

## MALLARME, STEPHANE

**Stephane Mallarme and his importance.** Stephane Mallarmé (1842-1898) was a French Symbolist poet, deeply influenced by Charles Baudelaire, who carried the abstract and futurist possibilities of lyric poetry to a new level, where they anticipate many currents of thought and art which will dominate French literature in the twentieth century.

**Mallarmé, Life and Works.** Mallarme was born in Paris, son of a civil servant. He was an excellent student, excelling in languages and writing, and showing from childhood remarkable promise. He got his baccalaureat degree in 1860, and had his first poem published two years later. From that point on we would say that he led a relatively quiet life. In 1883, when he was forty one, he married a German governess, with whom he had one daughter. The career element of Mallarme's life consisted of teaching English—or rather teaching French in England, which he had visited and where he had studied, and English in France, which was his primary bread winning activity. He began his teaching in Tournon, to which he ultimately returned, after spending the bulk of his work life in Paris. It was in Paris that he became known for his remarkable literary salon, which met on Tuesdays—hence acquiring for its members the name 'les Mardistes', those who 'Meet on Tuesday.' That gathering point became an attractive venue for many of the finest writers of the time—Andre Gide, W. B. Yeats, Rainer Maria Rilke, Paul Valéry—and it was in this setting, as well as in his writings, that Mallarme began to impose himself as the leader of the Symbolist Movement.

**The Work of Mallarmé.** Mallarmé was deeply influenced by the works of the Pre-Raphaelites in England, of Baudelaire, of Verlaine, and of Edgar Allen Poe, some of whose works he (like Baudelaire) translated into French. (The power of sonority, in Poe's mesmerizing poetry, attracted both of these Frenchmen, and led, through them, into 20 th century adventures if verse which could not have been imagined fifty years earlier, among the first generation of Romantics.) But Mallarmé had an elliptical mind which placed him in a category of his own; he deliberately encouraged obscurity in his writing, and he virtually ignored expected patterns of syntax. He wrote that "a poem must be an enigma for the vulgar, chamber music for the initiated." (These same sentiments had been formulated in spades by Baudelaire, for whom, as he said, 'copulation is the poetry of the masses.')

Mallarmé's desire to "free poetry from matter and to suggest, by means of sounds and images, our subconscious thoughts and feelings,, accounts for the obscurity of his prose and verse." Almost every one of his poems is built around a single image or metaphor, around which is grouped a cluster of subordinate images which help to develop the central idea. Mallarmé's most important volumes are *The Afternoon of a Faun* (1876), *Verse and Prose* (1893), a collection of some of his earlier pieces, and *Divagations* (1897), a book of prose containing many of his aesthetic theories. In *The Afternoon of a Faun* (to accompany which Debussy composed his tone poem of the same name) a faun gives voice to his amorous longings—"a dream of desire told at length"; and in "The Swan" Mallarmé symbolizes the "cold and sterile poet." We are very far, now, from the softness, passion, and romance of the poetry of the early Romantics like de Musset and Alphonse de Lamartine.

### Reading

#### **Primary source reading**

*Collected Poems*, tr. Weinfield, 1996.

#### **Secondary source reading**

Lloyd, R., *Mallarmé: The Poet and his Circle*, 1999.

#### **Further reading**

Johnson, Barbara, *A World of Difference*, 1982.

### ***Original language reading***

Richard, Jean-Pierre, *L'univers imaginaire de Mallarmé*, 1961.

### **Suggested paper topics**

What seems to drive Mallarmé's poetry toward the absolutely pure? When you review the poetry of Lamartine, Hugo, or de Musset you find much repetition, much rhetoric. Was Mallarmé pressing to free poetry of such verbal baggage?

Does Mallarmé's poetry provide a natural cross over point into music? Listen to Debussy. Can you hear some search for the kind of purity that haunts Mallarmé? Is it more than a metaphor, to speak of the music of poetry?

**Excerpt** <http://www.qotd.org/search/search.html?aid=6410>

A throw of the dice will never abolish chance.

Dreams have as much influence as actions

Every soul is a melody which needs renewing.

In a museum in London there is an exhibit called "The Value of Man": a long coffinlike box with lots of compartments where they've put starch — phosphorus — flour — bottles of water and alcohol — and big pieces of gelatin. I am a man like that.

In reading, a lonely quiet concert is given to our minds; all our mental faculties will be present in this symphonic exaltation

It is in front of the paper that the artist creates himself.

That virgin, vital, beautiful day: today.

The flesh is sorrowful, alas! And I've read all the books

The poetic act consists in suddenly seeing that an idea splits into a number of motives of equal value and in grouping them; they rhyme.

The work of pure poetry implies the elocutionary disappearance of the poet, who yields the initiative to words.

The world was made in order to result in a beautiful book.

We do not write poems with ideas, but with words.

Yes, I know, we are merely empty forms of matter, but we are indeed sublime in having invented God and our soul. So sublime, my friend, that I want to gaze upon matter, fully conscious that it exists, and yet launching itself madly into Dream, despite its knowledge that Dream has no existence, extolling the Soul and all the divine impressions of that kind which have collected within us from the beginning of time and proclaiming, in the face of the Void which is truth, these glorious lies!