

## Art History in light of Mallarmé

Review of:

Trevor Stark, *Total Expansion of the Letter: Avant-Garde Art and Language after Mallarmé*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020, 440pp., 10 col. plates, 60 b. & w. illus., \$£45.00 hdbk, ISBN 9780262043717.

Andrei Pop, *A Forest of Symbols: Art, Science, and Truth in the Long Nineteenth Century*, New York: Zone, 2019, 15 col. plates, 101 b. & w. illus., £25.00 hdbk, ISBN 9781935408369

Alex Weintraub

In his visionary prose poem 'Le Phénomène Futur,' Stéphane Mallarmé writes of twilight and desolation. A crowd has assembled in a vaguely described public space, a fairground of sorts. The sun is setting but the street lamps have yet to be lit. A carnival showman (the so-called 'Showman of Things Past') erects a canvas tent within which he promises to show this potential audience an as-yet-unforeseen attraction. 'In the worried silence of all those eyes there, the sun sinks below the water with the despair of a cry, and the showman prattles on: "No sign regales you of the spectacle inside, for there is no painter capable of capturing even its sad shadow"'.<sup>1</sup> In this Mallarméan tableau, the horizon line and the circus tent function as dual thresholds for a series of analogical pairs: day and night; sight and sound; word and image; light and shadow. What begins in picture-like silence soon modulates into the feeling of a wordless scream, only to be followed by the transcription of prolix babble. Mallarmé's showman is an arch-sceptic, and a decent salesman. He insists that no outward sign—the French word used here is *enseigne*, which splits the difference between writing and picturing—can communicate the private experience found inside. The showman attributes this deficiency to the painters of his day, who may have mastered the depiction of outer spectacles of nature, but to the neglect of interior ones. He might be thinking here of the Impressionists, the artists who famously made a manifesto out of dawn's scintillations.<sup>2</sup> What good is a Monet or a Pissarro, not to mention a Renoir, now, in this time of the sun's self-abolishing descent?

<sup>1</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1897, 6: 'Dans le silence inquiet de tous les yeux suppliant là-bas le soleil qui, sous l'eau, s'enfoncé avec le désespoir d'un cri, voici le simple boniment : "Nulle enseigne ne vous régale du spectacle intérieur, car il n'est pas maintenant un peintre capable d'en donner une ombre triste."'

<sup>2</sup> The poem was first published in 1875 in *La République des Lettres*, and so there should be little doubt that Impressionism and *plein air* painting was on Mallarmé's mind.

Most members of the crowd have no taste for all of this claptrap. (The same might also be said for many of Mallarmé's readers.) They 'will not have the force to understand' and end up leaving the show in indifference.<sup>3</sup> A select few, however—namely, the poets in attendance—can't seem to shake off this twilight experience. Instead, they will seek to 'relight their extinguished eyes, and move themselves towards their lamp, the mind drunk for the moment on the confused glory, haunted by the Rhythm and in the forgetfulness of now living in a period after the beautiful'.<sup>4</sup>

'Le Phénomène Futur' thus concludes elliptically, as if in anticipation of poetry's next move. And for many writers and critics, Mallarmé's aesthetic forecasts represent some of his work's signal achievements. His poetry marked an epochal turning point without which so much of twentieth-century Modernism might have remained unthinkable. Indeed, for some critics, Mallarmé's brilliance could only be fully realized by those future readers whom his published work already seemed to anticipate.

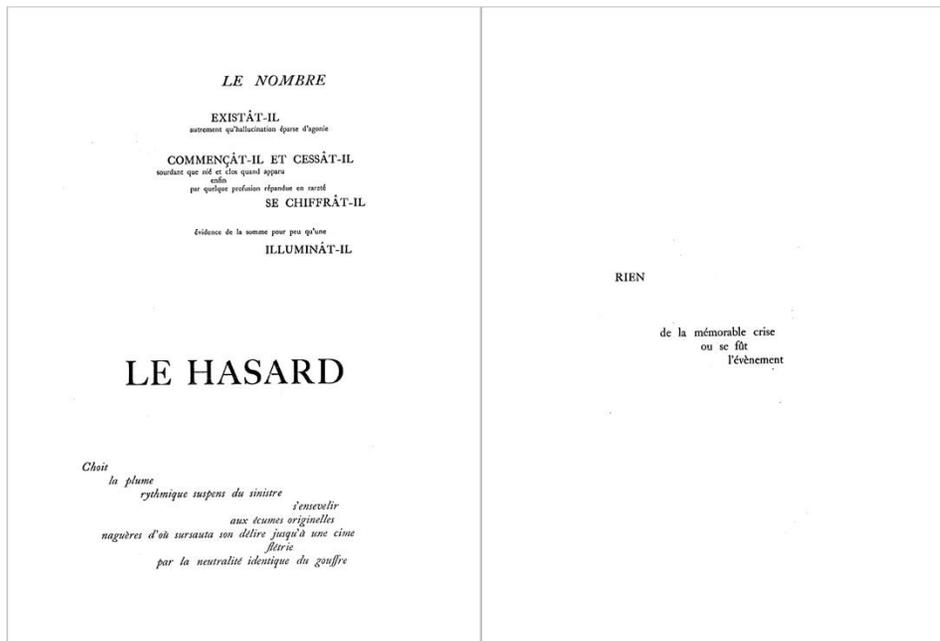


Figure 1 Stéphane Mallarmé, Page spread from *Un coup de dès jamais n'abolira le hasard*, 1914. Printed book, 32 x 25 cm (each page). Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Take the poem widely held to be Mallarmé's masterpiece, *Un Coup de Dès* [fig. 1], which, when it was first published in 1897, appeared in a tamed form quite

<sup>3</sup> Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 6: "[I]ls n'auront pas eu la force de comprendre".

<sup>4</sup> Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 6-7: '[L]es poètes de ces temps, sentant se rallumer leurs yeux éteints, s'acheminèrent vers leur lampe, le cerveau ivre un instant d'une gloire confuse, hantés du Rythme et dans l'oubli d'exister à une époque qui survit à la beauté'.

remote from the poet's intentions. According to Mallarmé's original designs, the poem was meant to reconceive the conventional conditions of poetry's legibility. Rather than organize discrete words into phrases and then into lines and then into stanzas, all which would read in linear succession, page after page, Mallarmé developed a new compositional schema, such that words were now meant to scatter down each individual page, and to form lines that would reach across the gutter of the codex spine, or even, as in the case of the poem's titular phrase, to span the entirety of the book. To this, the poet also introduced shifts in typographic scale and typeface, modifications which further dynamized the reading experience, and made his poem something to behold as well as to read. Mallarmé even aimed to make the seemingly neutral space of the blank page count formally, most pronouncedly by interrupting his uneven flow of verse with a completely empty two-page spread. But this daring version (or at least a version much closer to Mallarmé's specifications: the typeface was still wrong, and the desired illustrations by Odilon Redon were no longer possible) would not appear until 1914, just in time to be received by younger writers and artists of the historical avant-gardes.

And yet, Mallarmé's work is hardly reducible to his posthumous receptions. Rather, his poetry is most exhilarating because its repeated premonitions of tomorrow felt and continue to feel ever-present. In Roland Barthes's bracing formulation, Mallarmé's texts are 'eternally written here and now'.<sup>5</sup> In other words, Mallarmé not only called forth the language games to come. He also already rolled the dice. 'Le Phénomène Futur' is, after all, only the first poem in his 1897 collection, *Divagations*, not its last.

But what about those feckless painters so disparaged by Mallarmé's showman? When would visual artists, not to mention art historians, learn to adjust their eyes to the poet's disenchanting lamp light?

\*\*\*

Two recent books, Trevor Stark's *Total Expansion of the Letter: Avant-Garde Art and Language after Mallarmé* (MIT Press, 2020) and Andrei Pop's *A Forest of Symbols: Art, Science, and Truth in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Zone, 2019), propose two strikingly different approaches to Mallarmé's art historical legacy. In *Total Expansion of the Letter*, Stark locates Mallarmé in Art History's future past, by examining the conceptual links between the *fin-de-siècle* poet and a group of his early twentieth-century artist-readers—Pablo Picasso, George Braque, Tristan Tzara, and Marcel Duchamp. By contrast, in *A Forest of Symbols*, Andrei Pop considers the poet in his own time alongside a far-flung group of fellow symbolists, which includes visual artists, writers, analytic philosophers, and experimental scientists. Whereas Stark finds in Mallarmé a theory of language—rooted in the ostensibly permanent gap

<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, London: Fontana Press, HarperCollins Publishers, 2010, 145.

between word and world, and the contingency of linguistic meaning — that already predominates in art historical studies of twentieth-century Modernism, Pop turns to symbolism in order to reconsider the field's commitment to thinking about pictures in these linguistic terms.

Stark sets himself a formidable task in *Total Expansion of the Letter*: he aims to transform a well-known history of art historical reception into a well-understood one. Any historian of early twentieth-century art will tell you that Mallarmé mattered a great deal for the artists of the historical avant-gardes. The artists said so themselves, and they did so repeatedly. What most art historians have not yet understood, or at least not with Stark's depth and sensitivity, is Mallarmé's poetry. In *Total Expansion of the Letter*, Stark works to make Mallarmé's aesthetic ideas available for art historians through close, and at times imaginative, readings of the poet's writings. Eschewing linear reception history, Stark treats Mallarmé as both an 'object and a resource' for early twentieth century aesthetics and its subsequent study.<sup>6</sup> All of the artists examined in *Total Expansion*, as well as many of those artists' earliest interpreters, read, misread, appropriated, or somehow contended with Mallarmé's actual poetry; this means that art historians should as well.<sup>7</sup> What compelled the artists in *Total Expansion* to engage with poetry of the recent past, Stark contends, was their belated recognition of 'a crucial aspect of Mallarmé's theory of language that had barely been noted in the first waves of the poet's reception: the conviction that the medium of human sociability, language, is a structure perpetually in flux and haunted by emptiness'.<sup>8</sup>

While art historians are likely to encounter many of Mallarmé's writings for the very first time, they may find some of the arguments advanced in *Total Expansion* uncannily familiar. This is because Stark's readings of Mallarmé end up furnishing new historiographical and theoretical substance for a set of well-established interpretations of Cubist and Dadaist works of art, albeit with some ingenious, and well-researched qualifications. Consider, for instance, Stark's

<sup>6</sup> Trevor Stark, *Total Expansion of the Letter: Avant-Garde Art and Language after Mallarmé*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Stark describes his method as one of "reciprocal interpretation," by which he means that he toggles between artistic receptions of Mallarmé, his own interpretations of the work of the artists involved in those receptions, and his own readings of Mallarmé's writings. However, as Stark also briefly touches upon, Mallarmé played a more active art historical role than his reception history might suggest, including, for instance, his French translation of his friend James McNeil Whistler's lecture on Art, 'Ten O'clock' (1885). Stark, *Total Expansion*, 7: "Mallarmé had been a friend and collaborator of Édouard Manet, a subject for Claude Debussy, a defender of impressionism, a link between the poetic generations of Paul Verlaine and Paul Valéry [ ... ] Further, by the time of his death in 1898, Mallarmé had been claimed by successive waves of *fin-de-siècle* movements, whether the symbolists, *vers libristes*, Nabis, or various *wagnériste* sects. The cubists and Dadaists in the decades following, then, did not retrieve Mallarmé from obscurity, but rather entered into an already fraught contest of interpretation."

<sup>8</sup> Stark, *Total Expansion*, 31.

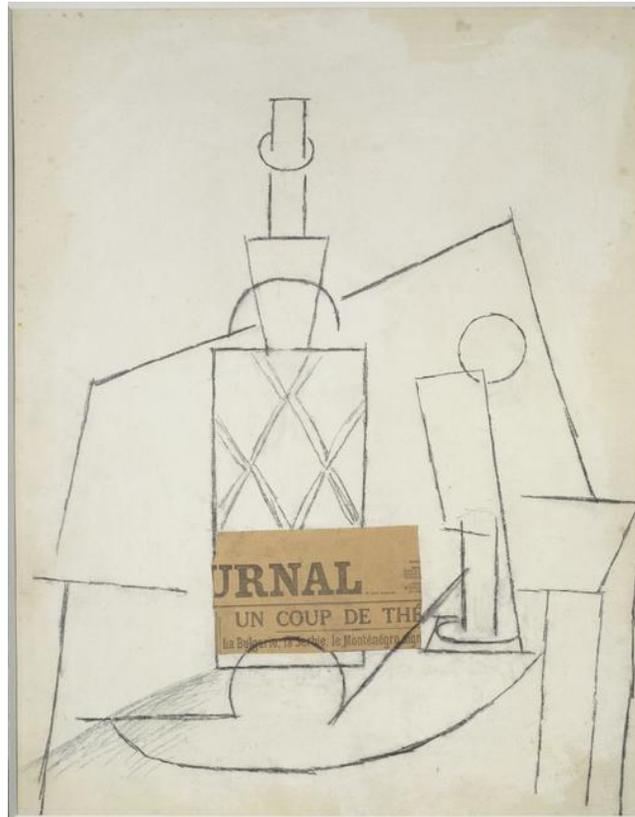


Figure 2 Pablo Picasso, *Bottle, Newspaper, and Glass on a Table*, After December 4, 1912. Pasted paper, gouache, and charcoal. 62 x 48 cm. Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou. © 2020 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society, NY. Photo: © CNAC/MNAM/Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

Mallarméan re-reading of Cubist *papiers collés*, collages made of pasted papers and charcoal drawing [fig. 2]. In these works, Picasso pasted fragments of newsprint into pictorial space, a choice that has resulted in a prickly dispute amongst art historians over how and when to read the appropriated texts. The two camps are, roughly speaking, the referentialists (Patricia Leighton) and the semiologists (Yve-Alain Bois, Rosalind Krauss, and Leo Steinberg). The referentialists read as much of the newspaper texts in any given *papier collé* as possible, which means that the content and context of any particular fragment might be read as if it disclosed important information about the artist's biography and politics. The semiologists, by contrast, are much more selective readers, claiming that only certain fragments of newsprint are textually significant for Picasso's work. For Stark, the semiologists are mostly right, but he also wants to draw out the meaningfulness of the debate itself. More precisely, he argues that *papiers collés* were designed in order to prompt such contests of meaning. Analysing Cubism through a Mallarméan lens, Stark suggests 'that we hold on to our experience of doubt about whether such meanings are mere accidents of chance' and that this doubt is itself a 'central part of [the collage's]

playful richness'.<sup>9</sup> This focus on doubt is new, but the underlying theory of language is not. To shore up his consistency with the work of earlier art historians, Stark even takes the time to 'root [Mallarmé] directly in the territory of semiotic "value" described by [Ferdinand de] Saussure', the theorist that members of the semiologist camp first turned to in their criticisms of the referentialists.<sup>10</sup>

What links Mallarmé's poetry-criticism even more explicitly to Cubist collage, however, is a shared interest in an aesthetics of anonymity. For Picasso and Braque, the use of ready-made materials like newsprint was meant to give their work an appearance of impersonality. A rectangular clipping of newspaper simply does not register as expressive in the same way that a free-hand smear of oil paint does. And in the same way that pasted scraps of paper allowed both men to circumvent the subjectivity that critics normally attach to a painter's handiwork, their incorporation of language into pictorial space in the form of newsprint typography added its own quality of industrial impersonality. For Stark, the Cubist pursuit of anonymity compounds the doubt that we may already experience when trying to determine a particular text's significance, since we are also left to wonder who, so to speak, is speaking these appropriated words. Is it Picasso? Braque? A newspaper journalist? Mallarmé himself? No one in particular?

By mobilizing these text-fragments so that they purportedly detach from any one authorial voice, the Cubists are taken to achieve what Mallarmé had already envisioned in his prose poem 'Crise de Vers', which was itself a kind of textual collage of some of the poet's previously published or presented writings. In 'Crise de Vers', Mallarmé suggests that pure poetry would require 'the elocutionary disappearance of the poet, who cedes the initiative to words, through the clash of their mobilized inequalities'.<sup>11</sup> Stark interprets the phrase 'elocutionary disappearance' to mean a metaphorical death of the author, which 'would take place in language; and finally, the hope that this language, would thereby—relieved of their duty to the person of the author—attain a "mobility" deriving from their innate instability'.<sup>12</sup> This is not quite right. The term elocutionary refers to speech, not to language as such. The author's elocutionary disappearance, therefore, need only entail the poet's ceding the authority of his own voice as the subjective ground authorizing the work's meaning, which Mallarmé would have counted as a Romantic form of *hasard*. Moreover, the words in pure poetry are designed so that they are already mobilized by the author, even if his voice was also meant to disappear. They are not then, as Stark seems to suggest here, left to clash in a state of permanent mobility, and this is true even if you uphold a theory of language in which the meaning of words is innately unstable. Without oversimplifying matters too much, it is worth stressing that one of Mallarmé's preferred pathways for achieving 'elocutionary disappearance' was through the publication of his work in

<sup>9</sup> Stark, *Total Expansion*, 127.

<sup>10</sup> Stark, *Total Expansion*, 63.

<sup>11</sup> Mallarmé, 'Crise de Vers', *Divagations*, 246.

<sup>12</sup> Stark, *Total Expansion*, 137.

books. As French literature scholar Steven Schwartz has argued, the Mallarméan “death of the author” has nothing to do with the philosophical decline of subjectivity and everything to do with his disappearance from the public scene.<sup>13</sup> This correlation between publishing and self-divestiture was a notion that Mallarmé held in common with his immediate poetic forebear, Victor Hugo. ‘What I write does not belong to me. I am a public thing’.<sup>14</sup> Needless to say, this feeling of writerly self-alienation was hardly unique to these titans of French verse, nor were Mallarmé’s attendant doubts about the certainty of mutual understanding. What was particular about Mallarmé’s doubt was his well-known aestheticization of the experience, which he likened to the rolling of dice.

Stark’s relative inattention to the Mallarméan dynamic between speech and writing, and between writing and publication, ends up distorting his historical account of the poet’s aesthetics of anonymity. A few pages later, for instance, he cites one of the poet’s letters written decades prior to the publication of ‘Crise de Vers’, in which Mallarmé complains of heart palpitations allegedly caused by ‘the impression of a pen moving as a result of *my will*’.<sup>15</sup> For Stark, this letter offers evidence of the poet’s deeply felt sense of ‘ontological and linguistic absence’, a belief that there is no personal, divine, or determinate ground for meaning, only language’s ‘innate instability’.<sup>16</sup> Maybe so, but Stark’s citation omits some crucial details. Here, again, is Mallarmé: ‘I am not completely over my crisis because the dictation to my dear secretary and the impression of a pen moving as the result of my will, even if thanks to the hand of another, increases my palpitations’.<sup>17</sup> By conflating the Mallarméan (and ostensibly Cubist) question of ‘Who is speaking?’ with the related, but distinct Mallarméan concern for ‘Who is writing?’ Stark ends up side-stepping the material conditions for Modernist anonymity. It turns out that Mallarmé was not, as Roland Barthes theorized, the scriptor of his author-less texts. His “dear secretary” —his wife—was. This letter’s interpersonal dynamics also help

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Schwartz, ‘Was Mallarmé a Transcendental Philosopher?’, *Romanic Review*, vol. 89, no. 1, January 1989, 107.

<sup>14</sup> Mallarmé treated the totalizing publicity of Hugo’s voice as a key element of his poetic inheritance. In “Crise de Vers,” he claims that Hugo “confisqua [ ... ] presque le droit de s’annoncer.” (236) Here again, we find a similar severance of Mallarméan writing from speech (*écrire sans s’annoncer*), but one now articulated not on the basis of any particular theory of language, and instead staged through the psycho-historical dynamic of influence. The question becomes first figuring out what is left to write after the death of Hugo and then determining how one ought to go about writing it. Mallarmé’s solution amounted to the recession of subjective voice (‘l’ancien souffle lyrique’ (247)) and the ‘total expansion of the letter,’ which serves as the title for Stark’s book. See Victor Hugo, note, 1870, in *Œuvres complètes: Choses vues*, vol. 2, Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1904–1952, 160: ‘[c]e que j’écris n’est pas à moi. Je suis une chose publique’.

<sup>15</sup> Mallarmé, cited in Stark, *Total Expansion*, 139.

<sup>16</sup> Stark, *Total Expansion*, 139.

<sup>17</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance complete, 1862-1871; suivi de Lettres sur la poésie, 1872-1898; avec lettres inédites*, ed. Bertrand Marchal, Paris: Gallimard, 1995, 342.

to return a sense of ordinariness to Mallarmé's doubts about meaning, which he experienced here not as a result of theorizing language's insurmountable contingency, but rather as a consequence of its normal functioning over the course of his writing poetry. After all, successful dictation (particularly in a language with as much homophony as French) requires that the auditor-writer correctly determine the speaker's meaning (his signified) in order to transcribe his acoustical signifiers into the proper written ones.

And given that the anonymous (well, anonymized) labour of Mallarmé's secretary never seems to trip up Stark in his interpretations of Mallarmé's writings, readers may be left with some doubts about whether they really require any theory of interpretation, Mallarméan or otherwise, in order to tackle the questions of meaningfulness and ambiguity in the *papiers collés*, even if they also recognize that Picasso did not, himself, write or set the type of the words that he pasted into each of his collages. As Stark contends, Picasso 'casts doubt on the assumption that the mere appearance of a newspaper cut-out implies an act of intentional selection by the artist that then authorizes a second act of selection by the reader, who chooses which words speak and which remain mute'.<sup>18</sup> This is an essential insight. Even still, all of Picasso's cut-outs do imply an act of intentional selection of some sort—even if the intention was pictorial, not discursive. At no point do readers of *Total Expansion* feel that there is indeterminacy of meaning all the way down, and this is thanks in large part to Stark's connoisseurly command of these cerebral works. With Stark as a guide, it becomes apparent that any given newspaper fragment will only count as textually significant to the meaning of any given collage provided that this was its intended usage. So long as one feels compelled to read a particular piece of text, as opposed to letting the letters recede into pictorial space, one will not experience any doubt that the meaning of this text is an accident of chance, and this is true even if one finds a particular phrase's meaning to be inescapably ambiguous.

*Total Expansion* succeeds in making a strong case for Mallarmé as an art historical subject. Literary scholars, however, may find Stark's readings of the poet less enlightening. They too will find many of the claims advanced in *Total Expansion* uncannily familiar, albeit for slightly different reasons than the art historians. Stark's interpretations of Mallarmé are never all that far off from earlier readings of the poet already published by Mallarmé specialists and literary critics, though these publications have a dismayingly shadowy presence in *Total Expansion*. Stark repeatedly refers the immense body of existing Mallarmé scholarship and the contentious debates within this field, but without delving into the terms of the disputes or even, in some cases, naming any of the participants. On one occasion, he speaks of 'the best recent scholarship on the poet', but this is only in reference to an article by a fellow art historian, Linda Goddard.<sup>19</sup> In an even more telling instance, Stark pretends to assess the current state of Mallarmé Studies before offering his

<sup>18</sup> Stark, *Total Expansion*, 132.

<sup>19</sup> Stark, *Total Expansion*, 171-172.

own close reading of the Mallarméan aesthetic aim (*visée*) of transposition: ‘the marvel of transposing a fact of nature into its vibratory near-disappearance according to the play of language’.<sup>20</sup> Stark writes that ‘[this] difficult concept of ‘transposition’ has received surprisingly little sustained analysis in the voluminous studies of Mallarmé, despite the poet’s own asserting of its centrality to his poetics’.<sup>21</sup> Pages later, he cites what he considers the only ‘major exception’ to this ‘relative silence’: the critic Paul de Man’s doctoral dissertation.<sup>22</sup> This assertion is demonstrably false.<sup>23</sup>

The problem here is not simply one of scholarly convention, but more substantively one of method. Unlike Stark, some of these critics do not wish to approach transposition as a ‘difficult concept’ central to Mallarmé’s poetics, nor do they necessarily look to his poetry for, in Stark’s terms, ‘one of the most rigorous nineteenth-century anti-foundationalist conceptions of language and aesthetics—but also of subjectivity, community, and value’.<sup>24</sup> Without ever losing sight of Mallarmé’s rigor or difficulty, many of these scholars rightly wish to engage with the poetry of Mallarméan concepts.<sup>25</sup> (No other anti-foundationalist theorist of

<sup>20</sup> Mallarmé, ‘Crise de Vers’, cited in Stark, *Total Expansion*, 64.

<sup>21</sup> Stark, *Total Expansion*, 64

<sup>22</sup> Stark, *Total Expansion*, 67

<sup>23</sup> Alongside De Man, Jean-Pierre Richard speaks repeatedly about transposition in his monumental study, *L’univers imaginaire de Mallarmé*, including a suggestive application of the term when describing Mallarmé’s writings on ballet. See Richard, *L’univers imaginaire de Mallarmé*, Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 384 and 412. Gardner Davies offers a lucid, expressly idealistic interpretation of the concept in his article, ‘Mallarmé’s Commitment to “Transposition”’, *Australian Journal of French Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1 January 1989, 52-70; Theo Hermans tackles transposition at length in “Mallarmé’s Language: Transposition, Structure,” a chapter of his book, *The Structure of Modernist Poetry*, London: Routledge, 1982. Rosemary Lloyd and Yuko Matsumura have each written illuminating, intertextual essays focused on Mallarmé’s use of the concept in the phrase “divine transposition,” in his portrait “Théodore de Banville,” a text that, surprisingly, does not find its way into *Total Expansion of the Letter*. See Rosemary Lloyd, “La Divine Transposition”: Mallarmé and Banville’, *French Studies Bulletin*, vol. 3, no. 9, 01 December 1983, 3-6; and Yuko Matsumura, ‘La “Divine Transposition” et quelques évocations de l’apothéose’, *Études Stéphane Mallarmé*, vol. 2, no. 2, January 2014, 59. Franck Dalmas considers Mallarmé’s concept of transposition alongside Julia Kristeva’s later, Mallarmé-inspired, transposition-concept in his article ‘Les Chants du Signe : Transformation du langage chez Lautréamont et Mallarmé’, *Dalhousie French Studies*, vol. 67, Summer 2004, 49-61. Finally, as the title suggests, transposition looms large in Peter Dayan’s book *Mallarmé’s “Divine Transposition”: Real and Apparent Sources of Literary Value*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but out of all of these works, only Richard’s book appears anywhere in *Total Expansion of the Letter*—in an unrelated footnote.

<sup>24</sup> Stark, *Total Expansion*, 71.

<sup>25</sup> The poet declared that he ‘found the Beautiful, after having found the Nothingness (of language)’, and so this criticism should not be misconstrued as the reviewer’s subjective aestheticist preference; it is essential for understanding the anticipated outcomes of

language has yet to pen a phrase quite as gorgeous as the ‘near-vibratory disappearance’ of a natural fact.) Gardner Davies, for instance, treats transposition with a much lighter touch, tracking patterns of transpositional movements across the poet’s *oeuvre*.<sup>26</sup> Franck Dalmas, for his part, takes interest in the subtle shifts in sense attributable to each of Mallarmé’s uses of the term.<sup>27</sup> Stark, by contrast, develops his interpretation through penetrating analyses of two appearances of the term transposition in ‘Crise de Vers’, to the exclusion the word’s third appearance in this same text, and also apart from its more idealistic (but no less definitional) usage in the poem-portrait, ‘Théodore de Banville’. This means that in order to develop Mallarmé’s scattered ideas into a usable theoretical concept, Stark ends up stilling what Leo Bersani (a literary critic who does get cited in *Total Expansion*) has described as the poet’s ‘speculative restlessness’.<sup>28</sup> This quality is especially germane to a term like transposition, which charts shifts across differing registers of sense. For Mallarmé, as for his contemporaries, transposition could entail movements from one form of music to another, from one sister art to another (music to poetry), and from one state of being to another (the realm of facts to the realm of ideas). This is precisely the kind of semantic mobility that one would expect from Stark’s own thesis, which stipulates that for Mallarmé, language is a structure in perpetual flux.

*Total Expansion* aims to demonstrate the depth of Mallarmé’s aesthetic thinking. This is all for the good. However, Stark’s effort to re-describe Mallarméan eclecticism as a rigorous aesthetic theory occasionally strains the poet’s writing. When, for instance, Stark re-reads Mallarmé’s posthumously published ‘Notes on Language’ alongside the philosophy of Hegel, he mentions that ‘the depth and extent of Mallarmé’s reading of Hegel has been the subject of some debate’.<sup>29</sup> He does not, however, specify the nature of this debate, which tends to concern how Hegel may, or may not, aid in our interpretations of Mallarmé’s poetry. Some *Mallarmistes*, most notably Robert Greer Cohn, contend that viewing Mallarmé as a Hegelian poet partly misdescribes the organization of his thought. For Cohn, the poet does not follow the philosopher’s well-known triad of thesis, antithesis, and sublation; instead, Cohn finds in Mallarmé a variety of fourfold or manifold structures, what the critic names tetrapolarity and polypolarity.<sup>30</sup> This will sound like academic arcana to the uninitiated, and in certain ways, it is, but many critics,

---

Mallarmé’s reflections on language. See Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance* vol. I, 1862-1871, ed. H. Mondor and J-P. Richard, Paris: Gallimard, 1959, 207: ‘après avoir trouvé le Néant, j’ai trouvé le Beau’.

<sup>26</sup> Davies, ‘Mallarmé’s Commitment to “Transposition”’, 52-70

<sup>27</sup> Dalmas, ‘Les Chants du Signe : Transformation du langage chez Lautréamont et Mallarmé’, 49-50.

<sup>28</sup> Leo Bersani, *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, 40-46.

<sup>29</sup> Stark, *Total Expansion*, 143.

<sup>30</sup> See Robert Greer Cohn, *Toward the Poems of Mallarmé*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965.

including Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva, have praised Cohn's interpretative approach in their own theoretical commentaries about the French poet and the German philosopher.<sup>31</sup>

It is, therefore, not unreasonable to expect that a new interpretation of Mallarmé's Hegelianism might contend with, or at least make mention of, possible alternatives. Instead, Stark undertakes a virtuosic philosophical *explication de texte*, which includes his speculation that a particular passage of Hegel 'must have stunned Mallarmé'.<sup>32</sup> In so doing, Stark ends up abandoning his previous chapter's doubts about psycho-biographical approaches to Mallarméan aesthetics, and moves into a space of pure theoretical fancy. His conclusion is that Mallarmé's theory of language is, in fact, a lot like Hegel's philosophy of language, except that the poet replaces the philosopher's notion of Spirit with his own world-bound ideal of Fiction. This, it turns out, is not all that different from the thesis of Deirdre Reynolds' 1991 essay, 'Mallarmé and Hegel: speculation and the poetics of reflection', though Reynolds does not make her way into the bibliography of *Total Expansion*.<sup>33</sup>

To be sure, Stark's book covers a lot more than the relationship between Mallarmé and Cubism and Hegel. *Total Expansion* also considers the poet's enigmatic designs for his never-completed *Book (Le Livre)* with and against Zurich Dada's *Soirées*; Mallarmé and Marcel Duchamp's engagements with chance; and, in a brief, forward-looking conclusion, Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Staub's 1977 film, *Toute révolution est un coup de dès*. Nonetheless, much of the force of Stark's scholarly contribution will rest on his interpretations of Stéphane Mallarmé, which he offers to an audience largely unfamiliar with the poet's work. These, unfortunately, must be approached with critical circumspection.

I will limit myself to one clear example of particular relevance for art historians. When Stark considers Mallarmé's praise for the painting *Le Bal de L'Opéra* (1874) [fig. 3], by his contemporary and soon-to-be collaborator, Édouard Manet, he claims that Mallarmé applauded the painter for having 'depicted a contemporary Parisian crowd through "the pure medium of this art," that is to say, with the forthrightly asserted, non-semantic materiality of paint'.<sup>34</sup> But this is not at all what Mallarmé intended to celebrate. The poet considered Manet's material facture 'irreproachable' precisely because he was 'taken aback by the delicious range found in the painter's use of black: dresses and gowns, hats and foxes, velour, wools,

<sup>31</sup> Greer Cohn speaks of this reception in his article 'Mallarmé's Wake', *New Literary History*, vol. 25, no. 4, 890.

<sup>32</sup> Stark, *Total Expansion*, 145.

<sup>33</sup> Deirdre Reynolds, "Mallarmé and Hegel: speculation and the poetics of reflection", *French Cultural Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 71-89.

<sup>34</sup> Stark, *Total Expansion*, 19.



Figure 3 Édouard Manet, *Le bal de l'Opéra*, 1873. Oil on canvas, 59.1 x 72.5 cm.  
Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art.

satins, and silks'.<sup>35</sup> In other words, what Mallarmé admired most in this particular Manet painting was the rich semantic texture that the painter managed to attain through his deft handling of his materials, a feat that the poet found all the more extraordinary given his feeling that contemporary life tends to flatten our experience into the pictorial equivalent of an undifferentiated, monochromatic expanse. Mallarmé insisted that Manet's brushwork comes off as well as it does because all of the paint stays firmly within the space of the picture. 'Nothing, therefore, out of place or scandalous at the level of Manet's paint, and nothing that wants to pull away from the canvas: but, to the contrary, the noble attempt to make it all hold there, through *the pure means called for by this art*, a complete vision of

<sup>35</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres Complètes*, edited by Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry, Paris: Gallimard, 1951, 697-8: 'Irréprochable est l'esthétique et, quant à la facture de ce morceau que les exigences de l'uniforme contemporain rendaient si parfaitement difficile, je ne crois pas qu'il y ait lieu de faire autre chose que de s'étonner de la gamme délicieuse trouvée dans les noirs: fracs et dominos, chapeaux et lous, velours, drap, satin et soie'.

contemporary society'.<sup>36</sup> I have italicized 'the pure means called for by this art', in order to emphasize that Stark's reading is mistaken at the level of both exegesis and also of translation. Mallarmé simply did not speak about painting with the same reductionist concept of medium that many modern art historians do. Indeed, in the rare, and perhaps singular, instance in which Mallarmé explicitly used the term *medium*, he did so in order to identify *air* (not paint) as the medium of Impressionist painting.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the phrase 'called for by this art' clearly concerns conventions for using painterly materials, rather than the materials themselves.

This is a difference between arguing that Mallarmé anticipated later Modernist ideas, and translating the poet in such a way so that he appears to have already written them. Stark would have us to believe that Mallarmé lifted the veil from inherited sign systems only to encounter the contingent flux of matter, and that, accordingly, he commended Manet for also having done so. But a much more Mallarméan description of unveiling can be found in the poet's text, 'The Mystery of Letters', which Stark himself cites in the third chapter of *Total Expansion*. Here, Mallarmé writes that '[t]here must be something occult at the bottom of everyone, I believe decidedly in something abstruse, signifying sealed and hidden, that inhabits the commons'.<sup>38</sup> No wonder Mallarmé praised Manet for lifting the veil from academic conventions of painting. He did so in order to represent a scene of fabulous occultation: a masked ball.

\*\*\*

Mallarmé and Manet also make their appearance in Andrei Pop's book, *A Forest of Symbols*, but as the interpreters of Edgar Allan Poe's masterpiece, 'The Raven', which Mallarmé first translated into French and then Manet took to illustrating with an accompanying suite of lithographs. Whereas Stark's book focuses on the aspects of Mallarmé's work that were 'barely noticed' during his lifetime, Pop considers the poet's activities as a translator, teacher, and collaborator, in order to situate him within the wider-reaching intellectual project of symbolism. Pop offers an expansive conceptual definition of symbolist art ('art that *works mainly by virtue of its meaning*'),

<sup>36</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres Complètes*, edited by Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry, Paris: Gallimard, 1951, 698: 'Rien donc de désordonné et de scandaleux quant à la peinture, et qui veuille comme sortir de la toile : mais, au contraire, la noble tentative d'y faire tenir, par de purs moyens demandés à cet art, toute vision du monde contemporain'.

<sup>37</sup> This essay, "The Impressionists and Edouard Manet," only survives in an English translation, and its publication history demands a certain philological humility with respect to the use of the term *medium*. See Stéphane Mallarmé, "The Impressionists and Edouard Manet," trans. George T. Robinson, in *Documents Stéphane Mallarmé*, Vol. 1, ed. Carl Paul Barbier, Paris: Nizet, 1968, 84. For a recent art historical analysis of Mallarmé, Manet, and Impressionism, see Margaret Werth, 'Mallarmé and Impressionism in 1876', *nonsite.org*, no. 29, 19 February 2019: <https://nonsite.org/article/mallarme-and-impressionism-in-1876>.

<sup>38</sup> Mallarmé, 'The Mystery in Letters', cited in Stark, *Total Expansion*, 247.

but his book primarily concerns ‘artists and writers at the end of the nineteenth century who called themselves symbolists, and whose unifying trait, for all their political and aesthetic differences, was a concern with how art gets its meaning’.<sup>39</sup>

Pop’s analysis of Mallarmé and Manet’s 1875 collaboration on ‘The Raven’ treats their project as symbolist in both senses of the term, since the book only explicitly appeared under the symbolist banner after some delay, when Léon Vanier re-edited the work in 1889. For Pop, Mallarmé’s interest in Poe was both personal (the French poet avowed that he learned English in order to become a better reader of Poe) and, more importantly, aesthetic. In Poe’s essay ‘The Philosophy of Composition’, the American author wrote that ‘a poem is a metrical composition without ideas’, which (with a good deal of wit) he aimed to describe through a meticulous detailing of the steps that went into composing ‘The Raven’.<sup>40</sup> In a similar vein, Pop cites Mallarmé’s casual remark to his friend, the painter Edgar Degas: ‘you can’t make a poem with ideas; you make it with words’.<sup>41</sup> The correspondence here between Mallarmé and Poe may call to mind the theory of language proposed by Stark in *Total Expansion*, in which modern artists started to work with linguistic materials only contingently bound to determinate ideas or objects. This connection is all the more striking, since Pop also draws our attention to Mallarmé’s ‘self-effacing performance’, or the anonymous aesthetics perceptible in the poet’s literal-minded translation of Poe. ‘[B]y printing his highly rhythmic translation in blocks of italicized prose, [Mallarmé] intended to stay out of Poe’s and Manet’s way’.<sup>42</sup>

In spite of these nominal overlaps in both scholars’ accounts, Pop means to draw out something quite different about Mallarmé’s poetic aims. He sees both Mallarmé and Poe as equally committed to an exploration of their art’s ‘conditions of meaning’, Poe through his narrator’s efforts to interpret the raven’s haunting refrain, ‘Nevermore’, and Mallarmé through his fastidious efforts to preserve the originality of Poe’s work even while working to swap out all of its original linguistic materials.<sup>43</sup>

What, then, did Manet have to contribute? According to Pop, Manet’s illustrations help readers to see the first-personal character of the poem’s meaning, and its unique grounding in aesthetic experience (i.e. what distinguishes poetic thought from other forms of thinking.) In order to make his point, Pop endeavours to make sense of the most formally daring print in Manet’s series, *L’Ombre* [fig. 4], which depicts the raven’s highly abstracted cast shadow alongside a humble wooden chair. The print not only shocked the book’s earliest readers, it also

<sup>39</sup> Andrei Pop, *A Forest of Symbols: Art Science, and Truth in the Long Nineteenth Century*, New York: Zone, 2019, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Pop, *A Forest of Symbols*, 54.

<sup>41</sup> Pop, *A Forest of Symbols*, 33.

<sup>42</sup> Pop, *A Forest of Symbols*, 69

<sup>43</sup> Pop, *A Forest of Symbols*, 97.



Figure 4 Édouard Manet, *L'Ombre* (Plate 4 from *Le Corbeau*), 1875. Transfer lithograph, 55 x 36 cm. Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division.

dismayed Mallarmé, who found the piece of furniture to be out of place in his picture of Poe's story. Pushing against Mallarmé, Pop defends Manet's decision, arguing that the artist aimed in his print to express something that 'would have evaded visual thought' had he stuck too literally to the source text.<sup>44</sup> Unlike all of the other prints in the series, *L'Ombre* is missing a moustachioed figure, who represented the poem's protagonist, and who also alluded to both the text's author and its translator. In other words, in all of his earlier illustrations, Manet had depicted the three principle personages who had taken up the position of the text's first-personal 'I'. One of these earlier prints, Pop also notes, included a similar wooden chair to the one found in *L'Ombre*, but upon which Manet had placed a cane and a hat, both of which seem to allude to either the visitor announced in Poe's poem or, as has been suggested, to the artist himself. As a result, Manet's decision to depopulate the scene in *L'Ombre* allowed for the artist to establish a shift in his pictorial frames from the illustrational third-person to the first-personal position of the text itself. This, Pop persuasively argues, matches up with Poe's intentional 'flitting from protagonist to author to reader' in the denouement of his poem.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Pop, *A Forest of Symbols*, 74.

<sup>45</sup> Pop, *A Forest of Symbols*, 79.

What makes Pop's interpretation so extraordinary is that he never once shies away from the possibility of erring or misunderstanding. Instead, he explicitly attempts to show something meaningful about Manet's illustrations that even the artist's collaborator could not see. In so doing, Pop can claim that the author, translator, and illustrator of 'The Raven' were all equally concerned with 'the intelligibility and aesthetic force that can be imparted in an effort to publicly articulate private experience'.<sup>46</sup> Pop's focus on the symbolist interest in expressing private experience leads him to think about Mallarmé quite differently than Stark does.

Pop, for instance, looks not to the poet's dense theoretical notes on language, preferring, instead, to examine a set of his curious pedagogical tools, which Mallarmé had developed in his capacity as an English teacher. Through a combination of watercolour drawing, vocabulary lists, and moveable cut-outs, Mallarmé created shifting collages that allowed for his French pupils to acquire the meaning of English words by physically putting arbitrary linguistic (and pictorial) signs to use. Pop suggests that as a teacher and as a translator, Mallarmé developed an awareness that 'private experience becomes the basis of public learning'.<sup>47</sup> This, in turn, affected the poet's aesthetic aims. More precisely, it helps to explain Mallarmé's ongoing interest in representing 'interior spectacles', which are so difficult to express in publicly available terms precisely because they are not in themselves shareable. It is also why the poet's later writings continued to be populated with so many shadows and reminiscences of the worldly objects that he also wished to do mostly without, and why he speaks of the vibratory *near-disappearances* of facts, rather than their disappearances *tout court*.

In one of his book's sharpest provocations, Pop claims that Mallarmé and Manet's 'challenge [was] to comprehend how we can have shared knowledge of the subjective aspects of our mental life' and that this challenge has been 'as yet unmet by theory'.<sup>48</sup> By theory, Pop means precisely the Saussurean account of language that Stark finds in its germinal form in Mallarmé's writings. For Pop, such theory has been incapable of meeting the true challenge of symbolist art because it treats meaning as ultimately and irrevocably bound to a 'public play of differences between arbitrary signs' and not at all internal to the mind.<sup>49</sup> His criticism is distinct from (though likely congenial to) earlier critiques of these same theories rooted in claims about intentionality.<sup>50</sup> By theorizing language's lack of determinate ground as both the problem and the solution to interpreting Mallarmé, Saussurean criticism has not been able to maintain a clear picture of the poet's symbolism or of symbolist art in general. This is because anti-foundationalist theorists of language

<sup>46</sup> Pop, *A Forest of Symbols*, 97.

<sup>47</sup> Pop, *A Forest of Symbols*, 96.

<sup>48</sup> Pop, *A Forest of Symbols*, 226.

<sup>49</sup> Pop, *A Forest of Symbols*, 90.

<sup>50</sup> For the paradigmatic example, see Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp, 'Against Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 4, Summer 1982, 723-742.

paradoxically treat language's supposed lack of foundation as itself a kind of conceptual ground for their criticism, which means that their interpretations end up evading the problem of subjectivity so central to symbolism, rather than keeping it in view as its central challenge to understanding.

As Pop boldly argues in his brief but perceptive analysis of *Un Coup de Dés*, 'Mallarmé's last work shows that we cannot take the arbitrariness of signs to guarantee the publicity of all language'.<sup>51</sup> This lack of guarantees need not imply, however—as Stark no less boldly claims—that Mallarmé's dice-rolling 'became a figure [...] of constructing a thought in language with the hope of being understood—all the while knowing that this wager was doomed'.<sup>52</sup> Mallarmé's belief in the possibility of translating Poe, and Stark's belief in the possibility of successfully interpreting Mallarmé, both point to the possibility of a far less gloomy conclusion: what the poet referred to as the possibility of a constellation forming.<sup>53</sup>

Throughout *A Forest of Symbols*, Pop examines additional symbolist efforts at "understanding the thoughts and actions of others, including their artefacts," even as these artefacts engaged ever more explicitly with "the pervasiveness of subjectivity."<sup>54</sup> This, he argues, was symbolism's central mission. Alongside Manet and Mallarmé, Pop also considers much more surprising constellations of figures, ranging from the psychologist Ernst Mach and the painter Odilon Redon, to the philosopher Gottlob Frege and the pointillist Georges Seurat.

Like Stark, Pop is an impressive cross-disciplinary thinker, and his book stands out, in particular, for his lucid explanations of analytic philosophy, a field that art historians have tended to shy away from. If Frege and Russell now start to get their art historical due, it will be thanks in part to Pop's penetrating analyses. (The same may also be true for one visual artist, Félix Bracquemond, who emerges from *A Forest of Symbols* as much more than a master printmaker, but as a philosopher of sorts, one whose medium just happened to be intaglio pictures.)

Pop's book offers an original art history of symbolism, as well as a timely polemic about the current state of art historical practice. He joins a growing list of scholars dissatisfied with the theories of language that have 'dominated intellectual

<sup>51</sup> Pop, *A Forest of Symbols*, 93.

<sup>52</sup> Stark, *Total Expansion*, 290.

<sup>53</sup> It must be stressed that a similar interpretative split between Pop's self-described 'charitable reading' of symbolism and Stark's avant-gardist approach to aesthetics also exists in literary studies of Mallarmé. As a result, art historians are fortunate to have such serious contributions to both of these interpretative 'camps'. Though beyond the purview of this review, readers are especially encouraged to consider how these differences play out between Pop and Stark's analyses of the concept of fiction, which Pop approaches through the philosophical writings of Frege and Stark through Mallarmé's theoretical writings on language. For an evocative description of this critical divide in Mallarmé studies in terms of skepticism and *bonheur*, see Robert Greer Cohen, 'Mallarmé on Derrida', *The French Review*, vol. 61, no. 6, May 1988, 888.

<sup>54</sup> Pop, *A Forest of Symbols*, 237.

life in university humanities departments in the latter half of the twentieth century'.<sup>55</sup> For Pop's part, art historians would do well to reconsider the logical bases of their practices, starting with the impulse to conceive of pictures in terms of language. Many readers are likely to remain indifferent to Pop's call for a new common sense. Others will be inspired to write histories of art under the light of an unfamiliar lamp, in the near-absent shadow of Stéphane Mallarmé.

**Alex Weintraub** is a Core Lecturer in the Department of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University, where he earned his PhD in 2019. A specialist of Modern European art, he is currently at work on a book examining the art history of the French National Library. Articles about Stendhal's definition of beauty (*Romantic Review*) and Thierry de Duve's approach to Marcel Duchamp and Immanuel Kant (*nonsite.org*) are forthcoming.

agw2114@columbia.edu



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

<sup>55</sup> For a thoughtful example of this trend, see Toril Moi's criticisms of what she refers to as Post-Saussurean literary criticism in her book, *The Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Criticism after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell*, Chicago: University of Chicago, 2017. Pop, *A Forest of Symbols*, 236.