

Genova on Norman (2014)

Norman, Barnaby. *Mallarmé's Sunset: Poetry at the End of Time*. Oxford: Legenda, 2014. Pp. 147. ISBN: 978-1-909662-2

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Today, few would doubt the extraordinary impact of Stéphane Mallarmé's thought and theory in a host of aesthetic and intellectual disciplines, not the least of which are philosophy and literary criticism. Given this backdrop, Barnaby Norman examines in his new study the undeniable significance of Mallarmé's writings within a cultural heritage that runs from Paul Valéry through Jacques Rancière, giving special attention to the influence Mallarmé had on the work of Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida. For these two cultural icons, the figure of Mallarmé embodied an important rupture in the history of literary theory, his stance symbolizing a metaphoric opening of literature toward a radically new kind of writing. Situating his analysis in reference to other texts of Mallarmé scholarship—in particular, Bertrand Marchal's *La Religion de Mallarmé* and Gardner Davies's *Mallarmé et le drame solaire*—Norman develops his study around the rich image of the Mallarméan sunset, an ambivalent formulation invoking an end and a beginning, melancholy and promise, an image undeniably key in the poet's unique notion of the Solar Drama.

Another important aspect in Norman's interpretation of Mallarmé's impact centers on his relationship to G.W. Hegel's *Aesthetics*; though the poet does not offer direct commentary on the philosopher's works, Norman argues that an appreciation of Mallarmé's Hegelianism is crucial to understanding his importance to Blanchot and Derrida, for whom Hegel clearly represents a significant precursor. Invoking the sunset motif, Norman suggests that Mallarmé situates his *œuvre* at the end of the history of art, in Hegelian terms, at the twilight of a certain kind of thinking, and it is especially this aspect of his project that attracted Blanchot and Derrida. In such a way, it is through the lens of Hegel's work that we can perceive the position of accomplishment at which Mallarmé's poetic view needs to be situated to be most fully appreciated with regard to twentieth-century intellectual history.

Within this general theoretical framework, Norman follows Mallarmé's trajectory primarily in his poetic work, and finds his argument on close readings of four key texts: *Hérodiade*, *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même*, *Igitur*, and *Un coup de dés*. Through his exploration of these works, Norman asks, "What does it mean to have outlived beauty?" We are faced here with a weighty issue: what does Mallarmé's perhaps unexpected formulation of a post-apocalyptic landscape, akin to Samuel Beckett's ambivalent settings, actually mean? He has seemingly left us with the concept of the closure of absolute beauty, as evidenced in Mallarmé's difficulties with his *livre* project, which is simultaneously offset by an infinite opening to the beyond.

To trace the twentieth-century development of these unique ideas, Norman devotes substantial discussion to Blanchot's reading of *Igitur* and proposes that Blanchot's literary criticism can be seen in a general way as being structured around the figure of opposition, reflected in his reading of Mallarmé as a site of passage—again, of a sense of opening—beyond the absolute. To explore Mallarmé's conception of negation, Norman turns to Blanchot's idea of the "two slopes of literature" (i.e., one that belongs to human culture, a concrete text that critics can analyze, and one contained within the text itself on a self-referential level, inaccessible to those who read it). The force of absence thus emerges as essential in Blanchot's interpretation of a Mallarméan formulation such as the celebrated "Je dis une fleur!" in which the word ultimately negates the contingent flower, through a gesture that allows it to open to its universal potential.

Norman then turns his attention to what he describes as *the* poem of dissemination for Derrida, *Un coup de dés*. Launching his analysis by examining Mallarmé's *livre* as Derrida considered it in *La Voix et le Phénomène* and *De la grammatologie*, Norman explores the ways in which the poet's work presents a substantial displacement of the metaphysics of presence. Derrida identifies the manifestation of crisis in Mallarmé's sunset, and his reading of Mallarmé's curious and engaging text on the art of mime, *Mimique*, which has attracted a good deal of previous critical interest; this is fleshed out by Norman here, particularly in his discussion of questions of Mallarmé's and Derrida's representation and mimesis.

In the end, Norman provides us with an imaginative reading of the reception of Mallarmé's thought and work by two of the most influential French thinkers of the twentieth century; he returns frequently to the figure of Hegel and his notion of the end of art. This study helps to remind readers of the undeniably significant presence of the poet for more modern philosophy, while Norman avoids the pitfall of losing sight of Mallarmé's exquisitely beautiful poetic vision.

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