

The Mystery of Pendentif

Mallarmé's Book & the Poetics of Suspension

Kuisma Korhonen

There is nothing certain about Stéphane Mallarmé's Grand Oeuvre or the Book. It first appears as a megalomaniac dream of a young man who is clearly too responsive to external influences. It develops itself into a work plan of a writer who tries to fit all parts of his diverse projects into one major scheme. During the years that follow, it gets buried under everyday obligations until it is almost forgotten, present only as an obscure desire. In the end, it has become a new literary ontology, a new vision of what writing could be.¹

Sometimes, the ideal of the Book is like a cupola of a Temple, a stable and premeditated representation of the Universe. Sometimes it is a mobile and changing piece of jewelry, scintillating in the evening lights.

I was asked, some fifteen years ago, to translate Mallarmé's essay "Crise de vers" into Finnish. Not really realizing what I was doing, I agreed.ⁱⁱ

During the following weeks and months, I plunged into a very strange world, full of eccentric visions, bizarre chimeras, and staggering prosody — sentences that sometimes, at the first reading, seemed to make no sense at all. How do you translate something that wants to remain in obscurity?

I remember one sentence, among many others, that caused me serious trouble. It was in a fragment where Mallarmé talks about his ideal of structure. In often quoted words, Mallarmé muses how (and here I refer to Barbara Johnson's translation that was not yet available for me at the time) "any cry possesses an echo — motifs of the same type balance each other, stabilizing each other at a distance." And he continues:

Tout deviant suspens, disposition fragmentaire avec alternance et vis-à-vis, concourant au rhythm total, lequel serait le poème tu, aux blancs; seulement traduit, en une manière, par chaque pendentif.ⁱⁱⁱ

Everything is suspended, an arrangement of fragments with alternations and confrontations, adding up to a total rhythm, which would be the poem stilled, in the blanks; only translated, in a way, by each pendant.^{iv}

The beginning of the sentence was somehow understandable — the total rhythm of the book is born from "alternations and confrontations," just as there are motifs that balance each other from distance, like echoes in the space. The blanks of different sizes between the fragments of *Divagations* itself — which unfortunately are not visible in Johnson's otherwise admirable translation — made evident how the total rhythm can be created with empty spaces. The last words, however, were mysterious: "seulement traduit, en une manière, par chaque pendentif."

What was “pendentif”? A native speaker of modern French would probably have automatically thought of a type of jewelry that people wear hanging in a necklace, “a pendant,” just as Johnson later translated the word. If you nowadays search online for “pendentif,” thousands of pages referring to jewelry appear. But what sense would that make?

I was not a native speaker so I checked almost every word in a dictionary. In the case of Mallarmé, consulting dictionaries is, in fact, quite recommendable even for those who think they have mastered French — as Jacques Scherer noted in his classic study,^v Mallarmé often plays with some little known archaic meanings of otherwise well known words. And indeed, I found out that in the 1870’s, the famous dictionary *Littre* defined “pendentif” as follows: “Portion de voûte sphérique placée entre les grands arcs qui supportent un dôme, une coupole, dite aussi fourche et panache.”

In other words, in the terminology of religious architecture, pendentif referred to a triangular construction that supports the cupola of the church. Usually there are four triangular pendentifs that allow the quadrangular space between the columns to be “transformed” into a round cupola. Also, in English, the word “pendant” is sometimes used in architecture, but with a slightly different meaning, referring to more or less “hanging” ornaments of the late Gothic style.

Many dictionaries gave both meanings, but it seemed that the first dictionary entry of “pendentif” for a piece of jewelry was in Larousse from 1903 — several years after Mallarmé wrote the first versions of his essay. Given the conservatism of dictionaries, I thought it was quite probable that both meanings of the word were already known in the 1880’s when Mallarmé wrote a series called “Variations sur un sujet” for *Révue Blanche* — a series that, in *Divagations*, formed the basis for “Crise de vers.” It is obvious, however, that in 19th-century literary French it was still much more common

to use the word for architectural construction than for a piece of jewelry.^{vi}

So, how should I translate “pendentif”? And how does this pendentif then translate, in its own way, the “total rhythm” of the book, or “the poem stilled”?

The stakes were high. After all, it is clear that Mallarmé is, in this sentence, shifting from normal poetry collections towards the Book, the Grand Oeuvre, the “orphic explanation of the Earth.” Should we search for the ideal Structure of the Book from religious architecture — or from the scintillating jewelry in women’s necks?

II

Hundreds of books and articles have been published on Mallarmé. Thousands of authors have cited him, taking sentences out of context, transforming his oeuvre into a mobile army of floating citations that have been used in order to defend or illustrate every imaginable poetic or philosophical position. The sentence I quoted has also been cited numerous times. Certainly someone has resolved the enigma for me, opened the meaning of these words?

In fact, this does not seem to be the case. These words have been quoted, again and again, but hardly anyone has made any comment on their possible meaning. Mallarmé is an oracle whose words are repeated as they have once been written, without necessarily any need or effort to explain them. This is especially true in the case of *Divagations*, which is usually read as a secondary source, as a collection of theoretical essays where Mallarmé explains his poetics. They are read as commentary, not as primary

texts that would need interpretation.^{vii} However, for Mallarmé, the texts of *Divagations* were critical poems — texts that combined the genres of the essay and prose poetry.^{viii} Verse and critical prose both belonged to the literary existence of a poet.

In her essay on Mallarmé and Boulez, Marcella Lista does attend to the word “pendentif” and calls it “la métaphore éclairante” — nonetheless, she does not truly clarify in any detail what light the metaphor casts, but only refers, vaguely, to the “suspension généralisée des forms.”^{ix} Fabien Vallos also interprets the word “pendentif” in general terms, seeing it as a strophe or winding-up of language that is being suspended on some form.^x

“Pendentif” is, then, linked to “sus-pension” — another ambiguous word originating from the Latin root *pendere*. What does “tout deviant suspens” mean? Does it refer, as *Encyclopedié universelle* (that takes Mallarmé’s sentence as an example on the word “suspens”) lets us understand, to “attente angoissée,” a synonym to the English “suspense”? Or does it refer more to uncertainty, indecision, things that are “hanging in the air,” so to say, waiting to be decided? Or, more literally, does it refer to some element that is being suspended on some other, hanging from, or dependent on some other element? While it is clear how a pendant is suspended on a necklace, it is less clear how, and on what, an architectural pendentif is suspended — however, as Henri Maldiney has suggested, in some sense, pendentifs alone do not support the cupola, they are also are suspended *on* the cupola.^{xi}

So, a pendant can be seen as both an object that one wears and an architectural pendentif that supports a cupola, and each is an example of the “suspension généralisée des forms.” Before we try to understand how the Structure of the Book is being translated by each “pendentif” in this large sense of the word, let us first examine the two more restricted meanings of pendentif.

III

A cupola in a Christian church is an image of the heavenly sky, a spiritual sphere above us. Pendentifs allow this image of heaven to rise from the earthly quadrangular walls.

Given the quasi-religious position that Mallarmé grants to poetry,^{xii} and many architectural references in his poems and essays, the interpretation of “pendentif” as something that supports the cupola of the Temple of the Book does seem plausible. After all, the figure of the temple already appears in one of the first fragments of “Crisis of Verse” when Mallarmé presents the “exquisite and fundamental crisis” that is taking place in French poetry: “we are witnessing, in this fin-de-siècle, not — as it was during the last one — revolution, but, far from the public square: a trembling of the veil in the temple, with significant folds, and, a little, its rending.”^{xiii}

Mallarmé uses the figure of the temple also elsewhere. Already in 1866, in a letter to A. Renaud, Mallarmé uses the figure of the Temple for his own ideal of the Grand Oeuvre, calling the poem “Hérodiade” that he had been working on as one of the “splendid and solomonic colons of that Temple.”^{xiv}

In the preface to *Divagations*, Mallarmé refers to the book as “scattered and with no architecture.” However, at the end of the preface, he does hint at some hidden architectonic rule beneath the scattered fragments: “they resemble an abbey that, even though ruined, would breathe out its doctrine to the passer-by.”

I have elsewhere suggested that there is, in fact, some architectonic structure to be found in *Divagations*, in spite of Mallarmé’s proclamation.^{xv} Just as Holger Thesleff once found a “pedimental structure” in Plato’s dialogues, leading the reader from

earthly world up towards the world of ideas and then back,^{xvi} so in the overall structure of *Divagations* one can discern a movement at the beginning of the book from earthly pleasures towards more spiritual topics in the middle, and then a kind of descent back to the social reality in the last part of the book, “Grands faits divers.”

One can also discern some conscious symmetry of motives in *Divagations*. For example, Mallarmé has placed the text “Conflit” at the end of the first part, “Anecdotes ou poèmes,” although it was originally written much later than the other texts in that section, among the “Variations sur un sujet” in *La Revue blanche* — texts that otherwise are situated at the end of the book. Is this because Mallarmé wanted to create a certain symmetry between “Conflit” at the beginning and “Confrontation” at the end of *Divagations*? After all, both texts seem to describe a similar kind of event, an encounter between the artist and workers. Is this an example of editorial choices that Mallarmé has made in order to “eliminate chance”?

To push the figure a bit further: perhaps we can see the “ascension” and the “descent” in the structure of *Divagations*, with motives that seem to be balancing each other, as kind of pendentifs that create symmetry in the whole and that support the cupola, the spiritual ideal of the Book. Or, perhaps we can find at least some traces of that structure from the fragmentary whole, in the way one can sense the holy architecture from the scattered ruins of an abbey — “certain symmetry” that links the place of the verse in the piece to the “authenticity of the piece in the volume” and further, on “spiritual space, the amplified signature of genius, anonymous and perfect, giving art existence and being.”

IV

But what if “pendentif” refers to a piece of jewelry? Not to the holy spiritual order of the Temple and its premeditated, stable architec-

tural order, but to the world of evening dresses, of jewels swinging and glimmering against the soft feminine skin in the twilight of Parisian salons? How would that translate the Structure of the Book?

In fact, this world is evoked in the immediate context of the sentence, just a couple of sentences before:

L'oeuvre pure implique la disparition élocutoire du poète, qui cède l'initiative aux mots, par le heurt de leur inégalité mobilisés; ils s'allument de reflets réciproques comme une virtuelle trainée de feux sur pierreries, remplaçant la respiration perceptible en l'ancien soufflé lyrique ou la direction personnelle enthousiaste de la phrase.^{xvii}

The pure work implies the disappearance of the poet speaking, who yields the initiative to words, by the clash of their ordered inequalities; they light each other up through reciprocal reflections like a virtual swooping of fire across precious stones, replacing the primacy of the perceptible rhythm of breathing in the classic lyric whisper or the personal feeling driving the sentence.^{xviii}

Poetic words are here likened to precious stones that reflect each other, not so much their “ordered” (as Johnson translates) as “mobilized” inequalities, just like one can imagine pendants fluctuating with their precious stones reflecting candles, gaslights, or the newly invented electric lights of Parisian evenings.

As we know, Mallarmé was deeply fascinated by women's fashion and jewelry. The first article that he published in *La Dernière mode*, under the pseudonym Marguerite de Ponty, was a long and inspired article on jewels.^{xix} There “Mme. de Ponty” compares jewels to flowers — and indeed, flowers and jewels both belong to privileged figures of poetry for Mallarmé. Here he was not alone in

his age — authors like Huysmans and Lorrain had also compared the work of the poet to that of the goldsmith.^{xx}

But, of course, a pendant is not just any jewelry — it is marked by its incessant movement, by its aleatory vacillation back and forth, following the movements of the person who wears it. A pendant translates the movements of its carrier in a way that reminds one of how Mallarmé describes the “cascades of cloth” that translated the movements of Loïe Fuller in her dance — both pendant and floating textiles referring erotically to the feminine body.^{xxi} One is also reminded of many other images of writing in movement in Mallarmé, like boats, wings, or butterflies, not to forget the several poems that he wrote on fans.

Indeed, in his late writings Mallarmé seems to have moved from the ideal of static and premeditated architecture to poetry as music or dance. From the icy perfection of the early sonnets he moves to the stormy lines of “Coup de dés” — to lines that float through the pages as, indeed, Fuller’s dresses floated through the air.^{xxii} And if we believe Scherer’s interpretation of the notes, which he published as the notes to Mallarmé’s *Book*, it seems that the *Book* itself had in the end transformed itself into a kind of moving set of pages that were to be read in highly ordered reading sessions — to a calculated but at the same time living and ever-changing ritual.^{xxiii} In these evenings, the worldly atmosphere of literary salons would transform itself into a Temple of art in a perfect marriage between the mundane and the holy.

V

I am convinced that Mallarmé was well aware of the extreme ambiguity of the word “pendentif.” The word is radically indecisive, just as Derrida argued in his “La Double séance” that the word “hymen” in “Mimesis” had a double meaning, referring both to the sign of

virginity and consummation.^{xxiv} It represents identity in difference, a hinge that turns a closed space into an open space, inside to outside, stability into movement. It is already in itself a source of reciprocal reflections, a firework of semantic potentialities. It is a perfect example of dissemination, as Derrida defines it: “dissemination affirms the always already divided generation of meaning.”^{xxv}

However, as a translator, I had to choose. There was no word in Finnish that could have sustained the double meaning of religious architecture and swaying jewelry that the French word contains. Even the English “pendant,” the word that Barbara Johnson chose, saves something of this polysemy, although its architectonic meaning in English somehow differs from French.

Finally, I made my choice: I chose the word “riipus,” which refers to a piece of jewelry. I lost the sacred atmosphere of the temple, but somehow I saw “riipus” in itself as a figure of double meaning — as it sways back and forth, it reveals now this side, now that side. It is like a coin, with two different sides, suspended between sacred and profane meanings.^{xxvi} And it need not be only profane: often pendants display some religious signification, such as a cross, which one wears close to one’s heart. It is a moving prism, reflecting different colors and meanings each moment, thus creating a significant space where new meanings are continuously created.

On the one hand, a pendant is a carefully crafted piece of art, often containing some internal symmetry. On the other, the movements of a pendant create a perpetual dance around its center, contingent vacillation that reflects the lights and colors of the outside. This dialogue between stable, premeditated structures and mobile, anarchic and surprising pirouettes around it is, in fact, something that can be seen in all of Mallarmé’s poetry, especially in his prose. Traditional syntax is, for him, only a starting point: the stable structure of French is set in internal movements by the

careful choice of commas and other punctuation that suspend the meaning and enable the coexistence of different, sometimes contradictory interpretations.^{xxvii}

The structure of Mallarmé's *Book* sways back and forth, sometimes reflecting visions of a premeditated whole, sometimes those of aleatory play. And in a way, as "Coup de dés" lets us understand, chance and order are two sides of the same cosmic vision, the process of becoming. The dice are thrown, words enter into play of aleatory and contingent chance, until they stop, and become a constellation — constellation that does not, however, cancel the chance.

ⁱ For the evolution of Mallarmé's ideas on the Book, see Jacques Scherer, *Le "Livre" de Mallarmé: premières recherches sur des documents inédits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957).

ⁱⁱ Stéphane Mallarmé, "Säkeen kriisi," tr. by Kuisma Korhonen, in *Oi Runous*, ed. Tuula Hökkä (Helsinki: SKS, 2000). A revised version of the translation was later published in *Estetiikan klassikoita*, eds. Ilona Reiner et al. (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2009).

ⁱⁱⁱ In Stéphane Mallarmé, *Igitur, Divagations, Un coup de dés*, éd. Yves Bonnefoy (Paris: Gallimard, coll. « Poésie », 1976) 249.

^{iv} In Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, tr. by Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007) 209.

^v Jacques Scherer, *L'expression littéraire dans l'oeuvre de Mallarmé* (Paris: Nizet, 1947).

^{vi} While writing this article, I made a brief search for the word "pendentif" in 19th-century sources, and while most of the results referred to architecture, there were also some references to jewelry, for example in Ambroise Comarmond's *Description de l'écrin d'une Dame Romaine trouvée à Lyon en 1841, chez les frères de la doctrine chrétienne, et donnée par eux au Musée de cette ville* (Paris: Ch. Savy, chez Dach, 1844) 37.

^{vii} There are some notable exceptions, especially Jacques Derrida's "The Double Session" in *Dissemination*, tr. by Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981).

^{viii} On the genre of "poème critique," see for example Kuisma Korhonen, "A Flower? Stéphane Mallarmé and the Poetic Essay" in *The Modern Essay in French: Movement, Instability, Performance*, Andy Stafford & Charles Forsdick (eds) (London: Peter Lang, 2005).

^{ix} Marcella Lista, "Esquisse, fragment et modernité: un parcours de Pierre Boulez," in Pierre Boulez, Henri Loyrette, Marcella Lista, Pierre Boulez, *Oeuvre: Fragment* (Paris, Gallimard/Musée du Louvre, 2008) 54.

^x “Cette langue existe comme poème, comme traduction (comme transposition, c’est-à-dire passage d’une structure à une autre), dit Mallarmé, selon la manière, c’est-à-dire en fonction du style qui, matériellement, suspendra, la langue, en quelques « pendentifs », c’est-à-dire en quelques strophes : figure de la langue comme un enroulement qui se suspend dans une forme.” Fabien Vallos, *Théorie de la fête: festivité, inopérativité & désœuvrement*. Thèse pour obtenir le grade de docteur de l’université Paris iv — Sorbonne, 2010. <http://www.chrematistique.fr/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/the%CC%80se-copie@o.pdf>

^{xi} “La coupole est établie sur pendentif. Il y a cette chose extraordinaire, que les pendentifs la portent, eux-mêmes portés par tout le mouvement des deux longs murs et des deux grandes coupoles, mais ils sont cependant suspendus à la coupole. C’est elle qui tient en suspens tout l’édifice qui la soutient.” “Rencontre avec Henri Maldiney, entretien du 26 mars 1996,” in Chris Younés; Philippe Nys; & Michel Mangematin (eds) *L’architecture au corps* (Bruxelles: Ousia, 1997) 16.

^{xii} See, for example, Bertrand Marchal, *La Religion de Mallarmé* (Paris: José Corti, 1988).

^{xiii} *Divagations*, 201.

^{xiv} “Hérodiade que je n’abandonne pas, mais à l’exécution duquel j’accorde un demi-temps, sera une des colonnes torsées, splendides et salomoniques, de ce Temple.” Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance générale*, eds. H. Mondor & L.J. Austin, tome 5 (Paris: Gallimard, CXX bis, 1981).

^{xv} Kuisma Korhonen, “Le Temple et le papillon blanc: la pensée structurale dans *Divagations* de Mallarmé,” *Méthode: revue de littératures*, vol. 2 (2002).

^{xvi} Holger Thesleff, “Looking for Clues: An Interpretation of Some Literary Aspects of Plato’s ‘Two-Level Model,’” in *Plato’s Dialogues: New Studies and Interpretations* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1993) 19, n. 4.

^{xvii} *Igitur, Divagations, Un coup de dés*, 249.

^{xviii} *Divagations*, 208. Translation modified.

^{xix} Stéphane Mallarmé, *La Dernière mode* (New York: Institute of French Studies, 1933).

^{xx} Sophie Pelletier, “De l’orfèvre à l’écrivain: poétique du ‘texte-bijou’ à la fin du XIXe siècle” in *Études littéraires*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (été 2009) 79–91.

^{xxi} In “Another Study of Dance”, *Divagations*, 135.

^{xxii} In her *Literature, Modernism, and Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), Susan Jones believes that “Coup de dés” was directly influenced by Fuller’s dance. On the centrality of dance in Mallarmé’s thought, see also Alain Badiou’s *Petit manuel d’inesthétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1998).

^{xxiii} Scherer, *Le “Livre” de Mallarmé*. See also Mary Lewis Shaw, *Performance in the Text of Mallarmé: The Passage from Art to Ritual* (PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 1993).

^{xxiv} Derrida, *Dissemination*, 229. Referring to Gödel, Derrida calls this kind of term “indécidable,” which is usually translated as “undecidable” in English. However, as Hugh Silverman once pointed out to me, the term “indecidable” would in

fact be a better translation, since the term does not actually refer to the impossibility of interpretation as such, but rather to the oscillation between different interpretations. In other words, hymen and pendentif are terms that are continuously “in” decision.

^{xxv} Derrida, *Dissemination*, 268.

^{xxvi} As Mallarmé notes, “The coin, exhumed from coliseum floors, presents, heads, a serene face, and, tails, the brutal universal number,” *Divagations*, 284.

^{xxvii} As Derrida notes, it seems that Mallarmé has often added polysemy to his sentences only in later editorial stages — in the case of “Mimesis,” the first versions of the text display no ambiguity, and only in the third version does the unorthodox punctuation create the radical and unstable polysemy that Derrida so carefully analyzes in “Double Session.” *Dissemination*, 225–226. See also Jean-Pierre Richard, *L’Univers imaginaire de Mallarmé* (Paris: Seuil, 1961) 548–555.