

## The Symbolist Voice for Appropriating the Human: The Modernist Sublime by Stéphane Mallarmé's Lyrical Pursuit

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### 1. Mallarmé's skinny sublimation

Stéphane Mallarmé's early lyrical poems, especially the seven romantic ones, represent a collective symbol for purified beauty. With joy and a sigh, the speaker-author's affective voice unifies the melodious collection, concentrated into a restricted framework of each short poem in both syllabic and stanzaic regularity. The implied, thus inaudible voice is an overall sound image of the collection's every poetic discourse; the sound image embodies the speaker-author's intention to accomplish an aesthetic utterance as a limited human entity. Simulating a celestial fruition, the voice culminates with clear, thus respectful presentations of cosmic bodies such as the sun, the moon, and the multiple stars as heavenly birds and angels; the speaker-author monologically seeks for an ultimate crystallization represented by "étoiles parfumées" ("Apparition"), reminiscent of earthly flowers. The expansive yet centripetal collection comprises the following pieces: "Apparition," "Soupir," "Brise marine," "Les Fleurs," "L'Azur," "Renouveau," and "Sainte." As is indicated by the poems' sentimental titles, the collection's dominant image is that of water for tears fused into sunny light. In "L'Azur," the ambitious speaker orders, embodying "l'idée étrange": "Brouillards, montez!"<sup>1</sup> The homogenized collection presents a metamorphic salvation of the speaker's voice as watery breath.

In "Brise marine," the poet-speaker's morbid psyche, which suffers from his lack of creativity and paternal responsibility, proceeds to be conveyed by his voiced breath, entailing the image of flooding tears: "La chair est triste, hélas!" Feigning a "Steamer," his hopeful mind is

yet turned into a nightly foam (“l’écume inconnue”), the cathartic transformation of wind and rain, and is sublimated onto a stellar jewel, the moon (“la clarté” in the night, or “nuits”), i.e., the prospective sun as the central cosmic umbilicus. This is the collection's crowning piece, “Apparition”'s illuminated symbol. At the textual end, the speaker's sublimated voice is glorified as the mariners' song (“le chant des matelots”), a hymn to the whole universe including the sky and the mirroring ocean. The sublimation is watery, beginning with the earthly speaker's confessional breath and ending with the heavenly crystal in condensed light mingling in air.

The highlighted poem, “Apparition,” suggests a soothing picture of the speaker's unrequited passion with tears (“sanglots”) melted into the night sky filled with haze and starlight: “De blancs sanglots glissant sur l'azur des corolles.” Becoming thus the omnipresent air in the symmetrical 16 verses, the speaker is finally able to reach and kiss his beloved: “C'était le jour béni de ton premier baiser.” The enlargement of one's limited self is realized; furthermore, he may be totally dissolved in air, because his melting mind is a part of his body, and his voice, conveying his mind, is a physical medium. In the cosmic wedding, the female counterpart is crystallized onto the celestial queen, the sun: being a blond, she is qualified as a fairy wearing a bright hat (“chapeau de clarté”). The diamond piece “Apparition,” which is the most popular among all of Mallarmé's poems and “inhabituellement sentimental,” according to Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (1412), is as follows:

La lune s'attristait. Des séraphins en pleurs  
 Rêvant, l'archet aux doigts dans le calme des fleurs  
 Vaporeuses, tiraient de mourantes violes  
 De blancs sanglots glissant sur l'azur des corolles  
 – C'était le jour béni de ton premier baiser.  
 Ma songerie aimant à me martyriser  
 S'enivrait savamment du parfum de tristesse

Que même sans regret et sans déboire laisse  
 La cueillaison d'un Rêve au cœur qui l'a cueilli.  
 J'errais donc, l'œil rivé sur le pavé vieilli  
 Quand avec du soleil aux cheveux, dans la rue  
 Et dans le soir, tu m'es en riant apparue  
 Et j'ai cru voir la fée au chapeau de clarté  
 Qui jadis sur mes beaux sommeils d'enfant gâté  
 Passait, laissant toujours de ses mains mal fermées  
 Neiger de blancs bouquets d'étoiles parfumées.

In “Soupir,” the sister piece of “Apparition,” the speaker's frustrated passion for an ideal beloved, “calme sœur,” raises itself to be assimilated with a seraphic sky in autumnal blue by the aid of his incantatory voice: “Mon âme . . . Monte.” The sky with a central burning body, the sun, naturally evokes the beloved's angelic eye (“ton œil angélique”). The small source of salvation is endowed with an oceanic expansion (“grands bassins”) with the falling sun at its center in the second half of the poem. The image of water is culminated, following the airy title and the appearance of a fountain in the first half of the piece.

The sacerdotal poems, “Les Fleurs” and “Sainte,” consecrate the pilgrims' subjective voice by superimposing it on the image of heavenly apogees, “Notre dame” and “l'Ange.”<sup>2</sup>

The blasphemous poems, “L'Azur” and “Renouveau,” end in the speaker-poet's apparent defeat vis-à-vis a natural object representing a transcendental beauty, i.e., a blue sky with the sun. Nevertheless, beyond that semantic defeat, the speaker's voice actually takes heavenly images, by mentioning those images.

In the collection, thus, not only the achieved beauty is presented, but also the process of purification evokes itself. Furthermore, the process is seen within a piece and across the collection: this tightens up the collected pieces' interrelationship as a self-sufficient cosmos of consumption and production. “Brise marine”'s chimeric despair should

be metamorphosed into “Apparition”’s dreamed fairy. The early Mallarmean beauty mainly depends on a sublimation processed in a universal scale; within a mimetic framework, the verbal achievement is superimposed on the picture of natural transformation that turns all the earthly components into airy flotation to become beaming jewels. Take, for example, the spiritual mist rising from a cremated human body into heaven. The environmental truth makes the Mallarmean psychological catharsis all the more acceptable and even desirable; an oxymoronic phrase, “mon ennui s’élève” (“Renouveau”), is apparently abrupt, but irreplaceable.

The collection’s seven romantic poems conceive, in fact, a powerful image of springing in each restricted form. In “Apparition,” the reader is sent out to the moon (“La lune”) at the poem’s very beginning. “Soupir”’s central verb is “Monte,” meaning “Rises,” “Brise marine,” “Lève” for “Lift.” Concerning “Sainte,” “L’Azur,” and “Renouveau,” they are cosmic from the title. “Les Fleurs” also gives an image of growing plants. The musical and readable verses push the euphoric reader to follow them at a glance or a breath to the textual end;<sup>3</sup> the ending point is the verses’ final climax at which the reader’s frustrated desire to continue to enjoy the poetic world accumulates itself. Nevertheless, the reader is then solaced by the memory of their own horizontal eye-movement springing as a sublimating elevation to the cosmic apex of the crystalline verses. The seven poems’ refreshing movement excludes Mallarmé’s other weaker early works such as “Les Fenêtres” and “Angoisse.” In the seven poems, the impressed reader is hopefully led to trace the poems’ implicit way of sublimation from the speaker’s lyrical breath crystallized onto the cosmic bodies.

Another cause which pushes the reader to seek for a hidden way of salvation in each of the romantic poems is that, on the surface level, the poems are semantically slight from a practical point of view: the artful poems’ information is private, and thus not directly usable for everyday life. The poems are, in fact, “pure poetry,” synonymous with “useless,”<sup>4</sup> as well as “lyrical.” According to Lloyd James Austin (31),

the poems represent Mallarmé's "confessions lyriques." Austin ascribes lyricity to the poet's personal, or private feelings, quoting Robert's definition (35). What "Apparition" explicitly tells is simply the wandering speaker's unrequited love, which is subjectively completed by a vision of the beloved and a dreamful landscape in a misty English town. "Soupir" seems to only appraise the beloved's eye with a heavenly beauty. "Sainte" corresponds to an instantaneous delineation of the heroine's admirable profile. "Les Fleurs" appears to be a decorative expansion of an ordinary tribute to God, the Creator. "L'Azur," "Renouveau," and "Brise marine" just embody a quest for the unattainable, at least on the surface. The polysemic gap between the explicit and implicit meanings reflects the speaker-author's youthful potential and subconscious optimism.

The modern self-conscious reader's joy should culminate when s/he recognizes that the Mallarmeian sublimation makes the human and the natural combine into one; the sublimation embodies a correspondence of the speaker's individual mind with the cosmic entirety which includes the objects of love, the locus of communication, scenery, and the seasons. The emotional I-voice dominates the collection of the seven poems, involving the short but nostalgic "Sainte" by the exceptional third-person narrative. The subjectivity of "Sainte" is foregrounded by the poem's continuous single sentence that makes up the whole text, while, at the same time, being arbitrarily divided into 16 verses with awkward enjambments. Though all the seven poems were written in the 1860s (from May 1862 to December 1865, i.e., from the poet's age of 20 to 23), I quoted the definitive texts in Mallarmé's *Poésies* by the poet's final edition and published posthumously in 1899. This is first because the changes are minor, such as punctuations, leaving the poems' original form almost intact. Secondly because the early-ness, or the Parnassian-ness, of the poems is intensified by the mature author's refinement. The collection's five poems were first published in *Le Parnasse contemporain*.<sup>5</sup> The poems are, in fact, marked by a Parnassian solid beauty, while simultaneously in a symbolist

musical flow. A typical example of the poet's refinement corresponds to the change of a poem's title; the definitive "Renouveau" was previously the ambiguous redundancy of foreign words, "Vere novo." An indefinite article substituted for a definite article ("un vent" from "le vent" in "Brise marine") enhances the freshness of oceanic splashes.

Though continuously melodious, the seven poems hint at their hidden tendency to separate each word, breaking up their syntagmatic continuity in the covering image of crystallization, which also reflects Parnassian-ness; conveying the speaker's breath, each word seems apt to fly from its own place in the sentence, aiming for a heavenly concentration. The formal/semantic duality, which is unified by the speaker's lyrical voice, is represented by the first metaphoric verse of "Brise marine," the meaning of which is summarized by the central single word "hélas" with a disseminating echo: "La chair est triste, hélas! et j'ai lu tous les livres." In the cozy but icy piece, "Soupir," the mirroring two 5-line stanzas present a crystalline symmetry of descent and ascent of the speaker's unsettled passion. The reflective poem, which offers the mirror images of both "Apparition" and "Sainte," was qualified by Jean Royère as "suprêmement purifié" (Mondor and Jean-Aubry 1434). Moreover, as "une rêverie automnale" (Mallarmé's letter to Mme H. Le Josne, 8 Feb. 1866), the phantasmagoric work simultaneously blurs the borders of the human and the natural: for example, "un jardin mélancolique" and "la fauve agonie / Des feuilles." In the ornamental "Les Fleurs," whose beauty impressed all of the poet's friends (Mondor and Jean-Aubry 1423), the enamored speaker sprinkles a prayer of figurative words to summon his heavenly beloved, "Notre dame," the lachrymose Madonna. In "L'Azur," the speaker's desperate quest corresponds only with the ineffable absolute: "L'Azur! l'Azur! l'Azur! l'Azur!" The repeated "A" represents a source of tears as a typical cry. At the ending of "Renouveau," a mingling of the blue sky, birds, flowers, and the sun sends a revivifying stream of spring to the frustrated speaker-reader: "Cependant l'Azur rit sur la haie et l'éveil / De tant d'oiseaux en fleur gazouillant au soleil."

The seven poems' duality unified by the monological voice may be qualified as an enlivened symmetry. As a main source for the image of refinement, the symmetry is most visibly embodied by the poems' surface regularity based on the pairing of binary divisions: "Apparition" and "Brise marine" in 16 alexandrine verses, "Soupir" in 10 alexandrine verses, "L'Azur" in 36 alexandrine verses, each stanza in 4 verses, "Les Fleurs" in 24 alexandrine verse, each stanza in 4 verses, "Renouveau" in an alexandrine sonnet form, and "Sainte" in octosyllabic 16 verses, each stanza in 4 verses. The syllabic and stanzaic regularity is consummated by each poem's imprinting rhyme.

The poems' motif is also identical: the vocal/psychological development as catharsis, fusion, sublimation, appropriation, and euphoria. The difference resides only in the degree to which the sublimation of the speaker's self is fictionalized. In "Apparition" and "Soupir," he becomes invisible in a harmonious fusion with the cosmic wholeness, whereas in "Renouveau" and "L'Azur," the egocentric hero remains on earth, just throwing curses to the patriarchal sky that refuses the acceptance of the hero. The curses are, however, virtual bridges connecting the hero to heaven.

Even at first reading, each poem of the romantic collection promptly attracts the reader by its accentuated image of refinement and superlative. This makes aestheticism dominant in the collection. The separate poems work together to set up a monistic cosmos charged with Mallarmé's typical poetic props. They are fleeting but expansive as symbols of margins, i.e., the "typically Mallarméan 'nexus' word(s)," according to Roger Pearson (55): angels, stars, moonlight, sunlight, dream, birds, masts, windows, viols, flowers, perfume, water, and tears. Some of the symbols, such as angels and viols, are recurrent across the pieces. Their unifying color is white, the poet's beloved colorless color, representing present absence, that is, omnipresence. In a word, the early Mallarmean beauty is angelic; it is airy and evasively detached, alchemizing the predecessor Baudelaire's aesthetics of decadence. According to Armand Renaud, Mallarmé's poetry has more

spiritualism than Baudelaire's and E. A. Poe's (Mondor and Jean-Aubry 1431). Mallarmé's reader is led to enjoy a cooling beauty in a seductive poetic illusion. The reader's experience is dualistically stratified; the Mallarmean poems represent a quick alternation between antagonistic elements, which shapes the reader's interpretive imagery as a growing cube: illusory, realistic, sensual, and sacred. The cubic form embodies Mallarmé's quest for all, or in Anne Bourgain-Wattiau's expression, "une passion pour le monde sensible" (25).

Different from Baudelaire's fiery animalism that instantaneously makes the beloved's Medusan hairs an inclusive cosmos, Mallarmé's early sublimation is gradational, following watery evaporation. Their contrast is clearly seen in the following example: "Cheveux bleus, pavillon de ténèbres tendues" (Baudelaire, "La Chevelure") and "la fée au chapeau de clarté" (Mallarmé, "Apparition"). Mallarmé's achievement is airy: subtle but covering.

The Baudelairean correspondence is made through a metaphorical clash between independent elements, whereas the Mallarmean development is metamorphic and reductive, thus metonymic: Baudelaire's rhetoric owes much to an unexpected juxtaposition of poetic images, often charged with tonic accents, for example, "Cheveux" (hairs) and "pavillon" (pavilion), while Mallarmé's symbol-making is characterized by a transformation of poetic images by corrosive qualifications including tacit connection between the images, thereby keeping harmonious serenity; his symbol-making represents a development of self-sameness, requiring time and space.

The sememe "human" in the word "fée" (fairy) connects the very word to the next "chapeau" (hat) without much difficulty, and the proximity between the "chapeau" and the sun invites the following word "clarté" (brightness) with sufficient legitimacy. Baudelaire's poetic world is marked by duality, whereas Mallarmé's universe is basically monistic. The attractive feminine body evoked by the reader who experiences Mallarmé's sublimating process is seraphic and skinny, unlike Baudelaire's productive motherly figure. The skin is, in



fact, a bridge between the self and the wholeness, neighboring windy air. In the melting equality of everything, the Mallarmean early poems twinkle with a subversive image that a purified white skin swallows up its surroundings and the cosmic wholeness, just as with the erosive water. In the reader's imagination, a classical normal beauty is miraculously distorted, due to the enormous expansion by Mallarmé's poetics.

Though temporarily painful for the reader, the early poems conscientiously give him/her euphoria, smoothly actualizing the culmination of humanness, which is symbolized by the translucent skin. The poems naturally fuse the vulgar into the beyond, or the sensual into the divine, resorting to the motherly imagery of water, which erodes and connects everything. Formally and semantically, the romantic collection represents a fertile source for the succeeding Mallarmean poetry; classically formalized, the early poems condense Mallarmé's art, from which the totality of his work comes forth and to which it returns for rebirth. The early lyrics may be qualified as the matrix of the theatrical pieces, *Hérodiade* and "L'Après-Midi d'un Faune,"<sup>6</sup> the novelistic poems "Toast funèbre" and "Prose," the esoteric late sonnets, as well as the typographic work, "Un coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard."

## 2. Mallarmé's lyrical cosmos

What paradoxically secures a human depth to the romantic collection is the speaker's apparently noncommittal attitude towards his object of love. The works all simulate love poems with the speaker's earnest voice seemingly searching for something endeared. The speaker's object of love is, however, difficult to ascertain, belying the reader's realistic expectations.

Unrolling natural scenery as the background of the passionate speaker, Mallarmé's early seven poems may be classified as pastoral lyrics. According to Terry Gifford's classification, the poems belong to

the second type of pastoral in a broad sense that subsumes any literary form presenting “a delight in the natural” (2). Originally for earthly shepherds (Cuddon 644), the non-transcendental pastoral genre essentially requires each of its naturalistic poems to delineate a beloved female, a representative of the verbalized humanness as a counterpart, or rather, a culmination of naturalness. The heroine may be viewed as the created pastoral itself for the author's partner. The pastoral's euphoric natural frame is set to prevent the reader's eye from wandering onto the cosmic vacancy. Thus “pastoral” is synonymous with “amorous.” Take, for example, Christopher Marlowe's “The Passionate Shepheard to his Love.”

Nevertheless, as for Mallarmé's “Apparition,” which is the romantic collection's seemingly most typical love poem, it is not clear whether the poem's enamored speaker is intrigued with a girl in blond hair or the golden burning body in the sky, the sun. The girl is designated as a fairy (“fée”), thus half-human and half-divine. She is disappearing in a misty veil, an evaporation of white flowers (“Neiger de blancs bouquets”). In “Soupir,” the speaker confuses his beloved's eye with the sky, this inanimate airy dome representing the transcendent. Moreover, the heroine is ambiguously designated as “sœur.” In “Les Fleurs” and “Sainte,” both the heroines are religious, i.e., the Virgin Mary and St. Cecilia. The other three poems, “L'Azur,” “Renouveau,” and “Brise marine,” long for a paradise, the camouflaged motherly womb. This stoical elusiveness legitimately leads the reader to suspect any cause of psychological complex in the speaker-author's mind: for example, his traumatic early experience of successive funerals indicated by Jean-Luc Steinmetz (35).

The culmination of humanness borders on the total negation of humanness, even if, in the poems, the negation is verbalized, thereby remaining under humanization with the speaker-author's verbal warmth/eroticism. In “Apparition” and “Soupir,” the description of the central human figure, the female beloved, is appropriated by that of the quasi-transcendental; both the poems end with a symbolic

picture of a natural acme, reminiscent of femininity, the first one with that of stars (“*étoiles*”) and the second one, the sun (“*soleil*”). The heroine becomes absent in the course of the textual development, though invisibly mingling in the cosmic sublime. In the poems, one of the most serious antagonisms, life vs. death, is foregrounded beside the male vs. female, the vulgar vs. sacred, and the consumptive vs. productive. The apparently romantic love poems cancel themselves, obsessed with idealism, and thus refusing to be the pastoral genre’s lawful examples. They paradoxically become cosmic pastorals.

For a verbal, thus human work to be transgressive, or at least decadent, it is enough that the work’s male speaker does not seriously concern his putative beloved. The Mallarmean poems are pushed divinely further, seeking for the cosmic absolute preceded by the colorful sky incrustated with various starry bodies: Sky as “*n’importe ce qui valut / Le blanc souci de notre toile*” (“*Salut*”) in the poet’s periphrastic expression. In the image of a powerful leap, the seven poems’ exploration seems to continue beyond the representative cosmic body, the sun, onto the cosmic vacancy. The vacancy, or apparent unhumanness, may be viewed as a reservoir of absolute death. The death can yet be considered to be replete with the potential for survival in this continuous and self-sufficient universe; thus, Mallarmé’s poetic quest seems devious, but it is circularly conscientious and the most ambitious, perfectly aiming for the ultimate that mingles both the human and the transcendental.

The apparently fruitless desire of Mallarmé’s early speaker consists in expanding his poetic voice as widely as possible in open air, so that he may reach every reader, as well as the cosmic acme. This is to realize perfect communication: “*La cueillaison d’un Rêve au cœur qui l’a cueilli*” (“*Apparition*”) in Mallarmé’s symbolic expression. His lyrical voice, as airy breath, searches for the cosmic apex, the convergence of absence and silence. He thus becomes the sublime itself. The reader remains intoxicated by the euphoric confusion of the appropriating voice and the cosmic wholeness. From another angle, the

speaker's object of love dissolves into his lyrical voice to be endlessly expanded, cosmically mingling with air, sunlight, and darkness. Since the voice embodies the air and the cosmic wholeness, the speaker's small but symbolic object of love is an inseparable part of the voice as all. Then, the author-speaker's concern with his human object of love is found to be irreproachably serious. Basically, the poetry's verbal framework always stays human.

From a feminist point of view, however, the voice's inclusion of the object of love leads to patriarchal dominance, which evokes Botticelli's mighty figure of Zephyr holding a stupefied female partner, Aura. The Mallarmé poem's object of love is, in fact, weaker and lower than the speaker's covering voice. This familiar classicism in Mallarmé's early poetry unnoticeably contributes to its accessibility and popularity. According to Steinmetz, Mallarmé is the poet that “we love” (“nous aimons”) with his poetic universe full of seraphs (31). Mallarmé's early poems are subjectively camouflaged, but traditionally mimetic.

Nevertheless, his creative ambition is too strong to remain in an ordinary frame of aesthetics, i.e., the finality as the celebration of eroticism, a core of human life. The limitless expansion of his inaudible textual voice indicates his hysterical motive for seeking all, which may not come from artistic perfectionism but from some existential anxiety causing aphasia. The Mallarmean speaker's enlarging voice naturally induces psychoanalysis and ontological reasoning, as is presented by the introspective studies of Sartre and Kristeva. It should be noted, however, that the appropriation of all is realized only by language, because the world embodies the viewer's consciousness controlled by language. Language is for art, philosophy, and world-making, which probably tempted Mallarmé, the poet and professor of language, to invent an ambitious form of poetry marked by self-referentiality. His motive finally takes a self-destructive form of “Un coup de Dés.”

Mallarmé's achievement by the romantic collection may be qualified as the culmination of lyricism, that is, the perfection of the lyric genre. According to J. A. Cuddon, the lyric is a kind of poem to be

distinguished from the narrative and dramatic verses (481). Contrasted with the other two poetic modes for recording outer actions, the subjective lyric is a comprehensive, or centripetal poetic form, which is directly concerned with both psychology and aesthetics, viz., the ontological inside and the phenomenological outside. The lyric is, hence, the most popularized union of art and humanness, because it is a poem in verbal signs for personal feelings, i.e., the subjective. Poetry represents literature in its artful form. Language is the first tool of human communication. Humanness may be represented by personal feelings, because both are medium: humanness is between divinity and animality, whereas personal feelings are between divine intellect and animalistic instinct. According to the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, the lyric is one of the most human-centered literary genres; furthermore, “through the criticism of the romantic school,” the term “lyric/lyrical” has had a synonymity with “poetry” (“Lyric”). In short, the lyric is a representation foregrounding both art and humanness: humanness as symbolizing modernity.

It may be considered that Mallarmé himself consciously aimed at a lyrical perfection. In his letter to one of his literary friends, Henri Cazalis, dated July 1, 1862, Mallarmé says: “la turbulence du lyrisme serait indigne de cette chaste apparition que tu aimes. Il faut méditer longtemps: l'art seul, limpide et impeccable, est assez chaste pour la sculpter religieusement.” In this letter, Mallarmé refers to his poem in progress to become “Apparition.” The letter evidently shows that the poet himself intended to rework the lyrical storm and to organize it into a sophisticated manifestation. Mallarmé thereby followed Wordsworth's definition of the lyric/lyrical as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (240). The frequent appearance of the word “lyrique” in the poet's letters sent to Cazalis in the same period attests to Mallarmé's serious interest in lyricality: in the letter dated January 7, 1864, twice, April 25, 1864, once, and July 1865, once.

As is pointed out by many critics, the definition of “lyric/lyrical” is confused. J. A. Cuddon designates the term as “loosely” used (481).

According to Jonathan Culler, as with the romantic school, any poem may be viewed as a lyric. Culler says: “the lyric” means “a short non-narrative poem” (73). The implications of Culler's definition are as follows.

First, to be “short” corresponds to be limited and subjective, “non-narrative” to be subjective and emotional, which follows Wordsworth's decisive definition of the lyric. In the Preface to his *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth strongly confirms the directness of lyricity, which is an essence of the subjective/emotional, by the phrase “the spontaneous overflow,” enforcing Johnson's “soft and pleasing” in 1778 (“Lyric,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*). Wordsworth's phrase is a part of his following declaration: “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (240). This Wordsworthian definition points to the lyric as a conflictive/ambitious combination of art (“overflow”) and humanness (“feelings”). Furthermore, the “spontaneous” directness represents an ultimate form of beauty, synonymous with simplicity, though often confused with artlessness. The Wordsworthian influence can be marked in a lexical reference. According to the *OED* (“Lyric”), the word “lyric” is currently the synonym of directness.

Second, the shortness is relative; and the speaker's poetic, or expressive voice that emotionally stops short the continuity of discourse always virtually negates the poem's objective narrativity, hidden behind the actualized text. Then, it can be said that all the poems are “short” and “non-narrative,” or subjective/emotional. Culler himself points out the fact that the lyric came to be identified with the essence of literature between the late eighteenth century and the mid-twentieth century (73). C. Day Lewis also indicates that, concerning modern poetry after the late eighteenth century, “one could almost say there is no lyric poetry since every poem has a lyrical quality” (13).

The semantic confusion revolving around the “lyric/lyrical”'s definition should be ascribed to a mixture of art and humanness principally through the intermediary of the concept “beauty,” close to eroticism, as well as to a manifold heap of concrete poetic works in

different cultures involving Greek, Latin, Spanish, Hebrew, Persian, Chinese, and Japanese.<sup>7</sup> To advance beyond that confusion, it may be legitimate to go back to etymological implications: a lyric is a song,<sup>8</sup> thus musical and essentially meaningless: meaningless, because, unlike a word, a musical note is not attached to any concept by convention, as is pointed out by Mallarmé himself (“La Musique et les Lettres” 649). The meaninglessness is reflected also in Wordsworth’s definition of the lyric, i.e., subjective/emotional. Feelings represent a counterpart of intellect, i.e., conveyed by the subjective I-voice of the speaker. In his article entitled “Mallarmé et la tentation du lyrisme,” C. Chadwick opposes lyricism to intellect, i.e., “la poésie cérébrale” (190).

Mallarmé’s romantic collection follows that etymological-Wordsworthian definition of the lyric, i.e., meaninglessness, by embodying the cosmic void through the apparent negation of humanness and the stupefying technique of aestheticism, all of which is conveyed by the sentimental speaker’s unifying voice. Incidentally, the vocal song is a representation which vividly foregrounds both art and humanness.

His apparent sentimentality, as is represented by the reminiscent expression “étoiles parfumées,” is not superficial, firmly backed up by the picture of cosmic sublimation from the earthly source. The voice is covering and uppermost, though rooted in the speaker’s body, just like the skin, a symbol of Mallarmé’s filigree beauty. They are both metonymic. The seven romantic poems may be viewed as an attractive representation of ultimate nonsense. The poems’ dominant image of water draws the reader into themselves, embodying an ancestral motherly ocean full of drowning sirens. The reader experiences a euphoric death in an oceanic cosmos. From another angle, however, Mallarmé’s nonsense represents a culmination of meaning and significance, mainly of humanness, thereby embodying a cosmic paradox by which a starting point equals an end. In sum, the nonsense represents a nullifying saturation of humanness for a supremacy of

humanness: the saturation is by the poet-speaker's appropriating voice, identified with the cosmic peak as an ultimate zero. It should be noted that Mallarmé's early poems emphasize absurdity in the textual entirety: the phonic level of musicality, which is supported by the texts' readability, the explicit level of meaning by slight information, and the implicit level of sublimation for a cosmic zero. The symbolist poet, Stéphane Mallarmé, thus concurrently accomplished the extreme of lyricality in an ideally refined form, i.e., an animated crystal freezing sentimental music, which represents a paradoxical sublimation of humanness. The poet made the most of the essence of lyricality as confessing absurdity: absurdity in a doubled sense of foolishness and arbitrariness/transience as a basic of both art and humanness. Modernity is thereby sublimated. The subjective lyric symbolizes the modern, the era for the secluded self of limitation.

Mallarmé's superlative meaninglessness should, and actually did, foreground a euphoric/erotic form of beauty, dominating intellectual judgment: the early pieces are conventionally attractive and touching, first appealing to the readers' five senses and basic feelings, just as with an abstract genre of art, music, while simultaneously codified within a symmetrical framework. In the pieces, the pleasant poetic symbols, such as flowers, waters, and stars, are abundant, inviting the readers to a rosarium of lyricality where they could cosmically travel for an ideal communion in an aphrodisiac trance. In "Brise marine," the excited speaker makes an engaging report: "Je sens que des oiseaux sont ivres / D'être parmi l'écume inconnue et les cieux!" The poems enhance both primitiveness/naturalness (or physicality/collectivity) and humanness/fictitiousness (or mentality/individuality) of the lyric, by qualifying it with the imagery of cosmic emptiness and saturation.

The lyrical development reflects the modernist urbanizing process that cuts out an individual from community and nature, which instinctively heightens the consciousness of him/herself, while, at the same time, diluting the existential self without its fertilizing communion with the surroundings. Moreover, the heightened



consciousness of the individual self is all the more driven to cherish the meagerness of the self. The urbanization accelerates aestheticism and lyricism, placing excessive importance on the self's secluded and disappearing body, ironically the most dependable basis of each individual. The informational growth that characterizes modernity does not lead to the increase of innate human wisdom, which makes both the modernizing process and the individual self all the more absurd.

Incidentally, language is almost synonymous with lyric: in the former, the sign and the referent are often confused, though distinguishable, and in the latter, the expression (or artistic form) and the meaning (or human feelings) are separable, but mixed up. In addition, both language and lyrics represent a double-focusing combination of art and humanness, or essentially, form and content, though the significance of humanness, which is often a focused content, makes the expressiveness of the verbal forms apt to be neglected. Lyricity corresponds, in fact, to a notable double, i.e., a meaningful combination of art and humanness; in other words, it confusingly foregrounds both the difference and the similitude between form and content. This is first because both art and humanness may be interchangeably recognized as form/the signifier and content/the signified; art as expression and beautifulness, humanness as voice and psyche. Second because meaninglessness as a lyrical essence paradoxically makes the reader ponder on the meaning/content as meaninglessness, while simultaneously drawing his or her inquisitive attention to the expression/form signifying meaninglessness. The traditional but tricky distinction between form and content is closely related to that between physicality and mentality for a human existence. The distinction may be viewed as a combination, or an attachment of created meaning to the absurd form. The attachment represents a human desire for self-identification, i.e., "a mental need for sense-giving configuration" (Valdés 6), with a view to rescuing one's own self as an absurd, viz., groundless existence. As an artful verbal

expression, the lyric embodies an embellishment of the absurdity of humanness, thereby cultivating the absurdity, the basic of humanness. The lyric foregrounds the function of language.

The refined lyric genre approaches a completion of modernist aesthetics, i.e., an embodiment of the sublimated human individual. In other words, the lyric poetry, which is voiceful but is actually silent expressed in written letters, offers a typical framework for paradoxical modernist aesthetics. The early Mallarmean poetry is successful in showing the picture of ideal lyricism, if not the ideality itself. The poems are, in fact, in a dependable framework of mimesis. On the other hand, the ideal lyricism resides in the filling of its receptacle, viz., cosmos itself, by the artist's developing, if not actually singing voice; lyricism aims at the appropriation of the spatial whole, or the erotic unification of the voicing self and its surroundings. This is for the victory of the subjective and its human embodiment, the isolated modern self as a combination of idealized form and humanness. In the same vein, the Mallarmean lyrics subsume the process of natural sublimation. Furthermore, the unification with the environment dissipates the individual self's existential dilemma, actualizing an absolute peace and eternal life. The diluted self is also reestablished. It is through his later esoteric sonnets that Mallarmé tried to perfect the lyric genre, by representing the sonnets' verbal self-sufficiency that dissipates the early lyrics' dualism, i.e., the real and the fictional. The sonnets claim that the world is created only by the word, or the author-reader's linguistic consciousness connected to the vast unconscious.

Fundamentally, lyricality represents an embellished absurdity. It is also useless and unpractical, because it is a kind of music as nonsense and playfulness. In short, to be lyrical is equal to be voiceful. The human voice is also dual, as a physical vehicle of mind. Moreover, music is based on the flow of time to be auditorially actualized. The flow of time corresponds to the flow of life, thus essentially cathartic, stirring nostalgia and sympathy; the flow cultivates new horizons beyond the limitation of individual. The lyric is, hence, for a salvation

of the limited humanness. Mallarmé's early lyrical poetry is legitimately intended to be touching and soothing. The lyric embodies a verbal effort for dissipating the distinction between form and content, or art and humanness, in order to realize a prenatal fusion as ultimate potential. The lyrical poets dream of an inspirational Eden to save the modernist restricted self. The diluted self is supposed to be fatally reduced to a minimal core mingling form with content, which is saved and heightened by Mallarmé's early lyrics.

The modernist poetry, which may be summarized as a word with its ungrammatical and self-deconstructive syntax (Takeda 11-17), represents a form of attempt to eternalize the temporal, or lyrical flow, by concentrating it into an absolute point for everything. In T. S. Eliot's expression, this is "the still point of the turning world . . . Where past and future are gathered" ("Burnt Norton" II). The modernist poetry as a nonsensical word embodies a drop of tear condensing lyricism; though a prefatory simulacra of perfection, a desirable crystallization was actualized by the early Mallarmean poems' purified beauty. The early poems are grammatically and musically continuous, but they already show a tendency of self-destruction in an overall image of crystallization/centralization. The poems' syntax is on the verge of falling apart, pulled in the bifurcated ways of sublimation, i.e., psychological and climatic, or, subjectively paradigmatic and objectively syntagmatic. Mallarmé's early pure form is represented by the poem "L'Azur"'s paralyzed ending: "L'Azur! l'Azur! l'Azur! l'Azur!" This is just a step from non-representational art, which is typically absurd from a conventional point of view.

### 3. A lyrical perfection

Mallarmé's late abstract sonnets represent a culmination of the poet's ontology: only the verbal signs can control the mind of modern men/women suffering from the keen consciousness of their mortality. From another angle, the late sonnets claim that the world equals a self-

sufficient word as the viewer's linguistic consciousness connected to the unconscious. The first piece of the quadruplet sonnets concludes itself by the following differential but hopeful verse for correspondences: "Que s'est d'un astre en fête allumé le génie." The suite of Mallarmé's abstract sonnets, especially the triptych, is a reworking of his early pastorals with the unconventional combination of words aiming for endless signification: for example, "Tout Orgueil fume-t-il du soir." The beautiful core of the early lyrics is only a product of signifying process by words. As a nonsensical word, the late puzzling sonnets comprise the early lyrical flow, i.e., the process of sublimation, the picture of which depends on the outer world's watery evaporation. Every word is one and the same, since it is a word. Hence, the endlessly-signifying chain of ambiguous words, which renders a simple juxtaposition of separated words to be finally viewed as a single conglomerated word, makes a lyrical flow a point of condensation. Ambiguity is a form of meaninglessness as a counterpart of reason and intellect, thus emotional and lyrical. Ambiguity is also the inseparability of the signifier and the signified, or the form and the content. The first representative poem of Mallarmé's later mystifying sonnets, "Quand l'ombre menaça de la fatale loi. . .," is constituted by the speaker's I-voice, or eroticism, significantly without a summarizing title. On the other hand, the interpretative words make the world, which is, in fact, a human truth. From the first, any individual is secluded by a wall of one's perception beyond his or her voluntary control. The direct communion with the world is impossible; the skinny perception as the self-conscious mind's other hinders. Then, the world is established only through the viewer's indirect interpretation by words. The early lyrics are all the more limited, because the modern reader's heightened consciousness of separate self tends to negate the fusion of one's self and its surroundings fictionalized by the lyrics. The cosmic evaporation is effective, though not enough for the modern skeptical readers including the author Mallarmé, who are isolated by a thick psychological wall, not only by a breakable film of skin.

In both the early and late poems, the themes are the same: the completion of the lyric genre and the pursuit of immortality symbolized by the imperishable lyrical voice. Both the groups of poems are self-referential for self-sufficiency. The early pieces are set up as a frozen mirror appropriating the cosmic wholeness including the pieces themselves, which heightens the dazzling luminosity of the airy pieces by mutual reflection. On the other hand, the later poems constitute themselves as a self-contained black hole of inexhaustible words. The pursued immortality represents the cosmic paradox: the absolute void and plenitude, or the least/most and meaningful/meaningless. The late abstract sonnets of a verbal cosmos are for the demanding connoisseurs, and in contrast, the early pastoral pieces may acquire a wider readership, although the narcissistic modern reader should not be completely satisfied with the pieces' dualism. This means that the limitedness of human consciousness prevents a total appreciation of both the early poems' illusory correspondence and the late sonnets' lyrical perfection with verbal plenitude in a baroque distortion. The early illusion is rendered by the understandable phrases, which prohibits the satisfied reader from going beyond the framework of lucidity. An exhaustive experience for appropriating cosmic totality demands the reader to be involved in the disordered unconscious: as constituting a semimaterial domain, the human unconscious is a gate to the cosmic whole as a combination of the animate and the inanimate. The consciousness represents a working of language, while simultaneously connected to the vast unconscious: language is also rooted in the unconscious, because the concept/meaning attached to language may be referred back to the depth of human mentality, i.e., the unconscious. Thus as a combination of the consciousness and the unconsciousness, language enables its operator to proceed to appropriate the whole world. Because form and content are fundamentally inseparable in this world's ontological connectedness, the early lyrics' lucidity, which allows a conscious reader to describe a clear picture of sublimation, is simply dubious.

In contrast, to render the reader into a hypnotic state dominated by the unconsciousness, the late poems are mystifying from their surface level, which tends to reject the reader who wants to clarify the texts. The skin of consciousness always hinders, though bridges. As an influential poetic expression, the lyric genre is traditionally a typical form of mimetic art, represented by the Wordsworthian axiomatic poems, thus expected by the readers to be normally or conventionally beautiful. The symbolist poet Mallarmé dared to present the reworked lyrics before the readership, probably knowing their prospective unpopularity and weakness as art. It is, in fact, a heavy, if enjoyable task for the readers to re-create the apparently broken works. The readers would have interpreted Mallarmé's late esoteric poems because of his early lyrics' beauty and their echoes in the later texts. Especially, the triptych's second poem is remarkable by its affectionate and nostalgic voice: "Je crois bien que deux bouches n'ont / Bu, ni son amant ni ma mère." The entire poem, in which twisted mimesis prevails, is as follows:

Surgi de la croupe et du bond  
 D'une verrerie éphémère  
 Sans fleurir la veillée amère  
 Le col ignoré s'interrompt.

Je crois bien que deux bouches n'ont  
 Bu, ni son amant ni ma mère,  
 Jamais à la même Chimère,  
 Moi, sylphe de ce froid plafond!

Le pur vase d'aucun breuvage  
 Que l'inexhaustible veuvage  
 Agonise mais ne consent,

Naïf baiser des plus funèbres!

A rien expirer annonçant  
 Une rose dans les ténèbres.

By destroying his attractive lyrics of limitation depending on mimesis, the poet Mallarmé courageously tried to overcome all the human restrictions through an endless and overwhelming chain of words. He thus universally disseminates the beauty and love, which is expressed by the early popularized pastorals, beyond the engaging conventions of art. It is the surrealist adventures, as represented by René Char's mechanical lyrics, that actively followed and celebrated Mallarmé's auto-sacrificial completion of lyricism.

As a successful fusion of eros and nonsense, Mallarmé's early lyrics represent a culmination of art and humanness actualized in the aesthetics of modernism. Humanness as absurdity is, in fact, represented by the nodal point of the conscious and the unconscious. The poems embody a victory of presence, from the impact of which sprang various attractive lyrics. The interpretation of the new modernist lyrics should be my aim for another article.

### Notes

- 1 The qualification "idée étrange" was rendered by the poet himself. See his letter to Henri Cazalis dated January 7, 1864.
- 2 In the first version, the expression "Ô mon Père" was used in place of the definitive "Notre dame," and in the second, "Notre Père," though the image of absoluteness was always retained. Moreover, the word "Père" accompanies the expression "Notre dame," his counterpart. I owe the bibliographical information to Marchal 107 and 121.
- 3 C. Chadwick indicates the early Mallarmean poems' readability in terms of both syntax and concept, which is generally admitted. See Chadwick 188. Roger Pearson also refers to the "accessibility" of the early poems written between 1863 and 1866 (41).
- 4 Graham Robb ascribes the identification of "pure poetry" with "useless" to the notion of Victor Hugo (5).
- 5 The five poems, which were published in *Le Parnasse contemporain* in 1866, are "Soupir," "Les Fleurs," "L'Azur," "Renouveau," and "Brise marine."

- 6 The two theatrical pieces are contemporary with the romantic collection, though the collection's each symmetrical poem may be viewed as delineating the matrix of the two texts intended for theaters.
- 7 For the global expansion of the lyric genre, see "Lyric" in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*.
- 8 For the notation of the lyric as primarily a song, see "lyric" in the *OED* and in Cuddon's Dictionary.

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