

Le Romantisme
et après en France

Romanticism
and after in France
Volume 20

Naomi Segal and Gill Rye (eds)

‘When familiar meanings dissolve...’

Essays in French Studies
in Memory of Malcolm Bowie

Peter Lang

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This volume commemorates the work of Malcolm Bowie, who died in 2007. It includes selected papers drawn from the conference held in his memory at the Institute of Germanic & Romance Studies, University of London, in May 2008, inspired by his work in nineteenth- and twentieth-century French literature. Malcolm Bowie was instrumental in shaping French studies in the United Kingdom into the interdisciplinary field it now is. The contributions to this collection are grouped around Bowie's principal interests and specialisms: poetry, Proust, theory, visual art and music. The book is, however, more than a memorial to Malcolm Bowie's work and legacy. In its inclusion of work by established and eminent members of the academic profession as well as new and emerging scholars, it is also a showcase for cutting-edge work in French studies in the United Kingdom and beyond.

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Le Romantisme et après en France
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Volume 20

a series founded by Alan Raitt
and edited by Patrick McGuinness

Peter Lang

Oxford · Bern · Berlin · Bruxelles · Frankfurt am Main · New York · Wien

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— NAOMI SEGAL AND GILL RYE

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Note on the Text

Throughout this book, all translations into English, unless otherwise attributed, are by the author of the article. With all such translated quotations, reference is given to the original text. Further references to a cited text will appear after quotations; passages without page reference are from the last cited page and page numbers without specified text are similarly from the one last named. Unless otherwise stated, all italics appear in the original.

PART I



Malcolm McNaughtan Bowie
5 May 1943–28 January 2007
Malcolm at home in his and Alison's study.

MICHAEL WORTON

Introduction

This volume of essays arose out of a conference organized by the Institute of Germanic & Romance Studies (IGRS) in May 2008 in memory of Malcolm Bowie, who had died in 2007. The conference aimed to celebrate and commemorate the life and work of a friend and colleague who was universally regarded as one of the most influential figures in UK French Studies for more than thirty years, having held a Chair of French at Queen Mary, University of London, then the Marshal Foch Chair at the University of Oxford and finally being elected Master of Christ's College, Cambridge, from 2002 to 2007. Malcolm was a wonderfully insightful reader of both literary and theoretical texts, an exquisite writer who drew his many readers not only into the worlds of fiction and of poetry that he was analysing, but also into a humane place between 'creative' and 'critical' writing, where we could learn to read and listen in new ways. This was evident in all of his books, ranging from his study of Henri Michaux, based on his PhD thesis, to his magisterial studies of Mallarmé and of Proust, his books on psychoanalysis and the relations between psychoanalysis and literature, and the eminently readable collaborative *A Short History of French Literature* (2003), co-authored with Sarah Kay and Terence Cave.¹

Malcolm was a singular and a singularly sensitive scholar; he was also perhaps the most generous and community-minded person in modern UK French Studies. He played a crucial role in the 1980s in gradually bringing together the conservative 'establishment' of French Studies that was deeply suspicious both of the new critical theories coming out of France and of the 'young Turks' who founded the Modern Critical Theory Group (MCTG) in 1981 and then the journal *Paraglyph* in 1983. That tensions and suspicions

1 Sarah Kay, Terence Cave and Malcolm Bowie, *A Short History of French Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

existed between these two wings of French Studies for well over a decade is undeniable, yet the two wings gradually grew closer together, helping to make UK French Studies the interdisciplinary, dynamic and intellectually fluid discipline that it is today. Malcolm's role in this process cannot be over-stated: in the 1980s he was general editor of *French Studies*, one of the founding members of the MCTG and one of the founding editors of *Paragraph*. He thus gave leadership to both 'factions', demonstrating loyalty to and inspiring loyalty from both, whilst also gradually eliciting greater openness and understanding from both. This was a work of exceptional and sensitive cultural diplomacy, for which we all owe him an enormous debt. This also illustrated one of Malcolm's qualities which everyone so admired: he always sought to see (and found) good in what other people were doing, whether it was in their academic writing, in their academic or other citizenship or more generally in their lives. It is for this reason that he was such an excellent editor and PhD supervisor, since he could always help others to think and write better by helping them to believe in themselves and to seek to go beyond their existing intellectual parameters.

Malcolm Bowie was also an important creator of institutions. In London, for instance, he was the founding director of the Institute of Romance Studies (IRS) in 1989 and later in 2004, he was the first chair of the advisory board of the new IGRS which was born out of the merger of the IRS and the Institute of Germanic Studies. Wherever he went, indeed, he created things. When he went to Oxford to take up the Marshal Foch Chair, he helped to launch and promote *Legenda*, the new imprint of the European Humanities Research Centre, and when he returned to Cambridge in 2002, he worked closely with Gillian Beer and Beate Perrey to establish an interdisciplinary research project 'New Languages for Criticism', which led to the foundation of the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and the Humanities (CRASSH). The creation of the IRS was one of the turning points for French Studies in London and throughout the UK, just as it was for Hispanic, Iberian, Italian and Portuguese Studies. The director of the IGRS and her colleagues thus felt it very important to hold a conference that would bring together colleagues from across the country in an act of shared remembrance which would be both an act of creative and critical community and an act of commemoration.

In the Christian tradition, the Eucharist is one of the most important liturgical moments, commemorating as it does the Last Supper. However, it is much more than a remembrance; it is a making present of simple everyday acts (the shared breaking of bread and drinking of wine) that through their repetition come to represent something much greater. Commemoration thus recognizes absence, but in its assumption of both the possibility and the necessity of repetition as transformation, it makes loss easier to live with and enables creativity to emerge from remembrance. Malcolm was not a Christian, but he was acutely aware of the importance and the meaningfulness of symbols and metaphors. He was also someone who delighted in the community of scholarship, taking pleasure in listening and in conversing. Throughout the IGRS conference, as papers were given and points were made and debated, many would have seen in their mind's eye the slight frown and the pursed lips of the attentively listening Malcolm.

Many of the essays in this volume refer to his work; all were in one way or another made possible by his example of literary scholarship. This would, we hope, have given him some pleasure, in that he was always committed to what the French so marvellously call *possibilisation*. However, in *Proust Among the Stars* (1998), where he wrote tellingly about his enjoyment of undertaking literary pilgrimages, he also revealed his anxiety about going to the Cabourg that so inspired Proust's novel:

I began to know in Cabourg a fear that I had not known at any other of my literary destinations. This was the fear that I might lose a supreme work of literature and never get it back; that I would resign myself to a non-reading knowledge of the novel, a Proust of tea-parties and table-talk, of selected short quotations and haunting images that had long ago drifted free of their original textual moorings. [...]

While I have no wish to deprive Cabourg, Illiers-Combray, the boulevard Haussmann or the Père Lachaise cemetery of their status as places of pilgrimage, or as stations on Proust's own journey towards artistic triumph, I shall argue here for the superior magnetism of his writing.²

2 Malcolm Bowie, *Proust Among the Stars* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), pp. xiii–xiv.

This is quintessential Bowie. Writing personally, but with a universality that touches each of us, as well as with his usual elegance, he reminds us of the need constantly to return to and to focus ever more intently on the literary text itself. Malcolm described this book as an introductory commentary on Proust, which would be accessible to all interested readers, rather than simply to the specialist academic reader. However, it is a masterpiece of critical insight and wisdom, which not only helps us better to understand Proust, but crucially, better to understand our own potential as readers. Malcolm's own mode of reading (and writing) is an expansive one, whereby the world is drawn into the recorded act of reading and thinking – and he is especially illuminating when showing how art and music interact with literature. However, the encyclopaedic knowledge that informs all of Bowie's critical work is fundamentally different from, and even opposed to, the kind of sterile encyclopaedism characteristic of much specialist work on Proust (and, indeed, Mallarmé), which Bowie so delicately and implicitly chides in *Proust Among the Stars*.

His critical life, like his personal life, was lightly yet also profoundly humane and moral, informed by an abiding desire to illuminate and explain the specificity of a work of art and also to prevent anyone from falling into the trap of reading or seeing or listening to a work of art only from a particular, predetermined position:

we may be moved by works of art in ways that our official critical procedures make no allowance for: we may be haunted by a single chromaticism in a Mozart quintet, or by the slant of a fierce, disconsolate eye in one of the later self-portraits of Rembrandt. Something is going wrong when criticism conscientiously refuses to take heed of the singular disruptive energies which works of art possess, and quite as badly wrong when those energies are normalised by being made into a test of political acceptability.³

If one of Malcolm's greatest gifts to his community was to make criticism much more pleasurable, he also liberated scholars from the need to enter or remain in any particular camp. His innate generosity meant that he was

3 Malcolm Bowie, *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 154.

uncomfortable with any embedded binary oppositions: for him, fluidity and porosity were much more important. Yet he fully appreciated the necessity of understanding and recognizing individual disciplines and positions. For this reason, he was one of the best engagers with and interpreters of modern theory, notably post-Freudian and Lacanian theory. There was a time in the late 1980s and 1990s when it was almost *de rigueur* for French scholars to engage in an informed way with Lacan, Kristeva, etc. For many, this was enjoyable as well as intellectually challenging; for others, it could be quite a struggle; for yet others, it was, quite simply, inappropriate. Bowie's *Psychoanalysis and the Future of Theory* (1993), based on his Bucknell Lectures in Literary Theory, was a clarion call to sceptics to understand the value of psychoanalytic theory, just as it challenged psychoanalytic theorists to engage more (and more dialogically) with art. As always, Malcolm's writing in this book is precise but also occasionally playful, as when he writes: 'but "theory" is an education and pleasure too. Some of it, at least'.⁴ His engagement with theory as with literature was very real and committed, yet it was always deeply personal and speculative, a process to be experienced rather than a formula to be followed:

What I'm trying to do in a small way for myself is to create a fully engaged and theoretically self-aware playfulness of response to literature, which means teasing out a whole range of incompatible possibilities, speculatively, conjecturally, and not being intimidated by the injunction that seems to say 'Be coherent, have a theory, apply it, get your results, and publish them'. Perhaps I'm talking about what the French are happy to call *théorisation* rather than *théorie*. 'Theorization' is one Gallicism that English really does need – to describe a process of continuous, open-ended speculative activity playing upon the empirical data. (p. 144)

The notion of play and playfulness that he developed in this book, in response to Freud and to post-Freudian theorizings of play and pleasure, is enormously liberating, although Malcolm also repeatedly emphasized the importance of knowledge, facts and empirical data.

4 Malcolm Bowie, *Psychoanalysis and the Future of Theory* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994 [1993]), p. 143.

In its insightfulness, Bowie's critical work is always both light and profound: many critics can achieve the latter at times, but few can also attain, let alone maintain, the former as Bowie did throughout his academic life. Both in their choice of research questions to address and in the discourses they choose, the essays in this book reveal the influence that he still, happily, continues to exert on scholars in UK French Studies. As is only befitting, they respond to different moments in his many works, but they especially engage with his constant desire to celebrate tension and paradox, rather than trying to resolve them in any simplistic way. However, Bowie's work itself is ultimately a repeated sequence of reconciliations, as differences are anatomized, understood, maintained and ultimately presented as productive – productive of art, productive of meaning, productive of life. This volume seeks similarly to play with tension and reconciliation.

This book arose out of a tragic death and the need to respond to it by affirming the ongoing presence of Malcolm Bowie, friend, mentor and inspiration to all who have participated in it. In that sense, it is, we hope, a worthy and active commemoration. The word used in Greek for remembrance is *anamnesis*. However, this remembrance is much more than simply remembering in an elegiac or lachrymose way. It signifies bringing something out of the past into the present. While the focus of these essays is essentially on poetry and fiction, I would also suggest that this collection can be seen as the staging of a *représentation*, whereby something is re-presented, whereby things that were, now are (again). Each essay, which is in itself original, is also a willed repetition of what Malcolm Bowie taught us all to do: to read and see and hear better, and finally, eventually, to make better connections, to make more – and different – sense of the world.

Strange Tongues: Mallarmé in the English Nursery, Beckett in Babel¹

Unfolding Mallarmé's sign-system in *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult* (1978), Malcolm Bowie drew attention to the way the poet transforms words from windowpanes through which one looks at a referent, into things in themselves, things materially manifest as acoustic events:

The poet has created a new – some may think scandalous – balance between the semantic function of words and the life they lead as physical things. The meaning(s) and the grammatical role of an individual word have often to be worked out by an elaborate process of deduction and cross-checking within the text. But long before these calculations are complete the word has assumed its place in an intricate system of physical parities and disparities. And the direction in which our calculation of meaning proceeds may be suggested or endorsed by the pressure of the sound and rhythm systems [...] Other sorts of phonetic correspondences between words – assonance, alliteration, internal rhyme and homonymy – also occur often.²

1 My profound thanks to Adam Watts, who most kindly read the essay in draft and commented very helpfully; to Anne Holmes, Daniel Tiffany, Michael Sheringham and Roger Pearson for advice and references; and to Naomi Segal and Gill Rye for editorial comment and support. This essay in honour of Malcolm Bowie develops thoughts about Mallarmé in work on Beckett which appeared in a different form in the lecture I gave at the Samuel Beckett Centenary Conference, Dublin, 17 April 2006, excerpted as 'Babble with Beckett', *Times Literary Supplement* (29 February 2008); 'Beckett, Mallarmé, and Foreign Tongues', *Raritan*, 27 (2008); and published as "Who Can Shave an Egg?": Foreign Tongues and Primal Sounds in Mallarmé and Beckett', in *Reflections on Beckett: A Centenary Celebration*, ed. by Anna McMullan and S. E. Wilmer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

2 Malcolm Bowie, *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 53–54.

How Mallarmé's sensitivity to the patterning of sense by means other than semantic enriches the experience of reading him also attracted the attention of Virginia Woolf, as she mused on the acoustic vitality that a non-native language can provide a writer in one of her most free-associating fugues of an essay, 'On Being Ill' (1926). She writes:

In illness words seem to possess a mystic quality. We grasp what is beyond their surface meaning, gather instinctively this, that, and the other – a sound, a colour, here a stress, there a pause – which the poet, knowing words to be meagre in comparison with ideas, has strewn about his page to evoke, when collected, a state of mind which neither words can express nor the reason explain. Incomprehensibility has an enormous power over us in illness, more legitimately perhaps than the upright will allow. *In health meaning has encroached upon sound.* Our intelligence domineers over our senses. But in illness, with the police off duty, we creep beneath some obscure poems by Mallarmé or Donne, some phrase in Latin or Greek, and the words give out their scent, and ripple like leaves, and chequer us with light and shadow, and then, *if at last we grasp the meaning, it is all the richer for having travelled slowly up with all the bloom upon its wings.* Foreigners, to whom the tongue is strange, have us at a disadvantage.³

In the case of Mallarmé's writings about English and in English, and in relation to the adoption of French by Samuel Beckett, Woolf's comments about the fruitfulness of a foreign tongue throw a curious light on the two writers' expressiveness. In a preface to William Beckford's *Vathek*, Mallarmé revealingly advances a prime motive for the English writer's adoption of French: 'le fait général du recours à un autre parler que le natal, pour se délivrer, par un écrit, de l'obsession régnant sur toute une jeunesse'⁴ ['the common recourse to a non-native language in order to rid oneself, through writing,

3 Virginia Woolf, 'On Being Ill' [1926], in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1994), IV: 1925–28, pp. 324–25 (emphasis added); see a slightly different version of the essay in *On Being Ill*, introd. by Hermione Lee (Ashfield, MA: Paris Press, 2002), pp. 22–23, where Woolf writes that the meaning comes 'like some queer odour...'

4 Mallarmé wrote a lavishly enthusiastic, long introduction to *Vathek* for the French edition of 1876: Stéphane Mallarmé, *Préface à Vathek*, in Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Bertrand Marchal, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), II, pp. 3–20 (pp. 8–9). Hereafter, unless otherwise indicated, all references to Mallarmé's published writings will be to this edition, abbreviated as *OC* in the text. The earlier *Œuvres*

of the dominant obsession of one's childhood']. Mallarmé's love of English was not rooted in fluency or familiarity, but rather in something literally other or alien in the language used by the writers he admired – Beckford, Edgar Allan Poe, Alfred, Lord Tennyson,⁵ Robert Louis Stevenson and some rather lesser known authors, such as Mrs Elphinstone Hope, whose now forgotten story, *The Star of the Fairies*, he translated in 1880. He also left unfinished a mammoth anthology of English literature.⁶

Mallarmé's interest in English as a language never became as central as Beckett's use of French, nor did his command of the foreign tongue reach Beckett's supreme artistry. But both men were language teachers: it remained Mallarmé's profession, even though he loathed it, and complained that he was pelted and booed.⁷ He taught English at various *lycées*, several outside Paris in 1863–71, then in the capital till he retired in 1893, while Beckett taught French at Campbell College in Belfast for nine miserable months in 1928,⁸ after which he became a *lecteur* in English at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris; he later returned to Trinity College Dublin to teach French. Neither writer liked teaching – Beckett, who was nocturnal, was reproached for his timekeeping; Mallarmé was under constant criticism for his distracted and chaotic classes.⁹

complètes, ed. by Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, 1945) will be abbreviated *OC* 1945.

- 5 Mallarmé made a prose translation of *Mariana* and of two other poems by Tennyson, see *OC*, pp. 825–33.
- 6 In 1871, he wrote to one of his friends that he only knew English from the words used by Poe in his poems; fourteen years later, he wrote to Verlaine that he had learned 'l'anglais simplement pour mieux lire Poe' ('Lettre du 16 novembre 1885', *OC*, I, p. 788) ['English simply to read Poe better']. For Mallarmé's shaky command of the idioms of English, see also his letter to Edmund Gosse of August 1875, in Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance II (1871–1875)*, ed. by Henri Mondor and L. J. Austin (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), pp. 69–70.
- 7 Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance complète 1862–1871, suivi de 'Lettres sur la poésie' 1872–1898*, ed. by Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p. 248.
- 8 See Brigitte Le Juez, *Beckett before Beckett: Samuel Beckett's Lectures on French Literature* (London: Souvenir Press, 2007) for a former student's fascinating account.
- 9 See Gordon Millan, *Mallarmé: A Throw of the Dice, The Life of Stéphane Mallarmé* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1994), pp. 214–15.

The formal understanding of languages that comes through teaching and translating has profound effects on both authors' writing; it gives both Mallarmé's poetry and Beckett's prose and poetry exactitude, translucency, control, compression, depths of resonance and emotion under the lucid syntax and the pitch-perfect lexicon – qualities sought by any writer perhaps, but above all by those who do not seek to apply language to representing a world out there but are attempting to create worlds with language in texts made as literature.

Beckett made frequent references to the talismanic line, 'le vide papier que la blancheur défend' ['the empty paper, defended by its own whiteness'],¹⁰ and in 1932, when he was reading Mallarmé's famous achievements of formal perfection, he railed in a letter to his friend Thomas MacGreevy in most revealing terms:

I don't know why the Jesuitical poem that is an end in itself and justifies all the means should disgust me so much. But it does – again – more & more. I was trying to like Mallarmé again the other day, & couldn't, because it's Jesuitical poetry [...] I suppose I'm a dirty low-church P.[rotestant] even in poetry, concerned with integrity in a surplice. I'm in mourning for the integrity of a *pendu's* emission of semen, what I find in Homer & Dante & Racine & sometimes Rimbaud, the integrity of the eyelids coming down before the brain knows of grit in the wind.¹¹

In some of his essays, and in his lesser-known writings, including the works on the English language, Mallarmé shows an analogous desire for this erotics of language, a sense of language as sound, as music, as havoc, as nonsense, an understanding of modes of communication that defy semantics and prick and kick with life, as Beckett in his drama and fiction – however much the two poets dwell on the freezing of life or the ebbing of vitality.

10 'Brise marine', in Stéphane Mallarmé, *Mallarmé*, ed. and trans. by Anthony Hartley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 29. See James and Elizabeth Knowlson (eds), *Beckett Remembering/Remembering Beckett: Uncollected Interviews with Samuel Beckett & Memories of Those Who Knew Him* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 217.

11 Quoted in Dan Gunn, 'Until the Gag is Chewed: Samuel Beckett's Letters, Eloquence and "Near Speechlessness"', *Times Literary Supplement* (21 April 2006), p. 14.

Chronically short of money, with two small children at home, and assailed by highly unfavourable reports for his classes as an English teacher, Mallarmé began looking for different ways to support his family, and undertook a series of schemes; around 1870 he was advertising home tutoring and inviting young people to join a reading group *chez lui* on the rue de Moscou. Four years later, he began his magazine *La Dernière Mode: gazette du monde et de la famille* [*The Latest Fashion: A Magazine for Society and the Family*] which focused on a niche market: fashion for children. It reveals an unexpected entrepreneurial flair in the poet, but his developed sense of consumer trends was too far ahead of its time, and after eight issues Mallarmé ceased his activities as an editor of fashion (see *OC*, II, pp. 485–654, 1712–19).¹²

The next phase of Mallarmé's moonlighting activities brought him back to his work as an English schoolteacher: he translated and taught English, and was so involved in aesthetics and semantics that he composed several rare and eccentric works on the language, proposing to the bookseller Truchy a sequence of English primers. The first of these, *Les Mots anglais* [*English Words*], was compiled around 1875 and published in 1877. It did not fly off the shelves and Truchy broke his agreement to bring out the next instalments of Mallarmé's pedagogical enterprise, *Recueil de 'Nursery Rhymes'* [*Collection of Nursery Rhymes*] and *Thèmes anglais* [*English Translations*], and, even more copious and astonishing in its range and learning, the unfinished book on literature in English (see *OC*, II, pp. 937–1345).¹³

Mallarmé's two attempts in the years 1875–82 to make some money (the children's magazine and the English lessons) are linked through his

12 See also Damian Catani, 'Consumerism and the Discourse of Fashion in Mallarmé's *La Dernière Mode*', *Mots pluriels*, 10 (May 1999).

13 The editor, Bertrand Marchal, has reorganized all the poet's writings on English language under the umbrella title *Les Mots anglais*; this organization differs from preceding editors, whose texts he has used: *Les Mots anglais*, in *OC* 1945; *Thèmes anglais pour toutes les grammaires* (retitled by Marchal, *Dossier des 'Mots anglais'*) (Paris: Gallimard, 1937); and *Recueil des 'Nursery Rhymes'*, ed. by Carl Paul Barbier (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).

implied readers (family and children) and the unexpected spaces of reading he imagines (the domestic parlour, the nursery, the park) where female presences traditionally set the mood. Writing in *La Dernière Mode* about jewellery and wedding presents, Mallarmé adopted female pseudonyms. One was 'Miss Satin' with more than a touch of the boudoir. Another, looking forward even more suggestively to Proust's *mondanité*, was Mme Marguerite de Ponty. In the magazine, Mallarmé included dressmaking patterns for the height of juvenile elegance, recipes for picnic outings, tips on achieving colour in the August garden border in the English style, and advice on what to wear when going to a concert in the open air: 'Toilette de Concert-Promenade: 1er Juillet 1874 – Le jupon et la taille décolletée, en poulte-de-soie saumon; le tablier, garni de deux rangées de volants à plis plats' (*OC*, II, p. 507) ['Costume for a promenade concert: 1 July 1874 – Skirt and waist *décolletée* in salmon-pink *poulte-de-soie*; apron with two rows of flounces with flat pleats'].¹⁴

With this adopted voice, Mallarmé dazzlingly impersonates an *haute bourgeoise* [upper middle-class lady] as he compiles an early version of today's fashion magazine or lifestyle supplement. But in order to bring about the amazing feat of eight complete issues, Mallarmé was also deeply involved imaginatively in the enterprise, and it can be associated with his *vers d'occasion* [occasional verses] on fans, trinkets and *bibelots* [knick-knacks]. More importantly, his children were young at the time: his daughter Geneviève, born in 1864, was ten and his son Anatole, born seven years later, still a toddler. It is easy to sense that the pair were his secret sharers, his interlocutors and his best listeners – he was trying to turn family interests and activities into a source of revenue in rather the same way as parents today often take up writing books for children to make ends meet.¹⁵ Mallarmé was serious when he made recommendations about clothes: he regularly

14 Stéphane Mallarmé, *Mallarmé on Fashion: A Translation of the Fashion Magazine, La Dernière Mode, with Commentary*, trans. by P. N. Furbank and Alex Cain (Oxford: Berg, 2004), p. 43. Adam Watt informs me that 'poulte-de-soie' may originate from 'paduasoy, a kind of serge from Padua.'

15 When my son was young, I was inspired by the questions he was asking to make up a series of little story-books.

wrote a column of replies to his young correspondents – addressing one as ‘Ma mignonne’ (*OC*, II, p. 653) [‘my dear’ (*Mallarmé on Fashion*, p. 207)] so he must have known her – and making a heartfelt appeal: ‘Mères, tout en menant votre fille chez la faiseuse, votre fils chez le tailleur, essayez que l’un et l’autre gardent la grâce transitoire de leur âge, et que l’adolescence soit longtemps l’enfance’ (pp. 653–54) [‘Mothers, when you take your daughter to the dressmaker or your son to the tailor, do your best to see they preserve the fleeting grace of their age and that their adolescence remains childhood for a long time’ (p. 207)]. I suggest that here again one can hear the voice of a father trying to hold back his daughter’s growing up, and sense the mixed feelings of dismay and pride when she appears in a new outfit looking desirable.

Mallarmé’s concern to stave off adolescence can throw light on his attraction to nursery rhymes, which he began to collect and gloss in idiosyncratic commentaries, mock earnest passages that expand learnedly on the possible scenario evoked in the mysterious verses, accompanied by scrupulous grammatical notes.¹⁶ He is communicating too at a level of acoustic play, the patter and babble that unites children and parents, a form of communication that springs free of rational rhetorical control – or at least gives the impression of doing so – and thus can come closer to expressing the passionate imagination.¹⁷ This is language in action before it becomes intelligible, and it is intertwined with mourning, both in Mallarmé and, later, in Beckett.

The work on nursery rhymes was abandoned at some point after Truchy made it clear that he would not issue it, and it first appeared in print in 1964, in an edition which I found at a *bouquiniste* [second-hand bookseller] on the *quais* [banks of the Seine] in Paris that year, when I was reading French at Oxford. It fascinated me that Mallarmé had bothered with this common store of ditties, nonsense songs and simple verse; above all, the editor’s note

16 Mallarmé included 106 nursery rhymes and eight nonsense songs in ‘Nursery Rhymes’; reprinted in *OC*, II, 1254–329, 1798–99.

17 Adam Piette, *Remembering and the Sound of Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 249.

that the poet had used nursery rhymes in class to pass on the rules of the English language gave me an insight into the importance of patterning, sound and rhythm in learning to speak in the first place. Seamus Heaney has remarked how, when working on translations, he hears the tune of the unfamiliar tongue at the back of his own ear until he wants 'to hum along'.¹⁸ So it seemed to me admirably original and inspired of Mallarmé to get his class of twelve-year-old *lycéens* to drum out in chorus:

Liar, liar lick spit;
Your tongue shall be slit,
And all the dogs in the town
Shall have a little bit. (*OC*, II, p. 1281)

'Menteur avale ta salive', wrote Mallarmé in his rendering – creating a palindromic alliteration in his most virtuoso style. But the inspector of schools who was visiting his class did not agree with Mallarmé's methods; their eccentricity was intolerable, he declared, and Mallarmé received one of the most damning reports on his performance as a teacher in a teaching career that at best limped along. The inspector remarked: 'Puisque M. Mallarmé reste professeur d'anglais au lycée Fontanes, qu'il apprenne l'anglais; [...] qu'il ne leur dicte pas [...] des niaiseries [...] On serait tenté de se demander si l'on n'est pas en présence d'un malade' (*Nursery Rhymes*, p. 13) ['Since M. Mallarmé remains a teacher of English at the Lycée Fontanes, let him learn English [and] not dictate nonsense [to the pupils] [...] One is tempted to ask if one is not in the presence of someone sick'].¹⁹

18 Seamus Heaney, 'Introduction', in *The Testament of Crisseid and Seven Fables by Robert Henryson*, trans. by Seamus Heaney (London: Faber, 2009), pp. xiii.

19 It is a clue, however, to Mallarmé's other pedagogical masterpieces that 'Liar, liar lick spit' is not the opening of the version that most English children know, which opens more usually: 'Tell tale tit'. See Peter and Iona Opie, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 189–90. When I gave this paper in Dublin on 8 April 2006, Prof. David Simms remembered that in India in the late 1930s his *ayah* taught him a variation beginning, 'Liar liar lip stick', which strongly suggests that the version Mallarmé quotes circulated very far afield.

1880, the year of this unfortunate inspection, was the year after Mallarmé's son Anatole died and the poet was writing an epitaph for him, a broken fugue of fragments, called *Pour un tombeau d'Anatole* [*For Anatole's Tomb*], which he eventually abandoned unfinished after many years' work. The eight-year-old Anatole was much closer to the age when a child learns and enjoys nursery rhymes than the schoolboys whom Mallarmé was teaching; the inspector's disgust was picking up on the twist and irony that adolescents bring to children's games.

Pour un tombeau d'Anatole conveys in every line the depths of Mallarmé's love for his lost child, his 'fureur contre l'informe' ['fury against formlessness'] that a death at such a young age represents.²⁰ Patrick McGuinness has produced a beautiful dual-language edition and translation of these ruinous and visionary fragments, which Mallarmé was creating during the time he was compiling his English lessons and after. In the poem, ghosts of games played together can be glimpsed in lines about the child's room, his toys and his things. For example, thinking about the funeral ceremony, Mallarmé drafts these notes: 'Sous-entendre peut-être la cérémonie – pompes funèbres etc – bref ce qu'a vu le monde – (enterrement messe? pour ramener cela à l'intimité – la chambre – vide – absence – ouverte – le moment où son absence finit pour qu'il soit en nous – [...]) il ne jouera plus – ' (*For Anatole's Tomb*, pp. 60–61) ['perhaps imply the ceremony – funeral, etc. – in short what the world saw – (burial mass? to bring it all back to intimacy – the room – empty – absence – open – the moment when his absence ends so that he can be in us – [...]) il ne jouera plus – ' (*For Anatole's Tomb*, p. 61)]. The undertow of this beloved child's absence pulls on Mallarmé's *Nursery Rhymes*, for the imagined audience is a young child, and the scene intimate, domestic and playful, even sly, very far

20 Patrick McGuinness, 'Introduction' to Stéphane Mallarmé, *For Anatole's Tomb*, trans. and ed. by Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Carcanet, 2006), pp. 2–3. Guinness comments in an Afterword: 'One of Mallarmé's many struggles in his projected poem is with the world of things, of matter – the boy's clothes, his room, his bed, toys left in mid-play, the flat. The child's games too are "forever unfinished", and in one of the sheets for the *tombeau*, the moment the child stops playing is invested with special poetic significance' (p. 82).

from the rough and tumble of a *lycée* classroom – and even farther from the austere control of the poet of carved hermetic symbolism. But the presence of children in Mallarmé's imaginary, accompanied by his anguished loss of Anatole, helps to illuminate a puzzling characteristic of the translations he made – they are cast as a dialogue between a child and a mother who speaks as a wise counsellor, a fussy moral mentor, a storyteller. If you were told the work had been written by a woman, you would not be surprised; the projected persona of the speaker, like Marguerite de Ponty, is a Mallarméan female alter ego. For example, Lesson 14 begins:

The captain was a duck,
With a packet on his back;
And when the ship began to move,
The captain said: Quack, quack. (*OC*, II, p. 1262)

The accompanying *thème* then opens a conversation *à trois*:

'Et le capitaine, qui était-ce? Un canard, avec un paquet sur le dos. Qu'y avait-il dedans?' 'Gourmand, cette fois il y avait des dragées. – Tout le monde lui obéissait, et quand il disait: "Quack! Quack!" et rien de plus, aussitôt le vaisseau commençait à se mouvoir. Vois-tu maintenant ce beau vaisseau?' – 'Oui, mère, dans le pays des contes.' (*OC*, II, p. 1262)

Here translated recently by the American poet John Ashbery:

['And the captain, who was he? A duck, with a packet on his back. What was inside it?' 'Greedy boy, this time there were sugar almonds. – Everyone obeyed him, and when he said, "Quack! Quack!" and nothing more, the ship began to move. Do you see it now, that beautiful ship?' – 'Yes, Mother, in the land of fairy tales.']*²¹

In Lesson 11 earlier, there had appeared another dream ship, when Mallarmé glosses 'I saw a ship a-sailing / A-sailing on the sea' through the child and mother exchanging responses:

21 John Ashbery (ed. and trans.), 'Stéphane Mallarmé: Nursery Rhymes', in *Conjunctions*, 45, 'Secret Lives of Children', ed. by Brad Morrow (2005), pp. 376–77.

Quel beau vaisseau! – Je ne le vois pas. – Un vaisseau naviguant sur la mer. – Penses-tu, maman, qu'il est tout chargé de jolies choses pour moi? Surtout de bonbons? – Peut-être. – Je ne l'ai pas encore vu. – Ferme tes yeux et écoute-moi chanter, alors tu l'apercevras, avec tout ce qu'il contient. (*OC*, II, p. 1260)

[What a beautiful ship! – I don't see it. – A ship, sailing on the sea. – Mama, do you think it's laden with pretty things for me? Candies, especially? Perhaps. – I still haven't seen it. Close your eyes and listen to me singing, then you'll see it, along with everything it contains. (Ashbery, p. 375)]

Nursery Rhymes has recently attracted more curiosity. In 2005, when Ashbery selected a handful of Mallarmé's versions to translate, he made a high claim in his Preface: 'Today, of course, no one is concerned about Mallarmé's effectiveness as a pedagogue. What might matter to us with regard to these long-forgotten exercises is the brilliant fragments of prose poetry resulting from his sometimes straightforward, sometimes fanciful, translation of the nursery rhymes' (pp. 370–71). He goes on: *Nursery Rhymes* is of the greatest interest when it 'announces motifs that will be developed later on in his poetry' (p. 371).

The imaginary beautiful ship in both the passages quoted earlier takes shape in the mind's eye – in the *pays des contes* [fairytale land] – as the words evoking it fall on the child's ear. Such envisioning, exchanged between one imagination and another, offers, albeit in a different register, a faint premonition of Mallarmé's seascapes to come, his marine tableaux, such as 'À la nue accablante tu' (*Mallarmé*, p. 101) ['Kept silent to the overwhelming cloud...'].

Ashbery singles out the riddle song, quoted by Mallarmé in English and left untranslated:

I had four brothers over the sea,
And they each sent a present to me.

The first sent a goose without a bone,
The second sent a cherry without a stone,
The third sent a blanket without a thread,
The fourth sent a book that no man could read. (Ashbery, p. 380)

The verses are followed by the solution, and as Ashbery notices, at this point, Mallarmé's dramatic dialogue turns personal: 'Le livre qu'on m'a promis est encore sous presse. – Personne, alors, ne pouvait le lire' (*OC*, II, p. 1268) ['The book I was promised is still in the press. – Thus, no one could read it' (p. 381)]. He is talking, Ashbery thinks, more broadly about his own fate as a writer who could not be sure he would ever emerge from the presses or be read when he had. The book that no one can read also foreshadows the prose poem 'Le livre, instrument spirituel' (1897) ['The book, spiritual instrument'], in which the book is called 'le miniscule tombeau [...] de l'âme' ['the soul's [...] minute tomb'].²² The nursery rhymes Mallarmé selected come from anthologies he found at Truchy's, by Laetitia Barbauld, Walter Crane (*The Baby's Bouquet*) and Kate Greenaway. In all three cases, the editor or illustrator depended heavily on *Mother Goose's Melody*, the pioneering collection that Oliver Goldsmith put together in 1780.²³ In his own selection, Mallarmé slips easily into the role of a Mother Goose in a similar spirit to Goldsmith, at several points catching very accurately the mingling of jocularly and sententiousness in his predecessor's adopted voice. For example, Mallarmé includes:

There was an old woman tossed up in a blanket,
Seventeen times as high as the moon;
Where she was going I could not but ask it,
For in her hand she carried a broom. (*OC*, II, pp. 1269–70)

He then comments:

Qu'on fait, la nuit de Noël, les méchants polissons du village? Ils ont rencontré une pauvre vieille qui portait un balai, et qui allait, où? [...] Tous, bien sûr, l'ont prise pour une sorcière, quoiqu'un garçon de douze ans doive aujourd'hui savoir qu'il n'en existe pas, il l'on[t] mise sur une couverture, et l'ont bernée. (*OC*, II, p. 1270)

22 *Mallarmé*, pp. 189–96 (p. 190), quoted in Roger Pearson, *Unfolding Mallarmé: The Development of a Poetic Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 302.

23 See William H. Whitmore (ed.), *The Original Mother Goose's Melody* (Boston, MA: Darnrell & Upham, 1892); see also Everett F. Bleiler (ed.), *Mother Goose's Melodies* (New York: Dover, 1970).

[What did they do, that Christmas night, those naughty rascallions of the village? They met a poor old woman who was carrying a broom, and who was going, where? [...] They all took her for a witch, of course, even though a twelve-year-old boy today should know that they don't exist, but they put her in a blanket and tossed her. (My translation)]

In the following Lesson 26, Mallarmé quotes the next stanza of the nursery rhyme:

'Old woman, old woman, old woman, quoth I;
O whither, o whither, o whither so high?'
'To sweep the cobwebs from the sky,
And I'll be with you by-and-by!' (*OC*, II, p. 1270)

He then retracts the story: the old woman had only dreamed she was tossed in a blanket, he assures his audience, and the rough boys never harmed her and she was only having nightmares. He closes: 'Ainsi ne blamez plus, comme vous le fîtes d'abord, vos camarades, les garçons du village' ['So don't blame your friends the boys from the village, as you did before' (my translation)].

Many things can be heard in this passage: a desire to soothe, to allay fears that the world is violent and that very strange things happen. Mallarmé introduces a normative, rationalizing commentary: there are no rough boys, he is saying, or not among your friends anyway, and old women have bad dreams, but all those stories about witches need not be credited because first there are none and secondly they are not persecuted. Ashbery shuns these examples in Mallarmé's *Nursery Rhymes*, with harsh strictures on such words of comfort and piety. He sounds surprised that Mallarmé could be so moralizingly didactic.

Mallarmé has not left any clues to his reasons for preferring one rhyme over another, but Ashbery is right to stress that his work on English nursery rhymes is filled with enigmas and double meanings, jokes and fanciful obscure nonsense, with puns and other wordplay; rhyme and metre, rhythm and sometimes melody bind the words and phrases together indissolubly conferring a different kind of sense than intelligible semantic meaning – hence the synonym, 'nonsense song'. Such verses catch at the mind through

charmed images arranged in riddling sequences that often defy explanation – when Mallarmé amuses himself by extrapolating miniature scenarios and edifying axioms, he is parodying with fine wit and a pinch of malice his own fumbling readers who always want to know what something means.²⁴ Nevertheless, reading the *Nursery Rhymes*, it becomes a little less surprising that the highly wrought, metaphysical Mallarméan aesthetic should draw energy from this anonymous vulgar tradition, and the high artificer plumb the artlessness of vernacular forms. Mallarmé himself uses some popular metres and rhyme schemes, and in an early virtuoso piece of 1862, written in collaboration with Emmanuel des Essarts, he borrowed the nursery song ‘Il était un petit navire’ [‘Once there was a little ship’] to produce a merry, tongue-in-cheek and Carrollian picture of a band of friends setting out for a day in the country:

LE CARREFOUR DES DEMOISELLES ou L'ABSENCE DU LANCIER ou LE TRIOMPHE DE LA PRÉVOYANCE.

Fait en collaboration avec les Oiseaux, les Pâtés, les Fraises et les Arbres.

Par Stéphane Mallarmé [et] Emmanuel des Essarts

C'était une illustre partie
Des gens bien vêtus et bien nés

Neuf parisiens sans apathie
Intelligents et vaccinés [...]

Tous gambadaient comme des chèvres
De bloc en bloc, de roc en roc;

Les mots mazurkaient sur les lèvres
Tantôt tic-tac, tantôt toc-toc.²⁵

24 See Daniel Tiffany, *Infidel Poetics: Riddles, Nightlife, Substance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 216–30.

25 See <http://mallarme.direz.fr/Mallarme/CarrefourDesDemoselles>; the Musée départemental Stéphane Mallarmé, Vulaines-sur-Seine, held an exhibition on the promenade, 29 April–30 July 2007.

[THE YOUNG LADIES' CROSSROADS or THE ABSENCE OF THE
LANCER or THE TRIUMPH OF FORESIGHT.

Made in collaboration with the birds, pâtés, strawberries and trees.

By Stéphane Mallarmé and Emmanuel des Essarts.

An illustrious gathering it was,
Everyone well dressed and well-born.

Nine Parisians wholly motivated,
Intelligent and vaccinated. [...]

Like goats they gambolled every one
From block to block, from rock to rock

Words tripped mazurkas from their lips,
Now tum-tee-tum, now tee-tum-tee. (my translation)]

And so on, 34 couplets in all, to an intricate and sustained patterning of *rimes croisées* [criss-cross rhymes] (Pearson, p. 22, n. 7).²⁶

Daniel Tiffany, a poet writing in California a generation after Ashbery, gives the *Nursery Rhymes* fine attention in his book *Infidel Poetics* (2009) (pp. 216–30), taking the work as a key to Mallarmé's celebrated lines in 'Le tombeau d'Edgar Poe' (1875) ['The tomb of Edgar Poe']:

Eux, comme un vil sursaut d'hydre oyant jadis l'ange
Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu (*Mallarmé*, p. 90)

[They, like a hydra vilely starting up on hearing the angel long ago give a purer meaning to the words of the tribe (*Mallarmé*, p. 90)]

For Tiffany these lines do not imply that the words of the tribe need to be purified, but that the angel can alert us to their intrinsic purity and lead us to listen to them more carefully; that is, Mallarmé is not setting up an irreconcilable opposition between language of the streets and poetic expression, as commonly interpreted, since Poe himself above all communicated

26 Pearson also comments that the *rimes croisées* reproduce 'the excitement of mixed company' (p. 27).

in an urban idiom of modern experience, and adapted vernacular metres, ballad form and song. The attraction Poe exerted over Mallarmé drew the French poet into his earliest experiments in translating from English: he wanted to follow where Baudelaire had led and render Poe's verse.

In the talk he gave in Oxford in 1894, 'La Musique et les lettres' ['Music and Letters'], Mallarmé urges all writers to turn to the vernacular:

que l'interprète, par gageure, ni même en virtuose, mais charitablement, aille comme matériaux pour rendre l'illusion, choisir les mots, les aptes mots, de l'école, du logis et du marché. Le vers va s'émouvoir de quelque balancement, terrible et suave [...] Là-bas, où que ce soit, nier l'indicible, qui ment. (*OC*, II, p. 73)²⁷

Mallarmé's failures as a teacher of English in the classroom or pedagogical entrepreneur did not stem from lack of effort or poverty of inspiration: he created an ingenious twelve-sided toy box, a cross between a pop-up book and a slide rule, to teach some basic usage of the language. 'L'Anglais récréatif ou Boîte pour apprendre l'anglais en jouant et seul' ['Recreational English, or Box to learn English when playing alone'] includes a portrait of the *professeur* in the white tie and tails of a conjuror, with his hand in a top hat as if about to pull out a stream of coloured handkerchiefs or a rabbit (see Figure 1). In his left hand is a cane – or a wand – his hair is puffed up on top and very long at the back, and his tongue is stuck out like that of the *croquemitaine* or bogeyman of French nursery folklore. But here, he urges 'Imitez et prononcez' (*OC*, II, p. 1331) ['Imitate and enunciate'] – and gives precise and indeed accurate instructions in how to pronounce the trickily different sorts of *th* sounds in English.

27 For the version he uses, Tiffany cites Mary Ann Caws's translation in *Mallarmé: Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York: New Directions, 1982), p. 54: 'The disinterested poet [...] must project his vision of the world and use the language of the school, home, and market place [...] Then poetry will be lifted to some frightening, wavering, ecstatic pitch [...] Wherever you find it, you must deny the ineffable; for somehow it will speak' (Tiffany, p. 219).



Figure 1 Stéphane Mallarmé, 'L'Anglais récréatif ou Boîte pour apprendre l'anglais en jouant et seul'. Photograph by Suzanne Nagy.

By kind permission of the Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris.

Other sides of the 'Boîte' include tabs to pull and discs to revolve in order to learn how to count, how to get words in the correct order, how to conjugate verbs and how to tell the time. One page verges into a Mallarméan still life as poem: under the title 'Le papillon et la fleur' ['The butterfly and the flower'], he draws a flower pot and a butterfly and scatters prepositions on the surrounding blank page to illustrate the use of 'over', 'far', 'towards', 'down' and so forth (OC, II, p. 1342, see Figure 2). Tiffany is so entranced by this Mallarméan word-object that he comments: 'One would also want to suggest that the "English Box", by virtue of its properties as an illusionistic device, is also a *poetry machine* – a toy medium revealing an undiscovered grammar of ordinary language' (Tiffany, p. 223).

After *Les Mots anglais* and *Nursery Rhymes*, Mallarmé compiled the vast essay *Thèmes anglais*, which consists of a wondrous gathering of a thousand English phrases, proverbs, adages and saws, each conscientiously marshalled in order to illustrate a rule of English grammar: first the definite article, then the indefinite, first the possessive pronoun, then the relative pronoun, etc.²⁸ He also drew on handbooks he came upon, and in effect gleaned a myriad eccentric equivalents to 'My postilion has been struck by lightning', regardless of current usage.²⁹

The contrast between the austere dry objective of the examples and their fantastical oddity, the disjunction between the scrupulous lexical and grammatical rigour and the free-association semantic chain of words, achieve an exhilarating absurdity of effect. A native speaker of English would know precious few of these locutions at best, and use them – never. Some of the proverbs he cites were obsolete by the seventeenth century, and even such appealing phrases as 'Who can shave an egg?' must surely have been peculiar in the 1880s.

28 *Dossier des 'Mots anglais'*, OC, II, pp. 1141–253; Martin Smith, 'Shaving Eggs?' [Letter], *Times Literary Supplement* (14 March 2008) has suggested that Mallarmé might have been back-translating from French into English, hence the oddity of the phrases, for example from the proverbial phrase for a skinflint, *pondre un oeuf*. But the poet gives French versions of all his examples rendering 'Who can shave an egg?' as 'Qui peut raser un oeuf?'

29 Mallarmé's principal source for English usage was Henry G. Bohn, *A Handbook of Proverbs, Comprising an Entire Republication of Ray's Collection of English Proverbs* (London: H. G. Bohn's Antiquarian Library, Bell & Dalby, 1867); see notes to *Dossier des 'Mots anglais'*, OC, II, p. 1796.