

CROSSROADS

An interdisciplinary journal for the study
of history, philosophy, religion and classics

SPECIAL ISSUE - LUIZ COSTA LIMA

VOLUME II ISSUE II 2008

ISSN: 1833-878X

Pages 13-17

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Mallarmé and the Mimesis of Production

This brief text is excerpted from *Mimesis e modernidade: formas das sombras* (1980) (currently not translated in English). The whole work is concerned with uncoupling the otherwise unquestioned reduction of mimesis to *imitatio*. Here, in examining Mallarmé's "Prose pour des Esseintes", Costa Lima identifies a distinction between what he here calls 'mimesis of production' from 'mimesis of representation'. This distinction is the necessary precondition for his later, far-reaching hypothesis as to why and how the reduction of these two ideas came about: the control of the imaginary.

Excerpt from "O questionamento das sombras: mimesis na modernidade" (p 185-191) in *Mimesis e modernidade: formas das sombras* © 2003 by Luiz Costa Lima, São Paulo: Paz e Terra. Translated by Paulo Henriques Britto.

MALLARMÉ AND THE MIMESIS OF PRODUCTION

Hyperbole! de ma mémoire
Triomphalement ne sais-tu
Te lever, aujourd'hui grimoire
Dans un livre de fer vêtu:

Car j'installe, par la science,
L'hymne des coeurs spirituels
En l'oeuvre de ma patience,
Atlas, herbiers et rituels.

Nous promenions notre visage
(Nous fûmes deux, je le maintiens)
Sur maints charmes de paysage,
O soeur, y comparant les tiens.

L'ère d'autorité se trouble
Lorsque, sans nul motif, on dit
De ce midi que notre double
Inconscience approfondit

Que, sol des cent iris, son site
Ils savent s'il a bien été,
Ne porte pas de nom que cite
L'or de la trompette d'Été.

Oui, dans une île que l'air charge
De vue et non de visions
Toute fleur s'étalait plus large
Sans que nous en devisions.

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

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

Mais cette soeur sensée et tendre
Ne porta son regard plus loin
Que sourire, et comme à l'entendre
J'occupe mon antique soin.

Oh! sache l'Esprit de litige,
À cette heure où nous nous taisons,
Que de lis multiples la tige
Grandissait trop pour nos raisons

Et non comme pleure la rive,
Quand son jeu monotone ment
A vouloir que l'ampleur arrive
Parmi mon jeune étonnement

Hyperbole! from my memory
triumphant can you not arise,
today from a book bound with iron
as cabalistic gramaries:

because by knowledge I induct
the hymn of all hearts spirituel
to this labor of my patience,
Atlas, herbal, ritual.

We would turn our visages
(I maintain that we were two),
O sister, to the landscape's charms,
Always comparing them with you.

The era of authority
is troubled when, with no motifs,
they say of this southland our double
mind's subconsciousness perceives

that, hundred-iris bed, its site,
they know if really it existed,
does not bear a name the gold
of the Summer's trumpet cited.

Yes, on an island charged by air
not with visions but with sight
every flower showed off, freer,
though we never spoke of it.

Such, immense, that every one
usually adorned itself
with a lucid edge, lacuna
which from the gardens set it off.

Glory of long desire, Ideas
all in me with great elation
saw the family Irides
arise to this new consecration,

but this sensible fond sister
went no further than to spare
a smile and, to understand her,
I attend my ancient care.

O Spirit of contention! Know
at this hour when we are still,
that too tall for reason grows
the stalk of multiple asphodels

and not as the shore weeps,
when its monotonous frolic lies
to wish an amplitude would come
into my juvenile surprise

D’ouïr tout le ciel et la carte
 Sans fin attestés sur mes pas
 Par le flot même qui s’écarte,
 Que ce pays n’existait pas.

at hearing all the sky and map
 always in my steps attested,
 by the wave even that ebbs away,
 that this country never existed.

L’enfant abdicque son extase
 Et docte déjà par chemins
 Elle dit le mot: Anastase!
 Né pour d’éternels parchemins,

Already lessoned by the roads
 the child resigns her ecstasy
 and says it: Anastasius! Born
 for parchments of eternity,

Avant qu’un sépulcre ne rie
 Sous aucun climat, son aïeul,
 De porter ce nom: Pulchérie!
 Caché par le trop grand glaïeul.

before a sepulchre could laugh
 in any clime, her ancestor,
 to bear the name: Pulcheria!
 hidden by the too great lily’s flower.

The “Prose pour des Esseintes” was published in 1885, in the *Revue Indépendante*.ⁱ Dedicated to the hero of Huysmans’s 1884 novel *À rebours*, the “decadent” Jean Floressas des Esseintes, it inaugurates Mallarmé’s most hermetic phase. Like the poem we analyzed earlier [“Tout l’âme résumée”], it may be interpreted from a representational angle or from a productive one.

Let us begin by summarizing two variants of the representational reading. The first is proposed by Mallarmé’s competent Italian translator, Luciana Frezza. About the opening stanza she writes: “Today... in our rational era, hyperbole (that is, the spirit’s soaring towards direct knowledge of the supernatural) is no longer able to rise triumphantly... as may have been true in the past time of which the poem carries a vague, ancestral memory.”ⁱⁱ Concerning the eighth line, she observes: “The poet must prepare the ground out of which poetry will break free— institute the hymn—with subtle, painstaking labor, making use of science..., resorting to every instrument of knowledge, every ingredient within his reach. Bearing in mind the intended goal, Mallarmé presents these ingredients as so many magical implements: atlases, herbaria, rituals.”ⁱⁱⁱ The opening stanzas are then to be taken as the poet’s invocation, in which he expresses the wish that the resources of the magician, formerly effective, will help him reinforce the language of exaltation, now shut behind iron doors. His plea is successful, for in the third stanza we are told about the paradisiacal island on which the poet now is. Frezza observes about the fifth stanza: “The flowers themselves are unable to communicate to others their certainty, experienced through the poet’s artistic consciousness, just as the poet is unable to say about the place of happiness and light that it *is*, but only that it *was*: that place or moment (it is an undivided whole) is fatally inscribed within the experience of a human being, a prisoner of time, who can only ‘tell’ about his adventure, but cannot show it to the eyes of unbelievers as an actual reality.”^{iv} The island is thus an incommunicable experience, sealed in the word of the poet-magician. It is an unwitnessed treasure, a message to an unknown addressee. The poet’s companion has already said goodbye—“this Beatrice who refuses to accompany... the poet because she knows that the success of his voyage would be a shipwreck on the coast of nothingness.”^v—and the seashore hypocritically laments the poet’s fate, “contending (*A vouloir*) that *l’ampleur*, the intuition of the absolute, caught him unawares so that he could not place it.”^{vi} Given the fleetingness of the marvelous presence, and the hostility of the authorities of reason and of those who allow themselves to whisper, the poet is moved to speak in haste, following the advice of the child who orders him: *Anastase!* (literally, “arise,” in Greek), “lest... the grave express, with its cold, ironic laughter, the uselessness of having lived” (Frezza, *ibid.*, 242).

Doubtlessly, Frezza’s commentary helps us to understand the poem. (Our quotations have done no more than indicate its tone.) To characterize the kind of interpretation proposed by her, we may say that it is an exegesis that casts no doubt on the representational character of “Prose,” given the opposition established between the vision of the “world machine”—which, in the form of a paradisiacal island, manifested itself to the poet—and the unbelieving children of the age of science, who will not accept heavens or charts unless they are duly attested.

Frezza’s position, except for the particular emphasis she gives to magic, is similar to that of Émilie Noulet; again, we will do no more than point out Noulet’s most characteristic observations. On the basis of the poem’s opening—it begins with a vocative equivalent to “Poème, soyez”^{vii}—the author emphasizes not magic but the sacred sphere in which poetry is generated, once its defensive system has been discovered: the “crystallization of a region (*atlas*), a vocabulary (*herbier*) and a cult (*rituel*).”^{viii} From now on poems may be born, “for poetry is finally protected, as a holy thing.”^{ix}

According to Frezza, the mythological apparatus is at the service of an exegesis exalting the magical; to Noulet, what is exalted is the sphere of the poetic. The difference, if any, is minimal. Again, the difference is just as slight as regards the second critical point, the reading of stanzas 11-12: “The shore cries; those who live on the shore, who never go to the secret island, groan with envy because they do not wish that my astonishment (in the sense of wonderment) should attain greatness, reach the supreme contentment, exaltation.”^x Although Noulet translates the allegory more sharply, it is clear that once again the conflict is between the poet’s exclusive vision and the envious blindness of the others. Finally, let us examine the third critical point, stanzas 13-14. Noulet begins by transcribing an illuminating comment by Henry Charpentier: “If we wish to take into account the etymology, it must be understood that this word (*Anastase*), in addition to the golden, Byzantine touch it clearly adds (*Anastase* and *Pulchérie* were respectively emperor and empress of Byzantium)..., announces from the outset the Resurrection of poetry, the new life that the supreme poet’s subtle art creates on undying parchments.”^{xi} Noulet associates this final invocation with that in the poem’s opening: “Hyperbole! de ma mémoire” etc.

Although partial, the readings excerpted from above are enough to provide an understanding of the spirit they lend to the poem: exaltation of the poet’s unique vision, which, however, is the cause of his exile. This Mallarméan theme belongs to the romantic tradition. But could it be that the sensation of déjà vu derives from the fact that “Prose” is being subjected to a sort of mimesis from which it ironically distances itself? This is the insight that may be explored on the basis of the quite different exegesis proposed by Karlheinz Stierle.

Instead of a narrative interpretation that provides solutions for the syntactic difficulties and golden paraphrases of a sacred language, what the poem requires, according to Stierle, is an inverted reading—that is, one that directly links the opening and closing stanzas, so that all that comes between them is the presentation of the fantasy elaborated in the mind of the poet-as-reader of the word “Anastase,” found in some old book: “The ascension of hyperbole—that is, the transcendence of reality in language—is achieved by the fusion of the memory and the old book.”^{xii} The basic difficulty for this proposed reading is in stanzas 11-12. However, Stierle’s solution is convincing: “The coast... seems identical with the previous place of contemplation. This places all that has come before under a different light. What is remembered is not the crossing of a miraculously beautiful island, but rather the vision of an island, or, more precisely, the vision of lights shimmering on the horizon which, seen by the spectator, are transformed into the phantasmagoria of an ideal island covered with flowers. All of this, however, is there only implicitly and is accessible solely to those readers who—perhaps on the basis of ‘L’ Après-midi d’un faune’—already know how, in subjective vision, the formless tumult of the light of high noon condenses into figures that are also subject to *doute* and thus oscillate between being and not being, between a position and the denial of such a position.”^{xiii} To sum up: “The opening word *Anastase* and its fundamental association with *Pulchérie* has produced the idea of poetry, which then finds its metaphorical actualization in the central interrelation between islands and flowers. The pseudoreferentiality established for the island, for the flowers and, ultimately, for the word *Anastase* itself, on the other hand, is part of the conceptual world preestablished in written language, and specified as *atlas, herbiers et rituels*.”^{xiv}

Although Stierle does no more than to reinforce with this analysis his thesis concerning the decisive importance of negativity in the modern lyric, I find it necessary to extrapolate from this to the next stage. Negation is not restricted to abolishing the referent and questioning its own fixed phantasmagorias, as *phantasmagorias*, in the text, for this endeavor, which aims to dismantle the mimesis of representation, ultimately formulates a different kind of mimesis, one that formulates in the text, as it is being deciphered, its own referent—i.e., the backdrop that allows the process of signification. The previous conception of reality is no longer the support of the significations actualized by the reader, and consequently adhesion to it will generate analytic distortions. As Frezza’s and Noulet’s interpretations show us, what was hitherto a support, a condition for contrast, is now an obstacle against the text. So it is not that the poetic leaves the field of a certain kind of communication—which is what would happen if the text completely lost its character as mimesis, that is, as “representation” of something distinct from it. *Distinction and identification are now created simultaneously; that is, the text establishes its distinction (from the outset, in relation to “representational elements”) even as its identification is being established.* Mimesis remains the basis on which the specific communication of the poetic rests.

Though it is not our intention to lengthen this discussion, it is important to underscore the problem that is in question here: unable to rely on his previously accumulated store of knowledge, which helped him to decipher texts and which was given him by the social conception of the real, the reader no longer has a basis for aesthetic pleasure. Does this mean that the mimesis of production is an obstacle to pleasure? If so, it is no less than an impediment to the aesthetic experience. Actually, it is not that aesthetic pleasure is suppressed; it is only its source that has become narrower; this pleasure is now born not of *recognition*, but rather of *the knowledge of*

production itself. That is why, in short, we take “Prose” as paradigmatic of what we call mimesis of production, as distinguished from mimesis of representation.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 237-238.
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- ^v *Ibid*, 240.
- ^{vi} *Ibid*, 241.
- ^{vii} Noulet, Émilie. 1940. *L'Œuvre poétique de Mallarmé*. Brussels: Jacques Antoine, 103.
- ^{viii} *Ibid*, 104.
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- ^x *Ibid*, 111.
- ^{xi} quoted in Noulet, *ibid.*, 112.
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- ^{xiii} *Ibid*, 108.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid*, 116.