

Philosophy or Philology?

Barnaby Norman. *Mallarmé's Sunsets: Poetry and the End of Time*.

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Outside of Mallarmé studies, Mallarmé is a proper name often invoked to signify something vague, something or perhaps someone foundational, but no doubt important to the other proper nouns and names that populate the academy: Philosophy, Literature, History, but also Hegel, Blanchot, and Derrida. Inside of Mallarmé studies, by contrast, scholarship over the past thirty years or so has sought to relinquish the properness of Mallarmé's proper name. Whether by revisiting his supposed "difficulty" to show the absolutely egalitarian nature of his poetics¹ or by situating him against his immediate competitors, interlocutors, and adversaries to tease out the specific influences on his poetry, recent readings of Mallarmé have reconstructed both his life and thought in its philological richness; attempting to demystify the otherness of a poet too often thought to have wandered more lonely than a cloud. One should credit Bertrand Marchal's *La Religion de Mallarmé: Poésie, Mythologie et Religion*² (1988)—a work described by Thierry Roger as "difficile de ne pas qualifier de philologique"³—with inau-

guring or at least popularising this shift. On the other side of the coin, to use one of Mallarmé's own images, the act of returning to Mallarmé's original history has by no means released him from his ubiquitous presence in twentieth century philosophy. From Jean Hyppolite, to Jean-Paul Sartre, to Julia Kristeva and the Telquelians, the philosophical readings of his poetry in France certainly did not walk in fear of abstraction, abstracting Mallarmé out of his concrete relations and into, well, other abstractions. Here one may think of Kristeva's remarks about Mallarmé and mathematics in "Towards a Semiology of Paragrams"⁴ or, more recently, the stunning reading of *Un Coup de Dés* given by Alain Badiou in mediation 19 of *Being and Event* (2005)⁵, which, due to his own philosophical orientation, necessarily removes the poet from his immanent political, social, and cultural situation. So, in summary, studies on Mallarmé often give their readers a choice: philosophy or philology, abstraction or history.

While such matters are never cut so clearly, Barnaby Norman's *Mallarmé's Sunset: Poetry at the End of Time* (2014) does attempt to reconcile these two traditions by focusing on the poet's philosophical and philological relationship to Hegel. One can, for example, see this already at work within the book's fourth sentence: "Literature changed with Mallarmé, and there is a sense that if we can understand what happened, if we can understand something of this *event*, then we can understand something of the opening of our own epoch" (1). The emphasis on the word *event* is crucial here—Norman's italics—because with it come a series of questions and assumptions that condition the trajectory of his argument. Is an event a rupture—and a rupture with what, exactly? Does it imply unprecedented novelty or are we able to predict when, where, and why an event takes place? And even if Mallarmé's poetry is an event, does it tell us something philosophical or historical about "our own epoch"? In other words, do we philosophise or historicise the event of Mallarmé? Drawing on Hegel, Norman's answer, admirably, is both.

The primary argument of *Mallarmé's Sunsets* concerns the poet's immediate historical situation and its relevance to Hegelian aesthetics, offering a coherent summary of Hegel's *Aesthetics: Lecture on Fine Art* (1988). Norman's reading of Hegel is pointed, exact, and forceful. He does an admirable job of synthesising the rebarbative difficulties of Hegel's work into roughly eight and a half pages, focusing mainly on the tripartite treatment of music, art, and philosophy's relation to the Absolute. Norman begins by recounting how, for Hegel, art runs up against its internal limit due to the inherently flawed nature of its essence. While art (specifically poetry) attempts to "express" the Absolute, its only medium is "sensuous manifestation," leaving it running parallel to the Idea (13). This paradox is well ad-

dressed. As he rightly recounts, in art of the Romantic period what we find is a “difference between the word and the note,” (11) where the word, and the medium by which the word finds its expression, is deemed arbitrary, contingent, even meaningless. In so doing, poetry is in a complicit liaison with music, and music with poetry, where the “conflict between the content and its formal expression” allows art to escape from its form and achieve self-transcendence, bypassing its own internal limits. But this capacity for transcendence comes at a price. It is a flawed transcendence, a transcendence that sees art sacrifice the very thing which makes it art in the first place: its formalist quality. The paradox is that if it is to achieve the Absolute, poetry must abandon its form, whereas if it is to cling onto its artistic pretensions, poetry must leave the quest for the Absolute in its wake. Hence, for Hegel, philosophy prevails: “art, considered in its highest vocation is and remains for us a thing of the past” (12). As indifferent to its form as it is, philosophy is situated at the end of time, at the apotheosis of history, where it alone can express the Idea: “Because the realm of philosophy is the realm of pure thought, it is unencumbered by a necessary link with an element external to itself; it does not suffer from the same restrictions as art” (13). But Norman argues that Hegel’s schema leaves open a paradoxical space in which poetry is at once “limited in its sensuousness,” while also able to “transcend that limit as it is dissolved in the poetic form” (14). This, he suggests, renders Hegel’s relationship to poetry not as concrete or exacting as he may have imagined: poetry’s limit is “there and it is not” (14). And here is where Mallarmé enters because his poetry, his *sunsets*, occur “at the end of time.”

In his second chapter, Norman turns to an unfinished “Scène” (18) first composed by Mallarmé in 1865, *Hérodiade*, and the series of letters that document the poet’s turn away from Romanticism and the influence of Baudelaire into what is generally thought of as his “spiritual crisis”—a period around 1866 that marks the beginning of his proper poetics. Norman argues that this poem and these letters are the starting point for a theory of an “Œuvre pure,” a term drawn from the letters themselves, where Mallarmé attempts to construct a purely poetic Absolute that would achieve its own self-transcendence. This is due to Hegel’s apparent inconsistent totalisation outlined in the previous chapter, where the Hegelian system leaves a space open for poetry. However, Norman writes of how his “interest in Hegel’s analysis of the history of art is primarily directed by the way in which Mallarmé *positions* his poetic project in relation to this history” (13). Notice the word *positions* here. What does it imply? What does it tell us about where Mallarmé is situating his own poetic project? Norman needs us to accept that there is an immanent relationship between Hegel and

Mallarmé—and that, moreover, this relationship was exploited by Mallarmé in order to open the path towards a poetic Absolute. In this sense, Norman not only focuses on the philosophical implications of the poet's relation to Hegel, but also suggests that Mallarmé self-consciously situates his poetry in this space. Let's look at his chapter on *Hérodiade* to see if this is the case.

Norman begins by quoting Mallarmé's letter to Villiers de l'Isle-Adam⁶ on the New Year's Eve of 1865, which says that the "subject of" the poem "is Beauty, and the apparent subject is nothing but a pretext by which to approach it" (19). He then suggests that because Mallarmé was intent on creating an "Œuvre pure," "with *Hérodiade* we are not faced with a poem which simply is beautiful or that is an ode to beauty . . . His [Mallarmé's] quarry is beauty reflecting on itself, beauty in and for itself, a self-conscious or absolute beauty" (19). The poem itself is split into two sections. The first gives an account of Hérodiade's nursemaid and the second is a dialogue between the girl, Hérodiade, and her nurse, on beauty. Hérodiade is sitting in front of a mirror when the nursemaid asks if she is able to kiss her ring. Hérodiade replies by speaking about how a kiss could kill her by tainting her beauty, and the "gesture is dismissed sharply as an assault on the princess' purity" (20). In the second part of the poem, the section given the most attention by Norman, the tension is between the purity of Hérodiade and her old nursemaid. They constantly go back and forth, arguing then reconciling, over the nature of beauty. Here, Norman argues that the link to Hegel occurs insofar as *Hérodiade* constitutes Mallarmé's first attempt to situate his poetics at the end of the Hegelian limit.

Norman reads the poem through three categories, all of which seem to express its self-reflexivity: Virginity (Purity) (19), Vanity (Narcissism) (22), Solitude (Self-Presence) (24). With the first, Norman examines an exchange where Hérodiade is offended by the cheap "intoxicating smells" (21) exuding from her nursemaid. Here, she says:

Away with those perfumes that do me hard!
I hate them, nurse, and would you have me feel
Their drunken vapors make my senses reel?
I want my tresses, since they are not flowers
Pouring oblivion on human sorrows,
But gold, forever pure of aromatics
In their dull pallor or their cruel prismatic,
To keep the cold sterility of metal,

Reflecting the jewels of my walls ancestral,

The armoured halls of childhood's sad domain. (21)

This passage is read as a rejection of “the sensory world of contingency in favour of a more eternal value” (21). I certainly agree with the last part—but what does this have to do with contingency? What is the relationship between contingency and impurity? Moreover, how can something be “more eternal”? It either is eternal, or it isn't. These questions are not addressed in the book, which moves immediately to the section on Vanity, or what Norman comes to call “narcissism” (22), where the argument rests on the fact that *Hérodiade* is transfixed by her own reflection—and thus, the poem is reflecting beauty onto itself in an act of pure narcissism.

Norman then proceeds to tie Mallarmé's spiritual crisis—and a purported Hegelian concept of “Synthèse” that he draws out of the letters (34)—to his reading of *Hérodiade*. The strength of this chapter lies in the philological reconstruction of the particular importance of *Hérodiade*, a poem not often read in English language scholarship, to Mallarmé's social situation. There is a very convincing, although not altogether new, account of how the composition of *Hérodiade* lead to the spiritual crisis, which in turn produced *Igitur*. But while the philology may be sound, I am not as convinced about the philosophy. Norman never defines what it means to create a purely reflexive work, instead relying on the transparency of Hegel's definition. I would like to see a longer discussion of what an “Œuvre pure” would look like, whether in Hegelian terms or not. And while Norman concedes that *Hérodiade* is a failed attempt at constructing this project, his analysis does not do him any favours. Think about the term “narcissistic,” for example. What does it imply and why is he able to invoke it as a critical category? The reason is that *Hérodiade* is sitting in front of a mirror. By invoking the term “narcissism,” Norman draws an implicit connection between the mirror in the poem and the etymological roots of his analytical category. The word is acceptable because it gestures towards the myth of Narcissus. Moreover, as Norman rightly states, *Hérodiade* “is the name that Mallarmé uses for the biblical Salome. He is able in this way to conflate the cold-hearted Hérodiad with her virginal daughter” (19). So if poem already engages with historical myths and theological references, it cannot be thought of as pure in any sense: it is, in fact, a priori littered with impure and referential invocations.

But Norman wants to make a larger point, which is that Mallarmé's work on *Hérodiade* “led [him] to the realization that absolute beauty implied a perfectly self-reflexive work, and it is in *Igitur* and his correspondence from this period that we are confronted by its extraordinary paradoxical

demands" (43). In the following chapter, he turns to "Sonnet allégorique de lui-même," an early version of Mallarmé's infamous "Sonnet en yx" (which appeared in the 1897 collection *Poésies*) to inquire into what an "allegory of itself" may be. Here, he invokes a remark from Derrida's "That Strange Institution Called Literature," where the philosopher claims that "a work that was purely self-referential would immediately be annulled" (51). Norman suggests that this, perhaps, "is what is happening with this sonnet, this 'sonnet nul': 'It [the sonnet] would then answer the demand of the Absolute as it was implied in *Hérodias*. This is what the title suggests'" (51).

He focuses on two key moments in the sonnet. The first is "pur Crime" of the second line, "De ses ongles au pur Crime lampadophore (Of its claws by the light bearing pure Crime)," and the second is the infamous meaningless mark of the "ptyx" that appears in the first line of the second quatrain. I find his reading to be novel and convincing, as he suggests that the answer to the poem's purity, the self-referential status of the work, is to be found in the act of a "Crime." There is no doubt that Norman's ability to read poetry is something to be admired, as he meticulously attends to each quatrain and tercet willingly and attentively. In so doing, he writes of how this "Crime" takes on a double movement. The first is in "the absolute annihilation of the world, the pure holocaust of the pure crime," (56) which leads to meaninglessness. But because of the self-reflexivity of Mallarmé's poetry, the crime, like the "ptyx," carries a trace. As such, "the crime . . . can never be pure, or rather it can only ever be both pure and impure; the Sonnet must carry a trace of the annihilation that made it possible, and since the annihilation is of the world, that is, it belongs to the world even as it destroys it, the Sonnet is constrained to carry this 'outside' within" (56). This, Norman argues, changes the meaning of the meaningless "ptyx." Just as the purity of the crime infects the poem, the mark now becomes "absolutely empty and absolutely full." The word, he writes, "cannot simply say nothing because it is constrained, in the same movement, to 'say-nothing-saying-itself': the mark . . . re-marks itself as a word saying nothing, as it say nothing" (60). Norman's conclusion is a modest one, writing about how this leaves the success of Mallarmé's self-reflexivity "ambiguous" (62).

The problem is that he cannot leave this reading on an island, so to speak, and must force it back into a comparison with Hegel. Looking at the last line of the poem, "De scintillations le septuor se fixe (In scintillations the septet is fixed)," Norman argues that the fixity of the infinite (the "septet" is almost unanimously agreed to be the Mallarméan image of the infinite) is the same as Hegel's distinction between the "true" and the "false" infinite: "The infinite can be fixed in as much as the poetic work is perfectly adequate to its idea—it is united with its concept" (61). To support this, Norman

quotes Mallarmé's "Notes sur le langage": "Le moment de la Notion d'un object est donc le moment de la réflexion de son present pur en lui-même ou sa pureté présente (The moment of the Concept of an object is therefore the moment of the reflection of its pure present into itself or its present purity" (61). This is somewhat problematic because, besides the fact that it was written before the composition of the poem when he was preparing to undertake a doctorate that never eventuated, Mallarmé is actually explicitly talking about Descartes here, not Hegel. The entire opening of "Notes" acknowledges the radical opportunity of Cartesian scepticism, going so far as to say that even the With the first, Norman examines an exchange where the Hérodiade ch mathematicians have not understood Descartes.⁷ Moreover, in his editorial notes, Marchal notes that while it does have a distinctly Hegelian tone, the piece was actually composed before any French translation of Hegel was available.⁸ So while this passage may dress like a Hegelian, underneath its clothes it is thoroughly Cartesian.

I do think that the overall scope of Norman's argument can be complicated when the assumption of Hegel's relevance is questioned. It is worth noting that plenty of fruitful claims can and have been made about this relationship, but the question is somewhat sidelined by Norman. He writes, "Mallarmé's Hegelianism is a subject which has received much attention in the past, particularly in mid-century scholarship" (37). However, the only references invoked to support this are Jean-Pierre Richard's *L'Univers Imaginaire de Mallarmé* (1961) and a more recent, but still somewhat out of date, essay by the great Lloyd James Austin. Further along, in a footnote that accompanies a statement made about Hegel's relationship to Blanchot's concept of "le Livre" and the French Revolution, Norman refers us to Philippe Sollers' 1968 essay "Littérature et totalité" if we wish to read about "the subject of the relationship between Hegel and Mallarmé" (96). Unfortunately, this ignores much of what has been said on the topic, both in English and French, over the past forty years. It is surprising to see that Janine D. Langan's *Hegel and Mallarmé* (1986)⁹ receives no attention, given that the first chapter offers a breath-taking, truly philological, answer to the contemporary reception of the contested claim that Hegel influenced Mallarmé. Better still is Jacques Rancière's "appealing" and "assured"¹⁰ philological reconstruction of the particularities of the poet's politics and poetics, which argues that while there is a relationship between the poet and the philosopher, the comparison ends only insofar as Mallarmé and Hegel were traversing similar terrain. For Rancière, Mallarmé's poetry falls behind philosophy and the Idea at the very moment it makes a pronouncement on them—and hence, in good Hegelian fashion, philosophy triumphs once more. While his reading is philological, Rancière's assertion about Mallar-

mé and Hegel is purely philosophical: since no strong philological evidence can be given to support the relationship, a philosophical comparison is needed to clarify the poet's own philological position. To give another example, there is Heather Williams' excellent *Mallarmé's Ideas in Language* (2004),¹¹ which carefully reads the logical and philosophical material Mallarmé would have come across during his years at university and beyond to claim that the only point of similarity one can draw between Hegel and the poet lies simply in the words themselves. Beyond this, she argues, the comparison must end. What is known for certain, then, is that Mallarmé visited the "trés hégélien" Eugene Lefébure in the spring of 1866.¹² What is thought in theory is that Mallarmé could have read Edmond Scherer's 1861 introduction to Hegel, *Hegel et l'hégélianisme*.¹³ Nonetheless, as Marchal notes, Mallarmé, who professed to "n'avoir pas la tête philosophique,"¹⁴ started to use quasi-philosophical and Hegelian language in his letters of April and May, 1866.

Quoting Blanchot later on in the book, though, Norman gives further evidence of a relationship between the poet and the philosopher, writing about how it is not just in the use of the same words that they are linked, but also in feeling. This strikes me as somewhat counter-intuitive. It is not a philological claim, nor is it a philosophical argument: it rests entirely on sensibility. If Mallarmé's poetry really does occur at the end of the Hegelian absolute, such a remark seems only to situate his poetry *before* this, returning it to its disavowed Romantic origins. So while I agree with Norman when he says that the "secondary literature on Mallarmé is vast, and there would be little sense in attempting even a schematic overview," (2) the secondary literature does help clarify the mysterious relationship Mallarmé may or may not have had with Hegel.

I do not want this to seem like a tedious academic quibble. And I do not want to criticise him for not enjoying the discourse of the university, to borrow a term from Lacan. However, I do think that the question of Hegel's relationship to Mallarmé and its treatment in the book pose a very serious question for the overall success or failure of Norman's argument: namely, does he even need Hegel? Do his excellent readings of *Hérodiade* and "Sonnet allégorique de lui-même" hold up if one subtracts, rather than sublates, Hegel? My answer is perhaps. Perhaps they do, perhaps they don't. However, if this is the way that Norman understands the "event" of Mallarmé, then I would say that he assumed a philosophical and philological relation between the two that informed his readings of the poems a priori, rather than the other way round.

But what happens after the event? If the connection between the poet and philosopher holds up, what comes next? The second half of the book moves away from Mallarmé's own writing, focusing instead on Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida's interpretations of Mallarmé and their respective motivations behind turning towards the poet in order to establish and exemplify their philosophical positions. For the former, the relationship between Mallarmé and Hegel is explicit. In *L'Espace Littéraire* (1955) and the essay "L'Absence du livre," Blanchot constructs his project against the dominance of French Hegelianism, putting Mallarmé, among others, into an antagonistic conversation with Hegel. Norman is great reader of Blanchot, noting how he names Mallarmé as a transitional figure who moves away from the "Livre," Blanchot's term for a kind of body of knowledge that conditions our relations to reading and writing, to an "other space" (90). While there is some great scholarship here, which sets up the Hegel/Mallarmé/Blanchot relationship very well, the assumption of Hegel's relevance in this chapter asks us to consider which "Hegel" Mallarmé and Blanchot were operating in relation to? I do see and very much appreciate the dialogue that Norman is setting up, but I wonder whether the philological interpretation of the philosophical history stands up if we note that the Hegel who may have influenced Mallarmé is different from the Hegel whom Blanchot was rallying against. Norman cites and acknowledges that both Blanchot and Derrida are working after Alexandre Kojève's monumental interpretation, *Introduction à la philosophie de l'histoire de Hegel* (1947), but this influential image of Hegel is to some degree an application of Kojève's thinking to Hegel. So when Norman writes about how Blanchot is able to use "Mallarmé's writings as a radical challenge to the totalizing impulse of the Hegelian dialectic," (67) I do wonder if Norman and Blanchot are talking about the same Hegel.

Nonetheless, the final section on Derrida is again a welcome piece of scholarship, simply because, as Norman notes, Mallarmé plays such a foundational role in his early texts. He reconstructs the complicated arguments of Dissemination to show the absolute centrality of Mallarmé, and in particular the developments of "Sonnet allégorique de lui-même," to Derrida. Hegel gets somewhat lost in this chapter, as Norman opts for reading what Derrida writes about Mallarmé rather than comparing them against what he wrote about Hegel. But as in the previous chapter where Mallarmé is said to have opened up an "other space," Norman argues that Mallarmé opens up an "other temporality" (131), a temporality, or perhaps history, that is made possible by Derrida's "closure" of metaphysics and the opening of Mallarmé (111). This argument sees Norman construct an exacting link between Speech and Phenomena, Of Grammatology, and Dissemina-

tion (as well as a Derridean reading of *Un Coup de Dés*) that no doubt clarifies Mallarmé's place within this early moment in Derrida's thinking.

At the end of his study, Norman writes: "After the end, where have we got to?" I must admit that I found myself asking a similar question after finishing this book. After all the solid, attentive readings Norman provides, where do we have to go? Throughout this review I have been suggesting that revisiting Norman's treatment of Mallarmé's relationship to Hegel complicates some of the assumptions of the argument. When I began, I recounted how the history of Mallarmé scholarship gives its readers a choice between philology or philosophy. There is a great deal in this book that overcomes and works through the aporias of deciding on one or the other, but in not deciding Norman occasionally runs the risk of sacrificing both philosophy and philology for the sake of his argument. In saying this, there is no doubt that, specifically regarding his readings of the poems and in his reconstruction of the philosophical arguments, there is an exciting amount of material that should be turned to in any future English language analysis of Mallarmé's poetry. However, the overarching thesis of Mallarmé's relationship to Hegel does not contribute to the debate as much as the book promises. While this does not detract from Norman's argument, it is worth thinking about why it is important to work through the philosophical and philological presuppositions guiding any analysis—of Mallarmé or not. I suspect the reason for doing so may have something to do with "Hyperbole!" a Mallarméan term sometimes associated with Cartesian scepticism, which reminds the reader that poetry is always thinking, always doubting, even when we are not. In other words, *Mallarmé's Sunsets* reminds us that regardless of whether Hegel held any influence over Mallarmé's thinking, returning to the poetry itself can help us better understand "our own epoch," our contemporary situation, in ways not yet fully disclosed. And it is here, I think, that Mallarmé's work begins at the end of time.

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NOTES

¹ See Jacques Rancière, *Mallarmé: The Politics of the Siren* trans Steven Corcoran (London/New York: Continuum, 2011).

² Bertrand Marchal, *La Religion de Mallarmé: Poésie, Mythologie et Religion* (Paris: José Corti, 1998). For more philological approaches see: André Stangnec, *Mallarmé et l'éthique de la poésie* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1992); Pascal Du-

rand, *Mallarmé: Du Sens des Formes au Sens des Formalités* (Paris: Seuil: 2008); and Thierry Roger, *L'Archive du Coup de Dés* (Paris: éditions classiques garnier: 2010)

³ Thierry Roger, “Comrade Mallarme” *mallarmisme, anachronism presentism, Acta fabula*, 15, no. 6 (2014). *Réinvestissement, rumeur & réécriture*, Juin-juillet. “... difficult to not qualify as philological” [my trans.]

⁴ Julia Kristeva, “Towards a Semiology of Paragrams,” in *The Tel Quel Reader* eds. Patrick French and Roland-François Lack (New York: Routledge, 1998), 25–49.

⁵ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* trans. Oliver Feltham (London/New York: Continuum, 2005), 191–198.

⁶ For a summary of the relationship between these two thinkers see Alain Badiou’s 1986 lecture on Mallarmé: Alain Badiou “Is it Exact that All Thought Emits a Throw of Dice?” trans. Robert Boncardo & Christian R. Gelder [forthcoming, *Hyperion*].

⁷ Mallarmé writes, “Nous n’avons pas compris Descartes, l’étranger s’est comparé de lui: mais il a suscité les mathématiciens français (We have not understood Descartes, those abroad have taken hold of him: but he arouses the French mathematicians)” [my trans]. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 872.

⁸ Mallarmé, Stéphane, *Oeuvres Complètes I* eds. Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 1362.

⁹ Janine D. Langan, *Hegel and Mallarmé* (Maryland: University Press of America, 1986).

¹⁰ Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* (London/New York: Continuum, 2009), 561.

¹¹ Heather Williams, *Mallarmé’s Ideas in Language* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004).

¹² Marchal, *La Religion de Mallarmé*, 58.

¹³ Quentin Meillassoux, “The Materialist Divinization of the Hypothesis,” *Collapse*, 8 (December 15, 2014), 837.

¹⁴ Quoted in Marchal, *La Religion de Mallarmé*, 59. “Not have a philosophical head” [my trans].