

# Stéphane Mallarmé

1842–1898

“It will be said, I suppose, that I am attempting to flabbergast the mob with a lofty statement. That is true.” Mallarmé’s remark, tinged with irony, is also replete with scorn. He has been accused of preciosity, aristocratic snobbism, and obscurantism. There is something as elusive about his critical prose as about his poetry. Perhaps it is because he sees the poet as constantly testing the possibilities, indeed the limits, of language. He hates the newspaper; he loves the book. For him, poetry lies in “the *contemplation* of things, in the image emanating from the reveries which things arouse in us.” Poetry does not *name*, it *suggests*. From the common point of view, therefore, that of the “mob,” poetry is obscure, enigmatic.

Mallarmé’s hauteur dramatizes his break with both Romantic expressivism and traditional pragmatic didacticism. Nor is literature, for him, imitation. Reality is in the poem itself. It may “exist on a piece of paper”: “All earthly existence must ultimately be contained in a book.” The poet, then, is not expressing himself, teaching the reader, or copying nature, but rather searching out and capturing an elusive reality in words, perhaps even *making* reality in words. Though Mallarmé sometimes suggests that the poet is trying, though always failing, to capture Platonic essences, he also seems to say that the poem organizes reality for us by means of the “obscurity” of its own nondiscursive verbal structures. This view represents the aspect of French symbolist theory that led to the idea of the objective nature of the poem in much twentieth-century criticism.

Mallarmé’s complete works are available in French in the edition by Henri Mondier and Jean-Aubry (1945). For an English translation of Mallarmé’s critical writing see *Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays, and Letters*, translated by Bradford Cook (1956). Studies of Mallarmé include Hayse Cooperman, *The Aesthetics of Mallarmé* (1933); Guy Delfal, *L’Esthétique de Stéphane Mallarmé* (1951), especially pages 161–84; Wallace Fowlie, *Mallarmé* (1953); Warren Ramsey, “A View of Mallarmé’s Poetics,” *Romantic Review*, XLVI (1955), 178–91; Guy Michaud, *Mallarmé* (tr. 1965); Thomas A. Williams, *Mallarmé and the Language of Symbolism* (1970); Paula Gilbert Lewis, *The Aesthetic of Mallarmé in Relation to His Public* (1976); Judy Karvis, *The Prose of Mallarmé* (1976); Malcolm Bowie, *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult* (1978); and Louis Wirth Marvick, *Mallarmé and the Sublime* (1986).

## The Evolution of Literature

(STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ One of the most generally beloved men of letters, along with Catulle Mendès. Average height; pointed beard turning gray; large straight nose; long, pointed ears like those of a satyr; wide-open eyes of extraordinary brilliance; an unusual expression of finesse tempered by the appearance of great goodness. Whenever he speaks, his words are accompanied by rhythmical gestures full of grace, precision, and eloquence. His voice drags a little at the end of his words and becomes gradually gentler. There is great charm in this man. You feel that there is an incorruptible pride in him which lifts him above all things; the pride of a god or seer. And once this is felt, inwardly and instinctively you bow down before him.)

"We are now witnessing a spectacle," he told me, "which is truly extraordinary, unique in the history of poetry: every poet is going off by himself with his own flute, and playing the songs he pleases. For the first time since the beginning of poetry, poets have stopped singing bass. Hitherto, as you know, if they wished to be accompanied, they had to be content with the great organ of official meter. Well, it was simply overplayed and they got tired of it! I am sure that when the great Hugo died, he was convinced that he had buried all poetry for the next century; and yet Paul Verlaine had already written *Sagesse*. We can forgive Hugo his illusion, when we remember all the miracles he produced; he was simply forgetting the eternal instinct, the perpetual and unavoidable growth of the lyrical. But the essential and undeniable point is this: that in a society without stability, without unity, there can be no stable or definitive art. From that incompletely organized society—which also explains the restlessness of certain minds—the unexplained need for individuality was born. The literary manifestations of today are a direct reflection of that need.

"A more immediate explanation of recent innovations is this: it has finally been understood that the old verse form was *not* the absolute, unique, and changeless form, but just one way to be sure of writing good verse. We say to children: 'Don't steal, and you'll be honest.' That is true, but it is not everything. Is it possible to write poetry without reference to time-honored precepts? Poets have answered this question affirmatively, and I believe that they are right. Poetry is ev-

erywhere in language, so long as there is rhythm—everywhere except on posters and the back page of the newspaper. In the genre we call *prose*, there are verses—sometimes admirable verses—of all sorts of rhythms. Actually, there is no such thing as prose: there is the alphabet, and then there are verses which are more or less closely knit, more or less diffuse. So long as there is stylistic effort, there is versification.

"I said a minute ago that today's poetry is, in the main, the result of the poets' boredom with official verse. Even the partisans of official verse share this boredom. Isn't it rather abnormal that, when we open a book of poetry, we should be sure of finding uniform and conventional rhythms throughout? And yet, all the while, the writer hopes to arouse our interest in the essential variety of human feelings! Where is the inspiration in all this! Where is the unforeseen! How tiresome it all is! Official verse must be used only in crisis moments of the soul. Modern poets have understood this. With a fine sense of the delicate and the sparing, they hover around the official Alexandrine, approach it with unusual timidity, almost with fear; and rather than use it as their principle or as a point of departure, they suddenly conjure it up, and with it they crown their poem or period!

"Moreover, the same transformation has taken place in music. Instead of the very clearly delineated melodies of the past, we have an infinity of broken melodies which enrich the poetic texture, and we no longer have the impression of strong cadence."

"Is that how the scission was effected?" I asked.

"Why, yes. The Parnassians<sup>1</sup> were fond of a very formal prosody which has its own beauty, and they failed to realize that the modern poets were simply complementing their work; this also had the advantage of creating a sort of interregnum for the noble Alexandrine which had been at bay, crying for mercy. What we have to realize is that the most recent poetical writings do not tend to suppress the official verse; they tend rather to let a little more air into the poem, to create a kind of fluidity or mobility between long-winded verses, which has heretofore been lacking. In an orchestra, for example, you may suddenly hear very fine bursts of sound from the basses; but you know perfectly well that if there were nothing but that, you would soon have enough of it. Young poets space these bursts so that they will occur only when a total effect is to be produced. In this way, the Alexandrine (which was invented by nobody, but rather poured forth spontaneously from the instrument of language) will get out of its present finicky, sedentary state, and hence-

forth it will be freer, more will lie exclusively in its times. And future voluminous majestic first verse which motifs originating in the

"So there has been been unaware that their poems than mutually destructive have, in effect, been perfect have sacrificed their poems; other hand, have anchored modes, as if there were; doing is reducing here as Asian structures; and it seems are complementary.

"Despite all this, I the miraculous knowledge; distinct for rhythmic pauses possess, the Alexandrine produce all possible shapes *Forgeron*, for example, seem interminable, yet concise.

"But, after all, it was and traditional poetic is overworked."

"So much for form,

"As far as content is that the young poets are poetical ideal. The latter philosophers and orators rectly, whereas I think t sively. Poetry lies in th image emanating from t us. The Parnassians take exhibit it; in so doing, th give our minds that exqui that we are creating some to destroy poetic enjoyment. The ideal is to *su* of this mystery which co gradually evoked in ord choose an object and fro of a series of decodings."

"Now," I said, "w was going to make: obs

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THE EVOLUTION OF LITERATURE. *The Evolution of Literature* is a report of an interview with Mallarmé by Jules Huret. It appeared in *Echo de Paris* in 1891. The text is from *Mallarmé: Selected Prose, Poems, Essays, and Letters*, translated by Bradford Cook. Copyright © 1956 by The Johns Hopkins Press. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

<sup>1</sup>Post-Romantic, pre-symbolist poets.

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forth it will be freer, more sudden, more refreshed. Its value will lie exclusively in its use during the soul's most serious times. And future volumes of poetry will be traversed by a majestic first verse which scatters in its wake an infinity of motifs originating in the individual's sensibility.

"So there has been scission because both sides have been unaware that their points of view are reconcilable rather than mutually destructive. On the one hand, the Parnassians have, in effect, been perfectly obedient servants of verse, and have sacrificed their personalities. The young poets, on the other hand, have anchored their instinct in a variety of modes, as if there were no precedent; actually, all they are doing is reducing here and there the stiffness of the Parnassian structures; and it seems to me that the two points of view are complementary.

"Despite all this, I still believe, personally, that, with the miraculous knowledge of verse and with the superb instinct for rhythmic pause which such masters as Banville possess, the Alexandrine can be infinitely varied and can reproduce all possible shades of human passion. Banville's *Forgeron*, for example, has a number of Alexandrines which seem interminable, yet others which are unbelievably concise.

"But, after all, it was a good thing to give our perfect and traditional poetic instrument a little rest. It had been overworked."

"So much for form," I said. "What about content?"

"As far as content is concerned," he answered, "I feel that the young poets are nearer than the Parnassians to the poetical ideal. The latter still treat their subjects as the old philosophers and orators did: that is, they present things directly, whereas I think that they should be presented allusively. Poetry lies in the *contemplation* of things, in the image emanating from the reveries which things arouse in us. The Parnassians take something in its entirety and simply exhibit it; in so doing, they fall short of mystery; they fail to give our minds that exquisite joy which consists of believing that we are creating something. To *name* an object is largely to destroy poetic enjoyment, which comes from gradual divination. The ideal is to *suggest* the object. It is the perfect use of this mystery which constitutes symbol. An object must be gradually evoked in order to show a state of soul; or else, choose an object and from it elicit a state of soul by means of a series of decodings."

"Now," I said, "we are coming to the big objection I was going to make: obscurity!"

"Yes, it is a dangerous thing," he replied, "regardless of whether it results from the reader's inadequacy or from the poet's. But if you avoid the work it involves, you are cheating. If a person of mediocre intelligence and insuffi-

cient literary experience happens to open an obscure book and insists on enjoying it, something is wrong; there has simply been a misunderstanding. There must always be enigma in poetry. The purpose of literature—the *only* purpose—is to *evoke* things."

"Was it you, sir," I asked, "who created the new movement in poetry?"

"I detest 'schools,'" he replied, "and anything resembling schools. The professorial attitude toward literature is repugnant to me. Literature is entirely an individual matter. As far as I am concerned, a poet today, in the midst of this society which refuses to let him live, is a man who seeks out solitude in order to sculpture his own tomb. The reason I appear to be the leader of a school, is, first of all, that I have always taken an interest in the ideas of young poets; and second, because of my sincerity in recognizing the originality of what the latest writers have contributed. In reality, I am a hermit. I believe that poetry should be for the supreme pomp and circumstance of a constituted society in which glory should have its place. Most people seem to have forgotten glory. In our time the poet can only go on strike against society, and turn his back on all the contaminated ways and means that are offered him. For anything that is offered him is necessarily inferior to his ideal and to his secret labor."

I then asked Mallarmé what Verlaine's position would be in the history of this poetic movement.

"He was the first to react against the impeccable and impassible Parnassian attitudes. His fluid verse and certain of his intentional dissonances were already evident in *Sagesse*. Later on, around 1875, all the Parnassians (except for a few friends such as Mendès, Dierx, and Cladel) shrieked with horror at my *Afternoon of a Faun*, and, all together, they threw it out. For I was trying, actually, to make a sort of running pianistic commentary upon the fully preserved and dignified Alexandrine—a sort of musical accompaniment which the poet composes himself, so that the official verse will appear only on the really important occasions. But the father, the real father of all the young poets is Verlaine, the magnificent Verlaine. The attitude of the man is just as noble as the attitude of the writer. For it is the only possible attitude at a time when all poets are outlaws. Think of absorbing all the grief that he has—and with his pride and his tremendous pluck!"

"What do you think of the end of naturalism?"

"Up to now, writers have entertained the childish belief that if they could just choose a certain number of precious stones, for example, and put the names on paper, they would be *making* precious stones. Now, really! That is impossible, no matter how well it is done. Poetry consists of *creation*: we must delve into our souls for states and gleams of such

perfect purity, so perfectly sung and illuminated, that they will truly be the jewels of man. When we do that, we have symbol, we have creation, and the word *poetry* has its full meaning. This, in short, is the only possible human creation. And if, in fact, the precious stones we wear do *not* show a state of soul, they are improperly worn. Take women, for example, external thieves that they are. . . .

"And just think," he added, chuckling; "the marvelous thing about jewelry stores is that, occasionally, we learn from the chief of police that what the woman wore improperly was something she didn't know the secret meaning of—something, therefore, which didn't belong to her.

"But to get back to naturalism. It seems to me that when we use that word, we mean the work of Émile Zola; and when he has finished his work, the name will disappear. I have great admiration for Zola. Actually, what he does is not so much literature as evocative art. He depends as little as possible on literary means. True, he uses words, but that is all. Everything else is based on his marvelous sense of organization and has immediate repercussions in the mind of the mob. His talent is truly powerful; consider his tremendous feeling for life, his mob movements, that texture in Nana's skin that every one of us has touched; and he paints it all with prodigious colors. It really is an admirably organized piece of work. But literature is more of an intellectual thing than that. Things already exist, we don't have to create them; we simply have to see their relationships. It is the threads of those relationships which go to make up poetry and music."

"Are you acquainted with the psychological novel?"

"Slightly. After the great works of Flaubert, the Goncourt brothers, and Zola—which are, in a sense, poems—novelists seem to be going back to the old eighteenth-century French taste which was much more humble and modest, consisting, as it did, not of a pictorial presentation of the outer form of things but rather of a dissection of the motives of the human soul. But there is the same difference between that and poetry as there is between a corset and a beautiful throat."

Before leaving, I asked Mallarmé for the names of those who seemed to him to represent the modern evolution in poetry.

"The young poets," he answered, "who seem to me to have done truly masterful work—that is, original work, completely divorced from the past—are: Morice, Moréas (a delightful poet), and, above all, the man who has given poetry the biggest boost, Henri de Régnier. Like de Vigny, he lives apart, at some distance from here, in retreat and silence. I greatly respect and admire him. His latest work, *Poèmes anciens et romanesques*, is a pure masterpiece.

"So you can see," he said, shaking hands with me; "that, in the final analysis, all earthly existence must ultimately be contained in a book."

## The Book: A Spiritual Instrument

I am the author of a statement to which there have been varying reactions, including praise and blame, and which I shall make again in the present article. Briefly, it is this: all earthly existence must ultimately be contained in a book.<sup>1</sup>

It terrifies me to think of the qualities (among them genius, certainly) which the author of such a work will have to possess. I am one of the unpossessed. We will let that pass and imagine that it bears no author's name. What, then, will the work itself be? I answer: a hymn, all harmony and joy; an immaculate grouping of universal relationships come together for some miraculous and glittering occasion. Man's duty is to observe with the eyes of the divinity; for if his connection with that divinity is to be made clear, it can be expressed only by the pages of the open book in front of him.

Seated on a garden bench where a recent book is lying, I like to watch a passing gust half open it and breathe life into many of its outer aspects, which are so obvious that no one in the history of literature has ever thought about them. I shall have the chance to do so now, if I can get rid of my overpowering newspaper. I push it aside; it flies about and lands near some roses as if to hush their proud and feverish whispering; finally, it unfolds around them. I will leave it there along with the silent whispering of the flowers. I formally propose now to examine the differences between this rag and the book, which is supreme. The newspaper is the sea; literature flows into it at will.

Now then—

The foldings of a book, in comparison with the large-sized, open newspaper, have an almost religious significance. But an even greater significance lies in their thickness when they are piled together; for then they form a tomb in miniature for our souls.

Every discovery made by printers has hitherto been absorbed in the most elementary fashion by the newspaper, and

THE BOOK: A SPIRITUAL INSTRUMENT. Mallarmé's *The Book: A Spiritual Instrument* was first published in *La Revue Blanche* in 1895. The text is from *Mallarmé: Selected Prose, Poems, Essays, and Letters*, translated by Bradford Cook. Copyright © 1956 by The Johns Hopkins Press. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

<sup>1</sup>See the last sentence of *The Evolution of Literature*, above.

can be summed up in the simply a plain sheet of paper printed in the most unrefined system (which preceded the notable advantages for the versers and proof sheets in other words, a "daily paper gradual discovery of the reader a sort of popular fairyland leader, which is the most ordinary way through a thousand of disinterestedness. But eventually overthrows the advertiser and, as if it were itself the far back beyond intervention leaves it there in a mass of A noble spectacle, without the newspaper possibly nevertheless (even though at the bottom the *feuilleton*<sup>2</sup>—it resembles generally regulating the conduct; or practically nothing doing and carelessly continuing even the book's format is an extraordinary addition of foliage to fly forth again) which is the reason for the secret content the priceless silence living following in its wake, to deluged totally delivered?

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The newspaper with its proper use of printing—though. Of course, the obvious anatomy body knows, lies in its material the advantage is secondary of the word: words led by twenty-four letters of the alphabet they will finally consecrate up in their endless variations the form of the principle.

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<sup>2</sup>The part of a page of a journal or voted to literary articles, light fiction

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can be summed up in the word: *press*. The result has been simply a plain sheet of paper upon which a flow of words is printed in the most unrefined manner. The immediacy of this system (which preceded the production of books) has undeni-able advantages for the writer; with its endless line of post-ers and proof sheets it makes for improvisation. We have, in other words, a "daily paper." But who, then, can make the gradual discovery of the meaning of this format, or even of a sort of popular fairyland charm about it? Then again, the leader, which is the most important part, makes its great free way through a thousand obstacles and finally reaches a state of disinterestedness. But what is the result of this victory? It overthrows the advertisement (which is original slavery) and, as if it were itself the powered printing press, drives it far back beyond intervening articles onto the fourth page and leaves it there in a mass of incoherent and inarticulate cries. A noble spectacle, without question. After this, what else can the newspaper possibly need in order to overthrow the *book* (even though at the bottom—or rather at its foundation, i.e., the *feuilleton*?—it resembles the other in its pagination, thus generally regulating the columns)? It will need nothing, in fact; or practically nothing, if the book delays as it is now doing and carelessly continues to be a drain for it. And since even the book's format is useless, of what avail is that ex-traordinary addition of foldings (like wings in repose, ready to fly forth again) which constitute its rhythm and the chief reason for the secret contained in its pages? Of what avail the priceless silence living there, and evocative symbols fol-lowing in its wake, to delight the mind which literature has totally delivered?

Yes, were it not for folding of the paper and the depths thereby established, that darkness scattered about in the forms of black characters could not rise and issue forth in gleams of mystery from the page to which we are about to turn.

The newspaper with its full sheet on display makes im-proper use of printing—that is, it makes good packing paper. Of course, the obvious and vulgar advantage of it, as every-body knows, lies in its mass production and circulation. But the advantage is secondary to a miracle, in the highest sense of the word: words led back to their origin, which is the twenty-four letters of the alphabet, so gifted with infinity that they will finally consecrate language. Everything is caught up in their endless variations and then rises out of them in the form of the principle. Thus typography becomes a rite.

The book, which is a total expansion of the letter, must find its mobility in the letter; and in its spaciousness must

<sup>1</sup>The part of a page of a journal or newspaper, usually across the bottom, de-voted to literary articles, light fiction, and so forth.

establish some nameless system of relationships which will embrace and strengthen fiction.

There is nothing fortuitous in all this, even though ideas may seem to be slaves of chance. The system guarantees them. Therefore we must pay no attention to the book indus-try with its materialistic considerations. The making of a book, with respect to its flowering totality, begins with the first sentence. From time immemorial the poet has know-ingly placed his verse in the sonnet which he writes upon our minds or upon pure space. We, in turn, will misunderstand the true meaning of this book and the miracle inherent in its structure, if we do not knowingly imagine that a given motif has been properly placed at a certain height on the page, ac-cording to its own or to the book's distribution of light. Let us have no more of those successive, incessant, back and forth motions of our eyes, traveling from one line to the next and beginning all over again. Otherwise we will miss that ecstasy in which we become immortal for a brief hour, free of all reality, and raise our obsessions to the level of creation. If we do not actively create in this way (as we would music on the keyboard, turning the pages of a score), we would do better to shut our eyes and dream. I am not asking for any servile obedience. For, on the contrary, each of us has within him that lightninglike initiative which can link the scattered notes together.

Thus, in reading, a lonely, quiet concert is given for our minds, and they in turn, less noisily, reach its meaning. All our mental faculties will be present in this symphonic exal-tation; but, unlike music, they will be rarefied, for they par-take of thought. Poetry, accompanied by the idea, is perfect music, and cannot be anything else.

Now, returning to the case at hand and to the question of books which are read in the ordinary way, I raise my knife in protest, like the cook chopping off chickens' heads.

The virginal foldings of the book are unfortunately ex-posed to the kind of sacrifice which caused the crimson-edged tomes of ancient times to bleed. I mean that they invite the paper-knife, which stakes our claims to possession of the book. Yet our consciousness alone gives us a far more inti-mate possession than such a barbarian symbol; for it joins the book now here, now there, varies its melodies, guesses its riddles, and even recreates it unaided. The folds will have a mark which remains intact and invites us to open or close the pages according to the author's desires. There can be only blindness and discourtesy in so murderous and self-de-structive an attempt to destroy the fragile, inviolable book. The newspaper holds the advantage here, for it is not ex-posed to such treatment. But it is nonetheless an annoying influence; for upon the book—upon the divine and intricate organism required by literature—it inflicts the monotonous-

ness of its eternally unbearable columns, which are merely strung down the pages by hundreds.

"But," I hear someone say, "how can this situation be changed?" I shall take space here to answer this question in detail; for the work of art—which is unique or should be—must provide illustrations. A tremendous burst of greatness, of thought, or of emotion, contained in a sentence printed in large type, with one gradually descending line to a page, should keep the reader breathless throughout the book and summon forth his powers of excitement. Around this would be smaller groups of secondary importance, commenting on the main sentence or derived from it, like a scattering of ornaments.

It will be said, I suppose, that I am attempting to flabbergast the mob with a lofty statement. That is true. But several of my close friends must have noticed that there are connections between this and their own instinct for arranging their writings in an unusual and ornamental fashion, halfway between verse and prose. Shall I be explicit? All right, then, just to maintain that reputation for clarity so avidly pursued by our make-everything-clear-and-easy era. Let us suppose that a given writer reveals one of his ideas in theoretical fashion and, quite possibly, in useless fashion, since he is ahead of his time. He well knows that such revelations, touching as they do on literature, should be brought out in the open. And yet he hesitates to divulge too brusquely things which do not exist; and thus, in his modesty, and to the mob's amazement, he veils them over.

It is because of those daydreams we have before we resume our reading in a garden that our attention strays to a white butterfly flitting here and there, then disappearing; but also leaving behind it the same slight touch of sharpness and frankness with which I have presented these ideas, and flying incessantly back and forth before the people, who stand amazed.

## Mystery in Literature

Any affirmations I make here, no matter how justified, are naturally going to be cannon fodder for the jokers in the mob.

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MYSTERY IN LITERATURE. Mallarmé's *Mystery in Literature* was first published in *La Revue Blanche* in 1896. The text is from *Mallarmé: Selected Prose, Poems, Essays, and Letters*, translated by Bradford Cook. Copyright © 1956 by The Johns Hopkins Press. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Every work of art, apart from its inner treasure, should provide some sort of outward—or even indifferent—meaning through its words. A certain deference should be shown the people: for, after all, they *are* lending out their language, and the work is going to turn it to some unexpected account. It is just as well to keep idlers away; they are glad to see that the work does not apply to them—such, at least, is their first impression.

Each to his own way and no hard feelings.

And yet somehow there is a disquieting gleam from the depths of the work, hardly distinguishable from its outward show. The clever idlers become suspicious and tell us to stop; for in their considered opinion the meaning of the work is unintelligible.

Heaven help the poor slandered poet who happens to be involved! He will be crushed beneath an immense and rather silly joke. It has always been so; and now, more than ever before, the unanimous and excessive pestilence rages.

There is certainly something occult in men's hearts; I am convinced that there is something abstruse, something closed and hidden in the mob. For whenever she sniffs out the idea that obscurity may be a *reality*; that it may exist, for example, on a piece of paper, in a piece of writing (heaven forbid, of course, that it should exist within itself!), she rises up in a hurricane fury and, with thunders and lightnings, blames the darkness on anything but herself.

Her credulousness finds satisfaction in the corresponding agitations of her fellow citizens; she jumps to extremes. So that whatever that dark fiend from hell (i.e., the poet) may write henceforth, she will shake her head (quite unaware that she herself is the enigma) and, with a whisk of her skirt, assert: "I don't get it!"—even if the poor poet has simply stated that he is blowing his nose.

Obedient as he is to his inborn rhythmical sense, the poet naturally finds a lack of proportion between the storm's cause and effect.

Those fellow citizens, it seems to him, are wrong; following their avowed intention, they plunge their pens within a nightless well and lay only the useless, minimum foundation of intelligibility. Granted that the poet does this too—but that is not all he does. It is hardly discreet of them to rouse the mob to such a fury—the mob, remember! is the vessel of genius—and to pour forth pell-mell the monumental stupidity of man.

And all this for a matter of no importance.

They play the game without rules and for useless stakes; they force our lady and patron saint<sup>1</sup> to reveal her

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<sup>1</sup>The Muse.

dehiscence, her lacuna, dreams which constitute

I know for a fact that stage and parade around their arguments on obscure and that if they "don't get refuse to discriminate from

The scandal is typical

It has to do with an importance—

Their undertaking—

Which consists of reward aspects of the world are struggling beneath that situation it is clearly spread banality abroad. W less mist that floats about thought. All that is vulgar stamp of immediacy. And to "put them in their place" of these bores is such a labyrinth lit by flowers road lined with headache man's interminable blind greenery bending above and bristling broken glass

Even the advertisers

Now, let us imagine when intermittent, does not

Music came along at

For at some point in through the musical veils of their unceasing impacted or dissolved through

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Yes, I know; mystery; the written word also lays

Yes, the supreme are are born of fleeting arabesque

dehiscence, her lacuna, her misunderstanding of special dreams which constitute the common measure of all things.

I know for a fact that they are the ones who rush on stage and parade around in humiliating fashion. For to base their arguments on obscurity, to say that they "don't get it" and that if they "don't get it" nobody will, means that they refuse to discriminate from the very outset.

The scandal is typical, and it continues to be irrelevant.

It has to do with an undertaking which is of no literary importance—

*Their undertaking—*

Which consists of revealing only the monotonous outward aspects of the world, as newsboys do. Admittedly, they are struggling beneath the pressure of the moment; but in that situation it is clearly improper to write at all, save to spread banality abroad. What they fail to spread is the priceless mist that floats about the secret abyss of every human thought. All that is vulgar which receives no more than the stamp of immediacy. And although I hesitate to use an image to "put them in their place" personally, nevertheless the crudity of these bores is such that they give us, I would say, not a labyrinth lit by flowers and beckoning to our leisure, but a road lined with headaches and vertical plaster images of man's interminable blindness, with no hidden fountains or greenery bending above them, but only green bottle bottoms and bristling broken glass.

Even the advertisers shy away from it all.

Now, let us imagine a steady brilliance which, even when intermittent, does not seem to be merely momentary.

Music came along and put an end to that kind of work.

For at some point in the composition, a motif breaks through the musical veils of our imagination and frees itself of their unceasing immobility, which is alternately compacted or dissolved through conscious art.

Such is the ordinary way.

Or else the composition can begin with a triumphant burst of sound too sudden to last; then the surprise dies away in a group of hesitating notes which its echo has liberated.

Then again, there is the reverse order: the hesitations are folded darkly together and rumor forth a particular obsession of the mind; they are crowded and massed together; and then out of them arises an ultimate and essential brilliance.

Such is the twin, intellectual fashion found particularly in symphonies which, in turn, found it in the repertory of nature and of the sky.

Yes, I know; mystery is said to be music's domain. But the written word also lays claim to it.

Yes, the supreme and heart-rending musical moments are born of fleeting arabesques, and their bursting is more

true, more central, more brilliant than any reasoning. When we consider their matchless efficacy, we feel unable to translate them into any language save that of the listener's ideas. Their contact with our spirit is direct and fitting; we feel somehow that words would be discordant and unwelcome.

And yet the written word, which is the ideal in noiseless flight from earth, regains its rights as it stands beneath that fall of virginal sounds. Both music and lyric call for the previous discarding of the spoken word, of course, in order to prevent mere talking.

In a single surge of opposites, the one descends, the other flies away, and yet the same silken veils follow in the wake of both.

Let me pause now and quietly add this parenthesis. It has always been my purpose that stylistic coloring should be neutral: neither should it be darkened in a dive nor brightly shimmer or splash; nor subject to the alternative, which is rules.

What sure guide is there to intelligibility in the midst of these contrasts? What guarantee?

Syntax.

I do not mean simply such spontaneous twists as are inherent in the facility of conversation, even though they are essential to oratory. The French language in particular is elegant when it appears in negligee. As history will show, this is one of the original French characteristics, one of the nation's truly exquisite natures. But our literature goes beyond this "fashion"; it does not consist merely of correspondence and memoirs. It has its quick high flutterings as well; and when these are on the wing, the writer can observe how extraordinarily well the limpid structure of the language receives the primitive thunderbolts of logic. The sentence may seem to stammer at first, hold back in a knot of incidental bits; then it multiplies, takes on order, and rises up in a noble harmony, wavering all the while in its knowing transpositions.

For those who may be surprised and angered by the broad application of my words, I shall describe the revels of this language.

Words rise up unaided and in ecstasy; many a facet reveals its infinite rarity and is precious to our mind. For our mind is the center of this hesitancy and oscillation; it sees the words not in their usual order, but in projection (like the walls of a cave), so long as that mobility which is their principle lives on, that part of speech which is not spoken. Then quickly, before they die away, they all exchange their brilliancies from afar; or they may touch, and steal a furtive glance.

The argument that a certain indispensable and pedestrian clarity may be lacking here and there is a matter for

grammarians. And even if the poor reader were to misread these words continually, his understanding of the slush which makes up the current literary fashion is not much better, and so there is hardly any need to distinguish him from the truly malicious. For he too speaks angrily and insultingly of obscurity. Yet why does he not consider literature's common stock and speak angrily and insultingly of *its* incoherence, its drivel, its plagiarism (not to mention any other deterrent or special accusation); or, again, he might well speak of its platitudes, with particular reference to those who are the first to cry "obscurity!" in order to avoid taxing the public's brains.

To answer these threats, I shall simply observe that several of my contemporaries don't know how to read.

The newspaper, yes; they can read that; it has the advantage of not interrupting the day's routine.

Reading—

Is an exercise—

We must bend our independent minds, page by page, to the blank space which begins each one; we must forget the title, for it is too resounding. Then, in the tiniest and most scattered stopping points upon the page, when the lines of chance have been vanquished word by word, the blanks un-  
failingly return; before, they were gratuitous; now they are essential; and now at last it is clear that nothing lies beyond; now silence is genuine and just.

It is a virgin space, face to face with the lucidity of our matching vision, divided of itself, in solitude, into halves of whiteness; and each of these is lawful bride at the wedding of the idea.

Thus the invisible air, or song, beneath the words leads our divining eye from word to music; and thus, like a motif, invisibly it inscribes its fleuron and pendant there.

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WHAT IS ART? Tolstoy's *What Is*  
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