

Poems by Stéphane Mallarmé
 translated by Ian Brinton
 and Michael Grant (Muscaliet)



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In the scholarly notes accompanying his 1870 prose translation of Edger Allen Poe's 'The Raven,' Stéphane Mallarmé assesses his own attempt as follows: "here is a copy chancing no aim other than rendering a few of the extraordinary sound-effects of the original music, and here and there maybe the feeling itself." The modest surface of the claim is troubled by the sheer ambition of recapturing the poem's sound and feeling in another language. Ian Brinton, discussing the working method employed by Michael Grant and himself in their translations from French in 'Golden Handcuffs Review' #23, describes their aims in seemingly more expansive terms: "we felt that our translations must attempt to make a construction of energy with which to convey the active experience of a foreign original text." This nest of processes and abstractions, worthy of Mallarmé himself, would seem to promise a recursive and somewhat detached reading experience. However, it is the material, almost tangible, qualities of this book that linger with the reader.

The first of these is the French blue cover, overlaid with a manuscript page from 'Un Coup de Dés,' with the book's lower-case title dwarfed by the block capital rendering of 'LE HASARD,' priming

the reader to the role of chance in the layout and language of the work between these covers. In the book's first work of chance, the dazzling azure of the cover is leached from the text through the omission of versions of Mallarmé's bluest numbers, 'Tristesse d'Été' and 'Les Fenêtres.' It is singularly fitting to the source poems that their signature colour sings itself through absence in these pages. In a further daring move, the greeting of 'Salut' that opens *Les Poésies* emerges as a 'Pledge' two thirds of the way through Brinton and Grant's *poems*. These gestures, together with the decision to eschew facing-page source poems, ensure that this construction stands as a book in its own right, offering its reader an experience inflected, but not entirely subsumed, by its origins.

It is, unfortunately, near impossible for a reader with long familiarity with the words of the source poems to approach this work with any pure sense. Instead, they will spend much time picking fights with individual word choices for reasons that are at least as autobiographical as they are lexical. For a reader who was awakened, literally, from mid-lecture lethargy by the sonic magic of the 'Sonnet en -yx,' that poem's 'aboli bibelot' seems diminished in its new form as an 'abolished plaything.' However, this same version offers some deft echoes to deflect from the impossibility of recreating the source poem's dense sound patterning in English. To this end, 'brûlé par le Phénix' is rendered 'cindered by the Phoenix' to reflect the following line's 'cinerary urn.'

These poems are propelled by the tensions generated by the need to make constant choices, at the level of the word or line, upon which all other possibilities will hinge. In this sense every poem is inflected by a version of the crisis of the suspended dice roll of 'Un Coup De Dés,' crystalized in the decision to hedge the title as 'A Roll of the Dice [OR] The Die is Cast.' While the second title, evoking Caesar's 'alea jacta est,' suggests that the Rubicon has been crossed, the juxtaposition of titles reminds the reader that, in translation, crossing is a process and one that, Zeno-like, resists completion.

The closing lines of this poem capture the book's play of the beautiful and the baffling. Choosing 'shining and considering'

for 'brillant et méditant' offers a sonic and etymological riff on the previous stanza's 'sidereal,' while turning 'avant de s'arrêter' into 'before settling' lengthens the stanza's string of gerunds into a chain of potential movement that is not within the power of the more static, adjectival French present participle. After this movement comes the still moment of the final line, 'Toute Pensée émet un Coup de Dés,' here rendered 'All thought admits Just the Roll of the Dice.' It is, no doubt, reader-specific whimsy to hear ready-made pastry in the proximity of 'Just' and 'Roll.' 'Just' does, however, seem an odd insertion and one that, taken with the choice of 'admit' rather than 'emit' for the verb, fundamentally alters the sense and orientation of the line. Where 'émet' unleashes movement outward, with the dice roll and its exponential chain of chance radiating from the thought, 'admit' suggests both restricted movement inwards and sanctioning, with the insertion of 'Just' reinforcing a sense of limiting or foreclosing possibilities that sits uneasily both with the source line and with the openness of the poem's English titles.

This kind of quibbling is one of the great joys of reading new translations of beloved poems, providing momentum for the kind of 'active experience' Brinton and Grant wish to construct in their translations. It is testament to their achievement that the poems are robust and flexible enough to withstand, even thrive, under such pressure, making a place for themselves in an infinite chain of acts of translating emanating from Mallarmé's *Poésies*.