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Formal Innovations and The Idea of Music in French Poetry, 1850-1900

The nineteenth century in France saw an unprecedented proliferation of experiments with poetic form which intensified after 1850. While music played a central role in this process, it was not as a repository of formal models which poets could somehow imitate; rather, its importance was primarily conceptual. Music's harmonic, melodic and rhythmic innovations from Beethoven onwards cemented its place in the literary imagination as an art form capable of reflecting that elusive ideal realm which Romantic poets such as Alphonse de Lamartine and Victor Hugo sought to evoke in words. As Lamartine writes in *Méditations poétiques* (1820), the challenge to language was significant: 'as soon as I try to depict what I feel, / All words expire in impotent efforts' (sitôt que je veux peindre ce que je sens, / Toute parole expire en efforts impuissants.)¹ Charles Baudelaire, thanking Richard Wagner for his Paris concert in 1860, claims, 'what I felt is indescribable' (ce que j'ai éprouvé est indescriptible); he attempts to convey the music's effect – 'I felt all the majesty of a life greater than our own' (J'ai senti toute la majesté d'une vie plus large que la nôtre) – but something escapes expression in words: 'I recognised the impossibility of saying it all' (j'ai reconnu l'impossibilité de tout dire).² While debates raged over instrumental music's capacity for representation, the idea of music offered poetry an example of an art which could suggest without naming. This enabled poets to conceive of poetry, unlike other modes of language use, as a form of expression which looks to surpass the limits of everyday language. This metaphorical music proved extremely malleable, adapting to the requirements of different poets, which ensured that it remained at the forefront of avant-garde thinking during poetry's rapid evolution from Romanticism, via Symbolism, to the twentieth century, across a wide variety of new textual forms.

In *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), which launched poetic modernity in France, Baudelaire depicts a quintessentially modern mind whose compulsive self-probing throws previous certainties into doubt. Among these was faith in the divine harmony of nature and the cosmos, portrayed by Hugo as a heavenly music reflected in the formal perfection of verse. In Baudelaire there are, certainly, moments of heightened sensitivity – 'Élévation', 'Correspondances', 'Harmonie du soir' – where the poet glimpses 'the majesty of a life greater than our own'. Yet throughout *Les Fleurs du Mal*, the poet oscillates between belief and profound despair, or 'spleen': days of dark depression where time passes unbearably slowly and he is gripped by an existential emptiness. At such moments, church bells, rather than tolling out hymns of praise, 'leap in fury, / And launch unto the heavens an awful scream' (sautent avec furie / Et lancent vers le ciel un affreux hurlement), while 'long funeral processions, with no drums or music, / Proceed slowly in my soul' (de longs corbillards, sans tambours ni musique, / Défilent lentement dans mon âme).³ Both these states find their parallel in the experience of music, for 'Music often transports me like a sea! /

¹ 'Dieu' (God), in *Méditations poétiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 107. All translations are my own.

² Letter of 17 February 1860 in *Correspondance*, ed. Claude Pichois, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 1973), I:672-74, original italics.

³ 'Spleen IV', *OC* I:75.

Towards my pale star' (La musique souvent me prend comme une mer! / Vers ma pâle étoile), while 'At other times, dead calm, great mirror / Of my despair!' (D'autres fois, calme plat, grand miroir / De mon désespoir!).⁴

The aesthetic implications of these moments of crisis are profound, and the poet wonders in 'L'Héautontimorouménos':

Am I not a discord	Ne suis-je pas un faux accord
In the divine symphony,	Dans la divine symphonie,
Thanks to the voracious Irony	Grâce à la vorace Ironie
Which shakes me and gnaws at me?	Qui me secoue et qui me mord? ⁵

Hugo's conception of divine universal music leaves no room for dissonance, as in *Chansons des rues et des bois*: 'Everything sings; and no discords' (Tout chante; et pas de fausses notes), 'A little bird in the leaves / Singing, is proof enough of God' ('Un petit oiseau sous les feuilles, / Chantant, suffit à prouver Dieu').⁶ The Baudelairean poet, however, embodies discord since he cannot escape the suspicion that there may be no divine realm, no afterlife, speculating in 'The Dream of a Curious Man' ('Le Rêve d'un curieux'): 'I was dead [...] What! Is that it? / The curtain was up and I was still waiting' ('J'étais mort [...] Eh quoi! N'est-ce donc que cela? / La toile était levée et j'attendais encore').⁷ Tormented by doubt, the poet presents himself as a cracked church bell croaking like a dying man, envious of 'the bell with vigorous throat' (la cloche au gosier vigoureux) which 'faithfully casts its religious cry' (Jette fidèlement son cri religieux).⁸ In *Les Fleurs du Mal*, the theological problem of worldly evil – how can the work of a perfect being contain imperfection? – finds a compelling parallel in the question of discord. Just as composers opened up new harmonic possibilities by including what had previously been heard as dissonance, Baudelaire incorporates irregularities into the textual fabric of the poem. He forces us to reconsider our understanding of beauty and ugliness, and to recognise such dichotomies as artificial constructs no longer guaranteed by any divine arbiter, positing the question of beauty as a personal search, rather than an absolute truth: 'I've found the definition of Beauty – of Beauty for me. It's something ardent and sad, something a bit vague, leaving free rein to conjecture' (J'ai trouvé la définition du Beau, – de mon Beau. C'est quelque chose d'ardent et de triste, quelque chose d'un peu vague, laissant carrière à la conjecture).⁹

Baudelaire does not suggest that the collapse of absolute beauty means that anything goes. His poetry features plenty of hideous imagery, such as the rotting bird carcass of the notorious love poem 'Une charogne', but an artistic phenomenon shared by both music and poetry – namely rhythm – transforms the repugnant raw material into something transcendently beautiful: the

⁴ 'La Musique', *OC* I:68.

⁵ *OC* I:78.

⁶ 'Meudon' and 'Ecrit en 1827', *OP* III:38 and 99.

⁷ *OC* I:129.

⁸ 'La Cloche fêlée', *OC* I:71-72.

⁹ Unpublished notes, *OC* I:657.

buzzing flies and pulsating maggots make ‘a strange musique’ (une étrange musique) thanks to ‘a rhythmic movement’ (un mouvement rythmique) through which ‘Forms disintegrated and became but a dream’ (Les formes s’effaçaient et n’étaient plus qu’un rêve).¹⁰ This is the poetic music of Baudelairean modernity: a complex interplay of harmony, melody and rhythm in which dissonance and irregularity play an integral role, and which allows us to submit to the illusion, for the duration of the artistic experience, that the ideal realm of absolute values does exist after all. His poetry has inspired countless studies of its formal techniques which may best be summarised as an inventive and meticulously controlled blend of tradition and innovation, harmony and discord, cadence and disruption, enacting on a versificatory level the tension between the poet’s desire to succumb to the illusion of art and his gnawing doubt. Complex patterns of alliteration and assonance increase the harmonic and melodic richness of every line and stanza, such as the intensification of rhyming phonemes in ‘Parfum exotique’: ‘climats / mâts / marine / tamariniers / narine / mariniers’.¹¹ While Baudelaire uses the sonnet frequently, most feature quite radical departures from the standard *abba abba ccd ede* rhyme scheme, for which they attracted much attention: quatrains rhymed *abba baab* (‘La Muse vénale’, ‘Je te donne ces vers...’) or *abab cddc* (‘Correspondances’), tercets rhymed *eef fgg* (‘De profundis clamavi’) or *eef eff* (‘Alchimie de la douleur’), and a sonnet with only two rhyme sounds, *abba abba baa bab* (‘Sonnet d’automne’). Even more experimental are ‘La Musique’, in alternating lines of twelve and five syllables, ‘L’Avertisseur’, in which the tercets are placed between the quatrains and ‘Bien loin d’ici’, which is upside down (TTQQ).

While such innovations breathed variety into the fixed forms of French poetry, perhaps the most striking and influential feature of modernity’s dissonance in *Les Fleurs du Mal* was disruption of the alexandrine. While folk and oral poetry used shorter lines, the alexandrine was the primary metre for serious verse and the theatre. Featuring twelve syllables, it is defined by a brief midway pause, the caesura, which accompanies a break in the sense. Baudelaire was the first to place an unaccentuable syllable in sixth position, causing a jolt in our reading: ‘Exaspéré comme *un* / ivrogne qui voit double’ (Exasperated like a / drunkard seeing double).¹² While the alexandrine never dies out – it has survived until today in various states of rhythmical fluidity – the seeds of French poetry’s formal modernism are sown, in theory and in practice, in these twenty or so lines. Their destabilising influence was instantaneous, making a considerable impression on poets such as Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé, Arthur Rimbaud and Jules Laforgue. The crisis in verse is both an existential and an embodied phenomenon: as faith collapses in the absolute values on which the classical alexandrine depended, so too the reader is shaken out of passive rhythmical complacency. Reading becomes an active, dynamic experience, a search for new patterns of meaning – and as the formal revolution launched here gathers pace, music, as a concept and as an art form sharing certain technical terms with poetry, remains central to the poetic idea.

This special relationship is reinforced by Baudelaire’s suggestion that ‘poetry relates to music via a prosody whose roots go further into the human soul than any classical theory indicates’

¹⁰ *OCI*:31-32.

¹¹ *OCI*:25-26.

¹² ‘Les Sept Vieillards’, *OCI*:88.

(la poésie touche à la musique par une prosodie dont les racines plongent plus avant dans l'âme humaine que ne l'indique aucune théorie classique).¹³ By the early 1860s, another Baudelairean revolution – prose poetry – makes the provocative claim that neither poeticity nor musicality exclusively belong to verse prosody any longer. In a much-quoted letter to Arsène Houssaye, published as a preface to *Le Spleen de Paris*, a posthumous collection of fifty prose poems, Baudelaire asks ‘Which of us has not, in his moments of ambition, dreamed of the miracle of a prose which is poetic, musical without rhythm and without rhyme?’ (Quel est celui de nous qui n’a pas, dans ses jours d’ambition, rêvé le miracle d’une prose poétique, musicale sans rythme et sans rime?).¹⁴ Prose poetry offers the avant-garde a way of protecting genuine art from the layman, for if poetry may now be found in texts which do not resemble verse, it follows that verse is no longer any guarantee of genuine poetry. Innumerable critics have attempted to define what makes Baudelaire’s prose poems poetic, but to attach poeticity to either content or formal features such as repetition, sound patterns, or fragments of verse metre is to miss the point, since these texts invite a search to which there can be, necessarily, no satisfactory conclusion. We know genuine poetry when we see it, Baudelaire’s generation would argue – we recognise it as musical – but it cannot be analysed scientifically, and it is no longer immanent in what were previously thought to be the divine structures of the natural world; as Baudelaire explains to Houssaye, it emerges from the bodily experience of the complex interplay between multiple man-made forms, ‘from walking in enormous cities, [...] from the intersection of their countless relations’ (de la fréquentation des villes énormes, [...] du croisement de leurs innombrables rapports).¹⁵

Poetry is now a search rather than a state, a specific perspective born of individual experience (or a particular disposition, a poetic way of looking, feeling) which creates the momentary illusion of a universal truth. The prose poem ‘Crépuscule du soir’ opens with ‘a great shrieking, made up of all sorts of discordant cries, which the distance transforms into a lugubrious harmony’ (un grand hurlement, composé d’une foule de cris discordants, que l’espace transforme en une lugubre harmonie).¹⁶ Close up, the hubbub of the city is a discordant racket, yet from a distance which impedes over-analysis or the isolation of individual elements, it may be perceived as a kind of harmony. This is the challenge that Baudelaire sets French poets: if a defining feature of artistic modernity is that no absolute values can be taken for granted, how do we ensure that poetry survive as a discrete entity, for which we can claim a proof, yet which we can never define, and whose mysterious essence might still manifest itself in multiple new forms?

The answer playfully given by Verlaine is: music. He opens ‘Art poétique’, a poem written in 1874 and published in 1882, with what quickly became the most famous mantra in all French poetry: ‘Music above all else’ (De la musique avant toute chose).¹⁷ While he later warned, in typically irreverent fashion, ‘don’t go taking my “Art poétique” literally, it’s just a song, after all,

¹³ Draft preface, *OC I*:183.

¹⁴ *OC I*:275.

¹⁵ *OC I*:276.

¹⁶ *OC I*:311.

¹⁷ *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, ed. Yves-Gérard Le Dantec and Jacques Borel (Paris: Gallimard, ‘Bibliothèque de la Pléiade’, 1962), 326.

– I WON’T HAVE WRITTEN THEORY’ (n’allez pas prendre au pied de la lettre mon ‘Art poétique’, qui n’est qu’une chanson, après tout, – JE N’AURAI PAS FAIT DE THÉORIE), the poem’s influence, and Verlaine’s prestige, within Symbolist thought of the 1880s cannot be overstated.¹⁸ Republished in *Jadis et naguère* (1884), it was influential with contributors to the *Revue wagnérienne* which, from 1885 to 1888, allowed writers to indulge their musico-literary theories based on Wagner’s idea of a fusion of the arts. In ‘Art poétique’, Verlaine prescribes odd-numbered metres (‘l’Impair’, l. 2), suggestion and nuance, rejecting eloquence and over-emphatic rhyming. This notion of musicality builds on the Baudelairean model of subtle, elusive effects and veiled imagery but has often been reduced to a rather simple formula, as if Verlaine were advocating for a poetic music based on sound patterns. His popularity with composers such as Gabriel Fauré and Claude Debussy, the great innovators of modern French art song, served to confirm this idea of Verlaine as literally the poet of song, and many early poems seem inseparable from their existence as actual *chansons*.

Popular song, too, with its short lines and heterometric stanzas, had already influenced poetic form, notably in Théodore de Banville’s *Les Stalactites* (1846) and Baudelaire’s ‘Invitation au voyage’, with its recurring refrain and intermingling of five- and seven-syllable lines. ‘Chanson d’automne’, from Verlaine’s debut *Poèmes saturniens* (1866), provides a perfect example of the rich sound patterns and sentimental impressionism on which his musical reputation depends:

Les sanglots longs	The long sobs
Des violons	Of the violins
De l’automne	Of autumn
Blessent mon cœur	Afflict my heart
D’une langueur	With a monotonous
Monotone. ¹⁹	Languor.

Form is certainly crucial – it is where broader poetic questions are symbolically thought through – but the heart of Verlainean music lies in irresolvable hesitations between competing structural patterns which stop one dominant reading from emerging: the tension between syntax and metre in emphatic *enjambement* – ‘un grand / Fantôme’ (‘Promenade sentimentale’), ‘une / Nuit mélancolique’ (‘Le Rossignol’) – or the dislocation of alexandrines following Baudelaire’s lead: ‘Et le vieux tremble *sa / plainte sempiternelle*’ (‘Après trois ans’). Poetic rhythm emerges as a far more complex phenomenon than metrical regularity. ‘Nuit du Walpurgis classique’ describes ‘A rhythmic sabbath, rhythmic, extremely / Rhythmic’ (Un *rhythmique sabbat, rhythmique, extrêmement / Rhythmique*), yet this rhythm is irregular, the alexandrines interrupted in awkward places by strong punctuation. Far-away hunting horns create ‘Harmoniously dissonant / Chords’ (*des accords / Harmonieusement dissonants*), a musical oxymoron which demonstrates Verlaine’s sensitivity to the interpretative tensions announced by Baudelaire. While Verlaine’s textual music has often been seen as a quasi-melodic enterprise, he is too subtle a poet for it to be quite so simple,

¹⁸ Preface to the 1890 edition of *Poèmes saturniens*, *OPC*, 1074.

¹⁹ *OPC*, 72.

as his best-known volumes *Fêtes galantes* (1869) and *Romances sans paroles* (1874) demonstrate.

The poems of *Fêtes galantes* take place in an eighteenth-century dream-world populated by aristocrats and *commedia dell'arte* figures cavorting as in the paintings of Watteau. The opening poem, 'Clair de lune', establishes music as a source of unanswerable questions, with masked revellers singing joyful songs in a minor key, 'almost / Sad beneath their fanciful costumes' (quasi / Tristes sous leurs déguisements fantasques, ll. 3-4). This tension is embodied by the *enjambement* on 'quasi / Tristes' which encourages us to rush over the line-end just as 'quasi' creates a rich two-syllable rhyme (*rime léonine*), with 'choisi' (l. 1), which has the opposite effect of inviting a pause between lines. Such interpretative quandaries are typical of Verlaine, creating a model of textual musicality based not simply on sound patterns, but rather, on multiple interplay between regularity and irregularity, harmony and discord, and the irreconcilable tensions they allow him to create. The reader of *Fêtes galantes* may yet be tempted to locate musicality in the presence of actual music: notation – 'Do, mi, sol, la, si' ('Sur l'herbe'), 'Do, mi, sol, mi, fa' ('Colombine') – or the sound of drums ('Le Faune') and mandolins ('Mandoline'). Yet this performed music is strangely inconsequential, and the party-goers pay it little attention. What seems more important is a different kind of music altogether: a metaphorical music, more mysterious and more powerful, which opens 'À Clymène':

Mystical gondolier songs,	Mystiques barcarolles,
Songs without words,	Romances sans paroles,
Dear, since your eyes,	Chère, puisque tes yeux,
The colour of the skies,	Couleur des cieux,

The poet enumerates the effects of his beloved's gaze, her voice, her scent, before music intervenes, as in Baudelaire's 'Tout entière', at the point where the panegyric goes beyond bodily attributes:

Ah! since your whole being,	Ah! puisque tout ton être,
A penetrating music,	Musique qui pénètre,
Haloes of deceased angels,	Nimbés d'anges défunts,
Tones and perfumes,	Tons et parfums,
Has, upon beneficent cadences,	A, sur d'almes cadences,
In its correspondences	En ses correspondances
Led my subtle heart,	Induit mon cœur subtil,

This figurative music, characterised by correspondences between the senses and an impression of wholeness, functions like the 'songs without words' of the opening lines, taking the poet beyond the limits of everyday language and into the realm of the poetic. Conversational platitudes, by contrast, produce misunderstandings: the poet of 'En patinant' tells his lover, 'We were duped,

you and I, / By mutual tricks' (Nous fûmes dupes, vous et moi, / De manigances mutuelles), while 'Colloque sentimental' features two former lovers whose recollections do not match: 'Ah! those happy days of indescribable bliss / When our lips would meet!' – 'Perhaps' (Ah! les beaux jours de bonheur indicible / Où nous joignons nos bouches! – C'est possible). If words are insufficient to express subtle nuances of feeling, then poetic language approaches a quasi-musical state, functioning 'without words' in that it allows meanings generated by complex patterns of rhythm, harmony and melody to supersede referentiality.

Romances sans paroles (1874) gives greater prominence to the reference to Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte*, and along with 'Art poétique' cemented the challenge which would excite the Symbolists in the 1880s. Conceptualising instrumental piano pieces as songs without words was relatively unproblematic, but for poetry, to remove words was an unrealisable task and, therefore, a highly attractive ideal. Verlaine told lecture audiences in 1893 that the title was chosen 'better to express the real vagueness and the lack of precise meaning projected' (pour mieux exprimer le vrai vague et le manque de sens précis projetés), and the opening 'Forgotten Ariettas' (Ariettes oubliées), depict hazy affective states: 'langourous ecstasy' (extase langoureuse) and 'amorous fatigue' (fatigue amoureuse).²⁰ Sound patterns which seem to replicate the music of nature, such as the muffled rolling of pebbles underwater (*Le roulis sourd des cailloux*), may suggest a literal song, but the elusive nature of Verlainean musicality, with all its interpretative hesitations, lies in lines of five, seven, nine and eleven syllables, as in the second 'Arriette':

Je devine, à travers un murmure,	I make out, in a murmur,
Le contour subtil des voix anciennes	The subtle contour of former voices
Et dans les lueurs musiciennes,	And in the music-making glimmers,
Amour pâle, une aurore future!	Pale love, a future dawn!

These nine-syllable lines are unsettling since they occupy an unfamiliar no man's land between the much more common octosyllable, which has no fixed caesura, and the decasyllable, which one would most often expect to hear as 4/6. There is no recurrent scansion around which to orient our ear – 3/6, 5/4, 5/4, 3/6 – and to add to our disorientation, what looks like a rich rhyme in lines 2 and 3 is destabilised by the fact that, in order to produce the nine syllables, we must pronounce the first with synaeresis ('anciennes') and the second, with diaeresis ('musiciennes'). Such slippage in pronunciation was not uncommon – entire treatises set out the accepted scansion of vowel combinations in different words – yet it is telling that the very word which unsettles our ear, rather than providing a reassuring euphony, is the adjective 'musiciennes' itself, the pronunciation of which sounds odd against the precedent set by 'anciennes'. Just as the poet attempts to identify recognisable contours within a vague murmur, the form of the text draws the reader into a similar search.

Verlaine's later collections do not possess the same coherence and focus as the early volumes which made his name. While he pushes his irreverent formal games further, it is the

²⁰ *OePC*, 901 and *OPC*, 191.

Symbolist generation of the 1880s, a loose grouping of minor poets swept along by a passion for Wagner, who most vociferously adopt the notion of musical poetry as a manifesto, and from whom both Verlaine and Mallarmé distance themselves.²¹ It was a commonplace of literary criticism at the time to claim that, while the Symbolists loved to expound upon their musical ‘theories’, the poetry itself, full of clichés, had almost nothing to say, and time has done little to disprove that assessment of volumes seldom read today: *Les Cantilènes* (1886) and *Le Pèlerin passionné* (1891) by Jean Moréas, *Les Cygnes* (1887) and *Joies* (1889) by Francis Vielé-Griffin, *Les Flambeaux noirs* (1891) by Emile Verhaeren, or Camille Mauclair’s *Sonatinae d’automne* (1895). The reader quickly tires of the practically self-parodic descriptions of vague emotional states and repetitive, hazy vocabulary. Much of the poetry making musical claims for itself in the 1880s-1890s achieves considerably less with the formula ‘De la musique avant toute chose’ than Verlaine already had by the time he moved on after 1874.

In the absence of anything much to say in their poetry, the Symbolist generation focused instead on form. The 1880s saw another formal revolution, perhaps the most influential and long-lasting of them all – *vers libre* (free verse) – which was conceptualised in relation to music by its self-appointed theorists, notably Gustave Kahn. The iconoclastic late poems of Rimbaud showed the way: his final verse poems and the opaque, disorientating prose poems of *Illuminations*, written 1872-1875, were not published until May-June 1886 in Kahn’s review *La Vogue*. They caused great excitement among the young avant-garde who, one year after the death of Hugo, were still searching for their own voice, and a flag to fly. ‘Qu’est-ce pour nous, mon cœur’ and ‘Mémoire’, whose twelve-syllable lines lack any recurrent pulse are the first radically non-metrical poems in French, while ‘Marine’ and ‘Mouvement’ are the first poems in a modern *vers libre*. Alongside Laforgue’s translations of Walt Whitman, *La Vogue* also published the first *vers libre* poems by Kahn and Moréas, lighting the touchpaper on a fierce debate which demanded a fundamental re-examination of the expressive potential of poetic form, and of the definition of poetry itself.

It is generally accepted that *vers libre* did not originate as the *eureka!* moment of one single innovator, but rather, emerged gradually in the work of Laforgue, Kahn and Marie Krysinska during the mid-1880s. Proving that the finest poets need not rely on a spurious theoretical selling point, Laforgue’s *Derniers vers*, the twelve *vers libre* poems he had written by his premature death in 1887, are a masterpiece in terms of content as well as form, with a truly original voice, and it is these poems which had by far the greatest impact on subsequent generations of writers, including T. S. Eliot. Laforgue and Kahn were close friends, sharing ideas throughout the early 1880s and commenting on each other’s poetry, and while working on ‘L’Hiver qui vient’, the first of his *vers libre* poems, an enthusiastic Laforgue told Kahn of his new method: ‘I’m forgetting to rhyme, I’m forgetting the number of syllables, I’m forgetting the ordering of stanzas, my lines start at the margin like prose’ (J’oublie de rimer, j’oublie le nombre des syllabes, j’oublie la disposition des strophes, mes lignes commencent à la marge comme de la prose).²² *Derniers vers* does contain a

²¹ *OPC*, 243 and 323.

²² *Œuvres complètes*, 3 vols, ed. Jean-Louis Debauxe et al (Lausanne: Editions L’Age d’Homme, 1986-2000), II:863-64.

‘Solo de lune’ (Moon solo), and music features in his earlier poetry, notably *Les Complaintes* (1885), with its self-parodic pastiches of popular song; the poet identifies with the wheezing and stuttering of fairground barrel-organs, while the sound of pianos drifting across bourgeois suburbs on autumnal Sunday afternoons articulates an acute sense of *ennui*. Yet Laforgue, inspired by the Buddhist thought encountered in the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer and Eduard von Hartmann, is more interested in *vers libre* as a form capable of representing the meanderings of the subconscious mind. Laforgue’s death left his new poetic project incomplete, and thereafter it was Kahn who seized the title of originator for himself.

Kahn elaborates his theory of *vers libre* by making the conceptual link to modern music, which neither Rimbaud nor Laforgue had done. In a long preface to a later edition of his *Les Palais nomades* (1887), which he calls ‘the founding book of free verse’ (le livre d’origine du vers libre), he claims that Beethoven, Schumann and Wagner played a crucial role in his thought: ‘the influence of music led me to perceive a poetic form which was both more fluid and precise’ (l’influence de la musique nous amena à la perception d’une forme poétique, à la fois plus fluide et précise); thus ‘by liberating verse, I was looking for a more complex music’ (dans un affranchissement du vers, je cherchais une musique plus complexe).²³ Despite titles such as ‘Thème et variations’, Kahn’s verse is much less ‘free’ than that of Laforgue, maintaining quite conservative stanzaic forms and rather uninventive juxtapositions of different line lengths. Indeed, it is also far less interesting. In *Symbolistes et décadents*, Kahn later claims that ‘by freeing the ear from the constant binary drone’ (en affranchissant l’oreille du ronron toujours binaire), *vers libre* ‘allows everyone to listen to the song inside them and to translate it as closely as possible’ (permet à chacun d’écouter la chanson qui est en soi et de la traduire le plus strictement possible).²⁴ Yet while the alexandrine is given the role of straw man in the musico-literary theories of the Symbolists, much of their poetry demonstrates that is it perfectly possible to bore the reader in an innovative verse form too. In the preface to *Intermèdes* (1903), Krysinska pours scorn on Kahn and René Ghil, claiming that when their poems were performed at the Odéon, ‘the audience left the hall saying that, certainly, it was beautiful, this novelty, but not very clear’ (le public quittait la salle en disant que c’était, sans doute, beau – la nouveauté – mais pas très clair).²⁵

The poetry of Krysinska, whom Kahn conspicuously omits from his narrative of *vers libre*, has better stood the test of time. Krysinska claims that it was she who initiated the revolution with poems published in *revues* in 1881-1882, and she, like Kahn, cites ‘the example of modern music, leaving more room for *Dissonances* and, like music, obtaining *crescendo* effects thanks to a rhythmic *progression*, and the opposite effect thanks to a *regression*’ (faisant à l’exemple de la musique moderne une plus large part aux *Dissonances* et, comme elle, obtenant des effets de *crescendo* par une *progression* rythmique et l’effet contraire par une *regression*).²⁶ As David Hillery observes, ‘No Symbolist poet – Villiers apart – gives the impression that he possesses or even desires to possess an adequate knowledge of musical technique’, but Krysinska insists on her

²³ Paris: Société du Mercure de France, 1897, pp. 3, 9 and 17.

²⁴ Paris: Vanier, 1902, p. 314.

²⁵ Paris: Vanier, 1903, p. xxv.

²⁶ Paris: Vanier, 1903, p. xvii, original italics.

credentials – she was a conservatoire-trained pianist – asking, ‘does modern music, with its great recitatives, its deliberate dissonances, its pursuit of the unexpected, not also seem to invite the poetic phrase to make itself diverse, similarly amplified, for happy unions?’ (l’évolution de la musique moderne, avec ses larges récitatifs, ses dissonances voulues, sa recherche de l’inattendu, ne semble-t-elle pas inviter aussi la phrase poétique à se faire diverse, amplifiée comme elle, pour des unions heureuses?).²⁷ Her *Rythmes pittoresques* (1890) includes plenty of musical terms, in the tradition of Banville’s ‘Symphonie de la neige’ (*Les Stalactites*, 1846) and Théophile Gautier’s ‘Symphonie en blanc majeur’ (*Emaux et camées*, 1852), with titles such as ‘Symphonie en gris’ and ‘Symphonie des parfums’. The latter echoes Baudelaire’s ‘Correspondances’ – ‘rhythms and scents mingle in a subtle and unique symphony’ (les rythmes et les parfums se confondront en une subtile et unique symphonie) – and there is a sequence of poems named after dances, as well as a ‘Sonate’ marked variously *prélude*, *rinforzando*, *fugue*, *dolce rittard*.²⁸ Crucially, Krysinska’s poems have substance, beyond the musical terms, which makes them more than an opportunistic *exercice de style*, and they repay close reading in ways many of her contemporaries’ efforts do not.

The most notorious attempt to write a musical poetry during this period was that of Ghil, remembered today for *Traité du verbe* and his theory of ‘instrumentation verbale’ which evolved across various editions from 1885 to 1904.²⁹ The French translation of Hermann von Helmholtz’s *Théorie physiologique de la musique* (1868) had been enthusiastically received by contributors to the *Revue wagnérienne*, and it led Ghil to the theory that if words, spoken aloud, create vibrations similar to those produced by musical instruments, then a poem should be written and performed as if it were an actual piece of music. Ghil attempts to define precisely the specific tonalities of different phonemes, linking them to sections of the orchestra – *ié*, *ie* and *ieu* (violins), *f*, *j*, *l*, *s* (flutes) – with specific expressive resonances (*p*, *r*, *s* – domination, glory, safety), even fixing timbre, pitch and intensity, so that the poet ‘will henceforth think with words returned to their original and total meaning, with the music-words of a music-language’ (pensera désormais par des mots redoués de leur sens originel et total, par les mots-musique d’une langue-musique).³⁰ Although he had several followers, Ghil was ridiculed for this system. In one sense, his logic is uncontroversial: poetic suggestion depends upon the sounds, as well as the sense, of words. Yet his attempts to micro-manage meaning at the level of phonemes, juxtaposed primarily for their sound, meant that it was all too easy to accuse him of writing gibberish. Thanking Ghil for a copy of his first volume *Légende d’âmes et de sangs* (1885), Mallarmé politely observes, ‘Your phrases are those of a composer rather than a writer’ (Vous phrasez en compositeur plutôt qu’en écrivain).³¹ Ghil’s later verse, an unfinished great *Œuvre* in three parts, *Dire du mieux*, *Dire des sangs* and *Dire de la loi*, may provide a practical demonstration of his theories, but it is almost unreadably opaque, and forgotten today. His disciple, Stuart Merrill, provides a salutary illustration of how

²⁷ *Music and Poetry in France from Baudelaire to Mallarmé* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1980), p. 61, and *Intermèdes*, p. xxxviii.

²⁸ Paris: Lemerre, 1890, pp. 38 and 106.

²⁹ The title changed to *En méthode à l’Œuvre* from 1901 onwards.

³⁰ *Traité du verbe: états successifs*, ed. Tiziana Goruppi (Paris: Nizet, 1978), pp. 109, 148 and 175.

³¹ Mallarmé, *Correspondance, Lettres sur la poésie*, ed. Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, ‘folio’, 1995), p. 577.

this mimetic, literal model of textual music can go awry in *Les Gammes* (1887), with a line which unintentionally summarises much Symbolist verse: ‘Un remous mollement remue au clair de lune’ (An eddy swirls weakly in the moonlight).³²

Ghil claims that his prescriptive mapping of the sonorous and expressive dimensions of his poetry demonstrates his ‘hatred of chance’ (haine du hasard).³³ Similarly, in the 1860s, the young Mallarmé had exhausted himself revising poems such as ‘L’Azur’, telling his friend Henri Cazalis that he was aiming for what Edgar Allan Poe had achieved in ‘The Raven’: total authorial control over every response which the text would provoke in the reader.³⁴ Mallarmé was paying obsessive attention to sound patterns, rhythms and semantic nuance in terms which seem to anticipate Verlaine’s ‘songs without words’ by ten years: ‘The line must not be made of words, but of intentions, and all the words must erase themselves before the sensation’ (Le vers ne doit donc pas, là, se composer de mots, mais d’intentions, et toutes les paroles s’effacer devant la sensation).³⁵ He uses a musical metaphor to describe the enormity of the compositional challenge posed by ‘Hérodiade’, the unfinished masterpiece that defeats him – ‘all these *impressions* follow each other as in a symphony’ (toutes ces *impressions* se suivent comme dans une symphonie) – but Mallarmé makes no claims for the musicality of his verse, in a Verlainean or Symbolist sense.³⁶ Rather, his ambition to write poems in which nothing is left to chance, and his attention to minutiae, lead to the famous breakdown of spring 1866 during which Mallarmé loses faith in God and accepts the reality of an empty universe (le Néant). His poetry, he tells Cazalis, will henceforth offer ‘this spectacle of matter, conscious of itself, and yet throwing itself fervently into the Dream which it knows does not exist’ (ce spectacle de la matière, ayant conscience d’elle, et, cependant, s’élançant forcenément dans le Rêve qu’elle sait n’être pas). The capacity to imagine a divine, transcendent realm makes us sublime, he claims, and he plans to celebrate it under the working title ‘*The Glory of the Lie, or The Glorious Lie*’ (*La Gloire du Mensonge, ou Le Glorieux Mensonge*).³⁷ The whole universe, then, is the embodiment of chance – and now the role of poetry, for Mallarmé, rather than to vanquish chance altogether, is to dramatise the human search for, and projection of, meaning, to articulate the tension between our desire for significant patterns and the knowledge that it is all in vain.

Mallarmé rose to prominence in the mid-1880s after inclusion in Verlaine’s *Poètes maudits* (1884), and as such his notoriety as a ‘difficult’ or ‘obscure’ poet coincided with the cult of Wagner, and the invention of *vers libre*. Despite his antipathy towards both of these, Mallarmé’s hermeticism was initially interpreted through the lens of ‘De la musique avant toute chose’. His labelling as a ‘musical’ poet was bolstered by the success of ‘L’Après-midi d’un faune’, published in 1876, and by the orchestral prelude which Debussy composed for it in 1894. The faun may be a musician, but the poem functions primarily as a dramatisation of Mallarmé’s spiritual crisis and

³² Paris: Vanier, 1887, pp. 8, 21, 46 and 42.

³³ *Traité du verbe*, p. 119.

³⁴ Letter of January 1864 (OC I:655).

³⁵ Letter of October 1864 (OC I:663).

³⁶ Letter of January 1865 (OC I:666), original italics.

³⁷ Letter of April 1866 (OC I:696), original italics.

great revelation, presenting an artist who confronts the possibility that the object of his desire might be nothing more than a figment of his imagination. The faun wakes from an erotic dream about two nymphs, so convinced that they really exist that he searches for them nearby. After a moment's doubt – 'Did I love a dream?' (Aimai-je un rêve?) – he tries various artistic strategies to bring them back, such as recounting the story to himself, and playing his flute, which:

Dreams, in a long solo, that we amuse
The beauty round about by false
Confusions between herself and our gullible song

(Rêve, dans un solo long, que nous amusons
La beauté d'alentour par des confusions
Fausses entre elle-même et notre chant crédule)³⁸

The poem can hardly be an ode to the power of music: by line 52, the faun throws his flute in the lake, frustrated that it has failed to conjure up the nymphs. Rather, Mallarmé's poetics, from this moment on, focuses on the unstable existence of those nymphs, and of the ideal, thanks to semantic and formal hesitations. The verb 'amusons' is both imperfect indicative and present subjunctive: the song, therefore, says simultaneously that the faun *did* possess the nymphs, and that he *might* possess them at some point in the future. This tension is also enacted in the *enjambement* from 'confusions' (the song's illusion of possessing the nymphs) to 'Fausses' (which immediately negates that illusion), and in the almost-rich rhyme which flickers between 'amusons' (synaeresis) and 'confusi-*ons*' (diaeresis). The poem offers a modern approach to the 6/6 alexandrine which frequently disappears beneath disrupted caesuras, jolting adjacent accents, and syntax which spills over one line-end only to be yanked back at the start of the next. Mallarmé explains his technique to Jules Huret in 1891: 'Indeed, I was trying to play, around the regimented alexandrine, a sort of flowing pianistic line, what one might call a musical accompaniment by the poet himself, only allowing the official line to emerge on the big occasions' (J'y essayais, en effet, de mettre, à côté de l'alexandrin dans toute sa tenue, une sorte de jeu courant pianoté autour, comme qui dirait d'un accompagnement musical fait par le poète lui-même et ne permettant au vers officiel de sortir que dans les grandes occasions).³⁹ Although he appears to adopt the musical terminology of the Symbolists, the music is located not in patterns of sound, but in the tensions between overlapping structural systems in such a way that neither is definitive, maintaining in the rhythmic fabric of the text that essential hesitation between the illusory ideal and the void.

'Sainte', of 1865, further illustrates this silencing of music, with a stained-glass window depicting a saint whose finger brushes an angel's wing shaped like a harp, 'instrumental plumage' (plumage instrumental). Mallarmé describes it as 'a melodic little poem made above all in view of

³⁸ OC I:24.

³⁹ OC II:701.

music' (un petit poème mélodique et fait surtout en vue de la musique).⁴⁰ The instruments – viol, flute, mandora – go unplayed, and the poem closes with the famous description of the saint as a 'musician of silence' (Musicienne du silence), often taken as a summary of Mallarméan poetics.⁴¹ The poem is not a piece of music; rather, it is written 'in view of' music since it describes only an image of a musician playing an unreal instrument whose *plumes* (feathers) also denote in French the writer's pen. In his prose responses to Wagner and *vers libre* – notably 'Richard Wagner, Rêverie d'un poète français' (1885), 'La Musique et les Lettres' (1894) and 'Crise de vers' (1897) – Mallarmé insists that the sounds made by instruments are not the only musical phenomena. They may seem to have a monopoly on 'Music, or what it is generally agreed to call as such' (la Musique ou ce qu'on est convenu de nommer ainsi), but:

It is not from elementary sonorities produced by brass, strings, woodwind, undeniably but rather from the intellectual word at its peak, that Music must, with plenitude and evidence, result as the ensemble of relationships existing in everything.

(Ce n'est pas de sonorités élémentaires par les cuivres, les cordes, les bois, indéniablement mais de l'intellectuelle parole à son apogée que doit avec plénitude et évidence, résulter, en tant que l'ensemble des rapports existant dans tout, la Musique.)⁴²

Much has been made of Mallarmé's insistence on taking back from music what belongs to literature, often interpreted as a desire to fight music at its own game. But when he demands 'the restitution, to impartial silence, of the whole [...] system' (la restitution, au silence impartial, de tout [...] l'appareil), he highlights the presence, and function, in literature, of all the structural and rhythmic relationships which it already shares with music, with the exception of actualised sound: 'collisions, shifts [...], a delicious inability to conclude, a leap here, a stroke there [...] minus the tumult of sonorities' (chocs, glissements [...] une inaptitude délicate à finir, ce raccourci, ce trait [...] moins le tumulte des sonorités).⁴³ Music and poetry share the same structural dynamics, but for Mallarmé, a musical work remains 'vain, if language, via the purifying immersion and soaring of song, does not confer a sense upon it' (vain, si le langage, par la retrempe et l'essor purifiants du chant, n'y confère un sens).⁴⁴ Mallarmé's thinking on music takes us back to the rivalry which emerged in the Romantic period, but he reframes the debate so that it is poetry, not music, which, by its very nature, is closer to the ideal. Everyday use may reduce language to its economic exchange value, and musical works may seem to transcend words, but music is ultimately limited, a 'facile occultism with inscrutable extasies' (occultisme facile aux extases inscrutables).⁴⁵ Only poetry, Mallarmé insists, can gesture in both directions at the same time while settling on neither.

⁴⁰ Letter of December 1865 to Théodore Aubanel (*OC* I:686).

⁴¹ *OC* I:27.

⁴² 'La Musique et les Lettres', *OC* II:68 and 'Crise de vers', *OC* II:212.

⁴³ 'La Musique et les Lettres', *OC* II:69.

⁴⁴ 'La Musique et les Lettres', *OC* II:69.

⁴⁵ 'La Cour' (1895), *OC* II: 264.

Only poetry mobilises everyday words while blocking, or erasing, and transforming the normal functioning of those words, which flicker irresolvably between obscurity and clarity like the faun's hazy memory of the nymphs.

This primal drama of meaning, for Mallarmé, is the only subject of genuine Literature. 'Nature takes place' (La Nature a lieu), he writes, and 'The only possible act, for ever and uniquely, remains to grasp the relationships, between measures, be they scarce or numerous' (Tout l'acte disponible, à jamais et seulement, reste de saisir les rapports, entre temps, rares ou multipliés).⁴⁶ Nineteenth-century French poets' thinking on music leads to this awareness that, following the collapse of absolute values, no artwork is inherently poetic, inherently musical. Nothing can be taken for granted, there is no external guarantee, and meaning must be constructed afresh with each authorial and readerly gesture. This legacy to twentieth-century modernism is best, and most spectacularly, demonstrated by the last poem Mallarmé completed before he died, the infamous 'Coup de dés'. First published in *Cosmopolis* in 1897, it features eleven double pages across which words are scattered in different font sizes, some in capitals or italics, with no punctuation and lots of white space. It offers an unprecedented reading experience, and a disorientating one in which words and clauses are grouped together, but it is unclear how each relates to the others. No single poem in French has inspired so many attempts at exegesis, and while it remains impossible to pin down, the musical angle has often been explored. Indeed, an editor's note in *Cosmopolis* claimed, 'the poet has tried to make a music with words' (le poète s'est efforcé de faire une musique avec des mots), while Mallarmé mischievously suggested in a short preface that the text might provide, 'for whoever wants to read aloud, a score' (pour qui veut lire à haute voix, une partition).⁴⁷

Silent reading, however, comes closer to the idea of music which Mallarmé famously articulates to Edmund Gosse: 'Use *Music* in the Greek sense, essentially signifying Idea or rhythm between relationships' (Employez *Musique* dans le sens grec, au fond signifiant Idée ou rythme entre des rapports).⁴⁸ Paul Valéry recalls walking with Mallarmé after seeing the *Cosmopolis* proofs, gazing at the night sky and feeling 'caught in the very text of the silent universe' (pris dans le texte même de l'univers silencieux), 'which speaks and does not speak' (qui parle et qui ne parle pas). With the 'Coup de dés', he muses, Mallarmé has attempted 'to elevate, at last, a page to the power of the starry sky!' (élever enfin une page à la puissance du ciel étoilé!).⁴⁹ The poem places us before a textual cosmos with no authorial presence, and the act of reading becomes an attempt to identify constellations of language in the knowledge that any interpretation is contingent, and cannot be confirmed. Just as we identify connections between stars of similar brightness, words in similar font size appear to form sentences from page to page:

A ROLL OF THE DICE / NEVER / WILL ABOLISH / CHANCE
(UN COUP DE DÉS / JAMAIS / N'ABOLIRA / LE HASARD)
IF / IT WERE / THE NUMBER / IT WOULD BE / CHANCE

⁴⁶ 'La Musique et les Lettres', *OC* II:68.

⁴⁷ *OC* I:391-92.

⁴⁸ Letter of January 1893, *OC* I:807, original italics.

⁴⁹ *Œuvres*, ed. Jean Hytier, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 1957-1960), I:626.

(SI / C'ÉTAIT / LE NOMBRE / CE SERAIT / LE HASARD)
NOTHING / WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE / BUT THE PLACE / EXCEPT
/ PERHAPS / A CONSTELLATION
(RIEN / N'AURA EU LIEU / QUE LE LIEU / EXCEPTÉ
/ PEUT-ÊTRE / UNE CONSTELLATION)⁵⁰

No sooner have they appeared than these statements seem to negate themselves. If we identify something which creates meaning, the text-cosmos seems to tell us, it may be a coincidence, and yet the patterns leap out at the eye. Some constellations look so clear that we cannot not see them, but thanks to that irresolvable 'PERHAPS' we can never reach a satisfactory conclusion or state of knowledge. What Ghil refused to recognise, and what Mallarmé learned the hard way, is that this is the fundamental condition of every act of writing, and of reading. It is encapsulated in the final line of the poem, the only successive subject-verb-object construction in the entire text, and, as it happens, a perfect 4/6 decasyllable: 'Every Thought emits a roll of the dice' (Toute Pensée émet un Coup de Dés).⁵¹

Further Reading

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⁵¹ OCI:387.

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