March 2001

Under Mallarmé's Wing

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To have 19th-century French poetry breeze into this exhibit of beautifully crafted fans from the 18th century should be viewed as a complementary and friendly action. Indeed, the exhibition title, "Hand-held Delight," is especially apposite for our topic today, for the poet in question, Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) took particular delight in the marvelous object that is the fan, its characteristic deployment, fold by fold, recalling for him that most cherished of objects, the book, that reveals its meanings page by page. And, since, as the exhibition here beautifully illustrates, a fan is rarely just a fan, its mechanism provided the poet with an elegant metaphor for the gradual emergence of any image, even the lifting fog in the Belgian city of Bruges that slowly exposed the old buildings, "pli selon pli." While rarely "just a fan," a fan often is, however, a fan, and what is most pertinent for us today, is that Mallarmé wrote poems on fans, and I mean that in both senses: poems about fans, and also poems written on that wonderfully suggestive surface. He also decorated them. So, when we speak of Mallarmé’s fan poems, we are referring to a rather unique artistic genre comprised of literary, painterly and rather specific cultural elements, associated with an intimate setting or space that was at once feminine and artistic. What I propose we do today is to follow Mallarmé along a meandering path through

1The following was presented as a lecture in conjunction with the exhibit of 18th-century European fans, held at the McMullen Art Museum of Boston College, September, 2000. The author is Professor of French at the University of Nebraska. He is the author of books and articles on French literature, and the editor of Nineteenth-Century French Studies.

2The sonnet, "Remémoration d’amis belges."
these objects and the topics they evoke (to this reader at least), that we take a kind of *visite guidée* through the new but temporary Mallarmé Wing of the McMullen Art Museum.

Mallarmé’s interest in fans was part of a larger network of associations, dating from the 1860s and ‘70s, that included ladies’ apparel and accessories, and collectible curios. It culminated in the 1880s and ‘90s at the height of the Japanese influence on French sensibilities, both artistic and mundane, known as *japonisme*. This last topic is familiar to many of us in the context of French painting from the mid 1870s onward, but it has been little explored in any detail with respect to the poetry of the same period.³

You will not be surprised to learn that the poems *about* were also the ones *on*. A first example is the fan that was a gift by the poet to the pianist, Misia Natanson (fig. 1). On it, one can make out the lines of the poem, a typically witty quatrain, containing the recipient’s name and alluding to her occupation:

Aile que du papier reploie  
Bats toute si t’initia  
Naguère à l’orage et à la joie  
De son piano – Missia

[O] Wing folded back by paper  
Beat your fastest if you were initiated some time ago  
To the storm and to the joys  
Of Missia’s piano.⁴

Because of the rather ephemeral nature of this and similar texts, as gifts offered on an easily perishable support, it is impossible to say how many of them have survived the vicissitudes


⁴Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are my own.
of time. Mallarmé did keep record of such circumstantial verse, and made note of 18 such quatrains and couplets. He was extraordinarily generous with this sort of labor-intensive gift for friends, using almost any occasion to pen verses on New Year’s greeting cards, labels for bottles of Calvados, Easter eggs, and on envelopes to be sent through the mail where a quatrain contained all the information needed for the letter to be delivered.

There are three other, more substantive fan poems, two of which Mallarmé had published as part of his poetic œuvre, written for his wife and daughter, and a third written for his sometime muse, Mery Laurent. Like the fan to Misia Natanson, these texts date anywhere from the mid 1880s to the mid '90s, as the Belle Époque was getting under way. To appreciate the origins of these objects, we must go back 15 years to the early days of the Third Republic and to the eye for women’s fashion of an impecunious junior highschool English teacher newly arrived in Paris. Such was indeed the case. Mallarmé’s principal stock and trade was teaching the language of Shakespeare and Edgar Allen Poe to ungrateful and inattentive adolescents, a chore for which he was paid precious little. Poetry was a higher calling, certainly, written at night when the grading was done. Unless one’s name was Victor Hugo, however, poetic composition was not a lucrative activity, so Mallarmé tried his hand at a variety of activities that he hoped would be successful commercial ventures. Certainly the most fascinating of these enterprises was a women’s fashion magazine, La Dernière Mode, which he wrote, edited and published over a series of eight issues in 1874. Aside from literary contributions submitted by writer-friends, all

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6The entire series has been photographically reproduced by the Éditions Ramsay (Paris), 1978. An original set is housed in the Bibliothèque nationale de France.
the copy was written by Mallarmé himself, from the major articles dealing with dress and children’s education, down to the fictitious letters to the editor arriving from the desks of ladies from all over Europe.

The dresses, fans and other accessories of La Dernière Mode (fig. 2) tell us that we are still in a Paris with strong fashion ties to the Second Empire that had collapsed only three years before. What is revealing here for our purposes, however, is that Mallarmé’s keen eye for visual detail came to these images of middle-class life in much the same spirit as did that of his painter friends – Degas, Manet, Morisot, Renoir, and Whistler – but independently. This is an attentiveness to a level of detail that we associate more with painting, and one that doesn’t fall easily within the ken of lyric poet. Even the middle class interiors evoked by Baudelaire, another poet with a painterly eye, are hinted at more than they are described: an oriental rug or an opened map here, a balcony or fireplace there.7

Returning to Mallarmé’s gift to Misia Natanson, it is clear that the object, while certainly having an ostensibly utilitarian value, would serve primarily as a keepsake souvenir. The poet-school teacher had a beautiful and careful hand, and, as I’ve said, the decoration was painted by Mallarmé himself. The fan was a playful evocation of poetry, certainly, but as important were the associations with women’s fashion accessories, and also with that of that quintessential item in any middle class home, the collectible curio, the bibelot, displayed on a table or book shelf, perhaps even framed and hung prominently. The curio holds a place of privilege in Mallarmé’s verse. Vases, small mirrors, decorative clocks, hand-painted porcelain are on display in the bourgeois interiors found in his early poems, especially. These decorative and seemingly trivial

7See “L’Invitation au voyage,” “Le Voyage,” and “Le Balcon.”
objects are tied for Mallarmé to essential characteristics of poetry, in part because they partook of
the salon, that intimate space where poetry might be read. In one poem, particularly, the curio
plays the central role, a fact that is doubly insistent given that its centrality is due precisely to its
being absent. Mallarmé’s poetics are often concerned with the absence of things that have been
displaced by language. In no poem is this esthetic parti-pris more in evidence than in the
notorious sonnet in yx.

Ses purs ongles très haut dédiant leur onyx
L’Angoisse, ce minuit, soutient, lampadophore,
Maint rêve vespéral brûlé par le Phénix
Que ne recueille pas de cinéraire amphore

Sur les crédences, au salon vide: nul ptyx,
Aboli bibelot d’inanité sonore,
(Car le Maître est allé puer des pleurs au Styx
Avec ce seul objet dont le Néant s’honore.)

Mais proche la croisée au nord vacante, un or
Agnonise selon peut-être le décor
Des licornes ruant du feu contre une nixe,

Elle, défunte nue en le miroir, encor
Que, dans l’oubli fermé par le cadre, se fixe
De scintillations sitôt le septuor.

Her pure nails held high offering their onyx
Anguish, this midnight, holds up, lamp-bearing
Many a vesperval dream burned by the Phoenix
That no cinerary vase welcomes

On the credenzas, in the empty salon: no ptyx,
Abolished knickknack of inane sonority,
(For the Master has gone to draw tears from the Styx
With this sole objet honored by Nothingness.)

But near the casement empty to the north, a gold
Agonises perhaps according to the decor
Of unicorns bearing down with fire on a nixie,

She, dead cloud in the mirror, while,
In the forgetfulness enclosed by the frame, is set
With scintillations immediately the septet.

The poem is one of Mallarmé’s most challenging. Let’s settle for the following very partial gloss: The scene, if one can call it that, is a livingroom at midnight. It is so dark that, for all intents and purposes, the room is empty. The darkness is absolute and so evokes what is visually absent: the black onyx fingernails of a figurine lamp, the credenza on which might have stood (or didn’t stand) an urn, the key missing object, the curio of inane sonority; in the room, there is no ptyx. The Master, presumably the Orphic poet, has taken it in order to draw tear-water from the infernal river Styx, doing so, one must suppose, because of its cup-like characteristics. We notice a faint glimmer in the room. It is the reflection in a mirror near the window of the seven star constellation containing the North Star, Ursa Minor, or the Little Dipper.\footnote{As an English teacher, Mallarmé would have known the English name for this constellation. In French, a constellations having this shape is sometimes known as “La Coupe” (the Cup).} The poet’s errand has been successful: we’ve just witnessed the divine apotheosis of a knickknack.

Mallarmé’s poems often work in this way, absolute absence evoking ideal presence. It’s a fundamental precept of how language, if used correctly, relates in its complexity to the objects it names. Now, any reading of this poem relies of course on how we understand the word ptyx. Mallarmé was doubtless counting somewhat playfully on the fact that most of us would read it and draw an absolute blank. He was right. This would give us a signifier having no signified, an inane-sounding signifier to boot. What better way to give a shape to nothingness than through such a word. Yet, while extraordinarily rare, ptyx is indeed a word: in Greek, it is a writing tablet,
and so, by extension, a book. Individual words give shape to nothingness; books do the same in greater complexity. Our reading is born out in that remarkable line: aboli bibelot d’inanité sonore, where aboli bibelot, suggestively re-inscribes that bookish prefix, biblio (from the Greek biblion). What more appropriate little curio to draw the eye in a middle class living room than a book of poetry on display, full of seemingly empty sonorities (especially if written by the obscure Mallarmé), useless, yet capable of generating meaning with mythic resonance?

Though published in 1887, the first version of the -yx sonnet dates from 1868. Despite the nocturnal setting, the furnishings of credenzas and urns do evoke the somewhat heavy décor of the Second Empire that we glimpsed in the pages of La Dernière Mode. New inspiration was on its way. Following Commodore Perry’s “opening” of Japan in 1853, among the first important displays of Japanese goods in Paris was at the Exposition Universelle of 1867. By 1873, Monet had boldly announced the new direction with his well-received painting, “La Japonaise” (fig. 3). It might be more aptly called, “À la japonaise,” or, “in the Japanese style”; the blonde Camille Monet, who looks rather perky here, lacks the quiet introspection of the Japanese models. But Monet was certainly attentive to the new forms of dress and décor, the lively palette and the swirl of his model’s body and of the drapery. I certainly don’t need to belabor the aspects of this influence that are so well-known, and that nearly every artist from Monet to Toulouse-Lautrec had a collection of Japanese art that included prints, screens and fans. The subject matter of these works – flowers, landscapes, interiors, courtesans, actresses, street

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and harbor scenes – paralleled that of the 19th-century French painters from the 1870s onwards.

Where was Mallarmé in this new excitement? Not surprisingly given the visual orientation of his poetry, painters were among his intimates, particularly after the move to Paris in 1871, and he simply could not have escaped the japonismes that so stimulated them. Mallarmé had especially close ties with Manet and began frequenting the artist’s studio in the early 1870s; it was close to the school where he taught, and the poet would drop by on his way home, nearly every day for a decade until Manet’s death in 1883. It was in this studio in 1876 that the artist painted a famous portrait of his poet friend, book and cigar characteristically at hand, and with the contemporary touch of a Japanese-style screen for the backdrop. It was also here that Mallarmé met Méry Laurent, whom Manet painted in a similar setting. She was one of his models and a notorious heart-throb among the upper echelons of the literary and political set. For years, Mallarmé had a hopeless crush on Méry, who was, as one said at the time, très fashionable. The infatuation was quite one-sided, though in following her around town, as he did, and even running errands for her – picking up curtain material here, an end-table there – he could indulge his penchant for interior decoration, fashion, and bibelots. She was definitely linked to the stylish craze for things Japanese, in Mallarmé’s mind at least, suggested by his choice of note paper, printed with Japanese scenes, that he used in his correspondence with her. The catalogue from the 1998 Mallarmé exhibit at the Musée d’Orsay shows that, in one of her keepsake albums,

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12 For more on this important friendship, see Lloyd, Rosemary. Mallarmé: The Poet and His Circle. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999.

Edouard Manet  *Stephan Mallarme*  1876
Oil on canvas  27x 36 cm. Musee d'Orsay, Paris (RMN)

Manet. *Mary Laurent in Black Hat* (detail), 1882
Pastel on canvas  54x44 cm
Musee des Beaux Aarts, Dijon

Katsushika Hokusai  *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*
colored woodcut 1823-37. Brooks Memorial Art Gallery
Mallarmé drew Japanese screen-like figures. She would also be the recipient of one of his major fan poems.

In a word, Japanese images and artefacts were everywhere from the early 1870s through the 1890s, and it is understandable that a poet like Mallarmé could not remain indifferent to them, as they were so consonant with some of the deepest currents in his poetry. Published in 1885, the poem “Prose (pour des Esseintes),” long associated with the heightened artifice of the Decadent movement, takes on an important new dimension when brought side-by-side with japonisme. The poem’s dramatic apogee occurs as the poet and his companion are letting their gaze roam over the landscape when, suddenly, a field of irises, “le sol des cent iris,” springs up before their eyes, taking on new meaning.

Gloire du long désir, Idées
Tout en moi s’exaltaït de voir
La famille des iridiées
Sur gir à ce nouveau devoir

How can we not see here a reflection of the often treated irises of Japanese landscape and floral painting? As in Hokusai’s paintings, the flowers take up the entire visual field.

Recalling again the fan sent to Misia Natanson, it is not difficult to discern an aspect of specifically Japanese painting that must have interested Mallarmé: the inclusion of text along side the painted image. Written out in his elegant hand, the quatrain is itself part of the suggested

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15One thinks also of Van Gogh’s celebrated imitations of Hokusai’s irises.
landscape: a few blades of grass shoot up around it, and the poet’s initials, in the form of a flower bud, serve as signature. When compared with some of the fan and screen art of Japan, Mallarmé’s formal inspiration is clear: a metonymical suggestion of nature, a partial landscape, is offered along with calligraphic text, signed by the artist with his signature stamp, or chop. Mallarmé didn’t read Japanese, though in one respect, the sense of the text was secondary to its purely visual aspect, and he was manifestly attracted to the shared life of painted image, text and signature. Words do signify, however, and the attraction to this form was all the stronger when the poem was itself about the very fan upon which it was written.

The fan of 1890 to Méry Laurent is the summum of the gift-objet. The fan is paper, of a deep golden color, printed with roses. The poem, in Mallarmé’s handwriting is written in white ink.¹⁶

De frigides roses pour vivre  
Toutes la même interrompront  
Avec un blanc calice prompt  
Votre souffle devenu givre

Mais que mon battement délivre  
La touffe par un choc profond  
Cette frigidité se fond  
En du rire de fleurir ivre

A jeter le ciel en détail  
Voilà comme bon éventail  
Tu conviens mieux qu’une fiole

Nul n’enfermant à l’émeri  
Sans qu’il y perde ou le viole  
L’arôme émané de Méry.

Fridgid roses in order to live

¹⁶For descriptions of these objects, see H. Mondor’s edition of Mallarmé’s Œuvres complètes (Paris: Éditions de la Pléiade, 1945), p. 1507. See also the Mallarmé catalogue, Musée d’Orsay exhibit, op. cit.
All in the same way will interrupt
With a promptly-brought white chalice / calyx
Your breath become frost

But may my fluttering free
The tuft with a profound stroke
This frigidity melts
Into laughter that is eager to blossom forth

To toss the sky bit by bit
That's how as a good fan
You serve the purpose much better than a phial

None of them closing completely
Without losing or violating
The aroma emanating from Méry.

The sonnet’s octave is constructed around references to some of Mallarmé’s best-known works, themselves constructed around landscapes. The Swan sonnet, particularly, carries the strongest echos here, that wintry, daybreak scene of a swan trapped in the ice of lake because it stayed on the water during the night admiring its celestial image, the Swan Constellation, reflected on the surface. The water has frozen, leaving the bird only one free wing with which to try to break out. Mallarmé has borrowed not only the ivre rimes from the earlier poem but the very words containing them, along with wintry cold, frosty whiteness and the conceit of a liberating stroke of the wing. The roses in the fan poem are tightly-shut buds, standing in a white vase; they are also the perfectly tended tufts and curls of Méry’s hair, which are “frozen,” so to speak, in their immobile perfection, rather like the inviolate and glacial blond hair of Mallarmé’s virgin heroine, Hérodiade. A further reference is to “L’Après-midi d’un faune,” a summer

17“Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui.”

18See especially the dramatic dialogue, “Scène.”
poem filled with amorous romping, wherein the faun must disentangle the tuft of the intertwined 
hair of two nymphs, the objects of his desire. So, as wintery cold finally gives way to warmth, 
the stroke of the fan will disrupt the icy perfection of Méry’s coiffe, liberating a lock or two that 
may fall, the rose buds bursting forth into full blooms, provoking Méry’s warm laughter.

In the sestet, the poetic voice shifts from the fan to an admiring observer, sitting beside 
Méry as she fans herself (he is in fact sitting downwind). With each stroke of the fan comes the 
admireur’s way a specific quantity of air, carrying with it a precise amount of Méry’s aroma. A 
perfume bottle could not contain its contents better than that measure of fanned air. True to the 
spirit of his gift-objects, Mallarmé personalizes this poem to Méry, by rimeing her name with the 
rather recherche expression, “à l’émeri,” which means hermetically sealed.

Our last two fans, for Mallarmé’s wife and his daughter, are different from the one 
addressed to Méry. Bibelots still, yet they are bibelots of a higher order. A word should be said 
about both titles. In their original state, neither poem carried the title of “Éventail.” The 
reference would have been too painfully obvious. In the printed version, the word has replaced 
the thing, and has done so ever mindful of the object’s complexity. The word éventail contains 
two essential elements of what is to follow: there is, of course, the movement of air, referred to 
in the vent of éventail; then there is the wordplay of Mallarmé’s own fancy, the fan as wing, seen 
when we bring the é around from the beginning to the end, ailé (winged), or just aile (wing). 
Unlike the other gift-poems, there is no clever flattery in the incorporation in the text of the 
recipient’s name. The dedication contained in the titles is formal – Madame Mallarmé, 
Mademoiselle Mallarmé – completely outside of the intimate tone of the poems themselves. The 
fan for Madame Mallarmé is made of a shiny silver paper, decorated with hand-painted white
daisies. The poem is written in red ink (fig. 4).

Avec comme pour langage
Rien qu’un battement aux cieux
Le futur vers se dégage
Du logis très précieux

Aile tout bas la courrière,
Cet éventail si c’est lui
Le même par qui derrière
Toi quelque miroir a lui

Limpide (où va redescendre
Pourchassée en chaque grain
Un peu d’invisible cendre
Seule à me rendre chagrin)

Toujours tel il apparaisse
Entre tes mains sans paresse.

With as if for language
Nothing but a fluttering toward the heavens
The future verse is freed
From its most precious abode

Wing soft-spoken messenger
This fan if it is indeed
The same one by which behind
You some mirror glimmered

Limpid (where will fall again
Tracked [as it falls] speck by speck
A bit of invisible cinder-ash
Alone enough to sadden me)

May thus it always appear
In your tireless hands.

A Shakespearean sonnet in heptasyllabic lines, this is an example of rare poetic language.

Yet, its language is but a descriptive commentary on another form of language, that of the fan as it is held and agitated by Madame Mallarmé. This second language is a metaphorical one, the subject matter of which is metaphor, whereby language becomes the metaphor for the language it
creates. As with all of Mallarmé’s major poems, this one is about the workings of poetic language and thought.

The agitation of Madame Mallarmé’s fan is compared to the rhythmic beating of the wings of a young bird taking flight. Classically, this is a metaphor for inspiration, which has wings and comes to the poet through the air, to be breathed in. Mallarmé has reversed the direction of the flight, making this a metaphor for the reading of a poem, of this poem specifically, the one we are reading. Dramatically, the poem is riding on the fan-wing that Madame Mallarmé is fluttering, creating a movement of air analogous to that created by the spoken voice, or in this case, the reading voice, “une agitation solennelle par l’air de paroles” (a solemn movement of words through the air), as the poet once called it. The message that is carried by the winged courier is said to be communicated “tout bas,” in hushed tones, coming on the whisper of the fanned air. In her husband’s earlier verse, Madame Mallarmé appeared occasionally where her nursing and rocking of the couple’s children were linked to her reading aloud a new poem, giving it life and sustenance through the rhythms of her voice. Here, though, she is not reading aloud. How, then, (except by us) is the poem being read? It is seen by the poet – its enactment tracked or followed – in a glimmer, or glow, of light reflected in the mirror situated behind the seated Madame Mallarmé. This is where the physical characteristics of the fan come into play. The paper of the fan is silver, able to reflect light, and the red ink of the poem is sufficient to give that reflection a warm glow. In the fan’s movement, the metaphorical bird taking flight is no ordinary one; it is a fire bird, a phoenix, that flies up, only to be consumed and turned into the ash or ashen embers that, sadly, will redescend. Of the celestial myths to which

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19"Toast funèbre."
he was drawn, along with those of the constellations, solar legends were especially dear to Mallarmé, as the path of the sun, its life, death and rebirth, were in his eyes powerful images of the creation of poetic meaning through the composition, and then completion, of a poem.\(^{20}\) The extended case obtains, also, of the reading of a poem and then of having the voice, be it inner or outer, fall silent. The phoenix referred to earlier in the -yx sonnet is just this bird, and I submit that the solar myth is again very much at play here.

Let us now turn to the last of the major fan poems, though the first one to be written, and the one for which we have, alas, no idea of what the object looked like, though it most certainly had to exist. I will provide an image for it later. The text dates from 1884:

O réveuse, pour que je plonge  
Au pur délice sans chemin,  
Sache, par un subtil mensonge,  
Garder mon aile dans ta main.

Une fraîcheur de crépuscule  
Te vient à chaque battement  
Dont le coup prisonnier recule  
L’horizon délicatement.

Vertige! voici que frissonne  
L’espace comme un grand baiser  
Qui, fou de naître pour personne,  
Ne peut jaillir ni s’apaiser.

Sens-tu le paradis farouche  
Ainsi qu’un rire enseveli  
Se couler du coin de ta bouche  
Au fond de l’unanime pli!

Le sceptre des rivages roses  
Stagnants sur les soirs d’or, ce l’est,  
Ce blanc vol fermé que tu poses  
Contre le feu d’un bracelet.

O dreamer, that I may plunge
To that pure delight that has no fixed path,
Learn, through a subtle lie,
To keep my wing in your hand.

A coolness of sunset
Comes to you with each flutter
Whose captive stroke delicately
Pushes back the horizon.

I swoon! now all space
Quivers like some great kiss
That, mad to have been born for no one,
Can neither burst forth nor be calmed.

Do you sense that paradise, gone wild,
Like a buried burst of laughter,
Is flowing from the corner of your mouth
To the bottom of the single-purpose fold!

Sceptre of the rosy shores that are
Stagnant on evening’s golden skies, that it is,
This white[-winged] flight, now closed, that you lay
Against a bracelet’s fire.

The fan poem is also the fan-poet; this time, the object itself is given voice, as through a subtle lie (the conceit of the poem on the fan): the poet, with the collusion of his dreamy listener, has allowed her fan to become his wing. Each stroke brings cool evening air and, as the sun sets, seems to push back the horizon as it becomes less defined in the falling light. Space, and particularly the now vast middle ground between the young woman and the inflamed horizon, has become a void that quivers in its infinite suggestiveness as it is agitated by the fan strokes that we look through to the horizon. That space has become as if wild with desire and yet there is no object of desire; perhaps it is the recognition of this oxymoron of infinite potential, “paradise gone wild,” that brings a silent smile to the young woman’s lips, a smile that seems to flow into the unanimous fold of the fan – unanimous, having a single soul, the many folds that are a single
fold. That smile is like a silent kiss that is received by the fan, the smile that comes at the end of “reading” the poem (Geneviève is reading metaphorically, as did her mother a moment ago, by having the text brought to her through the air by her winged messenger). She quiets the fan as we finish reading the poem, then collapses that “unanimous fold” as she would close the pages of a book, and lays the closed fan against her wrist, where a bracelet reflects the rosy hues of the dying horizon.

One may notice elements shared with the other fan poems: the fan as an accessory of feminine refinement, the poem as a delicate and witty intrusion into the intimate space of the gift’s recipient. In these last two poems under discussion especially, the rhythmic movement of the fanned air evokes the rhythmically expelled air of the reading voice, creating a reciprocal metaphor whereby each is an image of the other. Use of the fan is given as a principally diurnal activity, allowing the complex network of images that associate fanning with reading to be in turn associated with the path of the sun and thus to Mallarmé’s own myth-making. In other ways, the poem to Mademoiselle Mallarmé is more complex than the sonnet written for her mother seven years later: the speaking voice of the fan is exactly coincidental with the reading of the poem, the collapsing of the fan in the fading light suggesting not only the “death” of the poem when it is no longer being read, but also the “death” of the poetic voice. And then there is that great kiss that can neither burst forth nor be repressed. A latent kiss can never be just a kiss, and here signals a tension-filled silence that will be transmuted into the (equally silent) smile of the fourth quatrain.  

What I wish to draw your attention to, though, is the emphasis on visual space,

\[21\] A summary of the various interpretations of this poem may be found in: Minahen, Charles D. “From ‘vers de circonstance’ to ‘circonstance de vers’: Intimations of a Mallarmé Fan.” Dalhousie French Studies, 25 (1993): 27-34.
for which the kiss is the metaphor. We are reminded that Mallarmé has, despite the poem’s complexities, created a landscape scene, a sunset, specifically. Indirectly, the poem to Madame Mallarmé was a sunset, too, where the reflection in the mirror took us outside of the bourgeois interior (a practice reminiscent of Baudelaire who cast his sunsets as seen from windows and balconies). But, in the poem to his daughter, Mallarmé has given us a landscape directly: the scene is out-of-doors; in the foreground is the young woman fanning herself. In the background, the horizon is aflame with the sunset, and, in the quivering indistinctness of “all space,” *the middle ground of the picture has been obfuscated*. Why? Because the relationship expressed in the visual comparison, or juxtaposition, of the young woman and the horizon is the subject of the poem, and of the picture.

In this text, the painterly engagement of the landscape is more profound than it was on the painted surface of the fans, where Mallarmé could evoke it with just a few quick brush strokes. The poem is built around a contrast between the fore and deep back grounds. To appreciate what the poet is up to requires that we pursue the question of Mallarmé and *japonisme* in order to make an observation that is impossible to treat as a question of direct or traceable influence but is one which I’m convinced deserves attention, even though it may fall in that broadly defined category of artistic affinities. As a convenient point of departure, let’s stay with poetry for a moment and consider the visual technique of Bashō, the 17th-century master of haiku. His definition of the haiku as “what is happening in this place at this time” is deceptively simple. Meaning in Bashō is generated through the largely visual contrast of elements within a natural setting, as in the poem in which a young boy who is busy husking rice, stops to look up at the moon.
A farmer's child
Hulling riced
Arrests his hands
To look at the moon.

It is harvest time, late summer, and the moon is large and, presumably, full. The boy's eyes travel from the round bowl of rice to the round, white moon. Visually, it is an unmediated scene that invites comparison between what is young and ephemeral, and what is ancient and eternal. Another poem presents us with a similarly dramatic contrast: an azalea branch in bloom sits in a bucket of water, while behind a fishmonger is stripping the meat from a dried cod.

A branch of wild azalea
Thrown into a bucket,
Behind, a woman tearing
The meat of a dried codfish. 22

Springtime freshness and renewal are set in contrast to age and dessication. In neither case is intermediate space ever mentioned.

Japanese landscape painting often strives for similar effect. Hokusai and Hiroshige, the prolific 19th-century engravers whose wood-block prints would fill the private collections of the Impressionists, were worthy heirs to Bashô. Their foregrounds are often scenes of human activity, visual complexity (the well-known use of the negative space), great change (giant curling waves), or architectural forms suggesting movement (curved doorways or windows). We look from the foreground through the middle ground and scenes of stability, and then on to the background to some image of permanence. That middle ground is often given by a stretch of water. These were the landscapes so popular with the Impressionists. Yet, there is a critical difference between Hiroshige and his French admirers. We know all too well the attraction of

the Impressionists to water, the dancing colors of light, and reflected images of the sun or moon, of boats and the shoreline, as in paintings by Monet and Whistler. Through the 19th century, Japanese painting used the reflected image of the mirror, but, inexplicably, never that of water, giving the middle ground a muted quality; the middle ground is there, but it plays a very subdued role, allowing the lively dialog between the fore and back grounds. To my mind, this is very similar to what is going on in Mallarmé’s fan landscapes, especially in the "Éventail de Mademoiselle Mallarmé."

Let’s return to the final image of that remarkable poem: the close-up of the closed fan on the young woman’s wrist, lying along side the sunset’s glow reflected in the bracelet. The last quatrain is intended in part as a myth-making hyperbole in honor of the young woman, who has tamed the wild paradise, to become the reigning deity of the rosy shores, the fan now her scepter. Domination has its costs, however. The closed fan is also the folded wing of the bird whose flight is over and who has come to rest on the rosy shores of sunset. It is an image of death. In other words, and with the type of word play of which Mallarmé was particularly fond, the scepter has become a specter,23 the ghost or remembrance of the poem that is no more. What has happened visually is every bit as subtle as what has occurred lexically: in the reflection of the horizon seen in the bracelet, the background has been brought to the foreground; in the conceit of the folded wing on the rosy shores, the foregrounded image of the closed fan has been projected also into the background. It is an extraordinary use of space, made possible by the obfuscation of the middle ground of the landscape.

An appropriate substitute image for Mademoiselle Mallarmé’s fan poem, is the card

23The word play is identical in French.
painting of Lady Ise, by the 17th-century artist Sotatsu, famous in his day for his fan decorations (fig. 5). The work has all the elements that Mallarmé would have appreciated: landscape, the use of text as an element of visual composition, and a delicate though complicated sense of space.

The scene that is depicted is a literary one, taken from the 9th-century *Tales of the Lady Ise*. She was a legendary poet. In this tale, her husband has set off on a long journey. She recites a poem that expresses her concern for his safety, while he has hidden himself to learn whether she will truly miss him. Hearing her lament, he is so moved that he decides to remain. Foreground and background are in dialogue with one another, as the husband’s perspective creates a contrasting one from our own and Lady Ise’s. The middle ground has lost its physical reality and serves as a poetic space conveying the poem in one direction and the gaze in the other. When discussing this picture with me, a Japanese colleague pointed to the indeterminate middle space of the painting and said, “This is dream space!” There can be no better term than “dream space” to describe the un-representable space over which the recited poem travels, to be heard (and this is the painting’s great metaphor) by virtue of the husband’s gaze through his fan back at his wife. Seeing is hearing. Similarly, in Mallarmé the reciprocal exchange of fore- and backgrounds occurs through having viewed the horizon through the visual intervals of the beating fan-wing, the metaphor for reading the poem. It is just this space that is created by the poem and that becomes the quivering and (dare I say) dream space of the “grand baiser.” I find that Mallarmé’s sense of visual complexity rivals that of his great artistic contemporaries, and has an uncanny affinity with the Japanese models circulating in Paris during the 1880s and '90s.

To conclude: I hope to have shown that Mallarmé’s fan poems need to be appreciated in light of all of the above: as personalized gifts, as partaking of the intimate space surrounding
their recipients, as decorative collectibles, and above all in light of the new esthetic sensibilities inspired in such large measure by japonisme. Beyond this we should recall that, throughout his creative life, Mallarmé was drawn by the temptation of total art and of totalizing art forms, always seeking to remain faithful to his cherished notion of the book as the locus of all art. With its unanimous fold inviting a rich union of poetry and painting, the fan was an eloquent part of the poet’s vision.