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ENCLAVE REVIEW

Girl born without a mother: the posthumous Mallarmé Peter Manson

The great French Symbolist poet and theorist Stéphane Mallarmé died, of a choking fit, on the 9th September 1898. A few hours earlier, fearing the worst, he had pencilled a brief note to his wife and daughter, headed "Recommendation regarding my papers". Everything unpublished was to be burned unread. "Tell them that no-one could make any of it out, which is true: and you, my poor dear ones, prostrated by grief, the only beings in the world capable of respecting on this point the whole life of a sincere artist, believe me, it would have been very beautiful". He hid the note inside a pad of blotting paper, where it wasn't found until two weeks after his death. Perhaps he had second thoughts; perhaps he just thought posterity deserved a fair copy. In any case not everything was burned. Unknown, and essential, writings continued to emerge from that "heap of notes, half a century's worth" well into the 1960s. There is the extraordinarily moving set of notes towards a poem that Mallarmé could never quite bring himself to write in tribute to his son Anatole, who died at the age of eight. There are the cryptic — and now highly influential — notes written in view of "Le

Livre", that never-written Book of which every other book is but a foreshadowing, a Book which would be constructed from the permutation of its constituent parts in a series of performances before invited guests, each performance a kind of secular Mass where Mallarmé, or his representative, would demonstrate the internal consistency of the Book in each of its permutations.

Many of the posthumously-published works reflect a simple need to make a little extra money (Mallarmé was a poorly-paid teacher of English at secondary school, and had expensive tastes in furniture). Most poignant in its futility, perhaps, is the thousand-page maquette for an anthology of English poetry and prose called "Beautés de l'anglais", the contents of which were lifted, barely altered, from the "Cyclopaedia of English Literature" published by Chambers in 1876. Mallarmé covered his tracks by copying some of his texts out by hand, and clipping the others from whatever anthologies came to hand, *except Chambers Cyclopaedia*. An immense amount of mainly physical work, and essentially no thought, went into "Beautés de l'anglais": it was never published, though Mallarmé seems to have kept the thousand franc advance.

More intriguing, though again never published during Mallarmé's lifetime, was his course of English lessons, "Thèmes anglais". This was based on a list of a thousand English proverbs, and claimed to offer an idiomatic introduction to the language: "If one does not know these proverbs, these characteristic turns of phrase which contain the very soul of English, one might speak the language quite correctly, and nevertheless remain a foreigner". All of Mallarmé's proverbs seem to have been found in the index to Henry G. Bohn's 1855 "Hand-book of Proverbs". Bohn's book was in fact an enlarged reprint of John Ray's "A collection of English Proverbs", first published in 1670, and Mallarmé's sampling of English as she is spoke includes the following: "Between the hand and the lip the morsel may sleep. A man must plough with such an axe as he has. You have a handsome head of hair; pray, give me a tester. Undone, as a man would undo an oyster. If wishes were thrushes, beggars would eat birds. Knit my dog a pair of breeches, and my cat a cod-piece. She was a neat dame that washed the ass's face. Jack Sprat could teach his grandame." Several of Mallarmé's English proverbs turn out, for those who read beyond the index, to be examples of French proverbs quoted by Ray in English translation: the conceptual loops implied by this are dizzying, but Mallarmé probably didn't mean them to be there. He kept his 600 franc advance.

The biblical story of Salome and John the Baptist held a lifelong fascination for Mallarmé. Neither of the gospel accounts gives the girl's name, and Mallarmé preferred to follow an old tradition which called her by her mother's name, Herodias: "The

most beautiful page of my work will be the one which only contains this divine name Hérodiane. The little inspiration I have had, I owe to this name, and I believe that if my heroine had been called Salome, I would have invented this sombre word, red as an open pomegranate". Mallarmé began his "Hérodiane" in 1864, when he was 22 years old: it was conceived first as a tragedy, then as a poem, and finally abandoned in the years of deep existential crisis that left Mallarmé largely silent through the later 1860s. Only one fragment of the work was published during Mallarmé's lifetime, a dramatic scene of 134 lines which appeared in *Le Parnasse contemporain* in 1871. The scene is a dialogue between Hérodiane and her aged nurse, in which the nurse makes three advances towards the girl, offering a kiss, a bottle of perfume, and to set a fallen lock of hair back in place. Each advance is repelled, and Hérodiane delivers a long soliloquy in favour of her own diamond-like virginity, furiously rejecting the nurse's suggestion that she might one day marry. At the end, she asks the nurse to leave, and addresses her own lips:

O naked flower of my lips,
 You are lying!
 I await an unknown thing
 Or perhaps, not knowing the mystery and
 your cries,
 You emit the supreme, bruised sobbing
 Of a childhood sensing among daydreams
 Its cold gemstones break apart at last.

In the last few years of Mallarmé's life, he took up the Hérodiane project again, under the title "The Wedding of Hérodiane: a Mystery Play". These fragmentary and multiply-overwritten drafts are in Mallarmé's most irreducibly complex and ambiguous late (in fact posthumous) manner, but the most remarkable thing about them is that he seems to have meant the dramatic scene, written in the 1860s and quite different in style, to be inserted unchanged into their midst. The Hérodiane of the 1860s asks the nurse to leave; the Hérodiane of the 1890s complains, in the barely-sketched "Intermediate Scene" which follows, that she still hasn't left:

Who has by no means legitimately as is
 fitting
 (Dark empty secret still there on its feet)
 Vanished like a century-old plumage
 [] is becoming worn out
 Silently but remains fixed
 In this vain hesitation in taking leave
 While around its sachet of old heavy black
 silk
 Hovers, is formulated [] and falters
 The message [] about the features
 Of the fiancé [] I cannot well know.

On one level it's a startlingly lazy gesture of selfrecycling. On another it's one of the weirdest moments in all literature. It's as if the curtain had never gone down on Clov's failure to exit the stage

at the end of Beckett's "Endgame", leaving him standing there in plain sight for thirty years. The thing that won't leave the room is ultimately "Hérodiane" itself, the work that wouldn't allow itself to be abandoned. By refusing to paper-over the cracks that open up inside any voice which has had more than one occasion to speak, Mallarmé is both acknowledging how far he has come, and asserting a fundamental unity assembled from his fragmented, time-shifting selves. It may be as close as we'll get to knowing what "Le Livre", with its multiple demonstrations of unity-in-permutation, might have felt like.

There's an obvious pathos, though, in the figure of the nursemaid who never leaves the room. It's as if Mallarmé, whose mother died when he was five years old, can't quite bring himself to cling to the memory of a real mother, only an almost-mother. The very naming of Hérodiane, daughter of Hérodiane, seems to minimise the possibilities of motherhood in favour of something more like cloning. I think the truth is more direct, though no less moving. Mallarmé had been put out to nurse: his first recorded memory is of being with his grandmother shortly after his mother's death, and becoming aware that he wasn't feeling the grief people expected from him. In his embarrassment, he decided to throw himself down on the tiger-skin rug and tear at his own long hair. His first memory of grief was of his own staging of its simulacrum; sometimes a nurse is just a nurse.

Peter Manson is a contemporary Scottish poet. His books include *Between Cup and Lip* (Miami University Press, 2008), *For the Good of Liars* (Barque Press 2006) and *Adjunct: an Undigest* (Edinburgh Review 2005).