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Visual Culture: The Later Mallarmé and *japonisme*

Marshall C. Olds

Gloire du long désir, Idées
Tout en moi s'exaltait de voir
La famille des iridées
Surgir à ce nouveau devoir

– 'Prose (pour des Esseintes)' (1885)

Nous n'avons donc qu'à attendre – jusqu'à ce que, sur lui le signe des dieux, revienne parmi nous l' élu – qui continuera ce qui a eu lieu avant. Satisfaits que, jamais ne dût-il même apparaître, l'histoire du Beau soit complète déjà – taillée dans les marbres du Parthénon – et brodée, avec des oiseaux, sur l'éventail d'Hokusai – au pied du Fusi-yama.

– 'Le « ten o'clock » de M. Whistler' (1888)

(*nota bene*

To open a second window for the images that illustrate this essay, please click here:
<http://www.sdn.ac.uk/dixneuf/september04/olds/visualculture.htm>)

I am brought to my title by the lines from 'Prose (pour des Esseintes)' quoted above. These are among the most parsed verses in Mallarmé's *œuvre*, and we have become so accustomed to see the poet's longstanding desire as coextensive with those Ideas, neo-platonic or other, that we really don't bat an eye when presented with Matisse's Tahitian-inspired vision of luxuriant trees (1932), perhaps because, well, vegetation is vegetation. [image 1] What's lost from view are the *iridées*, a term which surely is meant to refer at least in part to flowers. Placed in the historical context of 1885, the year that Mallarmé decided to publish 'Prose',¹ when the influence of *le japonisme* was reaching its height not only among painters but elsewhere in society, these flowers that spring up before the eye are certainly evocative of the fore grounded irises in prints by Hokusai and others, that had been finding their way into collections in Paris since the early 1860s [image 2]. Questions of direct influence are unanswerable here because it

cannot be determined exactly which engravings Mallarmé saw by the mid 1870s, the likely period for the inception of 'Prose'. What the conjunction does call to our attention, however, is the importance of seeing, and of landscape, in Mallarmé's later poetry and how they evolve against the backdrop of the practice of the late 18th and early 19th-century Japanese masters whose influence was revolutionizing painting in France.

I am using the term 'later' rather broadly, referring to the period in the poet's life – the lion's share, chronologically – after his move to Paris in 1871. The adjective is a kind of shorthand, having inevitable shortcomings, but one that underscores that the poet's mature literary life falls into two major periods of unequal length, the first from about 1862 to 1871, and the second from 1871 until his death in 1898. The division is not artificial. One of the ironies to be confronted in studying Mallarmé's career concerning this latter phase of his life is that the better known Mallarmé became during his lifetime as recognition for his poetry grew, the less it seems we know about him, the more impenetrable his identity becomes. This will be the man, Valéry tells us, one might have mistaken for a most ordinary individual, a kind of social cipher (Valéry OC i, 660). Rosemary Lloyd further refines our appreciation of this purported discretion by pointing out that the poet's later correspondence as well as his public face seemed constructed in such a way as to create a persona rather than reveal the person: 'His letters, especially those he wrote after returning from the provinces to Paris in 1871, bear eloquent if sotto voce witness to the degree of self-fashioning that went into his presentation of his past, his personality, and his poetry' (*The Poet and His Circle*, 1). Lloyd's approach for her intellectual biography of this 'later' Mallarmé is to reveal the poet indirectly, through his relationships with friends and fellow-artists. Her method is justified by the relative paucity of primary documentation, especially when one compares the later period with the earlier, provincial phase of Mallarmé's young adulthood, a time that is particularly rich in his frank and unaffected correspondence with his most intimate poet-friends.² Indeed, the mature poet was careful to cover his tracks, leaving precious little behind (including, especially, manuscripts) that might reveal too much. Other approaches to the later Mallarmé have addressed the varied nature of the later work. Beginning around 1874, there are more and quite different genres of writing than before, the poet's voice taking on new inflections: there is the polymorph author of *La Dernière Mode*, the Mallarmé of the theater and *Le Livre*, the poet of the occasional verse and the postal quatrains, the public literary theorist, and the witty essayist of the dance. The topic that I'm putting forward here – the development of Mallarmé's visual culture as seen through his response to the cultural and artistic phenomenon of *le japonisme* – will add to this necessarily multi-faceted view of a later career that remains an important component of our appreciation of literary modernism. Mallarmé developed multiple esthetics over time that provide a counter current to the official canon that he continued to pursue nevertheless.³

Before heading down the oft-trodden path of poetry and painting, I would like to make clear a few suppositions. Painting and poetry are very different modes of expression and it is not my intention to suggest the opposite by appealing to analogies

between the arts constructed during the 19th century. They can be misleading if taken for other than what they were at the time, gestures meant to establish the contemporary terms of esthetic debate. Important points of convergence do exist, however, and have to do with affinities related to shared subject matter and above all to a common material culture, which as Philippe Hamon's *Imageries* has brought to our attention, cannot really be separated in the 19th century from visual culture. With Mallarmé, the question of visual culture brings us to the heart of the poet's pre- and post-1871 esthetic tendencies. Poems initiated in the later period – at least those where the dates are reasonably certain – are substantially different in at least one important way: they revel in the visual field in a way that the earlier poems did not. Again from our example of 'Prose': 'Tout en moi s'exaltait de voir'.⁴

In earlier poems, Mallarmé tended to restrict, even suppress, visual reality. 'Las de l'amer repos' (1866) is a good example of this. Composed in two major sections, the first part presents a nocturnal 'scene' that is impossible to apprehend with the visual imagination: open graves that close and vanish with the coming of day. We are told that they were there, but black holes against a black night are not for sight. In the poem's second half, the poet calmly sets out a landscape scene as it might be painted on a Chinese teacup:

Serein, je vais choisir un jeune paysage
Que je peindrais encor sur les tasses, distrait.
Une ligne d'azur mince et pâle serait
Un lac, parmi le ciel de porcelaine nue,
Un clair croissant perdu par une blanche nue
Trempe sa corne calme en la glace des eaux,
Non loin de trois grands cils d'émeraude, roseaux. (OC i, 12)

The poet again plays elusively with the conventions of visual imagery. Similar to the nocturnal scene of the first part, a crescent moon painted behind a cloud on a porcelain surface can only be grasped by the imagination ideationally due to *verbal* overlay; white on white on white remains vacant as an image in the visual field – which of course is the point, and this despite the painting metaphor. Another instance in a slightly different vein is 'Sainte' (1865) where the interest is in the decay of a visual image presented already as obscured or hidden:

A la fenêtre recelant
Le santal vieux qui se dédore
De sa viole étincelant
Jadis avec flûte ou mandore, [...] (OC i, 26)

Perhaps the ultimate example of Mallarmé's reluctance, even refusal, to visualize, is the 'Sonnet allégorique de lui-même' (1868), an early version of 'Ses purs ongles' (1887), which takes visual suppression just about as far as it can go: 'Sur des consoles,

en le noir Salon : nul ptyx' (OC i, 131).

No comparison in Mallarmé points out the difference between pre-and post-1871 more tellingly, to my way of thinking, than the transition from the visually empty *Salon* of that 1868 sonnet to the overstuffed *salons* and *salles à manger* of *La Dernière Mode*, Mallarmé's magazine project of 1874, where all the furniture and bric-a-brac that had been stored away is brought out of the closet, along with Mallarmé himself, the repressed materialist, in the gazette's eight issues published from September to December of that year.⁵ One can only speculate as to the exact cause of this change, of Mallarmé's plunge into the visual culture of the 19th century. The fact of being in Paris must have had something to do with it, although the sunny climes of Avignon, the last provincial school posting and associated with the gardens of 'Toast funèbre' (1873), also may have played a role. In any event, the new emphasis was certainly in place by the inception of the magazine project.

The critical literature surrounding *La Dernière Mode* frequently evokes Mallarmé's female role-playing in his creation of the magazine's principal correspondents, Marguerite de Ponty and Miss Satin. While there is doubtless something to the repressed eroticism implied in this view, more important to my subject is what the magazine allowed to be expressed: Mallarmé's eye for material detail, a detail that in *La Dernière Mode* was as visual as it was domestic. This is a trait that he shared with painters, especially portrait painters (even more than with novelists) who pursued a similar end by different means: meticulous documentation of the intimate details of dress, fashion, interior furnishings. He shared with visual artists a like sense of material reality and its semantic potential in a way that was less transgressive than it was digressive but where digression was the main point. It isn't surprising then, that Mallarmé should have been so receptive to the tutelage of Edouard Manet, whom he befriended at about this time.

One other point seems relevant with respect to Mallarmé's visual culture at the time of this crucial encounter. While it was undoubtedly true that an admiration for Baudelaire helped spark at least initially his interest in Manet, unlike Baudelaire the young Mallarmé didn't have much of an educated visual sense. He may have had some introductory exposure to painting during his early stays in London, but that would have been cursory. He was still left with what one is obliged to characterize as the visual culture of a provincial. This is nothing to be ashamed of, and in this he was very much like the young Flaubert.⁶ Like Flaubert, he would adopt a richer visual culture to express fundamental preoccupations in new ways. As Rosemary Lloyd has again pointed out, nothing in Mallarmé's modest past could prepare us for what would occur in the 1870s (123). Her reference, of course, is to the friendship with Manet, and to the essays on Impressionism and Manet from 1874 and 1876, which in turn would inaugurate a series of friendships with painters, most importantly, for our purposes here, with James McNeill Whistler.

The friendship with Manet developed into an important one for both men. On Mallarmé's side, it cannot be emphasized enough how crucial this relationship was for his visual education. Let us take note of some dates in this early phase inaugurated by

the meeting with Manet probably in 1873. As far as I know, there is little evidence of when exactly Mallarmé began frequenting the painter's studio, but the visits had certainly begun by the time of the 12 April, 1874 article 'Le Jury de peinture pour 1874 et M. Manet' (OC ii, 410-15). One might be surprised at the breadth of Mallarmé's focus here, the article being as much about the politics of the *Salon* and those of France's nascent democracy, as about painting. These were new and somewhat foreign subjects for him, and one has the distinct impression that he was writing at least in part under Manet's tutelage. If this sounds ungenerous, let us take, as a point of comparison, *La Dernière Mode* where, under the rubrics 'Chronique de Paris' and 'Gazette et Programme de la Quinzaine', Mallarmé announced current cultural events. No painting exhibits are recorded, with the exception of 'Peintures décoratives par Baudry pour le nouvel Opéra' (OC ii, 549). *La Dernière Mode* contains Mallarmé's first articles about music and the theater, and none about painting.

The first real evidence of Mallarmé's awakened interest painting is in the article of 1876, published in English, 'The Impressionists and Edouard Manet' (OC ii, 444-70). Now, how much of the insight contained in that article is Mallarmé's own and how much is still due to Manet's tutelage remains difficult to say with any certainty. The subject matter, which deals in part with questions of framing, seems less far afield than that of the earlier piece, and we can say with more assurance that a new readiness put Mallarmé's thinking in resonance with Manet's. To see how far Mallarmé had shifted within his sense of what was possible visually in art, we can compare the esthetics of ideal absence that characterized the earlier period with the 1876 remarks on outdoor painting and the visual properties of sun-lit air: 'The search after truth, peculiar to modern artists, which enables them to see nature and reproduce her, such as she appears to just and pure eyes, must lead them to adopt air almost exclusively as their medium...' (OC ii, 456). This reverence for the mimetic quality of art is simply not a view that Mallarmé had developed during the crucible years in Tournon and Besançon. One might argue that Mallarmé was merely representing Manet's point of view. This was perhaps the case, as the goal of the article was to defend Manet against his detractors on, and in, his own terms. But we see something new when we take his remark along side of the related motif from 'Prose' which had its beginnings around this time, where it is precisely the quality of the air that allowed truth to be seen: 'Oui, dans une île que l'air charge / De vue et non de visions ...'. Sight is key to the principal event in the poem, one that is the first important landscape poem of the post-1871 period. True, he would carry the banner of the fundamentally non-mimetic nature of poetic language right to the end of the 19th century. But if Mallarmé is sincere in his remarks about Manet, and there is no reason to suppose that he is not, then something new is afoot suggesting a changed attitude toward the visual nature of things.

Importantly for our topic, the 1876 essay is also the first place Mallarmé mentions Japanese art:

If we turn to natural perspectives (not that utterly and artificially classic science

which makes our eyes the dupes of a civilized education, but rather that artistic perspective which we learn from the extreme East – Japan for example) – and look at these sea-pieces of Manet, where the water at the horizon rises to the height of the frame, which alone interrupts it, we feel a new delight at the recovery of a long obliterated truth (OC ii, 457-58).

In his essay, Mallarmé is clearly opening a new chapter of his visual education: the piece is full of references to French painters with whom he was just becoming familiar – Fantin-Latour, Sisley, Monet, Morisot, and Pissarro⁷ ; still, while Japanese painting is mentioned in the passage just quoted, no single Japanese painter is identified – that will come later. The reference here is to framing technique and to the placement, in Manet's seascapes, of a high horizon line. Mallarmé is almost certainly referring to Manet's *Sur la plage* of 1873, which is more pronounced in this respect than the other seascapes produced in the period of 1864-78. [image 3] Mallarmé is absolutely right to observe that a high horizon line is not atypical of Japanese land and seascapes. In paintings by Hokusai (1760-1849), the most important landscape painter among those of interest to European artists, a high horizon line (though frequently broken) is often found.⁸ [image 4]

At this same time, three other events emerged from Manet's studio that were undoubtedly critical to Mallarmé's visual education. The first two were the signal events of the collaborations with Manet for 'Le Corbeau' (1875) and 'L'Après-midi d'un faune' (1876). The first of these cannot be qualified as anything other than an illustrated poem; the five images follow the poem's narrative in an unabashedly literal way, much like Delacroix's engravings for Stapfer's 1828 translation of Goethe's *Faust* which undoubtedly served as a model for Manet. [image 5] The second was more of a poem with accompanying images that did not attempt to reproduce the narrative visually but referred to it in a general way. [image 6] In both cases, though, what was new, and really quite unexpected given Mallarmé's heretofore intransigent fidelity to the word, was the collusion between text and image.

The third event is one that I cannot point to with the same certainty as the first two as representing a fundamentally new activity, because Mallarmé's participation was more passive than active, but the experience must have been a revelation: Manet's 1876 portrait of the poet. [image 7] This would be the first of an impressive line of portraits, most done considerably later, by Whistler, Renoir, Gauguin, Munch, a sculpted bust by a young Paul Valéry, photographs by Nadar, to name some of the most prominent. To my eyes, Manet's remains the most intimate and the most suggestive. With the relaxed pose, open book, smoking cigar, inward gaze, the subject is the very image of the young poet, set against a Japanese screen of burnished gold and floral designs. In his poetry, Mallarmé may have been able to cause the 'elocutionary disappearance of the poet',⁹ but Manet has allowed something visual and equally essential of the poet to appear on his canvas. It cannot be proven empirically, of course, but I think it highly likely that such a portrait would have had a pronounced effect on a sensibility such as Mallarmé's which was, at more than one level,

preoccupied if not obsessed with representations of the self.

Mallarmé's exposure to Japanese art and artifacts almost certainly began in Manet's studio. The first contact would have been with Japanese prints, the woodblock engravings of Hokusai, Utamaro (1753-1808), and others who had been known to painters in Paris and London for at least a decade. Along with other artists of his generation, Manet had been exposed to Japanese images surprisingly soon after Commodore Perry 'opened' Japan in 1854. The traces of this contact are there by the early 1860s and had become a working part of his painting vocabulary by the time of his portrait of Mallarmé.¹⁰ [image 8]

The *Exposition universelle* of 1867 was the first to have a Japanese exhibit and is widely attributed as having brought to the attention of a wider public a whole range of objects – artists' albums of prints, screens, porcelain, clothing, and of course fans – that would constitute the widespread *japonisme* from the 1870s throughout the rest of the century.¹¹ As a cultural phenomenon, this Orientalism brought with it an aesthetic of lightness and colour that was a perfect match for the emerging culture of the Third Republic. It is not unreasonable to hypothesize that, had Mallarmé waited another eight or ten years to publish *La Dernière Mode*, the heavy styles and furnishings of the early 70s would have given way to, or would have at least included, simpler patterns, lighter floral motifs, and of course paper Japanese fans instead of the heavier English and Spanish styles. [images 9 and 10]. Sometime later, in Mallarmé's summer home at Valvins, he decorated his own study with a Japanese screen and fan (Millan, pl. 12).

Mallarmé's appreciation of the possibilities of uniting text with the visual field continued to develop. Nurtured during the late 1880s and abandoned with regret around 1890, the project of publishing his prose poems (most of them written some 20 years earlier) foresaw a collaboration of grander proportions than the 'Corbeau' or 'L'Après-midi d'un faune'. The volume was to carry the *japonisme*-inspired title of *Le Tiroir de lacque* and would have brought together a number of the painters whom the poet had come to admire and to know personally: John Lewis Brown – slated to provide a cover image of Méry Laurent peering into a Japanese-style drawer –, Mary Cassatt, Degas, Monet, Berthe Morisot, and Renoir, each of whom would have provided an image to accompany one of the prose poems.¹²

In a different though related vein, the visual disruption of the traditional aspect of the page that had started with the broken line of verse in 'L'Après-midi d'un faune' (1876), was pursued dramatically in the fan poem for the poet's daughter. This work, known in its published form as 'Autre Éventail (de Mademoiselle Mallarmé)', was composed in 1884. [image 11] The published text has received substantial commentary, and we'll return to it presently.¹³ One must not, however, disregard its existence as an art object having an esthetic very different from that of the printed page where the title is in fact a stand-in for the absent fan. The unique visual characteristics are manifest: the manner in which the text conforms to the shape of the fan, forcing a realignment of the quatrains and requiring a modified approach to reading. There is an insistent visual dimension to this object that is lost when the text is extracted from it and transferred to print. The fan-shaped text being a visual

illustration of itself, this *éventail* is something like an early concrete poem (although it doesn't imitate a form; it possesses one) and as such is the first and perhaps the most important precursor of the formal experimentation that Mallarmé will pursue in *Un coup dés*.

The late 1880s brought Mallarmé's friendship with James McNeill Whistler, whose defense he took up much as he had done for Manet over a decade earlier, this time translating a text by the artist into French, 'Le « ten o'clock » de M. Whistler' (OC ii, 837-51). As is evident from the concluding sentences of that essay quoted above, by 1888 Mallarmé was acquainted with at least the name of Hokusai, who had become the best known, or at least the most publicly referenced, of the Japanese artists.¹⁴ It is probable that Whistler became as important a tutor in Mallarmé's visual education as Manet had been. With respect to Japanese influences on the American painter, the impact had been early and profound, Whistler incorporating clothing, objects, and even transpositions of setting as early as 1864. [image 12] It is remarkable that nearly 25 years later he should still accord such primary importance to this esthetic.

1891 again finds Mallarmé in Hokusai's company, if indirectly. In an album belonging to Méry Laurent, there are two facing pages containing drawings of animals – a cat, and various birds, notably two small birds on the wing and a group of standing cranes.¹⁵ [image 13] Which admirers of Méry Laurent are responsible for these drawings is not entirely certain; some may even be by Mallarmé. There are rhymed couplets in Mallarmé's hand accompanying a number of the images. The writing and drawing implements vary, indicating that these entries in the album were done on separate occasions, though the left page allows us to date the period of this activity. That verso contains the drawing of the cat, a couplet referring to it, some lettering in Chinese characters, and the date of '28 mars 91'. According Bertrand Marchal, the cat was the work of François Coppée, and so probably then was the date (OC 1: 1307 n. 167). All is done in green pencil, including Mallarmé's couplet.¹⁶ Of particular interest is the Chinese lettering: it is an astonishingly close imitation of the signature of Hokusai¹⁷, albeit somewhat clumsy as it was done by someone – if indeed by Coppée as seems to be the case – who was imitating a writing that he had been shown but did not fully understand.¹⁸ [image 14]

The rhymed couplets excepted, the two pages of animal drawings in Méry Laurent's album give the effect of one of Hokusai's *manga* albums. [image 15] These were albums of thematically organized sketches – of animals, flora, human characters, etc. – studies that provided the artist with a repertoire of figures for larger prints or albums. The figures do appear to have been inspired by Hokusai. Of special note in Méry Laurent's album are the two diving birds that bear an uncanny resemblance to those of the artist, as does the grouping of standing cranes. Diving birds and cranes are common in Hokusai. [images 16 and 17] Mallarmé was indeed familiar with the albums of the Japanese artists, referring to this fact with affected smugness in a note to Méry Laurent from the following year, 1892.¹⁹ [image 18] The note paper, having a decidedly Japanese motif, ends with this quatrain:

Feuilletez et, l'un comme l'une,
Avouez que je m'y connais
Moi, personne peu clair de lune,
En très-vieux albums japonais.

One of the diving birds in Méry's album is seen again on a fan containing 17 signatures, Mallarmé's and those of artist and literary friends.²⁰ [image 19] It is almost identical though is in a more finished state.

Beyond indicating the pervasive culture of *japonisme* in which Mallarmé was circulating in the 1880s and 1890s, these images help raise the issue of Mallarmé himself as the decorator of the fans on which he wrote the *éventail* poems and also of the flatter but not less significant sheets of paper containing verses for friends.²¹ While it is unclear for which, if any, of these avian images Mallarmé was personally responsible, it is certain that he did some illustration, embellishing some of the paper that was used for different *envois*, for instance a New Year's quatrain of 1896, which is composed of a flowering stem, a quatrain of *octosyllabes*, and the poet's stylized floral initials. [image 20] The verses also make reference to an orange tree flower, tying the floral motif together.

Again from 1896, the fan for Misia Natanson is similarly composed of a quatrain and an image, but here the verses in red ink are carefully superimposed on a suggested landscape of blades of grass, a wild flower, and then the floral initials SM, also in red ink. [image 21] The placement of the initials off to the right suggests that they are not so much a signature attached to the poem but one both referring to the overall composition and participating in it.

A final example of Mallarmé as self-illustrator or decorator is in the extraordinary dedication to Whistler of the 1893 edition of *Vers et prose*. [image 22] Again, we find verses set in a suggested landscape, though here the vegetation motif suggesting a garden-like environment is composed of the very names of the dedicatee and the dedicator: Whistler's name has morphed into some kind of exotic hybrid (part plant, part letters), and Mallarmé's floral initials likewise enter the picture joining text and image.

We may gather from these documents that what seems to have drawn Mallarmé's imagination with respect to the physical presentation of Japanese prints was their unique esthetic that combined, on a simple surface, words and image to achieve a harmonious *visual* balance between the two. This concept goes beyond even the collaborative work with Manet in 1876 for 'Le Faune'. The character of these surfaces, dating primarily from the last decade of the poet's life, is different because of the unmediated physical evidence of the artist's living self. These were, as gifts, personalized objects founded on human exchange between known individuals.²² As such, they rely for much of their effect on manuscript form. These are not at all the impersonal verses that Mallarmé had established in his hallmark poetry. The identity of these objects is based on the trace of Mallarmé's presence, where his double existence

as poet and as creator of visual images is so elegantly captured in the graphic letters SM construed as a calyx, not a signature imposed on the work from the outside but a part of the visual landscape. As the fan to Misia Natanson shows, moreover, those initials, when in red ink, recall the *ing*, or the red stamp, that the Japanese artists used as a visual means of identification beyond their graphic signature.²³

Beyond these combinations of words and images, there is another facet to Mallarmé's contact with Japanese painting that I would like to suggest here, one that is tied more pertinently to his development as a poet. The instances I have in mind are the fan poem for Mallarmé's daughter, Geneviève (1884), mentioned above, and the sonnet 'A la nue accablante tu' (1894). Both are waterscapes, offering a horizontal perspective over an expanse of water to a point of land in the distance. This geography is considerably different from the habitual one in Mallarmé's poetry of an earthly (and often vacant) point which then refers the mind's eye heavenward to some stellar point or constellation. 'Autre Eventail' presents a scene that is similar to that of many Japanese prints of female subjects: a young woman in the foreground, fanning herself; an indistinct middleground (further obfuscated here by the vertiginous and trembling space); a distant shore enflamed by the setting sun. [image 23] The poem's final image is that of the now closed fan lying on the young woman's wrist where her bracelet has captured the reflection of the dying sun, bringing the fore and backgrounds together in intimate proximity, obliterating, as it were, the middle ground:

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

Une fraîcheur de crepuscule
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 naïtre 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. (OC i: 31)

The sonnet 'A la nue' offers a brief, though highly compressed synopsis of *Un coup de dés*, published four years later, capturing the central motifs of shipwreck and the drowning death of the child siren. The differences that separate the two works are at least as important, and this quite aside from the manifest differences of form: the sonnet is diurnal and, instead of focusing on the nocturnal and vertical relationship between final nullity and a constellation, (a topography similar to that of 'Ses purs ongles' and 'Le vierge, le vivace') the sonnet lays out a horizontal seascape: the dark reef-like cloud is in the distance at the horizon, and the wisp of foam, addressed familiarly by the poet, is in the foreground. Though filled with ominous speculation – might there have been a shipwreck? or perhaps the death of a child siren? – the middle ground remains vacant, the tension of that interrogation arising directly from the contrast between the foam and the shoal-like cloud:

A la nue accablante tu
Basse de basalte et de laves
A même les échos esclaves
Par une trompe sans vertu

Quel sépulchral naufrage (tu
Le sais, écume, mais y baves)
Suprême une entre les épaves
Abolit le mât dévêtu

Ou cela que furibond faute
De quelque perdition haute
Tout l'abîme vain éployé

Dans le si blanc cheveu qui traîne
Avarement aura noyé
Le flanc enfant d'une sirène. (OC ii, 44)

The poem's visual structure is perfectly consonant with the visual culture of the period (the image may in fact be related to a memory of the Norman coast and so Impressionist in an officially geographic sense). Like many Impressionist renditions of similar scenes, it shares its topography with that of numerous Japanese prints. A close parallel is with Hokusai's 'In the hollow of a wave off the coast of Kanagawa' (ca. 1827), well-known even in Mallarmé's day. [image 24] We may be reminded of Mallarmé's comment, from his 1876 essay, on Manet's seascapes and Japanese painting. 'Sea-pieces' is the term he used, and it's useful here. If Mallarmé saw any of the images to which he (and Manet) were referring, he would have remarked that

Japanese landscape artists didn't usually paint seascapes, at least not in the habitual European sense (as in Manet's paintings, of views looking out to sea). Though there is often a lot of water, the scene is most often a view across water to another point of land. The sky rarely meets the sea in a unified line on the horizon. In prints by Hokusai and his successor, Hiroshige, the sky meets some immutable feature of the opposite shore, often Mount Fuji. In the foreground is something transitory – some human activity, a flowing or precariously placed tree, birds in flight – and the middle ground is occupied by an expanse of water. (In nocturnes, the moon, usually full, has the same semantic function as a mountain). [images 25 and 26]

Mallarmé's independence from his painter friends can't be over emphasized here. The Impressionists often adapted this format to their own purposes, as did Monet in this view over water of the mountains at Antibes (1888) but with a significant difference, especially insofar as the middle ground is concerned. [image 27] As we know only too well, Impressionists' water reflects light and mirrors objects, so much so that the middle ground becomes the focus, if not the subject, of the picture. In the Japanese tradition, water is a far more neutral space visually, as it is for Mallarmé. [image 28] There may be a boat or two, but never a reflection either of boats, the shore, or – if present – the moon.²⁴ The visual semantics of the Japanese landscape tradition, which eschew both reflections and shadows, is in the visual interchange that takes place between fore and backgrounds, usually playing up the relationship between the ephemeral and the eternal. This contrastive relationship is not discursive, it is visual, a characteristic that allows both for the succinct character of Hokusai's images and for Mallarmé's sonnet and fan poem, too.

It is worth noting in passing that the cultural tradition from which Hokusai emerges has literary antecedents along with painterly ones. The haiku is often built on such dialogical relationships, particularly in the classical tradition of Bashô (1644-94) whose poems foreground youth or the transience of a particular season against its counterpart. But Bashô and Mallarmé are lines that never intersected: the first important publications in France of Japanese poetry in translation date from well into the 20th century, and according to the *Robert*, the word 'haiku' does not enter the French language until 1922. Like his painter-contemporaries, Mallarmé's attention to *japonisme* was to a visual phenomenon.²⁵ Like them, he had a strong visual sense, and one could argue that even the early poems that tried to apprehend nothingness did so as if the problem were a visual one even if the results were more the ideas of things seen, rather than the creation of images. His visual orientation did change dramatically, however, by the time of *La Dernière Mode* in 1874, readying him for the acculturation to be provided first by Manet, and then by others, notably Whistler. The esthetics of *japonisme* is a strand that runs through this visual education from 1876 onwards and is tied to the poet's development of a visual materialism that was independent of the image as practiced by his painter-contemporaries, and even independent of (and offering a counter poetics to) his other esthetic, the exalted 'explication orphique de la Terre'. I submit that *le japonisme* is one of the threads we can use in following the later Mallarmé; as such, it provides an instance of how a contemporary visual idiom

may be brought to the reading of an important development in the practice of literary modernism.

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¹ Given the fact that Mallarmé had written the first version of this poem at least a decade earlier, one is entitled to wonder when, or whether, he would have published it had Huysmans not praised him so in *A rebours*.

² The proportions of Mallarmé's correspondence are revealing: of the 12 volumes published by Mondor and Austin, 3 are devoted to letters prior to 1872; yet, in Bertrand Marchal's more recently edited *Correspondance: Lettres sur la poésie*, 500 pages cover the period 1862-71, while barely 100 cover the remainder of the poet's life, from 1872 to 1898.

³ In the 1885 autobiographical letter to Verlaine that was written for publication, Mallarmé denigrated his 'lesser' occupations in favour of the canonical line: '[...]’ai toujours rêvé et tenté autrechose, [...] l'explication orphique de la Terre, qui est le seul devoir du poète et le jeu littéraire par excellence' (*Lettres sur la poésie* 585-86).

⁴ A late counter-example to the early tendency: 'Remémoration d'amis belges' (1893) wherein the city of Bruges is revealed, fold by fold (OC 1: 32).

⁵ The Ramsay facsimile (1978) remains the only full republication of these profusely illustrated issues.

⁶ On this, see L. Czyba's 'Flaubert et la peinture'.

⁷ Both of these last two names are misspelled – 'Morizot' and 'Pizzaro', respectively – suggesting that Mallarmé couldn't as yet have seen too many signed canvasses.

⁸ Art historians like Michael Fried have remarked that the Japanese print and the photograph were two simultaneous influences on French painting with respect to framing techniques that relied on visual imbalance and the truncated view, suggesting a new visual realism (326-29; 332-34).

⁹ See particularly the letters of 1867 on impersonality (CLP 280 ff.).

¹⁰ See Fried (17 ff.).

¹¹ The term *japonisme* was first used in 1872 by art critic Philippe Burty, referring to the influence on French painting. That will remain the principal meaning of the term throughout the century, informing Samuel Bing's journal of the 1880s, *Le Japon artistique*, as well as the first major books on Japanese artists published in France, Edmond de Goncourt's *Utamaro* (1891) and *Hokusai* (1896). The term may also be said to refer to the wider cultural influence that was not limited to French painters, as is borne out by changes in women's fashion.

¹² For a synopsis of this project and of its subsequent publication as *Pages*, see OC 2: 1676-77.

¹³ A summary of various readings of this poem may be found in Minahen.

¹⁴ Edmond de Goncourt's first book on Japanese painting was on Utamaro. The full title of the work explains in part his interest: *Utamaro, le peintre des maisons vertes*. The Japanese subject matter of courtesans, brothels, and erotica, along with representations of well-known actors and theatrical characters had many obvious parallels with French art and literature of the late 19th century. Hokusai, too, produced many *sensha*, albums of erotic prints, and his early career was devoted to the representation of theatrical figures. He did become the first great modern landscape artist, however, a part of his *œuvre* stressed by Goncourt in his 1896 study, *Hokusai*.

¹⁵ I express my thanks to Bertrand Marchal for some of the information that follows regarding this album.

¹⁶ Referring apparently to the cat's tail, the couplet reads: 'J'aimerais que l'on attachât / A votre sonnette ce chat' (OC 1: 343).

¹⁷ I owe this discovery and my understanding of it to Reiko O. Harpending, Kawasaki Reading Room, University of Nebraska (USA).

¹⁸ Two possible sources for the Chinese characters, both known to Mallarmé: Théodore Duret, art critic and specialist of Japanese art, tied to both Whistler and Mallarmé by 1889 (CWM 43) ; Samuel Bing, editor of the journal *Le Japon Artistique*, prominent gallery owner specializing in Asian art, and who prepared a book on Hokusai (JG 3: 360). Mallarmé knew the establishment, at least by 1898 and probably before (LML 239).

¹⁹ The Mallarmé-Méry Laurent correspondence specifies 'mardi 26 juillet 1892' (91).

²⁰ For a discussion of this fan, see R. Lloyd, 'Fan Autographs: Unfolding Relationships'. Lloyd offers the tentative date of April, 1892 for the signing of the fan (388). At the outset of her essay, she evokes a distant parallel between the fan's designs and the 'jeune paysage' of 'Las de l'amer repos'. (380).

²¹ Both the *éventail* poems to the poet's wife and to Méry Laurent are decorated (For descriptions, see Mondor OC, p. 1507). Mallarmé as illustrator is an area where more research is needed and will require working closely with the objects themselves.

²² Marian Sugano has shown quite correctly how the esthetics of *japonisme* harmonized with that witty and urbane Mallarmé, the 'occasional' poet of the visiting card and the versed bibelot.

²³ A number of western painters would adopt a similar identifying seal. The instance of Toulouse Lautrec is well-known. Whistler had a butterfly design. Far rarer is this practice among writers. The correspondence between Mallarmé and Whistler is illustrated throughout by these two designs, as both men signed many of their letters in this way (see CMW). Mallarmé signed other correspondence in this manner after about 1888.

²⁴ See Rosny, pp. 269-70. This pertains to the work of Japanese artists prior to western influence.

²⁵ Mallarmé was not alone in this. That collector of all things literary, Edmond de Goncourt, was aware that Utamaro wrote poetry, but was interested solely in the prints. That an interest in Japanese poetry on the part of French writers came significantly after the interest in art prints testifies to the power of the image in the last half of the 19th century.