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Review of Jean-Pierre Lecercle, *Mallarmé et la mode*

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Lecerclé, Jean-Pierre. *Mallarmé et la mode*. Paris: Séguier, 1989. Pp.198.

With this first book-length discussion of Mallarmé's *La Dernière mode*, Jean-Pierre Lecerclé has made an important contribution to Mallarmé studies. As an historian of the specialized genre of fashion journalism who also is well-read in Mallarmé and Mallarmean criticism, Lecerclé brings impressive and important documentation to his analysis. While one may find strident his efforts to distinguish his approach from those of the prior commentaries on the topic, one cannot but notice Lecerclé's freedom from traditional and contemporary clichés of the poetic master or of the subversive whose indeterminant language undermines authority. The result is a situating of Mallarmé's journal with respect to other publications of its kind and also with respect to his poetics of suggestion and anti-mimeticism.

The most needed chapter of the book is the first, which gives the probable history of the *Dernière Mode*. The journal was owned by the Belgian, Charles Wendelen, who was a neighbor of Mallarmé's on the rue Moscou in the early

1870s and who in July, 1873 received permission to publish. From August to December 1873, Wendelen published lithographic illustrations, with no text, that were sold by the sheet. They were, moreover, sold at newsstands and therefore the *Dernière Mode* had no reserves of subscribers when Mallarmé assumed his editorial responsibilities, probably in May, 1874 and began soliciting copy for publication of fiction and verse from among his writer friends. Mallarmé lent some money to Wendelen and probably did the promotional work himself, which consisted largely of giving specimen copies away to friends (some of whom, like Luigi Gualdo, lived abroad) and to influential figures in the artistic community, like Jacques Cressonnois, the conductor of the Champs-Élysées orchestra. Despite the apparently serious effort by Mallarmé to promote the project, the few paid subscriptions were insufficient to maintain it. After eight issues, the magazine was unceremoniously taken from Mallarmé's hands and placed into those of another neighbor, the Baroness Lomaria, where it died five months later. When Mallarmé learned he had lost the magazine, he wrote in anger to his literary collaborators, requesting that they refuse any further relationship with the *Dernière Mode*. The chapter also contains a detailed description of the fate of fashion magazines from 1871-78, their circulation figures, price, content, the taxes on paper and postage that affected their existence. Dozens proliferated during this period, all perished except those that had content clearly aligned with the targeted audience and that could rely on sales of 5000 copies. With a price nearly twice that of similar publications, there was nothing exceptional about the fate of the *Dernière Mode*. One positive characteristic that sets the magazine apart from its contemporaries (and that needs more extensive discussion) is its clean typographical presentation: the use of columns, a clear table of contents, articles remaining within a single page. As for the question of how much Mallarmé actually knew about dresses and hats, indirect evidence points to the probable fact that it was his wife Marie who ran the errands to all the shops for information and to fill orders.

The chapter, "Les Embarras de la critique," is in some respects less satisfying. While most critical approaches are discussed (recent feminist criticism by Barbara Johnson and Mary Lydon is not, however), the argument is unnecessarily reductive in its attempt to define a critical stance unbiased by some notion of Mallarmé as a superior literary intelligence. Yet, polemics aside, such a stance proves both needed and useful in that the *Dernière Mode* has not before been systematically studied within the context of the cultural production of which it was a part.

Where Lecercle has been impatient with prior critical assessment of the *Dernière Mode*, he accepts the doxa concerning Mallarmé's poetry in order to elaborate an opposing reading of the magazine. That view was given most succinctly by Poulet, who saw the tentative to "faire exister par le rêve, sans s'aider du monde réel, un monde proprement poétique" (quoted 95). For Lecercle, nothing could be further from the "aesthetic" position of the *Dernière Mode*, where material reality is present to the point of dominating the discourse altogether. This points to the fact that fully half of *Dernière Mode* is an extremely minute and prosaic description (few verbs and no figurative lan-

guage) that accompanied the life-size dress patterns, now lost, included in each issue. No matter how one reads the rest of Mallarmé, whether as pure poetry or as anti-phallogocentrism, it is awkward to attempt a close reading of such writing as a function of the canon (however defined). It is simply not sufficient to point to a poet writing about women's fashions under female pseudonyms (and some male ones, too) to have interesting literary documents. Mallarmé will himself condemn this type of writing as journalistic: "Une entreprise qui ne compte pas littérairement. . . . D'exhiber les choses à un imperturbable premier plan" ("Le Mystère dans les lettres," quoted 92).

What, then, is the writing of the *Dernière Mode*? Lecercle, who is preparing a history of fashion journalism, knows this material and, through a stylistic analysis of writing from the *Dernière Mode* and from similar publications, shows the extent to which Mallarmé conforms to the genre. Even passages that have been seen as highly original (e.g. the wedding dress description) are not distinguishable from what one could read elsewhere, and (*ô! malheur*) Lecercle has even found passages that Mallarmé lifted virtually word for word from the pages of the competition.

To characterize the representation of woman that comes out of this project, Lecercle situates Mallarmé with respect to Gautier and Baudelaire. The former came to accept women's fashion as a necessary part of a society that had repudiated the nude as the standard for beauty. For the latter, fashion and make-up were indispensable to the imagination's repudiation of fallen nature embodied by woman in her natural state. In Mallarmé's treatment of fashion, women and the female body are curiously absent. There is no mention in the *Dernière Mode*, for instance, of make-up or any kind of beauty product, or of the bodies that were actually to wear the dresses so minutely described. To ground this part of his argument, Lecercle points to Mallarmé's often harshly expressed misogyny, in his letters of the 1860s. While Mallarmé's fear of and condescension toward women are both more pervasive in his work and more complicated than is discussed here, Lecercle is among the first to provide important documentation for a subject that is as delicate as it is central to Mallarmé's notion of poetic audience.

Among Lecercle's conclusions, two strike me as being of overriding importance. The first concerns the language of the *Dernière Mode*. The magazine has no editorial parti-pris that allows for whim, caprice or individual choice in the matter of fashion unlike, for instance, the individual expressiveness that Mallarmé will accord poetic prose in his essays of the 1880s and '90s. Strict adherence to the form provided by the dress pattern (suggestively called in French *le Patron*) is a stated requisite, and Mallarmé sometimes resorts to a vocabulary of legislation. If the vocabulary has a playful side, it is not in a tacit recognition that fashion cannot be legislated but in the mock gravity of the tone whereby the legislation of fashion is construed as being of greater moment than social law. Future arguments making use of the *Dernière Mode* as an important document to argue anti-authoritarian indirection in Mallarmé, will need to address this point. The second conclusion I wish to point out here runs throughout Lecercle's book and is the disappointing degree to which Mallarmé misjudged (or simply didn't understand) his audience and the social

scene that his magazine purported to reflect. The Parisian upper crust simply didn't have dresses made at home but bought them ready-to-wear at the stores of the city's known, and thriving, makers, most notably Worth. Mallarmé's contact with this segment of society in the early 1870s was extremely limited, as his approach and subject matter make clear. What he produced was somewhat awkward and pretentious, with little social or economic value.

Lecerle's volume ends with appendices containing the correspondence between Wendelen and the authorities, a synopsis of the magazine's publishing history, extracts from the 1933 essays by Rhodes and Crépet, publishing statistics for Parisian fashion magazines for the period 1871-74, Gautier's "La Mode comme art" and Baudelaire's "Eloge du maquillage."

It should be mentioned that Lecerle has located originals of the magazine in the Bibliothèque Nationale and also that he gives a prominent place to the 1978 Ramsay facsimile edition of Mallarmé's eight issues, a book that is as important to any work on *La Dernière Mode* as it is, unfortunately, insufficiently known.

Mallarmé et la mode is clearly a fundamental contribution to the literature surrounding *La Dernière mode*. Yet the book's importance goes beyond its stated subject because, quite simply, *La Dernière mode* is more than an isolated instance of mediocrity. The project was interrupted too early to have acquired a unique character and its editorial *devenir* has yet to be established. Moreover, following on the heels of "Toast funèbre," the magazine helped inaugurate Mallarmé's arrival in Paris and the widening of interests that would have a profound effect on his poetry. Under the spell of Mallarmé himself in a way that it no longer is with Flaubert or with Proust, our thinking that an understanding of his life has little to do with our understanding of his texts has caused us to neglect the crucial decade of the 1870s from which Mallarmé emerged as an unsurpassed public icon of artistic value. Avoiding the many sacred cows in Mallarmé studies, *Mallarmé et la mode* will be a key text in the critical reexamination of Mallarmé's public writing.

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