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PROSE REDEEMED

There always comes a time when one is tempted to say: *nothing took place*. This moment is Mallarméan. It is not to be confused with the moment of the philosopher who says: *what you believe, it did not take place, but actually something else did*. Think of Plato. The dialogues, after all, describe an Athenian world where the Peloponnesian war, the plague and the reign of the thirty tyrants did not take place. Therefore, what Plato had seen with his very eyes, and which Thucydides considered to be more important than the war in Troy or the Mediterranean wars, is never spoken of. Of course this depends on a decision. Counter to Thucydides, whom in all likelihood he read, and Xenophon, Thucydides' successor, with whom he was no doubt familiar, Plato only recognizes the life and death of Socrates as having taken place. The plague never happened, but Socrates did, and this is the pattern of a large number of philosophical propositions—whatever names are substituted for those of the Plague or Socrates, since the names often change. Whether Platonists or not in general, philosophers always tend to be so in this respect, and nothing is so pleasing to them as the shifting of emphasis, granting or removing the mark of having taken place depending on their temperament.

But Mallarmé is an entirely different matter.¹ He says that nothing took place. The thesis is explicit in *A throw of the dice...* and I would argue that it is articulated in a way that is as distinct as it is obscure in the sonnet *The Virginal...* The 19th century did not take place, declares Mallarmé; none of its unforgettable crises (crises of verse or social crises) happened. On this basis, poetry alone may take place: as a Book, if the Book was able to exist, and if it does not exist (which is the thesis of *A throw of the dice...*), then as a verse. For there is only ever one verse: the verse that is said, in the moment that it is said. This is why, in the absence of being able

1. Translator's note: all translations of Mallarmé are taken from *Stéphane Mallarmé, Collected Poems and Other Verse*, trans. E.H and A.M Blackmore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and *Divagations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) except where I have translated them directly as indicated by a reference to the French text.

to establish the Book as an institution of reading and ceaseless diction, those who wish to declare to the universe that poetry is nevertheless possible cannot avoid indefinitely delaying, by way of numerous parenthesis, without a further thought for the Alexandrine twelve, the concluding stance of his last syntagm—"Throw of the dice"—replying to the distant first—"never." Much like the dice, whose being is decided in the very moment that it is thrown, however long it tumbles.

Such a position rests on a doctrine of poetry. That is to say, on a doctrine of prose. Mallarmé's doctrine, a phenomenology of verse, is well known: its first figure, Hugo, thought that prose spoke with eloquence about history and philosophy: "all prose, philosophy, eloquence, history"²; In short, prose eloquently *says* what takes place (history) in light of all possible knowledge (philosophy); therefore if poetry is to say something, it must thus say what takes place, otherwise it says nothing. Yet, for Hugo, poetry does say something. Consequently he believed that it was the duty of poetry to commandeer the entire domain of prose. The axiom is clear; prose speaks of what takes place.

Mallarmé does not accept this: insofar as it speaks of what takes place, prose is in the end identical to the newspaper. For what takes place adheres to the form of a day (virginal, vibrant and beautiful); it was Hugo's belief that this day was that of the uprising (the one depicted in *Les Misérables*), but for the true modernists (following Baudelaire, the second figure, the grieving figure, but also despite Baudelaire, because of the futility of grief) there is no such day and no uprising (except "in view of every result that is non human"³). If there is no uprising, not even its defeat, then the day (virginal, vibrant and beautiful) is nothing; in being nothing, it is indistinguishable from Fashion. Every actual newspaper, insofar it claims to pertain to the day, and therefore all prose, the newspaper being its catchment, is the *Latest Fashion*, the real grimace of the beautiful day. All that takes place falls under this prescription; since it speaks of what takes place and even when it thinks it is discussing history and philosophy, the most eloquent prose speaks of nothing but fineries, maraschinos and dutiful Negresses from Bengal. Prose alone speaks of what takes place, yet it does so as the newspaper, but the newspaper does not speak and nothing in it takes place. Consequently, if there is no day (and there is not) then prose never says anything.

We can see why, in the wake of *Rue de Rome*,⁴ Gide would place his own prose and the novel (where the novel of voyages represents all possible novels) under the spell of Urien, who shares his initial letter with Ulysses (every novel is an Odyssey) while his last presents the void as the secret nothingness of prose. To say nothing of *Paludes*, '*pas-lu-de-romans*' [the novels un-read]. Or *Journal*, whose title is indebted more to Mallarmé than to Amiel.

2. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres Complètes, tome 2* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003) 205.

3. Mallarmé, *Stéphane Mallarmé, Collected Poems and Other Verse*, trans. E.H and A.M Blackmore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 179.

4. TN: the Rue de Rome was Mallarmé's residence in Paris on the Rue de Rome and was a literary salon that Gide and Valéry, amongst others, attended.

We can see how, in the wake of *Rue de Rome*, Valéry could become the faithful servant of illusions, and of the most meagre one of all: the Third Republic, precisely because he shared exactly the same belief about it as Maurras.

By granting that any given thing takes place, poetry will inevitably collapse into the newspaper, and the latter into Fashion; the latest Fashion, as the truth of the Legend of the Centuries. Only a decision that is absolute allows poetry to distance itself, a distance that is infinite: “on high perhaps as far away as a place merges with the beyond...a constellation, etc.”⁵ If the newspaper speaks of what takes place, then it must be said that, on the basis of poetry, nothing takes place. 1830 did not take place, or 1848, or 1870, or 1871, or anything at all. “There is no present, no—a present does not exist.”⁶ Hence the days meld into one another; and none may be said to be virginal, vibrant and beautiful; today is nonexistent. This is what Mallarmé calls boredom.

The place of poetry is described as “cold with neglect and disuse.”⁷ As far as poetry is concerned, prose speaks of the everyday and is no different from the newspaper. But the newspaper never says anything that goes beyond the latest Fashion and the everyday is nothingness (“headlines whose task it is to propagate faith in the nothingness that is the everyday”⁸). Therefore, poetry must say something different. It is not enough that it does so in a different manner, what it speaks of must be different. It must speak in a different way of something different. But this something different is by definition what does not take place. It is all the more so because it does not take place. Taken from Plato, by way of Hegel, this is named the Idea (and not the Ideal).

Passers-by are therefore treated with contempt, because they mirror the present. Hence the disdain for Rimbaud: “Considerable passer-by.”⁹ One reads in Littré: “the real meaning of this word is: what should be considered, what merits consideration. It should almost never be employed beyond this meaning...” Furthermore, it is emphasized that one should never commit the error of making “considerable”

5. Mallarmé, *Stéphane Mallarmé, Collected Poems and Other Verse*, trans. E.H. and A.M. Blackmore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 180-181.

6. It is true that Mallarmé admits a proviso: he implies, except if the Crowd appears. But only to add straight away that the Crowd in fact does not appear: “a present does not exist... For lack of the Crowd appearing, for lack of—everything.” TN: the quote that the preceding footnote by Milner references, the quote in the footnote itself and the translation of both are from Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 218.

7. Mallarmé, *Stéphane Mallarmé Collected Poems and Other Verse*, 181.

8. Mallarmé, *Divagations*, p 218. TN: I have modified here the translation by Barbara Johnson who renders it as, “...those All-Paris occasions whose job it is to propagate faith in the quotidian nothingness...” The original French reads, “...des premier-Paris charges de divulger une foi en le quotidien néant.” I have translated *premier-Paris* as ‘headlines’ because *premier-Paris* was a Parisian newspaper in the 19th century and the term referred more generally to the leading front cover article of a newspaper. This rendering also fits better in the context of Milner’s discussion of Mallarmé.

9. Mallarmé, *Œuvres Complètes, tome 2* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003) 121.

a synonym of “great.” It often seems as though Mallarmé only employed the first adjective to make it clear that he was withholding the second from Rimbaud. Let us add to this a hidden comparison. By means of the allusion to the sidereal that harbours Mallarmé’s consideration of him, Rimbaud appears as a celestial body. This is what the word *influence* refers to (“at least...he exerts an influence on recent poetic events...”¹⁰). But this body is a comet and not a star. As opposed to the immobile stars, it passes and moves on to other heavens, just like Halley’s Comet. The allusion in the first paragraph to “vagueness” should be read as the Latin *vagus*, which refers to roaming.

The apparent sparkling from the comet is explosion, intermittency, migration and ultimately extinguishment: “he burst out like a meteor, ignited by no motive other than its own presence, arising and extinguishing alone,”¹¹ — “alone,” just as no comet forms a constellation; “by no motive”: meaning that its presence traces no delineable motif, unlike the Great Bear. Hence the presence of the crowd, as enthusiastic about Rimbaud as they are about comets, which figure, unlike the stars, within the realm of current affairs. Rimbaud took place, but in the sense that belongs to the newspaper and Fashion, and therefore in the sense that nothing takes place.

Like all that pertains to the newspaper, he belongs to the world of the commodity and money. His fate as a merchant only reveals a necessity masked by several beautiful verses; hence the conclusion about the author’s royalties. It would perhaps be going too far, but I doubt it, to decipher in the word *considerable*—which is linked to the sidereal—the lexical inversion of the word *constellation*. Constellations are made up of stars, not any old sidereal body—a planet or comet. That Rimbaud is “considerable” means only that, to this “cold constellation,” which alone is an exception to the idea that nothing took place, he is entirely irrelevant. Mallarmé also clarifies it in an inverse manner: “everything would have existed just as it did without this considerable passer-by.”¹² But as something may exist only as an exception to nothing taking place, and, as the place of this exception is a constellation, Rimbaud does not enter into this constellation. He is undoubtedly a sidereal body, but not stellar; considerable but not constellated.

Beyond those like Rimbaud who chose money and apostasy in favour of verse, poets and those who think they are right would never refute Mallarmé’s axioms and definitions. Because, from the standpoint of poetry, prose *qua* speech says nothing since, to the extent that it does speak, it is poetry. Therefore what prose says, if it is not poetry, must be nothing. But in voicing this nothing that poetry does not say, it is itself nothing. Even when it speaks of poetry, even when it presents to the universe this nothingness that, as prose, it itself is, it is indistinguishable from the newspaper, no matter what it utters.

10. Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 4.

11. Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 65 [trans modified].

12. Mallarmé, *Œuvres Complètes*, tome 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 2003) 121.

Those who write prose and argue that it must be something also believe that it does not converge with the language of the newspaper. In short, they reject Mallarmé's axioms. He would assert: *nothing from the newspaper takes place*. The prose writer affirms: *something from the newspaper takes place*, but if they are to withstand the Mallarméan assault, they must add that the newspaper itself is incapable of expressing this taking place. For something to be nothingness, it is not a sufficient condition that it takes the form of the everyday, today, the newspaper or Herodotean and Thucydidean history. But there is one condition that is necessary to grasp, that which, within this something, surpasses nothingness: prose must surpass the language of today, the language of the newspaper, history and the everyday.

Since nothing in the newspaper took place, Mallarmé concluded that prose is nothing, because, in the end, all prose amounts to the language of the newspaper. He also came to another conclusion. He argued that because the nineteenth century became the century of the newspaper, nothing in the nineteenth century took place. Therefore the question *has any century taken place?* and especially the question *did our century take place?* merge with the question *does prose exist?*

Here the Russians are important. In their language, Revolution and poetry summoned and, as it were, defied one another to prove themselves worthy of the task. But this challenge itself veiled another. Just like Blok, and following Pushkin, all the poets were convinced that poetry alone had the power to speak of Revolution—for or against it—because it alone was able to say what takes place at the very height of its taking place. Was it not Pushkin who showed that verse alone was able to become the language of the Decembrist rebellion, just as it alone was able to create the language of a true love? There was no need to renounce Mallarmé. It sufficed to interpret him within a negative theology; “nothing took place,” he said, meaning: nothing took place so long as there is no Revolution or new love.

Certainly there were a number of heretics: not poetry, they said, especially not that, since it is never anything but the dreamings of a Russia asleep and orating, asleep, about itself—but prose. But prose in the style of the French, unceasingly alert, and which does not dream.

They were misunderstood.

The adventures of this double challenge form a tale of pain and beauty, of bloody deaths and pitiful survival, a tale that constitutes the novel of chivalry, the Holy Grail or Don Quixote, for the 20th century. Not even the figure of the terrifying enchanter, who was perhaps merely a vicious charlatan, is absent: Joseph Stalin. And because of him it all came to a standstill; if there is Revolution, and because there is Revolution, nothing will affect language. It will not change.

It seems that the time for an epilogue has come. Who will recite it and on what terms? The question is open. Some claim to be able to settle the matter completely with statistics: the number of victims, the identities of executioners and black books of every variety. It is unlikely that this suffices since it remains within the

register of the newspaper in its most impoverished form: the language of numbers and names. Whether it would be sufficient or not, an intervention that is inscribed in the Russian language itself is nonetheless necessary. It appears that Brodsky had planned to be the one to recite the epilogue. Nevertheless, in the hands of Brodsky the epilogue erases each of the preceding episodes.

In *Flight from Byzantium*, he declares that everything, meaning everything important, was there already before 1914. It was all part of that universe which he calls civilization and which, above all, produced the great Russians: Blok, Akhmatova, Mandelstam, Tsvetaeva, Pasternak, Mayakovsky too—each in their own way, which distinguished them from one another and sometimes tore them apart. The will to render civilization worthless compared to what comes after 1914, and which bears no resemblance to what had come before, whether it is called the Revolution, history, the world, in short: what takes place—this is the idol of the 20th century. To revere it is a mistake; one that a number of writers committed and through them the mistake became a crime. Having succumbed to the idol, they themselves became one: Aragon, Neruda, Brecht, etc., the names of criminals.

To the extent that the 20th century took place, it admits here but a single definition: It is the century that halted civilization, which systematically destroyed it, tirelessly demolishing any monument that could testify to it. This is another way of saying that the 20th century only accomplished a single work that was peculiar to it, the USSR, which is simply the abolished place of civilization. The imperative is therefore clear; act, write and think all the while reminding those unable to fathom it that nothing took place and especially not the USSR.

The magic of writing is precisely what allows this unexpected juxtaposition: the absolute contemporaneousness of Brodsky (born in 1940) and Akhmatova. This is what confirms, what demonstrates that the 20th century did not take place (but simply, childhood, love, reading, unhappiness, etc.: everything that this century shares with all the others). For if it had taken place then so did all the brutal events, wars, revolutions, massacres and camps, that distinguished it from every other century, and if this is what takes place then poetry does not. But simply prose, meaning: Shalamov.

He is the stumbling block. His axiom is, *the 20th century took place and the USSR was something because the camps existed*. But to render it in the Russian language he argues that poetry is not enough; that it was never enough. What is needed is prose or, in other words, to write just like the Russians do not know how to, but instead like Flaubert. Kolyma is to be treated as Flaubert had treated Carthage (the tales of Kolyma are a modern Salammbô), not because the camps are distant, but because they are the essence of proximity, the milestone without which no distance can be measured, neither in time or space. But if Shalamov is right, then Mallarmé had always been wrong, and Brodsky after him.

Hence the importance for Brodsky of being silent. To not ever utter the offending name. This clarifies the origin of the syllogism: prose must not exist, particularly

not Shalamov, because if prose exists then the 20th century took place and if Shalamov exists then the USSR took place. But the 20th century cannot have taken place, or the USSR. Hence Brodsky argued persistently that there is no Russian prose after Dostoevsky. Posed in this way, nothing in the 20th century will have surpassed the possibilities of the Mallarméan newspaper. Shalamov will have been nothing more or less than the replacement for the *Latest fashion*. To ignore him is a duty.

The theorem on existence *the 19th century took place* was formulated by the author of *L'Écrivain Pensif*¹³ following a study of prose. That stands to reason, for example, with respect to the French language which Mallarmé had hoped to stamp with his seal. All the more so as something finally happened to this language that had stubbornly and recklessly weathered so many fractures. Moulded and remoulded by jurists for their own ends, it was long associated with the processes of the State and thus thought of as the consort to the nation-state, just as the Greek language was believed to be the consort of the *polis*. So much so that under the rule of the Mallarméan scission, apart from poetry, it hardly proffered anything in the form of prose, other than the canon of a cultured bureaucracy (the reserved rhetoric of the *New French Review*). However, the nation-state surrendered, debased or pitiful, or both at once. Just as after Alexander the *polis* turned into a pantomime.

Consequently, the French language found itself increasingly and completely internalized. Especially since the commodity evidently chose other idioms. In the French language today, the univocal nature of the questions of the century and prose takes on a pure form. Whoever examines whether the 20th century took place in this language will discover that they are interrogating the possibility *de facto* and the legitimacy *de jure* of prose. Those who ask if there exists a French prose, one that is modern but not in the sense of being the last fashion, are investigating the 20th century. This could be conceived in the negative, as proved by the strict Mallarméans. To reply in the affirmative is a rarer decision.

At the horizon of the affirmation, the subject no longer speaks of the century other than to speak of prose; it no longer speaks of prose other than to grasp the century. But this is in order to grasp the newspaper in a language that would in no way depend on the newspaper. To never begin by conceding to the nothingness of what would be able to be inscribed in the form of today, and not even if empirical newspapers treat it so. To never begin by affirming that prose is unable to surpass itself. Therefore, one question poses itself. Which levers will be proven powerful enough to liberate today from the battered carcass of the newspaper? To liberate what takes place from the news? To liberate the vibrancy of everyday life from nothingness?

For people in times gone by, the thesis that there could be a kind of everyday life that was not a nothingness fell within the domain of history and politics. Only recently was it still believed that, at the horizon of modernity, the Newspaper and History could by right be superimposed onto one another—be it at that infinitely distant point that only a great novel could attain or in its absence, a great man, or worse, a

13. TN: the author referred to here is Natacha Michel.

great party. Malraux and Sartre attest to this. But today people have doubts about history and the party (these may be the same doubt). They must therefore look to other terrains. I know of those for whom something from the newspaper takes place that can be said in a language freed from the newspaper and for whom this is named "thought," others for whom it is called "novel," others for whom it is called "voyage" and others still for whom it is called "truth" or "metaphor," which are not very different. It is from the standpoint of thought, novel, voyage, truth, metaphor or anything else that inhabits this role that today can once again matter. It is from this standpoint that considerable passers by exist. That is to say, that each day is distinct, that boredom did not perpetually shine, that prose is possible.

In other words, the 20th century did take place, as each one of us did, do and will take place.