

**STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ: COLLECTED POEMS, TRANSLATED AND
WITH A COMMENTARY BY HENRY WEINFELD (UNIVERSITY OF
CALIFORNIA PRESS)**

L'oeuvre pure implique la disparition élocutoire du poète, qui cède l'initiative aux mots.... ("The pure work implies the disappearance of the poet as speaker, yielding his initiative to words....")

—Mallarmé, "Crise de vers"

The New Formalism has surely had a deep impact on the art of translation. Despite some rave reviews, Henry Weinfield is by no means an ideal translator of Mallarmé. One of the worst moments of Weinfield's book is his translation of Mallarmé's great line, "Verlaine? Il est caché parmi l'herbe, Verlaine" (literally, "Verlaine? He is hidden amid the grass, Verlaine"). In Weinfield's version this becomes "Verlaine? He's hidden in the woolly sward." "L'herbe" means "grass"; it doesn't mean "sward." Part of Weinfield's problem is that he needs "sward" as a rhyme word. "What I *can* say, with absolute certainty," he writes, "is that in translating the *Poésies* it has been essential to work in rhyme and meter, regardless of the semantic accommodations and technical problems this entailed. If we take rhyme away from Mallarmé, we take away the *poetry* of his poetry." If that's true of Mallarmé, is it any less true of François Villon? Of Rumi? In *Digging for the Treasure: Translation After Pound* Ronnie Apter writes that "the Victorian compulsion to copy form is no longer with us." Weinfield would not agree. Dana Gioia was certainly among the first to be aware of this problem—and aware as well that the form of a poem is part of its meaning. In an eloquent and compelling passage in *Can Poetry Matter?* he writes,

[A]lthough the past quarter century has witnessed an explosion of poetic translation, this boom has almost exclusively produced work that is formally vague and colorless. Compared to most earlier translation, these contemporary American versions make no effort whatsoever to reproduce the prosodic features of their originals. One can now read most of Dante or Villon, Rilke or Mandelstam, Lorca or even Petrarch in English without any sense of the poem's original form. Sometimes these versions brilliantly convey the theme or tone of the originals, but more often they sound stylistically impoverished and anonymous. All of the past blurs together into a familiar tune. Unrhymed, unmetred, and unshaped, Petrarch and Rilke sound misleadingly alike.

Unfortunately, in Weinfield's hands the admirable attempt to reproduce rhyme and meter results in writing like this:

Does Pride at evening always fume,
Torch snuffed out by a sudden stirring
Without the immortal gust deferring
The abandonment about to come!

This is of course not to say that Weinfield's translations and notes are not often useful. They are. It is only to say that in reading him we are far from "the *poetry* of [Mallarmé's] poetry."

Neither Weinfield nor any of Mallarmé's other commentators seem to have noticed the extraordinary pun at the conclusion of "Brise Marine" ("Sea Breeze"):

Et, peut-être, les mâts, invitant les orages
Sont-ils de ceux qu'un vent penche sur les naufrages
Perdus, sans mâts, sans mâts, ni fertiles îlots...
Mais, ô mon coeur, entends le chant des matelots!

This is translated into graceful blank verse by Peter and Mary Ann Caws:

And, it may be, the masts, inviting storms
Are of the sort that wind inclines to wrecks
Lost, with no mast, no mast, or verdant isle...
But listen, oh my heart, the sailors sing!

In the penultimate line, everything is lost (“Perdus”): there are no masts (“mâts”) and no isles (“îlots”).* Yet, in a sense, the concluding *word* gives the poet back the very things he has lost: the *sound* of “matelot” contains “mâts” + “îlots.” The “lost” masts and isles are not restored to the poet as entities, only as names, echoing words. *But that is all they were to begin with.* In a way, the proper translation of the concluding line is “But, oh my heart, listen to the song of ‘mâts’ + ‘îlots.’” One can sense in this early poem—written when the author was in his twenties—an extraordinary shift from a focus on “things” to a focus on “words.” If, from one point of view, the poet’s fear of action propels him towards language, from another point of view the poem enunciates a new mode of beauty. Mallarmé’s “mâts-îlots” / “matelot,” is obvious once you point it out, but, amazingly, as far as I know, it has never been pointed out. Why? Perhaps because to notice it, one must move away, as Mallarmé does, from the referential quality of “matelot” and must “cède l’initiative aux mots,” “yield the initiative to words.”

The following translation attempts to include the pun:

And perhaps the masts will summon storms
That blast the sails and wreck the oars
Lost, without sails, without sails, or beating oars...
But oh, my heart, listen to the song of *sailors*.

* Note that the line “Perdus, sans mâts, sans mâts, ni fertiles îlots...” is only eleven syllables: it breaks off. The “...” (silence) is the twelfth syllable. Mallarmé’s line is a *cri de coeur*: everything is *perdu*, lost. In effect, the poem ends at that moment: the poet has absolutely nothing left. Then, out of nowhere, there occurs a new movement: “Mais, ô mon coeur, entends le chant des matelots!” In another poem, “le chant des matelots” might indicate the presence of Jesus saving the poet from the abyss. Not in Mallarmé. The poet is “saved” by words, not by “the Word.”