



'Les Chiffres et les Lettres':

Mallarmé's 'Or' and the Gold Standard of Poetry

Roger Pearson

'éprouver l'intelligence de l'or'
(‘Confrontation’)¹

Introduction

'Tu m'as donné ta boue et j'en ai fait de l'or': Baudelaire's famous line from his projected 'Epilogue' to the 1861 edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal*² traditionally stands as emblematic of his poetic enterprise: that is, the transformation – by the alchemy of imagination and prosodic technique – of the base metal of reality into the more valuable commodity of art. The poetic thyrus, twining fantasy around the stiff rod of fact, will restore freshness and wonder to our perception of the everyday and intimate a realm of connections, or 'correspondances', suggestive of 'une ténébreuse et profonde unité'. One of the several interesting ways in which Mallarmé presents himself as heir to the author of *Les Fleurs du Mal* but then gives his legacy an entirely new application may be seen in his use of this term 'or': and, as my ambiguous title is intended to convey, I propose to discuss not only the short *poème critique* so entitled in *Divagations* but also, summarily, Mallarmé's use of the word 'or' throughout his work.

This discussion will be concerned with the central aspect of a larger and ongoing project, namely a study of the articles which Mallarmé wrote during the 1890s for the *Revue blanche*, edited by the alleged anarchist bomber Félix Fénéon, and for the *National Observer*, a British weekly journal of politics and literature. In these articles Mallarmé examines a range of contemporary political, social and literary issues - anarchism and the class struggle, the role of the aristocracy and the Catholic Church, the workings of capitalism, the advent of *vers libre* - and seeks to refocus these issues within the context of his own carefully elaborated account of the public role of the writer. Thus self-evident analogies are skewed: writers constitute an élite but one that is working on behalf of the people; the writer is a priest but his religion is secular; the writer is a worker, but his work is spiritual and his labour unpaid; *vers libre* is anarchic,

but 'le Livre' makes a better bomb. Running through these texts – and this is the central aspect which concerns me here – is the idea of the writer as a guardian of value.

When Mallarmé revised these articles for publication in *Divagations* (1897) he appended a 'Bibliographie' (as he intended to also for Edmond Deman's edition of his *Poésies*), and in it he describes them as exemplifying a new kind of writing, the *poème critique*, which he presents as the culmination of his previous engagement with the genre of the prose poem.³ At the same time Mallarmé arranged all his material in *Divagations* in such a way that there is a progression from his own prose poems at the beginning to the *poèmes critiques* at the end. Thus we move from the prose poems, grouped under the title 'Anecdotes ou poèmes', through his prose writings about other writers and artists ('Volumes sur le divan', 'Quelques médaillons et portraits en pied', 'Richard Wagner: Rêverie d'un poète français') to his account of contemporary theatre (in *Crayonné au théâtre*). Then comes 'Crise de vers', a form of poetic credo, which is in turn followed by four groupings in which the modern world is examined within the context of this credo: 'Quant au livre', about the present-day realities of book-publishing and the Press; 'Le Mystère dans les lettres', his response to the accusation of obscurantism brought against Symbolism by the younger generation (in the person of the twenty-five-year-old Marcel Proust); 'Offices', about contemporary music and religious observance; and finally the nine *poèmes critiques* brought together under the heading 'Grands faits divers'. As in *Divagations* as a whole, the implied movement from the generically orthodox to the radical is again accompanied by a movement outwards from the parish of poetry to the wider province of the 'fait divers'. On vacating his ivory tower, it seems, the poet has to wear a new kind of text.

The first of the 'Grands faits divers' is 'Or', which I shall discuss presently, and the last is 'Sauvegarde' (thus the last text in *Divagations* itself) where Mallarmé condemns the Académie française for neglecting its primary role, the stewardship of the French language, and argues that independent writers are better qualified to carry out this task. The 'Livre' will serve better than the 'Dictionnaire'. The notion of linguistic guardianship thus frames the 'Grands faits divers', and the homophonic resonance of this title ('grands faits, dits vers') suggests that the salient issues of human social experience are here stated in the form of 'le vers', which is to be understood in the broad Mallarméan sense – of heightened, 'knowing' linguistic usage – that encompasses both verse and prose and in this case the *poème critique*. What the papers say (the 'fait divers') has been transformed into the 'great fashionings' ('grands faits') that are the product of 'Poésie' or what, on the basis of the word's etymology, Mallarmé also calls 'fiction'. The common currency of social and political debate will be pegged to the gold standard of Poetry.

LANGUAGE AS CURRENCY

The 'gold standard', or 'étalon d'or', was a monetary system, first adopted by Great Britain in 1821, according to which a unit of national currency had a fixed equivalent

value in gold. Other countries continued to use silver, but this so-called bi-metallic regime ceased in the 1870s when France, Germany, and the United States adopted the gold standard. Other countries soon followed, and the gold standard became the stable foundation of international finance from the 1870s until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. At this point the system was undermined as almost every country began to print paper money that was not convertible into gold and began also to place restrictions on the export of gold. Various attempts were subsequently made to reintroduce the gold standard, most notably by the United States after the Second World War, but it was finally abandoned in 1971. We now live in a world of 'floating currencies' wherein the monetary values of paper currencies vary daily according to demand and are no longer directly pegged to the worth of a real and tangible commodity. Which, more or less, is how one might metaphorically define our postmodern era. What were once thought of as universals - like, say, Truth or Beauty - no longer hold incontrovertible sway, and even the very notion of value has become decidedly suspect.

This kind of analogy, of course, is not new. In his book *Les Monnayeurs du langage* (1984) Jean-Joseph Goux draws persuasive inferences from the fact that the nineteenth-century began to lose faith in the aesthetic of realist representation just as gold was being phased out as a circulating currency. A system in which the coinage of the realm (or republic) had an intrinsic as well as a nominal value was replaced by one in which the metal coin (of copper or nickel) was a sign every bit as arbitrary as the Saussurean word. In Goux's analysis the replacement of a 'langage-or' by a 'langage-jeton' was part of the far-reaching crisis in values that eventually provoked Gide's thorough-going examination of patriarchal, cultural, and aesthetic counterfeits in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*.

Goux, as might be expected, draws attention to Mallarmé's analogy between language and currency at the end of 'Crise de vers', where the principal thrust of the argument concerns the clear division which the poet is seeking to establish between the everyday use of language and a more valuable and heightened form of linguistic expression: 'le double état de la parole, brut ou immédiat ici, là essentiel' (ii. 212). Two key passages naturally catch his eye. First:

Narrer, enseigner, même décrire, cela va et encore qu'à chacun suffirait peut-être pour échanger la pensée humaine, de prendre ou de mettre dans la main d'autrui en silence une pièce de monnaie, l'emploi élémentaire du discours dissert l'universel reportage dont, la littérature exceptée, participe tout entre les genres d'écrits contemporains;

and second, after the famous passages about the 'notion pure' and 'Je dis: une fleur!', the penultimate paragraph of the text where, instead of 'une pièce de monnaie' or coin, we have the image of hard cash, or 'le numéraire':

Au contraire d'une fonction de numéraire facile et représentatif, comme le

traite d'abord la foule, le dire, avant tout, rêve et chant, retrouve chez le Poète, par nécessité constitutive d'un art consacré aux fictions, sa virtualité.

For Goux, 'représentatif' indicates simple exchange-value: as the coin can buy an object, so in this everyday, non-literary use of language, the word unproblematically stands for the thing. In his view this type of language-use is equivalent to the use of gold as a currency, in which the coin has an intrinsic value. In the poetic use of language, however, there is no question of hard cash substituting itself unproblematically for the object. Rather, the coin denotes something fictive, a 'virtualité', for which – in the supposed absence of a Mallarméan analogy – Goux proposes the idea of 'absolute goldness' or what he calls 'l'or-archétype'. For Goux, Mallarmé's complaint is that language has become equated merely with the thing; it is a means of exchange, not a measurement of value. Through a reading of the text entitled 'Or' in *Divagations* Goux comes to the conclusion that for Mallarmé there are two types of 'or': real gold, the financier's gold, which is paradoxically worthless, and the poet's gold, which Goux defines as the 'trésor de sa signification symbolique (éclat, lumière, soleil, richesse, pureté, inaltérabilité)' (1984: 154).

Goux equates this division between the real and the poetic with that which Mallarmé allegedly perceives between aesthetics and political economy in 'Magie', the text (originally written in 1893) which follows 'Or' in *Divagations* as the fourth of the 'Grands faits divers': 'il n'existe d'ouvert à la recherche mentale que deux voies, en tout, où bifurque notre besoin, à savoir l'esthétique d'une part et aussi l'économie politique' (ii. 250), an opinion Mallarmé repeated in his notes to the published version of *La Musique et les Lettres*: 'Tout se résume dans l'Esthétique et l'Économie politique' (ii. 76). In 'Magie' Mallarmé reflects that capitalism is the new alchemy, in which credit – or the lending of money – is the equivalent of the philosopher's stone, allowing the 'value added' by industry, commerce, and financial speculation to be turned into gold. But for Mallarmé, Goux argues, the quest for the philosopher's stone has thereby been debased into a quest for material gain, whereas it falls to poetry – and the 'alchimie du verbe' – to pursue the objective of 'un or authentiquement philosophal' (1984: 156, Goux's emphasis). Finally, turning to 'Confrontation', the seventh of the 'Grands faits divers', Goux presents a Mallarmé who rejects all possible contact between commerce and literature: 'Le poète', says Goux, 'se fait martyr de la cause éternelle de l'or philosophal, contre le pouvoir établi de l'or vulgaire' (1984: 158).

Goux's exploration of the Mallarméan analogy between language and currency is suggestive and well-argued, but it falls down in one crucial respect. He implies that the 'état de la parole' which is 'essentiel' cannot still be a common currency. Accordingly we are left with a familiar figure: the solitary dreamer who turns away from the vulgar world of capitalism, the poet and aesthete for whom language is not a means of exchange but the private medium for the 'philosophical' or quasi-mystical pursuit of the 'Idée': 'L'or du poète est une valence de l'Idée' (1984: 156). I wish to argue against this aestheticising Mallarmé, a Mallarmé whose art of transformation –

which he variously calls ‘transposition’, ‘transfiguration’, ‘traduction’ – refines the quotidian out of language in the name of a timeless and other-worldly ‘idéal’; and I want to present instead a Mallarmé whose objective is to take the debased or worn-out coinage of language and to restore to it a lustre and sharpness of relief that enable it to offer a more acute, less duped account of the reality of human experience – of our spiritual and metaphysical existence, certainly, but also of our social, political, economic, and cultural reality. For him literature – or ‘Poésie’ – should provide a gold standard that guarantees the value and authenticity of human linguistic exchange. We think only in language (‘penser étant écrire sans accessoires, ni chuchotement mais tacite encore’ (ii. 208)); and for that thought to be authentic and valuable, so first must be the language in which it is couched. ‘Poetry’, defined as the overt and self-conscious mobilization of the plenitude of linguistic ‘virtualités’, is the opposite of demagogery and ‘spin’ and – in Mallarmé’s Utopian (?) vision – might one day become the common language of the people. As he puts it in his lecture on Villiers de l’Isle-Adam: ‘la foule, quand elle aura, en tous les sens de la fureur, exaspéré sa médiocrité, sans jamais revenir à autre chose qu’à du néant central, hurlera vers le poète, un appel’ (ii. 40).

There are two key passages in *La Musique et les Lettres* (written in 1894) which suggest that this is the more accurate appraisal of how Mallarmé envisages the writer’s role. Both occur towards the end. In the first, having humorously rebutted recent attacks on his fellow writers with the observation that poets cannot be both feckless degenerates (as Max Nordau had argued in *Entartung*⁴) and bomb-throwing anarchists (as Fénéon was held to be), he allows that writers do indeed operate on the margins of society, ‘à l’écart’, and even antagonistically; but their purpose is to demystify the illusory gods by which their contemporaries are periodically beguiled:

Près, eux, se réservent, ou loin, comme pour une occasion, ils offensent le fait divers: que dérobent-ils, toujours jettent-ils ainsi du discrédit, moins qu’une bombe, sur ce que de mieux, indisputablement et à grands frais, fournit une capitale comme rédaction courante de ses apothéoses: à condition qu’elle ne le décrète pas dernier mot, ni le premier, relativement à certains éblouissements, aussi, que peut d’elle-même tirer la parole. (ii. 72)

By keeping their distance and withholding their assent in whatever manner (‘que dérobent-ils’), writers bring ‘discredit’ – the opposite of the credit or belief which fuels the capitalist alchemy (as Mallarmé argues in ‘Magie’) – on the ‘god’ currently holding sway in the capital (i.e. at the centre of human affairs), the assumption being, of course, that such passing religions or belief-systems (be they financial or political) can never have the last word, or even the first, since they do not articulate certain ‘éblouissements’ – dazzling truths about the human condition, symbolized for Mallarmé by the *drame solaire*, and which language itself has the power to display. Keeping their distance does not mean that writers refuse to acknowledge the importance of what is going on or its direct relevance to them as fellow human beings:

quelle divergence que creuse le conflit furieux des citoyens, tous, sous l'œil souverain, font une unanimité – d'accord, au moins, que ce à propos de quoi on s'entre-dévore, compte: or, posé le besoin d'exception, comme de sel! la vraie qui, indéfectiblement, fonctionne, gît dans ce séjour de quelques esprits, je ne sais, à leur éloge, comment les désigner, gratuits, étrangers, peut-être vains – ou littéraires. (ii. 72-3)

Running in filigree through these passages is the language of finance: 'discrédit', 'à grands frais', the pun on 'capitale', 'compte', and – in a characteristically two-edged use of the conjunction – 'or'. The writer is the exception, separating out what is valuable ('or') in the spectacle of Darwinian struggle before him ('s'entre-dévore'). As Mallarmé then goes on to say (and this is the second key passage), the writer is an 'interprète' who 'plays' the language of the real world ('les mots, les aptes mots, de l'école, du logis et du marché' (ii. 73)) in such a way as to revalorise that language, not as the expression of the ineffable but as a form of 'music' rooted in our common human experience:

Le vers va s'émouvoir de quelque balancement, terrible et suave, comme l'orchestre, aile tendue; mais avec des serres enracinées à vous. Là-bas, où que ce soit, nier l'indicible, qui ment. (ii. 73)

The world is 'sayable', and it is the writer's function to 'say' it – with the words we use everyday, at school, at home, in the market-place. As Mallarmé puts it at the end of 'Or', mock-pretentiously treating himself to some big words: 'le don se produit, chez l'écrivain, d'amonceler la clarté radieuse avec des mots qu'il profère, comme ceux de Vérité et de Beauté' (ii. 246). Poetic language is not a gift from God, but the poet's gift to us – in exchange for nothing, but delivered nevertheless in a common currency of exchange which we can all, potentially, understand and use:

Un humble, mon semblable, dont le verbe occupe les lèvres, peut, selon ce moyen médiocre, pas! si consent à se joindre en accompagnement, un écho inattendu, communiquer, dans le vocabulaire, à toute pompe et à toute lumière; car, pour chaque, sied, que la vérité se révèle, comme elle est, magnifique. (ii. 73)

If my linguistic fellow human being will but raise his (or her) game a little – perhaps listen to the unexpected echoes of homophony and etymology resonating in the interstices of everyday language – then all of us can be privy to the truth. Which is more or less what Mallarmé had sought to demonstrate in the first paragraph of 'Faits-divers' written one year earlier...

From 'Faits-divers' to 'Or'

The text published in *Divagations* under the title 'Or' is a revision of the first paragraph of a much longer article (entitled 'Faits-divers') first published on 25 February 1893 in the *National Observer*. In that article Mallarmé addresses the current scandal surrounding the collapse of the Panama Canal Company and the subsequent conviction for financial fraud of its chairman, Ferdinand de Lesseps. Born in 1805, de Lesseps had conceived and carried through the building of the Suez Canal between 1854 and 1869; but the Panama project, on which he embarked a decade later, proved geologically much more challenging and financially much more complex. The project was underfunded from the start and quickly consumed large amounts of capital. Legislation was passed permitting the Company to raise money by issuing so-called lottery bonds; but the Company went bankrupt in December 1888 and a receiver was officially appointed on 5 February 1889. Thousands of small investors lost their money. After an official enquiry, begun in June 1891, the government instituted (on 15 November 1892) the prosecution of the company's administrators.⁵ Six days later, in the *Chambre des Députés*, a political storm ensued when Delahaye accused some 150 of his fellow *députés* of receiving bribes from the Company (in the form of Reinach's cheques). De Lesseps, too old and ill to attend court, was eventually tried in his absence and in February 1893 condemned to five years in prison (and a fine of 3000 francs), as was his son Charles. Charles was duly incarcerated; but since his elderly father was held to be mentally incapable of understanding the judgement, it could not therefore – by law – be carried out. In any case the sentence was overturned on a technicality in the following June. Elected a member of the *Académie des Sciences* (1873) and the *Académie française* (1884), appointed *Grand Croix* in the *Legion of Honour* (1869) and granted the *Freedom of the City of London* (1870), de Lesseps died on 7 December 1894: temporarily tainted by the scandal, but nevertheless held in high regard as the man whom Gambetta had dubbed 'le grand Français'.⁶

Mallarmé's article for *The National Observer*, written a fortnight after Ferdinand and Charles de Lesseps were sentenced, makes three essential points.⁷ First, about opacity. A vast quantity of money – of gold – has been at issue, and yet the writer would have been afforded a clearer view of this quantity by the golden splendour of a sunset than by the sheer opacity of the supposedly precise financial detail expounded during the legal proceedings.⁸ The more noughts there were, the less he understood. Just when the great God money was set to appear in all his glory, he vanished behind a cloud of obfuscation – a disappearance symbolized by the fact, central to the case, that cheques had been tampered with: 'Il n'est pas jusqu'à ces chèques fameux qui ne le desservent et, notamment, un soin par le destinataire pris d'y tronquer et rendre méconnaissable la signature' (ii. 310). 'Les chiffres' revealed nothing; 'les lettres' had been abused. Second, about the inadequacy – indeed the fictionality – of official justice ('la fonction de la Justice est une fiction'). Ferdinand de Lesseps will never learn of his sentence (so no punishment there); there is no means of financially compensating the victims of the fraud; and the very language of judgement is crude and simplistic,

both in its summary of the facts and as an expression by the state of the putatively unanimous view of the state's citizens. Third and last: about the emergence of an alternative, authentic voice of opinion. Apart from 'la plèbe d'âmes', the moral underclass who always thrill to see a statue toppled, the great majority of French citizens have their own reservations and nuanced reflections concerning the matter. Had not the 'promoteur d'une des grandioses aventures contemporaines' simply been scapegoated? Even drawing-room conversationalists ('de[s] gens pourtant de convention' (ii. 312)) have become quasi-anarchists in their rejection of the judgement: and whether or not the state decides to strip de Lesseps of his decorations, Mallarmé surmises (in the event correctly) that the Académie française ('elle représente les lettres' (ii. 312)) will not deprive him of a membership originally – and inconsistently – accorded 'par une prévenance extra-littéraire'. In its assessment of the non-literary, the literary can get it right where 'les chiffres' of the accountant and the official letter of the law cannot.⁹ But, as mentioned earlier, Mallarmé will show in 'Sauvegarde' why the poet / independent writer needs to take over that role of 'literary representative' from the Academy.

In his revised text – entitled 'Or' – the three points are made again, but drawing only on the material of the first paragraph of the earlier article (no doubt because the subsequent exoneration of de Lesseps had rendered the remainder of the article otiose). Gold, as the modern God, is paradoxically without lustre. In other words, the modern capitalist way of making sense of the world is opaque and unilluminating. For Mallarmé, having studied the comparative mythology of Friedrich Max Müller through the work of George Cox, all mythologies are versions of an original solar myth, itself a story about the death and resurrection of the sun that offers the therapeutic structure of a comprehensible and reassuring sequence in which to situate the terrible fact of our individual mortality. When the sun sets like a sinking ship, there is a conflagration that has every appearance of being a 'fête': a glorious moment – like a monstrosity – in the ritual passage from life to death (prefiguring the no less glorious moment of the dawn). But when a bank collapses, there is murk: 'du vague, du médiocre, du gris' – and a terrible paradox: the more precise the financial detail, the less comprehensible the phenomenon. Numbers talk big but they cannot explain: 'l'incapacité des chiffres, grandiloquents, à traduire'. And the bigger they talk, the more they speak of nothing: a string of noughts 'signifiant que son total équivaut spirituellement à rien, presque.' A thousand million means nothing unless you can actually put your hands on it; and if we hide it away in our coffers and pockets, how is this god ever to shine its light? There is a blatant 'manque d'éblouissement voire d'intérêt'; it pays no interest, it holds no interest.

But the poet is not complaining: there is opacity and a need of illumination at this moment of 'crisis', etymologically the point at which an issue is to be decided. There has been a 'procès financier' and the 'incapacité des chiffres, grandiloquents, à traduire, ici relève d'un cas'; it is now the job of the man of letters in a *poème critique* to 'amonceler la clarté radieuse avec des mots qu'il profère comme ceux de Vérité et de Beauté'. The choice is between unambiguous capitalist blindness ('aveuglant, clair,

cynique’) and literary illumination through the subtle use of language. The ‘circonstances théâtrales’ of the trial are replaced by this *poème critique*, a kind of stage-performance – or what Mallarmé elsewhere calls a ‘gala intime’ (ii. 162)¹⁰ – during which the writer has displayed the very word ‘or’: (i) with extravagant and reflexive ‘éclat’ in the title itself and in ‘dehors’, ‘fantasmagoriques’, ‘trésor’, ‘horizon’, ‘se majore’, and ‘hors le temps’; (ii) as present but unsatisfactorily occluded (as gold is in the world of referential reality) in ‘couchers’ and ‘l’ombre des coffres’; and (iii) as reversed and no less reflexively denied in ‘croulent’, ‘procès’, ‘froid’, ‘l’improbable’, and ‘zéros’.¹¹ A string of noughts means nothing; but put an ‘r’ there, like a bookend, and you have ‘or’, the gold of poetic language. It is as though Mallarmé were carrying out his very own Trial of the Pyx, the procedure performed by goldsmiths in which coinage is tested by weight and assay and which A.R. Chisholm once thought had given Mallarmé the idea for his ‘ptyx’...¹²

The Critical Debate

Mallarmé’s ‘Or’ has been at once a key syllable and a key text in the reception of his work. For Derrida in his essay ‘La Double Séance’ the word ‘or’ is precisely the one chosen to demonstrate the inadequacy of thematic criticism. The brilliance of Jean-Pierre Richard’s account of Mallarmé notwithstanding,¹³ his reading founders (according to Derrida) on the naivety with which the verbal signifier – in this case ‘or’ – is assumed to relate unproblematically to a referent in the world: ‘La limite du thématisme [...] n’est jamais aussi éclatante que dans le cas de “or”, et non seulement parce que la dissémination se confirme de l’affinité entre la semence et cette très précieuse substance, [...] mais d’abord parce que ce signifiant “perd jusqu’à un sens”, se laisse aussi exténué, dévaluer, miner. Plus de nom.’¹⁴ For Derrida the referential power of the word is a fluctuating currency, at once foregrounded by its insistent ‘scattering’ (as of seed) throughout the text entitled ‘Or’ and yet devalued by its seemingly random ubiquity:

OR, qui se condense ou se monnaie sans compter dans l’enluminure d’une page [...] Telles ‘avalanches d’or’ défont méthodiquement toute phénoménologie, toute sémantique, toute psychanalyse de l’imagination matérielle. Elles déjouent systématiquement les oppositions du syntactique et du sémantique, de la forme et du fond, du fond et de la figure, de la figure et du propre, de la métaphore et de la métonymie.¹⁵

In an exemplary demonstration of such proliferation Derrida devotes a brilliant two-page footnote to these linguistic avalanches of ‘or’ in Mallarmé’s writing, a word that not only illustrates the concept of ‘dissémination’ (here tentatively ventured by Derrida for the first time) but also the logic of the supplement and the compelling strategy of deconstructing binary oppositions. The fact that ‘or’ should be at once noun, adverb, and conjunction is valuable grist to his poststructuralist mill:

Or – impur – il n'aura été, simplement, ni la densité pleine d'une matière sensible (musique aussi bien ou rayon, 'traits d'or vibratoire' [ii. 201]) ni l'alliage transparent d'une conjonction logique. Or en fusion. Temps d'or, ni sensible, ni intelligible, pas même, donc, un signe, signifié ou signifiant, au moins autant 'Il Signor', 'qui s'ignore' (rimant, dans les *Triolets* [in *Vers de circonstance*], avec 'signe, or' [i. 360]) que signe-or, il est toujours enchâssé selon la double syntaxe d'une orfèvrerie et d'une horlogerie [cf. etymology > Lat. 'hora'], dans l'ancre doré d'une glotte ('glossa' a pu signifier "lingot d'or" et Littré note que 'l'ancienne étymologie, qui tire "lingot" du latin "lingua", à cause de sa forme, demeure toujours possible.')¹⁶

Where Derrida regards the plethora of 'or's (and thus of /o/ s or zeros) in the text entitled 'Or' as the emblem of dissemination, vanishing meaning, and a devalued currency, Barbara Johnson sees the blanks in the text as holes to be filled. For her, as she seeks to deconstruct the binary opposition of 'pure poet' and 'man of action' – and thereby to move beyond the clichéd view of Mallarmé as a Symbolist who 'refines diverse facts into gold, current events into a theory of currency'¹⁷ – the text entitled 'Or' does not represent a 'dehistoricising' of the earlier article (i.e. 'Faits-divers'). Instead, Johnson argues:

the reader of 'Faits-divers' knows that she must do some historical research to recover the story Mallarmé shared with his contemporaries. The reader of 'Or' knows that the blanks in the text – which is *about* blanks – are placeholders for historical structures, relatable but not reducible to anecdotal fact. [...] Mallarmé, far from simply erasing history, is here putting history under erasure. The first text alludes to Panama, while the second inscribes Panama as a blank, a 'zero' that, while being 'equal to nothing, *almost*,' holds the place and the attention of history in the text.¹⁸

For Bertrand Marchal,¹⁹ the text entitled 'Or' epitomizes *Divagations*. Where Mallarmé had referred to *Les Dieux antiques*, his own adaptation-cum-translation of George Cox's manual of mythology, as 'le livre sur l'or'²⁰ – because, in the light of Max Müller's theories, it is necessarily about the *drame solaire* – a similar 'livre sur l'or' is constituted by the several texts in *Divagations* in which Mallarmé points to an unbroken continuity between a primitive solar myth and a modern, capitalist mythology in which the archetype of gold is substituted for the sun. For Marchal, Mallarmé is demonstrating that the procedures and beliefs characteristic of political economy in late-nineteenth-century France are inherently religious in nature. Like God, gold represents at once an absolute but also an arbitrary and immeasurable standard of value. Whether it be the gold of a sunset or the gold of words, 'or' constitutes for Mallarmé an archetype symbolising 'peut-être l'éternelle chimère de l'esprit humain'²¹ – the unceasing efforts of the human mind and the human imagination to find or

create a pattern in the chaos of existence.

For Antoine Compagnon – writing in his Colloque de Cerisy article ‘La Place des fêtes: Mallarmé et la IIIe République des Lettres’ in which he assesses Mallarmé’s response to the political and social world he inhabited and concludes: ‘nul mieux que Mallarmé ne nous permet de mettre à jour les confusions et contradictions de ce régime’²² – the original article (i.e. ‘Faits-divers’) is of particular interest in that the Panama affair was the only political crisis about which Mallarmé wrote.²³ Accounting plausibly for the subsequent removal of all reference to de Lesseps on the grounds that pro-Lesseps sentiments might have been misunderstood as comparable with the right-wing, anti-Semitic views of his erstwhile friend Henri Cazalis, Compagnon draws particular attention to Mallarmé’s critique of the shortcomings of Republican justice; and in so doing he foregrounds the text as especially persuasive in giving the lie to the image of an ivory-tower Mallarmé: ‘Pas de prose mallarméenne, il me semble, plus éloignée de l’esthétique et consacrée intégralement à l’actualité ou à la *modernité* de notre *embryonnaire démocratie*, nommément à son pouvoir judiciaire’ (1999: 57).

In response to these four key commentators on Mallarmé (and on ‘Or’ in particular) I would argue, on the basis of the analysis given above, that Derrida overstates the negative aspects of undecidability. His account of the importance and ubiquity of the syllable ‘or’ in Mallarmé’s writing is a *tour de force*; but where in *La Dissémination* he prefers the concept of ‘dissémination’ to that of ‘polysémie’ on the grounds that the latter simply perpetuates the notion of ‘presence’, he inhibits our possible readings of Mallarmé by refusing to acknowledge a writer who is actively trying to work *with* the contingencies of language and to explore positively the rich and, to be sure, ultimately vertiginous perspectives of the word in contradistinction to the banality of everyday expression. Revaluation, not devaluation, is the aim – and achievement – of the Mallarméan verbal economy. One can share Johnson’s ambition to deconstruct the crass binary opposition of ‘pure poet’ and ‘man of action’, and agree with her that ‘rather than choose between politics and stylistics, between historical references and self-reflection, Mallarmé is showing the radical inseparability of these aspects of the functioning of writing in the world’ (1987: 66). But her account of ‘Or’ is potentially elitist – and thus at variance with Mallarmé’s fundamentally populist agenda – in its reliance on a studious and ‘research-led’ reader, however gendered, to ensure the comprehensibility of the text. Furthermore she tends unduly to allegorize ‘Or’ in a way which suits her own (perfectly respectable) agenda concerning hidden ideologies,²⁴ whereas in fact Mallarmé is trying to make a point about the value of writing compared with the empty ‘fictions’ of financial transactions and legal judgements. Marchal in turn, despite the persuasive and ground-breaking nature of his overall thesis, pays little attention to the linguistic display inherent in the act of writing (highlighted, but for different ends, by both Derrida and Johnson); while Compagnon, quite reasonably, is concerned to put the ‘aesthetic’ to one side for a moment and concentrate on the evidence for his wholly tenable view of Mallarmé as an acute social commentator. Where I would wish to supplement Johnson, Marchal, and Compagnon is by insisting on the specifically linguistic nature of Mallarmé’s response to his political and cultural

milieu and by drawing attention to the ostensive, or performative, character of this response. Like Poe he wanted above all to 'Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu' ('Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe') – and this in the name of Beauty certainly, but also in the name of Truth.²⁵

Conclusion

It may be a cliché to say that poetry restores the worn-out currency of everyday language; but it is not yet commonplace to say that, for Mallarmé, literature – 'Poetry' – safeguards our ability to talk truthfully – as well as beautifully – about the things that matter in our everyday lives during the countdown to mortality. From his earliest texts onwards there is recurrent evidence that he saw the Baudelairean alchemy strictly in terms of a verbal performance. Not for him the 'paradis artificiels' of wine, women, and song, let alone drugs or misogyny. In 'Les Fleurs', for example, written in March 1864, the 'avalanches d'or' mentioned in the first line are then 'enacted' in the poem in the shape of verbal recurrence ('jour'/'pour', 'encore', 'laurier', 'orteil', 'aurores', 'adorable', 'horizons'), culminating in the penultimate rhyme of 'fort'/'Mort'. The play on 'sonore / sonorité / son or', evident on the first page of *Igitur*, also informs the so-called 'Sonnet en yx', both versions of which ('Sonnet allégorique de lui-même' (1868) and 'Ses purs ongles très haut [...]') (1887)) hinge on the Phoenix-like (and Christ-like) 'resurrection' in the sestet of the rhyme on 'or' from that on 'ore' in the octave – while each version may also be seen as a 'lampadophore allégorique' as the fourteen lines of the sonnet relay the 'or' from beginning to end of the poem like runners carrying the torch to inaugurate ancient Greek games (the original meaning of 'lampadophore'). Similarly, in 'De l'orient passé des Temps...' (1868) and its subsequent versions 'Alternative' (1869) and 'Quelle soie aux baumes de temps...' (1885), the syllable 'or' is so deployed that the poetic text replaces the golden hair and silken textures with its own, superior linguistic reality (which may include the English sense of 'or' as 'alternatively'). In the so-called 'Triptyque' of octosyllabic sonnets, quite probably begun in the late 1860s ('Tout Orgueil fume-t-il du soir...', 'Surgi de la croupe et du bond...', and 'Une dentelle s'abolit...'), the *drame solaire* is enacted by the movement from the extinguished 'orgueil', through the absent 'rose', to the golden homophony of a potential rebirth ('Filial on aurait pu naître'), while the eternally 'perpetuating' function of the poetic text is symbolised by the 'orgue' and the 'mandore' (the 'mandore' which is also to be found in the no less golden surroundings of 'Sainte', dating from 1865). Consider also 'La chevelure vol d'une flamme...' (and its broader context of 'La Déclaration foraine'), where 'or' makes the world 'rhyme'; and 'Autre éventail', which verbally enacts – in a poem written in gold ink – the process by which Geneviève's gold-edged fan opens and folds before coming to rest on her gold bracelet; and 'Hommage [à Puvis de Chavannes]', where the repetition and indifferenciation of 'Aurore' (hom. 'or, or') is transmuted into the diffracted brilliance of 'gloire', the halo of the saint-like artist and the 'glorious' linguistic fresco that is Mallarmé's poem.²⁶ The list could be extended... 'le monstre d'or' ('Toast funèbre'),

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'L'or de la trompette d'Été' ('Prose (pour des Esseintes)'), 'Trompettes tout haut d'or' ('Hommage [à Wagner]'), the last rhyme ('accord / mort') of 'Tombeau (Anniversaire - Janvier 1897) [à Verlaine]', the 'zenith' rhyme ('désaccords / mort') at the centre of 'Cantique de saint Jean'... Suffice it to say that the simple syllable 'or' rises and sets time and time again in Mallarmé's writings in a repeated poetic enactment of the *drame solaire*, of the symbolic pattern to be found at the heart of darkness: the 'or' that can be salvaged from the shipwreck – and scandal – of 'la mort'. Is this not what he meant by 'l'explication orphique de la Terre' (i. 788)? To part the folds of mortal darkness – our terrestrial and strictly non-transcendental darkness – and intimate the tantalizing, half-glimpsed presence of meaning and value; to purify the language of the number-crunching, word-murdering tribe and pay golden tribute with and to the desperate longings of the human crowd. 'Orphée'/'or fait': for Mallarmé, a modern Orpheus in a capitalist world, such is 'le seul devoir du poète et le jeu littéraire par excellence' (i. 788). And who, in the age of the golden hello and the golden handshake, of golden handcuffs and the golden parachute, shall say he was wrong?

Roger Pearson
The Queen's College
Oxford OX1 4AW
UK
roger.pearson@queens.oxford.ac.uk

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1. *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bertrand Marchal, 2 vols, (Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1998-2003), ii. 264. Further references to this edition will be given in parentheses within the text.
2. *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1975-6), i. 192.
3. 'Les cassures du texte, on se tranquillisera, observent de concorder, avec sens et n'inscrivent d'espace nu que jusqu'à leurs points d'illumination: une forme, peut-être, en sort, actuelle, permettant, à ce que fut longtemps le poème en prose et notre recherche, d'aboutir, en tant, si l'on joint mieux les mots, que poème critique' (*Œuvres complètes*, ed. Marchal, ii. 276-7). Elsewhere Mallarmé prefers the older spellings 'poète' and 'poème'.
4. First published in 1890 and translated into French (under the title *Dégénérescence*) by Auguste Dietrich in 1894.
5. Also charged with de Lesseps were his son Charles; Marius Fontane, the Company Secretary; Baron Cottu, a director; Gustave Eiffel, the celebrated engineer; and Baron Reinach, a banker, who had been responsible for the liberal distribution of 'backhanders', in the form of cheques, to anyone (allegedly including Rouvier, the Minister of Finance) who might help the Company's cause. Reinach died suddenly on 20 November. Because of growing suspicion that he had poisoned himself or even been murdered, his body was subsequently exhumed: but it was unambiguously established that he had died from natural causes.
6. At the banquet held to mark the end of the Congrès International d'Études du Canal Interocéanique, which De Lesseps organized at the Société de Géographie in May 1879 and which, attended by some 90 delegates, launched the Panama project. On De Lesseps and the early history of the Panama Canal, the most authoritative work (despite its overt right-wing agenda and its covert anti-semitism) is Robert Courau, *Ferdinand de Lesseps: De l'apothéose de Suez au scandale de Panama* (Paris: Grasset, 1932). Other reliable sources include Hugh J. Schonfield, *Ferdinand de Lesseps* (London: Herbert Joseph, 1937), Charles Beatty, *Ferdinand de Lesseps: A Biographical Study* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1956), and George Edgar-Bonnet, *Ferdinand de Lesseps* (2 vols, Paris: Plon, 1951-9). A new Panama Canal Company was started up in October 1894. Ten years later the Company and the project came under American control, and the canal was eventually opened on 15 August 1914, more than thirty-four years after de Lesseps had officially attended the inauguration ceremony in Panama on 1 January 1880.
7. For the text see *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Marchal, ii. 310-12, and Norman Paxton, *The Development of Mallarmé's Prose Style*, pp. 124-6.
8. The prosecuting counsel's closing address lasted four hours and 'much of the time was taken up trudging [through] columns of seemingly endless figures' (Beatty, *Ferdinand de Lesseps*, p. 311).
9. Cf. 'La Gloire', where the posters advertising (with bold lettering) the sunny delights of Fontainebleau fail to capture the 'truth' and 'beauty' of the place which, for Mallarmé, lie in the spectacle of the sun setting (like a 'gloria' or halo) over the forest: 'Ces affiches, s'assimilant l'or incompromis des jours, trahison de la lettre' (*Œuvres complètes*, ed. Marchal, i. 433 or ii. 103). In the case of 'les chiffres', Mallarmé's major literary response to what he perceives as the opacity and tautology of number will be the 'compte total en formation' (i. 387) of *Un coup de Dés*, where

numerical calculation plays a central role in shaping the text: see my *Unfolding Mallarmé*, pp. 246-55, 263-70, 281-2, 283.

¹⁰. See my *Mallarmé and Circumstance: The Translation of Silence*.

¹¹ It is interesting to note in this connection that when Mallarmé was writing the first version of this opening paragraph he asked to borrow Méry Laurent's copy of a thesaurus, Prudence Boissière's *Dictionnaire analogique de la langue française*. See *Lettres à Mery Laurent*, ed. Bertrand Marchal, p. 118.

¹². See A. R. Chisholm, 'Mallarmé and the Riddle of the Ptyx', *AUMLA*, 40 (1973), 246-8, and *Unfolding Mallarmé*, p. 161. See also *Unfolding Mallarmé*, pp. 283-4 (on *Un coup de Dés* and the use of the double-page spread as a set of imaginary scales for the enactment of this trial).

¹³. *L'Univers imaginaire de Mallarmé*

¹⁴. *La Dissémination*, p. 295.

¹⁵. *Ibid.*

¹⁶. *Ibid.*, p. 296 (my additions in square brackets).

¹⁷. 'Erasing Panama. Mallarmé and the Text of History', in her *A World of Difference*, p. 57.

¹⁸. *Ibid.*, p. 66 (Johnson's emphases).

¹⁹. See his *La Religion de Mallarmé*, pp. 403-44.

²⁰. See *Correspondance*, ii. 198 (letter to Henri Roujon, 22 Aug. 1879).

²¹. Marchal, *La Religion de Mallarmé*, p. 405.

²². See *Mallarmé ou l'obscurité lumineuse*, eds Bertrand Marchal and Jean-Luc Steinmetz, pp. 39-86, especially pp. 56-9. Cf. Jacques Rancière, *Mallarmé: La Politique de la sirène*, p. 12: 'Sur le sens de "l'association terrestre", sur les rapports que son temps nouait entre la politique, l'économie, l'art et la religion, Mallarmé a ainsi été un témoin et un analyste dont la lucidité ne trouve guère de répondant chez les professionnels de la pensée.'

²³. It is difficult to agree with Compagnon's contention (see p. 56) that one reason for this may have been a form of revenge by Mallarmé for the part that the scandal had played in delaying the publication (by Perrin) of his translations of Poe. It is more likely that he was attracted by a *fait divers* which would allow him to highlight his own use of language as 'or' and to demonstrate the superiority of literature as a mode of calculation and judgement.

²⁴. 'By using erasure and inscription, shadows and light, as a thematic preoccupation and then going on to erase the specificity of events while retaining the way in which those events insist as a compellingly available paradigm for signifying structuration, Mallarmé is in a sense showing that history itself is involved in processes of inscription and erasure - that attitudes remain long after the reasons for them are forgotten, or that history can revolve around erasures as well as acts: think of Lesseps' senility, the eradication of the otherness of Panama, or even Nixon's eighteen-minute gap' (Johnson, 1987: 66).

²⁵. For a recent, intertextual perspective on 'Or', see Natalie Buchet-Rogers, 'L'Or du poète et l'or du

financier: Une lecture de *Chatterton* de Vigny, avec Mallarmé', (2002-3: 84-103).

²⁶. See *Unfolding Mallarmé*, pp. 56; 145-6, 151-6, 162-5; 193-9; 200-7; 64, and *Mallarmé and Circumstance*, pp. 116-9, 122-4, 128; 199-201; 221, respectively.