Translation, particularly that of poetry, is a notoriously knotty business, demanding as it does at once the negation and the preservation of the original. Fidelity is of little account, since the invocation of or commitment to fidelity merely begs the question as to what dimension of the poem one promises to be faithful. The German translator and translation theorist of the Romantic era, Friedrich Schleiermacher, offered three versions of translation: these range from the ‘conversations of the marketplace’ (those word-for-word translations familiar now to users of GoogleTranslate), through the attempt to recreate entirely in the target language the work of the original, to ‘bringing the reader to the original’ by incorporating into the translation the strangeness of the original language. All represent different notions of equivalence, each based on a specific function for translation or a different model of making and reception; each has its problems. That the marketplace version, concerned primarily with the transfer of useable information from one language to another, seems self-evidently inadequate as any kind of model for literary translation depends on at least two presuppositions about literature, both of which remain pertinent to any effort to translate Mallarmé. The first is that literature, poetry above all, is not concerned in its essence with communication of information or content, as a purely commercial translation must seek to be. The second is that literary modes of expression are intimately bound up with languages that are at once natural and national. The poetic element in language is inseparable from, if not the ‘essence’ or spirit of the language, then at least the texture that derives from its historical evolution and usage, its specific morphologies and syntax, its etymologies and sonorities. Hence, while Schleiermacher’s second version of translation would aim at recreating the poem entirely in a way that would harmonize it with the textures and histories of the target language, his third would estrange that target language by imposing upon it some of the values and textures of the original, potentially unleashing new possibilities in the former. That, at least, was what Walter Benjamin hoped for when he remarked of translation ‘that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own.’ For Benjamin, working still in the Romantic tradition instantiated by Schleiermacher, any possible kinship of languages, and thus the possibility of any translation, ‘rests in the intention underlying each language as a whole – an intention, however, which no single language can attain by itself but which is realized only by the totality of all their intentions supplementing each other: pure language.’ And it is Mallarmé whom Benjamin then cites on the disabling lack of the ‘supreme’ language in which the imperfection of the many natural languages would be cured by the one in which truth manifested immediately, ‘par une frappe unique’.

The supreme test of any translation theory that claims the possibility that translation might either creatively estrange the target language or at least ‘supplement’ it would surely be the translation of Mallarmé into English. Anyone who has attempted to
translate French poetry into English will be familiar with the suspect but nonetheless operative dictum that French is a far more abstract language than English. A language which invites the prospective cook to ‘suprimer les pédoncules des tomates’ rather than to remove their stems will be found hopelessly Latinate by the Anglo-Saxon ear. That the association of a Latinate diction with abstraction or with a conceptual vocabulary has a history specific to the English language and the peculiar ethnic and class formations that determined its evolution does not obviate the difficulty faced by the translator for whom—as Benjamin indicates—even words as simple as ‘bread’ and ‘paire’ establish utterly different networks of association and, of course, sound, despite sharing the same intended object. It is not, indeed, only a matter of the vocabulary: French, like other Romance languages, lends itself more easily to rhyme than does English, despite the extraordinary feats of Shelley or Tennyson in this regard. Above all, though French is by no means as thoroughly grammatically inflected as, say, German, it is subject to a much greater degree than the highly ‘analytical’ language English, to case, gender, and conjugation. Such syntactical constraints are also resources that enable poetic effects such as those which Mallarmé in particular was devoted to elaborating. As Paul Valéry, his most devoted disciple, recognized:

Anyone then who did not reject the complex texts of Mallarmé became insensibly involved in learning to read again. To wish to endow them with a sense that was not unworthy of their admirable form and of the trouble that such precious verbal figures had certainly cost led infallibly to associating the labour pursued by the spirit and its combinatory capacities with poetic delight. Consequently, Syntax, which is calculation, regained the rank of Muse.  

Valéry’s account of the young admirer’s learning to read Mallarmé accords with the latter’s poetic program to which Manson alludes in citing his ‘Crise de Vers’ in a luminous and generous ‘Afterword’. Mallarmé sought to shape a poetic ‘music’ in which relation displaces reference, just as the mere material sonorities of ‘brass, strings, wood’ give way to ‘the totality of relations’ that compose the actual symphony, or the poem.

Mallarmé in the same essay suggests a specific account of the musicality of his own verse, one which helps to explain what Alain Badiou has referred to as the insistent ‘obliquity’ (as opposed to hermeticism) of his poems:

All becomes suspension, fragmentary arrangement with alternation and face-to-faceness, converging in the total rhythm, that which would be the poem silenced, in its blank spaces.  

Suspense, delay, the suspension of reference or the spacing of subject and predicate through extended apposition or implied parenthesis that allow for multiple potential directions for meaning (les sens du sens) – all are characteristic of Mallarmé’s work and of the peculiarly elusive quality of his lyric works in particular. Embedded as these effects are in the possibilities allowed by French syntax, they pose the most intractable difficulties for the English translator. By the same token, the effort to approach this dimension of Mallarmé’s work can lead to the most estranging effects on the English language, to that aspect of French, or of this particular poetic work at least, that most fully tests and supplements the resources of English as a medium for poetry.

What Manson remarks of his decision neither to emulate the French alexandrine nor to substitute for it the pentameter as its English equivalent could be extended to what seems to be the procedure, or at least the outcome, of most of the translations in what is surely a momentous achievement in English poetic translation. Where his metrical decisions come to ‘form an interference pattern between English pentameter and French alexandrine’, one might say that the translations by and large constitute a similar interference pattern between French and English as a whole. Given that the translations have been composed over some twenty years, it is hardly surprising that the procedures that produce this effect of interference, of a third term between Schleiermacher’s creative options, will vary from poem to poem. Generally speaking, Manson refuses the temptation to produce mellifluous, smoothed-out versions of Mallarmé that conform to the expectations of English syntax and even rhyme. Compare for a moment some quatrains from Manson’s
translation of the ineffably ‘oblique’ ‘Prose, pour des Esseintes’, with the corresponding version in Keith Bosley’s Penguin Mallarmé:

Telles, immenses, que chacune
Ordinairement se para
D’un lucide contour, lacune
Qui des jardins la sépara,

Gloire du long désir, Idées
Tout en moi s’exaltait de voir
La famille des iridées
Surgir à ce nouveau devoir,

(Mallarmé)

All so immense that each one
ordinarily paraded
in a lucid contour, lacuna se-
parating it from the gardens.

Glory of the long desire, Ideas
all of them in me leapt to see
the family of the irides
arise to this new duty

(Manson)

So that they all, enormous,
Were adorned with clear outlines
Commonly, a hiatus
Between them and the gardens.

Ideas, glory of long
Longing, my all leapt to see
The tribe of the iris throng
To fulfill this fresh duty

(Bosley)

It may be admitted that Bosley’s versions of Mallarmé are themselves a remarkable achievement, succeeding in finding time and again admirably unforced rhymes and half-rhymes to match rhymes in the original French that are, as Manson remarks, ‘a fundamental property of Mallarmé’s poetry.’ Nonetheless, the overall effect of Bosley’s translations is to transpose Mallarmé’s work, in all its knotty syntactical and semantic difficulty, into a legible surface that reads like a slightly halting Wordsworthian lyrical ballad. Manson sets himself a different task, insisting from the start that ‘a translation of Mallarmé should at least be allowed to sound like interesting modern poetry.’ For him, ‘the strict (or even the very lax) use of rhyme and regular metre is one of the surest ways of forbidding that from happening.’ Instead, he opts for what he calls ‘unashamedly semantic translations of a poet whose best writing seems designed to put a semantic translator to shame.’ In consequence, Manson’s versions of Mallarmé seem to obey for the most part the logic of the scriptible, in Roland Barthes’ sense, rather than aiming for easy legibility.

That is, they map for us as readers the track of his own arduous and intense reading of Mallarmé and oblige us in turn to follow the track of that reading, with all its hesitations and even, occasionally, false starts. Thus, while Bosley’s ‘were adorned’ might be the closer translation of se para according to the dictionary, Manson’s reading as ‘paraded’ nicely picks up on his retention of Mallarmé’s ordinairement in ‘ordinarily’, with its echoes of the ordinal series as well as the ceremonial regularity of the liturgy. The witty decision to divide the word se-parating then not only allows for the internal rhyme between paraded and –paring, but performs precisely what the word does while recuperating the French rhyming pun on se para and sépara.

Though muted rhyme emerges (arises?) in the following stanza, by and large ideational or conceptual rhyme of this kind, rather than strictly aural rhyming, is the mode in which Manson transposes Mallarmé’s prominent and quite insistent rhymes. This is not inappropriate, since for Mallarmé rhyme tends to provoke and perform intellectual work, not merely mark and control repetition. Compare Mallarmé’s procedure to that of the possibly most remarkable of English rhymers, Tennyson, and the difference is profoundly marked. To remain with the stanzas cited above, the rhyme on chacune and lacune underscores not only Mallarmé’s precise notation of the way in which each flower, by virtue of its size and intense color, produces a halo-like effect that ‘separates it from the gardens’, but also the differential relation that individuates chacune/each one only through the establishment of an empty space within which that singularity can appear. This in turn is surely a reflection on the conditions of verse itself, where the ‘ordinal’ series of lines requires the blank spaces around it to signify at all, a dialectical condition Mallarmé famously exploited from the inaugural ‘Rien’ (‘No thing’, in Manson’s version) of ‘Salut’ to the radical spatial experiment of the Coup de Dés. Manson’s achievement, surely enabled by the decision to eschew systemically
rhymed translation, is to find an alternative set of echoes and correspondences at the conceptual level of the poetry that function at least partially as rhyme does for Mallarmé.

More taxing, though, than the issue of rhyme for the English translator of French poetry is that of syntax. Manson’s consistent translation of *grimoire*, which derives from *grammaire* but can mean spell-book (‘gramarye’ in medieval English) or scribble, as ‘grammar’ captures what is at stake. As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has noted in *Musica Ficta*, one of Mallarmé’s earliest writings, ‘Artistic Heresies—Art for All’ insisted on the necessity for art to retain its ‘mystery’—like religion and like magical rites, it demands initiation and veiling.\(^\text{7}\) Sortilege, sorcery or the reading of lots, is one of Mallarmé’s favoured analogies for poetic practice. But poetry is threatened by its apparently easy availability to the general and uninitiated public and can only be warded by its auratic difficulty of access, the *lacuna* by which it is hedged. Valéry notes both the approximation of Mallarmé’s verse to ‘magic formula’ and the quality of incantation that it invoked, as well as the ascetic labour that it demanded both of the poet and the reader.\(^\text{8}\) Mallarmé’s difficulty is of course notorious, but it is not, for example the kind of difficulty that might face the reader of the early Yeats, where most difficulty can be resolved by turning to a handbook of Irish myths or of Theosophical symbols. Difficulties of that kind there certainly are in Mallarmé, and Manson’s tactful and unburdened ‘Scholia’ go a long way towards relieving the reader of such contingent difficulties. But the crucial source of difficulty lies precisely in what Mallarmé terms *suspens*, suspension or delay, which is the practical poetic means for enacting ‘mystery’ or warding against that too instantaneous consumption of the work which would convert it into a mere commodity form, a source of distraction or of information. The effect of delayed and gradual precipitation of meaning is frequently enabled in the poems, and indeed in the prose, by Mallarmé’s exacting extension of the syntactical possibilities of French almost to their limits. To take a relatively simple instance, the exquisite *Éventail (de Madame Mallarmé)*:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Avec comme pour langage} \\
\text{Rien qu’un battement aux cieux} \\
\text{Le future vers se dégage}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Du logis très précieux} \\
\text{Aile tout bas la courrière} \\
\text{Cet éventail si c’est lui} \\
\text{Le même par qui derrière} \\
\text{Toi quelque miroir a lui}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Limpide (ou va redescendre} \\
\text{Pourchassée en chaque grain} \\
\text{Un peu d’invisible cendre} \\
\text{Seule à me rendre chagrin)}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Toujours tel il apparaîsse} \\
\text{Entre tes mains sans paresse}
\end{align*}
\]

Manson’s translation would be hard to better:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Fan (of Madame Mallarmé)} \\
\text{With for language nothing} \\
\text{but a beat in the sky} \\
\text{the future verse breaks free} \\
\text{of the most precious dwelling}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{quiet wing the courier} \\
\text{this fan if it is the} \\
\text{same through which behind} \\
\text{you some mirror gleamed}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{limpidly (where invisible} \\
\text{ash pursued to the last grain} \\
\text{will fall back again} \\
\text{only to cause me pain)}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{may it always appear so} \\
\text{between your unlazy hands}
\end{align*}
\]

While it risks sacrificing for a moment the ongoing analogy between the spread of the fan and the wings of a dove, biblical messenger and iconic angel of annunciation, Manson’s ‘beat in the sky’ (for the more exact ‘beating [as of wings]’) finely inserts a Mallarmean conceptual pun on poetic rhythm that anticipates the breaking free of verse. The poem, in whose title one might discern a muted pun on *événement*, event, is about the advent of the poem through the most oblique of glimpses, that of a fan seen as a momentary reflection passing across a mirror in the depths of a room. It is also a poem that seems to count the cost of poetic refinement, of its limpidity, precisely in a parenthesis that inserts both mortality and the temporality of delay into what might otherwise be an instantaneous epiphany. In

French, the arrival of the subject of the parenthesis is delayed by inversion: the verbal phrase ‘*va descendre*’ precedes, even if rhyme predicts its subject ‘*Un peu d’invisible cendre*’, melancholy reminder of death or of what cannot be taken up into the limpidity of the deeply reflected poem. In English, that effect of delayed advent of the subject is virtually impossible to reproduce without extreme syntactic strain that would do violence to what is far from violent in the French. Perhaps that is why, here, Manson allows a rare rhyme pattern to emerge, the three rhymes in ‘ain’ introducing something like an effect of delay into the English despite the necessity to begin the parenthetical clause with its subject. For rhyme does not only predict the phonetic patterns of the verse, as Manson reminds us in his afterword; it introduces, by its insistent recursive patterns, hesitation and slowing as the ear harks back as well as forward to establish the regularity of the rhyme scheme.

There is of course an erotic as well as mortal frisson embedded in this temporality of suspension, as ”*Quelle soie aux baumes du temps*” makes abundantly clear in final lines that reproduce the syntactic inversions of ‘Éventail’:

> Non. La bouche ne sera sûre  
> De rien goûter à sa morsure,  
> S’il ne fait, ton princier amant,  
> Dans la considérable touffe  
> *Expirer, comme un diamant,  
> Le cri des Gloires qu’il étouffe.*

No. The biting mouth will not be sure of tasting anything if your princely lover does not make

the cry of Glory he stifles expire, like a diamond in the considerable tuft.

Again, English syntax seems incapable of supporting the inversion that French allows, this time the suspension of the object, *le cri*, rather than the subject. These are relatively simple examples, though they do indicate the intrinsic difficulties of a syntactical rather than a semantic translation. What they do not reveal is the extent to which this quality of delay in Mallarmé’s poetry enables another musical effect—and as the passage Manson cites from *Crise de Vers* suggests, music for

Mallarmé has less to do with material soundscape or with individual notes or timbres than with the formal accomplishment of music, what he refers to as ‘orchestration’. Music, like poetry, takes place in time, but the suspension of the development of any motif or the recurrence of a given theme demand that the auditor hold in mind, as across a broad space, several musical ‘ideas’ at one time. Mallarmé’s verse at its most complex—and most notably in the *Coup de Dés*, which notoriously spatializes several thematic threads, using typographical scoring to assist the reader’s forward movement—seeks to extend to the maximum the condensation of ideas that a single phrase can accommodate, including ambiguities and contradictions.

As Lacoue-Labarthe argues, it is to the challenge—both aesthetic and national—of Wagner’s music, or rather to its ‘total art’, that Mallarmé responds by seeking to compose a poetry that would achieve a purer musicality, an ”archi-music”.9 Not surprisingly, then, it is in his ‘*Hommage*’ to Wagner that we can find one of his most complicated and ironically layered orchestrations. Manson’s note to this poem alerts us to Mallarmé’s own judgment that the poem is imbued with ‘the melancholy of a poet who sees the old poetic confrontations collapse, and the magnificence of words fade, before the sunrise of contemporary Music, of which Wagner is the latest God.’ But, like melancholy in general, the poem has a biting edge that belies its writer’s humility in the face of music. Much as does the early essay, ‘Artistic Heresies’, the poem takes its distance from a poetry that pleases the crowd:

> Our so old triumphal frolic of the grammar,  
> hieroglyphs the multitude exalts in  
> to spread with a wing the familiar shiver!  
> Bury it for me rather in a cupboard.

Manson adroitly captures here, in the implicit play on *exalts* and *exults* and in the use of the familiar ‘cupboard’ for what might tempt a poet less attuned to Mallarmé’s own shifts of register to ‘armoire’, the poet’s dismissive contempt for the vulgar. Such vulgarity is what has reduced poetry, including even the ‘*nouveau frisson*’ of Baudelaire, to an all-too-accessible art, devoid, as Manson’s notes observe, of the comparatively arcane script

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that is musical notation. The octet devoted to this ‘crise de vers’ is correspondingly relatively
straightforward. It is in the sestet, where the poet must confront the rise of Wagner, that
Mallarmé engages in a tour-de-force of syntactic complexity:

Du souriant fracas originel haï
Entre elles de clartés maîtresses a jailli
Jusqu'vers un parvis né pour leur simulacre,

Trompettes tout haut d'or pâmé sur les vellins,
Le dieu Richard Wagner irradiant un sacre
Mal tu par l'encre même en sanglots sibyllins.

From the original smiling uproar hated
among them, of master clarities, has burst
as far as a parvis born for their simulacrum,
gold trumpets swooning out loud on vellum,
the god Richard Wagner irradiating a sacrament
unmuted even by ink in sibylline sobs.

It is not only that the past tense verb, a jailli,
must wait three lines before finding its subject, the god Wagner, but moreover that almost every word in the sestet seems to refer at once forward and back, leaving a peculiar uncertainty as to referent. Ironically, the most difficult of all to assign a fixed place to are ‘elles de clartés maîtresses’ [‘those, mistresses of clarity’] who, if haï [hated] is past participle in the passive mood rather than an adjective simply qualifying ‘fracas’ along with souriant and originel, would appear to hate what could either be the Wagnerian music that is on the horizon or the ‘frisson familier’ of the multitude. But if elles points forward to trompettes, as logically it should, given that that is the only feminine plural noun other than maîtresses that appears in the poem, then it is the very signature of Wagnerian music, its triumphal, brassy climaxes, that would seem to value the clarity eschewed by Mallarmé, master of the obscure and the oblique.10 That this is a real crux is confirmed by comparing Manson's with two other translations, that given in Lacoue-

Labarthe’s Musica Ficta by Felicia McCarren
and, once again, Bosley's:

From the smiling, hated, originary fracas,
Amongst themselves, masterful clarities
To a parvis created for their simulacrum,
(McCarren)

Out of the smiling ancient din detested
Among themselves by powers in brightness vested,
Up to a court made for their imitating,
(Bosley)

English syntax seems unable to accommodate the ambivalent energies that course through this poem, a poem that suggests, at least in one possible reading, that Wagner is no more than a simulacrum of art, that the ‘central pillar’ indeed subsides as the curtain falls in the theatre. Poetry, in praising Caesar, also buries him, implying the secret superiority of the music of ambiguous orchestration over the brassy climaxes of an over-dramatic total art.

One of the great virtues of Manson's translations is that they do not obscure the turbulence, even at times the turbidity of Mallarmé’s poetry. There is a tendency in English translations of his work to imagine a greater degree of purity and abstraction than is actually there. At times, especially as in the work of Brian Coffey, the Irish modernist poet who made extensive and very fine translations of Mallarmé, that tendency towards abstraction becomes the integral basis for a poetic devoted to a reduction and simplification of the writer's own poetic in English. Manson, on the other hand, captures continually the dimensions of Mallarmé that are so often overlooked, so powerful is his reputation for asceticism and other-worldliness. Mallarmé is, in fact, a highly erotic poet, given, as Manson's scolia often enough point out, to double entendres and to a quite systematic meditation on the relation between erotic desire and poetic creation. He is also, as even the few citations here of his verse would indicate, an exceptionally sensuous as well as sensual poet, even if that sensuality succumbs to a fin-de-siècle headiness often enough. But what there is of decadence is at the very least counterpointed by a sailor's startling investment in sea and

spray, as both 'Brise marine' and Un Coup de Dés testify. His work furnishes, accordingly, a rich field for ‘interference patterns’, drawing to the fore through translation qualities of English that are the more marked the less the translator seeks to reproduce the superficial abstractions and refinements of the verse.

This could be evidenced all over Manson’s translations and it is possible here to give only one instance, drawn from that icon of symbolist decadence, the fragment of the unfinished Hérodiade. In the first part, the ‘Old Overture of Hérodiade’, the ancient nurse speaks, in rhymed alexandrines, lines that resume so many of the properties of Mallarmé’s verse:

Ombre magicienne aux symboliques charmes!
Cette voix, du passé longue évocation,
Est-ce la mienne prête à l’incantation?
Encore dans les plis jaunes de la pensée
Trainant, antique, ainsi qu’une toile enceinte
Sur un confus amas d’encensoirs refroidis,
Par les trous anciens et par les plis roidis
Percés selon le rythme et les dentelles pures
Du suaire laissant par ses belles guipures
Désespéré monter le vieil éclat voilé
S‘élève, (ô quel lointain en ces appels célestes)
Le vieil éclat voilé du vermeil insolite,
De la voix languissant, nullë, sans acolyte,
Jettera-t-il son or par dernières splendeurs,
Elle, encore, l’antienne aux versets demandeurs,
A l’heure d’agonie et de luttes funèbres!

Magician shadow with symbolic charms!
This voice, long evocation of the past,
is it mine, ready for the incantation?
Still dragging in the yellow folds of thought,
 antique, as a cloth of incense
on a confused mass of cooling church utensils,
through ancient holes and through the stiffened folds
pierced rhythmically and the pure lace
of the shroud, allowing through its fine crochet
the old veiled brilliance desperately to climb,
it is raised: (o, what a distance hidden in these calls!)

In accord with the grounding principles of his translations, Manson lets drop both the alexandrine line (or any pentametric equivalent) and the rhymes of the couplets. What occurs then in the transposition seems an instructive instance of the ways in which interference patterns operate to draw out or highlight quite distinct qualities in each language. The French is a classic instance of Mallarméan delay, the steady pace of the alexandrine and the arresting repetition of the rhymes allowing the build up through seven lines of apposition and parenthesis before the main active verb, s’élève, is reached, then a further parenthesis before the complex subject of the whole sentence (Le vieil éclat voilé du vermeil insolite, De la voix languissant) is attained. It accords precisely with the sterility and paralysis that afflicts the nurse as she waits for the entrance of Hérodiade, better known to English readers as Salomé. Manson’s lines, abnegating the restraining resources of rhyme and regular metre, seem rather to engage in a hurtling feat of vertiginous enjambement arrested only by a brief submission to the exigencies of English syntax and usage in the ‘it is raised’, before launching again into a further onrush of appositions. A breathless energy overtakes the lines that draws to the surface what an incantatory reading (as indeed, for instance, Bosley’s translation of the same passage more nearly is) fails to remark, the wild (farouche or fauve) and sensuous energies that lurk in Mallarmé’s apparently world-weary texts.

I would readily admit that I am influenced in this reading of Manson’s translation by hearing him read aloud from his then ongoing translation of the Hérodiade at the 2006 Soundeye Festival of Poetry in Cork. Mallarmé is famous for a line from his ‘Le Tombeau d’Edgar Poe’ that T.S. Eliot steals in ‘Little Gidding’: ‘Donner un sens plus pur au mots de la tribu.’11 Manson’s achievement in these translations seems to me in part the rigorous avoidance of any attempt to emulate

a poésie pure, or to engage in ‘purifying the dialect of the tribe’. Rather, he allows Mallarmé’s often too muted demotic accents to rub shoulders brusquely with his recherché idiom in a way that releases into English something utterly different that is none the less an impeccable homage to the Master. For this reason, it is perhaps permissible to lament that Manson did not include, even as an appendix, the versions published earlier, along the way, in various periodicals and in one chapbook collection, Before and After Mallarmé (Survivor’s Press, 2005). These earlier translations – deliberately rougher and freer in their way, which include Manson’s wonderful writing-through of Mallarmé’s most famous, or most memorable, poem ‘Salut’ [‘Rien, cet écume, vierge vers....’] – demonstrate beyond all that Mallarmé does not suffer from being a little roughed up, whether by irreverence or by interpolation. It opens with the slight but haunting sonnet ‘Tout l’âme résuméé’, which was apparently the first that Manson tried to translate. There, the final lines include a hesitation that is precise in its way:

so if the volatile chorus
of love-songs leap to your lip
begin by spitting
back the real because sick

too precise sense [erasure]
your vague literature

There is, of course, nothing ‘vague’ about ‘spitting back the real because sick’: it plays exactly against the tropism towards the abstract that this sonnet might seem to represent, even if its opening lines resume perfectly the sensuous and meditative pleasures of the dedicated smoker. Manson transposes some of the wit of the poem into English puns that sadly do not survive into the collected translations, the cigar ‘burning sagely’, the smoke rings ‘snuffed out.’ And yet that bracketed erasure bears with it the sense of what continually happens in the reading of Mallarmé’s poetry in all its delays and suspensions: a peculiar sense of being haunted by lines whose sense has already been altered, erased, or abolished, in what has slipped into place in their wake:

Tout l’âme resumée
Quand lente nous l’expirons
Dans plusieurs ronds de fumée

Manson’s translations of Mallarmé never pretend to the Romantic ambition of recreating the poem from its origins, nor do they entirely estrange the English language from itself. What they do achieve is the creation of a contemporary English poetry that stands in tension with Mallarmé’s own in a way that deepens and highlights the potentialities of both. They will stand as a mark, singular and idiosyncratic rather than blandly definitive, of what translation can and should attain to.

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Peter Manson’s translation of Mallarmé’s Poems in Verse is published by Miami University Press, Ohio. It is available from Small Press Publishers and Amazon.

Notes

1 For Schleiermacher’s theory of translation, see his ‘Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens’ [‘On the Different Methods of Translation’], in André Lefevere, ed. Translating Literature: The German Tradition from Luther to Rosenzweig (Assen, Amsterdam : Van Gorcum, 1977), pp. 80-86.


9 Lacoue-Labarthe, Musica Ficta, p. 82.

10 Lacoue-Labarthe points out that its instrumentation itself that undermines the ‘pure musicality’ of music itself, being ‘only a means to fake or reproduce’: Lacoue-Labarthe, Musica Ficta, p. 79.