

Mallarmé and the Politics of Literature

Sartre, Kristeva, Badiou, Rancière

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ROBERT BONCARDO

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Abbreviations

Alain Badiou

- BE *Being and Event*
C *Conditions*
HI *Handbook of Inaesthetics*
TOTS *Theory of the Subject*

Jean-François Hamel

- CM *Camarade Mallarmé*

Julia Kristeva

- RLP *Revolution in Poetic Language*

Stéphane Mallarmé

- OC *Œuvres complètes I*
OC II *Œuvres complètes II*
CP *Collected Poems: A Bilingual Edition*
D *Divagations*
PV *The Poems in Verse*

Quentin Meillassoux

- NS *The Number and the Siren*

Jean-Claude Milner

- C *Constats*
MP ‘Mallarmé Perchance’
MT *Mallarmé au tombeau*

Jacques Rancière

- MS *Mute Speech*
PL *The Politics of Literature*
PS *Mallarmé: The Politics of the Siren*

Jean-Paul SartreMPN *Mallarmé, or The Poet of Nothingness*FI *The Family Idiot: Gustave Flaubert, 1821–1857. Volume 5*

Introduction: *Comrade Mallarmé*

Throughout his posthumous reception, in particular in the post-war period, the late nineteenth-century poet Stéphane Mallarmé has been a privileged object of reflection for French intellectuals. Intriguingly, his writings have been drawn on not only to lend support to positions in philosophy or poetics: they have also been seen as politically significant. In stark contrast to the image that circulates of him as an aloof aristocrat unconcerned by history, Mallarmé has frequently been the writer of choice for twentieth-century French thinkers concerned with the politics of literature. From the work of Jean-Paul Sartre to that of Julia Kristeva, Alain Badiou, Jean-Claude Milner and Jacques Rancière, among many others, Mallarmé has been at the centre of political thought in French intellectual life. In fact, he has become ‘comrade Mallarmé’,¹ the glorious ancestor of all those who would seek to argue for the progressive or revolutionary virtues of literature.

The aim of this book is to investigate this history of political appropriations of Mallarmé’s writings. Our focus will be on the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, *Tel Quel*’s theoretician-in-chief Julia Kristeva, Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière. The book also contains a short chapter on Jean-Claude Milner, and closes with a brief consideration of Quentin Meillassoux’s recent intervention into Mallarmé studies. Throughout the book, our key concern will be to determine how Mallarmé has been constituted as an object of political reflection; what conceptual resources have enabled his writings to be construed as politically significant; and in what conjunctures – both intellectual and political – his work has been mobilised by French intellectuals.²

Whether these intellectuals proclaimed Mallarmé to be a privileged agent in the revolutionary transformation of society; feted his writing’s uncompromising complexity as the sign of an heroic attempt to resist, albeit in relative isolation and by the sole means of his literary art, a

politically contemptible period; or condemned his difficult poetry and prose as symptomatic of a fatal withdrawal into obscurity, French thinkers have consistently linked Mallarmé's writings to politics. Crucially, however, these links have been far from univocal. While Mallarmé's alleged aristocratism has made him the perfect instantiation of the 'legend of the irresponsible poet',³ to use Sartre's famous formulation, his 'commitment' has also been praised – and by none other than Sartre himself – for being as 'all-embracing as possible – social as much as poetic'.⁴ And while thinkers like Kristeva have admitted that Mallarmé's radical linguistic practice was confined in his time – and perhaps also in ours – to 'elitist refuges', they have also argued that this was 'an entirely conjunctural compromise' (RLP 439) and that Mallarmé's writings could one day still become what they always, already were: 'a sort of anarchist attack that would strike at the most tenacious dogma, that of a codified language, the last guarantee of sociality' (RLP 434). In short, Mallarmé has been a distinctly ambivalent figure politically: at once a contemptible counter-revolutionary (MPN 37; MT 63); a conservative who, despite the corrosive negativity of his poetry, 'participated in the maintenance of vacillating structures' (RLP 455); but also a rigorous egalitarian whose poetry was 'destined to everyone' (HI 31).

In the five chapters of this book, we will investigate five different cases in which Mallarmé has been the object of explicitly political concerns. Beginning with Jean-Paul Sartre's reading of the poet proposed in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, we will explore the entirety of the existentialist's writings in order to determine how Sartre conceived of Mallarmé's politics. In our second chapter, we will turn to the works of Sartre's most notorious successors: the collaborators of the journal *Tel Quel*. We will be particularly concerned with Julia Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), a work that channels the prophetic promise of May '68 and attends closely to the political significance of Mallarmé's writings. Our third chapter will be devoted to Alain Badiou's career-long dialogue with Mallarmé. Beginning with *Theory of the Subject* (1982), a work that only just postdates the Telquellians' most significant interventions on the matter of Mallarmé's politics, we will go on to explore Badiou's post-*Being and Event* (1988) reading of Mallarmé and show how the poet helps him negotiate the post-'89 conjuncture. Our fourth chapter on Jean-Claude Milner will engage with the same political context, but this time from the perspective of Milner's radically counter-revolutionary Mallarmé, a figure Milner first presents in his 1999 book *Mallarmé au tombeau*. In our fifth and final chapter, we will turn to the work of Jacques Rancière,

whose dense monograph *Mallarmé: The Politics of the Siren* (1996) offers a revisionist reading of Mallarmé's poetico-political project at the same time as it critically engages with the entire interpretative tradition we will have studied in this book. In our conclusion, finally, we will briefly consider Quentin Meillassoux's efforts to reopen the question of Mallarmé's political significance for today.

Unfortunately but inevitably, this book will not cover the complete set of political readings that have been proposed of Mallarmé. Such an unmanageably large set could conceivably include the interpretations of Maurice Blanchot, Roland Barthes, Jean-Pierre Faye, other collaborators of *Tel Quel* such as Philippe Sollers and Jean-Joseph Goux, and even the work of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe.⁵ Furthermore, the specifically political focus of this work means that we will have to exclude the more philosophical readings of Mallarmé, such as those by Jean Hyppolite,⁶ Michel Foucault,⁷ Jacques Derrida,⁸ Gilles Deleuze⁹ and Jean-François Lyotard,¹⁰ not to mention the more recent contributions of André Stanguennec¹¹ and Pierre Campion.¹² Finally, while we will take into account works of contemporary Mallarmé scholarship, in addition to well-established contributions from the past, this book is very much focused on the poet in so far as he is read by Sartre, Kristeva, Badiou, Milner, Rancière and Meillassoux. In other words, our principal concern will always be with how Mallarmé has been made to function within their singular conceptual schemes, as well as in terms of the socio-political and intellectual conjunctures these thinkers have confronted.

*

In his initial engagement with Mallarmé in the post-war period, Jean-Paul Sartre positioned Mallarmé at the negative pole of possible forms of literary engagement. As a member of the postromantic movement, inaugurated by Gustave Flaubert and Leconte de Lisle in the aftermath of the bloody events of June 1848, Mallarmé's writings constituted part of what Sartre considered a disastrous detour in the history of French letters. Certainly, for Sartre, this detour had since been corrected by his own doctrine of 'committed literature', but it was an historical error nonetheless and a warning to any future writer concerned with their political responsibility. Famously, Sartre claimed that he held 'Flaubert and Goncourt responsible for the repression that followed the Commune, since they did not write a line to stop it'.¹³ But he could well have included Mallarmé in his sweeping condemnation of the late nineteenth-century literary field – a field he argued was ontologically continuous and ethically complicit with 'a social order based on

exploitation' (FI 380). In works such as *What is Literature?*, *Mallarmé, or the Poet of Nothingness* and the third volume of *The Family Idiot*, Sartre read the poet as a radical nihilist whose ideology gave expression to 'the terror of the propertied class, which [was] becoming aware of its inevitable decline' (MPN 84). The figure of Mallarmé thus enabled Sartre to mark out the negative contours of his own literary and political vision.

However, as every commentator on Sartre's work on Mallarmé has noticed, in *The Poet of Nothingness* the philosopher also claims that Mallarmé's singular achievement was inventing a paradoxical form of poetic 'commitment'. Indeed, in that work Sartre explicitly refers to Mallarmé as 'the hero of an ontological drama' (MPN 122) and praises his lucidity in the face of 'the impossibility of Man' (MPN 144) – a lucidity that presages Sartre's own in *Being and Nothingness*. How are we to account for Sartre's oscillation between treating Mallarmé as a counter-revolutionary and as a 'hero'? Can Sartre truly conceive of a 'committed' poetry? Our first chapter will enter the debate and will attempt to clarify the political significance of Mallarmé's writings for the Marxist existentialist.

As members of the intellectual generation that succeeded Sartre's dominance, the writers and theoreticians of the journal *Tel Quel* initially turned towards an affirmation of the autonomy of literature – an autonomy that was defined in opposition to the political imperatives Sartre was perceived, in a quasi-Zhdanovian fashion, as having submitted literature to. In such a context, with their exemplary self-reflexivity and inventiveness, Mallarmé's poetry and prose became the perfect instantiation of a literary theory and practice capable of affirming its autonomy not only from politics but from the world as such, which it no longer had the servile duty to represent. Formal innovation, as well as theoretical reflection, could be pursued without reference to the directives or demands of politics. However, with an increasingly politicised student body as their main readership and an alliance with the PCF beginning in 1967, *Tel Quel* were forced to find resources within their essentially formalist theory of literature in order to demonstrate the continuity of their area of expertise with the task of social revolution. Mallarmé's writing, construed as a radical praxis that dissolved the standard semantic and syntactical unities of language and re-organised them according to more expansive, more flexible structures, would thus come to stage, at a microcosmic level, the radical transformation of the 'social order at its most fundamental level', that of 'the logic of language' (RLP 78), as well as to figure the ideal social arrangement. This vision was given its most sophisticated expression in the works by

Julia Kristeva, notably *Revolution in Poetic Language*, an examination of which will constitute the centrepiece of our second chapter. While Sartre had taken Mallarmé's famous provocation 'I know of no other bomb than a book' to signify that to 'the real and consequently particularized destructions of anarchism', Mallarmé had 'set the harsh, universal and intentionally ineffective abolition of the world by language and of language by itself' (FI 163), Kristeva argued that the poet's linguistic praxis truly was a sort of 'anarchist attack' that could bring forth 'the revolution of poetic language'. But how, precisely, did Kristeva argue for the revolutionary credentials of Mallarmé's work? And why, if such a transformative power was present in the poet's writings, had it not yet been fully realised?

With Alain Badiou's work we find an engagement with Mallarmé that is as indifferent to the *linguisterie* of the Telquellians as it is to Sartre's problematic of 'committed literature'. However, as we will see, Badiou's Mallarmé also oscillates between being a glorious ancestor – a political and intellectual companion from whom vital resources can be drawn – and a suspicious conservative, a 'hermetic recluse' (TOTS 65) who believed, in contradistinction to the militant philosopher, that there was 'no temporal advent of the new' (TOTS 108). While *Tel Quel* persistently maintained a prophetic posture, anticipating the moment that the 'revolution of poetic language' would come about, Badiou's staunch commitment to the revolutionary promise of May '68 was made in full recognition of its fragility (TOTS 327). What role could Mallarmé play in helping the philosopher navigate the long aftermath of the May events? In *Theory of the Subject*, Badiou turns to Mallarmé as the radical thinker of the 'structural dialectic', a form of thought that marks out the limits beyond which a committed revolutionary must pass if they are to properly think revolutionary change. While Badiou also finds in Mallarmé an image of the political endurance he needs to wait out, without compromising on his convictions, a moment of political reaction, he will only be able to treat the poet's 'structural dialectic' as a 'precious legacy' (TOTS 108) that falls short of the 'historical dialectic' required by the Maoist revolutionary. Thus, as we shall see, the figure of Mallarmé that emerges from *Theory of the Subject* resembles a curious amalgam of the petty bourgeois nihilist condemned by Sartre and the intellectual radical praised, with certain precautions, by *Tel Quel*.

Badiou's engagement with Mallarmé does not end with *Theory of the Subject*. Rather, it continues, indeed intensifies, following the publication of *Being and Event*. In this latter book, instead of arguing that Mallarmé set an arbitrary limit to thought and practice, Badiou

treats him as the unprecedented poet-thinker of the ‘event’ – a thinker to which he, as a philosopher, must henceforth remain faithful. Despite this shift, Badiou’s own political project remains marginalised. How does Badiou mobilise the resources of Mallarmé’s writings after the shift in his philosophy that occurs in *Being and Event*? What political significance can Mallarmé have during a period that saw the apparent defeat of Marxism and the downfall of the Soviet Union? Our third chapter will explore this question through a close reading of the essay ‘A French Philosopher Responds to a Polish Poet’, along with other texts from the latter half of Badiou’s philosophical trajectory.

It would be hard to imagine a reading of Mallarmé more opposed to Badiou’s than Jean-Claude Milner’s. In our fourth chapter, we will turn to the Lacanian linguist’s 1999 book *Mallarmé au tombeau*, which on first glance seems geared towards undermining the image of Mallarmé as a ‘comrade’ to progressive causes. In his short but devastating book, Milner steadily zooms out of a close reading of Mallarmé’s sonnet ‘The virginal, enduring, beautiful today’ to take in the entirety of the last two centuries of revolutionary politics. For Milner, Mallarmé was not only a counter-revolutionary but also a nihilist who refused to even recognise the existence of revolutions and the hopes and dreams people invested in them. As Milner argues, for Mallarmé the truth of the modern era was not the steady march of progress but the installation of a commodity society, which reduced all things to a ‘quotidian nothingness’ (D 218), including attempts at collective emancipation. The aim of our fourth chapter will be to present Milner’s challenge to the interpretative tradition that has produced the figure of ‘comrade Mallarmé’. How does Milner argue for the hidden complicity between Mallarmé’s nihilism and his progressive readers’ ‘political vision of the world’ – a complicity that makes readers like Badiou ‘strict Mallarméans’ (MT 88), albeit in an entirely unexpected sense? Is Milner’s interpretation grounded in a serious reading of Mallarmé’s *œuvre*, or does it distort his poetry and prose in the service of polemical ends?

The reading of Mallarmé proposed by Jacques Rancière initially appears to resist the general tendency of the poet’s post-war political appropriations. Returning as he does after the pathbreaking work of Bertrand Marchal to a recognisably philological approach that seeks to reconstruct the way Mallarmé conceived of his own project, we will see that Rancière – to whom our fifth chapter is devoted – is not concerned to enlist the poet in a punctual intellectual or political struggle. After Sartre’s strategic positioning within the post-war literary field, which led him to posit Mallarmé as a surpassed moment in the trajectory of French letters leading towards ‘committed literature’;

after the Telquellian's extraction from the poet's writings of a 'textual practice' that was thought to be the necessary poetic prolegomena to any further revolution; after Badiou's identification of Mallarmé's famed intransigence with the commitment and patience required of the Maoist revolutionary during a period of calm after May '68; and after Milner's polemic against the twentieth century's 'strict Mallarméans', Rancière's work cannot but appear as an attempt to read the poet strictly on his own terms. The 'politics' in the title of Rancière's monograph *Mallarmé: The Politics of the Siren* is not a revolutionary politics or a tool-kit for today's progressives. Rather, it refers, quite simply, to the way Mallarmé conceived of the central political problematic of his time and the role his poetry was to play within it. As we will see, Rancière reinterprets all of the major motifs of Mallarmé's posthumous reception – from his isolation from the public sphere to his writings' extreme difficulty – in terms of the immanent principles of this 'politics'.

But Rancière's intervention is not only an exercise in exemplary scholarship. By restoring Mallarmé's work to its proper horizon of significance, Rancière is also able to identify the constitutive ambivalence of this 'politics' – an ambivalence that is strikingly congruent with the diverse and contradictory estimations of the poet's political significance explored throughout this book. In our fifth chapter, we will follow Rancière as he shows how, despite recognising that it was the poet's duty to prepare 'the celebrations of the future' (PS 33), Mallarmé was led to eternalise 'the poet's solitude' (PS 33) and to infinitely defer the transcendence of his posture of aristocratic elitism. But the question then becomes what Rancière's own position vis-à-vis Mallarmé's 'politics' is. Despite consistently confusing his own voice with that of the poet's, it is not clear whether Rancière endorses or condemns Mallarmé's chosen mode of political engagement. What is the relation between the poet's 'politics of the siren' and Rancière's own? What stance does Rancière ultimately take towards the ambivalent political significance of the poet's writings? Our final chapter will close with a close consideration of these questions.

Each chapter of this book can be read individually as a relatively self-enclosed study of one thinker's engagement with Mallarmé. Yet the reader will undoubtedly see threads common to all five chapters progressively emerge. Indeed, these threads will converge in our conclusion, where, on the basis of a brief discussion of Quentin Meillassoux's book *The Number and Siren*, we will consider the more general implications for the politics of literature that Mallarmé's post-war reception poses. What does it mean for our ideas of literature and politics that Mallarmé has been both a hero and a villain, a comrade and a class

enemy? Are our conceptions of these two categories consistent, or are they a tangle of assumptions, fantasies and anxieties about literature's political significance? The book will end by broaching these pressing questions.

*

Contemporary Mallarmé scholarship continues to flourish. Ever since the late 1980s, when Bertrand Marchal published his two monumental works *Lecture de Mallarmé* (1985)¹⁴ and *La Religion de Mallarmé* (1988),¹⁵ the area of Mallarmé studies has enjoyed a period of intense productivity, in both the Anglophone and Francophone worlds. Coming after a period during which the poet had been annexed by proponents of 'high theory', Marchal's philological approach opened up vast regions of Mallarmé's *œuvre* to renewed exploration, in particular the *Divagations*. Today, Pascal Durand's¹⁶ and Patrick Thériault's¹⁷ sociological and psychoanalytic approaches exist alongside passionate investigations into Mallarmé's 'occasional' verse,¹⁸ while in the Anglophone world the works of Roger Pearson,¹⁹ Rosemary Lloyd²⁰ and Damian Catani,²¹ among others,²² have deepened our knowledge of the immanent concerns and principles of Mallarmé's project. Today, the interested reader has a far greater array of interpretative options open to them than readers of half a century ago – not to mention a new and masterfully edited two-volume *Pléiade* edition of Mallarmé's complete works.

It would be impossible to do justice to this novel scholarship in the space of this introduction. More seriously, however, to do so would potentially jeopardise our project from the outset. For in fact, the rise of today's philological approaches to Mallarmé has occurred in direct opposition to the speculative and philosophical readings treated in this book. A recent call for contributions to a collective work on Mallarmé's reception, launched in late 2016 by the eminent French Mallarméan Thierry Roger, remarks that philosophical readings of the poet make up 'a volatile but very productive zone' of scholarship – one that nevertheless 'poses questions of hermeneutical legitimacy from a philological point of view'.²³ How can we return to the readings of philosophers like Sartre or theorists like Kristeva when they seem to have been superseded by careful contemporary scholarship? What is the use of exploring their political appropriations of Mallarmé when a consensus seems to exist regarding their very limited value? There are a number of ways to respond to these questions. First and foremost, there is no absolute distinction between speculative readings of Mallarmé and readings that adopt a more philological frame. As we will see in some

detail, all of the thinkers treated in this book offer serious and synthetic readings of Mallarmé's *œuvre*. In each case, they present ample evidence to support their claims. In fact, they frequently go further and pose questions that are often neglected in mainstream Mallarmé scholarship – questions that turn around the ultimate foundation of Mallarmé's thought and its relation to other domains of human experience: politics, theology, science, and so on. Secondly, it is not clear that these theoretically inclined readings have been thoroughly understood and digested by today's Mallarméans. Is it so obvious that Marchal's claims regarding Mallarmé's 'religion' trump Milner's conviction that Mallarmé abandoned this post-secular project (MT 78)? Are Marchal's arguments to be preferred over Badiou's claims that the poet's religious designs are the most derivative part of his *œuvre*?²⁴ If a line of division has to be drawn between two kinds of Mallarmé scholarship, then we hope that the present work will help draw this line with the greatest possible accuracy.

In the remainder of this introduction, instead of engaging with the main lines of contemporary Mallarmé scholarship, we will discuss four recent works, all from the French-language scene, which have a similar focus to our own: Jean-François Hamel's *Camarade Mallarmé: Une politique de la lecture*, Thierry Roger's *Archive du Coup de dés: Etude critique d'Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard de Stéphane Mallarmé* (1897–2007), Vincent Kaufmann's *La faute à Mallarmé: L'aventure de la théorie littéraire*, and finally Laurent Jenny's *Je suis la révolution: Histoire d'une métaphore* (1830–1975). These works will help us situate ourselves within the contemporary debate around Mallarmé's politics.

Roger's *Archive du Coup de dés* studies the various readings of Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés* produced in France during the twentieth century. By means of an archaeological approach inspired by Foucault, Roger seeks to 'exhume the invisible substructures'²⁵ that undergird the multiplicity of discourses that have taken Mallarmé's masterwork as their object.²⁶ In addition to revealing the unconscious systematicity of the archive of statements made about *Un coup de dés*, Roger also aims – this time from a philological perspective – to 'show how readings [of *Un coup de dés*] have over- or under-valorised certain aspects of the letter of the text, by way of truncated citations or the displacement of textual unities'. Roger even goes so far as to 'invalidate certain interpretations' in the name of 'a certain idea of Mallarmé'.²⁷ His critique of *Tel Quel*'s reading of the poet, for instance, is particularly severe: Roger eviscerates the journal's 'violent de-historicisation' of *Un coup de dés* and Kristeva's generalised 'filtering' of Mallarmé's work, which

he argues was achieved by ‘augmenting certain traits . . . and by reducing, even occulting, others that were not compatible with the dominant frame of reading’.²⁸ Roger’s *Archive du Coup de dés* is thus at once a retrospective and critical work, which rigorously assesses the relative value of the readings made of Mallarmé’s testamentary text.

In stark contrast to Roger’s archivistic, archaeological and often-times explicitly critical approach, Jean-François Hamel frames his recent work *Camarade Mallarmé* as an affirmation of what he calls a ‘politics of writing’ – a ‘politics’ that has decisively influenced twentieth-century readings of Mallarmé and whose ‘strategy has consisted’, he argues, ‘in wrenching [Mallarmé’s] works away from their time so as to illuminate contemporary debates and so transform literature into a discourse of resistance to power’ (CM 62). As Roger writes in his review of *Camarade Mallarmé*, in contradistinction to his own approach Hamel ‘does not seek to demystify these political readings’.²⁹ Wondering whether they are thus ‘truly put at a distance’, Roger argues that the author of *Camarade Mallarmé*, like the literary theorist and philosopher Yves Citton, whose recent work on hermeneutics inspires Hamel’s own approach, inevitably ‘passes from a pragmatism of literary reading to a militant conception of literary reading’.³⁰ This passage is encapsulated in the conclusion to *Camarade Mallarmé*, where Hamel calls for ‘a use of the counter-times of literature in order to act against the stases of the present’ (CM 203) – a use that would take inspiration from Mallarmé’s writings themselves, as well as from the many and varied political uses to which they have been put in the twentieth century. Thus, while Hamel’s work surveys with an encyclopaedic enthusiasm the ‘chains of memory’ that have ‘fashioned the interpretative tradition surrounding the name of Mallarmé’ (CM 62), he supplements this historical account with a confident proposition for future political actualisations of Mallarmé.

Vincent Kaufmann’s 2011 work, *La faute à Mallarmé: L’aventure de la théorie littéraire*, takes a different approach altogether. Framing itself as an intervention into contemporary discussions in France about the teaching and production of literature, Kaufmann’s book seeks to argue against the idea that the French literary theory of the 1960s and ’70s, whose figurehead was Mallarmé himself, is responsible for the ‘decline of literature’; for literature being ‘cut off from the world of experience’; for its nefarious effects in ‘high schools’;³¹ and for having ‘prepared the terrain for the nihilism that characterises the contemporary literary field’.³² In order to resist this false diagnosis, Kaufmann chooses to present a sympathetic survey of ‘the adventure of literary theory’. This survey occupies the majority of his book and deals with

the themes of literary autonomy, the death of the author, literature's revolutionary or subversive pretensions, as well as a selection of the major works of the key actors in this 'adventure'. What emerges from Kaufmann's essay is thus a passionate portrait of a moment of intellectual effervescence, a moment in which literature in general and Mallarmé's work in particular were seized with intellectual tools that had 'an aura of scientificity'³³ and were invested with extraordinary political powers. Far from being 'the name for the radical autonomisation of a literature become solipsistic',³⁴ as Tzvetan Todorov or William Marx would have it, Mallarmé and the French literary theory that so often took him as its privileged object stand for a vigorous defence of the powers of literature to effect change. In a manner somewhat similar to Hamel, Kaufmann thus affirms the 'pleasure of appropriation, of the use of texts, or of their actualisation',³⁵ and remarks that despite 'the innumerable reproaches bearing upon the lack of culture or ignorance directed against the commentators situated in the theoretical movement' it is finally 'these commentators that are read and who themselves read'.³⁶ Kaufmann does finally concede, however, that 'the adventure of literary theory' and the political readings of Mallarmé it produced constitute 'a chapter that is no doubt closed in the history of literary criticism'.³⁷ Moreover, he intersperses his book with critiques of the literary theories that were proposed during this 'adventure', in particular of their utopianism. For instance, when writing of Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kaufmann argues that its claim for the revolutionary power of literature 'was only ever a horizon or a sort of revolutionary index destined to give credibility to a theoretical construction'.³⁸ Thus, *La faute à Mallarmé* constitutes a sort of synthesis of the retrospectively critical approach that Roger adopts and the affirmative attitude of Hamel's *Camarade Mallarmé*. The difference with the latter work lies in the fact that Hamel's prophetic posture, which he assumes at the close of his book when he invites his readers to 'augment the power of texts, and, with an antagonistic aim, inscribe a dissidence within them' (CM 203), contrasts with Kaufmann's definite sense of the closure of 'the adventure of literary theory', however passionate his survey of its achievements might be.

The last of the four contemporary works relevant to the present book, Laurent Jenny's *Je suis la révolution*, explores the various metaphorical transfers that have occurred between the literary enterprise and political revolution. Like Kaufmann, Jenny relegates this hermeneutical act to the past. Pleading for a future 'reconciliation with our language',³⁹ Jenny's project details the ways in which an anti-classicist

aesthetic, which either accorded the component parts of a literary work an anarchic autonomy from the work as an organic whole, or conceived of it as an absolute rupture with the common run of the world, came to be a mirror for the political fortunes of democratic and revolutionary modernity.⁴⁰ By way of a sensitive investigation of the various modalities of this metaphorical relation, Jenny shows how it was able to 'arouse the adhesion and interest'⁴¹ of some of the main actors in the literary and political dramas of the modern age, from Hugo to Maurras, Blanchot to Paulhan, Barthes to Sollers. Nevertheless, Jenny convincingly demonstrates that these readers 'incessantly alluded to different aspects of the revolutionary event in order to pinpoint changing forms of literature'.⁴² The confident stance of a Sollers, for example, who affirmed that 'writing [was] the continuation of revolution by other means',⁴³ is thereby revealed in all of its conjunctural contingency and theoretical fragility. While Hamel still looks forward to a future 'art of political interpretation' (CM 203), Jenny's 'archaeology',⁴⁴ just like Roger's, has an undeniably critical dimension that suggests that this literary adventure is over. As he writes in his conclusion, the 'time of the revolutionary metaphor has passed'.⁴⁵ It would seem that the time of 'the figure of comrade Mallarmé' (CM 14) is therefore over as well.

What we have here, then, is a series of contemporary works that differ wildly in their methodologies and axiologies. While dealing with relatively distinct objects, Roger and Jenny both practise an archaeological approach with a view to both comprehending and surpassing certain interpretative *dérives* involving Mallarmé. Kaufmann, by contrast, is situated somewhere between the latter critics' critical approach and Hamel's prophetic confidence. While he seeks to defend 'the theoretical movement' of the 1960s and '70s against those who would treat it as 'the scapegoat'⁴⁶ for today's literary decadence, Kaufmann does not go so far as to call for its re-actualisation. As a result, *La faute à Mallarmé* is at once a welcome corrective to contemporary reactionary diagnoses regarding the status of literature and a nostalgic review of a period of intellectual effervescence. Finally, despite recognising that 'it would be easy to point out the historical misinterpretations' manifest in the various political readings of Mallarmé he explores, Hamel revels in their capacity to 'valorise literature as a discourse of resistance to power' (CM 62) and proposes them as models for a future 'politics of reading' (CM 203).

The contemporary significance of political interpretations of Mallarmé is therefore not the object of a consensus. Rather, there appears to be a distinct oscillation between, on the one hand, a sense

that political appropriations of the poet are interpretative extravagances, while on the other hand critics like Hamel treat these readings as an inspiration for a revitalised ‘politics of literature’ (CM 203).

What place does our work have amongst these contemporary efforts to understand how Mallarmé has been read? Given that our own corpus and set of guiding questions coincides almost entirely with those of Jean-François Hamel’s *Camarade Mallarmé*, it behoves us to discuss his work in more detail, thereby situating our own perspective with greater precision.

*

As we mentioned above, Hamel’s book sets out to give an historical account of the phenomenon of ‘comrade Mallarmé’, a paradoxical figure of literary engagement constructed by politically minded readers, for the most part on the broad French left, during the latter half of the twentieth century. Registering the various problematics confronted in Hamel’s work, Roger writes that *Camarade Mallarmé* ‘bears less on Mallarmé than on what we ourselves have called “Mallarmisme” . . . and just as much on the avatars of “Mallarmisme” as on the becoming of Marxism and the revolutionary paradigm within French intellectual life in the twentieth century’. Roger continues, underscoring the fact that Hamel’s book is thus ‘a sort of history of French intellectual lefts, situated between history and philosophy, and approached through the projective test of Mallarmé’.⁴⁷ Despite this plurality of points of interest, it is crucial to point out that *Camarade Mallarmé* should be understood, in least in part, as a viable move within contemporary Mallarmé scholarship. Why is this the case?

To answer this question, we must first of all remark that the principal focus of *Camarade Mallarmé* is hermeneutics as such, or ‘the act of reading’ in itself, the examination of which Roger tells us has ‘had the wind in its sails’ ever since contemporary literary studies in France displaced ‘the active centre of literature from the author to the reader’.⁴⁸ What this focus tells us is that, however fruitful Hamel’s discussion of ‘the act of reading’ might be, the implicit assumption of his work is that the readings of Mallarmé in question are not in themselves wholly viable propositions for reading the poet today, at the very least from a philological perspective. Their contemporary interest lies less in expanding our knowledge of the poet’s *œuvre* than in exploring a more general thesis, which Hamel puts as follows:

the hermeneutical engagement of ‘militants of restricted action’ demonstrates . . . that it is through the gestures of reading and interpretation, which are always gestures of memory, that the political significance of texts is

produced and reproduced, beyond the first intentions of the writer and his ideological commitments. (CM 17)

In other words, since it would arguably be implausible to revive many of the readings he deals with as fruitful proposals for contemporary Mallarmé research, the demonstrative force of Hamel's book lies in his arguments, presented consistently and compellingly throughout, regarding the nature of 'cultural memory' (CM 10) and the practices of various 'interpretative communities' (CM 199). Indeed, Hamel approvingly cites the following passage from Pascal Durand's recent attempt at a sociological reading of Mallarmé's trajectory, which aims in part to rectify many of the interpretative *dérives* of the past century: as Durand writes, Mallarmé's reception 'teaches us less, perhaps, about his *œuvre* than about the theoretical uses to which it has successively been put'.⁴⁹ However, despite the fact that Hamel recognises the questionable nature of these readings from a philological perspective, his thesis regarding 'cultural memory' is conspicuously doubled, as we have already noted, by a confident claim regarding the potential for political 'dissidence' (CM 203) possessed by certain interpretative practices:

New critical theories, which prolong the interest of Western Marxism for art and literature and which have imposed themselves at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first century, could in turn – if this hermeneutical practice appears fruitful to them – appropriate for themselves the poems and prose works of Mallarmé. (CM 189)

Curiously, then, while Hamel registers and even seems to subscribe to a certain consensus within contemporary Mallarmé studies regarding the validity of the political readings of the poet's *œuvre*, he also explicitly reproduces one of the principal tropes that characterised them: namely, as Kaufmann would have it, that of conceiving literature as possessing 'a singular symbolic efficacy'⁵⁰ capable of 'transforming social reality'.⁵¹ Thus, while Hamel suggests at the beginning of *Camarade Mallarmé* that the only way one can read these interpretations is to 'suspend one's incredulity' (CM 10), he closes his book by declaring his fervent belief that such hermeneutical practices can function as 'discourses of resistance to power' (CM 62). There is thus a palpable tension in *Camarade Mallarmé* between a position of critical, indeed oftentimes ironic, distance from these past literary-theoretical extravagances, and a position involving the enthusiastic affirmation of the emancipatory powers of literature.

But if we are required to 'suspend our incredulity' towards the readings of Mallarmé proposed in the twentieth century, why should we invest any more faith in the 'politics of reading' that Hamel champions?

How can we avoid having to choose between an attitude of enlightened incredulity, which would relegate these political readings of ‘comrade Mallarmé’ to the past, and an incongruously enthusiastic attempt to replay a moment of this history?

In our view, the key to resolving this deadlock is first of all to reconstruct as precisely as possible, and in terms of their own individual integrity, the specific conceptual schemes that Sartre, Kristeva, Badiou, Milner, Rancière and Meillassoux bring to bear on Mallarmé’s writings, as well as the political and intellectual conjunctures these thinkers confront with these schemes. For the fact is that these conceptual schemes, by force of their own internal consistency and capacity to respond to the conjunctures our thinkers confront, *compel belief* and adherence, not incredulity. If Hamel claims it is not possible to believe, today, in the seriousness of these twentieth-century readings of Mallarmé, then we must go further in the direction of faithfully reconstituting the situations in which such a dynamic of belief did operate. It is crucial to give an exact account of each thinkers’ intervention – an account that restores them to their proper horizon of significance. While it is true that Hamel himself also attempts to situate the various constructions of the figure of ‘comrade Mallarmé’ in their intellectual and political context, we can briefly remark upon two significant divergences between our own account and the one provided in *Camarade Mallarmé*. Firstly, while Hamel claims that each of these political appropriations of Mallarmé pursues ‘a deliberate art of anachronism’ (CM 62), it is not at all clear that this is an accurate description of what Sartre, Kristeva, Badiou, Milner, Rancière and Meillassoux set out to do. In fact, it seems to better describe his own proposed ‘politics of literature’. As Roger makes clear, ‘Rancière and Lacoue-Labarthe would no doubt be surprised by such a judgement of their practice’, since their respective writings ‘converge with the reading produced by Bertrand Marchal in 1988 under the title *Religion de Mallarmé*, a reading it is difficult not to describe as philological’.⁵² But it is also clear that Sartre, in his painstakingly totalising account of nineteenth-century literature, did not seek to ‘wrench Mallarmé’s *œuvre* away from its time’ (CM 62) but rather to exhaustively analyse ‘the Objective spirit’ (FI 41) that nourished his writings. No doubt Sartre, like the Telquellians after him, also deployed his understanding of nineteenth-century literature to intervene in intellectual and political conjunctures contemporary to him, such as when he made Mallarmé’s ‘pure literature’ the negative double of his own ‘committed literature’. But as with theorists like Julia Kristeva this was always done on the basis of a purportedly accurate account of Mallarmé’s significance: the aim of *The Family Idiot* is

a total account of nineteenth-century France, just as *Revolution in Poetic Language* seeks to describing as precisely as possible the entirely ‘new phenomenon’ (RPL 15) that the poet’s *œuvre* represented for the Telquellians. Likewise, Badiou’s reading of Mallarmé involves the very precise claim that ‘Mallarmé’s poems and prose pieces [were] enquiries whose grouping-together defines this indiscernible as the truth of French poetry after Hugo’ (BE 404). Finally, as we mentioned above, Rancière’s approach is guided by a concern for philological accuracy. To claim, then, that these interpretative practices are examples of ‘a deliberate art of anachronism’ is to obscure the immanent teleology of the works of the thinkers treated in this book.

Secondly, while Hamel claims that these political appropriations of Mallarmé all seek to constitute ‘literature as a discourse of resistance to power’ (CM 62) in a manner identical to his own proposed project, this only holds for *some* of the political appropriations of the poet’s writings. Indeed, the irony of Hamel’s prophetic affirmation regarding his ‘politics of reading’ is that Mallarmé has often stood for the *failure* of literature to actualise its subversive power or to fulfil its political responsibilities. Rather than being a heroic figure who resisted ‘power’ or who intervened decisively in the ‘social order at its most fundamental level’, Mallarmé has also been deemed a counter-revolutionary and a conservative. Thierry Roger seems to pick up on this point when he writes that ‘the readings of Mallarmé produced by Blanchot, Mondor, Valéry and the Sartre of *What is Literature?* have nothing specifically “left-wing” about them and therefore have little to no relation with the idea of comrade Mallarmé’.⁵³ Indeed, as Sartre would have it, Mallarmé is no ‘comrade’, but rather the perfect example of ‘the legend of the irresponsible poet’. Against Hamel, we might say that the case of Mallarmé actually provides a lesson in the possible failure of his own proposed ‘politics of reading’.

In our intervention, then, by restoring the political appropriations of Mallarmé made by Sartre, Kristeva, Badiou, Milner, Rancière and Meillassoux to their proper horizon of significance, we will seek to give full expression to the conflicting assessments that have been made of Mallarmé’s writings, some of which already contest the pertinence of Hamel’s proposal. It is only on the basis of such a reconstruction that their contemporary significance can then be determined.

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The above points of criticism should nevertheless not obscure the fact that Hamel’s work is a significant and in parts unprecedented contribution to our understanding of Mallarmé’s reception. Indeed, it

should be recognised, for instance, that *Camarade Mallarmé* presents many of the key contextual determinants of the pre-war reception of the poet. Hamel's reconstruction of the chain of interpretative practices leading from the very first editions of *La Nouvelle Revue Française* to the works of Gide, Valéry and Claudel, the communists of *L'Humanité*, the Surrealists, and finally to the pathbreaking work of Henri Mondor, will from this point on be indispensable to any reconstruction of the context in which Sartre and his successors write on Mallarmé – the moment from which our own work departs. In his first chapter, entitled 'The Invention of a Politics of Reading', Hamel identifies at least three distinct uses of Mallarmé in the pre-war period. By briefly reviewing these, we will be able to launch into our first chapter on Sartre with the proper context of the philosopher's intervention in mind.

Firstly, as Hamel points out, Mallarmé had come to be a model of the writer who, with an almost inhuman patience, valiantly refused to compromise with the status quo. Unsurprisingly, the actual content of this status quo is unstable. For Valéry, it was the political disorder of the 1930s in particular, as well as the violence, vulgarity and spiritual emptiness of modern life in general, which rendered the intellectual powerless. Highlighting the specifically ethical character of Valéry's reading, Hamel concludes that 'the disclosure of the ethical implications of a deliberately separated poetry, that is, of an autonomous literature subtracted from the laws of the market as well as from universal reportage, is Valéry's major contribution to the political interpretation of Mallarmé' (CM 52–3). As this passage also makes clear, Valéry was able to transform Mallarmé's famed isolation into the property that made him politically – or ethically – significant, instead of being a handicap or a sign of his irresponsibility. For Michel Leiris, by contrast, the status quo against which Mallarmé's stance could provide a model of resistance was the moral degradation of France during the Occupation (CM 21–7). Against the corruption of language that Leiris claimed had occurred after the capitulation to the Nazis, Mallarmé's 'defence of a pure art, radically distinct from universal reportage, signalled, according to Leiris, a literary resistance to the ideological instrumentalisation of language' (CM 27). The apparently anti-democratic aspects of Mallarmé's writings were thus transformed by Valéry and Leiris into signs of his ethical heroism.

Secondly, however, and in contradistinction to this first interpretative tendency, Mallarmé had also become an example of a general tendency witnessed in modern literature towards a corrosive – or, in Paulhan's terms, *terroristic* – approach to literary creation. Hamel

describes this terroristic literature as a 'pure literature, stripped of commonplaces and attacking the language of contemporaries and the existence of a public space open to democratic deliberation' (CM 86–87). Intriguingly, in so far as this terroristic tendency was associated with the idea that modern literature had subtracted itself from communal life, both the right *and* the left critiqued the withdrawal of the writer from public affairs, their investment in a 'pure literature' and finally in an artistic individuality that came at the expense of the construction of a national – or democratic – culture. A work like Julien Benda's *La France Byzantine, ou, le triomphe de la littérature pure* (1945),⁵⁴ for example, prefigures Sartre's defence of democracy, associating as it does literary purists, from Mallarmé to the Surrealists, with an aristocratism that, as Jean Paulhan had already argued in *Les Fleurs de Tarbes* in 1941, manifested a 'disgust in the face of clichés [and] ended in hatred for current society and common sentiments' (CM 91), leading ultimately to 'the divorce of the writer from the public' (CM 81). Mallarmé thus stood for the corrosive negativity of modern literature – its terroristic assault on the foundations of a shared culture, however the latter was construed.

Thirdly, Mallarmé's writings were treated as a symptom via which the state of French culture could be diagnosed more generally. This diagnosis was made by the right before and during the Occupation and sought to explain the weakness of French culture compared to that of the Germans – a weakness that was seen as the result of the writer having either become 'separated from national life' or from propagating the 'disorders of individualism' (CM 22). But it was also made after the Liberation by the left, who aimed to identify the origins of collaborationist tendencies and to purge them from French letters.

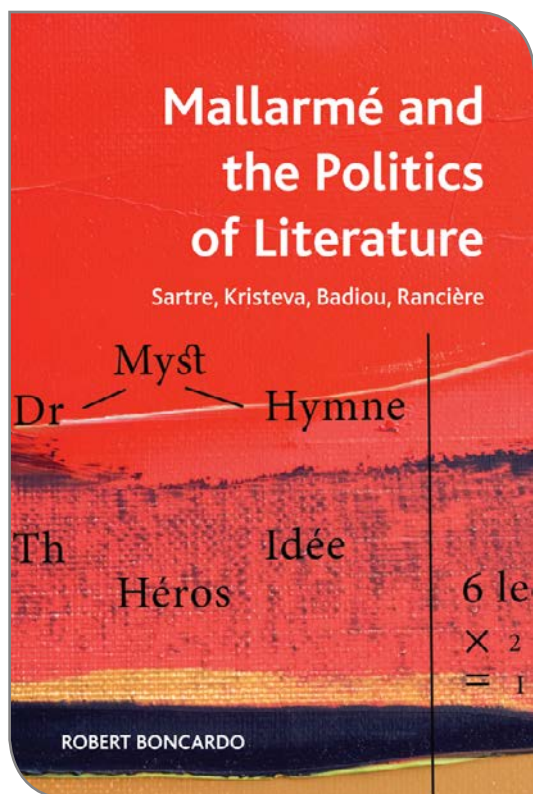
At the moment, then, of Sartre's decisive intervention in the post-war intellectual field, Mallarmé was already a figure who condensed a number of decisive political and ethical questions. Was the poet's alleged distance from the public sphere a mark of his principled commitment to an art that represented, as Valéry would have it, 'the spiritual destination of man, that is, his capacity to raise himself above animality by the recognition of the absolute' (CM 52)? Or was Mallarmé – that 'being of refusal' (CM 80) – guilty of failing to cultivate a viable common culture characterised by 'democratic deliberation'? Did the negativity of his poetry manifest a disdain for ordinary people's prosaism, or a liberation of fundamental human capacities? Questions such as these will animate not only Sartre's engagement with Mallarmé, but those who come after him as well.

NOTES

1. J.-P. Faye, 'Le camarade Mallarmé', *L'Humanité*, 19 September 1969.
2. For interpretations of the political significance of Mallarmé's work that were contemporary to him, see B. Marchal (ed.), *Mallarmé (Mémoire de la critique)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Paris-Sorbonne, 1998).
3. J.-P. Sartre, 'Introducing *Les Temps Modernes*', in R. Aronson and A. Van Den Hoven (eds), *We Have Only This Life To Live: The Selected Essays of Jean-Paul Sartre, 1939–1975* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2013), 137 (translation modified).
4. J.-P. Sartre, 'The Purposes of Writing', in *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, trans. John Matthews (London: Verso, 2008), 13.
5. These readings have nevertheless been the object of Jean-François Hamel's recent work, which we will soon discuss in detail. J.-F. Hamel, *Camarade Mallarmé: Une politique de la lecture* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2014).
6. J. Hippolyte, 'Le Coup de dés et le message', in *Figures de la pensée philosophique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1971), 877–84.
7. M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).
8. J. Derrida, 'The Double Session', in *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 173–286.
9. G. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. H. Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), and G. Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. T. Conley (London and New York: Continuum, 1993).
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11. A. Stanguennec, *Mallarmé et l'éthique de la poésie* (Paris: Vrin, 1992).
12. P. Champion, *Mallarmé, poésie et philosophie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994).
13. 'Introducing *Les Temps Modernes*', 137.
14. M. Marchal, *Lecture de Mallarmé: Poésies, Igitur, le Coup de dés* (Paris: José Corti, 1985).
15. M. Marchal, *La Religion de Mallarmé: poésie, mythologie et religion* (Paris: José Corti, 1988).
16. P. Durand, *Mallarmé: Du sens des formes au sens des formalités* (Paris: Seuil, 2008).
17. P. Thériault, *Le (Dé)montage de la fiction: La révélation moderne de Mallarmé* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2010).
18. B. Bohac, *Jouer partout ainsi qu'il sied: Mallarmé et l'esthétique du quotidien* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2012).
19. R. Pearson, *Unfolding Mallarmé: The Development of a Poetic Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997); R. Pearson, *Mallarmé and Circumstance: The Translation of Silence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

20. R. Lloyd, *Mallarmé: The Poet and His Circle* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).
21. D. Catani, *The Poet in Society: Art, Consumerism and Politics in Mallarmé* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003).
22. See the very recent book by R. H. Bloch, *One Toss of the Dice: The Incredible Story of How a Poem Made us Modern* (New York: Liverlight Publishing Corporation, 2017).
23. See http://www.fabula.org.actualites/contre-mallarme-contre-attaque-contrepoint-contretemps_76726.php (accessed February 2017).
24. A. Badiou, 'Mallarmé Said It All', in R. Boncardo and C. R. Gelder, *Mallarmé: Rancière, Milner, Badiou* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 92.
25. T. Roger, *L'Archive du Coup de dés* (Paris: Éditions Classiques Garnier, 2010), 15.
26. See, for Roger's discussion of Foucault's archaeological approach and his application of it, *L'Archive du Coup de dés*, 15–19.
27. *L'Archive du Coup de dés*, 22.
28. *L'Archive du Coup de dés*, 482.
29. T. Roger, "'Camarade Mallarmé': mallarmisme, anachronisme, présentisme', *Acta fabula*, Vol. 15, No. 6, 'Réinvestissement, rumeur & réécriture', Juin–juillet 2014.
30. "'Camarade Mallarmé': mallarmisme, anachronisme, présentisme'.
31. V. Kaufmann, *La faute à Mallarmé: L'aventure de la théorie littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 2011), 7.
32. *La faute à Mallarmé*, 8.
33. *La faute à Mallarmé*, 27.
34. T. Roger, 'La faute au mallarmisme', *Acta fabula*, Vol. 13, No. 9, 'L'aventure Poétique', Novembre–Décembre 2012.
35. *La faute à Mallarmé*, 194.
36. *La faute à Mallarmé*, 195.
37. *La faute à Mallarmé*, 15.
38. *La faute à Mallarmé*, 191.
39. L. Jenny, *Je suis la révolution: Histoire d'une métaphore (1830–1975)* (Paris: Editions Belin, 2006).
40. *Je suis la révolution*, 212.
41. *Je suis la révolution*, 211.
42. *Je suis la révolution*, 211.
43. Cited in *Je suis la révolution*, 181.
44. *Je suis la révolution*, 6.
45. *Je suis la révolution*, 211.
46. *La faute à Mallarmé*, 10.
47. As Roger writes in his review of *La faute à Mallarmé*, 'Mallarmisme is a reductionism that consists in reducing the poet to the *Sonnet en -yx* and to a few decontextualised formulas', 'La faute au mallarmisme'.
48. 'La faute au mallarmisme'.

49. Cited CM 14.
50. *La faute à Mallarmé*, 31, n. 1.
51. “Camarade Mallarmé”: mallarmisme, anachronisme, présentisme’.
52. “Camarade Mallarmé”: mallarmisme, anachronisme, présentisme’.
53. “Camarade Mallarmé”: mallarmisme, anachronisme, présentisme’.
54. J. Benda, *La France Byzantine, ou le triomphe de la littérature pure: Mallarmé, Gide, Proust, Valéry, Alain, Giraudoux, Suarès, les Surréalistes. Essais d’une psychologie originelle du littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945).



Mallarmé and the Politics of Literature

Sartre, Kristeva, Badiou, Rancière

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