the great poets, rather than to be engaged in the social activities of his family. His desire to make a career of writing poetry met with marked
disapproval in his family. His grandmother found occasion to express her strong disapproval of his conduct, speaking of his "relâchement" and recommending him to the prayers of a friend in April 1861, implying that his morals gave her cause for concern. Mondor thinks this must have been simply the failure on his part to observe certain religious practices. Furthermore, Mallarmé's temperament apparently offended his family: "On continue à appeler insociabilité son goût du silence, délire sa fébrilité lyrique, vanité l'élan de son âme, débauche la force de ses désirs." It is undoubtedly significant that he discovered Les Fleurs du Mal in 1861, which opened up new poetic perspectives for him. Twice, however, his volume of Baudelaire's poetry was confiscated by his stepmother and father who considered it unsuitable reading for the young man. His grandmother at this point was also pressuring him, even as late as February, 1862, to enter into a year's internship in a Catholic school, the prospect of which Stéphane strongly rejected. But more significant than all of these factors was the youth's own inability to find satisfaction in the poetry he had produced. Even when his poems had appeared in publication, they were still subject to revision: "Tel mot, dans tel vers, lui semble fautif, tel rythme, dans telle strophe, négligé, telle réminiscence, baudelairienne ou banvillesque, l'humilie." Even in 1862, the first year in which his poetry was published,
this was the case. "Le Guignon" was subjected to serious revision, the final version being attained only in 1887: "Le Sonneur" was revised until a final version appeared in 1866, retaining only four lines unchanged from the original. The first springtime he spent as a published poet was characterized by the basic torment that would characterize his whole lifetime.

Michaud contends that it "is easy to explain this impotence by recalling the excessive demands the poet made on his art." Although the main body of his critical writings revealing a preoccupation with the difficulty of his art dates from a much later period, there is concrete evidence that Mallarmé is laboring at length and agonizing over his poems at this early point in his career. Witness this letter to Cazalis in June of 1862:

Tu riras peut-être de ma manie des sonnets—non, car tu en as fait de délicieux—mais pour moi c'est un grand poème en petit: les quatrains et les tercets me semblent des chants entiers, et je passe parfois trois jours à en équilibrer d'avance les parties, pour que le tout soit harmonieux et s'approche du Beau.

This preoccupation with form must be responsible for the fact that so little was written by Mallarmé in the period from 1861 to 1862. His literary production for this period numbers some twelve to fifteen poems which have been dated by Mondor and Jean-Aubry in the Pléiade edition of Mallarmé's Oeuvres Complètes. Most of these are lighter poetry, falling into the category of "pièces de circonstance," and form a marked contrast with the three or four
of the group dealing with those loftier and more abiding concerns which form the nucleus of this study. It must be recalled that it was in September of this year that he published his essay "L'Art pour tous" in which he offers a first definition of the Mallarmean esthetic, an esthetic of aristocratic, hence difficult, art—hermetic in the sense that it was addressed to an intellectual elite.

The year 1863 was an unproductive one in terms of the number of poems written. Three poems and one prose poem form the total of his poetic legacy for that year, yet if it is true that adversity fosters the greatest of accomplishments in the field of art, the axiom was not applicable in this case. This was a year particularly filled with anguish for him. His relationship with Marie Gerhard remained especially unsettled, and a source of constant frustration until he finally decided to marry her in August. But no trace of these personal troubles appears in his work, which prompts Mondor to comment: "Quels que soient les déceptions et les déchirements qui l'affligent, rien ne passera dans son oeuvre. Nul poète n'a dédaigné avec plus de hauteur, moins de retard, et sans aucune recherche d'impassibilité ou d'inhumanité, l'utilisation littéraire des caprices de sa vie et les effusions de la douleur personnelle."

In a letter to Cazalis, dated June 3, 1863, Mallarmé submits for his friend's evaluation almost all of his
poetry written in that year: two poems, one entitled "Les Fenêtres," and the other "L'Assaut," which was to be re-named "Le Château de l'espérance" in its definitive version. At the same time Mallarmé provides the most significant commentary to date concerning his thoughts about the Ideal. Remark ing upon the facility with which a poet friend, Emmanuel des Essarts, produces his works, Mallarmé writes:

Toutefois, j'aimerais mieux rédiger bien des actes d'avoué que des articles faits en vue de quelques pièces de cent sous. Je trouve qu'Emmanuel se fait beaucoup de tort en se laissant aller à la grande facilité: il commet trop aisément de ces sortes de pages brillantes et vides.

Il confond trop l'Idéal avec le réel. La sottise d'un poète moderne a été jusqu'à se désoler que "l'Action ne fût pas la sœur de Rêve." Emmanuel est de ceux qui regrettent cela. Mon Dieu, s'il en était autrement, si le Rêve était ainsi défloré et abaissé, où donc nous sauverions-nous, nous autres malheureux que la terre dégoûtée et qui n'avons que le Rêve pour refuge? O mon Henri, abreuve-toi d'Idéal. Le bonheur d'ici-bas est ignoble--il faut avoir les mains bien calleuses pour le ramasser. Dire "je suis heureux" c'est dire "je suis lâche" et plus souvent "je suis niais." Car il faut ne pas voir au-dessus de ce plafond de bonheur le ciel de l'Idéal ou fermer les yeux exprès.19

The two poems submitted with the letter develop the theme expressed with such conviction in the above passage, a theme very closely associated with that of impotence, i.e., the desire to escape. In both of these poems an Ideal is sought; in neither is it attained. Mallarmé provides his own commentary to the poem "Le Château de l'espérance" in this same letter:
D'une chevelure, qui a fait naître en mon cerveau
l'idée d'un drapeau, mon coeur, pris d'une ardeur mili-
taire, s'élance à travers d'affreux paysages et va as-
siéger le château fort de l'espérance pour y planter
cet étendard d'or fin. Mais l'insensé, après ce court,
moment de folie, aperçoit l'Espérance qui n'est qu'une
sorte de spectre voilé et stérile.

This is the idea expressed in the first strophe: "Ta pâle
chevelure ondoie/ Parmi les parfums de ta peau/ Comme fo-
lâtre un blanc drapeau/ Dont la soie au soleil blondoie."
(ll. 1-4) The poet's need for escape is developed in the
second strophe, where, extending the military imagery, the
poet's sobs are beating the drums, only to have them de-
stroyed by the weight of his tears: "Las de battre dans
les sanglots/ L'Air d'un tambour que l'eau défonce,/ Mon
cœur à son passé renonce/ Et, déroulant ta tresse en
flots...." (ll. 5-8) Renunciation of his past indicates
the escape; the direction of his escape is toward Hope.
The latter, however, turns out to be a "....sombre château
de cuivre/ Où larmoyant de nonchaloir,/ l'Espérance re-
brousse et lisse/ Sans qu'un astre pâle jaillisse/ La Nuit
noire comme un chat noir." (ll. 12-16) The image chosen
to convey the idea of sterility and the denial of hope is
dark and brooding, caught in its own useless back-and-
forth movement that goes nowhere. The black night is
likened to a black cat, which Hope is stroking much as one
would caress a pet. Rather than attack or destroy the
night, Hope, caught up in an aura of nonchaloir, appears
to be mollifying it instead. But Hope is prey to the same
anxieties which beset the poet-escapee. Ennui is revealed through the circularity of the movement of petting and caressing this black-cat night; frustration and anxiety surface in the fact that Hope is weeping. The negative attitude of Hope is reinforced by the fact that no star, however pale, emerges to push back the blackness of night. The darkness of this final scene, and the incessant, monotonous action, provide vivid contrast in color and movement with the first segment of the poem. Again, as in "Le Sonneur" and "Le Guignon," there is a progression from light to dark in the poem. The escape is thwarted. The object which served as a point of departure for this intellectual thrust was an erotic one, a strand of hair. Here, as in subsequent poems, the poet finds that there is no escape through eroticism.

What remains largely implicit in this poem of despair is made very explicit in "Les Fenêtres." This poem, a fine example of classic balance in which an analogy is established between "le moribond surnois" in the first five quatrains and the idealistic poet in the remaining five quatrains, speaks of escape on two levels: for the dying man, the escape longed for is on a more physical plane—away from the grimness of his hospital-bed death-reality, toward the sunset and his vision of golden galleys, where dream and life are one. The poignancy of the situation is that there is of course no escape. For the
poet, however, escape is on a more esthetic plane. He seeks here too to turn his back on life and find some sort of escape in the window panes, in reaction against the materiality of life. He speaks of a "dégoût de l'homme à l'âme dure, Vautré dans le bonheur, où ses seuls appétits mangent...." (ll. 21-23) The poet's flight is defined in the following manner: "Je fuis et je m'accroche à toutes les croisées/ D'où l'on tourne l'épaule à la vie, et, béni,/ Dans leur verre, lavé d'éternelles rosées,/ Que dore le matin chaste de l'Infini....." (ll. 25-28) Reacting against materiality and plenitude, he finds transcendence momentarily by means of these window panes which allow the eye to follow through to the azure beyond. This transcendence is defined in the following strophe: "Je me mire et me vois ange! et je meurs, et j'aime/ --Que la vitre soit l'art, soit la mysticité--/ A renaître, portant mon rêve en diadème,/ Au ciel antérieur où fleurit la beauté." (ll. 29-32) Just as in the first section of the poem the dying man had perceived through the window visions of golden galleys lying in the sun, the poet now perceives his own reflection, which he contemplates, and he becomes an angel in that reflection, which translates his transcendence. The poet then dies, i.e., to the world of material things and of base appetites which disgust him. He is pleasurably resuscitated in a process which he now equates with art and with mysticism, as if to say that
this process of rebirth comes through both these avenues, just as it has done so momentarily in the contemplation of himself in the panes. In his rebirth, the dream has become a crown, symbol of the poet's glory, his sacré. Significantly, this rebirth is effected in an anterior sky, i.e., the pure state from which the poet was forced to issue by accident of birth, and to assume human form. As in the first half of the poem dealing with the dying man, however, there is no escape. Just as the galleys the former had perceived were laden with memory, the transcendence of the poet comes to an end: "Mais, hélas! ici-bas est maître: sa hantise/ Vient m'écoeer parfois jusqu'en cet abri sûr,/ Et le vomissement impur de la Bête/ Me force à me boucher le nez devant l'azur." (ll. 33-36) The world of material reality intrudes upon his transcendence, as though the panes of glass persisted not only in reflecting his own angelism but the real world as well. The "abri sûr" is the world of transcendence that he has entered; the presence of the real (with its "vomissement impur de la Bête") in this pure haven forces him to hold his nose lest he be overwhelmed by nausea as he contemplates the Ideal.

Since transcendence has been momentary, since he too is subject to human foible and failure, he must find another avenue of escape: "Est-il moyen, ô Moi qui connais l'amertume,/ D'enfoncer le cristal par le monstre
The poet longs for a way of breaking through the glass, which reflects not only his dream but the monstre of "ici-bas", of "l'homme... vautré dans le bonheur," of "cette ordure" that is materiality. He wishes to flee, to take flight actually, with his featherless wings—to project himself bird-like into this azur which beckons beyond the panes. But he is keenly aware of his limitations; his wings, featherless, do not have the buoyancy necessary for sustaining flight. There is also an important second meaning: the image of the poet without the pen (sans plume), the poet who cannot give expression to what he feels. Flight (and it must be noted that flight is a frequent symbol for the creative élan in his later poetry) under these conditions of inadequacy involves a serious risk, that of falling throughout eternity, the poet having remained incapable of attaining his Ideal, of expressing his vision, and thus falling short of the absolute which derives from the creation of an immortal work of art. The poem ends on a humble and defeated note. This attempt to escape, as indeed any other, is a futile process. By trying to break away from one polar position to project himself toward the other, away from the Real toward the Ideal, through the smashing of the glass, the poet would perhaps fall victim to an even worse fate than the one he
presently laments.

By the end of 1863, Mallarmé has wed Maria Gerhard, obtained a diploma for his study of the English language, and received an appointment as a teacher of English in a lycée in Tournon, where he arrived in December. Here, as he entered into one of the most anguished periods of his life, he realized one of the most productive years of his entire literary career. When he arrived in Tournon with a new bride, a new profession, and high hopes for a successful new life, he was ill-prepared for what he was to find there. High hopes were quickly dashed, as his correspondence attests, by disappointment with the climate of Tournon and the rheumatism it brought, with his position which took so much of his time and offered so little reward, with the lodging which was cold and uninviting, with the people for whom he developed a great distaste. A brief excerpt from a letter to Albert Collignon written almost immediately upon his arrival provides ample testimony to his profound disillusionment: "...mais ici je ne veux connaître personne. Les habitants du noir village où je suis exilé vivent dans une intimité trop touchante avec les porcs pour que je ne les aie en horreur. Le cochon est ici l'esprit de la maison comme le chat autre part."21

In early January of 1864 another of his letters to a friend began with an apology for the delay in writing, contending, "... que je me suis trop ennuyé depuis un mois
pour ne pas avoir horreur de ma plume....."\(^{22}\) Yet Mallarmé shook himself from this torpor to finish "L'Azur," which remains the classic statement on the poet's obsession with sterility. He tells Cazalis in a letter what this poem has cost him in terms of physical and psychical energies expended:

Je l'ai travaillé ces derniers jours, et je ne te cacherais pas qu'il m'a donné infiniment de mal—outre qu'avant de prendre la plume, il fallait pour conquérir un moment de lucidité parfaite, terrasser ma navrante impuissance. Il m'a donné beaucoup de mal, parce que bannissant mille gracieusetés lyriques et beaux vers qui hantaient incessamment ma cervelle, j'ai voulu rester implacablement dans mon sujet. Je te jure qu'il n'y a pas un mot qui ne m'ait coûté plusieurs heures de recherche, et que le premier mot, qui revêt la première idée, outre qu'il tend lui-même à l'effet général du poème, sert encore à préparer le dernier. L'effet produit, sans une dissonance, sans une fioriture, même adorable, qui distrait,—voilà ce que je cherche.\(^{23}\)

As Mallarmé indicated, the poem opens with the idea of l'azur. "De l'éternel azur la sereine ironie/ Accable ...../ Le poète impuissant...." just as it terminates with that anguished cry so closely identified with Mallarmé's quest for the Ideal: "Je suis hanté. L'Azur! L'Azur! L'Azur! L'Azur!" The azure here is serenely ironic, serving only to heighten the poet's awareness of the pitiful inadequacy of his efforts, of his feeble potential to comprehend and give expression to the Ideal. The poet's genius is in a sense what brings unhappiness here because it is inadequate to the vision: "De l'éternel azur la sereine ironie/ Accable, belle indollement comme les fleurs,/ Le
poète impuissant qui maudit son génie/ A travers un désert stérile de Douleurs." (ll. 1-4) The gaze of l'azur is unbearable; flight is necessary. But flight where? Having no haven to flee to, he seeks a screen to block off l'azur from view, a screen of fog: "Brouillards, montez! Versez vos cendres monotones/ Avec de longs haillons de brume dans les cieux/ Qui noiera le marais livide des automnes/ Et bâtissez un grand plafond silencieux." (ll. 9-12) He invokes his Ennui to rise from its Lethean depths and close off with mud and reeds the holes that birds make in the screen that he has erected, through which l'azur is quick to filter. In an immense effort of will, as though in the hope that by proclaiming it so, it will be so, he pronounces the heavens dead: "Le Ciel est mort. — Vers toi, j'accours! donne, ô matière,/ L'oubli de l'Idéal cruel et du Péché/ A ce martyr qui vient partager la litière/ Où le bétail heureux des hommes est couché...." (ll. 21-24) Incapable of coping with l'azur, he proposes to turn to the material world, the monstre decried in "Les Fenêtres," in order to find release from his notion of the Ideal and of Sin, that avowal of human fallibility which contributes to his inertia too. There the vulgar herd of man finds contentment, and he hopes to continue to exist there until death finally overtakes him: "Lugubrement bâiller vers un trépas obscur." (l. 28) Since by an act of will he has abolished the heavens (or so he thinks),
he feels his mind is now emptied of the dream, that it will cease to probe into the mysteries of the Ideal: "...ma cervelle vidée/ ...n'a plus l'art d'attifer la sanglotante idée....." (ll. 25-27) But as was the case with the ephemeral screen he sought to construct, this act of will is ineffectual: "En vain! L'Azur triomphe, et je l'entends qui chante/ Dans les cloches. Mon âme, il se fait voix pour plus/ Nous faire peur avec sa victoire méchante,/ Et du métal vivant sort en bleus angélus." (ll. 29-32) As in "Le Sonneur," the bell has become the voice of l'Azur, as the hantise is now fed by auditory rather than visual imagery. The sound rolls through the screen of fog constructed earlier in the poem, piercing to the poet's very soul: "....et traverse/ Ta native agonie ainsi qu'un glaive sûr." (ll. 33-34) The symbol of the sword found in "Le Guignon" recurs, no longer brandished by an angel, the instrument of l'azur, but by l'azur itself. The poem ends with the tortured outcry quoted above. Here, as in "Les Fenêtres," flight is the first impulse, but again there is no escape.

There is strong emphasis on emptiness in this poem, an emptiness which translates an état d'âme of the poet. His soul is characterized as empty in the second stanza; in the seventh, it is his brain which has been emptied of its ability to decorate "la sanglotante idée." In this vacant state it resembles an empty paint can standing at
the base of a wall which, by its need of paint, only dramatizes the emptiness of the can. This emptiness is an obvious expression of the poet's discouragement before the enormity of the task he feels is his. Emptiness characterizes this world too, which is termed here "un désert stérile de Douleurs" against which the poet's genius stands in impotent relief. The eternal azure is an infinity of empty space beneath which the poet would like to build a ceiling, thereby placing more finite limits upon his ambitions and accomplishments. The ultimate and inevitable triumph of the blue finds expression in that most insubstantial of phenomena—the song of the bells, the abstract quality of which allows it to fly unhindered by the more tangible earth-bound mists.

Mallarmé provides a rare commentary upon his own poem in the previously mentioned letter to Cazalis, in which the general and the specific implications of the theme are given:

Pour débuter d'une façon plus large, et approfondir l'ensemble, je ne paraís pas dans la première strophe. L'Azur torture l'impuissant en général. Dans la seconde, on commence à se douter, par ma fuite devant le ciel possesseur, que je souffre de cette cruelle maladie. Je prépare dans cette strophe encore, par une forfanterie blasphématoire, "Et quelle nuit hagard," l'idée étrange d'invoquer les brouillards. La prière au "cher ennui" confirme mon impuissance. Dans la troisième strophe, je suis forcé comme l'homme qui voit réussir son voeu acharné.

La quatrième commence par une exclamation grotesque d'écolier délivré: "Le ciel est mort!" Et tout de suite, muni de cette admirable certitude, j'implore
la Matière. Voilà bien la joie de l'Impuissant. Las
du mal qui me ronge je veux goûter au bonheur commun
de la foule, et attendre la mort obscure.... Je dis
"je veux." Mais l'ennemi est un spectre, le ciel mort
revient, et je l'entends qui chante dans les cloches
bleues. Il passe indolent et vainqueur, sans se salir
à cette brume et me transperce simplement. A quoi je
m'écrie, plein d'orgueil et ne voyant pas là un juste
châtiment à ma lâcheté, que j'ai une immense agonie.
Je veux fuir encore, mais je sens mon tort et avoue
que je suis hanté. Il fallait toute cette poignante
révélation pour motiver le cri sincère et bizarre de
la fin, l'"azur"... Tu le vois, pour ceux qui, comme
Emmanuel et comme toi, cherchent dans un poème autre
chose que la musique des vers, il y a là un vrai drame.
Et c'a été une terrible difficulté de combiner, dans
une juste harmonie, l'élément dramatique hostile à
l'idée de poésie pure et subjective avec la sérénité
et le calme de lignes nécessaires à la Beauté.24

This commentary, particularly the latter lines, re-
veals the close relationship between the theme of the poem
and the anxiety that issues from the effort to produce it.
A large part of the problem in the composition of this
poem has been that drama, with its own demands on litera-
ture, can be reconciled only with great difficulty to the
demands of pure poetry. There are two literary worlds in
conflict here: that of the theater and that of pure po-
ey. The images, carefully chosen to impart a feeling of
yet another desperate struggle between two worlds, that of
"l'éternel azur" and that of "le marais livide", suggest
the complex psychological states that Mallarmé will trans-
late into increasingly denser poetry. It is significant
that Mallarmé considered the triumph of l'azur in the voice
of the bells a just punishment for his would-be renuncia-
tion of the ideal.
The next poem that Mallarmé was to finish came very close upon the heels of "L'Azur", following it by approximately a month (February, 1864) in the estimate of the annotators of the Pléiade edition of the Oeuvres. However, the tone of the new poem, "Las de l'amer repos," is very different; whereas "L'Azur" is still full of the spirit of rebellion, the more recent poem bespeaks inordinate lassitude. The idea of the need to escape is still fundamental to the poem, but gone are the invocations, the exclamations, the frenzied efforts to evade l'azur. Instead, the poet makes a simple statement of a wish: "Je veux délaisser l'art vorace..." (l. 11) and then sketches what he deems a less demanding art medium than his own.

Las de l'amer repos où ma paresse offense
Une gloire pour qui jadis j'ai fui l'enfance
Adorable des bois de roses sous l'azur
Naturel, et plus las sept fois du pacte dur
De creuser par veillée une fosse nouvelle
Dans le terrain avare et froid de ma cervelle,
Fossoyeur sans pitié pour la stérilité,
--Que dire à cette Aurore, ô Rêves, visité
Par les roses, quand, peur de ses roses livides,
Le vaste cimetièr e unira les trous vides?
(ll. 1-10)

The image of the empty mind that was developed in "L'Azur" recurs in this strophe. The mind is referred to as "le terrain avare et froid de ma cervelle," but this is a very particular kind of field--the cemetery. The poet, in those nightly vigils during which he seeks to capture his dream, is likened to the pitiless gravedigger who each night digs a new grave in a cold and unyielding earth.
Lassitude weighs heavily upon this first strophe, a lassitude stemming from Ennui as well as from the fruitless effort to produce. The vast cemetery of the poet's mind is on the verge of becoming nothing but a solid fabric of empty holes. Characteristically, the poet seeks escape, this time by turning his back on what he terms "the voracious art of a cruel land"—the rigorously demanding art that the sum total of his experiences (friends, past history, genius) has thrust upon him, with its resultant agony: "Je veux délaisser l'Art vorace d'un pays/ Cruel, et, souriant aux reproches vieillis/ Que me font mes amis, le passé, le génie,/ Et ma lampe qui sait pourtant mon agonie,/ Imiter le Chinois au cœur limpide et fin...." (ll. 11-15) He seeks to portray an alternative that would make his life bearable—to imitate the Chinese artist whose most perfect expression is the reproduction in miniature of a flower on a porcelain cup. The flower is not rich in detail, particularized; it is rather a pure abstraction, a flower that has become an intimate part of the poet's psyche, "grafted unto the blue filigree of his soul": "Imiter le Chinois au cœur limpide et fin/ De qui l'extase pure est de peindre la fin/ Sur ses tasses de neige à la lune ravie/ D'une bizarre fleur qui parfume sa vie/ Transparente, la fleur qu'il a sentie enfant,/ Au filigrane bleu de l'Âme se greffant." (ll. 15-20) The same abstraction, through stylization, appears in the landscape
he would paint—a "young" landscape, young perhaps in the sense of simplified, uncomplicated by a lot of externals that would rob it of its essential simplicity and beauty, one that, like the flower, arises from associations with childhood and is intimately associated with his emotional reality:

Et, la mort telle avec le seul rêve du sage,
Serein, je vais choisir un jeune paysage,
Que je peindrais encore sur les tasses, distrait.
Une ligne d'azur mince et pâle serait
Un lac, parmi le ciel de porcelaine nue,
Un clair croissant perdu par un [sic] blanche nue
Trempe sa corne calme en la glace des eaux,
Non loin de trois grands cils d'émeraude, roseaux.

(11. 21-28)

The inevitable azure is there, but it is reduced to a thin pale line which in this context has become a lake, assuming relief on the cup against a sky of empty porcelain. A crescent moon, half-hidden by clouds, dips into the frozen waters of the lake. The landscape is completed by three large reeds, which are described as large emerald eyelashes. What seems most significant about this landscape is that it is a reduction, an abstraction, a move toward simplification, toward negation. Azure, which occupies such a large part of Mallarmé's young life and his thought, pales virtually into insignificance as it is miniaturized. The crescent moon, which rises out of the heavens, dips now into the lake to symbolize a kind of bridge between the absolute, now depicted as all-white (the empty porcelain of the cup-sky), and the virtually subjugated azure,
which has now been reduced to a more human level. This bridge, dipping into the lake, emphasizes the descent of l'azur from its dominating former position to a more passive one. But it is not totally passive, however; its ironic gaze as depicted in "L'Azur" is echoed here by the fact that the lake-azure complex now assumes the contour of an eye, with three large eyelashes provided by the reeds.

This whole last movement of the poem is prefaced with the line, "Et la mort telle avec le seul rêve du sage...", as though to equate death with the "sole dream of the wise man." In this connection Fowlie remarks that the idea of death "is seemingly related to the serenity of the artist and the simplified landscape he is painting. For Mallarmé the work of the poet is precisely a simplification of the world, an adding to it of the void and the night."\(^25\) Death and the poetic act are linked here because "death and poetry are two processes of simplification and magical transformation."\(^26\) Richard echoes this idea as he comments upon the most significant new element injected in this poem: "Cette fleur est fanée, ce parfum s'évapore. Mais voici le nouveau: au lieu de laisser vibrer en lui le suspens de cette évaporation, Mallarmé se fixe maintenant la tâche d'en suivre la disparition même. (Underlining mine.) A travers la transparence enneigée de la mémoire, il trouve sa seule extase à en peindre la fin."\(^27\)
A shift of emphasis has therefore occurred, a shift that will have more and more bearing on Mallarmé's work through the remainder of his lifetime: a shift toward the suggestion of the void by depicting the disappearance of things, rather than the things themselves. The stylization found in Oriental art is an important first step in that direction, for the pictorial, concrete qualities are minimized there almost to the point of extinction. Richard refers to this tendency toward abstraction as "cette invasion de néant," which is still limited in its progress by the presence of the line of azure, pale and thin. This is the last boundary to be crossed before confronting the void itself.

Escape serves as the theme for another of Mallarmé's poems from this same month of February, 1864—escape this time from consciousness, by means of the carnal act. The poem is "Angoisse." Originally entitled "A une putain," it follows the Baudelairean vein. The poet asks a prostitute for a moment's oblivion, thus restating the theme of escape from sterility and the death that it implies: "Je demande à ton lit le lourd sommeil sans songes/ Planant sous les rideaux inconnus du remords,/ Et que tu peux goûter après tes noirs mensonges,/ Toi qui sur le néant en sais plus que les morts." (ll. 5-8) Whereas the prostitute undoubtedly suffers less from this sterility because her stone-like breast harbors no crime, the poet,
who obviously feels very guilty about something, and perhaps about this very liaison (not for moral considerations as much as for the feeling that he is betraying his calling by seeking escape), flees from reality into "le lourd sommeil sans songes," haunted by his shroud, fearful of dying when he has to sleep alone. "Car le Vice, rongeant ma native noblesse/ M'a comme toi marqué de sa stérilité,/ Mais tandis que ton sein de pierre est habité// Par un cœur que la dent d'aucun crime ne blesse,/ Je fuis, pâle, défait, hanté par mon linceul,// Ayant peur de mourir lorsque je couche seul." (ll. 9-14) The guilt of the poet is important, attributable to what he terms "le Vice" in the poem. The idea of vice or sin has appeared earlier in his poetry; in "L'Azur" the poet sought forgetfulness "of the cruel Ideal and of Sin." The association of the Ideal and of Sin is found again in a poème de jeunesse entitled "L'Enfant prodigue, I": "Chez celles dont l'amour est une orange sèche/ Qui garde un vieux parfum sans le nectar vermeil/ J'ai cherché l'Infini qui fait que l'homme pèche,/ Et n'ai trouvé qu'un Gouffre ennemi du sommeil." (ll. 1-4) The quest for the Ideal leads the poet into sin in an effort to escape it; this sin may be variously the consort ing of the poet with prostitutes, as in this poem written when Mallarmé was nineteen years old, or it may be the human limitation factor which leads him, long after he has abandoned any concept of Christian morality, to escape
from the hantise de l'azur, as depicted in "L'Azur." The idea of vice or sin seems to be operable on two planes: the moral and the esthetic.

Escape into love unblemished serves as a unifying theme in "Le Pître châtié" and "Soupir," both of which date from the Spring of 1864 also. The initial version of the former, which is much simpler than its definitive version, is a simple and uncomplicated statement of the theme of escape through love: the poet-clown turns his back on the Muse, flees the shoddy tent in which he exercises his vocation, to plunge into the eyes (compared to lakes) of his loved one. The quotes will be taken from the definitive version, as will be the case throughout this study. "Yeux, lacs avec ma simple ivresse de renaître/ Autre que l'his-trion qui du geste évoquais/ Comme plume la suie ignoble des quinquets,/ J'ai trouvé dans le mur de toile une fenêtre." (ll. 1-4) Even as he plunges into the lake of forgetfulness, however, the poet is presented as a traitor, which will be explained in the second tercet. Each stroke of this swimmer seems to create a new grave for the obsessed poet who seems to disappear with his obsessions, virgin-pure, into each successive sepulcher: "De ma jambe et des bras limpide nageur traître,/ A bonds multipliés, reniant le mauvais/ Hamlet! c'est comme si dans l'onde j'innovais/ Mille sépulcres pour y vierge disparaître." (ll. 5-8) These waters, however, turn glacial cold and
the clown-poet, who is in the process of being reborn at each instant, feels exhilaration turn gradually into dread. As his greasepaint disappears, washed away by the waters of the lake, he comes to realize that this make-up was the very consecration of his genius: "Hilare or de cymbale à des poings irrité,/ Tout à coup le soleil frappe la nudité/
Qui pure s'exhala de ma fraîcheur de nacre,// Rance nuit de la peau quand sur moi vous passiez, Ne sachant pas, in-grat! que c'était tout mon sacre,/ Ce fard noyé dans l'eau perfide des glaciers." (ll. 9-14) In short, he has nothing left. It is from adversity, from the continuous struggle against the ineffable, that Mallarmé drew his greatest inspiration. To renounce it or to sublimate it would deprive him of the very soil of adversity from which sprang whatever genius he felt he had. Although Mallarmé revised the original version significantly during the following twenty years, ascribing additional facets of meaning to many of the lines, the general development of the thought, as well as the idea itself, remains fundamentally unchanged.

There are several indications of the poet's attitude toward himself and his role in this sonnet, notably in the title, where the pitre, or clown, is introduced. Again in the second line, he refers to himself as a his-trion, which bears the connotation of a second-rate actor. In the second quatrains, he speaks of his newly acquired
freedom (the image of the clown swimming vigorously in the lake) as a renunciation of "le mauvais Hamlet," the tragic hero who for Mallarmé represents the incarnation of indecision and the inability to act. Hamlet is therefore symbolic of the poet in his inability to realize his dream. Hamlet is bad in this context for two reasons. The histrion, with his seriously limited capacities, can only approximate, as he performs in the Muse's sideshow tent, what a more skilled actor would make of the role. This Hamlet is bad in the further sense that he cannot find a solution to his problems. The histrion takes desperate measures to break through this inertia, risking all in the hope of gaining all; but the vigor manifest in the first two quatrains (troué, à bonds multipliés, reniant) gradually disperses in the tercets (s'exhalait, passiez, noyé), and whimpers into nothingness. For the poet, the implication of this abortive attempt to escape is that his poems, even if they are not the absolute expressions he would have them be, are all he has, and to find oblivion in love is to be a traitor to himself and to his dream. Robert Greer Cohn sees the resolution of the poem as

...a confession of provisional personal failure to win through to the highest realms, but mainly it is an exaggeration of the truism that pure intentions are not enough, that art requires perspiration (as well as inspiration), compromise, technique, showmanship. The central theme is merely the need to stay "down here" in order to create..., the need to remain a mere performer, a "clown". An idea that is disappointing in terms of Mallarmé's wildest ambitions, but which speaks for his wisdom.
The effort to escape has led the poet to punishment, a punishment deriving from that very escape. Mallarmé, who saw Hamlet as the Hero of the stage (an idea subsequently discussed in connection with *Igitur* and *Un Coup de dés*), and who dreamed of performing the role of Hamlet himself, imagines such a performance here, only the performance is visualized as the real-life drama that he, Mallarmé, was constantly living out in his anguished search. The performance is second-rate, hence the need for escape; but escape leaves the poet stripped of whatever "sacre" he was endowed with, empty and all the more impotent for the ineffectual effort to escape. Fowle concludes: "Only in revolting against one's faith, does one learn its value. The clown had to leave his tent and lose his travesty in order to comprehend the mystery of his calling and the deep kind of liberty which resides within one's restrictions and patterns of living."  

In "Soupir," written in April, 1864, there is another love-object, but this one is addressed as "calme soeur," the word "calme" setting the tone for the entire meditation. The poem carries with it the utterance of an aspiration, and a view of this aspiration denied: "Mon âme vers ton front où rêve, ô calme soeur,/ Un automne jonché de taches de rousseur,/ Et vers le ciel errant de ton oeil angélique,/ Monte, comme dans un jardin mélancolique,/ Fidèle, un blanc jet d'eau soupiré vers..."
l'Azur!" (ll. 1-5) This first movement of the poem is one of ascent: "Mon âme....monte....," but this ascent is almost immediately negated, for it is likened to the white jet of water in a fountain that sighs after the Azure. The image itself implies negation: the water must return to the basin because of physical laws, and the verb "soupirer" introduces a note of dejection and resignation which confirms this descent. The point of departure for this abortive ascent is once again the eye, suggesting the blue of the sky, a sky significantly paled by the autumn haze (therefore "attendri") and therefore seemingly less hostile and mocking at this point: "--Vers l'Azur attendri d'Octobre pâle et pur/ Qui mire aux grands bassins sa langueur infinie/ Et laisse, sur l'eau morte où la fauve agonie/ Des feuilles erre au vent et creuse un froid sillon,/ Se traîner le soleil jaune d'un long rayon."

(ll. 6-10) The poet's hope is short-lived. The tension of the first half of the poem is dissolved by the image of the fountain, as well as by the abulia-suggesting vocabulary (mire, langueur, morte, laisse ... se traîner....). Even the light reflected in the basin has an air of negation about it since the yellow sun drags itself out in a long ray. Lassitude triumphs.

The hantise de l'azur in this poem is less anguished because l'azur is less relentless. On this autumn day it seems pale and pure, as it languishes in the yellowing ray
in the basin. This description recalls vividly the image of l'azur forged in "Las de l'am er repos," in which it is reduced to a thin line. "Et l'azur ne s'accorde à nous que pour mourir en nous...." Once again, the picture of l'azur is less sinister than the ironic, mocking portrait shown in earlier poems; it too seems subject to the laws of change. Richard finds in the emphasis on the fall (la chute) in this poem, however, not the decay associated with death; the Ideal seems to have diminished power, but there is another facet to consider, that is, that the fallen object affords proof that there is a transcendance, which it bears witness to.

The mood of "Tristesse d'été" is no longer an autumn mood, but the hot summer of passion. Written also in 1864, it describes yet another attempt at escape through physical love. It opens on a note of sadness, however, as the title indicates: "Le soleil, sur le sable, ô lutteuse endormie,/ En l'or de tes cheveux chauffe un bain langoureux/ Et, consumant l'encens sur ta joue ennemie,/ Il mêle avec les pleurs un breuvage amoureux." (ll. 1-4) The girl is weeping. The cause for her tears is revealed in the second strophe: "De ce blanc flamboiement l'immuable acalmie/ T'a fait dire, attristée, ô mes baisers peureux,/ "Nous ne serons jamais une suele momie/ Sous l'antique désert et les palmiers heureux." (ll. 5-8) Passion has been consumed, and with its passing, the sense of total union
briefly enjoyed, which fact the girl laments. She laments, weeps, falls asleep. But not so for the poet who is more given to contemplation. After the act of physical love which is suggested by the sensuality of the imagery in the first quatrain, the poet remains pensive, and finds yet another kind of immersion, another kind of flight: "Mais ta chevelure est une rivière tiède,/ Où noyer sans frissons l'âme qui nous obsède/ Et trouver ce Néant que tu ne con­nais pas!" (ll. 9-11) Fascinated, as Baudelaire before him, by the erotic power of hair, he wishes to put it to quite a different end from that suggested by Baudelaire— not to ride the wave of its evocative powers into new realms of sense experience, but rather to seek in it that oblivion he had sought from the prostitute in "Angoisse." The separateness, the isolation of the man, is emphasized by the fact that the girl has no awareness of the void he seeks. As though her hair were not sufficient to project him into that void, he turns then to the girl's tears drying on her cheek and now mingled with her make-up: "Je goûterai le fard pleuré par tes paupières,/ Pour voir s'il sait donner au cœur que tu frappas/ L'insensibilité de l'azur et des pierres." (ll. 12-14) Human passion has not sufficed to make these two creatures one; the brilliance of the summer sky remains, and indeed, the heat of their passion has only served as another reminder of it. Will this "breuvage amoureux" which he finds on her cheek afford
the release he is seeking? Dreading l'azur, he wishes to appropriate its very qualities so that he may in turn be less sensitive to the pangs of love and to the concomitant awareness that love and the escape it affords are ephemeral.

In October of 1864, Mallarmé begins to work on Hérodiade, but his initial efforts were both frustrating and enervating, leaving him in a state of virtual collapse by winter's end. Discussion of this undertaking will be reserved for the following chapter since the work fits into Mallarmé's middle period more easily than in the first. There is another poem, however, dating from May of 1865, which must be considered here, i.e., "Brise Marine", one of his most anthologized works, which offers a kind of summation of the theme of flight before the implacable azur. Mallarmé himself, in commenting upon the poem to Madame H. Le Josne, states simply that it expresses:

"... ce désir inexpliqué, qui nous prend parfois de quitter ceux qui nous sont chers, et de partir."

Flight receives an orientation in this poem that it has not had since "Les Fenêtres," written two years earlier. Instead of seeking to efface himself in some love-object, or to separate himself from l'azur by some sort of screen, here he flees in the direction of the azur itself. But there seems no illusion about reaching l'azur itself, nor the desire to do so. The poem expresses contentment with some middle state, similar to that enjoyed by sea-birds
suspended between the sea and the sky: "La chair est triste, hélas! et j'ai lu tous les livres./ Fuir! là-bas fuir! Je sens que des oiseaux sont ivres/ D'être parmi l'écume inconnue et les cieux!" (ll. 1-3) There are no considerations, however pressing, which suffice to quell this impulse to flight. As the poem develops, the reader becomes aware that the azure is no longer the object which provokes the desire for flight:

Rien, ni les vieux jardins reflétés par les yeux
Ne retiendra ce coeur qui dans la mer se trempe
O nuits! ni la clarté déserte de ma lampe
Sur le vide papier que la blancheur défend
Et ni la jeune femme allaitant son enfant.
Je partirai! Steamer balançant ta mâture,
Lève l'ancre pour une exotique nature!

(ll. 4-10)

The heart of the poet is now swimming in the sea; the poet is clamoring to reach some exotic spot. What he seeks to escape is "la clarté déserte de ma lampe," and "le vide papier que la blancheur défend," images of what he feels is his sterility; he would also escape "la jeune femme allaitant son enfant," symbol of those daily concerns which thwart him in his efforts to work and which produce the feeling of Ennui that seems the real threat: "Un Ennui, désolé par les cruels espoirs,/ Croit encore à l'adieu suprême des mouchoirs!/ Et, peut-être, les mâts, invitant les orages/ Sont-ils de ceux qu'un vent penche sur les naufragés/ Perdus, sans mâts, ni fertiles îlots..../ Mais, ô mon coeur, entends le chant des matelots!" (ll. 11-16)

In this second strophe all the momentum generated
by a hope of escape lapses back upon itself into inertia. Boredom has led the poet into the belief that leave-taking remained within the realm of possibility. Ennui has fallen victim to hope and has been deceived. There is a feeble, half-hearted gesture to rationalize the inertia, to convince himself that no fertile island awaited him anyway. The poem ends on a passive, if poignant, note, expressing in now subdued terms the initial urge that led to the frenzied thrust toward freedom.

There remains another poem, written in October of 1865, which deals with the theme of l'azur, "Don du poème." But the theme is treated from a different standpoint. There is no effort made here to escape from the hantise; the subject matter is not flight, whether inspired by the hantise or by an overwhelming sense of ennui. Here stands the poet-creator, who has addressed himself to a work and, that work completed, sits in judgment of it, measuring it against his ideal vision. For this reason it heralds a more mature approach on the part of the author vis-à-vis his particular problem. It belongs to another period in the work and life of Mallarmé, and will therefore be considered in the following chapter.
Notes

2Ibid., p. 49.
3Ibid., p. 54.
5Ibid., p. 9.
6Ibid., p. 33.
7Ibid., p. 34.
8Ibid., p. 41.
9Mallarmé, Oeuvres, p. 28. All subsequent references to Mallarmé's poetry will be from this edition, and will bear line references in the text of the study.
10Mallarmé, Correspondance, I, 31.
11Ibid., p. 24.
12Ibid., pp. 30-31.
13Mondor, Vie, pp. 47-143 passim.
14Ibid., p. 28.
15Ibid., pp. 35-36.
17Mallarmé, Correspondance, I, 32.
18Mondor, Vie, p. 71.
19Mallarmé, Correspondance, I, 90.
20Ibid., p. 91.
21Ibid., p. 98.
22Ibid., p. 102.
23Ibid., pp. 103-104.
24Ibid., pp. 104-105.
26Ibid., p. 248.
27Richard, L'Univers, p. 69.
28Ibid., p. 69.
30Fowlie, Mallarmé, p. 94.
31Richard, L'Univers, p. 59.
32Ibid., p. 60.
33Mallarmé, Correspondance, I, 200.
CHAPTER II

YEARS OF CRISIS

The period of Mallarmé's metaphysical crisis, which began in the mid-1860's and continued throughout the remainder of this decade, is important as a turning point for his poetry as regards both theme and technique. The crisis itself must be considered in detail, as well as the works which are interwoven in the crisis, in order to appreciate the symbolic content of the poetry produced by Mallarmé in the remaining years of his life.

By 1865 Mallarmé has abandoned the theme of the hantise de l'azur, which until this time has afforded the richest thematic source for the expression of his fear of remaining unproductive. He does not abandon the obsession of the Ideal, however; his correspondence, as well as his poetry, continues to speak of sterility and impotence, indicating that he has begun to measure his work against the criterion of ideal purity. There also occurs in his correspondence from 1864 on, increasing mention of the difficulty of his medium, and with just cause, for he has begun to restructure his medium to make it reflect a more complex vision of reality, hence, making it more difficult. The idea of the difficult medium will acquire prominence
in the symbolic content of his poetry. But too, the idea of the Void develops during this middle period, contributing an important new light under which to view his work. Mallarmé comes to consider each work as something wrested from the Void; he uses this very struggle as an important thematic element. The Void contributes thematically in another way: he becomes fascinated with the disappearance of things, or with the absence of things, and focuses his attention increasingly upon these aspects of reality.

October of 1864 is one of the outstanding dates in the life of Mallarmé, for it is then that he undertakes the writing of Hérodiade, a work destined to cause him more anguish than any other of his compositions. This work brings the metaphysical crisis to a head, for in the labor of composing it, he comes face to face with the Void. Mondor and Jean-Aubry, in the Pléiade edition of Mallarmé's works, relate his awakening and rapidly increasing interest in the subject of Hérodiade during the several months preceding that autumn of 1864. The poet confides to Cazalis his anxiety concerning the work once it is begun, in terms significant for his obsession with sterility: "J'ai enfin commencé mon Hérodiade. Avec terreur car j'invente une langue qui doit nécessairement jaillir d'une poétique très nouvelle, que je pourrais définir en ces deux mots: Peindre non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit."

This sentence suggests the shimmering movement of light
that is later found in the works of the impressionist painters; it also serves to define a facet of the Symbolist technique. This effort to depict "the effect produced" by things leads him into closer study of his language, into a re-ordering of the elements of the sentence, into a choice of vocabulary that reflects multiple facets of meaning. As never before he takes liberties with syntax; ellipsis becomes more thoroughly established; inversions and convolutions, appositions, ambiguous syntactical relationships abound. In effect, Mallarmé has been led into the creation of a new poetic idiom. Gone is the facile content of the earlier poems expressing his hantise. Gradually, his poetry becomes more difficult to penetrate as it is made to reflect a more complex reality. This is an important consideration in the discussion of Mallarmé's poetry and his esthetic; his own metaphysical quest leads him into complex conclusions which he seeks to weave into his work. These conclusions revolve around the presence of the Void and the loss of faith in the Ideal, the Dream, that he has yearned to apprehend in the first period of his literary creation. As he becomes increasingly convinced of the certainty of the Void, he works to enmesh this very Void, through negation, into the fabric of his work.

There seems to be a suggestion of all these considerations in the letter he wrote to Cazalis in March of 1865:
Je me suis mis sérieusement à ma tragédie d’Hérodiade..., moi, stérile et crépusculaire, j’ai pris un sujet effrayant, dont les sensations, quand elles sont vives, sont amenées jusqu'à l'atrocité et, si elles flottent, ont l'attitude étrange du mystère. Et mon vers, il fait mal par instants et blesse comme du fer! J'ai, du reste, là, trouvé une façon intime et singulière de peindre, et de noter des impressions très fugitives. Ajoute, pour plus de terreur, que ces impressions se suivent comme dans une symphonie, et que je suis souvent des journées entières à me demander si celle-ci peut accompagner celle-là, quelle est leur parenté, et leur effet... Tu juges que je fais peu de vers en une semaine.....

Mallarmé's agony over his medium could only be compounded by the trials he had to undergo both in his family and at the lycée. In his letters he reveals that the birth of his daughter Geneviève during that winter robs the household of peace and quiet, which are so necessary to his labors. As for his concerns about school problems, these are graphically depicted farther on in the letter quoted above:

A chaque instant, mes plus beaux élans ou de rares inspirations, que je ne retrouve plus, sont interrompus par le hideux travail de pédagogue, et quand je reviens, avec des papiers au derrière et des bonshommes sur mon manteau, je suis si fatigué que je ne puis que me reposer.

Mallarmé fears for his work and for his own mental health to the point of writing to Cazalis in November of 1864 that he will write no more verse: "Pour les vers, je suis fini, je crois: il y a de grandes lacunes dans mon cerveau qui est devenu incapable d'une pensée suivie et d'application." In late December, again to Cazalis, he states: "J'arrive là, fatigué de mes classes, qui me
volent cette année presque toutes mes heures, et Geneviève continue à me briser la tête avec ses cris...."6 Incapable of experiencing the pleasure of accomplishing his work, he can allow himself no pleasure at all: "....et je cherche à ne voir aucune joie afin de ne pas croire que c'est elle la préférée, et la cause de ma coupable stérilité."7 Four days later, in a letter to Mistral, he defines his impasse: "Je suis dans une cruelle position: les choses de la vie m'apparaissent trop vaguement pour que je les aime et je ne crois vivre que lorsque je fais des vers, or je m'ennuie parce que je ne travaille pas et d'une autre côté, je ne travaille pas parce que je m'en­nuie. Sortir de là."8 January of 1865 finds him apparently in the depths of despair: "Etre un vieillard, fini, à vingt-trois ans, lorsque tous ceux qu'on aime vivent dans la lumière et les fleurs.... à l'âge des chefs-d'oeuvre!"9 Even nature is hostile in this city which he finds so ugly. Thus, "...quand vient l'heure sainte de Jacob, la lutte avec l'Idéal, je n'ai pas la puissance d'aligner deux mots. Et ce sera de même le lendemain!"10

Circumstance conspires, therefore, to make Hérodiade particularly difficult of accomplishment. Add to this the fact that he hopes to produce a work on a significantly larger scale than that of the Hérodiade ultimately consigned to posterity. Mallarmé wishes to make of it a dramatic work, in verse, to be performed at the
Comédie Francaise. Moreover, this Hérodiade is to be completely the product of his own imagination, in his words "...purement rêvé, et absolument independant de l'histoire.... Mais ferai-je jamais ma tragédie, mon triste cerveau est incapable de toute application, et ressemble aux ruisseaux balayés par les portières. Je suis un lâche, ou peut-être un malheureux abrutit et éteint qui retrouve parfois une lueur, mais ne sait resplendir pendant huit cents vers."\(^{11}\) In June Hérodiade is temporarily abandoned: "J'ai laissé Hérodiade pour les cruels hivers: cette oeuvre solitaire m'avait stérilisé et, dans l'intervalle, je rime un intermède héroïque, dont le héros est un Faune."\(^{12}\)

Although Mallarmé abandons the struggle with Hérodiade, it is not for very long. When he resumes it, however, in the following fall (1865), his conception of the work has changed: "Je commence Hérodiade, non plus tragédie, mais poème...."\(^ {13}\) The change is prompted by the fact that his friends Banville and Coquelin, who had encouraged the original conception, "n'y ont pas rencontré l' anecdote nécessaire que demande le public, et m'ont affirmé que cela n'intéresserait que les poètes."\(^ {14}\) Mallarmé evidently wrote the "Scène d'Hérodiade" first, which is in reality the middle portion of the definitive version, apparently finishing it by late 1865, and then the "Ouverture Ancienne," which he had sketched in its main lines by March,
1866. The "Cantique de Saint Jean" dates from a later, unspecified period. These separate parts were not finished of a piece, however, for the work remained under scrutiny and development throughout the remainder of Mallarmé's life. In 1886, in 1891, in 1896 and again in 1898, the year of his death, there are mentions in his correspondence of his intention to "achever Hérodiade." In addition to these three sections, which comprise the work as presented in the Fléiade edition, there was a series of fragments which Mallarmé apparently planned to incorporate in the final version, had he ever been able to finish the work. Gardner Davies, in his Les Noces d'Hérodiade, establishes what he thinks must have been the plan for the entire work.

This evident obsession with and abiding dedication to the perfection of this major work leads to the conclusion that Hérodiade represents more to the poet than just a character study with which he became fascinated. Viewing it as an illustration of Mallarmé's "intense love for a poem and the desperate difficulty he underwent in achieving it," Fowlie concludes: "On one level of interpretation, Hérodiade is a cold virginal princess who stands aloof from the world of men, but she may also represent the poem itself, so difficult to seize and possess that the poet ultimately despairs of knowing it." Her splendor and her magnificence are symbolic of sterility, for her beauty is cold and inaccessible, and therefore it "summarizes the
void of life and hence translates a philosophical concept." Beauty and sadness have been equated by earlier nineteenth-century poets: an awareness of the beautiful stimulates a feeling of sadness as well as exaltation. A knowledge of the beautiful evokes sadness because man realizes that any demonstration of its presence on earth is but a partial view of Ideal Beauty. And it is ephemeral besides. This is the idea embodied in Keats' Ode on Melancholy in which he stresses the fact that melancholy derives from an awareness of the transience of beauty, and again in his "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," in which, after experiencing Ideal Beauty, the hero is given to self-destruction because he cannot accept anything less. Beauty in Hérodiade is frigid and concentrated and immobile. Her initial position is one of negation of the natural ebb and flow of life.

Hérodiade is based upon the legend of Salomé and Saint John the Baptist; it re-creates the incident of the decapitation, but here all similarity with the legend ends. The heroine bears the name of the mother rather than her own, for several reasons which Mallarmé explained: "La plus belle page de mon œuvre sera celle qui ne contiendra que ce nom divin Hérodiade. Le peu d'inspiration que j'ai eu, je le dois à ce nom, et je crois que si mon héroïne s'était appelée Salomé, j'eusse inventé ce mot sombre, et rouge comme une grenade ouverte, Hérodiade." The sonority of the name, therefore, appealed to him. Furthermore,
he wished, as indicated earlier, to create a work different from those which the Salomé legend was inspiring in his own day. This is the idea expressed in his notes which Gardner Davies includes just before the "Prelude" in the reconstructed version:

J'ai laissé le nom d'Hérodiade pour bien la différencier de la Salomé je dirai moderne ou exhumée avec son fait-divers archaïque--la danse, etc., l'isoler comme l'ont fait des tableaux solitaires dans le fait même terrible, mystérieux--et faire miroiter ce qui probablement hanta, en apparu avec son attribut--le chef du saint--dût la demoiselle constituer un monstre aux amants vulgaires de la vie.19

Analysis of the work in the present study will follow the divisions established in the Pléiade edition, with commentary upon the additional fragments as deemed necessary.

The "Ouverture" is an incantation delivered by the old nurse of Hérodiade, who perceives in the dawn the portents of tragic days ahead. The opening movement defines a negative place--the tower which is the abode of Hérodiade. This tower is described variously as "notre tour sacrificatrice et funéraire,/ Lourde tombe...." (ll. 5-6) and "....des pays déchus et tristes le manoir!" (l. 8)

The time is dawn, but a dawn abolished; the basin of the fountain is equally abolished: "Pas de clapotement! L'eau morne se résigne," as it reflects "l'abandon de l'automne éteignant en elle son brandon." (ll. 9, ll-12) The water is now a "pale mausolée" (l. 13) in which the swan buries its head. The purple of the "abolished" dawn and the pool
are accomplices, contributing to the same portrayal of autumnal (and as we shall see, spiritual) death. There is a window open upon this spectacle, however, which prevents the nurse from blotting it out.

The chamber is then depicted; it is "... une chambre singulière... attirail/ De siècles belliqueux, ofrèvrerie éteinte," (ll. 20-21) a room filled with the trappings of war and laden with time: "A le neigeux jadis pour ancienne teinte..." (l. 22) The nurse thinks of one of her dresses, apparently locked in a chest: "ma robe blanchie en l'ivoire fermé" (l. 27), perhaps her wedding dress, which leads her by association to consider Hérodiade, the young princess whose nurse she has been. The aroma of this dress is so unlike that associated with Hérodiade and her bed: "... un arôme,/ Loin du lit vide qu'un cierge soufflé cachait,/ Un arôme d'ors froids...." (ll. 30-32) The empty bed and the frigid gold aroma evoke the specter of Hérodiade's virginity. Just as the first movement closes with a view "from the inside looking out," a view of the dying autumn dawn, this second movement closes with the opposite perspective. Dawn has entered the chamber: "Une Aurore traînait ses ailes dans les larmes!" (l. 37).

The third movement of the "Ouverture" introduces a voice, and the nurse wonders if it is not her own, a voice equally laden with time, a voice in seeming dialogue with time: "Elle, encore, l'antienne aux versets
demandeurs...." (l. 52) But here again the negative forces prevail: "Et, force du silence et des noires ténèbres/
Tout rentre également en l'ancien passé;/ Fatidique, vain-
cu, monotone, lassé;/ Comme l'eau des bassins anciens se
résigne." (ll. 54–57)

The final movement of the "Ouverture" develops the idea of Hérodiade's sterility: her bed is laid with parch-
ment, not linen. It is cold, hard, and vacant; not a bed for love, and dream, and creativeness: "Qui des rêves par
plis n'a plus le cher grimoire" (l. 61); nor, for that matter, is it a bed in which one may await an ordinary
death: "Ni le dais sépulcral à la déserte moire...." (l. 62) Hérodiade is then depicted as a "froide enfant," solitary, unaccompanied by any angel in her enigmatic wand-
derings. The nurse regrets the passage of time, the ab-
sence of the father who is away on his military campaigns and who does not know that "...la gorge ancienne est
tarie...," (l. 74) that she, the nurse, no longer communi-
cates with her charge. Everything portends disaster. This child is "exilée en son coeur précieux;/ Comme un cygne ca-
chant en sa plume ses yeux...." (ll. 91–92); this movement toward interiority, this return upon herself, is an effort to find purity: "...pour voir les diamants élus;/ D'une étoile mourante, et qui ne brille plus." (ll. 95–96) But the nurse knows that the purity to be found there is a
kind of death, an arrest, in narcissism, of the normal
psychological development of the person, and therefore a star that ceases to shine. The "Ouverture" closes with this dim prospect of a kind of spiritual or emotional death for the girl.

The "Scène d'Hérodiade" is an encounter between the Nurse and Hérodiade, presented in the form of a dialogue between the girl and the Nurse following the return of the former from one of her mysterious outings. Joyous at her return, the Nurse makes an effort to kiss the princess' hand, whereupon the latter recoils in disgust. She speaks haughtily, in words which indicate clearly the degree to which she is closed within herself and that she considers the Nurse's gesture a violation of her purity. This turn toward inward purity is symbolized in the words: "...et j'effeuille,/ .../ Les pales lys qui sont en moi...." (11. 29-31) She asks instead that the Nurse help her comb her hair, those "cheveux immaculés" and "immortels" which incarnate on the physical plane that inner purity which she has achieved. The Nurse offers perfumes for her hair, which provokes a second movement of recoil by the princess. She proclaims that she wants her hair to give off, rather than the perfume of flowers which lends forgetfulness of human pain, the sterile coldness of metals as it has been reflected in all the trappings of war, the weaponry, that has adorned the walls of her home since childhood. She looks into a mirror, which has been the object of her
contemplation many times before as she sought through memory and self-contemplation to arrive at a pure awareness of self, where, static and inviolate, she could continue to live free from the threats of the impurities of life. She has arrived at this final stage, although it is not a painless one: "Mais, horreur! des soirs, dans ta sévère fontaine (i.e., in the mirror),/ J'ai de mon rêve épars connu la nudité." (11. 54-55) For all her desire to remain pure, sufficient unto herself, inviolate, she is still endowed with enough humanity to find the burden of solitude painful. The burden of total self-knowledge must figure here as well.

For the princess needs reassurance; she turns to the Nurse with a question: "Nourrice, suis-je belle?" (1. 56) As one of the girl's tresses falls, the Nurse moves to put it in place, whereupon this third attempt to touch Hérodiade provokes the sternest rebuke yet given. The princess charges her with "impiété" and "sacrilège," and sees in these efforts an ominous presage of tragedy. The Nurse can no longer contain the matter that is troubling her; she asks Hérodiade for whom she is reserving her dazzling beauty. The princess answers,

...c'est pour moi, pour moi, que je fleuris, déserte!
Vous le savez, jardins d'améthyste, enfouis
Sans fin dans de savants abîmes éblouis,
Ors ignorés, gardant votre antique lumière
Sous le sombre sommeil d'une terre première,
Vous, pierres où mes yeux comme de purs bijoux
Empruntent leur clarté mélodieuse, et vous
Métaux qui donnez à ma jeune chevelure
Une splendeur fatale et sa massive allure!
(ll. 98-106)

Any effort to remove her from this pure, inert state would kill her, she affirms, for "J'aime l'horreur d'être vierge et je veux/ Vivre parmi l'effroi que me font mes cheveux..." (ll. 116-117) In dismissing the Nurse, Hérodiade asks that she close the shutters since "....l'azur/ Séraphique sourit dans les vitres profondes,/ Et je déteste, moi, le bel azur!" (ll. 134-136) Left alone, Hérodiade then gives the lie to this seeming self-sufficiency and interiority that she has displayed: "Vous mentez, ô fleur nue/ De mes levres./ J'attends une chose inconnue....." (ll. 148-150) The closing lines signal the emergence of a thaw: "...sentant parmi les rêveries/ Se séparer enfin ses froides piergeries." (ll. 153-154)

The "Cantique de Saint Jean" depicts the decapitation of St. John. Its relationship to the rest of the work is made clear by fragments which have come to light since the publication of the Pléiade edition of the Oeuvres Complètes, about which more will be said. From the standpoint of Saint John, the "Cantique" is a triumphant song, delivered at the moment of his decapitation. As his head is severed, all movement in time and space seems arrested: "Le soleil que sa halte/ Surnaturelle exalte/ Aussitôt redescend/ Incandescent." (ll. 1-4) Darkness begins to fold over the saint. One slight movement is noted—the upward
surge of the head due to the impact of the blade: "Et ma
tête surgie/ Solitaire vigie/ Dans les vols triomphaux/ De
cette faux...." (ll. 9-12) All previous tension between
body and spirit are dissolved through the workings of the
blade. The supernatural halt of the sun in the heavens
dramatizes this upsurge. But then the upsurge is only a
flash; the head is destined to descend. This descent is
made all the more humble by the emphasis on the bouncing
movement: "Qu'elle, de jeunes ivres / S'opiniâtre à
suivre/ En quelque bon hagard/ Son pur regard...."
(ll. 17-20) This "pure glance" of the saint, however,
does not descend; it rises: "Là-haut où la froidure/
Eternelle n'endure/ Que vous le surpassez/ Tous ô gla-
ciers...." (ll. 21-24) This eternal cold is such that it
surpasses that of all the glaciers in the world. The
spirit has returned to its source, whereas the mortal head
remains behind to bow in saluté to that source: "Mais
selon un baptême/ Illuminée au même/ Principe qui m'élu/
Penche un salut." (ll. 25-28) It is this creative source
which has elected the saint, endowing him with his unre-
 lenting urge to perfection. The ultimate vision of the
Absolute has been attained at the expense of the mortal
man.

What is the meaning of Hérodiade in terms of the
crisis which Mallarmé is undergoing at this point in his
life? A poem so complex may reasonably be expected to
yield meaning on various levels; this Mallarmé has ensured. Most significantly for this study, however, Hérodiade deals with the theme of artistic sterility, what Fowlie terms "the staggering impossibility of achieving the birth of a poem."\textsuperscript{20} Certainly, the fragments collected by Davies and the conclusions he draws based upon these fragments, require a modification, an attenuation of Fowlie's judgment. This is important, but Fowlie's view does not sufficiently take into account the meaning of the apparent thaw at the end of the "Scène d'Hérodiade," for the work does not end on the negative note implied in his statement. However, to a considerable extent, Fowlie's assertion is valid: this does symbolize the birth of the poem, but it can no longer be viewed as impossible—difficult, certainly, and demanding of great sacrifice on the part of the creator, but not impossible.

As the work appears in the Pléiade edition, the dominant movement is one of withdrawal: Hérodiade moves away from the outside world and into herself. The Nurse, who symbolizes the call to life, fears that the princess is moving away from the mainstream of life; she attempts to call her back by three symbolic gestures, three efforts to touch her. Hérodiade recoils in anger from each attempt, reaffirming vigorously her intent to remain aloof and hermetic, inviolate and integral. At this point, it is easy to equate the Nurse, who seeks to caress Hérodiade
and to determine the course of her life, with the poet. The work he is seeking to coax into reality is, of course, the poem itself, here symbolized by the princess who is flowering in a garden of precious stones, flowering, as she says, for herself alone, living and loving to live in the horror of being virgin, burning from this very purity she incarnates. Everything about the appearance of the haughty princess suggests coldness and sterility, whether it be the color of her hair which has the sterile, cold sheen of metal, or the precious stones in which she finds a reflection of herself. Life must be denied in this haughty, introspective princess. Her nudity is likened to a white shiver, contrasted immediately with "le tiède azur d'été," (l. 112) another expression of the call to life, evocative of the male principle: "Quant à toi, femme.../
Prophétise que si le tiède azur d'été,/ Vers lui naïvement la femme se dévoile,/ Me voit dans ma pudeur grelot-tante d'étoile,/ Je meurs!" (ll. 107, 112-115). But it is this eventuality that she is so vigorously seeking to circumvent. It represents the pure poem refusing to be coaxed from its realm of non-being. Hérodiade remains for the time being within "l'horrueur d'être vierge," affirming that she wishes to remain "parmi l'effroi que me font mes cheveux..." (l. 117). Sending the Nurse away, she moves instinctively away from the azure once again, thereby guarding herself "against the male fecundity of the sun."²¹
As soon as she is alone, however, Héraclide destroys this whole posture of rejection and calculated self-sufficiency. She confesses awaiting something unknown to her. On the symbolic plane, this unknown factor seems to be the poet-creator that the work awaits, the one who must be immolated to the achievement of the work. Cohn confirms this interpretation: "Underneath Héraclide, in sum, is the dream of a prolonged childhood: a fiercer struggle than most, a tenser drama leading to a more explosive resolution, and a richer result, the maturity of the artist or his work's ripeness."

Viewed as part of the myth of poetic creation, the "Cantique" revolves around the idea of the poet's immolation before his task. The poet may attain his vision in all its purity; he may achieve the dreamed-of work, but only at the expense of self. But more must be said about the "Cantique" in the perspective of Davies' conclusions. He determines the order which he feels the work would have taken if Mallarmé had been able to finish it before his death, an order quite different from that given in the Pléiade edition. The seemingly unrelated "Cantique" of the Pléiade version would therefore be intimately united with the rest of the work by material provided in fragments, intended to figure in a final version to be entitled Les Noces d'Héraclide: Mystère. The fragments reveal that the princess has given the order that Saint John be
beheaded after the Nurse has raised the question already discussed in "Scène," i.e., "For whom are you saving these treasures?" The question forces a reality upon Hérodiade, causing a desire to surface, whereupon she issues the order that seals the saint's fate. The "Finale" fragment depicts Hérodiade in contemplation of the severed head, seeking reassurance that the look in the glazed eyes, as it falls upon her, is not a lingering expression of lust, but rather a consummation of that union "par laquelle la beauté pure arrive à la conscience de soi." Receiving no such reassurance, she performs a symbolic act to perfect their union, spotting her thighs with his blood. From this symbolic act, Hérodiade attains full consciousness of herself, "afin que personne pure celle-là en jaillît." The saint, freed from the contingencies of life, participates in a total mystical union with the princess in her ideal beauty. The theme of the poet's immolation before the work is implicit in the situation depicted. The poet may attain to his ideal vision, in all its purity, but only at the sacrifice of himself, a feeling which Mallarmé felt only too strongly. Davies sees confirmation of this view in a passage taken from Igitur, a prose poem dating from the year 1869:

Pour être à la hauteur de sa vision poétique, il doit abjurer jusqu'à la conscience de soi, comme il ressort du passage suivant d'Igitur, où Mallarmé évoque égale­ment le génie impersonnel par l'image d'une tête:
"...d'un personnage, dont la pensée n'a pas conscience
Davies, in his commentary upon the overall significance of the work, adds nothing that cannot be reconciled with the symbolic interpretation herein given. He rather complements it by his idea that the princess Hérodiade represents Ideal Beauty, and that this was the real quest of the poet. He feels that Mallarmé must be taken seriously when he writes to Villiers de l’Isle-Adam in December, 1865, that the subject of the work was Beauty and that "le sujet apparent n'est qu'un prétexte pour aller vers Elle." Saint John, liberated from life, realizes a mystical union with Hérodiade, who represents Ideal Beauty in all its purity. In the last scene of the "Finale" fragment, the princess dances for a moment alone: "Cette danse, sur laquelle devait probablement se terminer le Mystère des Noces d'Hérodiade, symbolise...aux yeux de Mallarmé l'assujettissement réciproque du génie et de son rêve de beauté, qui est la condition de l'oeuvre pure." Hérodiade unquestionably serves to portray Mallarmé's own evolution toward creative maturity. It reflects his interpretation of a total vision which bedazzles him and for a while immobilizes him, but which he works incessantly to capture, even up to the year of his death.

It hardly seems necessary to comment upon the use of negation in this work. The first word of the text,
"abolie," establishes a trend which persists throughout the poem. The decor reflects, on an external level, what Hérodiade experiences internally. The dawn seems abolished; the water in the pool reflects the death of autumn. The tower itself is a symbol of the negation of life; furthermore, it is characterized as "funéraire et sacrificatrice," and called a tomb. Hérodiade's constant and increasing "repliement sur soi" echoes this negation. But significantly, from this negation there emerges something positive—the attainment of an Ideal of Beauty, even if it is at the expense of the mortal saint-poet-genius. This is surely the deeper significance of negativity as it occurs in the later works of Mallarmé. From negation there emerges something positive—the work. But we must remain aware of the fact that this particular work is the product of long years of labor, that only in the light of the fragments dating from later years does this poem take on such positive implications. Perhaps Mallarmé was tending instinctively toward this direction at the time of the composition of the first segments, but there can be little doubt that at the time of this first composition, in 1864 and 1865, the more negative implications of the poem were most meaningful for Mallarmé.

Saint John's head rolling and bouncing down to an all-too-finite earth is a symbol in its way of the crisis that Mallarmé was undergoing at the time he worked on
Hérodiade. Azure has ceased to be a preoccupation; in its stead comes a preoccupation with the Void which finds expression through absence and negation in his poetry. Mallarmé crosses the threshold of Hope and discovers an abyss. In late April, 1866, writing to Cazalis, he speaks of this crisis in these terms:

J'ai donc à te raconter trois mois, à bien grands traits; c'est effrayant, cependant! Je les ai passés, acharné sur Hérodiade, ma lampe le sait! J'ai écrit l'ouverture musicale, presque encore à l'état d'ébauche, mais je puis dire sans présomption qu'elle sera d'un effet inouï, et que la scène dramatique que tu connais n'est auprès de ces vers que ce qu'est une vulgaire image d'Épinal comparée à une toile de Léonard de Vinci. Il me faudra trois ou quatre hivers encore, pour achever cette œuvre.

Malheureusement, en creusant le vers à ce point, j'ai rencontré deux abîmes, qui me désespèrent. L'un est le Néant... et je suis encore trop désole pour pouvoir croire même à ma poésie et me remettre au travail, que cette pensée écrasante m'a fait abandonner.

Oui, je le sais, nous ne sommes que de vaines formes de la matière, mais bien sublimes pour avoir inventé Dieu et notre Âme. Si sublime, mon ami, que je veux me donner ce spectacle de la matière, ayant conscience d'être, et, cependant, s'élançant forçément dans le Rêve qu'elle sait n'être pas, chantant l'Âme et toutes les divines impressions qui se sont amassées en nous depuis les premiers âges et proclament, devant le Rien qui est la vérité, ces glorieux mensonges.28

The second abyss Mallarmé sees is "celui de ma poitrine," for he thinks himself very ill. What seems to have the most significance for Mallarmé's verse is his affirmation that the Dream is a lie, this Rêve which he has associated with l'Idéal, the elusiveness of which he has so long deplored. The pursuit of this Dream is the saga of man, that "vaine forme de matière" of whom he speaks so
sympathetically here—a saga that could well bear the title of "Le Glorieux Mensonge." His faith in his Dream has disappeared, for all practical purposes the victim of his struggle with Hérodiade.

Three months later Mallarmé writes to Cazalis:

En vérité, je voyage, mais dans des pays inconnus, et si, pour fuir la réalité torride (i.e., the extreme heat he is experiencing in Tournon), je me plais à évoquer des images froides, je te dirai que je suis depuis un mois dans les plus purs glaciers de l'Esthétique—qu'après avoir trouvé le Néant, j'ai trouvé le Beau—et que tu ne peux t'imaginer dans quelles altitudes lucides je m'aventure. Il en sortira un cher poème auquel je travaille et, cet hiver (ou un autre) Hérodiade, où je m'étais mis tout entier sans le savoir, d'où mes doutes et mes malaises....

It seems evident, therefore, that his meditations and labors over this work have hastened the destruction of the Dream, i.e., his belief in an Ideal. But what seems more important for the poet at this point is that a sense of the Void has carried with it a perception of the Beautiful. The spring of 1866, which plunged him into the deepest despair, and which critics refer to as the "Nuits de Tournon" to signify the climax of his metaphysical crisis, is only a few months distant, but what a difference in tone here. His correspondence reveals a buoyancy born of a new sense of direction. Michaud feels that this resurgence can only be attributed to a budding acquaintance with the works of Hegel, to which he was introduced in April of that year by his friend Eugène Lefebure while the two were vacationing together in Cannes. Lying in wait for Mallarmé
as he dispelled those mystical dreams of his childhood and young manhood, was the Void, that "Rien qui est la vérité," which led directly to despair until he became acquainted with Hegel. For Hegel, "that Nothingness was not an end but a point of departure. This Nothingness, this Nonbeing, is Being in its first state: a negative state since it cannot be defined by anything, but containing in itself every possibility, because everything must finally come out of it."30 Henry D. Aiken, in his book The Age of Ideology: The Nineteenth Century Philosophers, summarizes briefly the view in Hegel that seems to have had the most significance for Mallarmé:

Superficially, the thing that appears most real to us is the individual thing or substance. But this, when considered in itself, always turns out to be a bare abstraction, a mere "being" which is so far distinguishable from nothing at all. Anything becomes real, so to say, only in so far as it ceases to be a bare particular, just as any human being for Hegel, becomes a person only in so far as he gives up, his claim to individual uniqueness and is content to be regarded as an aspect of the large social whole to which he belongs. Concreteness and particularity, in this philosophy, are not only not the same, but actually contrary ideas. The bare particular is abstract; only the concrete universal is fully real. The only completely concrete or real entity is the unenvisageable totality, the Absolute itself.31

Things therefore become real only insofar as they lose the characteristics of the particular. This calls quickly to mind Mallarmé's celebrated phrase: "Je dis: une fleur,... et hors de l'oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose d'autre que les calices sus, musicalement se lève, idée même et suave, l'absente de tous
bouquets." It is this flower, then, stripped of its particularities, that attains to the real as Hegel sees it. Mallarmé makes this view his own.

A letter to Aubanel in July, 1866, points out the importance the poet attaches to his intellectual journey amid "les plus purs glaciers de l'esthétique":

Pour moi, j'ai plus travaillé cet été que toute ma vie, et je puis dire que j'ai travaillé pour toute ma vie. J'ai jeté les fondement d'un œuvre magnifique. Tout homme a un Secret en lui, beaucoup meurent sans l'avoir trouvé, et ne le trouveront pas parce que morts, il n'existera plus, ni eux. Je suis mort, et ressuscité avec la clef de pierrières de ma dernière cassette spirituelle. A moi maintenant de l'ouvrir en l'absence de toute impression empruntée, et son mystère s'émanera en un fort beau ciel. Il me faut vingt ans pour lesquels je vais me cloîtrer en moi, renonçant à toute autre publicité que la lecture de mes amis. Je travaille à tout à la fois, ou plutôt je veux maintenant, qu'une sensation m'arrive, elle se transfigure et va d'elle-même se caser dans tel livre et tel poème. Quand un poème sera mûr, il se détachera. Tu vois, que j'imiter la loi naturelle.33

Scarcely two weeks later he confides to the same Aubanel that he has found the scheme for his whole work after having discovered "la clef de moi-même... centre de moi-même," from which, spider-like, he will spin the web of his works which already exist "dans le sein de la Beauté." He foresees an expenditure of twenty years' labor to realize the five volumes that will constitute "l'Oeuvre." His task will be to extract these works and by so doing, give them life. What is most striking is the enthusiasm radiating from this correspondence, a quality attesting to the value of his discovery. But it must not
escape notice that Mallarmé has now arrived at another type of Ideal, the concept of the Ideal Work, against which he will measure his poems during the remainder of his life. The judgment he passes is always severe.

The severity of his judgment is exemplified by the short poem "Don du poème," which was written in October of 1865 and which is considered by Mondor and Jean-Aubry to be a direct outgrowth of his struggles with Hérodiade. Commenting briefly on the poem to Mme Le Josne, to whom it was sent in February, 1866, Mallarmé states that it evokes "...la tristesse du Poète devant l'enfant de sa Nuit, le poème de sa veillée illuminée, quand l'aube, méchante, le montre funèbre et sans vie: il le porte à la femme qui la vivifiera." It reveals a Mallarmé now haunted by the ideal of the pure poem. The idea of the difficult birth of a poem, central here as it was in Hérodiade, translates the artist's great sense of frustration and even horror at the compromise he has had to make with his vision:

Je t'apporte l'enfant d'une nuit d'Idumée!
Noire, à l'aile saignante et pâle, déplumée,
Par le verre brûlé d'aromates et d'or,
Par les carreaux glacés, hélas! mornes encor,
L'aurore se jeta sur la lampe angélique.
Palmes! et quand elle a montré cette relique
A ce père essayant un sourire ennemi,
La solitude bleue et stérile a frémi.
O la berceuse, avec ta fille et l'innocence
De vos pieds froids, accueille une horrible naissance:
Et ta voix rappelant viole et clavecin,
Avec le doigt fané presseras-tu le sein
Par qui coule en blancheur sibylline la femme
Pour les lèvres que l'air du vierge azur affame?
As soon as it is brought into being, the poem is rejected by its creator, who considers it an "enfant d'une nuit d'Idumée." As explained by Saurat, the Idumeans were a hairy and monstrous pre-Adamite people who were disinherited in favor of present-day humanity. They were sexless and reproduced without women, which is the parallel which Mallarmé particularly seeks here. This poem, child of his Idumean night, i.e., born of Mallarmé's solitary efforts, revulses him at sight. He consigns it to his wife (Marie, to whom Geneviève had been born in November, 1864) so that she may nourish it and therefore humanize it. The poet's hope is that she, the natural creator, will be able to achieve for this pitiful, imperfect creature what he as artistic creator has not been able to accomplish. The hunger which this child suffers is for the "sibylline whiteness" which Woman can provide, that milk of paradise which makes Hérodiade long for a return to a pure, previous state when she speaks in similar terms to her Nurse. The poet hopes that purity can be infused into this creature by Woman after seeing his own efforts collapse.

Unlike the two darkly-textured works immediately preceding, i.e., "Don du Poème" and Hérodiade, Mallarmé's next work is one that portrays a sense of buoyancy and uplift. This is "L'Après-midi d'un faune," which was also a direct outgrowth of his frustrations over Hérodiade. The poet turns hopefully to it in the summer of 1865 as a
release from all the tensions and anxieties generated by the other work. Indeed, outwardly, it is a buoyant piece, a call to the instinctual life, an exaltation of the senses, a warm and fragrant and sensual testimony to the duality of Mallarmé's soul. But there are deeper and more serious implications in the work; it takes a larger step forward into the Void than does the earlier creation, despite its air of frolicsome gaiety. Although Mallarmé terms this his "summer poem" as opposed to the "winter poem" (Hérodiade) that has rendered him immobile and sterile, the theme here is unsureness as to the reality of an experience. The resolution of the poem is the conviction that the experience has not taken place.

The poem begins with an assertion: "Ces nymphes, je les veux perpétuer," (l. 1) which may be taken to mean both "procreation and creation; to perpetuate in the flesh or in the spirit." But no sooner are they evoked than doubt intrudes to efface the contours of reality from the experience he (the faun) has had with them. He must therefore reflect about the implications of this whole experience. But his reflections lead nowhere; he then attempts to sublimate his doubt, as well as the strong carnal impulse, into music: "converting nature—or the real naked body... by a distillation, into melody, or (through synesthesia) arabesquing lines in the air." The flute, which was formerly the nymph Syrinx, must hold the key to the
enigma, he thinks. He refers to the flute as an "instrument des fuites," an instrument of flight in the sense that, in mythology, the goddess Syrinx was turned into a reed-flute, allowing her successfully to escape the grasp of Pan, and again in the sense that it allows man, the artist in man, to gratify his instincts through the conversion of them into song or some other art form. The faun has but one dream at present, that is, to entertain the youthful beauties around him by giving musical imitations of their forms, by transforming the detail of "back" and "side" into the "sonore, vaine et monotone ligne" represented by the strains of the melody. But this is a young and lusty faun, whose primal instincts are strong; sublimation is not very effective. The adjectives "vaine" and "monotone" suggest that the experience is not an entirely successful one, and the change of tone in the passage immediately following bears this out even more fully: "Tâche, donc, instrument des fuites, ô maligne/Syrinx, de refleurer aux lacs où tu m'attends!" (ll. 56-57) A rejection of the flute-Syrinx as an instrument of sublimation is clear.

Since sublimation is ineffectual, the faun decides to analyze his problems verbally. A long flash-back follows in which the faun seeks to re-establish the sequence of events (real or imaginary). This sequence he does establish, but he can still draw no conclusions as to the
reality or the unreality of the experience. What is certain is that, whether in dream or in fact, the experience has been a negative one in point of sexual gratification. But there will be other less reluctant nymphs, he muses philosophically. However, just as he reaffirms life, he allows himself paradoxically to sink into a fantasy of even greater import than the preceding, if fantasy it has been: the possession of the goddess Venus. The punishment for such blasphemy is swift and certain: his guilt renders him sexually impotent. He finds his soul "de paroles vacante" and so, "sans plus il faut dormir en l'oubli du blasphème." (ll. 110, 112) He bids adieu to the pair of nymphs he has pursued as he returns to sleep: "Couple, adieu; je vais voir l'ombre que tu devins." (l. 116)

Throughout the poem there is affirmation, but only as a means to call forth negation. Doubt overrules reality. The resolution is a negative return to sleep. This is all the more significant since the poem may be interpreted as an expression of the myth of self-perpetuation. "Desire is always a need or a quest for immortality." If by "perpetuation" is meant the sexual process of regeneration, the effort of the faun is an expression of sexual impotence. If one sees in this poem the deeper "problem of the relationship between the life of the senses and the life of the creative artist," one arrives at the same
conclusion. The basic erotic instinct which is the generative force in this poem on the literal level moves through artistic sublimation (into music) back into the realm of pure fantasy where it perishes by its own excessiveness. The faun dismisses musical sublimation, sending his pipes back to the lakeshore to become reeds again. In the daydream he yields to bestial sensuality. The experience is negative now as it was not before; this daydream is an admission of failure. The emptiness of the fantasy experience is emphasized by the fact that the faun likens the pleasure derived therefrom to that obtained when he used to inflate empty grape-skins and watch the light as it shone through them. Finally the faun returns to sleep, to dream, where, if the vision returns, it will be a non-substantial, purely subjective, negative experience. The dream has always mirrored impotency in Mallarmé's poetry. Mondor seems to attach too much positive significance to the "Faun interlude": "Après la chair triste de 'Brisé Marine," la chair victorieuse du Faune; après la froideur stérile du métal, de l'hiver, d'Hérodiade, de l'artiste, la brûlure des heures fauves, trop d'hymen souhaité, l'ivresse jusqu'au soir." As regards the externals, this seems accurate enough; for the deeper meaning of the poem, it overlooks the overriding negativity of the experience the faun undergoes. As the faun returns to sleep, thesparklingly brilliant illusion sustained throughout the poem is now wrapped
in the darkness of non-existence.

The sparkling illusion of the faun is a brief interlude. The crisis weighs heavily upon Mallarmé in the years following the middle sixties. A few notable excerpts from his correspondence of this period authenticate its gravity. Mention has already been made of his statement in 1866 denying the validity of the Dream. It is also in 1866 that he professes to have found the Beautiful (le Beau) after having found the Void (le Néant). Again in mid-1866, he claims to have found his "centre de moi-même" and to have discovered his Secret (present, though perhaps undiscovered in every man, he affirms), which will allow him to accomplish his life's work with a labor of twenty years.

By May of 1867, Mallarmé reaches some sort of plateau which allows him to write to Cazalis:

...mais combien plus je l'étais [incapable... de me distraire] il y a plusieurs mois, d'abord dans ma lutte terrible avec ce vieux et méchant plumage, terrassé; heureusement, Dieu.43

It has been a bitter struggle, he reflects, one from which he fell:

...victorieux, éperdument et infiniment--jusqu'à ce qu'enfin je me sois revu un jour devant ma glace de Venise, tel que je m'étais oublié plusieurs mois auparavant. J'avoue, du reste, mais à toi seul, que j'ai encore besoin, tant ont été grandes les avanies de mon triomphe, de me regarder dans cette glace pour penser et que si elle n'était pas devant la table où je t'écris cette lettre, je redeviendrais le Néant. C'est t'apprendre que je suis maintenant impersonnel, et non plus Stéphane que tu as connu,—mais une aptitude qu'a l'Univers spirituel à se voir et à se développer, à travers ce qui fut moi.44
The more impersonal the poet succeeds in rendering himself, or conceiving himself to be, the more faithful will be his reflection of reality. But this is very thin atmosphere indeed, and whatever element of hope is implied here is not without its counterweight of despair. In September of 1867, he writes to Villiers de l'Isle-Adam:

...je suis arrivé à l'idée de l'Univers par la seule sensation (et que, par exemple, pour garder une notion ineffaçable du Néant pur, j'ai dû imposer à mon cerveau la sensation du Vide absolu). Le miroir qui m'a réfléchi l'Être a été le plus souvent l'Horreur et vous devinez si j'expie cruellement ce diamant des Nuits innommées.45

Despair is resurgent again by October, 1867. He writes to Aubanel:

J'ai passé la plus triste année de ma vie, miné par un mal auquel je ne comprends rien, et me raidissant sur les poèmes commencés, avec un stérile désespoir: et, de guerre lasse, quand je les quittais, tu juges si j'avais le courage de reprendre cette plume parjure pour une lettre....46

On this same October day he has written to Cazalis: "Je le suis [malade] de plus en plus sous l'apparence injurieuse d'une santé ordinaire.....47

The-winter of 1867 brings with it a change in teaching assignments. He obtains a position in Besançon, which offers a hope of better times. But it is a false hope once again. During the latter months of the year he is in effect ill from lung congestion; convalescence is slow and hope of ever realizing his "Oeuvre" flags. In April, 1868, he writes to Coppée:
...voici deux ans que j'ai commis le péché de voir le Rêve dans sa nudité idéale, tandis que je devais amonceler entre lui et moi un mystère de musique et d'oubli. Et maintenant, arrivé à la vision horrible d'une œuvre pure, j'ai presque perdu la raison et le sens des paroles les plus familières.

From these several fragments quoted from the correspondance, it is clear that the crisis has now become a struggle to arrive at a full awareness of self as well as the realization of the perfect, absolute work. This is a crisis of both metaphysical and esthetic significance. It has led him to the Void, where in a flash of vision, he perceives the vaineess of the Dream and feels his own identity shattering within him. It is at this point, in 1868, that Mallarmé begins to produce his most typically Mallarmean poetry, the dense, hermetic, abstract poetry for which he is most noted. This experience is an exhausting one for him, and he moves toward a compromise, as shown in this letter to Lefebure in early May, 1868:

...je suis dans un état de crise qui ne peut durer, d'où vient ma consolation! ...Décidément, je redescends de l'absolu.... mais cette fréquentation de deux années (vous vous rappelez? depuis notre séjour à Cannes) me laissera une marque dont je veux faire un sacre. Je redescends dans mon moi, abandonné pendant deux ans: après tout, des poèmes, seulement teintés d'absolu, sont déjà beaux.

The reference to the Cannes sojourn is that mentioned earlier in connection with Mallarmé's acquaintance with the ideas of Hegel. The softened tone of this letter suggests that the poet is finding a practical way out of the impasse he has entered. But despite readiness for
compromise with the Absolute, he remains an unhappy man. The brilliant sun at Avignon, where he obtained a professorship in the fall of 1867, means intenser heat in those summer months of 1868, about which he complains. He feels slighted by the fact that a collection of poetry published by Lemerre (Sonnets et Eaux-Fortes) includes none of his poetry; he is depressed by the final break of the relationship between two of his close friends, Cazalis and Ettie Yapp. In January his health worsens: "Ainsi commence une neurasthénie dont on verra les effets s'aggraver....."51 Poverty becomes more acute than ever, and he must make requests for money to his relatives. By February, 1869, he is so immobilized by his ills that he has even stopped writing his own letters, dictating them instead to his wife. In January, 1869, he writes to Cazalis:

...je suis toujours sous l'influence de ma crise la plus funeste: je me démène à tâtons. Ce que je vois de sûr est que tout l'édifice patient d'une année—soins et luttes, efforts de minutes accumulées, --s'est écroulée.....52

And two weeks later:

...quand j'aurai reconstitué mon moi, je n'en parlerai plus jamais: c'est un châtiment naturel de l'homme qui a voulu l'abjurer, qu'il en radote.53

Explaining to Cazalis that he has sworn not to take up the pen, even for letter writing, he writes in February, 1869:

Il le fallait: mon cerveau, envahi par le Rêve, se refusant à ses fonctions extérieures qui ne le sollicitaient plus, allait périr dans une insomnie permanente;
j'ai imploré la grande Nuit, qui m'a exaucé et a étendu ses ténèbres. La première phase de ma vie a été finie. La conscience, excédée d'ombres, se réveille lentement, formant un homme nouveau, et doit retrouver mon Rêve après la création de ce dernier.54

But whatever promise of accomplishment this may offer, it is belied. This year 1869 is not a productive one. The depression continues. Only at the end of the year is there evidence of accomplishment. In November, he writes to Casalís about the work he has undertaken during the previous summer's vacation, i.e., Igitur:

C'est un conte, par lequel je veux terrasser le vieux monstre de l'Impuissance, son sujet du reste, afin de me cloîtrer dans mon grand labeur déjà réétudié. S'il est fait (le conte), je suis guéri; similia similibus.55

The latter phrase, roughly equivalent to current English "Fight fire with fire," indicates that Igitur, the conte in question, is a careful reflection of the crisis that Mallarmé underwent at that time. He seems to have had therapeutic effects in mind for the composition of this work; apparently this exorcism was at least partially successful, for the poet was able to write to Catulle Mendès in May, 1870:

Je dirai donc maintenant seulement, en deux mots, que j'ai passé quelques années très misérables, opprimé entre un mal qui m'empêchait presque de lire et d'écrire et un métier très dur qui tendait à le rendre incurable: j'ai pu me dégager un peu et me voici vraiment mieux. Par une sorte de compensation, un vieux Rêve avait installé en moi comme une grotte marine, où il s'est donné de curieux spectacles, si je ne m'abuse. Cela ne sera pas perdu et j'en conserve la donnée de trois ou quatre volumes, opiniâtres et avaries, qui seront ma vie....56
The crisis has had its fluctuations, certainly, but this seems finally to mark the point at which Mallarmé has emerged. The main theme of the crisis has been the Void and the death of the Dream. Jean-Pierre Richard notes the importance of the theme of nightfall in Mallarmé's poetry from this point on, a theme closely allied with that of the Void, and which has been observed and commented upon by other critics as well. The death of the sun has furnished the *leitmotiv* for many of these poems, as will be seen in subsequent chapters. For Mallarmé the theme implies death, but it is also a death that bears a note of triumph; the Mallarmean "nightfall" is equated with the idea of apotheosis, manifest in the splendor with which the sun expires. There is implied in this drama the contradiction of life and death: life is withdrawn, yet life is given; light is fading, but its resplendence is heightened dramatically at sunset.

The theme of night has not reached this point in its evolution at the writing of *Igitur*, however. Although *Igitur* is a prose work, its consideration here is essential since so many of the elements incorporated into the later works are present here in the germinal state. Furthermore, as Mallarmé himself tells us, the subject of the piece is his "impotence."

The title of the work, which is also the name of the central (indeed the only) figure in the drama, has
given rise to considerable speculation. According to Roland de Renéville, the title is taken from the second chapter of Genesis, which begins, "Igitur perfecti sunt coeli et terra et omnis ornatus eorum", i.e., "Thus (therefore) the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them." Renéville's contention is that "all the host of them" refers to "the angels, the Elohim, creative powers emanating from Jehovah, in short, all the stars." The subtitle of the work, "ou La Folie d'Elbehnon," provides a further clue to Igitur's identity, since, again according to Renéville, in Hebrew "El behnon" means "le fils des Elohim, puissances créatrices émanées de Jehovah." With these facts in mind then, Igitur would represent "the son of the stars who have created heaven and earth....before any other manifestation." This view seems valid in that the narration does involve a quest for the purity of non-being before the advent of being. Michaud sees Igitur as the "logical and necessary product in the human order, of the creative principle from which everything came.... But he is above all, the poet himself, obsessed by the 'old monster of Impotency'."

Jean-Pierre Richard suggests a simpler explanation, which does not exclude those previously given: "Igitur c'est celui qui s'impose à lui-même la loi de n'être pas: Elbehnon, c'est-à-dire peut-être El be none....le 'ne sois personne,' l'être qui a su répondre négativement et
impérativement en lui à la vieille interrogation shakespearienne."

The most cogent treatment of this very complex and difficult work has been that given by Gardner Davies in his work *Vers une explication rationnelle du "Coup de dés,"

in which he demonstrates the close parallels in content between *Igitur* and the much later *Un Coup de dés*. It is because of the light that it sheds, not only on the later work, but on the nature of Mallarmé's metaphysical quest, that *Igitur* is now studied.

The work is presented in several panels, including in the Pléiade edition an introduction, five episodes numbered consecutively, and several variants of the panels. The "Argument" preceding the work indicates that Mallarmé must have had a quadripartite structure in mind for the definitive version (the work is unfinished). A four-part movement, each bearing a title, is listed in the "Argument," followed by a resumé of the action of each part. If the order of the work and its content are not as clear as the reader would like, Mallarmé addresses himself directly to the reader in an epigraph: "Ce Conte s'adresse à l'Intelligence du lecteur, qui met les choses en scène, elle-même.""64

According to Davies' interpretation, the underlying assumption of this highly abstract drama is that the hero, *Igitur*, has been asked by his ancestors to perform a
certain act that will save them from total oblivion. Since Igitur is the last descendant of his race, his forbears feel particularly vulnerable to the machinations of chance. Igitur, by abolishing chance, will remove whatever vulnerability his race may feel. He must further arrive at a pure, abstract Notion of self which would necessarily include that of his ancestors since he himself represents the sum total of them all. Having attained this pure Idea of self, Igitur (and his ancestors) would then exist in the Absolute, whereupon a cast of the dice would be made in order to negate, to deny chance, allowing the pure Idea to live on outside of time.65

The first episode is entitled "Le Minuit," about which the "Argument" states simply, "Minuit sonne—le minuit où doivent être jetés les dés."66 A decor is established in the panel: there remains a presence of midnight, the time of no time, so to speak, the time which for a fleeting moment belongs neither to what precedes nor to what will follow. This midnight appears in a dimly outlined room, a symbol and reflection of the Void, for Mallarmé evokes immediately what he terms the reciprocal voids of the sea and the constellations (the two voids later evoked in Coup de dés), which at a given moment (midnight—"l'heure unie") will bring about "le présent absolu des choses," i.e., the absolute pure Idea which will be attained by Igitur. Necessary to this attainment,
therefore, is the abolishment of time, the first concern of the hero. Igitur, termed "l'hôte," appears, stripped of everything but presence; his eyes appear "nuls pareils aux miroirs" (p. 435). There is an open book on a table, which contains "le silence d'une antique parole, proférée par lui," (p. 435), i.e., "la parole de sa destinée...[qui] contient la prédiction à laquelle les ancêtres d'Igitur attachent une telle importance." There seems to occur a fusion of Igitur with this presence of Midnight, which, time of no-time, will allow him to attain purity, the complete abstraction of self. Henceforth, Igitur will be referred to as "l'ombre": "ce Minuit évoque son ombre finie et nulle...." (p. 435) In leaving the chamber, as he does in the second panel, Igitur bids the night good-bye, in terms that evoke both what he has been and what he will become: "Adieu, nuit, que je fus, ton propre sépulcre, mais qui, l'ombre survivante, se métamorphosera en Éternité." (p. 436) The vocative nuit here is not a reference to midnight, but rather to what has preceded midnight, a representation of the finite man, from which has emerged a shadow which, on this midnight, will attain the Absolute and exist beyond time.

Panel Two, termed "L'Escalier," represents the journey of the shadow of Igitur into his Self. The "Argument" says: "Igitur descend les escaliers de l'esprit humain, va au fond des choses, en 'absolu' qu'il est." (p. 434)
The staircase is a symbol for the descent into his ancestral past, for each successive ancestor is represented by a step on the staircase. To arrive at total, pure self-knowledge, Igitur must arrive at a knowledge of each of his ancestors since in effect, he is the summation of his line. And Igitur's shadow does arrive at this goal: "il n'y avait pas à s'y tromper c'était la conscience... -- sa réussite." (p. 438)

However, having arrived "[au] coeur de cette race," (p. 438) Igitur's shadow finds that he has not totally lost his individual consciousness; the first person intrudes in the narration: "Je n'aime pas ce bruit: cette perfection de ma certitude me gêne: tout est trop clair, la clarté montre le désir d'une évaison...." (p. 438) The noise is his own heart-beat, which now beats for all of his ancestors as well. The lingering individual consciousness separates him from the Absolute, raising doubt as to his ability to accomplish the Act for which he was destined.

Igitur-Shadow ponders: "Dois-je encore craindre le hasard, cet antique ennemi qui me divisa en ténèbres et en temps créés, pacifiés là tous deux en un même somme?" (p. 438) The specter of the two lives of Igitur is evoked here: the "temps créés" representing finite time, the world of the material that he has left, and the world of "ténèbres" in which the present journey is accomplished, both now fused by the heavy sleep of the Absolute, the inertia of
the Absolute. But then Igitur does arrive at his goal, after which he asserts that nothing can now frighten him. He arrives at an awareness that the heartbeat was the sound of his own progress toward the Absolute. He recognizes his own arrival as though completely external from himself, speaking of this Self in the third person: "je vais m'oublier à travers lui, et me dissoudre en moi." (p. 439) Igitur is now able to leave this room in which he has arrived at his Absolute, and since he has in effect met the necessary requirements, he is now ready to accomplish the Act.

In the third episode, entitled "Le Coup de dés," Igitur performs the Act: "Il récite la prédiction et fait le geste." (p. 434) This is the act that will raise his ancestors to the realm of the Absolute by abolishing chance. But Igitur comes to the realization that Chance is not subject either to negation or affirmation: "Bref, dans un acte où le hasard est en jeu, c'est toujours le hasard qui accomplit sa propre idée en s'affirmant ou se niant. Devant son existence, la négation et l'affirmation viennent échouer." (p. 441) Realizing the absurdity of the Act, Igitur nonetheless casts the dice. Chance seems to be negated, at least momentarily, by the appearance of the number twelve on the dice, but whether negated or affirmed, Igitur realizes, chance accomplishes itself, arrives at its own perfect Notion of self. This momentary
negation of chance leads Igitur to the Absolute, paradoxical though it may seem: "Elle a eu raison de le nier, -- sa vie -- pour qu'il ait été absolu." (p. 434) And again: "Ce hasard nié à l'aide d'un anachronisme, un personnage, suprême incarnation de cette race--qui sent en lui, grace à l'absurde, l'existence de l'Absolu...." (p. 442) By an act of volition, therefore, the Hero thinks that "la conscience de soi par lui atteinte [est] si parfaite qu'il annule le Hasard... Tout ce qu'il peut alors créer c'est l'impossibilité d'être, ... l'absolu." (p. 430) In this state of non-becoming, there is nothing for Igitur to do but "[souffler] la bougie de l'être, par quoi tout a été." (p. 434)

Thus Igitur arrives at the point where he must close the book of his destiny, "le grimoire," and blow out the candle symbolizing that consciousness "qui a permis à l'action d'avoir lieu,"68 which has allowed a first person narrator to speak of himself in the third person. Crossing his arms, he lies down on the tomb of his ancestors, which forms the subject of the brief fourth panel, "Le sommeil sur les cendres, après la bougie soufflée." Igitur is at one with the Pure Idea of his race. He drinks from a phial "la goutte du néant qui manque à la mer.... Le néant parti, reste le château du la pureté." (p. 443) In an additional panel, the logical order of which seems not to be observed in the Fléiaïade edition, Mallarmé appears to
have intended for Igitur to summarize his life for his ancestors before snuffing out the candle. The picture Igitur presents is that of his life before embarking upon the present journey: "Ecoutez, ma race, avant de souffler ma bougie—le compte que j'ai à vous rendre de ma vie—Ici, névrose, ennui (ou absolu!)." (p. 439) This last fragment seems to summarize the impotence which Mallarmé has experienced in his life, about which more will be said later. Igitur reveals that he has always lived with an acute consciousness of the flow of time, and has sought to capture it, to arrest its flow by thickening the curtains of his room, or again by sitting opposite a mirror, in an effort to arrive at that perfect awareness of self which the conte describes in such detail.

It is in the context of Mallarmé's life and his avowed purpose for writing this particular work (to "terrasser le vieux monstre de l'Impuissance") that Igitur can best be understood. During the period in which critics situate the composition of the first version of Igitur, somewhere between 1867 and 1870, Mallarmé was undergoing the process of depersonalization prompted by his exposure to the ideas of Hegel, a process which was making inordinate demands on his strength and lucidity. In early 1869, he found it impossible to write at all, even his correspondence. This is also the point at which, feeling his brain invaded by the Dream, he implores "la Grande Nuit"
to descend upon him and then, his plea granted, there awakens within him a new consciousness, forming a new man which will allow him to rediscover his Dream, presumably from a new perspective.

When Mallarmé attempts to summarize the life of Igitur in the conte, what he depicts there is a life paralyzed by ennui and impotence, that impotence which he himself hoped to exorcise by the work. The entire movement of the narration is toward the performance of an act, the casting of the dice. This act, of course, has symbolic significance with regard to the crisis that Mallarmé was undergoing: "Cet acte, nous le savons, consiste à fixer la pensée par écrit, en terrassant le démon de l'Impuissance." Mallarmé hopes, through the composition of the work, to arrive at some conclusion about the reasons for what he terms his creative impotence, and by having Igitur cast the dice, he seems to project more of a wish than a certainty that he will be able to accomplish his "Grand Oeuvre," to wrest from chance the elements that go into its composition. Davies points out that variant versions, apparently written at a later date, show an uncertainty about the accomplishment of the Act, for instead of casting the dice, Igitur makes the gesture of doing so, leaving it unspecified whether this gesture was a feint or a valid accomplishment of the Act. This is the area where the Coup de dés will concentrate its attention: on the
ambiguity of the gesture performed by the central figure.

Through Igitur, Mallarmé finds for himself a sort of death—a spiritual death, allowing him to die to be re-born again. Literature annihilates, Mallarmé seems to say, but then it resuscitates too. On the esthetic level, the cast of the dice represents the act of artistic creation. Thought leads to death in this sense: this thought, which forms the subject matter of the literary creation, requires the subordination of the artist, or even his annihilation, before the exigencies of the creative process. The creator is the one who must disappear so that the work may have an autonomous existence. Chance is annulled in the sense that a choice is made; a word, or a particular grouping of words, comes to rest as a reality in the literary work, thereby denying existence to the multiple alternate possibilities and the force that governs them. The act, the cast of the dice, the production of the work—this is what arrests chance and fixes it. When Igitur lies down on the tomb of his ancestors, he has blown out the candle, but he has also closed the book, "le grimoire," which has been present from the beginning of the narration. Once this closure is effected, Igitur is referred to as the "supreme incarnation of his race." The Dream, and all that his ancestors have represented and consigned to him, are now in a pure and absolute state where chance has no dominion. The book may well be closed as Igitur and Dream both enter the Absolute.
In the earliest version, Igitur drinks from a phial in which his Dream has died: "le Rêve a agonisé en cette fiole de verre, pureté, qui renferme la substance du Néant." (p. 439) The Dream and its death have been recorded, and the Act has been creative. And as Chisholm notes, this is the absolute to which Mallarmé really aspired—creativity, which eliminates chance. 71

Absence pervades the work. Richard has termed it "liturgie d'anéantissement" in which, from the very outset, everything has disappeared from the field of consciousness. 72 Time itself is nullified; midnight is a most appropriate moment for seeking a timeless Absolute, and the whole action occurs within that flash that is pure midnight. But even this midnight is denied its full entity, for it is in the process of effacement: "Subsiste une présence de minuit." (p. 434) Annihilation has set in here; the entire sequence occurs in a flash. When the hour strikes, Igitur announces: "l'heure a sonné pour moi de partir, la pureté de la glace s'établira, sans ce personnage, vision de moi...." (p. 439) The central figure has moved from presence to absence, vaporized, as it were, before the reader's eye. But an Absolute is established in his stead.

Throughout his early poetry and in the crisis period as well, Mallarmé has been obsessed with impotence, what he considered his inability to grasp the Ideal. The
struggle over Hérodiade brought his crisis to a head, a crisis of metaphysical and esthetic significance. It brings him face to face with the Void, and in the comprehension of the Void, he finds a new orientation for his work. He conceives of a "Grand Oeuvre," an "oeuvre pure," that must reflect this Void, and this "oeuvre" becomes in its turn an Ideal as unrelenting as that azur which figures so extensively in his early poetry. Viewed in terms of this new Ideal, his works seem to be just so many records of his own failure.

The Void which he perceives at the core of life becomes the focus of his creative endeavors. The depiction of the Void becomes a form of sublimation of his inability to attain the Ideal. From this force of negation comes something positive, in a typical Hegelian synthesis—the work. And even if that work does not quite measure up to the Ideal view he has of it, then, as he himself concedes: "Après tout, des poèmes, seulement teintés d'absolu, sont déjà beaux."

The poet has found a workable compromise.
Notes

1. Mallarmé, Oeuvres, p. 1440.

2. Ibid.


4. Ibid., p. 160.

5. Ibid., p. 144.

6. Ibid., p. 145.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., p. 149.

9. Ibid., p. 150.

10. Ibid., p. 151.

11. Ibid., p. 154.

12. Ibid., p. 166.


14. Ibid.


17. Ibid., p. 127.


21. Cohn, Toward the Poems, p. 79.

22. Ibid., p. 56.


24. Ibid., p. 42.
25 Ibid., p. 17.

26 Ibid., p. 16.

27 Ibid., p. 44.

28 Mallarmé, Correspondance, I, 207-208. Underlining mine except for "je le sais."

29 Ibid., pp. 220-221. Underlining mine.

30 Michaud, Mallarmé, p. 53.


32 Mallarmé, Oeuvres, p. 857.

33 Mallarmé, Correspondance, I, 222.

34 Ibid., pp. 224-225.


36 Mondor, Vie, pp. 179-180.

37 Cohn, Toward the Poems, p. 13.

38 Ibid., p. 22.

39 Fowlie, Mallarmé, pp. 164-165.

40 Ibid., p. 153.

41 Ibid., p. 164.

42 Mondor, Vie, p. 168.

43 Mallarmé, Correspondance, I, 241.

44 Ibid., pp. 241-242.


46 Ibid., p. 263.

47 Ibid., p. 262.

48 Ibid., p. 270. Underlining mine.

49 Mondor, Vie, p. 258.

Mondor, Vie, p. 276.

Mallarmé, Correspondance, I, 294-295.

Ibid., p. 298.

Ibid., p. 301.

Ibid., p. 313.

Ibid., p. 324.

Richard, L'Univers, p. 209.


Michaud, Mallarmé, p. 73.

Mallarmé, Oeuvres, p. 1580.

Michaud, Mallarmé, p. 73.

Ibid.


Mallarmé, Oeuvres, p. 433.


Mallarmé, Oeuvres, p. 434.

Davies, Vers une explication, pp. 56-57.

Ibid., p. 66.

Ibid., p. 173.

Fowlie, Mallarmé, p. 115.

A. R. Chisholm, Mallarmé's "Grand Oeuvre" (Manchester, 1962), p. 84.

Richard, L'Univers, p. 185.

Mallarmé, Correspondance, I, 273.
CHAPTER III

LA HANTISE DU NEANT

The years of crisis have produced a change of outlook and of orientation for Mallarmé. During the post-crisis years, the hantise de l'azur is superseded by a hantise du néant, which leads the poet to express his malaise in terms of several recurrent themes, notably, the Void itself, and the theme of Night. Whereas the Dream required that there be an Azure beyond, an ideal place beyond the concrete universe, in which its perfect expression might be contained, the loss of that Dream brings the disappearance of Azure, to be replaced by the presence of Night, which is nothing more than the visual representation of the Void. The hantise du néant will be reflected richly in both theme and technique during the remainder of Mallarmé's life.

Analysis of the poetry from the last thirty years of Mallarmé's lifetime will be made according to theme. There are, of course, poems in which the two themes mentioned above fuse, but categorization will be made on the basis of the dominant theme. No effort will be made to observe strict chronological order since chronology seems relatively unimportant following the crisis years. The
Void finds expression through both form and content, sometimes more through the one than through the other. With reference to content, it may revolve around the old theme of impotence, or it may occur in the theme of the abolition of the concrete things of the world. Again the Void may intrude, not in thematic treatment of abolition, but in the "technique of absence" whereby the poet suggests a non-material, volatilized essence in preference to the description of material objects.

One of Mallarmé's first poems to embody the reflection of the Void is "Sainte," written in December, 1865, when the poet was in the midst of his crisis. Written for the godmother of his daughter Geneviève, the poem depicts a stained-glass window portraying an image of Saint Cecilia, patron saint of music. She appears to be playing a harp, but the harp is only suggested by the configuration of an angel's wing, against which her own uplifted finger suggests the plucking motion associated with the playing of the instrument.

A la fenêtre recéulant
Le santal vieux qui se dédore
De sa viole étincelant
Jadis avec flûte ou mandore,

Est la Sainte pâle, étalant
Le livre vieux qui se déplie
Du Magnificat ruisselant
Jadis selon vêpres et complie:

A ce vitrage d'ostensoir
Que frôlé une harpe par l'Ange
Formée avec son vol du soir
Pour la délicate phalange
Du doigt que, sans le vieux santal
Ni le vieux livre, elle balance
Sur le plumage instrumental,
Musicienne du silence.

The emphasis in the first strophe is not on presence so much as on disappearance, not on the scene originally depicted in the glass but rather on one which has been abstracted through the annihilating force of time. Absence is suggested in several ways, notably through the words "recélant" and "jadis." The first of these suggests that something is lacking. The instruments in question are scarcely visible; they seem half-hidden now due to the erosion of age. The sandalwood of the viol is losing its gilt; it seems to belong to times of yore (jadis).

Repetition of the word "jadis" in the second strophe establishes a parallel with the situation depicted in the first, with this difference: in the first strophe it was a question of the fading of the instruments, but now it is the absence of the book. The hymnal is equally consigned to disuse and hence oblivion. The florid musical notations seem to trickle across the page. The words "vieux" and "jadis," the paleness of the saint, the faded quality of the viol—these are so many signs that suggest the dust of the ages that has descended upon the scene, and which is in the inexorable process of removing this scene from existence for all time.

The negation stated in the first two strophes is reinforced in the fourth: "...sans le vieux santal/ Ni
le vieux livre....." (ll. 13-14) The finger of Cecilia is uplifted, and because of the distorted perspective not infrequent in stained glass, she seems now to be playing upon the wing of the angel. She is termed in the closing line a "musician of silence," an image which captures succinctly the feeling created by all that has preceded. The reader has been prepared for this silent music by the emphasis on fading and absence which occurs throughout the poem.

This little piece represents the perfect blending of Parnassian and Symbolist techniques, which Noulet expresses in the following terms:

...ces stances sont purement descriptives, purement parnassiennes dans leur donnée. Leur vertu étrange est dans le style, dans la syntaxe, dans les répétitions, dans la composition symétrique, dans l'effort d'assurer, par les mots, et leur place et leur rapport et leurs sons et la construction de chaque vers, une audition plus mystérieuse.¹

Cohn grasps the feeling of the poem perfectly in affirming that "We are reminded of Keats' 'unheard music' frozen, visually, on a Grecian urn. The sonnet thus gently represents the aspiration of Mallarmé's art that occasionally seems, or somehow manages, to express the ineffable."²

The change which Mallarmé wrought upon the original title shows the well-established tendency to choose the abstract over the particular, thereby contributing to the overall impression of negation that issues from the poem. Originally entitled "Sainte Cécile jouant sur l'aile d'un
chérubin," it becomes simply "Sainte" in the definitive version.

Mallarmé's preference for the abstract is stated most concretely in a sonnet published in January, 1887, "Mes Bouquins refermés sur le nom de Paphos," in which, more so than anywhere else, he has sought to "investir l'absence d'une valeur positive...." The first quatrain shows the poet taking obvious pleasure in a landscape that issues from his own imagination: "Mes bouquins refermés sur le nom de Paphos,/ Il m'amuse d'écrire avec le seul génie/ Une ruine, par mille écumes bénie/ Sous l'hyacinthe, au loin, de ses jours triomphaux." (ll. 104) Paphos is a Greek city of antiquity, founded by the Amazons, on the island of Cyprus. Through "génie" (the etymon of which is the Latin ingenium, meaning a game of the mind), the poet elects to recreate a ruin as it had once existed in far-distant, triumphal times. The warmth and splendor of this evocation are immediately negated by the second strophe, which establishes the current reality of intense cold by way of contrast: "Courez le froid avec ses silences de faux,/ Je n'y hululerai pas de vide nénie/ Si ce très blanc ébat au ras du sol dénie/ A tout site l'honneur du paysage faux." (ll. 5-8) This depicts a snowstorm scene, the whirling movement of which denies for very long to the poet's imagination the ability to sustain the vision: it can take anchor nowhere. Despite this intrusion and the
abolition of his dream, the poet quietly asserts that he will utter no funereal lamentation at its disappearance.

The tercets reveal why he views this disappearance with such equanimity:

Ma faim, qui d'aucuns fruits ici ne se régale,
Trouve en leur docte manque une saveur égale:
Qu'un éclate de chair humain et parfumant!

Le pied sur quelque guivre où notre amour tisonne,
Je pense plus longtemps peut-être éperdument
A l'autre, au sein brûlé d'une antique amazone.

(11. 9-14)

The first two lines of the first tercet offer the explanation. Having no taste for the fruits of this earth, so to speak, the poet finds compensatory delight in their "learned absence," i.e., in their re-creation through the faculties of the imagination. Proof of this obsessive attraction is given in the third line; the fruits of absence are placed in juxtaposition with that most attractive of human fruits, the female breast, sensually described in this vibrant line. It is as though the poet exhorts the appearance of such a breast in order that he may prove the point. The line may be read as "Though one of them (fruits, i.e., breasts) should burst with human perfumed flesh"5 or it could be viewed as more exhortatory, with the implication that the poet would like thus to be tested in order to prove his point.6

The final tercet clearly establishes the predilection for the "absent fruit"; the scene evoked may be that of the poet lying abed, his foot on the "guivre" (i.e.,
the designs of the snake that serves as the foot of the bed), remembering the part that love has played in his life. The import of the last two lines is clear: the burned breast of the ancient Amazon is more fascinating for Mallarmé than is the real one mentioned in the last line of the first tercet. It commands his attention longer, apparently in a more intense fashion, than does the real one. The reference to the Amazon's burned breast is mythological. They were said to burn off one of their breasts in order better to be able to shoot the bow. This sacrifice to skill offers a parallel, of course, with the poet, who must sacrifice in his particular world. First, there is the sacrifice of ennui implied in the first tercet: "Ma faim qui d'aucuns fruits ici ne se régale," which leads the poet, by way of compensation, into the world of absence. And secondly, it is the world of the Ideal which imposes upon him the obligation of "depersonalization," necessary to the attainment of a clearer vision of reality. The predilection for the absent, it scarcely need be said, is typically Mallarmean. This poem provides a straightforward statement of the poet's conviction of the supremacy of the imaginary over the real.

Absence is the point of departure here—a landscape distant in time and space, flashing through the poet's mind as he comes upon the word "Paphos" in a book he is reading. But no sooner does the vision shine forth than
the gloom of the real winter scene cancels it out of existence. The same contrast between reality and the world of the imagination is provided in the tercets, in terms of the flesh. The absent breast has more real meaning for the poet at this point in his life, precisely because it is absent. The material things of the world encumber, stultify the man of Mallarmé's exaggerated sensibilities. The vaporous, the diaphanous, the fleeting, the faded, the de-materialized, the absent--these are the things which pique, which provide the impetus for creation, which issue the challenge to the poet, which ultimately allow him to play God in the manner in which he is best suited to do so.

This process of volatilization is demonstrated admirably in the sonnet "Toute l'âme résumée" (published in 1895), which is frequently mentioned as a somewhat playfully serious art poétique. Indeed, it is reminiscent of Verlaine's poem which advocates that the poet cultivate "...la chanson grise/ Où l'Indécis au Précis se joint." The message is carried by the somewhat frivolous but valid analogy of the smoker of the cigar who exhales his soul (the idea of contemplation associated with watching the swirling disappearance of smoke) as he exhales cigar smoke:

Toute l'âme résumée
Quand lente nous l'expirons
Dans plusieurs ronds de fumée
Abolis en autres ronds
Atteste quelque cigare
Brûlant savamment pour peu
Que la cendre se sépare
De son clair baiser de feu

Ainsi le choeur des romances
A la lèvre vole-t-il
Exclus-en si tu commences
Le réel parce que vil

Le sens trop précis nature
Ta vague littérature.

The first stanza does nothing more than introduce the subject of the sentence, which is then qualified. However, the art of smoking, so aptly described here, assumes the characteristics of thought and hence of poetic creation. The poet's thought, provoked by the constantly enlarging circle of smoke rings, follows the same pattern of expansion and disappearance, a pattern that is successive in nature, for with each disappearance there occurs the appearance of another ring. The process is akin to the poetic act. Poetry is the puff of smoke "into which the soul is entirely withdrawn. Line follows line, verse, verse, each element dissolving, 'abolished' in the following element."  

Curiously, it is this "whole soul summed up" which attests (bears out, assures the reality of) the cigar, the immaterial thereby substantiating the material. The exhalation of smoke-thought-soul occurs to the same extent as the cigar burns. The cigar thus "skillfully accomplishes a kind of alchemistic operation with each puff... The poet operates in this way, skillfully separating the bright
fire of the soul from the ashes of reality." The third quatrain continues the analogy. The "chorus of romances" flying to the lips of the smoker-poet represents "l'ensemble des chansons, des poèmes, l'oeuvre elle-même." The cigar burns "knowledgeably" insofar as the ash is sloughed off by the kiss of fire. Structurally, the word "ainsi" establishes an analogy between the separation of the ash and the upsurge of the chorus. From this chorus must be excluded "le réel, parce que vil." In effect, the poet-critic has excluded from his work the relation of anecdote, the narration of incident, the presence of material things per se. The couplet is uncharacteristically limpid. For Mallarmé, for whom the great value of poetry lay in its ability to suggest and hence to create new realms of thought and feeling through the power of imprecision, there could be no compromise with this most basic tenet. To suggest is to create.

A rare moment of quiet pleasure, inspired by a flash of beauty, is described in the shimmering, impressionistic piece, "Petit Air, I: Quelconque une solitude," written and published in 1894. A perception of movement, of line and color, is depicted against a backdrop of vacancy—a solitude, i.e., a solitary place, apparently along a river. The only description given of the locale is in negative terms—the absence of the swan or the quay:
Quelconque une solitude
Sans le cygne ni le quai
Mire sa désuétude
Au regard que j'abdiquai

Ici de la gloriole
Haute à ne la pas toucher
Dont maint ciel se bariole
Avec les ors de coucher

Mais langoureusement longe
Comme de blanc linge ôté
Tel fugace oiseau si plonge
Exultatrice à côté

Dans l'onde toi devenue
Ta jubilation nue

To comprehend the last two lines of the first quattrain, it is necessary to follow the thought into the second, where Mallarmé develops the idea of the poet's gaze, indicating from whence it has been displaced. It becomes clear that the solitude is reflected in the eye of the poet-wanderer, who has turned his glance away from the "gloriole," the vainglory of a lush sunset that can be compared to the artist's palette from which many an evening sky is colored. The reference to vainglory suggests the artist's inner state: the sumptuousness and the great remove of the sunset fill the artist, at least momentarily, with a certain malaise which he seeks to dispel by contemplation of a more immediate scene. There is an intrusion upon the solitude, however, an intrusion ambiguous in its presentation, in which difficult syntax creates an aura of vagueness so frequent in Mallarmé. There is movement, but of what? A bird drifting lazily by, as Cohn suggests?¹³
The parallel of a bird's flight with the movement of the river as Mauron suggests? In any case, the precise nature of the occurrence which gives rise to these lines seems unimportant. There is a suggestion of various kinds of very fluid movement, all closely related in this perceptual experience, fused and made indistinct. These elements, the river, the bird, and the white linen which has been removed, apparently by a female companion, and finally the female companion herself, modulate from langour to fleeting movement, to the ecstatic jubilation of the swimmer splashing about in the water. But even here there is an absence of certainty, a lack of concreteness deriving from the use of the conditional "si", which wraps the whole perceptual experience in a cloud of doubt. The reality of the movement, if not negated, is at least placed under question. This immateriality seems heightened by the vagueness of the locale. Negatives stack up in line after line—"solitude," "sans," "ni," "désuétude," "abdiquai," "ne pas," etc. The end result is that an experience has been suggested rather than described, an experience which indicates that the poet is at this instant attracted to a purely terrestrial manifestation of beauty but which, none-theless, for all its abstraction and néantisation at Mallarmé's hand, reveals a well-established pattern of yearning: for the burned breast of the Amazon.

The second poem of the "Petit Air" group,
"Indomptablement a dû," is equally ethereal, once again resorting to the movement of a bird for the fundamental analogy of the poem. Whereas movement in "Petit Air I" is horizontal ("langoureusement longe") or descending ("plonge"), there is in this poem an upward thrust, a vertical ascent which continues beyond the range of both visual and auditory perception. The subject of ascent is clearly a bird here:

Indomptablement a dû
Comme mon espoir s'y lance
Eclater là-haut perdu
Avec furie et silence,

Voix étrangère au bosquet
Où par nul écho suivi,
L'oiseau qu'on n'ouït jamais
Une autre fois en la vie.

Le hagard musicien,
Cela dans le doute expire
Si de mon sein pas du sien
A jailli le sanglot pire

Déchiré va-t-il entier
Rester sur quelque sentier!

Reconstruction of the syntax shows that the bird, mentioned only in line seven, is the subject of the verb "a dû... éclater..." The movement is upward, not because Mallarmé explicitly says so, but because the poem deals with the disappearance of the bird high above. The bird is no longer seen, his song no longer heard. The bird bursts "avec furie et silence," the fury indicating the struggle of aspiration, an unbridled instinct to transcend, and the silence indicating the loss of the perceptual experience.
from the poet's viewpoint. What seems most significant here is that the bird has borne the poet's hope upward as well, or at least is recognized as a symbol for that hope. But this hope is denied in the remainder of the poem.

The bird's voice is foreign to the grove, the normal habitat of birds; the implication seems to be that this is a loner, a figure of great aspiration, one who sacrifices himself to that aspiration. Indeed, the bird is depicted as experiencing anguish in the image "bursting with fury and silence" and again in the epithet "le hagard musicien." The image of solitude and of sacrifice is repeated in that his voice can produce no echo. He is utterly alone, in the silent upper reaches of the atmosphere; he will be heard from no more. The bird-poet offers a brilliant synthesis of Mallarmé's ideas about the role of the poet and his particular plight. The analogy is continued in the last three lines of the third stanza, wherein the doubt of the experience is injected. The birdsong expires into doubt, this birdsong which is turned by analogy into a sob. And this very sob has perhaps issued, not from the throat of the bird, but from the breast of the poet. Mallarmé refrains from explicit statement again by the use of the conditional "si". If this utterance of his imagining has issued from his own breast, then it is consumed by the very doubt that evokes it. The poet's expression, if indeed it be his, whimpers away into the void of
doubt, rather than bursts forth furiously, however silently, in the upper reaches. The experience is fruitless for both poet and bird. The final image shows the bird consumed by his élan, lying torn, along some path or other, victim of an aspiration.

The concrete experience of reality yields to Mallarmé’s techniques for negation. The first two stanzas are controlled by a verb of conjecture. The second movement of the poem (stanzas 3 and 4) is made non-specific by the interrogative structure followed up, not by the question mark, but by an exclamation point. When the poet injects himself into the situation, it is with a conjectural "if". As in the previous "Petit Air," a highly negative vocabulary is used. As regards the content of the poem, there is emphasis upon both movement and sound, but each is effaced. The bird, non-specific (designated simply as "l'oiseau") in a manner which recalls the flower "absente de tous bouquets," has passed from agent to victim, his failure attributable to "la démesure..., le produit d'un irrédentisme passionné."¹⁵ He has simply over-extended himself, serving thereby as yet another symbol and haunting expression of a quest unfulfilled.

The theme of the bird is a recurrent one in Mallarmean poetry, but its single most significant appearance is in the frequently anthologized "Le Vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui." This sonnet was published only in 1885,
and there is no record of its having been written any earlier than that date, yet in content it would seem to belong to an earlier period, so well does it express the feeling of impotence and sterility associated with the hantise de l'azur. It is clearly a product of the later years, however, as evidenced by the tone of intellectual detachment. The hantise of an Ideal is all too apparent, but the dynamism of the earlier urge to escape is virtually abandoned. This is a poem of stasis.

The piece has been termed both a "Symphonie en blanc" and a "Symphonie en i"—white is the dominant color and the brilliantly clear sound of i dominates on the tonal scale. This is the "swan poem" par excellence, mirroring an image of the poet "not as a prisoner of the world, but as a martyr of the idea, as one haunted by the blue of the sky."16

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

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

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

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

In the first strophe, the poet muses over whether
the new day, born virgin, vivacious, and beautiful from the flow of time, will offer new hope of accomplishment, whether this *aujourd'hui* will rend with a drunken wing-stroke the ice of this hard, forgotten lake, which contains beneath its congealed surface the memory of all those aborted yesterdays. The "today" of this first strophe, which in the imagery suggests some big bird flapping its wing to crack the icy surface of the lake, yields in the second strophe to the presence of a real bird—-a swan, a swan of *yore* who remembers that he is the one who is delivering himself up in despair. The implication is that struggle is hopeless because he has not sung (celebrated) "la région où vivre" when the *ennui* of sterile winter was permeating the air with its sheen.

The tercets introduce the only action in the poem, but it is action that will take place, rather than immediate action. The swan's neck will shake off the white agony which space inflicts upon him (the frost or snow that settles upon him), but he will be unable to rid himself of the horror of his captivity on earth. Movement is negated in the second tercet, however, as the swan falls motionless ("s'immobilise"), assuming an attitude of cold disdain ("songe froid de mépris") in his useless exile.

The theme of the poem is quite obviously sterility: the swan, in its cold, proud, haughty, static serenity seems the perfect symbol for the poet immobilized. The
posture of the swan, its graceful neck curved and its head pointing downward to its own breast, suggests the interiority associated with Mallarmé's quest at this stage. The noble mien of the big bird reflects Mallarmé's own view of the poetic attitude. The limited capacity for flight in this most beautiful of birds equates closely with the Mallarmean sense of frustration at not having total flight at his command, full capacity to see, to understand, and to express the Absolute which, by definition, remains beyond the range of human intellect and vision. The dazzling white plumage conveys the ideal of purity that Mallarmé sought in his verse; the reflective quality of the water which the bird floats on suggests the reflective depths of the poet's intellectual processes.

Apart from the dominant swan figure, there is abundant imagery of sterility throughout the poem: the ice, the frost, the glacier, the frozen forgotten lake, the dazzling ennui of sterile winter, the white agony of the snow, space, phantom, the cold dream of scorn. The ice in which the swan-poet is entrapped is his own stasis, his own inability to rise beyond the condition that is his, and in a sense, "those frozen layers of his past history, deep, crystallized dream-memories." He is encircled by his past, for the poem tells us that the ice in the lake is haunted by "des vols qui n'ont pas fui," i.e., all of the attempts that have been made in the past to transcend
these very limits which have now crystallized into ice. These abortive attempts have themselves formed a glacier beneath the ice, but a transparent one, which yields to the eye an immediate and complete record of this unsuccessful past. This new day, with its brilliant summer sun, offers a hope, translated here in terms of a drunken wing-beat, the sudden impulse or aspiration, that will rend the ice cover and free the swan-poet.

Dimension in time is deepened by the fact that here is a swan "of olden times," which reinforces the concept of the swan-poet living with complete consciousness of the failures of his past. Here he remembers, as if to make this moment a part of the past as well as of the present, that it is he who gives himself up without hope. Seeing a swan, the poet remembers that he has been (and is) such as this animal now is. The swan-poet's great failure has been in not celebrating "la région o"vivre"--for not having been able to come to terms with the Absolute, to fulfill his quest before ennui and sterility set in.18

Denial dominates the first tercet. Space (the Absolute) has blanketed the swan in a "white agony"; the messenger of the Absolute has in effect been sent down to heighten the swan-poet's discomfort, to make him all the more keenly aware of the source from which his white agony issues. At this point the swan shakes its head (the head-shake itself approximating a gesture of negation) and in
so doing, denies that space, shakes off the snow that he has been sent in a spirit of taunt or insult (recalling the mocking azure of an earlier period). "The deeper meaning is that the bird has stoically rid itself of an impossible dream of beauty.... It could dispel an illusion, but not the hard fact of being caught in the ice on northern ground." Noulet sees Space as inflicting a punishment, whereupon the victim of that punishment avenges himself by denying Space. Resignation dominates the last tercet, but a resignation which calls to mind the role of Sisyphus in the myth as re-shaped by Camus: it is a resignation strengthened by an attitude of scorn. The active verb "s'immobilise" brings his own will to bear within the framework of his limitations. He is now a phantom, whether because of the white-on-white juxtaposition, or because this "cygne d'autrefois" is but a ghost of what he once was ("the adult Mallarmé ... is a wisp of his former youthful self...."). He is assigned to this place by his pure brightness, i.e., "this is the stoically expected and accepted fate of genius, solitude and the terrible honesty that will not allow him to escape the 'absurd'." There is yet another note in the final line of the poem which implies that this exile is willed, the active verb "vêtir." He puts on, wears this dream of scorn as though it were some protective mantle, in this useless exile, useless because the poet cannot realize his quest and give utterance
to the Ideal. This attitude completes the movement of the poem:

Et ceci est l'événement essentiel survenu au coeur du poète: à l'oubli..., à la torpeur resignée, accompagnée de vagues regrets, succède le mépris, un mépris actif et orgueilleux de ce qu'il ne peut plus atteindre. Son pur éclat, son éclatante pureté lui suffit et le place au-dessus de tout ce qu'il pourrait faire.... L'oiseau, après des battements d'aile et des torsions de cou, reprend son immobilité première. Mais c'est une immobilité renforcée, parce qu'elle est définitive, et qu'elle est voulue.23

Richard also makes of the swan a sort of existen­
tialist hero, who, although he has been introduced as an image of failure, succeeds in dominating his own impotence and wilfully assuming it:

"Fantôme", voué à un "exil unutile," parce que forcê­ment infécond, le moi y choisit d'assumer sa condition fantômatique, de vouloir son exil, et de vivre lucide­ment son agonie. Ce corps et ce paysage, qui lui étaient du dehors "assignés", et qui disaient son im­puissance à être, il les élit délibérément, décide d'être en eux, ou comme le dit mieux Mallarmé, de les vêtir. Les habitant désormais de l'intérieur, il leur donne aussi une nouvelle signification morale: à l'inélegance secouée de la révolte et du refus, mar­quée dans le premier tercet, succède une immobilité dominée par la pensée, qui dit la noblesse, et plus encore le mépris.... Certitude d'une impuissance dé­passée par l'acte qui l'assume, d'un échec pensé, et donc mué en une sorte de victoire.24

This attitude represents a significant advance over the poem "L'Azur" with which it invites comparison. The no­bility and quiet dignity of the later poem reflect a much more mature stance than the earlier one, with its frenetic outcry and frenzied search for a place to hide from the torment inflicted by a no-less-hostile Azure.

The decor of the Tournon crisis reappears in the
Triptyque, published in 1887, and unified in its three elements by a common theme. This decor is essentially the one found in Igitur, the empty room, the night, the shadows, the corridor, the sepulcher, the empty container that holds the void. The three sonnets of the "triptych" will be considered as a unit, although the first is dominated by the Night theme. The first sonnet, "Tout orgueil fume-t-il du soir," may have been inspired by the death of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, with whom the poet had especially close ties of friendship. Many divergent interpretations of this difficult work have been given, but the most reasoned explanation, the one most consonant with the rest of Mallarmé's work, has been offered by Gardner Davies, who sees the subject of the trilogy as the failure of inspiration to be born.

Tout Orgueil fume-t-il du soir,
Torche dans un branle étouffée
Sans que l'immortelle bouffée
Ne puisse à l'abandon surseoir!

La chambre ancienne de l'hoir
De maint riche mais chu trophée
Ne serait pas même chauffée
S'il survenait par le couloir.

Affres du passé nécessaires
Agrippant comme avec des serres
Le sépulcre de désaveu,

Sous un marbre lourd qu'elle isole
Ne s'allume pas d'autre feu
Que la fulgurante console.

The first strophe evokes the proud sun of late afternoon (Orgueil du soir), casting its once-flaming (now
smoking) rays, which are being snuffed out, as a torch is shaken to put it out. This sun is incapable of avoiding or delaying the fatal moment when it must pass from sight. It is this inability of the sun to cling on, this desperate longing to remain, which becomes focal in the remainder of the poem. The second strophe evokes an absent poet in the guise of "l'hôir." The heir of many a rich but fallen treasure is the poet; the treasures are the sunsets that have gone before, and which the poet is called upon to perpetuate through his art. (A significant variant interpretation is that this treasure represents all "the inherited cultural objects this aristocratic, final heir of a long tradition had revivified. Now alas, they are fallen into disuse with his death.") The room is empty now, however, empty of the poet's presence, empty of the slightest bit of warmth. The corridor in question here is the corridor of time, the same image found in Igitur, where it was used in reference to the Hero's race, his ancestors. The tercets depict the dying light of the sun, engaged in a last desperate effort to remain in this empty room, but succeeding only in finding a reflection, however fleeting, in the glowing wood of a console, over which a heavy marble slab, evocative of a tomb, suspends certain oblivion. In the first tercet the "death pangs of the past" suggest this and all previous deaths of the sun, echoing the "maint riche mais chu trophée" inherited by the poet. These
death pangs, or dying glimmers, are now necessary in the special Mallarmean sense of essential (abstract) rather than real; they seem to cling, as with claws, to the edge of the "sepulcher of disavowal," the grave that would annihilate them, that is represented by the marble slab atop the console.

Davies sees in this struggle the drama of inspiration that is trying to be born, yet aborting. The sun seeks perpetuation in this empty room; a poet is unable to provide it since he is absent. His absence symbolizes his "disavowal," his impotence, his inability to use this lingering ray of light, of inspiration, which must look elsewhere for refuge. The room is now chilled; the only reflecting surface is a wooden one, which does offer, momentarily, a refuge to the gleam of light. But this console is weighted down by the marble slab. A note of optimism may have intruded here, however, in that the marble slab easily suggests the mantelpiece and the console the fireplace, the image of the hearth counteracting the somber tone of the second quatrain. Other critics are less optimistic, in varying degrees. Cohn feels that "the torch of life is extinguished and his room is left unwarmed. The piece ends in despair; yet something survives in the last word console--after all, this image hovers in the dark like a ghostly star."28

Death provides the dominant weight in this first
poem of the trilogy, a death represented by the passing of the sun. Light is being snuffed out and it seeks perpetuation. The flame is not even visible at the outset; it is now only smoke. The language of abstraction emphasizes the non-materiality of the scene: Orgueil (for the sunset), immortelle bouffée (the sun), l'abandon (solar death). The visual impression left by the first strophe is that of a diaphanous cloud of smoke hanging in the sky. Focus shifts then to a room devoid of life, of warmth. But the absence within the room is not total: there is a console, the wood of which picks up the dying rays of the sun. At the same time that this light gleaming faintly in the dark gives scope to the void, the console itself, reflecting the light, is characterized as "fulgurante", which, in the vigor implied in the word, suggests an affirmation of life. Yet this aspect too is minimized by the fact that only this console reflects the light. The implication is that it may not be a very significant reflection. The heavy marble slab seems an oppressive weight, since these "affres" (the dying rays of light) grip this "sepucher of disavowal" as though with claws, fearing to fall into the abyss of the grave.

Negation in imagery, in abstraction, is reinforced by negative sentence structure. The statement made in the first quatrain is not given simple declarative structure but rather a less affirmative subject-verb inversion; this
compound sentence is rounded off by the negative "sans que" construction. The second quatrains is a simple negative statement. The tercets form one negative statement.

The subject of the **Triptyque** comes into clearer focus in the second sonnet, "Surgi de la croupe et du bond," the absence of inspiration. The decor of the sonnet is the same as in "Tout Orgueil," but one significant element has been changed: the darkness is now more pronounced. It is now night. The poet mentions a "veillée amère," the bitter vigil that is associated with so many an unproductive night's labors for Mallarmé. We have only to recall references in "Brise Marine" to "la clarté déserte de ma lampe" and in "Don du poème" to the futility of his night's work to receive the full impact of this image.

Surgi de la croupe et du bond  
D'une verrerie éphémère  
Sans fleurir la veillée amère  
Le col ignoré s'interrompt.

Je crois bien que deux bouches n'ont  
Bu, ni son amant ni ma mère,  
Jamais à la même Chimère,  
Moi, sylphe de ce froid plafond!

Le pur vase d'aucun breuvage  
Que l'inexhaustible veuvage  
Agonise mais ne consent,  

Naïf baiser des plus funèbres!  
A rien expirer annonçant  
Une rose dans les ténèbres.

The immediate focal point of the sonnet is some ill-defined crystal vase ("une verrerie éphémère") which is held captive by a sterile destiny: it contains no flowers.
This view of sterility is translated by a striking image: the neck of the vase, surging upward from the "croupe" (i.e., the rounded bottom of the vase)\textsuperscript{29} and the "bond" (i.e., the movement whereby the neck issues from the lower part of the vase)\textsuperscript{30} is interrupted. It lacks the extension which one accepts as the destiny and the fulfillment of a vase— the stem of the flower issuing from the neck.

The second strophe, here as in many another sonnet by Mallarmé, proves the most enigmatic. One possible interpretation issues from structural comparison with the previously discussed "Tout Orgueil". There, after evoking a dying, smoking sunset scene, Mallarmé shifts the focus to the room of the poet, which is found to be empty. Here there may well be a parallel development. As the lines literally indicate, he (Mallarmé) may be the poet in question. A reference to his parents may be intended quite literally in the second line, and the overall implication could therefore be that he, "sylph on this cold ceiling" (another image of sterility for Mallarmé), feels that he owes much of his sterility to the fact that his parents never drank from the same Chimera, source of poetry and dream.\textsuperscript{31} This interpretation, in effect, clearly establishes the poet's so-called sterility as the heritage left by his ancestors since they have not sufficiently endowed him with those qualities that would make of his evenings something other than a bitter vigil.
Cohn takes a broader, less literal view of this quatrain, interpreting the sylph as an event that does not occur, "the perfect-poem-which-cannot-be,"\textsuperscript{32} which Mallarmé despaired of ever producing. The parents, animus and anima of the creator himself, have realized no spiritual union, hence the sylph is fixed upon the ceiling, "the place par excellence of coldly blocked aspiration...."\textsuperscript{33} For Davies, the sylph represents the flower (a rose) which is absent from the vase, a child "dont les parents ne se sont jamais connus, n'ont jamais bu dans la même coupe d'amour à leur rêve commun."\textsuperscript{34} For Richard, this poem is the expression of an interrupted metamorphosis: the upward surge of the neck of the vase is interrupted and falls back upon itself, upon an absence. The line of vision then proceeds to the ceiling, where a sylph is held captive, incapable of surging beyond, caught in a frozen interval like the swan of "Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui," held captive on the threshold of resurrection by some insuperable obstacle to the flight of poetic creativity.\textsuperscript{35} Whatever the variation, these interpretational differences bear only on detail. What is most important is that the poet identifies with the child in question. This seems to be the particular beauty of Mallarmé's poetry: that all of these interpretations fit, and fit well. There is obvious agreement as to the general feeling of the passage: there is negation that stands in the path of creation.
In the tercets the focus returns to the vase which, in its purity and vacuity, is dying, but which nonetheless will not consent to exhale anything that would herald a rose. The vase is pure of any content save its own widowhood (emptiness, sterility). There is an implied parallel between the vase, which could not even be coaxed ("mais ne consent") into producing something that would suggest the presence of a rose, and the poet who must also be waiting, empty-handed, in the night. "A rose, placed in the opening of the vase, would have fulfilled the vase in its reason for being, as a poem or some act of creation would have justified the poet's vigil." The inability of this vase to generate a rose is seen as a "most funereal, naïve kiss" in contrast with the parental kiss that might have engendered the rose, or on another level, the work of poetic creation.

Absence is even more concentrated in this second sonnet of the trilogy than in the first, where there was a wisp of smoke to suggest the sun's prior presence, as well as lingering reflection on the console. Here the word "veillée" plunges the reader into darkness, and the focus is on an empty, ephemeral vase, containing "the irremediable absence of any life-giving force (which) even in its death agony, stubbornly refuses to exhale any perfume, anything which might proclaim the presence of a rose amid the darkness." It is as though this void is
jealously guarding its own vacuousness. The first quatrain begins with a vigorous verb, "surgi," only to end on the word "s'interrompt": a surge of dynamism is broken; the movement congeals. The second quatrain seems chimerical and otherworldly, but it too culminates in stasis--imprisonment beneath a cold ceiling. The tercets are strongly negative: the vocabulary evokes death ("agonise," "funèbres," "veuvage") and sterility ("pur," "rien expirer"). The movement of the tercets is toward self-abolishment of the vase ("agonise, mais ne consent...").

The first tercet, analyzed element by element, is totally negative. The "pure vase" means the vase that is empty; it is empty of any liquid other than its own inexhaustible widowhood, an image that projects absence unlimited. At this point the vase is in the throes of death since it must continue to have its raison-d'être betrayed. The vase does not consent because it is unable to do so. The void is self-perpetuating. The only really positive symbol in the poem is the rose mentioned in the last line, the rose of love, of inspiration, of creation, but it is mercilessly negated by the thirteen lines of verse that have preceded.

The last poem of the trilogy, "Une dentelle s'abolit," portrays a window reminiscent of the one described in "Les Fenêtres" in its function of separating the finite world on this side from the infinite perspective beyond,
yet unlike the earlier-described, golden sunlit window in
that this one is described solely as "blème." The window,
moreover, serves merely as a backdrop for a more focal con­
flict, the play of diaphanous lace curtains against the
pale window panes, the outcome of which is expressed in
negative terms as concerns the curtains, which are abolished.

Un dentelle s'abolit
Dans le doute du Jeu suprême
A n'entr'ouvrir comme un blasphème
Qu'absence éternelle de lit.

Cet unanime blanc conflit
D'une guirlande avec la même,
Enfui contre la vitre blème
Flotte plus qu'il n'ensevelit.

Mais, chez qui du rêve se dore
Tristement dort une mandore
Au creux néant musicien

Telle que vers quelque fenêtre
Selon nul ventre que le sien,
Filiaal on aurait pu naître.

The enigmatic "Jeu suprême" of the first tercet has
once again given rise to very different interpretations.
Some critics see this game as the play of love, at various
levels; others view it as the life principle that as­
sures the return of light each morning; yet others think
this represents the process of transforming the real to
the Ideal. Fowlie and Davies have adhered more to a
unifying principle in the trilogy, which would make of
this supreme game the process of poetic creation. The
lace is thus abolished in the sense that its whiteness is
gradually eclipsed by the increasing whiteness of the
window pane behind it as dawn's light begins to spread. This action is accomplished "in the doubt of the supreme Game," i.e., in the poet's ignorance as to the outcome of this game of creation. The movement of the curtains at the window (as explained in the second quatrain) apparently suggests to the poet the parting of the curtains upon some spectacle, some performance, some act, and it is this act which the final lines of the first strophe evoke. It is an act associated with the bed, the act of birth, the symbolic birth of the rose-sylph of the poem "Surgi de la croupe et du bond," the birth of the poem. But the curtains part only to reveal the absence of a bed. This absence of a bed symbolizes, in effect, the poet's creative impotence, hence the glimpse of its absence comes as a sort of "blasphème," expressing the anguish and guilt resultant for the poet.

The second quatrain concentrates upon the movement of the curtains at the window, movement created because they are blown by a breeze or because of the busy design in the lace. The struggle of white against white, undoubtedly the curtain against the increasingly whitened pane, suggests floating more than it does enclosing or burying. This insistence on the floating movement, rather than on a downward one, opens up a new perspective: this suggests that perhaps there is yet a chance, that the fate of poetic inspiration may still be unresolved.
curtain is not shroud-like, in any event, for there is nothing in the room it could serve to cover in death, since even the bed is absent. The idea seems to be that "there is finally a promise in that flotte, despite the defeat."44 This coming of dawn therefore expresses the hope that there will finally be a creative act.

The tercets open, however, with the word "Mais."

The reference of the epithet "chez qui du rêve se dore" is clearly to the poet; it is he who is illumined by the Dream. But, the mandolin of the poet (whether this be literally a musical instrument in the room45 or, on the subjective plane, the soul of the poet)46 sleeps sadly, belying what little hope was held forth in the preceding stanza. This hollow musical void of the mandolin-soul will not pulsate with the rhythms of creation. The final tercet concentrates on the potentialities of the mandolin: This instrument is such that it would have sufficed to give birth to the poem, or to the inspiration for the poem, but it is asleep. And the relationship would yet have been "filial" between creature and instrument. The image of the bed has been transformed into the image of the mandolin, which is also viewed as a place of birth: "as if it were a maternal womb from which an expression would be born in the full light of the window."47 But the tense of the last verb is significant: "aurait pu naître" has clearly negative implications. There has been no birth,
and the poet is non-committal about the prospects. It is interesting to note that Davies sees this ending as more optimistic than that of the two preceding sonnets in that the **possibility** for such a birth exists, which he feels is more important in the main than what has actually occurred, or not occurred. But this view seems to overlook the fact that the verb tense is conditional **perfect**, that the possibility **has** existed; the poet does not project the eventuality forward. After all, the absence of the bed was described as eternal, which does project the negative state of non-birth through all time.

The theme of the Void is again prominent. Here is another empty, or virtually empty, room, conspicuously lacking a bed. The eye, as it follows the movement of the poem, is fixed upon objects which seem to de-materialize. The lace is abolished. The window is another notable Void which can only underline the vastness of the infinity beyond. The mandolin, even if materially present, is characterized as a "creux néant musicien," asleep, and is thereby negated as a significant force in the drama.

Indeed, it is difficult to find anything very affirmative in the **Triptyque**—a glimmer of light here, a floating movement there, but this scarcely suffices to allow one to speak in terms of optimism as regards the three pieces. Silence is thick and heavy in "Tout Orgueil" as the poet's absence leaves things unsaid. In "Surgi,"
the neck of the vase is interrupted and nothing is exhaled from it. In "Dentelle" the musical instrument is asleep.

Each poem evokes a particular image of the Void, confronting the poet with it. There is another poem, equally dedicated to the Void, but which rises above the individual consideration of the poet's confrontation with it. In "A la nue accablante tu" published in 1895, the question of the Void seems to have bearing on the ultimate destiny of all mankind. Is Man not marching headlong into a Void, larger than that reserved for the particular individual?

A la nue accablante tu
Basse de basalte et de laves
A même les échos esclaves
Par une trompe sans vertu

Quel sépulcral naufrage (tu
Le sais, écume, mais y baves)
Suprême une entre les épaves
Abolit le mât dévêtu

Ou cela que furibond faute
De quelque perdition haute
Tout l'abîme vain éployé

Dans le si blanc cheveu qui traîne
Avarement aura noyé
Le flanc enfant d'une sirène.

The theme of the poem is shipwreck. The setting is cosmic: earth-ocean and sky seem to fuse beneath the dark scowl of the tempest. The menacing, ponderous storm hangs over a strangely silent scene, a silence which comes into clearer focus in the second quatrain. The word "tu" of the first line of the poem, the past participle of "taire," relates to the subject as finally expressed in the second
quatrain. Thus, Mallarmé asks "What sepulchral (and cosmic) shipwreck, silenced (now) beneath the lowering storm cloud, abolished the stripped mast?" It seems that the poet is uncertain that there has been a shipwreck at all, as demonstrated by the alternative possibility speculated upon in the tercets. Perhaps, lacking something more exalted to strike down, the abyss, now characterized as vain, has simply swallowed up, drowned, some siren. In the quatrains, the shipwreck involves Man, the stripped mast symbolizing the naked being, at death. The possible destruction of a siren suggested in the tercets implies that the event may be virtually insignificant rather than all-important. No answer is given. The foam that is seen flecking the surface of the water knows the answer ("tu le sais, écume, mais y baves"), but insensible and inarticulate, it can give no answer.

Here again is a poem of absence, of destruction, and of the Void. The verb "abolir," of such importance in the Mallarmean vocabulary, is the single most important word of the sonnet. The fusion of sky and ocean, the two azures that haunted Mallarmé, suggests the Void. The silence reigning over all adds an element of surreality to the scene, removing it from the dimension of our concrete world, giving it a timeless, cosmic scope. An immense backdrop has been set up for an action which perhaps was on an equally grandiose scale—"quelque perdition haute,"
the shipwreck of man. Or again, it may be a figment of the imagination, just as the mythical siren was a figment of the imagination of ancient man.\textsuperscript{50} It is in this latter possibility that one feels the fullest impact of Mallarmé's irony, that a tremendous stage has been set for a virtually meaningless event.

Noulet seems to capture the theme of negativity quite succinctly when she terms this a "...poème désespéré qui symbolise l'engloutissement de ce qui n'a pas été...."

On voit se profiler derrière lui, le rêve immense du poète, l'oeuvre synthèse qui eût pu faire échec au hasard, le Livre unique, expression totale du monde... Plus émouvant encore, on y entend surgir la plainte renouvelée de l'impuissance créatrice."\textsuperscript{51} For Noulet, clearly, the "perdition haute" suggests the great literary undertaking to which Mallarmé has dedicated his life, and which he fears he will never accomplish. Cohn concurs in that he sees the siren as "representing the ultimate, somewhat androgynous, angelic poet, or ambiguously, ... his final Work, disappearing back into the all-sea."

This echoes a sentiment Mallarmé had expressed in his autobiographical letter to Verlaine in 1885:

\begin{quote}
Au fond, je considère l'époque contemporaine comme un interrègne pour le poète qui n'a point à s'y mêler, elle est trop en désuétude et en effervescence préparatoire pour qu'il ait autre chose à faire qu'à travailler avec mystère en vue de plus tard ou de jamais.....\textsuperscript{53}
\end{quote}

Later perhaps, or never, this is the dilemma. The
symbol of the shipwreck will be taken up again in *Un Coup de dés*, in reference to the accomplishment of l'oeuvre.

The second of the large themes under which Mallarmé's mature work may be classified is that of Night. This is, of course, a theme which has been used earlier, notably in *Igitur*, where the night in question is not total. There is a lighted candle (symbolic of the poet's consciousness) throughout the piece. This light remains one of the permanent fixtures of Mallarmean Night, since it helps to define the Void and at the same time serves to symbolize the presence of the human consciousness, which, through the workings of artistic imagination, affords the only hope for any kind of immortality. This borders now on a theme which will receive more extensive treatment in a subsequent chapter on the eternity of art. As Fowlie observes, "the meaning of night itself seems to have been taken as a clue by Mallarmé for the paradox of the artist's work, which becomes real when an absence is consummated." 54

This duality in the vision of the poet has been discussed earlier in the framework of Hegelian synthesis; it assumes increasing importance in those works which bear upon the Night theme, many of which move by way of negation to an affirmation.

In many of the works dating from the later period, as evidenced in the "Void" poems, Mallarmé returns to the crisis of 1865-1870 for his subject matter. This tendency
persists throughout the poems on Night as well, as demonstrated by "Quand l'ombre menaça," a sonnet dating from 1883 and dealing with the torments (and the triumph) of that crisis. It exalts the splendor of the poet's light above all other lights of the universe.\textsuperscript{55}

There is general agreement among critics that this is a poem celebrating the triumph of genius—an exaltation of the human spirit—not so that any one poet may attain to a personal immortality, but rather in the sense that an artist, once he has died, has made a contribution to the "sum of artistic achievements that gives our planet its special place among the stars."\textsuperscript{56}

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

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

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

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

The shadow of death appears in the first quatrains, threatening the "old Dream" that is so integral a part of the poet's life and thought (being both desire and ache). This Dream, fearful, folds up its wing in the poet. The dominant aspect of this stanza is the darkness of night,
symbolizing within the poet "the darkness of vision, that absence of light into which dissipates the poet's dream." This descent of night seems to threaten the very soul of the poet—the continuation of his thought, his vision which has subsisted in the shape of the old Dream, corresponding to the earlier hantise de l'azur. The wing that the Dream folds is characterized as "indubitable," which seems to indicate the certainty of its existence. The only thing which is subject to doubt, therefore, is the accomplishment of the Dream, not its existence. Richard interprets this inward movement of the Dream as an expression of confidence in oneself: "Si tout est mort autour de moi, si je dois douter de tout, une seule chose échappera à ce doute, et c'est l'existence de la pensée qui me permet de me retourner ainsi vers moi et de poser le monde entier comme douteux." Thus, consciousness of self, disappointed with the useless aspiration to the heights of the Ideal, renounces the exterior world for the interior world. Cohn considers this as basically a move of self-composure: "...sacrificially, a resplendent retreat into the innermost recesses of tragic consciousness."60

The second quatrains gazes into the starry night after the advent of darkness, likening it to a luxurious ebony hall. The "well-known garlands" seem to be the constellations, clusters of stars which, so overwhelmed by the surrounding, vaster darkness (therefore belied),
appear in their twinkling to be caught up in the throes of death. Thus these agonizing stars seem but an expression of pride (possibly vainglory) in the eyes of the poet ("the solitary one"), who is now "dazzled by his faith," i.e., in his perception of the truth of the Void and the immortality of poetic genius. For Fowlie, this faith would appear to be "his power of thought, of wonderment, of imagination, the ancient dream which never abandons him. His faith would not be precisely faith in the Absolute, but in the survival of the Dream..."\textsuperscript{62}

The first tercet affirms vigorously the poet's cognizance that the planet Earth flings into the cosmic Night a dazzling light despite the hideous times that Earth has known. This light, cast outward into space, is termed "un insolite mystère," mysterious both to man and to space itself, since this is a different kind of brilliance. Earth is depicted as living through dark times itself ("sous les siècles hideux"), but the spark of poetic genius dispels some of the darkness that surrounds it. The final tercet offers the spectacle of space rolling vile fires (stars) in boredom as mere witnesses to the fact that genius on a festive planet (Earth) has lighted up. The stars, pale by comparison, can only reflect, bear testimony to, the brilliance issued from the Earth. The extent to which this poem is considered an expression of confidence in poetic genius is best illustrated by Mauron: "The sonnet closes
then like a picture of the Nativity. All the immense but stupid universe surrounds the chosen star where there has just been lighted a mysterious illumination." A mysterious illumination there is, but here the parallel with the Nativity ends. This light heralds the birth of no Messiah who will proclaim an eternity of life for man; it is rather the spark of poetic genius that is celebrated, and through that, the radiance of the human spirit that is proclaimed.

There is a significant variant interpretation of this sonnet which must be taken into account for two reasons. First, it is entirely logical and consonant with the major trends in Mallarmé's thought, and secondly, it furnishes valid insight into the problem of dealing with Mallarmean criticism: the kaleidoscope is easily shifted, providing a whole new series of shapes and patterns to dazzle the eye and stretch the mind, and who could say, other than the poet himself, which interpretation is more valid? Perhaps they are equally so. In any case, the interpretation of Gardner Davies, though differing significantly in detail, does not stray very far from the above-mentioned theme of the eternity of poetic genius. He sees this poem rather as dealing with the subject of poetic inspiration, endangered, faltering, then triumphant. The first quatrain evokes a sunset, but the old Dream is rather that distinctly Mallarmean need to abstract the
pure essences from his experiences of the phenomena of nature; hence the allusion is really to the sunset which darkness threatens with annihilation. The poet must make all of his vivid, real impressions abstract enough to be able to incorporate them into poetry. The word "Dream" evokes for Mallarmé any phenomenon of the exterior world which captures the poet's attention. Thus it is the dying sun which, fearful of "perishing under these funereal ceilings" (i.e., the darkening sky), takes refuge in the poet, invoking his genius to perpetuate its life. The second quatrains describes the darkening sky; the garlands are the clouds banked by the sun's dying rays. All the splendor of this sunset "death-victory" is only vanity as far as the poet is concerned, vanity which the darkness will finally deny. This falsity is fully perceived by the poet, who knows his function is to re-create Nature, and that he is capable of doing so now. In the sestet the Earth casts the sun into the heap of time ("sous les siècles hideux"), abstracted now by death. Just a memory now, it seems less vulnerable to annihilation; it can be resuscitated by the genius of the poet. The stars, rolling in boredom in the blackness of night, bear witness to the fact that the poet's genius has "caught fire" from this setting sun. Thus it is that the poem which celebrates poetic genius for some records the awakening of poetic inspiration for another.
A perfect blending of the themes of the Void and of Night is embodied in the sonnet "Ses purs ongles très haut," written in 1868. It is a poem permeated with absence, the primary drama of which may be said to be between "the empty space and the empty room." But Mallarmé himself can best set the stage for a discussion of this work, for he defines in a letter to Cazalis in July, 1868, those very elements with which the present study is concerned.

The work, Mallarmé says, will depend not on linear discursiveness, but rather on inner resonances, on what he terms an "interior mirage of words." He suggests that it
could provide a subject for an engraving, a subject "plein de Rêve et de Vide," which shows that in Mallarmé's mind the two are now equated. The décor is defined— a window opening upon the Night, the window symbolizing the Void, just as does the Night. The shutters are fastened back to afford an uninterrupted view. The night sky is but a backdrop for a more immediate expression of the Void: the room comes into focus, uninhabited, but with the strong suggestion that it was inhabited earlier but is no longer. The entire fabric of Night is made of absence and interrogation, absence on the physical plane and interrogation on the spiritual or metaphysical plane. The room is revealed as being without furniture, and yet there are the "plausible outlines" of shapeless pieces. Most significantly of all, however, a mirror seems to be hanging on the farthest wall of the room, reflecting (but incomprehensibly) the Great Bear constellation, thereby serving as a link between the sky and this abandoned room.

Absence is reflected in the macrocosm and the microcosm, the first quatrains depicting the exterior Void:

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.

It is midnight, and Anguish is the lampbearer (lampa- padophore), holding up (lamp-like) many a sunset dream that has been consumed by the sun: "The Phenix-sun has gone down with his hopes, which are 'burned' at whatever level--metaphysical, creative (the paper of his manuscript?), personal--yet comes back to life with the morning...."67

The "pure fingernails very high up dedicating their onyx" undoubtedly refers to the stars, which suggests that they are participating in that anguish, contributory to it. These dreams are burned and they remain scattered, rather than collected into some funeral urn. The interpretation of Gardner Davies continues to emphasize the related theme of poetic inspiration: the Phenix in question is the sun that has expired; Anguish is that hantise which drives the poet to re-create his Dream on a symbolic level; these "vesperal dreams" are the impressions the poet has garnered from witnessing the sunset and which he must make quintessental and then perpetuate in poetry; the absence of the amphora indicates that the Phenix-sun, which needs its own ash for its rebirth, has little to hope for since this ash remains uncollected. Thus, at midnight the poet is recalling all the inspiration which the sunset has provided; the anguish he experiences is like a torch-bearer, keeping the sun alive.
The second strophe establishes the inside décor, the room which in its way is nothing more than a mirror of the exterior Void. There exists no bauble ("ptyx") on the buffet in the empty room; death has called the Master and he has taken this object that symbolizes the Void. The word "ptyx" has generated much discussion as to its meaning. Some critics have suggested a vase, others a seashell, yet others a fold in a fabric. All these variant meanings have one element in common: "one elementary meaning: the simplest container of reality (or nothing)." But whatever this object may have signified for the poet, it is not present here. Its prior presence is suggested by the reference to it as an "aboli bibelot" resounding with emptiness. Death has taken the Master, and he in turn has taken this trinket, leaving the room except for the ghost of a former presence, reflecting the black Void that is filled with meaningless stars, "the very image of Hasard." The absence of the Master may be seen as an expression of that need of Mallarmé to abstract himself; the poet, by sacrificing his personality, will allow these dreams (this inspiration) to prolong their struggle against the darkness.

The first tercet introduces a light in the inner Void, just as there was light (the stars) in the outer Void. There is a pale gold fleck of light ("un or agonise") near the vacant window, perhaps issuing from the decorated
mirror-frame. The image of unicorns "ruant du feu contre une nixe" suggests the decorative motif of an old mirror that Mallarmé had bought in Avignon, confirming the idea that this is not just any room but Mallarmé's, that the Master is a reflection of the poet himself. Charles Chassé attributes the image to Larousse: "Les licornes... jettent du feu dans des combats contre ces autres êtres légendaires qu'étaient les nixes."72

The last tercet portrays the mirror, another symbol of the Void, referring to it as "oblivion," i.e., annihilation, "enclosed by a frame." Reflected finally in this oblivion is the septet that can only be a reference to stars, and particularly to the seven stars of the Big Dipper in the Ursa Major ("Grande Ourse") constellation, mentioned by Mallarmé in an earlier poem. Once again there is a light in the darkness. There has been a progression in this Void, from the large macrocosmic view of outer Night to the microcosmic view of the empty chamber, to the reflection of both (a synthesis) in the mirror. The stars of the constellation sparkle, it is true, but only to give dimension to the void. At the end of the poem, these scintillations are made static by their enclosure in the mirror. Cohn sees the emergence of the Big Dipper at the end as holding the promise of something beautiful, as "fraught with captive voluptuousness, potential dynamic energy, on the brink of melting and flowing."73 A similar
view is expressed by Gardner Davies, for whom the awakening of the seven stars in the mirror constitutes a definite sign of hope:

Les rêves de lumière inspirés par le soleil couchant luttent dans le salon vide contre l'obscurité envahissante. Leur luminosité latente fait luire, comme la torche, les ongles du lampadophore imaginaire, mais ils ne trouvent dans la pièce rien qui puisse les perpétuer. Le cadre doré de la glace leur offre un réfuge momentané qui se dérobe à son tour. C'est alors qu'apparaissent dans le miroir les sept étoiles de la Grande Ourse. Jusqu'au lendemain matin, quand le Phénix renaîtra de sa cendre, ces étoiles sont destinées à le représenter dans le cadre noir.\textsuperscript{74}

Originally entitled "Sonnet allégorique de lui-même" at the time of its composition in 1868, two years after his claim of having seen "le Rêve dans sa nudité idéale," this sonnet clearly has reference to Mallarmé on a personal level. On this level, the death of the Master refers to the poet's becoming "impersonal"; he has gone to death in the sense that he seeks oblivion, taking with him those objects which "do honor to the Dream," i.e., those memories and aspirations that are associated with and elicit the Dream. But as the Master disappears, there comes into focus in the mirror the reflection of the stars, a positive sign that even in this stage of the crisis, a light is emerging. This is a light which receives increasing attention from the poet during the remainder of his lifetime, recurring time and time again, and culminating in his last and most ambitious work, \textit{Un Coup de dés}.

The light shining in the darkness receives a
different treatment in "Victorieusement fui le suicide beau," written and published in 1885. A clearly-defined positive force is shown in operation for the first time: a woman's love. The sonnet is inspired, at least in part, by Méry Laurent, a charming and beautiful woman who frequented the same artistic circles as did Mallarmé during the 1880's, and with whom he established a relationship in the second half of that decade. The light that lingers past the death of the sunset is reflected, not in a frozen mirror or in the vastness of an empty night sky, but rather in the sensuous chevelure of a woman. This marks the first discernible appearance of Méry as an inspirational force in the poetry of Mallarmé, a force destined to grow considerably more significant in the following years.

The first strophe indicates the victorious flight of a beautiful suicide (the sunset), a suicide because it is seemingly giving itself up to death, yet it is a splendid death, an impressive cosmic manifestation with which Mallarmé was obviously fascinated, the spectacle of nightfall in which "le catastropha s'égale....à une apothéose."75 The sun is victorious in the sense that it always survives its seeming destruction.

Victorieusement fui le suicide beau
Tison de gloire, sang par écume, or, tempête!
O rire si là-bas une pourpre s'apprête
A ne tendre royal que mon absent tombeau.
Because of syntactical ambiguity in the third and fourth lines of the first stanza, it is impossible to know whether it is the sun or the poet who is struck by the ironic thought that preparations are being made for a tomb which will remain "absent." Conceivably, it is both. The poet may see in this solar death a prefiguration of his own death, yet a death that is still future as he continues his own particular struggle with another night. Davies feels it is more likely the sun which feels victorious in this splendid apotheosis it is enjoying, in the unquestionable certitude that tomorrow will bring a return.76

There is a shift of time and place in the second strophe. It is no longer a sunset spectacle, but a bedroom scene at midnight, where the poet marvels that nothing remains of the fiery splendor of the earlier scene—except in the glints of light reflected in the hair of his beloved. These pale reflections, surviving in the neutral moment of midnight, suggest a transmission of this light to the new day, therefore making of this loved one's hair an instrument of regeneration, a means whereby the cycle of life
may begin anew. In the light of this possible rebirth, the irony of the last two lines of the first strophe comes into clearer focus: the butt of the irony would be the death force itself, the Void, from which the poet (or the sun) has victoriously fled, leaving all the royal purple to deck out an absent tomb! The means by which this escape becomes effective is the hair of the loved one, both for poet and for the sun. From the viewpoint of the poet, this may be construed as a call to the life of the senses, of love. The head is considered "presumptuous" here in that it has assumed the role of the sun.77

The metamorphosis of the golden head of hair into an instrument for the re-assertion of life is continued in the tercets. The head retains from the vanished sky a bit of childish triumph, childish perhaps because of the idea of rebirth that is implied in the process whereby death is defeated, or perhaps as an indication of the small scale on which the sunset splendor is reflected here in the room.78 In the second tercet the hair has become a warrior's helmet worn by a child empress. The royal sun, by its extinction, has conferred a title upon this successor: she is an empress now. Her hair surrounds her as though it were a warrior's helmet, now protective and militant, but at the same time feminine enough to give off the reflection of roses which offers an image of the beloved.

There is a tendency among certain critics to
emphasize the "laughter" mentioned in the first quatrain, which indicates an irony, even an absurdity. Cohn interprets the catastrophe of the solar death as a "glorious holocaust to dramatize the absurdity of all creation," the laughter indicating a leap forward by the poet from "what is really an inner suicide, or awareness of the absurd." This interpretation is certainly consonant with Mallarmé's attitude toward the meaning of life after his crisis years in Tournon. Richard assumes basically the same attitude, but translated into other terms: "...dans 'Victorieusement fui le suicide beau' ....nous voyons une chevelure échapper au 'suicide' solaire de l'être et poursuivre au coeur vide de la nuit son rayonnement heureux." This critic finds that woman in Mallarmé's universe is justifiably proud: "...son feu constitue bien la seule force bénéfique capable de nous faire heureusement traverser toutes les discontinuités de l'être. L'amour réussit ici à tromper directement la mort." Here the poet is not seeking oblivion and escape as he had in a much earlier poem based on the hair image, "Tristesse d'été." Instead, there is the strong implication that he seeks this "puéril triomphe" reflected in the beloved's hair as active engagement in affirming life.

The affirmation of life through appeal to the senses receives much more extensive treatment in a number of poems attributable to the beneficent influence of Méry Laurent on
the poet's life. These will be treated in another chapter since the theme of Night does not appear in them. This engagement in life is further developed in the theme of the eternity of art, a theme which forms the substance of a number of poems yet to be considered, in which the poet expresses confidence in the transcendance and immortality of the work of artistic creation.
Notes

1. 'Noulet, Dix Poèmes, p. 43.
2. Cohn, Toward the Poems, p. 91.
3. 'Noulet, Dix Poèmes, p. 113.
5. Cohn, Toward the Poems, p. 237.
6. 'Noulet, Dix Poèmes, p. 120.
7. Ibid.
12. 'Noulet, Dix Poèmes, p. 145.
13. Cohn, Toward the Poems, p. 118.
17. Cohn, Toward the Poems, p. 124.
19. Cohn, Toward the Poems, p. 130.
20. 'Noulet, Dix Poèmes, p. 98.
22. Ibid.
23. Duchesne-Guillemin, p. 68.
24 Richard, L'Univers, p. 256.
26 Cohn, Toward the Poems, pp. 198-199.
27 Davies, Drame solaire, p. 208.
28 Cohn, Toward the Poems, pp. 196-197.
29 Ibid., p. 203.
30 Davies, Drame solaire, p. 213.
31 Fowlie, Mallarmé, p. 50.
32 Cohn, Toward the Poems, p. 205.
33 Ibid.
34 Davies, Drame solaire, p. 224.
35 Richard, L'Univers, p. 258.
36 Fowlie, Mallarmé, p. 51.
37 L. J. Austin, "The Mystery of a Name," L'Esprit Créateur, I (Fall, 1961), 134.
38 Cohn, Toward the Poems, p. 208.
39 Noulet, Dix Poèmes, p. 105.
40 Mallarmé, Poèmes, commentary by Mauron, pp. 273-274.
41 Fowlie, Mallarmé, p. 53, and Davies, Drame solaire, p. 229.
42 Davies, Drame solaire, p. 229.
43 Ibid., p. 234.
44 Cohn, Toward the Poems, p. 213.
45 Davies, Drame solaire, p. 236.
47 Fowlie, Mallarmé, p. 52.
48 Davies, *Drame solaire*, p. 238.
49 Cohn, *Toward the Poems*, p. 230.
50 Ibid.
52 Cohn, *Toward the Poems*, p. 235.
55 Noulet, *Dix Poèmes*, p. 47.
58 Noulet, *Dix Poèmes*, p. 50.
60 Cohn, *Toward the Poems*, p. 121.
64 Davies, *Drame solaire*, pp. 41-71 passim.
65 Cohn, *Toward the Poems*, p. 143.
67 Cohn, *Toward the Poems*, p. 140.
68 Ibid., p. 141.
69 Ibid., p. 142.
70 Davies, *Drame solaire*, p. 50.
71 Mondor, *Vie*, p. 261.
72 Chassé, *Clefs*, p. 130.
73 Cohn, *Toward the Poems*, p. 145.
74 Davies, *Drame solaire*, pp. 135-136.
76 Davies, *Drame solaire*, pp. 80-84.
77 Cohn, *Toward the Poems*, p. 136.
78 Davies, *Drame solaire*, p. 93.
79 Cohn, *Toward the Poems*, p. 133.
81 Ibid.
CHAPTER IV

AFFIRMATION

The poet who has spent such a large measure of his life in contemplation of the Void and in the suggestion of the Void through his poetry ultimately finds in this Void a point of departure, a kind of abstract terrain upon which to stand and affirm both the life of the senses and the immortality of artistic creation. But these affirmations are not without their qualifications. The poetry inspired by Méry Laurent offers the clearest expression of the call to life which Mallarmé experienced, to the life of the senses, of love. But in a typically Mallarmean fashion, each affirmation made in the "Méry poems" bears within it a contradiction, an ambiguity that is capable of casting an entirely different light on the interpretation of the work, so that ultimately one wonders how much of an affirmation has really been made. Mallarmé, creature of intellect par excellence, seems to have been unable to make an unqualified affirmation except as regards the primacy of the artistic creation.

Love is the theme of the poems inspired by the Méry Laurent relationship. In "Quelle soie aux baumes de temps," published in early 1885, the joy of loving brings
about an eclipse, at least momentarily, of the concern over art and the fear of the Void. Mallarmé's favorite object of eroticism, the hair, gives rise to this statement of the urge to life, as it has done before. The hair of his mistress serves as the first term of an analogy that permits meditation on the comparative merits of loving, or forsaking such terrestrial pursuits for more eternal ones. These latter are represented in the analogy of a flag hallowed by time ("soie aux baumes de temps"):

Quelle soie aux baumes de temps
Où la Chimère s'exténue
Vaut la torse et native nue
Que, hors de ton miroir, tu tends!

Les trous de drapeaux méditants
S'exaltent dans notre avenue:
Moi, j'ai ta chevelure nue
Pour enfuir mes yeux contents.

Non! La bouche ne sera sûre
De rien goûter à sa morsure,
S'il ne fait, ton prince amant,

Dans la considérable touffe
Expirer, comme un diamant,
Le cri des Gloires qu'il étouffe.

The first strophe raises the question: What time-honored flag is worth this twisting, waving head of hair that you hold forth? The second strophe again places in juxtaposition those proud battle-scarred flags, symbolizing man's most honored pursuits of duty to country fulfilled, with the head of hair of the beloved, in which the lover's eyes seem to burn holes just as the bullets have pierced the flags. Each tercet presents another facet of
the problem. What hope can the poet hold of realizing anything from the present pursuit, anything of value, of abiding merit, that is, if he does not either: 1) stifle (faire... expirer) the poet's cry for glory, or 2) breathe forth (faire... expirer) this cry for glory through the instrumentality of this head of hair? Thus two clearly distinct, and opposite, possibilities are raised, stemming from two divergent interpretations of the one word "expirer." This ambiguity is quite characteristic of the poet's late style: the word or the syntactical structure which can lend itself to either a positive or a negative interpretation contributes to the perplexing but equally intriguing ambiguity of the verse. There seems to be no need to choose one interpretation over the other; Mallarmé must surely have chosen the word "expirer" for this very duality. Whether the hair definitively smothers the cry for glory which the poet longs to utter (in effect serving as a temporary escape mechanism similar to those which express the desire to flee from l'azur), or whether it serves as the very expression of that cry, breathing it out (hence accomplishing an effective sublimation of the poet's yearning), the result is, momentarily at least, the same for the poet. He is finding a release in the enjoyment of his love. Whether it has the negative value of temporary escape or the positive value of successful sublimation is the question that remains unresolved.
Syntactical ambiguity at a crucial point leads to ambivalence in another of the Méry Laurent poems "M'Introduire dans ton histoire," published in 1886.

M'introduire dans ton histoire
C'est en héros effarouché
S'il a du talon nu touché
Quelque gazon de territoire

A des glaciers attentatoire
Je ne sais le naïf pêché
Que tu n'auras pas empêché
De rire très haut sa victoire

Dis si je ne suis pas joyeux
Tonnerre et rubis aux moyeux
De voir en l'air que ce feu trouble

Avec des royaumes épars
Comme mourir pourpre la roue
Du seul vespéral de mes chars.

The poem begins with the statement of a proposition, the accomplishment of which seems to be intimated, but there is no indication that clearly confirms it. The poet proposes that he become a part of the life story of his beloved. But as soon as the possibility is raised, there is a fear reaction on the part of the poet, where, through analogy, he evokes a hero terrified at the moment of conquest. Fowlie sees this as a possible allusion to Achilles, or at least to the point of vulnerability of the Greek warrior, implying that there is danger in this conquest.

The second strophe reveals that the poet's hesitancy stems not only from his own reserve or timidity but also from the coldness of his beloved. It is at this point that the ambiguity arises. The lines may mean:
"'I don't know what (undefinable) sin it is/ That you won't have prevented,' that is to say, the woman was immediately indulgent to some desire of the poet; then, 'I know no sin however naive (or innocent)/ That you won't have prevented', in other words, the poet complains at her stopping even the most harmless physical expression of affection."  

Whatever the case, however, the experience was evidently not a gratifying one, for as the tercets unmistakably indicate, the note of triumph expressed there is not provoked by the conquest of a lady but rather by a sublimation; he must turn outward to find triumph, which he perceives in the brilliance of a sunset glow.

The implication seems to be that, since the lady's coldness and his timidity have kept the poet from experiencing the full triumph of conquest, he will provide a triumph through the force of his imagination. Desire was insufficient to thaw the feminine cold, but the sun will prevail. "L'échec n'entraîne donc finalement que joie; projetée dans le ciel, la défaite terrestre s'y sublime en victoire."  

Whatever affirmation is to be found in the poem derives from the poet's sublimation of the love instinct to art.

The mood in "Dame sans trop d'ardeur" is quite different. The poet commemorates an anniversary of his relationship with Méry, which is here portrayed as a tranquil affair that has even become somewhat monotonous now.
Dame
sans trop d'ardeur à la fois enflammant
La rose qui cruelle ou déchirée et lasse
Même du blanc habit de pourpre le délace
Pour ouir dans sa chair pleurer le diamant

Oui sans ces crises de rosée et gentiment
Ni brise quoique, avec, le ciel orageux passe
Jalouse d'apporter je ne sais quel espace
Au simple jour le jour très vrai du sentiment,

Ne te semble-t-il pas, disons, que chaque année
Dont sur ton front renaît la grâce spontanée
Suffise selon quelque apparence et pour moi

Comme un éventail frais dans la chambre s'étonne
A raviver du peu qu'il faut ici d'émoi
Toute notre native amitié monotone.

Another year has passed. The two quatrains speak of what their relationship is not, hence the prominence in each strophe of the negative "sans." The first strophe cancels out excessive ardor which would inflame (incarnadine) the rose (symbol of love, of life), a rose which, in opening up, unlaces the white coat (sepals) with purple to hear the diamond purity (virginty) of its flesh weeping. This last verse may describe "the dew sparkling in the deepest, the most carnal depths of the opened flower." The second quatrain continues the negation. The relationship is without these crises of passion, without the winds that sweep away storm clouds (suggesting tranquility after a storm), but which are also ever eager to push back the horizons of their calm and quiet tenderness (and turn it into something different, something less serene).

Having disposed of those factors which are not
characteristic of the relationship, the poet proceeds to
describe what is, and to draw quiet pleasure from what he
sees. The first tercet records the passage of each year,
which leaves marks, but benevolent ones, on the face of
the beloved. And this is enough for the poet's happiness.
Each new anniversary arrives, and its arrival suffices to
revive, out of the calmly unemotional atmosphere, the
"whole monotonous, natural friendship." This small event
(the anniversary) is enough "to provoke just the slight
emotion that is needed"\textsuperscript{7} to keep the special relationship
alive.

Absence figures prominently in the two negative
quatrains, which are highlighted by the more positive, con-
crete tercets. Yet even these are softened by the negative
question which begins the first tercet. The presence de-
scribed is virtually borderline on absence: "du peu qu'il
faut ici d'êmoi." The ponderous final line of the poem
serves as a perfect pendant for the more flashing opening
line ("ardeur," "enflammant"), a pendant dark and heavy
with nasal vowels and consonants, negative in tone and
idea. For the monotony of the relationship is a negative
note. Once again the reader is constrained to wonder
whether the affirmation is not unduly qualified.

One must conclude from these works that the love
experience was not entirely successful in providing Mal-
larmé with a satisfactory answer to the Void. What he
gives to amour-passion with one hand, so to speak, he takes away, at least in part, with the other. But this is not the case when the eternity of art is involved. The light of artistic genius invariably shines in the darkness, for here is the only creative force that can succeed in transcending the grave.

In late 1873 Mallarmé published "Toast Funèbre," a pièce de circonstance intended to commemorate the death of a poet whom he greatly admired, Théophile Gautier. "Toast" contains much in theme that is similar to the prose poem Igitur, Mallarmé's last preceding work. It offers up a toast to Gautier, a funeral toast, incongruous though the idea may seem. It refuses any profession of faith in Gautier's immortality in the religious sense, but rather affirms the belief that Gautier, in his entirety, lies in the tomb. Nonetheless, something remains. Gautier, by virtue of his particular visual and poetic gifts, has contributed in his art to the perpetuation of pure Beauty. This is his glory, the glory of his art, and it is eternal. Gautier is viewed as a symbol of the poet's destiny.

The opening line, "O de notre bonheur, toi, le fatal emblème," apostrophizes Gautier, recognizing in him the symbol of those poets who have fulfilled their destiny, i.e., to achieve a glory that will survive the mortal man. Referring to himself as commentator on the death (and the life) of Gautier, Mallarmé defines his role here as being
to "chanter l'absence du poète." This is the "fil conducteur" of the poem, a theme of absence. The poet has disappeared bodily, to be replaced by something much more lasting. This something is the fame that comes through the exercise of the poet's craft:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Salut de la démence et libation blème,} \\
\text{Ne crois pas qu'au magique espoir du corridor} \\
\text{J'offre ma coupe vide où souffre un monstre d'or!} \\
\text{Ton apparition ne va pas me suffire:} \\
\text{Car je t'ai mis, moi-même, en un lieu de porphyre.} \\
\text{Le rite est pour les mains d'éteindre le flambeau} \\
\text{Contre le fer épais des portes du tombeau:} \\
\text{Et l'on ignore mal, élu pour notre fête} \\
\text{Très simple de chanter l'absence du poète,} \\
\text{Que ce beau monument l'enferme tout entier.} \\
\text{Si ce n'est que la gloire ardente du métier,} \\
\text{Jusqu'à l'heure commune et vile de la cendre,} \\
\text{Par le carreau qu'allume un soir fier d'y descendre,} \\
\text{Retourne vers les feux du pur soleil mortel!} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(11. 2-15)

Nothing remains of the poet in this world, certainly. But then, having made the sweeping negative, Mallarmé recovers an element, as he frequently does through similar stylistic devices, from that negation. "La gloire ardente du métier," i.e., the poet's craft, will remain until time itself is obliterated in apocalypse. The poet's glory radiates outward beyond the walls of the tomb, to merge with the rays of the sun, which is proud to descend upon this very tomb at nightfall, thereby signalling a union of the poet's fame with the fires of the "pur soleil mortel," the sun in its death agony. This last image, though focusing attention on the mortality of the sun, is nonetheless a symbol of the only immortality for the poet: the
sun dies only to be reborn with each new day. Thus shall Gautier know a rebirth after a period of waiting.

The second section of the poem reflects on the attitudes of the ordinary man toward death as opposed to those of the poet who, rather than accept death with the blandishments and deceitful platitudes on immortality proffered by religions, stands upright in all his pride before the Void. Mallarmé uses Gautier as a symbol of such a poet, but the symbol certainly embraces Mallarmé himself. The death of the poet is evoked in lines which emphasize this nobility:

Magnifique, total et solitaire, tel
Tremble de s'exhalar le faux orgueil des hommes.
Cette foule hagardé! elle annonce: Nous sommes
La triste opacité de nos spectres futurs.
Mais le blason des deuils épars sur de vains murs
J'ai méprisé l'horrer lucide d'une larme,
Quand, sourd même à mon vers sacré qui ne l'alarme
Quelqu'un de ces passants, fier, aveugle et muet,
Hôte de son linfeul vague, se transmuait
En le vierge héros de l'attente posthume.
Vaste gouffre apporté dans l'amas de la brume
Par l'irascible vent des mots qu'il n'a pas dits,
Le néant à cet Homme aboli de jadis:
"Souvenirs d'horizons, qu'est-ce, à toi, que la Terre?"
Hurle ce songe; et, voix dont la clarté s'altère,
L'espace a pour jouet le cri: "Je ne sais pas!"
(ll. 16-31)

A brilliant display of the "culte de l'absence" occurs in the second half of this section of the poem, where the Void of the poet in death encounters the Void beyond life. A shimmering, quivering, reverberating effect is achieved on a cosmic scale in the last six lines. The absence of the poet is evoked most effectively by the
image of the "vaste gouffre apporté dans l'amas de la brume,"; he is literally absence transposed upon absence now, a gulf carried into the abyss by all the things that the mortal man has had to leave unsaid. The implication is that the impotence-sterility concept of Mallarmé, operable in Gautier as well, has been responsible for the poet's death. Cohn sees this inarticulateness as a kind of judgment of the mortal man: "The unsaid haunts him, judges him--this man who was already dead in a sense, formerly ('of yore'), that is, in his lifetime because of his inarticulateness."9

The third section looks not so much at Gautier the mortal, who has had to leave so many things unsaid, but rather at Gautier, the Master, who in his role of poet has made himself immortal. This section is a sort of art poétique for Mallarmé.

Le Maître, par un oeil profond, a, sur ses pas,
Apaisé de l'édén l'inquiète merveille
Dont le frisson final, dans sa voix seule, éveille
Pour la Rose et le Lys le mystère d'un nom.
Est-il de ce destin rien qui demeure, non?
O vous tous, oubliez une croyance sombre.
Le splendide génie éternel n'a pas d'ombre.
Moï, de votre désir soucieux, je veux voir,
A qui s'évanouit, hier, dans le devoir
Idéal que nous font les jardins de cet astre,
Survivre pour l'honneur du tranquille désastre
Une agitation solennelle par l'air
De paroles, pourpre ivre et grand calice clair,
Que, pluie et diamant, le regard diaphane
Reste là sur ces fleurs dont nulle né se fane,
Isole parmi l'heure et le rayon du jour!
(11. 32-47)

... Through his keen visual perception, Gautier gives
essential being to things which seem merely on the threshold of existence. The marvels of Eden (the garden aspect) are unquiet, anguished, and the poet appeases these anxieties (le frisson final) by giving "the mystery of a name to the Rose and the Lily." Here Mallarmé defines the poet's immortality: surviving the man there is "une agitation solennelle par l'air/ De paroles...," the transmutations of things that he has viewed, those essences he has distilled and thus protected from the ravages of time and the vagaries of chance. It is these essences which will endure. Threatening the exercise of the poet's function is "le rêve, ennemi de sa charge," that immobilizing, paralyzing factor that plays such an important role in Mallarmé's poetry. Numerous critics see the dream in question as a symbol of religious belief in a supernatural life, but there seems little reason to give this term a meaning other than its usual one: that of illusion. The two interpretations are not mutually exclusive; they rather complement each other. The exercise of the poet's role is an enervating, consuming one, in which the poet is frequently the victim of the sacrifice. Death may arrive to cancel out the man, just as he must efface himself before the work of literary creation. But there is a salvation, paradoxically, at the same time: Death (as well as the literary work) transforms him into an author; the literary legacy left by the man consecrates the true
essence of the man and makes of him a poet. Literature annihilates, but it resuscitates too.\textsuperscript{10} The final movement of the poem defines the role of the poet:

\begin{quote}
C'est de nos vrais bosquets déjà tout le séjour,
Où le poète pur a pour geste humble et large
De l'interdire au rêve, ennemi de sa charge:
Afin que le matin de son repos altier,
Quand la mort ancienne et comme pour Gautier
De n'ouvrir pas les yeux sacrés et de se taire,
Surgisse, de l'allée ornement tributaire,
Le sépulcre solide où gît tout ce qui nuit,
Et l'avarice silence et la massive nuit.
\end{quote}

The poet's function (i.e., his "séjour" among the groves on earth, the reason for his being here) is to prevent his labor from becoming too engrossed with the Dream to the point that he becomes static. The essences abstracted by the poet are the force which defy the solid sepulcher, the greedy silence, the massive night.

The theme of absence, a suggestion of absence in which a presence is shown effaced or being effaced, an esthetic of suggestion, of the need for abstracting the particular—such is the substance of "Toast funèbre."

This is the first of several poems written by Mallarmé with a commemorative function. The well-known "Tombeau d'Edgar Poe" follows the Gautier piece by three years (1876), breaking a long pause in poetry writing. This poem, along with the other commemorative works, shows the way through death to resurrection, through the instrumentality of a literary or artistic legacy. When Mallarmé
writes in the first line of his tribute to Poe's genius, "Tel qu'en lui-même enfin l'éternité le change," he is providing an extremely concise statement of his fundamental and abiding attitude toward death. The poet, misunderstood in life and frequently scorned, is removed from the contingencies of daily existence by death, but death does more. By separating the poet from his work, by drawing the line beyond which there will be no further work, death turns the poet's oeuvre into an absolute. After a given period in which the man and his work must jell, so to speak, a period which Mallarmé refers to as "l'attente posthume," the spark of genius contained in the work will begin to glow. Thus, in this context, death is viewed merely as a fluctuation that promises hope to the man of genius, a hope of renewal. This poem on Poe deals not only with the fate of a particular poet, but of the poet, who suffers from lack of acceptance in his lifetime and can only be appreciated by future generations.

Tel qu'en Lui-même enfin l'éternité le change,
Le Poète suscite avec un glaive nu.
Son siècle épouvanté de n'avoir pas connu
Que la mort triomphait dans cette voix étrange!

Eux, comme un vil sursaut d'hydre oyant jadis l'ange
Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu
Proclamèrent très haut le sortilège bu
Dans le flot sans honneur de quelque noir mélange.

Du sol et de la nue hostiles, ô grief!
Si notre idée avec ne sculpte un bas-relief
Dont la tombe de Poe éblouissante s'orne,
The role of the poet, according to the second quatrain, is to "donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu," which recalls a statement discussed earlier about the "commercial" aspects of language: "Parler n'a trait à la réalité des choses que commercialement." The words uttered by the tribe, the crowd, are those used in the trivial undertakings of daily existence, the practical applications of speech. The realm of the poet transcends this, reaching up to a more essential plane: "En déclarant que Poe donne un sens plus pur aux mots de tous les jours, Mallarmé veut dire qu'il se sert de ces mots dans un but plus idéaliste, les douant d'une véritable puissance d'incantation." In the exercise of his function, the poet encounters hostility, a hostility summarized in the antithesis: "Du sol et de la nue hostiles, ô grief!" The tribe is to be equated with "le sol" and the ideal-oriented poet with "la nue," which offers its own kind of resistance. It is Mallarmé's closing wish that, if he does not provide a dazzling literary monument to Poe's death, then at least this tombstone on the grave of Poe should serve in the future to deter his detractors from blasphemy.

In "Le Tombeau de Charles Baudelaire," published in 1893, Mallarmé depicts the work of the dead poet in
symbolic terms— an idol of the god Anubis, dug up from some buried temple, a mélange now of mud and rubies. The image captures the antithesis of Baudelaire's moral preoccupation and his fascination with evil, with beauty and with sin. The second image used to evoke the work is that of a prostitute, a figure used recurrently in Baudelaire's poetry, depicted here as shifting with the flickering of the gas lamp near which she stands. She is considered a much worthier monument, as she leans, in the poet's imagination, against the tombstone over Baudelaire's grave, than the funeral wreath or laurel crown which may be placed there by friends or admirers. In the final tercet the prostitute fades momentarily from view under the flickering light to fuse with the very shade of Baudelaire himself. She is termed a "tutelary poison," the image encompassing both the prostitute and the poet's works. She is tutelary in that she is watching over the tomb, and poison by her profession. The work is tutelary in what it reflects about the forces of good and poisonous in its reflection of evil. Les Fleurs du mal are flowers to be inhaled even if they should mean the death of the person breathing in their essence.

Le temple enseveli divulgue par la bouche
Sépulcrale d'égout bavant boue et rubis
Abominablement quelque idole Anubis
Tout le museau flambé comme un aboi farouche

Ou que le gaz récent torde la mèche louche
Essuyeuse on le sait des opprobres subis
Il allume hagard un immortel pubis
Dont le vol selon le réverbère découche

Quel feuillage séché dans les cités sans soir
Votif pourra bénir comme elle se rasséoir
Contre le marbre vainement de Baudelaire

Au voile qui la ceint absente avec frissons
Celle son Ombre même un poison tutélaire
Toujours à respirer si nous en périssons.

This poem demonstrates a pattern of burial and re-emergence already established in "Toast funèbre," whereby from the buried temple there issues an idol-symbol that expresses the duality of Baudelaire's poetry, thereby synthesizing it. The emergence factor is strongly heightened by the imagery of the last three strophes, in which fire, movement and shade (spirit) are emphasized. The poem closes with the image of a reader breathing in the essence of these flowers of evil, which, despite the death of the poet, retain all of their vital (and mortal) force.

In "Hommage," written in 1885 to commemorate the life of Richard Wagner, the initial movement of sinking, of burial, receives the full emphasis of both quatrains:

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

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

The first quatrains evoke the negative aspects of death— "silence funèbre," "le manque de mémoire,"—at the same time that it stresses downward movement—"un tassement du
principal pilier." The vaguely defined image seems to be that of an edifice. Cohn feels it evokes the contemporary theater, 16 while Davies interprets it as a symbol of the temple of Wagner's art. 17 Thibaudet 18 and Mauron 19 both see this as a reference to the drama of the period, considered by Mallarmé to be in a state of decay. Of the numerous arguments given in support of particular views, those of Davies seem the most coherent and satisfying. They make of Wagner the "main pillar" in the temple of his art, a pillar which settles down into the earth and in so doing, pulls aside the black mourning cloth ("moire") of silence and oblivion that have followed the death of the poet. Underlying this image is the idea of "l'attente posthume," that period during which the artist's reputation solidifies and his star rises.

The "something more than a single fold" mentioned in the first quatrain is thought by Davies and Chisholm 20 to be a Wagnerian score, interrupted by the death of the musician. This score provides the real subject of the second quatrain. Like the poet's work, it is a manifestation of the artist's creative urge and struggle, and must not remain exposed to public view. Mallarmé asks that it be buried too. The tercets tell us why:

Du souriant fracas originel hai
Entre elles de clartés maîtresses a jailli
Jusque vers un parvis né pour leur simulacre,

Trompettes tout haut d'or pâmé sur les vélins,
Le dieu Richard Wagner irradiant un sacre
Mal tu par l'encre même en sanglots sibyllins.
From the original black notations of the score (which are hated by the blank spaces that remain on the formerly white, i.e., pure, sheet of paper), there emerges the blaze of golden trumpets, consecrating the god-artist Richard Wagner, whose art has such power that the notations in ink cannot hold back the sounds. The artist is thereby consecrated by his work. From an initial movement of settling, of sinking into the earth, there occurs a triumphal re-emergence, attributable to the genius of the artist. From the darkness and silence of the opening lines, the poem has evolved toward brilliance both visual and auditory. The golden trumpets which resound through their musical transcription proclaim a god "irradiant unsacred," lighting up and radiating his consecration, his anointment, through his art.

Another "Tombeau," written in tribute to Verlaine in 1897 on the occasion of the first anniversary of his death, is completely antipodal to the Wagner tribute in timbre and in texture. The brilliance and force of visual and auditory imagery disappear, but, although the stylistic treatment differs, this is not the case as concerns theme. Once again, Mallarmé emphasizes the emergence of the poet's genius after death, as symbolized by the awakening of a star. The poem begins on a dark, cold note, evoking a cemetery scene of that cold January of 1897:
Le noir roc courroucé que la bise le roule
Ne s'arrêtera ni sous de pieuses mains
Tâtant sa ressemblance avec les maux humains
Comme pour en bénir quelque funeste moule.

Ici presque toujours si le ramier roucoule
Cet immatériel deuil opprime de maints
Nubiles plis l'astre mûri des lendemains
Dont un scintillement argentera la foule.

Qui cherche, parcourant le solitaire bond
Tantôt extérieur de notre vagabond--
Verlaine? Il est caché parmi l'herbe, Verlaine

A ne surprendre que naïvement d'accord
La lèvre sans y boire ou tarir son haleine
Un peu profond ruisseau calomnié la mort.

The black rock of the opening line is apparently the grave­
stone of Verlaine, and by extension, Verlaine himself.
This strophe translates the anger (of the gravestone and
of Verlaine) that the north-w ind causes at this time of
year, on the anniversary of his death when people will
come to visit his grave and "pin him down with misguided
piety (narrow philistine ethics and insufficient under­
standing), as a type of human pathology, failing to grasp
the exceptional nature of Verlaine's genius."\textsuperscript{21} The sec­
ond quatraine introduces a very different element, the
turtle-doves, which in their plaintive call express a much
more valid kind of grief. Their sorrow is said to weight
down with many "marriageable folds" the poet's star of
fame, which will rise only in the future. The fold is a
symbol of emptiness, but here the folds are "nubile," that
is, holding forth a promise of fruition. Hence, his fame
is not yet, but when the star rises, it will shed silver
upon the crowd. How unlike the golden trumpets' blare of the "Hommage à Wagner."

The tercets reveal a Verlaine at peace in death, at one with death, hiding in the green grass (suggested by the poet's name), waiting to spring into the shallow stream called death, in which he will neither drink (the waters of oblivion will therefore leave no mark on him) nor waste his breath (the river is shallow enough to ford, hence not such a fearsome crossing).22

The main idea of the sonnet is that Verlaine has crossed very easily into the realm of death, and that his genius assures him of an immortality that will not be long in asserting itself. Here again, there is passage from darkness to light, although there is not the same emphasis on verticality that was found in the other commemorative poems. Verlaine remains hidden in the grass, however, and not buried in the dark confines of the earth.

"Hommage à Puvis de Chavannes" (1895), although not really a commentary on poetic genius as defined by death, is significant for its clear statement as regards the role of the poet. Mallarmé indicates that here is an artist who is ahead of his time, one who is not appreciated by his contemporaries.

Toute Aurore même gourde
A crisper un poing obscur
Contre des clairons d'azur
Embouchés par cette sourde
Every dawn has its shepherd who goes out to seek the spring in order to water his flock. And such a man is Puvis de Chavannes, although this particular dawn seems especially reluctant to herald the coming of the new day. The artist is similarly a shepherd who goes out before his flock, to provide for them, to lead them to that source which is "the immortal muse, source of art."^23

In looking back at the sequence of poems entitled Hommages et Tombeaux, one finds a consistent attitude toward both the role of the poet-artist and the role of death in the accomplishments of this figure. He is a man apart, agonized and frequently misunderstood, whose special function is to "donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu" or again to "...conduire le temps boire à la nymphe sans linceul." Death is an inevitable final step to glory in that it completes the poet's contribution and abstracts him from the hardships of life, after which, given a sufficient period of time, he comes into his own. The poet-artist, by virtue of his genius, has the
possibility of triumphing over the Void which threatens at all times. To accept the challenge to transfigure death into immortality is a great undertaking, certainly, one which the poet-artist will suffer for. But this was a price which Mallarmé was willing to pay. Although the threat of the Void remains with Mallarmé until the end of his life, the poems in this series reflect a consistently optimistic view concerning the genius of a luminary.

The commemorative poems pay tribute to the genius of great artists who have met death (with the exception of Puvis de Chavannes, who was still alive at the time Mallarmé's tribute to him was composed). But as regards his own genius, Mallarmé seems less certain, less affirmative. In the two works remaining to be considered ("Prose pour Des Esseintes" and Un Coup de dés), he reveals a lingering doubt as to his ability to accomplish his own oeuvre. Unlike the great poets whom he has celebrated in his verse, he is still caught up in the contingencies of life, subject to the fluctuations of chance, and must therefore be constantly on guard. This is the idea expressed in "Prose pour Des Esseintes" (1884), a fifty-six-line poem which remains one of the most hermetic of his works. It is generally considered an art poétique, although as regards the interpretation of detail, there is frequently the widest divergency of views among critics. The substance of the work seems to be drawn from the crisis years spent in
Tournon and Besançon. Mauron feels that the story related in "Prose" is the story of the renunciation of the Absolute, of the triumphal ascent through "hyperbole" to the Absolute only to return to patient toil—in effect, "a flight from madness, and conversion to life, which separates the Besançon metaphysics from the convalescence of Avignon." Cohn sees this work as an effort to explain to an admirer (Des Esseintes, the hero of Huysmans' A Rebours) the nature of the crisis he had undergone in the latter half of the 1860's and also why his "Grand Oeuvre" was not being written.

The title itself is ambiguous insofar as it uses the word Prose to designate a work in verse! This may be a reference to "proses chrétiennes," the Latin hymns of the Byzantine period, composed of verses without meter, but rhymed. Cohn also views this word as "an oblique reference to Mallarmé's high ideal. The title Prose...would point ironically and modestly to the failure to write a Poem (we note that the attempt at his great Work, the Coup de dés, is proudly entitled 'Poème.')" Fowlie speculates as to another interesting possibility: "If the word bears its customary and banal meaning, it might signify that what would be poetry and therefore hermetic communication to the ordinary reader, is for des Esseintes trained in mysteries and symbolism, lucid and prose-like." But Fowlie feels it more likely that the poet had the
ecclesiastical use of the word in mind: "As the Latin of the Church Proses is comprehensible only to priests and the initiated, so the Prose of Mallarmé is apprehended by the lineage of des Esseintes, those readers who possess patience and science, who understand that poetry is a kind of liturgical mystery."  

The opening word of the piece, "Hyperbole," has similarly given rise to various interpretations, a highly tenable one being offered by Mme Noulet and partially concurred in by others. Étymologically, the word means "jeter au delà," but in its technical and rhetorical sense, it means "images supérieures à la réalité," images which Mallarmé creates by the intellectual process called hyperbole. This word, appearing thus at the beginning of the poem, followed by an exclamation mark, is viewed as a command for the poem to "Be!" The narrative proper begins only in the third strophe, the first two serving as a prelude to the narration and being separated from the remainder of the poem, in the original version, by a dash.

This view of "hyperbole" as a transcendance, a "passing beyond," is accepted by Richard, but in a different perspective. He feels it is an expression of the immediate upward thrust of inspiration which leads to the rapid production of a work. Thus "hyperbole" would contrast with the more studied approach to art, which he refers to in terms of "patience" and "science," both to be
associated with "conscience" and proceeding through orderly, well-determined channels until it has attained (and contained) a careful view of the world. 30

Poetic vision may become too large, threatening to destroy the mind of the poet if it is not properly contained. It is this containment that is the central preoccupation of the poem. Containment comes through patience, the quality which Mme Noulet identifies as the "sister" mentioned in the narrative. Science is linked with patience in the practice of the poet's craft, allowing him ultimately to achieve a notion of essential Beauty.

Thus the stage is set for a fabulous voyage which takes place in the remainder of the poem, a journey to an island with a "sister," where flowers become greatly magnified and where the poet becomes exalted at the sight of these "hyperbolical" flowers rising up to fulfill his need, to accomplish his poetic duty.

Oui, dans une ile que l'air charge
De vue et non de visions
Toute fleur s'étalait plus large
Sans que nous en dévisions.

Telles, immenses, que chacune
Ordinairement se para
D'un lucide contour, lacune,
Qui des jardins la sépara.

Gloire du long désir, Idées
Tout en moi s'exaltait de voir
La famille des iridées
Surgir à ce nouveau devoir...

(11. 21-32)

By contrast with the exhilarated poet, the sister simply
smiles, and, as though heeding her, the poet exercises what he terms his "antique soin," his concern that dates from olden times. He proclaims that at this moment in which they fell silent (i.e., he and his sister), the flowers were growing too great for their reason, for their minds to comprehend:

Oh! sache l'Esprit de litige,
A cette heure où nous nous taisons,
Que de lis multiples la tige
Grandissait trop pour nos raisons
(ll. 37-40)

It is this over-enlargement which brings their silence. It is not, the poet contends, because this fabulous-island country did not exist, as his detractors contend, asserting that Life and Nature should have been producing poetic fruit within the poet all along. The child-sister abandons her ecstasy, and says to the poet: "Anastase! --"Stand up!" before the tomb can rejoice at bearing the name Pulcheria, a tomb hidden by the magnified "trop grand glaèul."

L'enfant abdique son extase
Et docte déjà par chemins,
Elle dit le mot: Anastase
Né pour d'éternels parchemins,

Avant qu'un sépulcre ne rie
Sous aucun climat, son aèul,
De porter ce nom: Pulchérie!
Caché par le trop grand glaèul.
(ll. 49-56)

Such are the main lines of the allegory. It scarcely requires mention that such an abstract allegory lends itself to many interpretations. The sister element has been particularly discussed. Madame Noulet seems to have
offered the first satisfactory interpretation of this enigma by suggesting that it represents patience. Other more recent critics, e.g., Richard and Cohn, see the element as more complex: that the sister represents patience-anima, patience being an essentially feminine trait and anima recognizing the fact of Mallarmé's duality. The sister is thus construed as the woman principle in the poet's self, that part which counsels patience and common sense, which restrains the poet from being carried off by enthusiasm when faced with a greatly ambitious vision.

The island is a mystical and marvelous place, abundant in over-sized flowers, an Edenic garden which was already suggested in "Toast Funèbre" where Gautier, seeing these flowers, confers an eternal value on them through his particular poetic gift of observation. This is the island of great poetic vision, but this vision is fraught with danger in itself. The flowers perceived are not passive; they defy the scope of the poet's reason.

As the flowers are magnified, each seems to stand out, projected forward, surrounded by a halo-like "lucide contour" which separates them from the garden. Larger than life, bathed in purity, standing in extremely sharp focus, each existing as a separate entity, these flowers suggest so many separate Ideas with which Mallarmé has grappled, or their perfect expression. The view brings elation, exaltation to the poet. And it is here that the
mysterious sister, characterized as "tendre et sensée," makes her presence felt as a positive force. The sister-anima beholds this wonderful land, but cannot rise to the same heights of ecstasy as the poet-animus: "Mais cette soeur.../ Ne porta son regard/ Plus loin que sourire." (l. 33-35) This is an act of negation, which exercises a restraining influence on the poet. Heeding her, he "exercises his old craft"—old in the sense that Mallarmé has long since become accustomed to the quiet work of patience.

From the beginning this poem is permeated with an air of self-defense, self-justification. Numerous images evoke the detractors of the poet's work, of his esthetic, of which there were many in Mallarmé's time. He seeks to inform the carpers that his silence at the crucial moment was not due to the non-existence of the island, but rather to the fact that the Vision had become too large, the total poetic-consciousness of the poet remaining unable to cope with that immensity. The sister-anima pronounces the word "Anastase!" born for eternal parchments, the "sesame word which opens the door to the living future, to 'eternal parchments' or immortal, effective, or recorded art...."31 This she does before Beauty disappears into Nothingness, the victim of that inordinate vision which had so elated the poet, but at the risk of his losing his mind. The poet must be patient for some time longer, since he
evidently feels that the Vision exceeds his capacity to cope with it.

Mallarmé reveals in this poem his awareness of the need to mature his techniques. Indeed, patience seems at the very core of the Mallarmean work. His slender output, the lengthy intervals in which no single work is published, the poems written and then repeatedly re-worked—all offer testimony to his having heeded the call to patience. Impotence in "Prose" emerges as a positive value, a negation which forces the poet to re-evaluate in order to make an affirmation; there is a promise of fruition. The poem affords an optimistic view on the poet's creative capabilities. What is needed is time. The poet must wait and see in order to know what the outcome of his experience will be.

This outcome is the subject of the Coup de dés. The positively hopeful cast of the dice (even in the face of doubt) issued by Igitur seems now to be tempered by the attitude expressed in "Prose." As is usual with the more hermetic poetry of Mallarmé, Un Coup de dés has aroused a great deal of speculation about its meaning, but once again, it is Davies who offers the most satisfactory explanation of its content. He interprets the work in the light of Mallarmé's enduring preoccupation with the creative act, as a reflection of the philosophic and esthetic problems arising from the impossibility of producing the
"Grand Oeuvre" of which he dreamed for so long:

Hanté par la conception de l'Oeuvre idéal, Mallarmé voue à l'exécution de ce projet non seulement une foi inébranlable, mais le travail de toute sa vie. À la veille de sa mort seulement, il comprend qu'il ne lui sera pas possible de l'achever, même partiellement... Le Coup de dés reprend, sur le plan poétique, les mêmes problèmes philosophiques et esthétiques qui avaient préoccupé Mallarmé pendant trente années de sa vie.32

The dominant theme of the work is, as the letters in heavy, bold print proclaim at intervals throughout the poem, that there is no possible denial of chance: "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard," since chance is always operable, in affirmation as well as in negation.33 This is the conclusion that Mallarmé had reached as he strove to perfect Igitur, yet nonetheless, Igitur casts the dice in a sort of "leap of faith" and momentarily negates chance.

The decor for this poem, unlike that of Igitur, and quite similar to that of the sonnet "A la nue accablante tu," is that of cosmic shipwreck. Sea and sky have combined to form a unit, the image of a ship. The sea forms its hull and the heavily clouded sky its masts. This image of the Void is full of the tension of thwarted action, of a flight that cannot be: "L'Abîme --blanchi --étale (the sea is slack) --furieux -- sous une inclinaison (beneath the angle of its own wing) -- plane désespérement (the wing is desperately flat) -- d'aile -- la sienne -- par -- avance retombée d'un mal à dresser le
Davies points out that the wing is frequently an image of dynamic aspiration in Mallarmé's poetry, which brings to mind the attempted flight of the swan in "Le Vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui." Flight is once again impossible, not because of the ice in which the aspirant is frozen, but because of the heaviness of the storm cloud which immobilizes any action before it can be initiated. Mallarmé wrote concerning this image of the ship, given on the third set of double pages on which the text is set up, "Le vaisseau y donne de la bande, du haut d'une page au bas de l'autre," (p. 1582) indicating that the movement of the ship is downward, dragging with it the wing-mast and thereby negating the basic sense of aspiration and promise which the latter expresses. The listing of the ship continues to set the pattern of the movement of the action until near the end of the poem, whereupon, with the emergence of a constellation, the movement assumes an upward trend.

At the beginning of the poem, however, against this backdrop of the listing, sinking ship, there rises immediately the figure of the Master, the central figure of the piece, the captain of the ship that is sinking and, of course, the image of the poet-idealist confronting the Void. This figure rises to the surface and hangs perilously close to doom. His arm is upraised for the cast of the dice, but he concludes that the Number is not yet
ready for casting: "... inférent... que se prépare -- s'agite et mâle -- au poing qui l'étendrait -- ... l'Unique Nombre..." (pp. 462-463). He hesitates ("cadavre par le bras écarté du secret qu'il détient") (pp. 462-463); this upraised arm is all that separates him from death at this point, i.e., the Act yet unaccomplished. His hesitancy arises from a doubt as to whether he should cast the dice. He contemplates carrying the dice down with him into the abyss: "...jouer.... -- la partie -- au nom des flots." (pp. 462-463) Faced with this negative possibility, he hesitates to yield to the temptation not to cast the dice, because he remembers the plea of his ancestors as it was expressed in Igitur, that he should immortalize them by making them absolute through the negation of chance. The dilemma is summarized thus: "la mer par l'aïeul tentant ou l'aïeul contre la mer -- une chance oiseuse..." (pp. 464-465) Whether the sea will turn the old man into a plaything of chance, or whether the old man will try to beat the sea at this game of chance, this is the question. It seems not to matter at this point, for he qualifies this game as "oiseuse," trifling. The decision of the "Maître-vieillard-aïeul" is therefore useless. The meaning of that part of the text laid out on the fifth set of double pages, which has just been considered here, seems to be reinforced by the arrangement of the text itself on these pages: virtually everything appears on the left
hand page, where the movement is one of descent, as if to indicate that all will end up in the abyss, whether the dice are cast or not. The only element to appear on the otherwise-blank facing page is the negation "N'ABOLIRA," which belongs to the central assertion of the poem, "Un coup de dés-jamais n'abolira le hasard."

The poem continues to develop the idea of the Master's hesitancy, weighing the two possibilities of action, first the negative one in which he is simply engulfed by the waves: "Une insinuation simple -- au silence enroulée avec ironie," (pp. 466-467) and secondly the affirmative one: "ou -- le mystère -- précipité -- hurlé..." (pp. 466-467) The two alternatives seem to hover and spin over the abyss about to consume the Master. This indecisiveness becomes a feather ("plume") in the next development, a concretizing of the spiritual state. The plume hovers, "solitaire éperdue," then encounters "une toque de minuit," a black cap (suggested perhaps by the black ocean surface) in which it will come to rest (et immobilise cette blancheur rigide) (pp. 468-469) This cap with the feather in it evokes the idea of Hamlet, undoubtedly through association with a poem on the subject of Hamlet by Théodore de Banville which Mallarmé quotes in his essay "Hamlet." In the essay Mallarmé writes concerning Shakespeare's prince, in words that have the ring of his own crisis in them:
L'adolescent évanoui de nous aux commençements de la vie et qui hantera les esprits hauts ou pensifs par le deuil qu'il se plaît à porter, je le reconnais, qui se débat sous le mal d'apparaître: parce qu'Hamlet ex- térorise, sur des planches, ce personnage unique d'une tragédie intime et occulte, son nom même affiché exerce sur moi....une fascination, parente de l'angoisse.36

The reason for this anguish is then given:

...mais avance le seigneur latent qui ne peut devenir, juvénile ombre de tous, ainsi tenant du mythe.37

His drama is the drama of everyman:

...car il n'est point d'autre sujet, sachez bien: l'antagonisme de rêve chez l'homme avec les fatalités à son existence déparées par le malheur.38

Hamlet affords, to Mallarmé's thinking, a perfect parallel with his Hero in the Coup de dés, since, prey at first to indecision, he is fated to perish once he does take action: "le fatidique prince qui périra au premier pas dans la virilité."39

Cohn interprets the "plume" in yet another sense, one which must not be overlooked: "The plume is also un-assigned art-vision..., a pen waiting to write."40 The adjectives "solitaire" and "éperdue" both have relevancy to the fate of the artist: the isolation of the true artist and the sense of defeat.

The evocation of Hamlet seems to be made even clearer by reference to a "prince amer de l'écueil" at this point, the reef on which a ship founders, the obstacle that separates the dreamer from his goal. The Hero-Hamlet-Master figure is here represented as "contenu --
par sa petite raison virile," (p. 469) which Davies thinks is the explanation of the reef. 41 Limited by his human faculties, his awareness of self, he cannot attain to the pure Notion, and will remain thus foundering on the reef of consciousness until the moment of death. 42 The hero's concern over his dilemma suddenly turns to laughter as a revelation dawns upon him, a revelation which Mallarmé begins to present to the reader only to interrupt it immediately with a long parenthetical (and simultaneous) development on the human-consciousness level, i.e., the emergence of the pure Notion of self: "Une stature mignonnette ténèbreuse," reflection of the "ombre puérile" heralded earlier. This concept appears in the form of a siren, who with the flip of her tail slaps the rock (the reef), "faux manoir" (i.e., the ancestral home around which are consolidated all those factors which go into his awareness of himself as an individual, the product of his lineage, so to speak). The rock disappears, the rock which had imposed "une borne à l'infini," (p. 471) and with its disappearance, the last obstacle to the appearance of the pure Idea is removed.

The next set of double pages develops the revelation which had begun to dawn on the Master earlier: "Si c'était le Nombre, ce serait le hasard." (pp. 470-473) Even if the dice were cast, if a particular number appeared to deny chance, this would in effect constitute no
denial; it would be but another affirmation of it. Chance is operative whether one casts the dice or not, whether one acts or not; the outcome would be the same, whether the Master chose the course of action or inaction. With this realization, the plume falls, signalling the end of the hesitancy of the Master; the plume is "flétrie par la neutralité identique du gouffre," (p. 473), i.e., victim of the awareness of the fact that both solutions lead to the same result.

Mallarmé begins to draw conclusions: "Rien n'aura eu lieu que le lieu." (pp. 474-475) The disappearance of the feather image leaves nothing but the sea and the sky, against the backdrop of which nothing seems to have transpired. But even if the empty, senseless act of casting the dice had been performed, this act, "par son mensonge (the illusions of his ancestors) -- eût fondé -- la perdition -- ... -- du vague -- en quoi toute réalité se dissout...." (p. 475)

Si ce mensonge était devenu réalité, le coup de dés, en supprimant le Hasard, eût abouti à un déterminisme absolu, le vague disparaissant nécessairement avec le Hasard.... Vague, employé comme substantif, ... évoque précisément tout ce qui contient un élément de mystère ou de hasard.43

It is as though Mallarmé were offering himself the consolation here that there will continue to be mystery in the universe, for after all, mystery has received an enormous part of Mallarmé's attention during the entire span of his life.
But the disappearance of the Master is to be further elucidated by Mallarmé in the last movement of the poem. He has said that "Rien n'aura eu lieu que le lieu," and now he qualifies the statement with: "Excepté peut-être une constellation." (pp. 476-477) The fuzziness and imprecision of the entire action have been maintained by "peut-être" in this development. The constellation that takes shape in the formless sky "...énumère...le heurt successif -- sidéralement -- d'un compte total en formation..." (pp. 476-477) i.e., it arrives at a number of its own. What the indecision of the Master has left in abeyance seems accomplished on a cosmic plane, independent of the will of the Master, despite him. It is his indecisiveness which calls forth the Ideal, the Absolute cast of the dice as represented by the appearance of the constellation. The Master's decision as to whether to cast the dice or not is left shrouded in "le vague -- en quoi toute réalité se dissout," (p. 475), which indicates a middle course as concerns the performance of the act. The result is that chance itself determines the outcome. As concerns the esthetic considerations for the poet-artist, the question is whether to force the work from its mould prematurely, or to abandon any attempt to produce it:

Le poète vient de comprendre qu'il faut se garder de choisir entre ces contraires, comme d'ailleurs d'en réduire l'équivalence à l'absurde: une sorte de gestation, où les deux solutions qui s'excluent mutuellement se trouvent néanmoins conciliées, permet de dépasser le paradoxe et d'aboutir à l'Absolu.44
A case is made therefore for the operation of chance, which will not be denied in the accomplishment of the work. When the poet sets out to produce a work, his mental image of the work he dreams of producing may be clear, and yet, as Fowlie indicates: "The secret of each poem rises outside of and in spite of all the calculations. A poem is written to contradict chance, and yet, if it is a great poem, the part which came about unexpectedly...constitutes its principal achievement. At some point or other in the fabrication of his poem, the poet is helpless and useless before the gift of chance." To which it may be added that, in the light of the Coup de dés, every element is directly attributable to chance, for Mallarmé's closing words in the poem are: "Toute Pensée émet un Coup de dés." (p. 477) Chance is operable in all things, at all times. For this reason he continued, despite periods of despair, to work at the production of his oeuvre. The poet works in patience and knowledge of his craft, and chance willing, his star will someday rise in the darkness too. This is undoubtedly why, in the year of his death (1898), Mallarmé was able to assert: "Heureuse ou vaine, ma volonté de vingt ans survit intacte." And it undoubtedly helps to explain why, as death approached, he made this request of his family in his last hours:

Le spasme terrible d'étouffement subi tout à l'heure peut se reproduire au cours de la nuit et avoir raison de moi. Alors, vous ne vous étonnerez pas que je
pense au monceau demi-séculaire de mes notes, lequel ne vous deviendra qu'un grand embarras; attendu que pas un feuillet n'en peut servir. Moi-même, l'unique pourrais seul en tirer ce qu'il y a... Je l'eusse fait si les dernières années manquant ne m'avaient trahi. Brûlez, par conséquent: il n'a pas là d'héritage littéraire, mes pauvres enfants. Ne soumettez même pas à l'appréciation de quelqu'un: ou refusez toute ingérence 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.47

The mystery that has so characterized Mallarmé's deepest preoccupations as well as his literary production is thus served in this death-bed wish. His wife and daughter burned the half-century-old pile of notes that would undoubtedly have helped to clarify many a puzzling element in the Master's work.
Notes

1. Cohn, Toward the Poems, p. 225.
3. Cohn, Toward the Poems, p. 226.
7. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 103.
16. Cohn, Toward the Poems, p. 177.
17. Davies, Tombeaux, pp. 138-139.
21. Cohn, Toward the Poems, p. 171.
22. Davies, Tombeaux, p. 203.
23Cohn, *Toward the Poems*, p. 188.


28*Ibid*.

29Noulet, *Dix Poèmes*, p. 72.


31Cohn, *Toward the Poems*, p. 254.


34Mallarmé, *Oeuvres*, pp. 460-461. Since it is impossible, because of typography, to give line references for this work, page indications according to the Pléiade edition will be inserted in the text in parentheses.


40Cohn, *Mallarmé's "Un Coup de dés, "* p. 72.

41Davies, *Un Coup*, p. 131.


46 Davies, Un Coup, p. 175.

47 Mondor, Vie, p. 801.
Mallarmé's lifetime was spent in pursuit of an Ideal, the record of which is given in his poetry. From his very earliest works, written during adolescence, he manifests a fascination with the realm beyond our concrete universe, which he terms l'azur. Subsequent to the death of his sister Maria in 1857 and of a close friend, Harriet Smith, in 1859, the fascination becomes all the more pronounced. It finds expression in almost all of the poetry which he writes before 1865, in terms of la hantise de l'azur. Poem after poem reveals an obsession with an unattainable Ideal, which he feels it is his special poetic duty to comprehend and express. When the obsession becomes too painful, he seeks to escape from it through poetry itself, through love, through concentration on the material aspects of life. This haunting awareness of the Ideal, as well as the fruitless efforts either to escape it or to come to terms with it, receives its fullest expression in the poem "L'Azur." Testimony of the youth's failure either to escape or to sublimate successfully is amply provided in the verse of this period. Wherever he turns, he is brought face to face again with that Ideal,
and failing to comprehend it, he records this failure in
terms of impotence or sterility.

By 1865 Mallarmé has reached an impasse. His Dream
(the Ideal vision which preoccupied him from his youth)
disappears as the result of a metaphysical crisis which
culminates between the years 1865 and 1870. He no longer
believes in the existence of that ideal Platonic realm in
which the ultimate Reality resides. The metaphysical cri-
sis, by destroying his Dream, presents him with a view of
the Void. But the perception of the Void brings, rather
than a negative attitude on the part of Mallarmé, an exist-
tential assumption of that Void and a determination to
make something positive of it. Under the influence of
Hegel's ideas, he is able to conceive of the Void not as
the end but as a beginning, the point from which to estab-
lish a synthesis. The Void is absence, but an absence
from which something positive must issue. This something
positive is his poetry, the instrument by which the
presence–absence synthesis will be effected. In order to
accomplish this synthesis, a new esthetic must be forged,
an esthetic based on the evocative power of suggestion.
The substance of his poetry is sought in absence; the con-
crete existence of the material things of the universe are
viewed as impurity. Focus is shifted to the disappearance,
the volatilization of objects, or to their failure to ma-
terialize. The obsession with l'azur is now replaced with
the obsession of the Void, but with a different orientation. The poet struggles with the Void to wrest from it a Work, his "Grand Oeuvre" of which he speaks in alchemistic terms, which will turn the base metals of human perception into the pure gold of an ideal "Livre." The "alchemy of the word" is the instrumentality by which such a work will be achieved.

But against this ideal Work Mallarmé must now measure his own production, and he never seems to be satisfied with what he observes. The Ideal that had haunted him early in his life is now replaced by the vision of a work that he would like to accomplish, which would be nothing less than an "orophic explanation of the Earth." This new position is fraught with danger since his vision of the Work may prove an impossible one to express. He faces the possibility of not being able to accomplish it, and he lives with this fear. In this new context, the theme of impotence, or sterility, recurs. He realizes to what degree the accomplishment of the Work is controlled by chance, which cannot be negated no matter how hard the poet tries, as shown in *Un Coup de dés*. The only hope lies in patient labor, as expressed in "Prose pour des Esseintes." By means of language perhaps he can wrest from the Void the Work that he contemplates.

For one thing does survive the Void, providing chance does not intervene to cancel out its realization—
the work of artistic creation. This conviction is expressed in "Toast Funèbre" and throughout the suite of "Tombeaux" poems written to commemorate the accomplishments of such luminaries as Poe, Baudelaire, Wagner and Verlaine. But Mallarmé can draw only a limited consolation from this conviction because of his feeling that his own Work is yet to be accomplished, that "orphic explanation of the Earth" that was to form the synthesis of everything in the universe and to be embodied in "le Livre."

In his autobiographical letter to Verlaine written in 1885, Mallarmé speaks poignantly of what he deems his success and his failure as regards his art:

Aujourd'hui, voilà plus de vingt ans et malgré la perte de tant d'heures, je crois, avec tristesse, que j'ai bien fait. C'est que, à part les morceaux de prose et les vers de ma jeunesse et la suite, qui y faisait écho, publiée un peu partout, chaque fois que paraissaient les premiers numéros d'une Revue Littéraire, j'ai toujours rêvé et tenté autre chose, avec une patience d'alchimiste, prêt à y sacrifier toute vanité et toute satisfaction, comme on brûlait jadis son mobilier et les poutres de son toit, pour alimenter le fourneau du Grand Oeuvre. Quoi? c'est difficile à dire: un livre, tout bonnement, en maints tomes, un livre qui soit un livre, architectural et prémédité, et non un recueil des inspirations de hasard fussent-elles merveilleuses... J'irai plus loin, je dirai: le Livre, persuadé qu'au fond il n'y en a qu'un, tenté à son insu par quiconque a écrit, même les Génies. L'explication orphique de la Terre, qui est le seul devoir du poète et le jeu littéraire par excellence: car le rythme même du livre, alors impersonnel et vivant, jusqu'à sa pagination, se juxtapose aux équations de ce rêve, ou Ode."

The statement of his Ideal is clear. The statement of his awareness that this is too large a task for him to accomplish is equally clear:
Voilà l'aveu de mon vice, mis à nu, cher ami, que mille fois j'ai répété, l'esprit meurtri ou las, mais cela me possède et je réussirai peut-être; non pas à faire cet ouvrage dans son ensemble (il faudrait être je ne sais qui pour cela!) mais à en montrer un fragment d'exécuté, à en faire scintiller par une place l'authenticité glorieuse, en indiquant le reste tout entier auquel ne suffit pas une vie. Prouver par les portions faites que ce livre existe, et que j'ai connu ce que je n'aurai pu accomplir.  

He views his accomplishments as partial, as simply first steps along the path to the realization of the Work:

Rien de si simple alors que je n'aie pas eu hâte de recueillir les mille bribes connues, qui m'ont, de temps à autre, attiré la bienveillance de charmants et excellents esprits, vous le premier. Tout cela n'avait d'autre valeur momentanée pour moi que de m'entretenir la main: et quelque réussite que puisse être quelquefois un des [un mot manque] à eux tous, c'est bien juste s'ils composent un album, mais pas un livre. Il est possible cependant que l'Editeur Vanier m'arrache ces lambeaux, mais je ne les collerai sur des pages que comme on fait une collection de chiffons d'éttoffes séculaires ou précieuses. Avec ce mot condamnatoire d'Album, dans le titre, Album de vers et de prose, je ne sais pas; et cela contiendra plusieurs séries, pourra même aller indéfiniment...  

The reference to his work as a reflection of "les mille bribes connues" is echoed in the bibliography which Mallarmé prepared for the 1898 edition of his poem: "Beau-coup de ces poèmes, ou études en vue de mieux, comme on essaie les becs de plume avant de se mettre à l'oeuvre, ont été distraits de leur carton par les impatiences amies de Revues en quête de leur numéro d'apparition....."  

Mallarmé worked assiduously until his death, continuing in his struggle to wrest his Work from the Void. The note written to his family just hours before his death bears ample testimony to the fact that he had not yet
accomplished the Ideal Work. Requesting that all of his notes be burned, he seeks to reassure them that it would have been very beautiful. Chance intervenes.

One can only be struck with the immense courage of this arch-idealist who labored to achieve an expression of his great vision in the full knowledge that his goal would remain beyond his grasp. One is also impressed with the similarity between this attitude and that of the existentialist _isolato_ who, like Sisyphus, accepts his isolation and estrangement, and finds in his labors a meaning for existence that denies the Void.
Notes

1Mallarmé, *Oeuvres*, pp. 662-663.
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Date of Examination:

December 18, 1967