

## MALLARMÉ ON MUSIC AND LETTERS

By L. J. AUSTIN, M.A., D.U.P.

PROFESSOR OF MODERN FRENCH LITERATURE IN THE UNIVERSITY  
OF MANCHESTER

**I**N the first volume of *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Entry No. 383 reads :

The elder Languages fitter for Poetry because they expressed only prominent ideas with clearness, others but darkly—Therefore the French wholly unfit for Poetry ; because is clear in their Language—i.e.—Feelings created by obscure ideas associate themselves with the one *clear* idea. . . .

And in Entry No. 1016, Coleridge asks this question :

Whether or no the too great definiteness of Terms in any language may not consume too much of the vital and idea-creating force in distinct, clear, full made Images & so prevent originality—*original* thought as distinguished from positive thought—Germans in general—

“ Therefore the French wholly unfit for Poetry. . . . ”  
This was written probably in 1799 : Racine had then lain a century dead ; André Chénier’s work was still to be revealed ; Alfred de Vigny was a child of two, Lamartine a boy of nine ; and Victor Hugo was not to see the light of day until the new century itself was two years old. The three successive waves of the one great poetic renewal, Romanticism, Parnassus and Symbolism, were yet to come. Had Coleridge been writing in 1899, had he been able to read the work of Gérard de Nerval, of Baudelaire and Mallarmé, and the early writings of Claudel and Valéry, he might not have written that the French language was “ wholly unfit for poetry ”. For by then French poetry had undergone a radical transformation. One aspect of this change is the subject of this paper.

Some thirty-eight years ago Paul Valéry suggested that what was baptized *Symbolism* could be very simply summed up by the intention, common to several families of poets (otherwise on very bad terms with each other), of “ taking back from Music what properly belonged to them ”. Since then, this definition

has become a commonplace of literary history. But, like many commonplaces, it is more often repeated than examined or discussed; like many definitions, it needs to be itself defined. What was this property that Music was alleged to have stolen from Poetry? And when did Poetry seriously begin to lodge a claim for its return? In her thesis Madame Thérèse Marix-Spire has recently shown, with a wealth of new facts and new interpretations, that the French Romanticists were far more aware music, of and far more deeply influenced by music, than had been generally recognized hitherto. Scornfully rejecting the accepted notion that Music and Letters began to draw together in France only during the Symbolist period, she produces overwhelming evidence to show that George Sand, for one, lived, moved and had her being in the realm of music, and that her work, in substance and style, was profoundly influenced by this art.<sup>1</sup>

But Valéry was speaking of poetry, not of prose; and it is, I think, still true that Baudelaire was the first of the great modern French poets "to experience, to invoke, and to question Music".<sup>2</sup> He did so on the occasion of the scandalous reception of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* in 1861, when it was performed in Paris, and hooted off the stage. But this date, 1861, is enough to reveal that Wagner can have had no significant influence on Baudelaire's poetry; for in that year the second edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* appeared and set the seal on Baudelaire's poetic achievement. What Baudelaire found in Wagner was the confirmation of his own aesthetic theories; the suggestive and evocative power of this music seemed to him a further illustration of the doctrine of correspondences, of the reciprocity of the various sensorial impressions; and, by the "passionate energy of its expression" (one of Baudelaire's supreme aesthetic and moral values), it marked Wagner as the truest representative of

<sup>1</sup> Thérèse Marix-Spire, *Les Romantiques et la Musique, Le Cas George Sand 1804-38* (Paris, 1954). The Valéry quotation comes, of course, from his *Avant-Propos* to Lucien Fabre's book of poems *La connaissance de la Déesse* (1920), reprinted in the first volume of *Variété* (1924). See p. 95 of the current edition.

<sup>2</sup> *Variété*, p. 93. Baudelaire's views on Wagner are discussed briefly in my book *L'Univers poétique de Baudelaire* (Paris, 1956), pp. 260-81.

the nature of modern man. Baudelaire discussed Wagner's theories on the relations between Music and Poetry in terms that were closely read by the next generation of poets, and by none more than by Mallarmé.

Valéry claims, not altogether wrongly, that Romantic music, as represented by Berlioz and Wagner, for example, had been seeking for *literary* effects, for Romantic literary effects. And he claims, quite rightly, that Music achieved these effects better than literature could do. For, as he sardonically comments, "the violence, not to say the frenzy, the exaggeration of profundity, of distress, of brilliance, or of purity which were to the taste of that period, can hardly be translated into language without involving much silliness and many ridiculous features . . . ; and these elements of ruin are less perceptible in musicians than in poets".<sup>1</sup> Valéry emphasizes the dynamic resources of the orchestra, and the force of its physical impact on the hearer's sensibility. Small wonder that poetry should "feel itself grow pale and faint" in the presence of such a formidable rival, if what Valéry says of the Symbolist poets is true: "our literary heads dreamed of nothing but deriving from language almost the same effects as the purely sonorous causes produced on our nervous beings".<sup>2</sup> But is this true of all the Symbolist poets? It is often overlooked that Valéry had placed within quotation marks the phrase concerning their alleged desire to "recover from Music what properly belonged to them". The author of this phrase was in fact, not Valéry, but his master, Mallarmé. Our initial question can therefore be more precisely formulated in these terms: How did Mallarmé propose to recover from Music what he considered to be the rightful property of Poetry? This raises a number of other problems: how did Mallarmé define Music? How did he define Poetry and what did he consider to be the relation between these two arts?

Now there is one answer that has often been given to the first question: how Mallarmé proposed to take back from Music what rightly belonged to Poetry. It is beautifully simple; but it is highly improbable that it is the right one. It states that

<sup>1</sup> *Variété*, p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 94-5.

the stolen property in question is the *sound* of words, and that Mallarmé's intention was to group together words devoid of any logical or grammatical coherence, hoping that they would thereby produce similar effects to those of music. This, it is claimed, is what is meant by *poésie pure*. No less an authority than Gustave Lanson was one of the first to give currency to this theory, which is, needless to say, a complete travesty of Mallarmé's real intentions; and many other critics, often, incidentally, well-disposed towards Mallarmé, have subsequently repeated this erroneous interpretation. Valéry himself sometimes gives one the impression that he shared this view. This is how Lanson formulated it:

He thought that one could write pure poetry, reduce words to being nothing but musical sounds that produce emotion and evoke images, and strip them of their intelligible meaning, which he regarded as commonplace, because it was customary. He imagined he could also dispense with the structure that logic and grammar assign to the sentence, and group together words solely in accordance with the rhythm singing within him and the associations they spontaneously formed.<sup>1</sup>

There is one truth in this tissue of errors: Mallarmé did indeed strive to attain "pure poetry". But the path he followed went in exactly the opposite direction to the one that Lanson thought he took. For while he began by envying Music its mystery, he ended by asserting repeatedly that Poetry is superior to Music precisely because it is intelligible, because it has a discursive meaning; and while his use of language was undoubtedly highly original, he always insisted that syntax is the guarantee of poetic intelligibility. Mallarmé, in fact, first turned towards Music in quest of obscurity, and in the end exalted Poetry in the name of clarity.

<sup>1</sup> *Histoire de la littérature française* (Paris, 22nd edn.), p. 1129. The same error vitiates Sir Maurice Bowra's account of Mallarmé in *The Heritage of Symbolism* (London, 1945), p. 14, but is rectified in a more recent statement. Cf. his address on *Poets and Scholars*, reprinted in *English Critical Essays, Twentieth Century, Second Series* (Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 150-1: ". . . Scholars . . . have unravelled the main secrets of his art and proved that, so far from courting ambiguity, he maintained a hard core of intelligible structure behind the mystery which he loved and expressed through evocative symbols. . . . The scholars were right in denying that he was guilty of wilful obfuscation. . . . The process reveals Mallarmé's genius in its true splendour, and we are now beginning to enjoy his poetry as it really deserves."

Another common misconception concerns the date at which Mallarmé became aware of the existence of Music and of its challenge to Poetry. It is customary to date his preoccupation with Music from 1885. On Good Friday of that year, Edouard Dujardin, the founder and editor of the *Revue wagnérienne*, took Mallarmé to the *Concert Lamoureux*; and henceforth, Mallarmé went regularly every Sunday afternoon throughout the winter to the *Cirque d'Hiver* where the concerts were held.<sup>1</sup> While it is true that from that date onwards the problem became a real obsession, it should not be forgotten that Mallarmé makes constant reference to Music from the beginning of his career, and that he was not long in formulating his essential ideas on the subject. His daughter Geneviève states that when young he disdained music, on the grounds that true music is to be found in verse; but this is a remark which he would have endorsed at any age.<sup>2</sup> What Geneviève Mallarmé did not know was that even before she was born, her father, aged twenty, had begun one of his first important articles, a youthful and truculent profession of faith, by a comparison between the methods and resources of Music and Poetry that was all to the advantage of Music.

Under the provocative title *Artistic Heresies: Art for All*, Mallarmé fulminates against the popularization of Poetry. For this, he blames, on the one hand, the practice of teaching poetry in schools as if it were a science, and, on the other hand, those poets themselves who deliberately write, like Victor Hugo, for the masses. But this, Mallarmé feels, is only possible because Poetry, unlike the other arts, does not possess an autonomous means of expression, and is obliged to use for its own very special ends the language common to all. At this early stage, Mallarmé deplored this bondage in these eloquent terms :

<sup>1</sup> See Edouard Dujardin, *Mallarmé par un des siens* (Paris, 1936), pp. 40-1, 216; Henri Mondor, *Vie de Mallarmé* (Paris, 1941), pp. 451, 531 (referred to below as VM).

<sup>2</sup> She also reveals that he would never allow her to learn to play the piano, and that is certainly evidence of a real aversion, in an age when this art was considered an indispensable "accomplishment" for young ladies. Cf. *Nouvelle Revue Française*, special number of homage to Mallarmé, 1 November 1926, p. 521.

Everything that is sacred and that wants to remain sacred shrouds itself in mystery. Religions take refuge behind arcana disclosed solely to the elect : art has its own.

Music affords an example. If we idly open Mozart, Beethoven or Wagner and cast a casual glance at the first page of their work, we are smitten with religious awe at the sight of those gruesome processions of stern, chaste and unknown signs. And we close the missal unsullied by any sacrilegious thought.

I have often wondered why this indispensable feature has been denied to one single art, the greatest. That art holds no mystery to protect it from hypocritical curiosity, no terror to avert acts of impiety, or to defend it from the smile and the grin of the ignorant and hostile.

And Mallarmé explains that this greatest of all arts is, of course, Poetry ; and he deplors that the same letters are used to print Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* and the daily newspaper, or popular fiction :

Thus anybody and everybody can plunge straight into a masterpiece, and since poets have existed, there has never been invented, to ward off these intruders, an undefiled language,—hieratic formulae whose arid study blinds the uninitiate and spurs on the predestined victim ; —and these uninvited guests bear by way of an admission card a page of the ABC wherein they learnt to read !

O golden clasps of ancient missals ! O inviolate hieroglyphs of papyrus scrolls !<sup>1</sup>

Thus at the outset of his career, Mallarmé conceived of art as a “mystery accessible to rare individuals”,<sup>2</sup> and he deplored that poetry had not been fully recognized as such. In strong reaction against the democratic, not to say demagogic, poetry of Victor Hugo, he was already seeking to lay the foundations of an aristocratic poetry, intelligible to the initiate alone. If he appeals to Music it is merely because Music possesses its own language, its own form of notation : there is no suggestion here that Poetry is Music's debtor or creditor. Nor is there yet any hint that Poetry might be able to devise its own “undefiled language” by a process of inner transformation, and not by any external device. Such speculations were to come later. What is significant here is that Mallarmé sees already in musical notation a potent, if external, “means of mystery”.

Meanwhile in all the poems of Mallarmé's first period—those published in the *Parnasse Contemporain* of 1866—musical

<sup>1</sup> *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by H. Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris, 1945), Collection de la Pléiade, p. 256 (referred to below as OC).

<sup>2</sup> OC, p. 259.

instruments and musical imagery play a fairly prominent part : this poetic orchestra includes rare and archaic instruments such as the Egyptian sistrum (picked up probably from Ronsard)<sup>1</sup> and the medieval rebeck (probably noted in his reading of Mathurin Régnier)<sup>2</sup>, his favourite instruments being, however, the viola and the harpsichord. In Mallarmé's correspondence at the same period, musical analogies frequently recur. Thus when deploring his solitude at Tournon in January 1865, he compares himself to a musical instrument : ". . . A poor poet, who is only a poet, that is, an instrument that resounds beneath the fingers of the various sensations, is mute when he lives in surroundings where nothing affects him, then his strings grow slack and then come dust and oblivion".<sup>3</sup> Again we find him describing the section of *Hérodiade* on which he was working in the winter of 1865-6 as the "musical overture" of his poem, as an "elusive overture singing within me but which I cannot take down".<sup>4</sup> In reality, Poetry was already for Mallarmé the total art, and the references to Music are matched by allusions to Painting. Thus the "musical overture" to *Hérodiade* is also described in pictorial terms. Mallarmé claims that the dialogue between *Hérodiade* and the Nurse is to the overture what an *image d'Epinal* is to a canvas by Leonardo da Vinci.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere he evokes all the complex conditions that must be fulfilled if his ideal is to be realized, and once again Music and Painting are invoked on equal terms :

. . . But if you only knew (he writes to Cazalis) how many nights of despair and days of reverie must be offered up in order to succeed in writing original

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Littré, s.v. *sistre*.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, s.v. *rebec*.

<sup>3</sup> *Propos sur la Poésie*, ed. H. Mondor (Monaco, 2nd edn., 1953), p. 50 (referred to below as PP). Curiously enough, Wagner had complained, ten years before, of his solitude in Zürich, in terms at once similar and very different : "By this life-destroying solitude", he wrote to Princess Caroline Wittgenstein, "anyone like myself must finally be ruined. Favourable moods for work come to me more and more infrequently in my barren life, and without any incitement for my art I shall no longer be able to complete it. So long as I was writing books and composing poetry, it was all right : but for music I need a different life, I need music itself ; but as things are, I am like someone trying to kindle a fire and who has the light but not the wood for it". Quoted in *Einleitung*, p. 3, of Reklam edition of the libretto of *Die Walküre*.

<sup>4</sup> PP, p. 63.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 65.

poetry (a thing I had never achieved so far) and worthy, in its ultimate mysteries, of delighting a poet's soul! What a study of the sound and colour of words, music and painting, through which your thought must pass, however beautiful, in order to be poetic!<sup>1</sup>

These words were written in July 1865, when Mallarmé was working on the first version of *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*. Later he was to describe his intentions in this poem in purely musical terms: replying to a question by Jules Huret, conducting in 1891 his famous inquiry into the literary developments of the day, Mallarmé said of his poem: "In it, I was trying to place alongside the alexandrine in all its decorum, a kind of running byplay strummed around it, as who should say a musical accompaniment written by the poet himself and allowing the official line to emerge only on the great occasions".<sup>2</sup> But it is significant that as early as 1865 he should have stressed the musical values his poetry was to incorporate. Small wonder that when he heard that Debussy had undertaken his *Prélude*, he exclaimed: "I thought I had set it to music myself!"<sup>3</sup> The same conviction that Poetry is at no disadvantage compared with Music underlies the half-serious, half-humorous, and delightfully frivolous *Chronicle*, so typical of the tone of *La Dernière Mode*, that Mallarmé devoted on 6 December 1874 to the theatrical, literary and artistic life of Paris. His highly personal prose style is already taking shape, with all its subtlety and complexity. His views on musical history are also highly personal; whereas Victor Hugo declared that music dates from the sixteenth century, Mallarmé seems to place its origins in the eighteenth!

Though scarcely a century old, Music today holds sway over every soul: a cult for several among you ladies, who are enamoured of her, and for others a pleasure, she has her catechumens and her dilettanti. Her marvellous privilege is to arouse, by devices that are alleged to be forbidden to speech, very profoundly, the subtlest or the grandest reveries; and further to authorize whoever listens to her to fix for a long time upon a point of the ceiling devoid even of paintings, his or her gaze, while opening a mouth glad to blossom out in its customary silence. The whole of Society life is there: to hide the fine higher emotions that imagination is made for, and even often to pretend to have them. Who would dare complain that, an incorporeal Muse, wholly made up of sounds and quivers, this deity, Music, nay, this cloud, endowed with the pervasive power of a charming plague, should now invade the city's theatres one by one: since

<sup>1</sup> PP. p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> OC, p. 870.

<sup>3</sup> VM, p. 370.



she evokes around these social centres of her glory, in the boxes, in the dress-circle, alive ! the most wonderful types and the most richly bedecked representatives of feminine beauty !<sup>1</sup>

“ By devices that are alleged to be forbidden to speech. . . . ”  
Once again Mallarmé strikes the key-note of his variations on this theme. It rings out again at the end of this Chronicle when he somewhat unexpectedly sings the praises of Auguste Vacquerie’s comedy *Tragaldabas*: “ What music there is in these four acts, exquisite, dreamlike or sparkling, if only one of you, Ladies, is willing, having closed your piano, to hear, to the sole rhythm of the verse, the passion, animating their dialogue, arise therefrom ! ”<sup>2</sup>

In this same Chronicle, Mallarmé discusses the possibility of inaugurating the new Paris Opera-house which Garnier had just completed by a performance of Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*, and “ by an extraordinary display of glory, avenging it for the insult once perpetrated in the name of France by a hundred-odd unmannerly cads ”.<sup>3</sup> Mallarmé, as we have seen, well knew Baudelaire’s brilliant essay. He had also had first-hand impressions of Wagner from his friends Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, Catulle Mendès and Judith Gautier, who had spent a few days with him in Avignon, on their return from a visit to Wagner in Lucerne, just after the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Villiers had been introduced to Wagner by Baudelaire in 1862, and he was famous among his friends for his one-man performances of Wagner’s operas on the piano, worthy of the best traditions of *Le Neveu de Rameau*, as described by Diderot. Mendès had written enthusiastically to Mallarmé of Wagner and the “ new art that is neither poetry nor music ” created by him, in a letter dating from April 1870. And so it is not surprising to find Mallarmé speaking out in favour of Wagner as early as 1874.

I have dwelt on these facts because they have often been overlooked. But I do not want to exaggerate their significance. After all, Mallarmé cannot have had much opportunity of hearing

<sup>1</sup> OC, p. 817. *La Dernière Mode* was the “ Society and Family Fashion Gazette ” which Mallarmé produced single-handed from September to December 1874.

<sup>2</sup> OC, p. 820.

<sup>3</sup> OC, p. 818.

music during his provincial years. There is, however, positive proof that the desire was there. On several occasions, when referring to Paris and its possibilities, he specifically mentions music among his deepest needs.<sup>1</sup> But he also mentions painting too; and after his installation in Paris, it was painting that first became a passion, thanks to his friendship with Manet. In 1874, the same year in which he spoke up for Wagner, he also took up the cudgels in defence of Manet, two of whose pictures out of three had been rejected by the Jury charged with the selection of pictures for the Salon. Until Manet's death in 1883, Mallarmé was a frequent visitor to the painter's studio, dropping in on his way home from the *lycée*. Perhaps it was the gap left by Manet's death that was filled by his new-found passion for music. His name is found among the *membres fondateurs* of the *Concerts d'orgue* given on Saturdays at the Palais de Chaillot from early 1883 to the end of 1884.<sup>2</sup> The flame that had long been smouldering blazed up on Good Friday, 1885, when, with Edouard Dujardin and Huysmans, he attended his first *Concert Lamoureux*; and from that time onwards Mallarmé not only lost no opportunity of hearing orchestral, choral and organ music, but he grappled again and again in his writings with the problem of Music and Letters.

He did so with all the more zeal because he felt that his own poetry had already in its first phase gone a long way towards introducing some of the devices of music. This emerges very clearly from a letter to René Ghil dated 7 March 1885, the very year in which his concert-going habits were formed. Commenting on Ghil's first collection of poems, Mallarmé warned his young disciple against going too far in the imitation of musical techniques—a warning that went unheeded by the inventor of "Verbal Instrumentation" and the deviser of "exact"

<sup>1</sup> PP, p. 44: "J'ai besoin d'hommes, de Parisiennes amies, de tableaux, de musique . . ." (To Cazalis, July 1864); p. 50: "Tête faible, j'avais besoin de toutes les surexcitations, celle des amis dont la voix enflamme, celle des tableaux, de la musique, du bruit, de la vie . . ." (To Cazalis, January 1865).

<sup>2</sup> Detail kindly supplied by Mrs. Cynthia Lawrance, through Mr. Anthony Pugh.

equivalences between musical instruments, vowel sounds and colours !

I shall only find fault with you for one thing (wrote Mallarmé) : in this act of rightful restitution, which must be ours, of taking everything back from music, its rhythms which are only those of reason and its very colourings which are those of our passions evoked by reverie, you tend to let the old dogma of the Verse vanish away. Oh ! the more we extend the sum of our impressions and the more we refine them, the more, with a vigorous synthesis of mind, we should concentrate all those elements into clear-cut, solid, tangible and unforgettable lines. Your phrasing is a composer's rather than a writer's : I quite understand your exquisite intention, having been that way myself, only to return as you will perhaps do of your own accord !<sup>1</sup>

Mallarmé's references to music in the last phase of his life constitute a complicated sequence of variations on a given theme : characteristically enough, Mallarmé used this musical term as the running title of his last series of articles. While sometimes varying the emphasis, he remains faithful to his central beliefs, and especially to his conviction that Literature is the supreme art.

But what then were his motives in so assiduously attending the Sunday afternoon concerts? He sought and found there, first of all, what he humorously called "the Sunday washing of the commonplace"; he went to concerts, according to a remark recorded by Bonniot, "out of a mere regard for cleanliness, to wash away the words heard during the week". For the first virtue of music seemed to him its power to purify. "The orchestra with its floods of glory and sadness outpoured" appeared to him to carry out the "musical swilling of the Temple"<sup>2</sup>. But the orchestra had far higher functions for Mallarmé than this ; and he half-mockingly half-seriously notes that "Music promises to be the last plenary cult of man", the audience being animated less by aesthetic than by unwittingly religious motives. He himself used to say : "I am going to Vespers", when leaving for a concert. He dreamed of creating a new religion whose rites would combine the resources of dancing, poetry and music. He believed that in a concert the

<sup>1</sup> PP, pp. 139-40.

<sup>2</sup> OC, pp. 390, 322 ; Bonniot in *Les Marges*, 10 January 1936, t. LVII, No. 224, p. 11.

orchestra "synthetised the immortal, innate refinements and splendours that unknown to all are present in the concourse of a silent audience".<sup>1</sup> I do not, however, wish to follow up here these ultimate dreams of Mallarmé, but rather to consider the more narrowly poetic aspects of his views on music, in so far as it is possible to isolate them, and in so far as it is possible to express them in terms other than his own.<sup>2</sup>

Mallarmé saw in Music, first of all a supreme example of that "divine transposition from the fact to the Ideal, to accomplish which man exists". He believed that Music transmuted the external world into a subtle essence, that it was in fact a quintessence of Nature. He confesses that he had loved Nature in his youth with a fervour, a passion comparable to that funeral pyre that Nature lights up in autumn for her glorious suicide. When he later discovered Music, he recognized in its subtle fire that last recurrent flame wherein the groves and the skies were offered up as a holocaust. Elsewhere he affirms that musical instruments detach the summit of natural landscapes, evaporate them and reform them, wavering, in a higher state. A chord, almost devoid of any reminiscence of hunting is enough to express the forest, fused into the green twilight horizon : or the meadow, with its pastoral fluidity as of an afternoon that has slipped by, is mirrored and flees away in stream-like strains. A line, a little vibration, each succinct, and the whole picture is betokened. Unlike lyric art, as it was, eloquential, owing to the strict need for meaning. Although there is linked up with it a supremacy, namely a rending of the veil and lucidity, the Word remains, in subjects, in means, more massively bound to Nature.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Geneviève Mallarmé, art. cit., NRF, 1 November 1926, p. 521 ; OC, pp. 388, 545.

<sup>2</sup> One of the chief problems that arise in dealing with Mallarmé is that any detail of his thought almost inevitably involves by implication his total position. In lines written a few weeks before his death, he says that a thought never occurs to him in isolation ; his thoughts are musically placed to form a whole and when isolated they lose their truth and ring false. (Cf. OC, p. 883.) Another problem is that with Mallarmé as with Flaubert, thought is inseparable from its expression. Mallarmé's poetic theory is itself poetry, and his language carries with it all the subtle overtones, the ironic or humorous qualifications that are an integral part of his "meaning". I have therefore quoted him as far as possible in his own terms, translated as faithfully as possible, given the different genius of the two languages.

<sup>3</sup> OC, pp. 522, 402-3.

But Poetry can escape from this bondage by following the example of Music and taking as its ideal, not description, but suggestion. And the instrument of this suggestive art is analogy, which destroys the materiality of things by bringing them together in metaphor: objects are volatilized and only their abstract point of resemblance remains. The poet's object is to "institute an exact relationship between images from which will emerge a third aspect, fusible and clear, offered up to the reader's divination".<sup>1</sup> This means the end of descriptive literature, although as Mallarmé recognizes, masterpieces have been written in this vein. Henceforth literature will seek to express only the mood or attitude of the poet in the presence of Nature, the atmosphere of the wood rather than the exact form of the trees.

Although Mallarmé seems to beg a large question by his assumption that Music is a transmutation of the natural world into its own ideal realm, the conclusion drawn for Poetry is certainly a valid one. And in so far as he is concerned with "descriptive" or programme music, he reveals deep insight into the nature of musical expression. It is interesting to note that Beethoven uses very similar terms, in the notes he left concerning the significance of the *Pastoral Symphony*:

It is left to the hearer to discover the situations. *Sinfonia caratteristica*—or a recollection of country life. Any painting loses its effect when it is carried too far in instrumental music.—*Sinfonia pastorella*. Anybody who has ever had any idea of country life can imagine the composer's intentions, even without a lot of descriptive titles.—Even without any description the whole will be recognized: it is an impression rather than sound-painting.

Another note is a little more explicit: "Pastoral symphony not painting, but in it are expressed the impressions aroused in man by the enjoyment of the countryside, whereby some feelings of country life are depicted. . . ." <sup>2</sup>

Very early in his career, Mallarmé had defined his poetics in two words: "To depict, not the thing, but the effect it produces."<sup>3</sup> The first-fruits of his experience of music were the confirmation and deepening of this initial intuition.

<sup>1</sup> OC. p. 365.

<sup>2</sup> *Beethovens Briefe und persönliche Aufzeichnungen* (Leipzig, n.d.), p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> OC, p. 46.

But it may be objected that pure or absolute music has nothing to do with the evocation, however tenuous, of scenes or landscapes. This is true ; but there is no lack of evidence to show that Mallarmé was not unaware of this. He sought and found in music other lessons than that of suggestion or evocation. The most controversial of all is his theory of obscurity. In one of his last theoretical writings, entitled *Mystery in Letters*, and dating from 1896, Mallarmé declares that the coming of Music has put an end to the exclusive reign of clarity in literature, the famous *clarté française* : and he asserts the rights of Poetry to Mystery, hitherto reserved to Music. In this article Mallarmé, who for many years had borne with humour and good humour the unceasing insults heaped upon him, launches for once a vigorous counter-attack against his accusers. He charges them with “ exhibiting things in an imperturbable foreground, like hawkers, hurried on by the pressure of the moment ”. What is the use of writing if it is only to display banality? he asks, “ rather than to spread out the cloud, the precious cloud, floating over the inmost abyss of every thought, since that is vulgar to which is assigned, no more, an immediate character ”. And over against the doctrine of “ clarity poured out in a continuous stream ”, Mallarmé places the aesthetic use of obscurity which, by an effect of contrast gives clarity “ the momentary character of liberation ”. He declares that Music has learnt from Nature and from the Heavens alternations of light and shade ; and that henceforward Poetry must seek for analogous effects :

Music, in its time, has come to sweep all that away—

In the course, merely of the piece, through assumed veils, those still relative to ourselves, a subject emerges from their successive stagnancy accumulated and dispersed with art—

The usual arrangement.

One may, moreover, begin with a triumphant outburst too sudden to last ; inviting the gathering up, in suspensions, released by the echo, of the surprise.

The opposite : are, in a dark withdrawal anxious to attest the state of mind on a point, pressed down and thickened, doubts, so that there may emerge a simple definitive splendour.

This twin, intellectual method, is discernible in symphonies, which found it in the repertory of Nature and the sky.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> OC, pp. 384-5.

The predominantly visual character of these vivid impressionistic evocations of musical effects is at once apparent: a subject gradually becoming visible through veils or light breaking forth from darkness. Mallarmé quotes no examples, and one can only speculate about what precisely he had in mind. Perhaps he was thinking of such a passage as the long modulation, full of foreboding, at the end of the third movement of Beethoven's Fifth (C Minor) Symphony, followed immediately and without a break by the glorious triumphal fanfare that opens the fourth movement. This might appear to the layman to be the outburst of a "simple definitive splendour" after a "dark withdrawal" of "doubts pressed down and thickened". Be this as it may, this effect struck Mallarmé so much that he often reverted to it: in his Oxford and Cambridge lecture on Music and Letters, for example, he once again describes this method of composition, ". . . wherein there follows on re-entries into darkness, after an anxious swirling, all at once the eruptive manifold springing up of light, like the imminent irradiations of the break of day".<sup>1</sup>

Now these are really effects of chiaroscuro, belonging to painting rather than to music, except in so far as they presuppose temporal succession: but for our purpose it is enough that Mallarmé felt entitled to borrow them from music.<sup>2</sup> I believe that he did in fact try to apply these principles in some of his later poems: appropriately enough, for example, in his sonnet of homage to Wagner, where the movement goes from the

<sup>1</sup> OC, p. 648.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to my friend and colleague Professor Eugène Vinaver for reading my text, making some very valuable comments and, in particular, contributing the following remarks on this point: "So far as I know the most authoritative recent formulation of the problem of 'clarity' and 'obscurity' in music is the one given by Schloezer in his *Introduction à J.-S. Bach*. In the light of this formulation, and of musical aesthetics generally, Mallarmé's fundamental fallacy is the *conceptual* assessment of 'obscurity' in music, the notion that whatever is not translatable in non-musical terms (pictorial or intellectual) is obscure. A musicologist would say that clarity and obscurity in music can only occur on the structural or compositional plane, *pace* all the composers who often talk about their music in the most naïve 'pictorial' terms. Like most artists (but perhaps unlike Mallarmé) *ils ne savent pas ce qu'ils font*. Programme music of the most obvious kind can be *musically* obscure, and pure, 'indecipherable' music very clear. If I remember rightly, Professor P. Mansell Jones said something to this effect in our discussion."

mysterious darkness of the opening quatrain to the magnificent, luminous apotheosis of the tercets. But this example also reveals the dangers of the method : the darkness of the opening lines is intellectual as well as visual. If a poem is to be intelligible, it is not enough that certain parts should be clear ; and *chiaroscuro* can be merely a polite term for obscurity. Obscurity thus achieved is a purely external means of attaining mystery.

This brings us to the third and last aspect of the relations between Music and Letters in Mallarmé's aesthetics that I wish to touch on : the problem of the " meaning " of poetry, of its " intelligibility ". It is here that Mallarmé places the decisive superiority of Poetry over Music. For while it is true that traditional poetry was too often nothing but rhythmical and rhyming prose, giving primacy to the clarity of its discursive content, while neglecting its function of creating a particular state of resonance within the reader's sensibility, music on the other hand seemed to Mallarmé to possess great emotive power without having any intelligible significance, being, as he once put it, " a facile occultism with inscrutable ecstasies ".<sup>1</sup> The ideal poetry of which he dreamed would unite the suggestive power of music to the intellectual clarity of speech. Mallarmé indefatigably reverts to this supremacy possessed by the poet because of his medium, " the humblest consequently essential, speech ", " the vulgar and superior medium, elocution ", " the words, the apt words, of the school, the home and the market ".<sup>2</sup>

We have moved far from the stage where Mallarmé envied Music its esoteric notation : he now sees an advantage in the very fact that had once seemed to him a servitude, namely, that Poetry must use as its medium the language common to all. For he had come to learn that the distinctive character of poetry lies not in any external feature, but in the new function to which it applies human speech. It is the poet's duty to " give a purer

<sup>1</sup>OC, p. 416. Professor F. Kermode has very appositely recalled Coleridge's words : " Yet I wish I did know something more of the wondrous mystery of this mighty *hot magic*. . . ." (Cf. *Inquiring Spirit, a new presentation of Coleridge*, ed. K. Coburn (London, 1951), p. 214).

<sup>2</sup>OC, pp. 334, 389, 653.



meaning to the words of the tribe".<sup>1</sup> No longer seeking to exclude the common run of men from the Temple of art, Mallarmé now dreamed of great Festivals wherein the whole of humanity would be called to celebrate the divinity latent in every soul.<sup>2</sup> And while awaiting the day of these new Ceremonials, the Book, he felt, could adequately stand for all other forms of art. Again and again he declares that all the effects of all the arts, and especially those of the great rival, Music, are within the scope and compass of Poetry: "A solitary, silent concert is given, by reading, to the mind that regains, in compensation for a lesser sonority, significance: no mental means exalting the symphony will be lacking, rarefied, that is all—by the act of thought. Poetry, close to the Idea, is Music, pre-eminently—admits no inferiority".<sup>3</sup>

And Poetry in this sense is not confined to metrical writing. To illustrate this conformity between the two arts, Mallarmé quoted Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, as one of the great, the "magic" writers who raised literature to the heights of music. Mallarmé declares that Villiers's work "recalls to mind the enigma of the orchestra" by qualities he evokes in one of those impressionistic passages which reveal what he felt to be the true effect of music, namely the awakening of the most diverse human feelings and moods, freed from any form of imagery, visual or otherwise: "clash of triumphs, abstract sorrow, laughter wild or worse when it is hushed, and the bitter gliding of shadows and eventides, with unknown gravity and peace."<sup>4</sup> In the presence of this analogy between Villiers's work and music, Mallarmé thus expresses his "supreme opinion":

It seems that by an order of the literary spirit, and through forethought, at the very moment when music seems to be better suited than any rite to what is latent and for ever abstruse in the presence of a crowd, it has been shown that nothing, in the inarticulateness or anonymity of these cries, jubilation, outbursts of pride and every kind of rapture, exists that cannot, with equal magnificence

<sup>1</sup> *Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe*: "Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu. . . ." This line is echoed by T. S. Eliot in *Little Gidding*: "To purify the dialect of the tribe. . . ."

<sup>2</sup> OC, pp. 390, 393, 394, 395.

<sup>3</sup> OC, p. 380.

<sup>4</sup> OC, p. 507.

and moreover our consciousness, that clarity, be rendered by old and sacred elocution ; or the Word, when it is somebody that utters it.<sup>1</sup>

“ Our consciousness, that clarity ! ” Thus Mallarmé finally and definitively reinstates clarity in literature. But in reality he had never sought obscurity as such ; what he primarily wished to win back for French poetry was the feeling for mystery, suggestive and evocative power, and, at the same time, a high degree of abstraction and immateriality. He wanted to save the language of poetry from bondage to the referential function of speech, and to liberate it for the widest play of its connotational potentialities. That was the true “ property ” that was to be reclaimed from Music. And if Mallarmé sometimes seemed ready to jettison the essential intellectual clarity of Poetry in favour of these new values, he finally reaffirmed the traditional values of Poetry, which he wanted to perfect and not to abolish. Just as Music is obliged to accept, in song, “ the triumphant contribution of the word . . . so as not to remain the forces of life blind to their splendour, latent or devoid of an outlet ”, even so Poetry can “ descend into the dusk of sound ” in order to find there “ some explosion of Mystery to all the heavens of its impersonal magnificence ”, in order to relearn the art of evocation, of allusion, of suggestion.<sup>2</sup> But, all things considered, Poetry will retain, from this “ pooling of resources and retempering ”, the advantage of clarity. The ultimate aim of the two arts is the same ; and Mallarmé sometimes tries to place them impartially on the same level : “ . . . Music and Letters are the alternative face here extended towards the obscure ; scintillating there, with certainty, of one phenomenon, the only one . . . the Idea.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> OC, p. 507. Cf. Charles Du Bos, *Qu'est-ce que la Littérature?* (Paris, 1945), pp. 39-40, for an admirable plea for final rather than initial clarity in literature : “ qui veut au terme la lumière doit redouter la clarté au départ. . . . ”

<sup>2</sup> OC, pp. 648-9, 365. In referring to the “ triumphal contribution of the word ”, Mallarmé may perhaps be thinking of the *Hymn to Joy* in Beethoven's Choral Symphony. It is interesting to note, however, that Beethoven himself did in fact attribute a very precise psychological and even dramatic meaning to each of his works, and would have liked to indicate this meaning by titles in his complete works. (Cf. Romain Rolland : *Beethoven : les grandes époques créatrices*, tome vi, *la Cathédrale interrompue, III, Finita Comoedia* (Paris, 1945), p. 63.)

<sup>3</sup> OC, p. 649.

But that is not his last word on the subject. His supreme utterance assigns to Poetry the highest place, as being the true Music, destined to intone the "hymn, harmony and joy . . . of the relations between all things".<sup>1</sup> For Mallarmé's life-long dream of the great Book to end all Books dominates and explains his cryptic meditations on the "reciprocal means of mystery" that Music and Letters were for him: "It is not from elementary sonorities by brass, strings, and woodwind, undeniably but from intellectual speech at its apogee that there must wholly and patently result as the totality of relationships existing in everything, Music."<sup>2</sup>

But the discussion of what Mallarmé meant by the Idea and the history of his dream of the Great Work is another subject. As this Work never came near commencement, to say nothing of completion, I have preferred to discuss some aspects of his existing writings. I should like to conclude by stressing that Mallarmé is not really an aesthete nor is he a philosopher. He is a poet, a poet in everything that he wrote; and his poetic theories are themselves poetry, whether expressed in verse or in prose. To be properly understood, they must be read in Mallarmé's own terms and in his own language. Their form is their true content. Poetry was for Mallarmé the true philosophy, as music was for Beethoven and painting for Leonardo da Vinci. After Mallarmé's repeated claims in favour of the supremacy of poetry (which I do not ask you to endorse), it is amusing to see what his fellow-artists had to say on the subject. Leonardo makes equally exclusive claims for painting: "Painting excels and ranks higher than music, because it does not fade away as soon as it is born, as is the fate of unhappy music. . . . The poet ranks far below the painter in the representation of visible things, and far below the musician in that of invisible things. . . . The painter is lord of all types of people and of all things. . . ."

<sup>1</sup> OC, p. 378. On this point, cf. my article "Mallarmé et le rêve du 'Livre'," *Mercur de France* (January 1953), pp. 81-108. Cf. also the valuable discussion by Professor R. Peacock in Ch. IX ("Music and Poetry") of his book *The Art of Drama* (London, 1957), pp. 120-156, esp. p. 151: "Here is indicated the haunting image of a transcendent dream, hovering beyond both poetry and music in their ordinary forms."

<sup>2</sup> OC, pp. 367-8.

Oh wonderful science which can preserve the transient beauty of mortals and endow it with a permanence greater than the works of nature ! ”<sup>1</sup> Beethoven is a little less arrogant, and is prepared to make some concessions : but his ultimate view is no less favourable to his own art. He declares that “ the description of a picture belongs to painting. The poet too can deem himself fortunate in this ; he is a master whose domain is not so limited in this as mine. But mine extends farther into other regions, and our realm is not so easily attained ”.<sup>2</sup> Beethoven’s biographer and panegyrist, Romain Rolland, goes farther still, and gives more specific reasons for the faith that is within him. After commenting on a brief transitional passage in the slow movement of Beethoven’s Choral Symphony, he apologizes to the lay reader for having gone into so many details, and then continues thus :

I wanted the non-musical reader to feel the extraordinary complexity of the art of music which, beneath the hand of a master like Beethoven, commands resources that are, alas ! denied to the writer, for realizing within a very brief space the synthesis of most varied emotions and reflections. In sixteen bars this transitional *adagio* includes a world of different intuitions and apperceptions ; and a Beethoven can at once pursue therein the course of his meditations as a man of thought, a man of passion, and the perfect solution of problems of writing set by his construction as a pure musician. All must be seen and embraced, with the eyes, with the heart. Long live music, which enables us to read, with a single glance, on a single stave, on all levels of thought, all its most secret movements and, out of their diverse voices makes one simultaneous voice, a “ symphony ” !<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Irma A. Richter, *Selections from the Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci* (Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. 194-9. Cf. Delacroix, who, although he loved music and sometimes seems to set it highest, nevertheless regarded painting as supreme. See *The Journal of Eugène Delacroix* (London, 1951), p. 39 (“ Painting—and I have said this a hundred times—has advantages which no other art possesses ”), pp. 91-2, 200-1, 258-9, 267-8, 369 (“ Superiority of music ; absence of reasoning (not of logic). . . . The intense delight which music gives me—it seems that the intellect has no share in the pleasure. That is why pedants class music as a lower form of art ”), etc.

<sup>2</sup> Romain Rolland, op. cit. tome i, *De l’Héroïque à l’Appassionata*, p. 206 n.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. tome iv, *La Neuvième Symphonie*, p. 92. Cf. also Beethoven’s famous words reported by Bettina Brentano and quoted by R. Rolland, ibid, tome vii, *Les Aimées de Beethoven*, p. 117 : “ Dieu est plus près de moi, dans mon art, que des autres . . . la musique est une plus haute révélation que toute philosophie. . . . Qui a compris une fois ma musique sera libre de la misère, où les autres se traînent ! . . . ”

But every artist is entitled, perhaps indeed bound, to regard his own art as the highest form of human activity. And, indeed, it may well be that each branch of art, when raised to its highest perfection, realizes within its own sphere something of that all-embracing synthesis which Wagner hoped to attain by the juxtaposition or combination of painting, poetry and music. It may well be that Mallarmé's meditations on Music and Letters as the reciprocal " means of mystery " and, still more, his dream of the supreme Book, are to be taken as an allegory of the ultimate ideal inspiring every artist, whether he knows it or not. <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Since this article was set up, an excellent book has appeared, dealing in some detail with the problems discussed here: Suzanne Bernard: *Mallarmé et la musique* (Paris, 1959).