

Fall 2016

## Writing Unwritten: Reference, Opposition and Morality in Poe, Baudelaire, and Mallarmé

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### Recommended Citation

Woodard, Matthew Abraham, "Writing Unwritten: Reference, Opposition and Morality in Poe, Baudelaire, and Mallarmé" (2016). *Senior Projects Fall 2016*. 33.  
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Writing Unwritten

Reference, Opposition, and Morality in Poe, Baudelaire, and Mallarmé

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

December, 2016

## II

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisor, Prof. Eric Trudel, whose constant, perceptive assistance and astonishingly kind support made not only this project possible, but also this semester; the remaining members of my board, Profs. Marina van Zuylen and Matthew Amos, for their insightful commentary regarding my project, and their inspiration and assistance over the course of my undergraduate; Dean of Students for the Conservatory Eileen Brickner, for lending the kind of ear I hope someday to be able to lend others; Rosemary Nelis, for her timely appetite and unwavering friendship while jointly navigating this semester's Scylla and Charybdis; and my parents, Martha and Craig Woodard, for welcoming me home when mine was overrun with ideas and deadlines (and bringing food when ideas and deadlines simply were not enough).

### III

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	II
Introduction.....	4
Chapter I.....	6
Poe's Farce	
Chapter II.....	27
Baudelaire's Critique	
Chapter III.....	50
Mallarmé's Polemic	
Conclusion.....	74
Bibliography.....	78

## Introduction

Why begin a discussion of themes of reference in Baudelaire and Mallarmé by mentioning Poe? For one because the first and second refer to the third. A simpler yet less obvious reason: Poe's work teaches one how to read Baudelaire; this relationship then aids a reading of Mallarmé. One certainly has access to Baudelaire and Mallarmé without the aid of Poe, but a richer and fuller reading, a reading at once more focused and more expansive, can only be achieved having been firmly rooted in Poe's work. The fact remains that while Poe never explicitly refers to Mallarmé or Baudelaire, the two refer to him explicitly and often.

Beginning with a discussion of Poe also involves making several key generalizations about all three poets. In as much as they – their works – refer to one another, they also resemble each other. This general resemblance offers a promising entry into the present inquiry. Poe, Baudelaire and Mallarmé each produced a significant body of critical work, regarded in each case as equal in importance to their creative output. Critical thinking was key to all three poets and as such often makes its way into their fiction and poetry. In all three, the line between creative and analytic is blurred. An understanding of their artistic output as inherently critical created by this blurring in fact broadens the importance of their art; a reciprocal understanding of their critical work as inherently artistic does the same.

While a potent blend of analytic and creative is by no means exclusive to these three poets, the particular circumstances of their textual relation lends itself to a vivid discussion of the ways in critical application of textual reference can dissect art – that is, analyze it – while at the same time illuminating it, outlining and exaggerating it,

enhancing it, pushing it beyond itself in search of itself. The result seems a unifying gesture, both scientific and beautiful. Yet in *seeming* unified this gesture will ironically render itself the opposite. When these texts seem to complete an understanding of each other, this essay suggests they do so by opening up the others to an infinity of possible – referential – meaning.

## Chapter I

## Poe's Farce

Being that the referentiality discussed above is inherently circular, I would suggest Poe's work teaches one how to read Baudelaire's as much as Baudelaire's work teaches one how to read Poe's. Baudelaire translated a great deal of Poe and while the act of translation is certainly a critical one, Baudelaire also produced a considerable amount of explicitly critical work regarding the subject of his translational enterprise. Three lengthy essays, "Edgar Allan Poe: Sa vie et ses ouvrages," (1852) "Edgar Poe: Sa vie et ses œuvres," (1856) and "Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe" (1857) in addition to several shorter notices attached to individual translations or letters comprise the body of this critical effort and it is with the third essay that the present discussion begins (Brix, 55-56). I think the term "critical" an apt one because Baudelaire's tone throughout this most critical of essays is not simply critical in a scientific or even structural sense. In fact, the idea of such a tone – or lack thereof – is something Baudelaire ardently criticizes in the essay. His personal tone is very much a tone (and very personal) in that it is deeply, emotionally critical. It is almost pained at times, hurt, sensitive, fraught with insecurity and beholden to an artistic ideality that is never not arresting in its conviction. It becomes apparent in the opening gesture of his essay that criticism is essentially an artistic – a beautiful – act for Baudelaire: "*Littérature de décadence!* —" (Baudelaire, *Notes nouvelles*, 4) This is not a sentence; it is a gesture. Baudelaire literally points, toward a faction defined by those who choose to delimit literature (thereby limiting it) as such. But he does not do so objectively. This gesture is a criticism in that it literally criticizes in the derogatory, derisive, disdainful sense of the word. It separates and most importantly, it

valuates, that is, applies value. The italicization further imbues the sentence with a sardonic tone. This tone is important to the remainder of the sentence as well: “Paroles vides que nous entendons souvent tomber, avec la sonorité d’un bâillement emphatique [...]” (Baudelaire, 4). Note that these words are “heard,” their “sonority” an “emphatic yawn. This tone is thus aural, sonic; the words as gesture leave the page and are heard, gaining in dimensionality. What is more, the sardonic tone italicization creates further implies that these words are another’s, this other group defined in the same sentence as “ces sphinx sans énigme qui veillent devant les portes saintes de l’Esthétique classique” (Baudelaire, 4) Interesting that Baudelaire would begin his essay with a contemptuous quote, mocking the words of another. And yet it is a brilliant critical move. The critic’s work is understanding, and Baudelaire immediately and beautifully performs the act of understanding. He simultaneously (and thoroughly) seeks to understand what exactly is meant by those who use the term “littérature de décadence,” while imbuing the act of understanding with a fundamentally critical take on what he understands the phrase to mean.

Baudelaire both justifies and reinforces his disgust for those “critics” who pride themselves on an ability to discern what they deem to be true in art, which truth then becomes a kind of timeless “essence.” This essentializing viewpoint is an academic one, the academy in turn at the heart of Baudelaire’s evident disdain. In fact, his disgust appears almost a kind of pity, and in a tone of apparent conciliation, he offers “wise men” the benefit of the doubt: “Mais, pour laisser de côté les paraboles, je crois qu’il m’est permis de demander à ces hommes sages qu’ils comprennent bien toute la vanité, toute l’inutilité de leur sagesse” (Baudelaire, 5). The critical act – that is, the act of criticizing –



is once more revealed to allow understanding. The essentializing emphasis on truth is shown simultaneously to hinder actual understanding. Baudelaire is careful not to submit a merely different essence as truth, but rather to assert in these opening lines that any such generalization hinders access to beauty by foundering in a childish need for verification, that is, empirical evidence. Baudelaire values, he criticizes, but his valuation and criticism seek to highlight what is specific to criticism itself. Any attempt to unify theoretically and pass grand judgment represents a disaster as such. He goes on: “Le mot *littérature de décadence* implique qu’il y a une échelle de littératures, une vagissante, une puérole, une adolescente, etc. Ce terme, veux-je dire, suppose quelque chose de fatal et de providentiel, comme un décret inéluctable ; et il est tout à fait injuste de nous reprocher d’accomplir la loi mystérieuse” (Baudelaire, 5). A slightly more introspective tone inhabits these lines. Note that here Baudelaire examines the same phrase he tossed off so sardonically at the top of his essay, utilizing a more classically analytical vocabulary (“impliquer” for instance). He also rhetorically implies his own fallibility by correcting himself: “veux-je dire.” And yet, these lines accomplish a similar task to the opening. The word “*décadence*” becomes the troubling one. This is the word upon which Baudelaire’s disdainful reading hinges. It is the word that spurs on much of the essay. Baudelaire goes on to negate – that is, undo – the criticism this word implies by using precisely a critical approach..

How then does Edgar Poe factor into the critical undoing of *decadence*? Having established and fortified an initial other, Baudelaire makes the savvy critical move of introducing Poe in relief. Poe becomes a kind of hero, a fellow crusader, opposed to the theoretical Classicism against which Baudelaire rails in equal measure. And, as is

revealed over the course of the essay, an artist whose response to the criticism of decadence appears in solidarity with Baudelaire's own. It would be difficult though to claim any direct influence in this regard. What is true is that the two artists employ similar means of subverting a common critically opposed and judgmentally suppressive establishment, an establishment that has deemed them both decadent. Important to an understanding of said means of subversion is the fact that Baudelaire does refer to Poe's chosen subversive tactics as powerful and deserving of acclaim. Over the course of his essay he scrutinizes both Poe's analytic and creative output, regarding the whole with a critical eye in order to claim its powerful – and subversive – success.

So from the mire of established explanatory modes – the doldrums of quotidian expression and the academy that seeks to institutionalize them as commonality – springs Poe: “Du sein d'un monde goulu, affamé de matérialités, Poe s'est élancé dans les rêves” (Baudelaire, 7). Once again, Baudelaire utilizes a particular kind of motion – note the fortitude and directionality of the verb “s'élancer” – that turns criticism into *gesture*. Poe is not merely a theoretical entity that textually inserts itself into Baudelaire's debate. He darts, runs, throws himself from one world into another, entirely separate. The space traversed is dramatic and large. From the bosom of a world that revels in the sordid utilitarian, Poe moves toward dreams, presumably unbounded and revelatory, unlimited even. The contrast between material and dream worlds is made extremely stark by Baudelaire's lengthy setup. And it is a dramatic setup. Drama resides at the heart of Baudelaire's presentation. Poe becomes a hero figure in that he represents the critical opposition Baudelaire creates in his opening. The extent that the creation of a hero figure as part of Baudelaire's criticism could be said to “moralize” the debate is irrelevant; as

will be shown later, Baudelaire's appropriation of a moralizing tone in fact ironically undoes the established modes of criticism he seeks to criticize. This emergent irony is very important and will play a key roll going forward. Irony will in fact be key to understanding the work of Poe, Baudelaire and Mallarmé, as well as the relationships between these works.

Poe has emerged on the scene, seemingly triumphant, a hero. Yet his heroism is complicated by Baudelaire's use of a series of epithets: first "caricature" (7), then "jongleur" (7) and "farceur" (7). These epithets can't help but echo throughout the remainder of the essay, at which point they proceed to echo out across all of both Poe's and Baudelaire's work. They demand a critical reevaluation of the meaning of Poe's work while simultaneously framing Baudelaire's work within the context of his profound critical eye. That is to say, these epithets reveal Poe's artistry while also underscoring the artistry of Baudelaire's criticism. Further, these epithets are complicated because they avoid the kind of moralization toward which it seems Baudelaire is critically building. As has been mentioned, Baudelaire attempts to make Poe into a hero, yet at the apex of his expository chapter – concerning the emergence and movement of Poe-as-idea mentioned – Baudelaire undermines his entire argument by referring to Poe as something entirely different:

Dans ce bouillonnement de médiocrités, dans ce monde épris des perfectionnements matériels, – scandale d'un nouveau genre qui fait comprendre la grandeur des peuples fainéants, – dans cette société avide d'étonnements, amoureuse de la vie, mais surtout d'une vie pleine d'excitations, un homme a paru qui a été grand, non-seulement par sa subtilité métaphysique, par la beauté sinistre ou ravissante de ses

conceptions, par la rigueur de son analyse, mais grand aussi et non moins grand comme *caricature*.” (Baudelaire, 7)

Rather than a hero, Poe is presented as *caricature*. The immediate opposition could not be starker. And yet it is precisely this dramatic opposition – the clash between expectation and reality, that is, buildup and delivery – that makes Poe’s heroism subversive, and which Baudelaire seeks to reveal. He is quick to clarify the intention of the provocative epithet: “ – Il faut que je m’explique avec quelque soin ; car récemment un critique imprudent se servait, pour dénigrer Edgar Poe et pour infirmer la sincérité de mon admiration, du mot *jongleur* que j’avais moi-même appliqué au noble poète presque comme un éloge” (Baudelaire, 7). While this explanation does in fact clarify, it also further complicates. Yes, Baudelaire means only admiration in applying the term, but in addition to “caricature,” he further refers to Poe as a “juggler” – perhaps more generally, a “minstrel.” The drama of the situation seems only enhanced. Rather than a hero, Baudelaire has summoned forth what might be summed up best as an actor, that is, someone capable of performing caricature, minstrelsy, farce. For the caricature and minstrel are both defined by their ability to alter, to enhance in the sense of magnify, scrutinize. The caricature in fact criticizes; having deliberately chosen to augment features and diminish others, the caricature presents an opinion. The minstrel as metaphor is perhaps even more apt, for the emphasis on entertainment is clarified. Both the caricature and minstrel are intent on entertaining. They exploit humor in order to show the difference between what they are and what they signify. Baudelaire has one more important epithet for Poe, and its usage intensifies the complexity of his reading. In sum, says Baudelaire, “pour affirmer ma pensée d’une manière encore plus nette, Poe fut

toujours grand, non-seulement dans ses conceptions nobles, mais encore comme farceur” (Baudelaire, 7). Humor is thus shown to be key. Baudelaire locates Poe’s heroism, his genius, in his ability to joke, his manipulation of what Baudelaire deems essentially humorous. Contradiction abounds. Poe wrote next to nothing involving identifiable humor. His œuvre typifies the Gothic in literature, its ardent seriousness and stoicism regarded as stylistic hallmarks of the genre. Whence then this farce? What minstrel acts serious? What caricature remains stoic? Once again the moment of contradiction becomes the moment of critical revelation. Baudelaire suggests that in so much as Poe is a minstrel, he *acts* the very stoicism he typifies. Poe’s stylistic conceit thus caricatures the very modus operandi that is for Baudelaire “style.”

Perhaps Baudelaire’s epithet’s most profound implication is that Poe says one thing with the words in his work, yet with these words in fact means entirely another thing. That is, meaning in Poe’s work is inherently removed from that which his words signify. The idea of humor thus seems less farfetched, for just as the caricature derives its humorous effect from the dislocation of image from subject, and the minstrel body from gravity or physical limitation, so too Poe’s prose will be shown to evoke subtle humor by dislocating its meaning from the words presented. In this ability to say one thing while implying another, Baudelaire defines Poe’s genius, his heroism. This genius thus represents a kind of subversion, for by calling Poe a “jongleur” “presque comme un éloge,” Baudelaire acknowledges the ability of Poe’s genius to critique an aesthetic establishment from within the confines of that establishment. Baudelaire’s epithets appear yet more apt. How better to show what is ridiculous about a costume than by sporting it for all to witness? Yet key to revealing the ridiculous is the act of sporting the

costume in the first place. Baudelaire's measly "farceur" appears the hero for which he sought initially once more. Poe's heroism is indeed his subtlety. In using contradiction to define Poe, Baudelaire artfully performs the contradiction that makes Poe great. This contradiction will be shown shortly in relation to a poem of Poe's.

Yet the question poses itself: what constitutes the aesthetic establishment – the silly costume – against which Baudelaire rails? Key to his critical reliance on Poe is the fact that this establishment is inherently American:

“Jeune et vieille à la fois, l’Amérique bavarde et radote avec une volubilité étonnante. Qui pourrait compter ses poètes ? Ils sont innombrables. Ses bas-bleus ? Ils encomrent les revues. Ses critiques ? Croyez qu’elle possède des pédants qui valent bien les nôtres pour rappeler sans cesse l’artiste à la beauté antique, pour questionner un poète ou un romancier sur la moralité de son but et la qualité de ses intentions.” (Baudelaire, 7)

Baudelaire uses rhetorical repetition to show the continuity and pervasiveness of the American pressure on poetry: note his repeated use of punchy questions. He shows America to be a place inherently hostile to poetry. Later in his essay, if not necessarily American in physical composition, the same establishment is shown to be deeply aligned with that which America represents for Baudelaire. He refers to this American quality as a sickness, using the neologism “l’americanomanie” (Baudelaire, 16). This term is interesting because it represents a fascination with America while also subtly suggesting the very qualities that make it so dangerous. Chief among these are an emphasis on entertainment, an infantile desire for proof, and a respect for the virtue of utility above all else. “L’americanomnie” thus refers both to the infectious inability to tear oneself from

America – he refers to it as “un passion de bon temps” (16) – and the cult of image America as nation prizes in itself above all else. Baudelaire goes on and on, criticizing the nation’s inherent hypocrisy, its mediocrity and its utter fascination with itself. For the nation with the most potent case of “americanomanie” is of course America itself. Again Poe emerges as the one artist capable of removing himself from the present squalor. Yes, Poe is idealistic; his own critical output often appears almost Platonic in conception – think of “The Poetic Principle” or “The Philosophy of Composition,” both of which will be discussed at length.

Yet according to Baudelaire, Poe’s most effective means of suggesting the artistic ideal he conceptualizes constitutes an undoing from within, rather than any kind of rejection or removal. This undoing relies upon the use of that which Baudelaire refers to as “imagination.” In a particularly moving passage, he defines imagination as he understands it in Poe’s case:

“Pour lui, l’Imagination est la reine des facultés ; mais par ce mot il entend quelque chose de plus grand que ce qui est entendu par le commun des lecteurs. L’Imagination n’est pas la fantaisie ; elle n’est pas non plus la sensibilité, bien qu’il soit difficile de concevoir un homme imaginatif qui ne serait pas sensible. L’Imagination est une faculté quasi divine qui perçoit tout d’abord, en dehors des méthodes philosophiques, les rapports intimes et secrets des choses, les correspondances et les analogies. ” (Baudelaire, 17-18)

The divinity of imagination is a beautiful thought, and key to the internal undoing of a system described by Baudelaire as defined by *belief*. Be it in God or science, the desire to locate thoughts, opinions and theories within the shadowy framework of belief could be

said to constitute that which disgusts Baudelaire about America, that is, the essence of the framework against which he – along with Poe – pits himself. Imagination for Poe thus constitutes the space beyond belief, its divinity precisely that which keeps it from the clutches of our pitiful human “understanding,” our need to define and categorize.

Baudelaire lashes out equally against the rapacious American thirst for progress, be it social or scientific. He sees this progress as anything but, and in fact associates it with a civil decrepitude, a destruction of humanity in favor of the false divinity of the measurable. Imagination lies beyond even philosophical methods, which Baudelaire again allies with the kind of scientific savagery that seeks only to diminish by explaining. Elsewhere he defines philosophy coyly as “une manière à eux de nier ce qui est et d’expliquer ce qui n’est pas” (Baudelaire, 11). Philosophy thus misses the point by disregarding what there in fact *is*. Imagination could then be understood (although any attempt to define it might seem, in line with Baudelaire’s criticism, an ensuing act of reduction) as that which *enhances* what is, the network of “correspondences and analogies” that links all things. These links are “intimate and secret” in that, much to the dismay of the American sensibility, they cannot be shown, they cannot be proven, nor can they be utilized. They are in a word beautiful.

Baudelaire relies heavily (to the point of plagiarism) on a critical essay of Poe’s entitled “The Poetic Principle,” which I will refer to in greater detail momentarily. Baudelaire finds abundant merit in the essay and points to its thesis as the heart of his own conception of poetry: “La poésie ne peut pas, sous peine de mort ou de défaillance, s’assimiler à la science ou à la morale ; elle n’a pas la Vérité pour objet, elle n’a qu’Elle-même” (Baudelaire, 24). Similar to the discussion of imagination above, poetry for



Baudelaire is utterly incapable of *use*. It can never refer away from itself, can never show, prove, describe, define, point, or do. It simply *is* itself, inhabiting that secret, intimate space between things that cannot be objectified. Truth again returns as adversary, and Baudelaire's critical tone remains as potent as ever. Truth as *essence* is shown to be limiting, to constrict what need not be fettered. A desire for truth, suggests Baudelaire – and Poe – is in fact a limiting desire. In reference to the imagination mentioned above, Baudelaire evokes a kind of communication with the “splendeurs situées derrière le tombeau” (Baudelaire, 25): “La soif insatiable de tout ce qui est au delà, et que révèle la vie, est la preuve la plus vivante de notre immortalité” (Baudelaire, 24). Note that in describing a conception of death, Baudelaire evokes “prevue [...] vivante.” The contradiction is striking: that which enhances life, makes it unending, in fact involves an imaginary leap “beyond the tomb.” Imagination thus appears to encompass that which is unimaginable – that which is simply “au delà” – and herein lies the beauty of the term itself. For once again, the term *as a word* takes on poetical significance by suggesting that which it logically delimits. The afterlife is theoretically inaccessible, its boundaries the sheer limits of human cognition and mortality. The word itself permits access to that which science could not possibly feign to prove.

Baudelaire locates Poe's power to conjure imagination in his formal application of brevity. This brevity is as much a sign of Poe the “farceur” as Poe the artist. In the “nouvelle,” or short story, a genre Poe's work defines, Baudelaire recognized a subversive genius unparalleled (or perhaps paralleled only by himself). Again referring to “The Poetic Principle,” Baudelaire notes how Poe's manipulation of length permits the presence of imagination by controlling the volume of words. As a caricature, the short

story refers humorously to that which it is not, namely a long story. It defies essence by referring constantly away from itself. The intimate spaces between the words, the “correspondence and analogy” they provoke, thus become more meaningful. Of course, adds Baudelaire, the short story inevitably fails to evoke said spaces, because doing so is the realm of “pure poetry” (Baudelaire, 19). Yet in eschewing the formal characteristics of poetry, the short story in fact shows itself to comment critically on poetry’s very nature. Baudelaire says as much when he writes: “Mais ce sont des luttes et des efforts qui ne servent qu’à démontrer la force des vrais moyens adaptés aux buts correspondants, et je ne serais pas éloigné de croire que chez quelques auteurs, les plus grands qu’on puisse choisir, ces tentations héroïques vinsent d’un désespoir” (Baudelaire, 19). The “true means” – a contradiction in terms, as these are the very words that earlier disgust Baudelaire – referred to here is poetry. And it is, as Baudelaire states, the performative nature of the short story’s ultimate failure to adequately inspire imagination that makes it so important to a subversion of the aforementioned aesthetic establishment. Key here is that Baudelaire is suggesting Poe’s short fiction self-consciously refers to its own failure, that is, the fact that it *isn’t* poetry. Thus “imagination” here involves the subtle, intimate correspondence between fiction and poetry. The comparison – the contradiction – is forced formally, thus becoming the subversive force so admired by Baudelaire.

And yet, Baudelaire at times doubts the very subversive force he seems to otherwise ardently admire. In a brief discussion of another critical essay of Poe’s entitled “The Philosophy of Composition” (which will also be discussed later), Baudelaire seems to at last find fault with the very hero he’s praised: “Bien des gens, de ceux surtout qui ont lu le singulier poème intitulé Le Corbeau, seraient scandalisés si j’analysais l’article

où notre poète a ingénument en apparence, mais avec une légère impertinence que je ne puis blâmer, minutieusement expliqué le mode de construction qu'il a employé [...]" (Baudelaire, 25). Most interesting is that Baudelaire refers to Poe's systematic explanation of creative method in his most famous poem "The Raven" by adding that it is not without a "une légère impertinence que je ne puis blâmer." The word "impertinence" makes this seem at once a critical jab, an admonition, as if to say, "don't go there..." And yet Poe's willingness to display said impertinence still deserves respect; note that Baudelaire "cannot blame" this impertinence. By acknowledging the audacity of Poe's impertinence, he belies his own admiration. Poe's "impertinence" is first the subversion of artistic inspiration; it is a calculus of creativity. Yet its calculus also ironically performs the subversion of the troublesome "americanomanie" it exists as part of, the same "americanomanie" Baudelaire derides in his essay.

As will be shown, the mathematical efficiency of Poe's self-exegesis in the essay employs the scientific, methodological vocabulary that Baudelaire chastises. And yet the formal, theoretical appropriation of such methods in the hands of Poe, Baudelaire acknowledges, does not represent a concession. Rather, Poe appropriates the scientific method in order to show its ultimate failure. He dons the scientific costume as *caricature* in order to parody it. Here is Poe as "farceur" at his best. The essay is extremely serious in tone, both thoughtful and self-confident, yet it strives in terms utterly removed from the poetical to capture precisely that which might best be defined as Baudelaire's "imagination." The failure of the essay is subtle, yet it is impossible to ignore. Baudelaire suggests Poe is impertinent for even attempting such a silly task: identifying the mechanism of the poetic imagination. The contradiction between

bombastic tone and futile task, the opposition of façade and content, ushers in a humor associated with irony.

Rather than jump immediately into the pertinent fiction of Poe, this essay will first take a detour through more of Poe's critical work, an understanding of which has been broadened by examination of its interpretation in Baudelaire, discussed *supra*. The critique in question is Poe's "The Poetic Principle," to which Baudelaire refers extensively in his "Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe." His reference is thorough in that he quotes the essay extensively, but he occasionally does little more than translate it. Whether this constitutes plagiarism is perhaps unimportant. Baudelaire's careful attention to Poe's essay means that an essay about the referential space between the two authors had better consider this essay in some detail. Startling about "The Poetic Principle" is that it appears to contradict itself. Simply put, Poe states a claim, but then at the conclusion of his essay, opposes it with another. How then to understand the essay's conclusion, and what to make of this act of understanding? The essay opens with a discussion of length as it pertains to poetry. Poe criticizes the conception of the poetic as necessarily "epic" and in fact advances the notion that an "epic poem" is in fact *not* a poem (Poe, *Critical Theory*, 197). At best it is perhaps a series of linked poems. The poetic "excitement" (179) thus derives from a poem's consciousness of its own formal existence. It is the poem itself that defines what is poetic, not the "Quarterly Reviews" (179) that, much like Baudelaire, Poe criticizes as a general bastion of aesthetic dogma. He defines such thought as perpetuating the "heresies of the Didactic" (182) – what Baudelaire calls "l'hérésie de l'enseignement" (NN, 35) – and goes on to set up the very same dichotomy as Baudelaire between "Poetry and Truth" (P, 183). And much like Baudelaire, he

suggests the ultimate domain of the poetic to be neither more nor less than poetry itself: “there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified, more supremely noble, than this very poem, this poem per se, this poem which is a poem and nothing more, this poem written solely for the poem's sake” (182). Like Baudelaire again, he recognizes a modern propensity – an American propensity – to consider a poem “good” – successful – in that it perpetuates some moral end, that is, inculcates Truth:

“It has been assumed, tacitly and avowedly, directly and indirectly, that the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth. Every poem, it is said, should inculcate a moral, and by this moral is the poetical merit of the work to be adjudged. We Americans especially have patronized this happy idea, and we Bostonians very especially have developed it in full.” (182)

And yet, the poetical realm lies beyond such utilitarian necessity. It is rooted in Baudelaire’s “divine imagination,” that is, the point at which comprehension fails and subtle interactions and correspondences take over: “The struggle to apprehend the supernal Loveliness- this struggle [...] has given to the world all that which it (the world) has ever been enabled at once to understand and to feel as poetic” (184). Inherent in the “poetic” is an *inability* to understand, the so-called “struggle to apprehend.” This inability fundamentally defies a relentless progress of scientific thought based on the notion of limitlessness of human propensity for comprehension. That which cannot be understood, suggests Poe, is actually the most important. This conclusion evokes Mallarmé, who, in “Le Mystère dans le lettres,” suggests similarly that a poem’s real meaning exists around and below it, in the “blanc” around the word, or the “cul-de-lampe invisible” under the text (M, 288).

Truth, suggests Poe, is still accessible, only the means of access are opposite: “In enforcing a truth we need severity rather than efflorescence of language. We must be simple, precise, terse. We must be cool, calm, unimpassioned. In a word, we must be in that mood which, as nearly as possible, is the exact converse of the poetical” (183). Notice that truth here is “enforced.” It is not shown, nor is it tested or proven. “Severity” is key. Truth exists in diametric opposition to the poetical in that truth is *useful*. This is an extremely interesting and fundamentally jarring understanding of the term “truth,” and important here is that only through defining that which truth is *not* – that is, poetry – can the nature of “truth” as concept be grasped. Truth appears here the result of mere rhetorical emphasis. It is in fact the instrument of rhetoricians, those who use words in order to accomplish tasks. Clarity is their goal, clarity being simply the absence of poetry.

And yet the conclusion of the essay is thus confounding in the extreme. Poe begins an extensive paragraph with a litany of those things he understands as inducing “in the Poet himself the true poetical effect” (198). What to make of a poetical effect that is indeed “true”? Whence this “truth” that seems to magically insert itself? Can “truth” thus be shown to be subverted, its meaning incontrovertibly multiplied? Poe does offer reconciliation:

“And in regard to Truth – if, to be sure, through the attainment of a truth, we are led to perceive a harmony where none was apparent before, we experience, at once, the true poetical effect – but this effect is referable to the harmony alone, and not in the least degree to the truth which merely served to render the harmony manifest” (198).

Poe here contradicts himself while reveling in his apparent contradiction. As Baudelaire suggests, Poe can here be understood as purposefully contradicting himself in order to aid his critical approach. The Truth initially definable in terms of its opposition to poetry is here subsumed in order to more adequately define that which is in effect poetical. Poe cannot avoid suggesting that although inherently opposed, the poetic must use what he deems “true” in order to undo a conception of Truth as driven by an aforementioned moralistic compulsion. The essay’s final paragraph constitutes an extremely moving testament to the beauty resulting from the contradiction he engenders. It constitutes not only a litany of those things he deems “true” poetical impulses, but a *performance* of the poetry conjured by manipulating Truth. The result is imagination *employed*. These evocative lines form a quasi-prose-poem, their genre-bending conclusion paving the way for a critical look at a specific nouvelle of Poe’s.

“The Imp of the Perverse” appears to immediately and utterly oppose itself to all that Poe defines in “The Poetic Principle” as beautiful – recall the “supernal Lovliness” we all “struggle to apprehend” (P, 184). And yet, it attains beauty provoking the same imagination Poe’s “struggle” does, Baudelaire argues this when he discusses “divine imagination” (B, 17) regarding Poe’s nouvelles: “Il est un point par lequel la nouvelle a une supériorité, même sur le poème. [...] les artifices du rythme sont un obstacle insurmontable à ce développement minutieux de pensées et d’expressions qui a pour objet la vérité” (19-20) Note that even in this quest for “la vérité,” Poe’s nouvelles exhibit “une supériorité.” “The Imp of the perverse” is thus a prime example of what precisely makes Poe a genius “farceur.” His ability to criticize a costume by donning it elicits Baudelaire’s sincere admiration.

“The Imp of the Perverse” can be seen as a template for many of Poe’s more well-known stories. Much like “The Black Cat” or “The Tell-tale Heart,” “The Imp of the Perverse” involves a curious and irrational impulsion to ultimate self-undoing. “The Imp of the Perverse” is an interesting case, though, because it remains a more general account, following the same basic plot structure as the others, only without the artful narrative focus that has earned them renown. In fact, the story begins in a state of description entirely removed from narrative. Its opening constitutes a kind of metaphysical meditation, and indeed appears sincerely philosophical in character. Its grammatical subject is a general first person, or an impersonal third. It resists all narrative pretension; it in fact defies fictional intent. Upon reading the opening of the story, one does not presume to have begun a story at all. This false opening is also key to the story’s ultimate conclusion. Rather than tell, this opening *explains*. Interesting of course that a narrative should *commence* with explanation; nothing has yet happened for a narrator to explain. And yet grounding the story’s irrational content in carefully established rationality artfully sets up the story’s brilliantly macabre – and irrational – conclusion.

“The Imp” takes a turn toward narrative when an intimate first person address jumps from philosophical obscurity at the reader: “I have said thus much, that in some measure I may answer your question, that I may explain to you why I am here, that I may assign to you something that shall have at least the faint aspect of a cause for my wearing these fetters, and for my tenanting this cell of the condemned” (Poe, *The Complete Stories*, 858). Not only has the shapeless author of the opening suddenly taken form (human) and location (prison), a reader is also intimately addressed. In addition, this presumed reader is presumed to have spoken, to have engaged conversationally with the



fettered narrator. Suddenly, shockingly, within a mere sentence, an entire narrative has sprung up, and not simply contained within said sentence, but suggested by it. Most of this sentence's considerable action has taken place beyond its small confines. This sentence is genius, and illuminates Poe as "farceur" immediately. For within this one sentence, the reader – not to mention the story itself – becomes fully and viscerally aware of all the delicate machinations of the fictive process that have been put to work creating this very moment. The genius of the moment is that it reveals *while doing*. It is thus critical of the fictive act while managing to maintain the fictive coherence necessary to extending a narrative and telling a story. In that it moves beyond itself, inhabiting those secret spaces between its words, this sentence attains what Baudelaire and Poe attribute almost exclusively to poetry: beauty.

Yet here again, contradiction abounds. In line with Poe's thesis in "The Poetic Principle," that which is true is only so as a result of its cold, measured, mathematical enforcement. The appeal to philosophical rationality that opens the story can be seen at once as both reinforcing Truth in a general sense, and creating the fictive mode of truth that the story will in the end move to corrupt. Question being: how can a sentence that appears upon examination to have attained a level of beauty remain couched in the calculated establishment of truth? Further examination is warranted. The narrator, with whom a reader has established an extensive, intimate relationship, continues to narrate, describing in relative detail the disturbing circumstances that culminated in his present imprisonment. Yet the machinations of fiction begin again to reveal themselves from beneath their façade. If, as the narrator suggests, he is telling a reader his story, who has written it down? If, as he ends his story, he will find himself tomorrow in a ghostly

elsewhere, what is a reader (or listener) to make of his story's perpetual redoing? The narrator's direct and profoundly intimate address appears at once utterly true. It pretends in every way to that ultimate Truth which Poe pits against Poetry in his essay. And yet the very nature of its fictional form reveals the pretense of truth to be just that – a pretense. By the same token, truth here is also shown to be a fictive device. Its use reveals Poe's critical intention, elevating the story to that plane of the "divine imaginary" suggested by Baudelaire. In criticizing its own insistence upon truth, the story invites an ironic reading of itself, elevating itself to (equating itself with?) poetic beauty.

Further, the insistence upon rationality evinced by the story's self-consciously "prolix" (Poe, 858) opening serves to contradict the fundamentally irrational nature of the "Perverse." In fact, despite its rationality, the opening succeeds only in defining perversity as that which *isn't* rational. And yet the story formally and rhetorically appropriates rationality in order to suggest the irrational. Once again, Poe's propensity for caricature emerges: the irrational appropriates the guise – in this instance linguistic – of the rational in order to mock it. The rational is thus emphasized, ballooned. The opening is indeed "prolix" to the point of bombast. Whether or not it in fact means anything is redundant. Its meaning is as much formal as topical. Of course, the insistence upon a *moral* ir/rationality is something to note. The moral sense as compass is destabilized by the story, much as an essential conception of Truth is destabilized by the failure of the story's fictive form to be objectively "true." In the moral absence that is this "Perverse," morals themselves are shown to be defined as much by their lack as by their presence. With Poe's essay in mind, the question of a "useful" fiction recalls itself. In "The Imp of the Perverse," any moral agenda is deliberately upended, yet, as Baudelaire suggests

when he calls Poe a “jongleur,” the upending of this agenda is performed – juggled, so to speak – as much as it is referred to. The story’s very creation pushes habits ordained by morality to their limit in order to question them. To use an earlier metaphor: it criticizes morals by donning them as costume, thereby revealing them to be no more than costume. Although the events detailed never took place, they claim to have done so, which claim is destabilizing in the extreme. The story itself eggs on those in search of simple “verification” – in Baudelaire’s words: “ô vérificateurs de ce qui ne peut pas être vérifié !” (Baudelaire, 8) – by tempting them to search for what inevitably is not there. Thus fiction, through its failings, permits access to that “imaginary,” which, in the case of the moral, reveals the very structure of things – their contingency.

## Chapter II

## Baudelaire's Critique

The above reading of Poe's "The Imp of the Perverse" suggests that the text not only permits but encourages an ironic reading of itself. The story's final moments, when the text reveals its truth to be simply the illusion of truth – when it *enacts* truth in so doing – are most pertinent here as they pertain to the following discussion of Baudelaire. Another reading of Poe's text as moral critique was described, and will also be engaged as pertaining to Baudelaire's poetry. The text's ironic self-understanding in fact enacts its moral critique; this relationship is pertinent to understanding Baudelaire as well.

Earlier it was claimed that the irony elicited by Poe's text's self-reference was precisely what elevated it to the poetical plane of the beautiful, leading Baudelaire to praise it so. As was also suggested earlier and will be shown in more detail, the "utility" of a text wedded to morally ordained realism disgusts Baudelaire. Such a text refuses to titillate the mind, to provoke what he refers to as the "divine imaginary," the ability of thought to physically transport a reader. This in mind, it seems like "The Imp of the Perverse" would be of little interest to Baudelaire. As shown, it revels in the real, fetishizing as it were the semblance of truth by appropriating different stylistic turns: the appearance of philosophical discourse, professorial declamation, last will and testament, confessional statement, diary entry, intimate address. These rhetorical styles are important because they convey truth, and are employed as such. But they are also exaggerated in turn, which exaggeration Poe uses to subvert the "truth" they claim.

Where is the origin of Baudelaire's admittedly non-obvious admiration for such ardent and seemingly heartfelt truthful proclamations located? Yet the origin is just there,

in the sentence immediately preceding this one: “seemingly.” In his “Notes nouvelles,” Baudelaire presents the future reader of Poe with a word of caution: this man does not mean what he says; he revels in *farce*: “[...] Poe fut toujours grand, non-seulement dans ses conceptions nobles, mais encore comme farceur” (Baudelaire, 7). The truth of Poe’s tone in “The Imp of the perverse” is so true – painfully so – that it creates the presence of falsehood. That is, the *untruth* of the story – its logical impossibility – is revealed through the trueness of the story itself. The story is its own undoing, its own defamation, and most importantly its own critique. Here is the origin of Baudelaire’s admiration. For a story that is critical of itself, that admonishes its own power, that reveals only the art of the fictive, is a story that approaches the beauty of the poetical. When words are given double meaning – a plurality of reference – they cease to remain within the mundane and task-oriented world of definition and move stealthily into the sublime mode of the poetical. Thus their referentiality is also ironical. Interesting also that within an essay that vilifies the then-current status of discourse both critical and popular – recall the “sphinx sans énigme” (Baudelaire, 4) that begin his “Notes nouvelles”<sup>1</sup> – Baudelaire should so heartily laud an author for the self-critical capacity of his work.

That said, both authors had their own critical streaks. Poe’s “The Poetic Principle” is evidence of this streak, like Baudelaire’s “Notes nouvelles.” Yet in “The Poetical Principle,” Poe defines poetry by its reliance on the very “truth” both he and Baudelaire criticize: “And in regard to Truth – if, to be sure, through the attainment of a truth, we are

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<sup>1</sup> Or this lick from the same: “Combien eût-il ri, de ce rire méprisant du poète qui ne grossit jamais la grappe des badauds, s’il était tombé, comme cela m’est arrivé récemment, sur cette phrase mirifique qui fait rêver aux bouffonnes et volontaires absurdités des paillasses, et que j’ai trouvée se pavanant perfidement dans un journal plus que grave : Le progrès incessant de la science a permis tout récemment de retrouver le secret perdu et si longtemps cherché de... (feu grégeois, trempe du cuivre, n’importe quoi disparu), dont les applications les plus réussies remontent à une époque barbare et très-ancienne !” (Baudelaire, 11-12)

led to perceive a harmony where none was apparent before, we experience, at once, the true poetical effect [...]” (Poe, 198). This reliance, though, is ultimately self-critical. The *utilization* of truth as poetic device is what permits a subversion of the moralistic “truth” Baudelaire disdains for its very utility. Baudelaire admires Poe’s essay – and quotes it so thoroughly – because it functions by revealing the same “truth” to have been used. So “The Poetic Principle” performs the very transformation it describes, turning statements of fact – truth – into acts of displacement: beauty creeps in where before there was none. Truth is not “simple, precise, terse [...] cool, calm, unimpassioned” (Poe, 183), but merely the form rhetoric takes to convey an image as such. Thus Baudelaire reveals Poe to be above all else an author capable of meaning other than what it is he writes. Such double meaning is the seat of irony.

While this might not initially appear a compliment, Baudelaire means it as one of the most profound sort, and it is this quality above all others that, for Baudelaire, makes Poe a poet of the first. But these questions then present themselves: why did Baudelaire go to such great lengths to compliment a (deceased) colleague? Why attempt to explain the ironic value of an œuvre also successfully operative on fundamentally simpler – or rather, less ironic – fictive levels? Why put so much effort into what effectively became a monopoly over the reception of Poe’s work in France?<sup>2</sup> Baudelaire’s correspondence reveals vacillation in his stance on Poe, as in this letter to Mme Paul Meurice, dated February 18<sup>th</sup>, 1865: “Je regarde les traductions comme un moyen paresseux de battre monnaie” (Brix, 59). What is more, Baudelaire’s translations of Poe’s short stories

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<sup>2</sup> Consider Michel Brix’s interesting interpretation: “Baudelaire, qui s’était fait en France le spécialiste de Poe, ne pouvait déconsidérer publiquement celui-ci sans mettre en cause l’intérêt de son travail, et donc ne disposait plus, pour la critique, d’une entière liberté de parole.” (Brix, 59)

remained a primary source of income throughout his life.<sup>3</sup> This essay suggests, though, that Baudelaire's writings themselves reveal the complexity of this stance. To answer the questions posed, this essay claims the extent of Baudelaire's critical and translational attention to Poe's writings shows his *reliance* on them. Further, Baudelaire devoted himself to disseminating Poe's writings because he considered them necessary to a general comprehension of his own work. Baudelaire's critical attention to Poe and his dissemination of Poe's work in translation suggest an attempt to prime an audience for learned access to his own artistic endeavor. His condemnation of poetry's then-current critical discourse shows he understood such learned access to be widely unavailable. The subtle nature of his critical insight into Poe and the fact that this insight is framed as a compliment create an explanatory key that opens a richer reading of Poe. This richer reading could then be used to access Baudelaire's own loftier, more erudite poetry. As a foreword to his translations of Poe's nouvelles, Baudelaire's "Notes nouvelles" becomes a kind of gauntlet: "if you have read my "Notes" and understand them," Baudelaire is imagined adding, "you may proceed to Poe, and then perhaps to my own work..." The line between gauntlet and instructional manual is fine, though, and one that Baudelaire of course never consciously acknowledges. The essay's own explanation is certainly erudite in the extreme. Yet it also remains a general critique, and interestingly refrains from illustrating its most subtle claim – that Poe was at every turn *joking*, that he meant other than what he wrote – with direct textual allusion to Poe's fiction. Baudelaire reserves this illustration for his own creative work. His critique of Poe's work does not take place in

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<sup>3</sup> Again, Brix: "Jusqu'aux rachats des droits par Michel Lévy, le 1er novembre 1863, les traductions de Poe — qui étaient payées à Baudelaire par son éditeur mais également par les directeurs des journaux où elles paraissaient en préoriginales — ont constitué pour l'écrivain français sa seule source de revenus réguliers." (Brix, 59)

the essay; rather, it is performed within his poetry itself, complicating a poetry that, it will be claimed, already operates with respect to an intrinsic irony cultivated through self-referentiality. Poe's "The Imp of the Perverse" was discussed so as to illustrate this point. A poem of Baudelaire's – "Le Mauvais vitrier" – may be fruitfully understood as precisely the critique-in-poetry just described. As will be shown, it is both directly and indirectly an analysis of Poe's "The Imp of the Perverse."

Whether or not Baudelaire read Poe's "The Imp of the Perverse" before writing his own "Le Mauvais vitrier" is inconsequential. That said, moments in Baudelaire's correspondence suggest that the nature of his textual relation to Poe was questioned following the publication of his translations. In the same letter to Mme Meurice mentioned earlier, Baudelaire writes: "J'ai perdu beaucoup de temps à traduire Edgar Poe, et le grand bénéfice que j'en ai tiré, c'est que quelques bonnes langues ont dit que j'avais emprunté à Poe mes poésies, lesquelles étaient faites dix ans avant que je connusse les œuvres de ce dernier" (Brix, 57). The nature of this chronology takes on a subjective tinge; Baudelaire's strong reaction reveals no uncertain contempt for the "bonnes langues" that have unequivocally denounced his poetry as derivative. A caustic and typically Baudelaireian sarcasm penetrates even his casual correspondence. Referenced beneath the bitterness, though, is a kind of unity of idea, an affinity of purpose with Poe. Having acknowledged the filial nature of their theoretical bond, and the subjective nature of any chronological attempt to define this bond, describing it in detail can now be pursued textually. That is, Baudelaire's poetry actually clarifies – or rather, shows – the complexity of his relationship to Poe better than his criticism, or even a history of that criticism.



“Le Mauvais vitrier” is a striking title. It remains utterly specific, doing little more than pointing to the story’s literal content. It answers the reader’s – that is, the critic’s – initial and principle question: what is the story just begun about? This title *clarifies* – or seems to – in precisely the way Baudelaire rejects in his introductory notes on Poe. And yet, whether or not the story is in fact about a bad glazier remains a question that goes unanswered. The glint imagined in Baudelaire’s eyes is the very same glint he, in his “Notes nouvelles,” imagines in Poe’s own. This is a title that makes fun of titles. And humor is indeed the intention. Baudelaire’s insistence on monikers that invoke the humorous – “caricature,” “farceur,” “jongleur” – reinforces this intention by going so far as to perform said humor with regard to Poe. For the subject matter of Poe’s work is inherently not funny; recall his relation to the Gothic mentioned supra. Is it not funny, then, that Baudelaire would find the use of this darkness itself funny? From the very title, Baudelaire invokes irony by inviting humorous juxtaposition. Like Poe, he caricatures a title, uses the title itself to question a title’s discursive role.

The title’s ironic flippancy also ushers a reader into the text. In that it is obvious or utilitarian, the title in fact ironically induces subtle intrigue; this intrigue has little to do how or why said glazier is “bad.” It only becomes important as the story reveals the “bad glazier” to play a supporting, rather than leading role. The title’s simplicity is deified by the text. Baudelaire’s claim about Poe seems immediately pertinent: poetry is defined by that use of words, which leads those same words to question themselves. The intrigue mentioned functions independently of reader or critic. The words inscribe it in themselves.

Having been ushered into the text, its opening immediately confronts, marking a tonic switch to the general that juxtaposes the title's straight-forward specificity. That is, whether or not the text actually involves a bad glazier is not immediately evident: "Il y a des natures purement contemplatives et tout à fait impropres à l'action, qui cependant, sous une impulsion mystérieuse et inconnue, agissent quelquefois avec une rapidité dont elles se seraient crues elle-mêmes incapable" (Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, 238). "Il y a des natures..." Can a story begin more generally? The first sentence, a lengthy paragraph, exaggerates this generality, referring to a swath of the population, a collection of individuals defined (seemingly) by their existence. These "natures" simply "exist." The French construction "il y a," like the English equivalent "there are," reinforces the opening's general ambiguity. Yet a critical reading of "there are" invites the question: where? These words in combination undo themselves – that is, their function – by instigating this question. They cannot exist without it. As such, they are words that do little more than function; they are defined by this function. Recall the extent to which Baudelaire denigrates words that simply function in "Notes nouvelles." The meaning of this opening must then contain the ironic self-reference "Notes nouvelles" calls for. In that it does, it also invites the very same critique offered by the essay, but enhanced by its placement within prose-poetry itself. That is to say, the general tone of this story's opening – its rhetorical reliance on discursive constructions – leads to the initial impression that it is not a story at all. It seems at first a natural history or catalogue. That is, in the spirit of the current essay, the opening sentence *explains*.

Of course, this "explanation" is bounded initially by the presence of a lack thereof. That which Baudelaire explains appears to be singular in that it *cannot* be

explained: “[...] sous une impulsion mystérieuse et inconnue [...]” (Baudelaire, 238). It is in fact “unknown.” Its mysterious nature both permits its discursive inculcation and ensures it remains inherently hazy, blurred, like a photograph taken while unfocused on purpose. While words permit this definition, they also clarify its inability, its lack. Irony is inevitably present. There is a subtle humor present in this irony as well: that a word used to clarify in fact blurs is funny on an ontological level. The nature – the being – of the word as object in itself is thus made subtly apparent.

The choice of the word “impulsion” is also key, and critical to the current comparison of Baudelaire’s text with Poe’s “The Imp of the Perverse.” Like the other words Baudelaire chooses in his opening paragraph, “impulsion” complicates an understanding of the text because what it defines is by nature vague. Whence this impulsion? The veritable lack of origin that defines this “mysterious, unknown” force is its defining feature, while also the feature that renders it the most vague. Physically speaking, forces describe their origin, their “doing.” Force does not simply “do” itself. Yet the force described here is alienated from any such actor, and seems somehow to appear. Baudelaire thus uses grammatical fluidity to undermine a normalized conception of force as enacted. He goes on to state that the force described is precisely the kind modern modes of knowledge fail utterly to grasp. He condemns such modes to devastating effect in his “Notes nouvelles”:

“Mais ce à quoi les professeurs jurés n’ont pas pensé, c’est que, dans le mouvement de la vie, telle complication, telle combinaison peut se présenter, tout à fait inattendue pour leur sagesse d’écouliers. Et alors leur langue insuffisante se trouve en défaut, comme dans le cas, – phénomène qui se multipliera peut-être

avec des variantes, – où une nation commence par la décadence, et débute par où les autres finissent.” (Baudelaire, *Notes nouvelles*, 6)

According to Baudelaire, a language he deems “academic” utterly fails to capture the “complication” of lived experience. Rather, its insistence upon its own trite proscriptions limits it, leaving it “at fault.” This language *uses language* to project its own sufficiency by claiming that it is sufficient. Baudelaire refers to this same irony when he writes of a “mysterious and unknown impulsion.” These words perform their critique rather than describe it, though; it is a critique *through* rather than *at*, and thus Baudelaire’s constant and unrelenting criticism. Every word he uses begins to appear both a critique of something, and critical of itself. His words refuse to defer the simultaneous outward gaze and inward turn that lend their meaning real fortitude. It is, though, a vocabulary of contradiction: that which seems strong often and easily collapses into the vague, the tenuous. That these words may be understood only fleetingly begins to define the nature of their power. Baudelaire also explicitly uses the same words when discussing Poe’s œuvre in his “Notes nouvelles,” as will be shown. Remember them, for they serve also as pivot toward the analysis involving morals mentioned supra.

Before pivoting toward the moral, the remainder of “Le Mauvais vitrier” bears examination. The second sentence (and second paragraph) begin by introducing specificity. It is introduced in small doses, though, eased into the text carefully and at length. The vehicle of specificity in this instance is example. In order to better explain the general conundrum introduced at the outset, slightly more specific language is employed. Perhaps “explain” itself is too general a term, for rather than explain as clarify, this language attempts to coral the transience of the aforementioned “impulsion” within an

explanatory gesture. Example here is perhaps better described as a kind of explicit analogy:

“Tel qui, craignant de trouver chez son concierge une nouvelle chagrinante, rôde lâchement une heure devant sa porte sans oser rentrer, tel qui garde quinze jours une lettre sans la décacheter, ou ne se résigne qu'au bout de six mois à opérer une démarche nécessaire depuis un an, se sentent quelquefois brusquement précipités vers l'action par une force irrésistible, comme la flèche d'un arc” (Baudelaire, *OC*, 238).

Note that litany – an explicit pointing – ensues. This gesture, although explicit, is not entirely so, since the individuals referred to – “tel qui...” – reside within the same obscurity of the opening’s generality. The sentence’s manic, undirected expanse further links it to the “mystery” of the opening. The examples mentioned are simply examples, with no textual relation to the story beyond their analogic ability to invoke the opening’s mystery with more perceived accuracy. They form a kind of fiction within fiction, yet that they are fictitious is key to their gestural efficacy. By mentioning these specific experiences in a general way, Baudelaire seems to say, “You know the type.” There is an implied familiarity that renders the general example more explicit. As a result, this introduction is more inviting than the opening, more relatable. Perhaps this move in fact *performs* relatability. Once again, the fiction as device appears, its oiled cogs whirring efficiently. Somewhere, vaguely, the inkling of a narrator appears, a voice suggested by the establishment of a fictive rapport, this rapport both fictional and created by fiction.

A narrative voice creeps to the fore, becoming, via the intensification of specificity mentioned supra, more and more present. The story’s next paragraph begins

with the subtle yet definitive introduction of a discursive narrative presence, although this presence remains extra-textual: “Un de mes amis, le plus inoffensif rêveur qui ait existé, a mis une fois le feu à une forêt pour voir, disait-il, si le feu prenait avec autant de facilité qu'on l'affirme généralement. Dix fois de suite, l'expérience manqua ; mais, à la onzième, elle réussit beaucoup trop bien” (Baudelaire, 238). Within this paragraph, the most important word is the third, “mes,” a measly possessive pronoun. Yet as pronoun, it stands *for* another word; in this case that word is not a word but the *concept* of a narrative as told by a narrator. The volume of the word’s implications – that for which it stands – again far exceed its formal presence.<sup>4</sup> This juxtaposition in turn creates precisely the self-referential irony infecting the story, and from which the story cannot escape.

In writing “Un de mes amis...” Baudelaire ushers in a kind of cordial familiarity juxtaposed in turn with the opening’s unfamiliarity, its acknowledged lack of the kind of certainty often associated with “narrator” as omniscient. Here, at least, the narrator appears in order to offer what sounds very much like a story, a tiny fiction that satisfies the rules of Aristotelian plot. This micro-story – a story-within-a-story – has a beginning, middle and end, as well as rising action and falling. It also has a moral of sorts, although this “moral” – which will be discussed at length – constitutes precisely the lack thereof. A semblance of omniscience is present. Trust as relation appears. To the extent that a reading concedes this tiny vignette’s semblance of veracity, it inaugurates a fictive relationship with the narrator Baudelaire’s possessive pronouns establish. If anything, this moment of “truth” further underscores through contrast the troubling nature of the opening’s insecurity. This insecurity could be said to persist through the explicit story

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of “excess” should be remembered, as it will factor significantly in the discussion of Mallarmé’s poetry below.

discussed in the form of question: *why* exactly did he do it? Key here is that the narrator does not offer an explanation – the vignette is troubling *because* it appears true, while simultaneously defying rational explanation.

Baudelaire maintains his specifying trajectory in the next paragraph, which comprises a second micro-story, this one the macabre tale of another of the narrator's friends. Like the first, it also uses explanation explicitly. The story begins: "Un autre allumera un cigare à côté d'un tonneau de poudre, *pour voir, pour savoir, pour tenter la destinée, pour se contraindre lui-même à faire preuve d'énergie, pour faire le joueur, pour connaître les plaisirs de l'anxiété, pour rien, par caprice, par désœuvrement*" (Baudelaire, 238). This moment, like the first, displays the narrator's power – and thus the power of narrative. Its dénouement is not made explicit, and yet the tension of the moment is arresting. Besides the ever-present "*Why?*" this second story makes clear it is a story by asking another more pressing, but less relevant question: what happened to him? Note as well Baudelaire's italicization of phrasal fragments, which, like the second paragraph described supra create the gesture they describe. Insistence here is key: Baudelaire's narrator is intent on conjuring the complexity of this mystifying impulse, which he has "diagnosed" within so many of his companions. "Diagnosed" is placed in quotation marks here because the implications of such a word are explicitly denigrated and formally tested in the story. Recall Baudelaire's claim in "Notes nouvelles" that the exaggerated importance of fidelity, accuracy, and truth in then-modern discourse prevent precisely this diagnosis. The state he wishes to describe is too far removed from the confines of normalization for language to reach. And yet the narrator does not shy from using language explain. Thus the formal importance of the narrator's insistence on using

explanation This contradiction, while ironic, is also tempered by a self-referential gesture toward its own *inability* to explain. The resulting irony is perhaps more important; the narrator spends most of the opening explaining the extent to which that which is being explained *cannot* be explained. The story thus implicates its own failure from the outset. It criticizes *itself* before all else.

This can be claimed before examining the entirety of the story in detail because the rest of the story functions ultimately as performance of this claim; that is, the story itself makes this claim first by performing it. The power of “Le Mauvais vitrier” comes from its ability to make this claim about itself before any exegetical scalpel crosses its discursive flesh. The story continues: the narrator offers yet more examples of friends overcome by the same mysterious impulse. It seems there is an epidemic, to employ once more a language denied by the story itself. But following his third vignette, the narrator makes a bold rhetorical move by asking precisely the question his multiple micro-stories have themselves asked. The formulation of this question is also striking for its brevity, which further enacts the shock latent within the question itself. “Pourquoi?” asks the narrator, “Parce que...” (Baudelaire, 239). What an answer. Again, as so often, an infinity appears contained within a frankly rather insipid rhetorical construction. “Why?”: the very question this essay posited the existence of earlier. It is stated baldly, matter-of-factly, without buffer or padding, simply an indent. It forces what narrative direction the story had amassed to a grinding halt. The explanatory tone of the opening prevails in this inquisitorial interjection. And yet, its failure as explanation is made all too obvious. To answer this ultimate and prevailing question with a mere “Because...” is equivalent to a tepid shrug of the narrative shoulders. This maddeningly lacking answer is genius,



though, precisely because it is maddening. Once again, as in the poem's very opening words, this pivotal narrative – and argumentative (note the blurring of creative and analytic) – moment is given over to a rhetorical construction.

Much like its English equivalent, two words crippled by use into a banal one, “Parce que...” is little more than the logical, inevitable, and “correct” response to the all-important question. As an answer, it is little more than a let down. Yet in that it recognizes its own rhetorical construction, it also permits its transparency. The failure of language to grasp the complexity of the “condition” the story recognizes is again performed, this time by the reflexive use of a stock answer. Its use is reflexive because it follows on the heels of its question without ceremony. It abuts the question, belying an almost scientific clarity, a near legal brevity, and an entirely “useful” reduction. It seems unnecessary to point out the irony in such a usage, yet the way in which Baudelaire as author punctuates his narrator's response complicates his apparent dejected defeatism. The use of an ellipsis masterfully circumvents this defeat by first and foremost acknowledging it. More words are not necessary. Instead, the stock answer instigates the absence of words suggested by the ellipsis. The presence of this ellipsis is thus the absence of words. It refers beyond words by demarcating the immediate geography of their lack. This ellipsis also belies further reliance on text – here reduced to punctuation – as discursive device. Which is to say, the presence of an ellipsis indicates something beyond the page, beyond word, yet exists only through its being written. The narrator's theatrical involvement in the ellipsis – the aforementioned shoulder shrug – is unclear. It is in fact speculative. The very use of “shoulder shrug” references the current essay's lazy reliance on analogy to suggest what precisely this ellipsis might refer to. That said, it

refers principally to itself, and its own existence as formal punctuation. In this way, the story perpetuates its thorough and multivalent self-critique.

Directly following this discursive shrug, the narrator concludes his specifying trajectory – a rhetorical telescoping – by introducing the grammatical zenith of specificity: the first person singular. Suddenly, shockingly, once again without padding or preparation, the narrator introduces himself. That is, *a* narrator becomes *the* narrator. The presumed truth inherent in a friend’s description – if friendship implies proximity – here becomes incontestable. To the extent that friendship (in this instance the third person) is indeed proximity, the first person is no less than precise, precision being not truth, but the terms of an agreement with the reader established by the narrative itself. If use of the first person implies honesty, validity, and authenticity, then its fictional presence must carry the same weight. Key here is that this fiction *utilizes* the aforementioned agreement in order to create the “effect” (Poe, *Critical Theory*, 198) of sincerity.

The opening’s telescoping trajectory thus transforms an omnipresent generality into pinpoint specificity. Even the use of verbal tense, the *passé composé*, implies inherent narrative precision. Note that in English the translation of this tense is the “perfect.” The fact that the very *application* of this tense implies the truth of what is said strongly suggests the discursive nature of the so-called truth. Yet in this context, use of the first person singular – an admission of subjectivity and opinion – seems weak as regards scientific discourse’s reliance on accuracy and impartiality is concerned. Much scientific writing avoids the semblance of partiality by using the impersonal third, or plural first. Baudelaire as author here chooses to consciously eschew such semblance of truth as proven in favor of the personal intimation of *faith* – that is, a belief in the facts of

the narrator's narrative, despite only discursive evidence. Irony cannot be avoided. In choosing faith over proof, Baudelaire furthers his already biting critique. The present "I," personal and subjective though it may be, is ironically more "true" than any objective rationalization blind to its own shortcomings. Baudelaire's "I" is more true precisely because it moderates its pretense of "truth" by acknowledging its failure.

As the opening would suggest, the narrator's "I" is both true and fallible, honest and false. "I" introduces himself this way: "J'ai été plus d'une fois victime de ces crises et de ces élans, qui nous autorisent à croire que des Démons malicieux se glissent en nous et nous font accomplir, à notre insu, leurs plus absurdes volontés" (Baudelaire, 239). Notice that this introduction includes explicit mention of belief, will, and authority – an authority always already undermined. This "I" that relies heavily on belief. Rather than truth, belief is a willingness to acknowledge truth exactly where it cannot be pointed at, shown or described. Notice also that the very thing "I" has been gesturing toward from the beginning, that initial and omnipresent "mysterious and unknown impulsion," is here given a name. It is a name in part because is capitalized, although capitalization again references the discursive structure that permits this name. "Démons" are not simply the "demons" to which the word literally refers, but the core of the narrator's opening argument given a name. All the vague gesturing, the digressional examples, the micro-stories – all initial explanation is here summer up. This summation interestingly parallels the narrative's telescopic culmination in first person singular. In as much as the narrator is named ("I"), that which he attempts to conjure is also named ("Démons"). The parallel is both artful and direct. As the origin of the text – its narrator as reporter – becomes purportedly clear, the subject of his report is also clarified by analogy. And yet this

clarity has been shown by the text itself to be contested: what could be less true than fiction, less precise than a name? The discursive reality of these concepts reveals their failure and once more ushers in irony. More, the presence of an ironically unclear clarity at this moment of definition subtly and powerfully *redefines* the terms that have themselves been claimed to do just that. The text suggests the Démon supposedly capitalized by “I” is actually *irony itself*. With regard to the text, irony has been discursively shown to perform the insidious and malevolent destruction these Démons perform in the narrator’s exemplary tales. Irony destabilizes, it questions, and perhaps above all, its presence *criticizes*.

Before a look at the ending of Baudelaire’s text and a comparison between “Le Mauvais vitrier” and “The Imp of the Perverse,” the presence of morality in “Le Mauvais vitrier” must be addressed. This moral backdrop, perhaps subsumed by the discursive nature of its construction, plays an important role in facilitating what is its essential undoing, its deconstruction. The example of the “Démons” just mentioned is extremely pertinent. This “Démon” is textual before it is moral; even though the text’s narrative doesn’t make this argument explicit, its nature as text is sure to. But the word “demon” cannot fail to supply a moral overtone. The word implies malevolence and trickery – everything redolent of evil, in the most moral sense. In the definitive paragraph mentioned, Baudelaire writes: “des Démons malicieux se glissent en nous et nous font accomplir, à notre insu, leurs plus absurdes volontés” (Baudelaire, 239). These Demons are malicious in that their intent is *bad* – here note the relevance of the story’s title. The narrator’s vague reference to a “mysterious and unknown impulsion” comes with the moral designation *bad*. And yet, this designation represents an attempt to reinvigorate the

term, to redefine it, rejuvenate it, instill it with new life and potency. Bad is not simply the opposite of good. Like the impulsion the narrator seeks to define, the opening of this poem also seeks to define – that is, complicate – a tired, lame, trite conception of “bad” as moral, and push it beyond the normativity of morals in general. This is a moral sense that seeks the very same complication words themselves seek in the text.

How then to reconcile the present redefinition of morality with Baudelaire’s disdain – and also Poe’s – for the utilitarian story that seeks only to further a moral end? Even in “Le Mauvais vitrier,” Baudelaire explicitly decries the failure of those who attempt explanation via moral doctrine:

“Le moraliste et le médecin, qui prétendent tout savoir, ne peuvent pas expliquer d'où vient si subitement une si folle énergie à ces âmes paresseuses et voluptueuses, et comment, incapables d'accomplir les choses les plus simples et les plus nécessaires, elles trouvent à une certaine minute un courage de luxe pour exécuter les actes les plus absurdes et souvent même les plus dangereux.”

(Baudelaire, 238).

This disregard is primarily textual – the doctor and the moralist fail first discursively – but with regard to that *bad* just described, the presence of the moralist is important in that he, like the doctor, *fails*. The moralist as traditional, archetypal even, cannot fathom a new “absurd” badness. Its connection with the absurd is key because “absurd” defines, like the impulse it describes, an absence, specifically of rationality. To the extent that grammar, syntax, diction, and orthography have been agreed upon as rational – that is, correct – Baudelaire’s mysterious impulse becomes the opposition – incorrect – yet *correctly*, using correct diction, syntax, etc. The subversion of this system includes the

moral overtone mentioned: the correct can in fact become incorrect, the good in fact *bad*.

Baudelaire writes about the *bad* with respect to Poe's fiction in "Notes nouvelles":

“Mais voici plus important que tout : nous noterons que cet auteur, produit d'un siècle infatué de lui-même, enfant d'une nation plus infatuée d'elle-même qu'aucune autre, a vu clairement, a imperturbablement affirmé la méchanceté naturelle de l'Homme. Il y a dans l'homme, dit-il, une force mystérieuse dont la philosophie moderne ne veut pas tenir compte ; et cependant, sans cette force innommée, sans ce penchant primordial, une foule d'actions humaines resteront inexplicables, inexplicables. Ces actions n'ont d'attrait que parce qu'elles sont mauvaises, dangereuses ; elles possèdent l'attraction du gouffre. Cette force primitive, irrésistible, est la Perversité naturelle, qui fait que l'homme est sans cesse et à la fois homicide et suicide, assassin et bourreau ; – car, ajoute-t-il, avec une subtilité remarquablement satanique, l'impossibilité de trouver un motif raisonnable suffisant pour certaines actions mauvaises et périlleuses pourrait nous conduire à les considérer comme le résultat des suggestions du Diable”

(Baudelaire, *NN*, 9).

Note the fascinating insistence on the inherent “evil of man.” Perhaps this evil is more a capacity than an explicit tendency toward wrongdoing, but its claim is abundantly clear. Note also that Baudelaire uses the very same language he employs in “Le Mauvais vitrier” to describe this capacity for evil: “une force mystérieuse.” Note again his insistence that modern ways of interacting with morals – even philosophy – utterly fail to conceptualize this inverse moral capacity. For Baudelaire, and Baudelaire claims for Poe

as well, it is the role of fiction, and more importantly of poetry, to engage this capacity for evil. Recall the title of Baudelaire's one published collection: "Les Fleurs du Mal."

And yet the responsibility Baudelaire and Poe award poetry by entrusting it with understanding this moral capacity for vice involves just the subversion mentioned earlier. That is to say, poetry cannot aim to perpetuate the moral dichotomy of good and bad. Rather, poetry represents precisely the means of showing the falsity behind this polar conception of morality, and not only its falsity, but its constant perpetuation through the "correct" grammatical construction. The appeal to absurdity is thus an ardent and meaningful one. Those interstices where all meaning appears lost seem now the very moments where the possibility of redefinition is present, perhaps even the possibility of an imaginary beyond definition.

If perhaps apparent, it is still important to reiterate the claim made earlier that Baudelaire's "Le Mauvais vitrier" is both a prose-poem and a critique of Poe's. The first aspect of comparison is the telescopic opening. This formal aspect appears in both stories, although reduced significantly in Baudelaire's. The reference is explicit, and on this most general level, implies the essence of the claim just supra. Much like Baudelaire's thorough and laudatory analysis of Poe in "Notes nouvelles," the fundamental reference between these stories' respective openings implies that they cannot be understood separately. Their respective meanings are tied up in one another. Another general formal characteristic complicates their intertwined state: Baudelaire refers to his composition as a "poème en prose," while Poe refers to his own as a "tale" or "story." Use of these monikers highlights the critical aspect of Baudelaire's text moreso than Poe's. At this general level, it can be shown that Baudelaire's intention involves a

more explicit critique of the poetic, as opposed to Poe's singularly fictional one – although like Baudelaire's it implies "in prose," it doesn't simultaneously intimate poetry. Baudelaire says as much in the "Note Nouvelles" when he refers to the short story ("nouvelle") as Poe's coinage:

"Je sais que dans toutes les littératures des efforts ont été faits, souvent heureux, pour créer des contes purement poétiques ; Edgar Poe lui-même en a fait de très-beaux. Mais ce sont des luttes et des efforts qui ne servent qu'à démontrer la force des vrais moyens adaptés aux buts correspondants, et je ne serais pas éloigné de croire que chez quelques auteurs, les plus grands qu'on puisse choisir, ces tentations héroïques vissent d'un désespoir" (Baudelaire, 19).

This quotation is remarkable because, having praised Poe's short stories, Baudelaire claims their utter and inevitable failure on the grounds that they *are not poetry*. They approach poetry, yes, but they do not, and will never achieve it, the tragedy of the moment captured in "désespoir." One wonders what poetry actually achieves the ideal Baudelaire describes here. His own prose-poem then offers a related critique on the failure of the poetical form itself. This critique, though, is only made possible by the critique of fiction Poe's nouvelle describes discursively.

A second aspect of formal similarity involves the pieces' endings; both conclude with a question. That said, the stories end in very different places. Poe's narrator concludes his monologue on the verge of death, while only the prospect of such devastating "péril" (Baudelaire, *OC*, 240) is present for Baudelaire's. Baudelaire's narrator is never physically punished (nor does he await the *certainty* of punishment) but the *presence* of punishment is key. In fact, its presence is one of the defining aspects of



both stories. As has been argued, the discursive definition of a moral code that deems these supposedly unreasonable acts “bad” actually *creates* the acts themselves. They are made possible only because they are forbidden, deemed morally reprehensible and understood as fundamentally *irrational*. What’s at stake for Baudelaire though is somehow fundamentally closer to the nature of poetry, and the power of art itself. “La vie en beau!” is echoed like a mantra throughout the ending of “Le Mauvais vitrier.” It’s a kind of rallying cry, and definitely belligerent in nature. Here the critical aspect of the poem becomes evident: this is a “poem” that eschews formal beauty in favor of referentiality and formal criticism, while calling, crying, *demanding* beauty in life. Beauty, the poem claims, is life’s *only* goal. And yet the poem that claims it is inherently *not* beautiful. Nor is it ugly per se, but it formally defies poetical conventions intrinsically associated with beauty. And thus the destruction of the glazier’s wares that is the pivotal moment in the story is performed in the text: Baudelaire destroys poetry itself by crippling it into a prose-like form.

In this context, Baudelaire’s final question is a harrowing one, equally as challenging and impossibly rhetorical as Poe’s final question in “The Imp of the Perverse.” Baudelaire’s final question represents a pointed commentary on Poe’s. “But where?” in Poe is complicated to begin with because the narrator has already condemned himself to Hell unequivocally. Self-doubt in the face of the afterlife is tempered by and echoed in Baudelaire’s final question, which seems to suggest that “where?” is unimportant; what matters is the infinity of the beautiful, the present: “Ces plaisanteries nerveuses ne sont pas sans péril, et on peut souvent les payer cher. Mais qu’importe l’éternité de la damnation à qui a trouvé dans une seconde l’infini de la jouissance ?”

(Baudelaire, 240). What's at stake for Baudelaire is less the nature of man and more the nature of his art – the question of a human capacity for reason as defined by its lack in Poe becomes in Baudelaire the capacity of human *art* to question precisely this presence (or lack) of reason. Baudelaire criticizes Poe's text by asking the text itself – the words that comprise it – criticize *themselves*.

## Chapter III

## Mallarmé's Polemic

Poe and Baudelaire, it is suggested, constitute a self-referential unit of critique. They complete each other in that they correspond, but their correspondence also complicates both by encouraging new and variant interpretations. The critical application of Mallarmé's text to the Poe-Baudelaire unit discussed further complicates an interpretation of this unit. In complicating it also enriches, though, for Mallarmé offers an antidote to the Möbius strip-predicament mentioned. His work – both creative and analytic – here constitutes the critical element that ultimately completes the Baudelaire-Poe cycle by suggesting its annulment. That said, the finality of Mallarmé's œuvre – its capacity to destroy (annul?) – is something this essay will present in a critical light as well. Mallarmé's application with respect to Poe and Baudelaire thus both enhances and reduces an interpretation of their work; considering Poe and Baudelaire in relation to Mallarmé allows for a similarly paradoxical analysis of his work.

Unlike Baudelaire, Mallarmé did not present explicitly detail his critical involvement with Poe's work. He translated Poe's poetry – most famously “The Raven,” published in 1875<sup>5</sup> – and wrote poetry *about* Poe – “Le tombeau d'Edgar Poe” – but he did not engage with Poe's work in an explicitly critical way. That said, this essay suggests Mallarmé's “Le Démon de l'analogie” in fact engages critically with Poe's “The Imp of the Perverse” by referring to it, in the same way Baudelaire's “Le Mauvais vitrier” does in reference to the same poem. In so doing, it also offers its own commentary on Baudelaire's poem's commentary. The three poets' nexus thus represents a set of

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<sup>5</sup> Cite? Yes. As far as I can tell, it's *Le Corbeau* (avec illustrations par E. Manet), Richard Lesclide éditeur, Paris, 1875?

variations on a theme; the reference to musicality will be important considering Mallarmé's critical reliance on music as analogy for poetry's goals. In typical Mallarméan fashion, though, his prose-poem "Le Démon de l'analogie" questions precisely what is theme and what is variation, while simultaneously attaining the exalted plane of poetry. The power of Mallarmé's poetry to question, destabilize and recontextualize while remaining poetry makes it extremely pertinent to a discussion of Baudelaire and Poe. And thus, like these two poets, the fortitude of Mallarmé's work is derived from its propensity to mean many things at once by meaning other than is said. The double meaning of the written word discussed above is directly related to Mallarmé's work; his work in turn deepens a discussion of the evasion of meaning by self-consciously referring to precisely this discussion. Before showing how Mallarmé deepens this discussion in his poetry – or relating it to the Poe-Baudelaire discussion – it must be shown how he does so in critical writing.

This essay suggests that, like Poe and Baudelaire, Mallarmé's creative and analytic writings are all critical in capacity. While this is perhaps true, it assumes Mallarmé intended distinction between his creative and analytic work. Yet the work itself defies this distinction. As in the essay "Le Mystère dans le lettres," first published in 1896, his work in fact criticizes the "critical" as it removes itself from poetry. Mallarmé's defiance in the face of what he refers to as "la loi" (Mallarmé, 286) is constant, and constantly radical. As will be shown, the constancy of Mallarmé's dissent reveals each word he chooses to be precisely that: a choice. Insistence on the radical power of artistic choice invigorates his text. Like in Poe and Baudelaire, the *usage* of words necessarily removes them from this poetical plane, limiting their "beauty." But in Mallarmé, the

critical manages to critique while simultaneously gesturing toward the poetical plane it critiques. A very complex beauty is achieved.. Mallarmé achieves precisely this beauty in “Le Mystère dans les lettres.” Of course, calling it an “essay” immediately lessens it by failing to capture its genre-defying qualities. The “essay” is as much a poem as the poem of Mallarmé’s examined below. The result its genre-confusion and -assimilation is: both “essay” and “poem” deserve redefinition as terms in themselves. The essay itself also points toward this redefinition.

In his notes on the text, Bertrand Marchal suggests that “Le Mystère dans les lettres” originated as a form of reply to an article published earlier the same year (and in the same periodical) by Marcel Proust entitled “Contre l’obscurité” (Mallarmé, 499). Proust’s article was not necessarily directed at Mallarmé, but he nonetheless seems to have understood it as a personally relevant affront. In “Le Mystère” (his purported reply), Mallarmé starts by making his own claim that literature should endeavor to portray itself – recall Poe’s use of “caricature” – as *indifferent*: “Tout écrit [...] doit [...] présenter [...] un sens même indifférent [...]” (Mallarmé, 281). This claim seems directly in contrast with the nature of his reply, which is profoundly polemical. This is important because Mallarmé, a poet for whom words themselves offer all explanation necessary, here employs an explanatory tone. Note though that literature “must present” itself as “indifferent.” Whether or not it must *be* indifferent – that is, in substance – is unclear. As Marchal also points out, this explanation does not fail to be polemical (Mallarmé, 499). Of course, the very same explanation will in due time explain its own superfluity. His polemic’s key proposition is thus paradox. The result is the polemical application of a dialectical form that will eventually annul itself by rendering its explicit *incoherence*

paramount. How precisely does “Le Mystère” annul itself? First, it complicates the aforementioned paradox by presenting this polemic as bona fide debate. In so doing, it ushers in a visually and rhetorically explicit formality. .

How better to question formalistic modes of literary discourse than by using them to do the questioning? Mallarmé does precisely this in “Le Mystère,” adopting a dialectical form (mentioned supra) that his essay then negates in order to annul itself. Rather than approach it chronologically – thesis, antithesis, synthesis – starting from its synthesis best serves an exegesis of this dialectic. Mallarmé uses explicit visual cues to indicate the rhetoric that define his polemic. These cues include the use of *tirets longs* as final punctuation, the sequestration of a few words to separate paragraphs, an emphasis on grammatically inconsistent phrase structure, and abundant surrounding blank space; in short, Mallarmé goes to great length to remove these formal indicators from their discursive surroundings. The result is a map that avoids various and complex pitfalls.

At the polemic’s dialectical synthesis – where it directly engages the aforementioned paradox – the removal of formal definition reveals profound beauty and meaning: “Lire—” (Mallarmé, 287). The transcendent beauty of this phrase is done no justice here. It must be referred to within its proper visual context. Its meaning is reduced having proverbially cut it out and pasted it, but also multiplied by its extreme rhetorical presentation. Not only is the word “lire” itself important, but its position, its punctuation, and (most importantly) what else *is not present* near it are shown to be significant as well. What Mallarmé refers to elsewhere as “l’écrit” (Mallarmé, 285) appropriates new meaning here. The beauty of “Lire—” exists beyond that to which the word refers; the word *itself* is beautiful.

If this moment is indeed a “synthesis” the text must also imply its own thesis and antithesis as well, and it does so at precisely the moment Mallarmé decides to insert himself into it. This moment is almost as jarring as the synthesis discussed, but its surprise is explicitly polemical in a different way. When Mallarmé inserts himself into the text, words momentarily relinquish their subjectivity: “Je préfère, devant l’agression, rétorquer que des contemporains ne savent pas lire—” (Mallarmé, 287). Note that Mallarmé himself is purportedly the one “retorting.” It seems the words that are present no longer take charge; an “I” – a subject – has superimposed. And yet, implication aside, this sentence – note also that it is displaced visually from its concluding clauses – discursively implies the explicit presence of the dialectic this essay posited. There is an inherent opposition of meanings at work, which is further substantiated by the words’ form.

But what exactly is the “opposition of meanings” Mallarmé and his words refer to? A better question is perhaps: to whom does Mallarmé refer when he writes “des contemporains”? His remains explicitly vague. In fact, throughout his essay, Mallarmé is wary of ever actually specifying who precisely these contemporaries might be. He instead refers to them as “les malins” (281), “les individus” (282), “dénonciateurs” (287), “gens” (287), also using the various and vaguer pronouns they elicit, like “les,” “leur,” and “eux.” His obscurity is intentional. He means to force those he says “ne savent pas lire” into the very thing they are incapable of. That is, “Le Mystère” is meant to teach those who don’t know (whoever they may be, and perhaps that means everyone) how to read. By providing the antidote for the disease it diagnoses, the polemic of “Le mystère” is closely related to that of Baudelaire’s “Notes nouvelles,” which, as discussed, attempts to

prime a readership for the complexity of the author's poetry by revealing the functioning of a related poetry (Poe's). Rather than refer specifically to a related work, though, Mallarmé's essay attempts to "cure" with more general criticism. Its general criticism becomes, in its generality, a critique of criticism itself. The sentence above could then refer generally to all those who criticize, and not only criticize him. Thus Mallarmé suggests further that critics in general don't know how to read. Although the essay's genesis may well have been Proust's critique, Mallarmé replies by finding a general fault. The problem, he suggests, is a systemic one.

Having identified and described the locus Mallarmé defines as his argument's synthesis, the text obligates formal articulation of the parties at odds: thesis and antithesis. The present essay claims Mallarmé capitulates to his text's demands by using the argumentative framework his conclusion necessitates.<sup>6</sup> Whether or not this claim can be successfully demonstrated, the text both inspires and *permits* the present reading – "reading" being an important word in this context. Also important is that the "coherence" implied by a formal framework is consequently undone by the text itself. Said framework must then exist solely as exegetical device posited by the present analysis. Rather than explain (or worse: simplify), said framework points toward a reading of Mallarmé that evades comprehension or understanding. This is why the word "reading" is so important. It, like other words Mallarmé favors, retains its all-important generality, even considering subsequent description. Rather than specify – which is to say, limit – it *produces*, referring constantly beyond itself. In this light, the word seems to produce its subsequent description: "Appuyer, selon la page, au blanc, qui l'inaugure, son ingénuité, à soi, [...]"

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<sup>6</sup> It is also entirely possible that this analysis prioritizes its own coherence by concretizing elements of the text left intentionally recondit.



(Mallarmé, 288). The infinity produced by such words in absentia is key to Mallarmé's synthesis, which will be re-discussed at length shortly.

First though, a look at the two sides Mallarmé opposes: his thesis and antithesis. The first large section of "Le Mystère" details the opposed side, which is the side Mallarmé disdains. This opposing side constitutes the *bad* one. Recall Baudelaire's similar use of this descriptor; much like Baudelaire's critique's social implications discussed above, Mallarmé, despite the "indifference" to which his essay refers, subtly (and not-so-subtly) moralizes his subjects. One side is bad, the other good. But the simplification this exegetical gesture in turn implies is very possibly only functional as regards the rhetorical nature of the present analysis. In opposing two critical modes – prose and poetry – this essay claims Mallarmé intends not simply to negate one in favor of the other, but to expand both, and expose both to the action of further critical discourse.

Ironically, Mallarmé reveals the difficulty in discussing these opposed sides to be the ease with which they are construed for each other:

“Le débat — que l'évidence moyenne nécessaire dévie en un détail, reste de grammairiens. Même un infortuné se trompât-il à chaque occasion, la différence avec le gâchis en faveur couramment ne marque tant, qu'un besoin naisse de le distinguer de dénonciateurs : mais il récuse l'injure d'obscurité — pourquoi pas, parmi le fonds commun, d'autres d'incohérence, de rabâchage, de plagiat, sans recourir à quelque blâme spécial et préventif — ou encore une, de platitude ; mais celle-ci, personnelle, aux gens qui, pour décharger le public de comprendre, les premiers simulent l'embarras.” (Mallarmé, 287)

This paragraph describes the complicating paradox at the heart of said opposition in twisting, often maddening, detail. Notice foremost that the text acknowledges “the debate,” but proceeds immediately to disclaim it, suggesting it lie solely with “grammarians.” For the relegation of a word to the world of mere usage – the grammarian this world’s archetype – is insulting. And yet, the complexity of the debate itself is then described in full, grammatical detail. This grammar also implies further the moralizing polemic mentioned above.

Note that Mallarmé here refers to his aforementioned “contemporaries” as “le gâchis en faveur couramment.” The troubling aspect of this opposition is thus tethered to a notion of the popular and current, like in Baudelaire. This current “gâchis” is troubling in that “un infortuné” fails to grasp the difference between it and what Mallarmé’s polemic opposes it with. “L’obscurité” is thus an “insult” in the eyes of whatever this generally “current” might represent. That is, the goal of the “current” is *comprehension*, a base sentiment that Mallarmé’s polemic moralizes. Comprehension, like usage mentioned supra, is *bad*, in a removed, idealized sense. Rather than simplify his argument Mallarmé’s *bad* – much like Baudelaire’s – in fact *complicates* the meaning of “bad.” Thus when Mallarmé decries the “fonds commun” of utter nonsense, the concepts of “obscurité” and “incoherence” are both negative as they define an opposed party, and positive – that is, *good* – as they define the remaining party he lauds. This “remaining party” – presumably the good one – deserves its own exegesis.

Mallarmé names the opposition in question at the beginning of “Le mystère”: “Si, tout de même, n’inquiétait je ne sais quel miroitement, en dessous, peu séparable de la surface concédée à la rétine — il attire le soupçon : les malins, entre le public, réclamant

de couper court, opinent, avec sérieux, que, juste, la teneur est inintelligible” (Mallarmé, 281). Mallarmé reserves an unkind epithet for his foes: “les malins.” These individuals are “wily/cunning,” and what is more, “entre” the public, that is, “within/among” them. His foes are conspicuously denied the privileged removal of “le poète,” mentioned later (282). Regardless of their lowly position *within* a public, the “malins” still possess the capacity to “cut short” that with which they engage – earlier called “tout écrit” (281) – rendering it finally “unintelligible” to the public they cunningly influence. These “malins” thus possess a definite critical capacity. In “cutting short,” they in fact *judge*. The essay claims this judgment renders incomprehensibility incomprehensible, much like the passage mentioned supra toward the essay’s close, where the very same critics, who, “pour décharger le public de comprendre, les premiers simulent l’embarras” (287). In order to understand the implications of this opposition, consider these “malins” or “gens” generally representative of “current” critical discourse. Remember though that as discourse, it does not distinguish between the people that write/speak it and the words that are written/spoken.

Another important passage evokes the “dessein avéré propre” (282) of the same critical discourse, further claiming “ils agissent peu délicatement, en précipitant à pareil accès la Foule (où inclus le Génie) que de déverser, dans un chahut, la vaste incompréhension humaine.” (282-3). Here, “la Foule” is the public and “le Génie” the poet. Notice that capitalization of the first letter enshrine’s these terms’ generality. The words are endowed with a supreme power to represent and symbolize, and the aforementioned “malins” wish to refuse the terms precisely this power. Yet it is revealed they wish to refuse said power because of the disastrous possibility of realizing “la vaste

incompréhension humaine.” This phrase is striking because of what it is not. Rather than ponder the extreme depth of human comprehension – the extent of a general human knowledge indeed vast – the text insists upon the negation of said comprehension: human *incomprehension*. Petty popular critics thus prevent incomprehension from bearing creative fruit by denouncing it, and stopping incomprehension’s revelation short.

And yet, as in the aforementioned example, Mallarmé follows by negating the very negation he just called for: “À propos de ce qui n’importait pas” (Mallarmé, 283). This phrase is troubling, for it seemingly prevents the scandal articulated supra – a refusal to engage with *un*-knowing/-knowledge – itself from bearing creative fruit, just like “le débat” unfortunately relegated to “grammariens.” Mallarmé defines this scandal – a debate between thesis and antithesis – with his customary separated paragraphs and *traits longs*: “Le scandale quoique représentatif, s’ensuit, hors rapport — / Quant à une entreprise, qui ne compte pas, littérairement — / La leur — ” (283). Once again, the argument – a “scandal” no less – articulated at length is subsequently called “hors rapport.” In this instance, the argument is further denounced – that is, undone – because it “does not count literarily.” Possession of this literarily insignificant enterprise? *Theirs*. The fundamental opposition – thesis vs. antithesis, mine vs. theirs – is here articulated, as before, both visually and rhetorically. The “banalité” of the “immediate” (283), as Mallarmé distinguishes “their” enterprise, is thus starkly opposed to presumably his own.

“Le Mystère dans les lettres” formally articulates its thesis by defining the party opposed to Mallarmé’s own in this way. It is possible that by pointing out this formal articulation, the present analysis lessens its efficacy and makes it banal. But the text complicates its own formal articulation by already having pointed to its banality. As a

result, it negates the very depth of exegetical scope it seems to warrant. That is, sufficient analysis of this text – an analysis sufficient for comprehension – necessarily reduces it. Yet the text itself could also be said to deny this reduction, linking it with the *opposed party* it denounces at length. Understanding what *good* the text presents thus necessitates engaging with the *bad* it also defines. The text’s *actual* goal – the goal that exists “sous le text” (288) – is to foster awareness of precisely this paradox. The text, like Baudelaire’s, uses irony in order to redefine the critical propensity in language.

How then to define the text’s antithesis? Characteristically, the antithesis follows a large break in the text; a white void momentarily dominates the eye.<sup>7</sup> Defined initially and visually by its white boundary, the antithesis assumes the terse, open-ended syntax of its aforementioned thesis: “La Musique, à sa date, est venue balayer cela—” (284). Notice first that “music” is capitalized, removing it to the plane of generality toward which much of this essay gestures. Having been capitalized, it also further denotes its own intrinsic formal (and visual) articulation. Music as a general category thus stands in opposition to the limiting, comprehensible and equally general category of criticism defined initially (thesis). Notice second that Music performs a metaphorical task. That is, Music does not actually sweep anything up. Rather, the words evoke implied meaning by analogy, further defining Music’s relationship to their so-called “enterprise.” The fact that music “sweeps up” this enterprise implies that it is literally a mess. The image is strikingly clear. Notice also that the text evokes this image in one word: “balayer.” This is a powerful word because it immediately and convincingly refers to an image beyond itself. This reference beyond is precisely the “envol tacite d’abstraction” (285) Mallarmé’s

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<sup>7</sup> Although this “void” will ironically be shown to symbolize quite the opposite: it both articulates and performs the text’s synthesis, an analysis that concludes the essay.

text suggests Music so successfully exemplifies. He defines Music as his argument's antithesis – the opposite of current criticism – in a careful assemblage of beautiful prose that closely resembles poetry: “Au cours, seulement, du morceau, à travers des voiles feints, ceux encore quant à nous-mêmes, un sujet se dégage de leur successive stagnance amassée et dissoute avec art — / Disposition l’habituelle” (284). “Faint veils” immediately suggests themes of limpidity and effacement in Mallarmé’s poetry; think “Une dentelle s’abolit...” or “Éventail de Madame Mallarmé.” They also elicit what Poe calls the “poetic sentiment” (Poe, 184) by evoking potent images that refer immediately beyond the text. These images represent the presence of metaphor, a device this essay claims Mallarmé reinvigorates in “Le Mystère.” That is, his poetic diction revivifies the referential devices of metaphor and analogy by performing their liberation in the context of the essay. The radical extent of this liberation will become clear.

Another important passage must first be discussed in relation to the thesis-antithesis debate. Music in this passage is defined as precisely the incomprehensible mystery toward which all text must gesture. In order to justify this definition, the text evokes powerful, moving imagery: “Les déchirures suprêmes instrumentales [...] éclatent plus véridiques, à même, en argumentation de lumière, qu’aucun raisonnement tenu jamais : on s’interroge, par quels termes du vocabulaire sinon dans l’idée, en écoutant, les traduire, à cause de cette vertu incomparable” (Mallarmé, 285). Once again, Mallarmé’s dialectic asserts itself as opposition. The text opposes the beauty of “déchirures suprêmes instrumentales” – another striking image – with the banality of “reason.” As a result, the term “véridiques” appears ironic, like in Baudelaire, when he denounces scholarly jargon that instantiates its own validity by claiming its own truth. Notice the text performs the

same ironicization of “termes du vocabulaire,” which appears frail and measly in the face of a concept like Music. Even ideas fail to adequately capture Music’s “virtue,” another term charged with significant moral implication. Thus Music – antithesis – defines what is *good* in relation to an initial – thesis – *bad*. Note that “good” is again thoroughly complicated by its analogic (that is, with Music) lack of definition. Mallarmé admires music for precisely this indefiniteness and inherent abstraction, which his text argues the written word must emulate.

His polemic’s dialectical antithesis points toward its own synthesis, concluding: “L’écrit, envol tacite d’abstraction, reprend ses droits en face de la chute des sons nus : tous deux, Musique et lui, intimant une préalable disjonction, celle de la parole, certainement par effroi de fournir au bavardage” (Mallarmé, 285). Music is shown to exist entirely within its own analogic form. As this polemic’s antithesis, Music suggests a dialectic within Letters.<sup>8</sup> Here “l’écrit” (written word) defends itself from “la parole” (spoken word), which represents the “horror” of lowly “chit-chat,” by abstracting itself – just like Music (note the analogy). Imagine that: chit-chat is not just bad, it’s something *feared*. This ardent opposition suggests profoundly polemical critique. And yet, in an ironic turn, the antithetical opposition of Music *criticizes* the very criticism that relegated its antithesis to a fringe position in the first place. The text actually performs the irony of a critique of criticism by showing that words successfully criticize themselves through their own self-abstraction. Mallarmé also performs his polemic’s synthesis, claiming “Les mots, d’eux-mêmes, s’exaltent à mainte facette produite la plus rare ou valant pour l’esprit, centre du suspens vibratoire [...]” (286-287). The entirety of the polemic is thus

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<sup>8</sup> This term implies a reference to the essay’s title – “[...] *dans les lettres* [emphasis mine]” – while referring to the totality of written word, as in the phrase, “a man of letters.”

relegated to the “many facets” of *words themselves*. That is, the debate is thus removed from the *contextual* and placed within the *textual*.

Mallarmé’s insistence on “La Syntaxe —” (286) as a moment of “pivot” (note again the punctuationally explicit articulation of form) – that is, a “garantie” understood even by those aforementioned and deplorable “grammariens” (287) – appears to contradict its own analogy with Music. And yet, through the conscious application of artistic choice, even that which appears to “guarantee” comprehension (that is, intelligibility) can show its façade of reliable function to be cracked: “Un balbutiement, que semble la phrase, ici refoulé dans l’emploi d’incidentes multiple, se compose et s’enlève en quelque équilibre supérieur, à balancement prévu d’inversions” (286). The striking complexity of this sentence is overwhelming. Yet the text aids in its own comprehension by *performing* this “stammering.” Consider the text’s second paragraph mentioned supra, redacted in order to better convey grammatical meaning. Now examine the full sentence, which ripples with contingent and grammatically vertiginous phraselets: “Tout écrit, extérieurement à son trésor, doit, par égard envers ceux dont il emprunte, après tout, pour un objet autre, le langage, présenter, avec les mots, un sens même indifférent [...]” (281). Reading this sentence aloud is performing it, delivering it, as if a line in a play; it becomes the “balbutiement” described above as “équilibre supérieur, à balancement prévu d’inversions.” Once again, comprehending this phrase involves reduction, performed in the present analysis by the redacted version supra; ironically, Mallarmé’s text decries precisely this reduction in contemporary criticism.

Yet criticism can also be shown to expand what it criticizes, to further the text’s “envol tacite” (285) from itself. “Le Mystère” exemplifies referential and expansive



criticism best at the moment of synthesis presupposed by its polemical form: “Lire—” (287). But this gesture is more than the synthesis of Mallarmé’s self-annulling dialectic. Considering Music’s transcendent role in the text, “Lire—” as word must also be *heard*. Its separation from the words surrounding it emphasizes its heard quality. Recall discussion of the term “reading” in this essay when used to describe an analytical gesture. In this instance, the term appears doubly meaningful. “Lire—” is “read” meaning interpreted, and “read” meaning performed, spoken like a line in a play. The word as sonic structure further suggests its homophones. Consider the French homophone “lyre,” a musical instrument associated with Apollo and the Arts. Through analogy, this term evokes inspiration, creation, emotion and performance, though note that the analogy is *internal*, meaning the word evokes its own analogic reading. The *trait long* that defines this word’s graphic gesture becomes the lyre’s string, visually articulating the “centre du suspens vibratoire” (287) present in every word. This central suspense vibrates with *possibility*, the possibility of an infinity of readings, an infinity of analyses, a critical mode that embraces this infinity by avoiding the popular tendency to reduce meaning into comprehensible and inoffensive spoonfuls.

Mallarmé concludes his essay – and the sentence he begins with “Lire—” – by implicating the infinity of the blank page, as hinted at supra: “[...] Appuyer, selon la page, au blanc, qui l’inaugure, son ingénuité, à soi, oublieuse même du titre qui parlerait trop haut : [...]” (288). Pause here to consider the radical nature of this complete attribution of subjectivity to *words themselves*; the page, the white, inaugurates, according to its own taste, its own ingenuity. It forgets its own title, as the title of Mallarmé’s essay refers to the Letters that in turn forget it (see supra). The sentence

continues: “et, quand s’aligna, dans une brisure, la moindre, disséminée, le hasard vaincu mot par mot, indéfectiblement le blanc revient, tout à l’heure gratuit, certain maintenant, pour conclure que rien au-delà et authentifier le silence —” (288). The page’s white remains certain, its silence authenticated. What the text as “brisure” refers to only intimates a possibility, an infinity of reference beyond itself.

Ironically, “Le Mystère” *uses* words in order to suggest the impossibility of their use. Like Baudelaire, the critical act is key, yet Mallarmé’s critique *approaches poetry* in that it ironically performs the poetical multiplication of meaning it attempts to define. Ironic again is that this multiplication is defined by its indefinability, that is, its incomprehensibility. Ironic yet again is that words themselves manufacture both this definition and *in*-definition. In that Mallarmé emphasizes “L’air ou chant sous le texte [...]” (288) above all else, his essay suggests a reassessment of Baudelaire’s and Poe’s respective texts. Mallarmé suggests criticism – *good* criticism – must consider both what is present and what isn’t, or rather what those words that are present define in their *lack*. Just as the self-annulling dialectic of Mallarmé’s essay ironically opens its own internally negative irony to a constant and self-perpetuating rebirth – a kind of miraculous “virginité” (288) – it also manages to reclaim analogy as device – a device so easily muddied by and confused with the nonsense of a “fonds commun” (287) – for poetical “divination” (288). The importance of this reclaiming through negation, the emphasis on what lies beneath – this “cul-de-lampe invisible” (288) – is masterfully articulated and performed in the poem of Mallarmé’s mentioned *supra* as well. This poem is important, as mentioned, precisely because it refers beyond itself to the works of Poe and Baudelaire also discussed *supra*.

Mallarmé's essay reclaims for poetry the analogy as poetical "device" (although forever a device of the most rarified sort, a device against all devices, an *un-device*); his prose-poem "Le Démon de l'analogie" then performs this reclaim. That being said, as was shown supra, "Le Mystère dans les lettres" does a fine and subtle job of performing its own exegesis – its own reclaim – thereby denying and undoing it. The current analysis suggests that the two – prose-poem and essay – relate to each other along this analogic axis, which means that the two support each other. If the essay poeticizes image, the poem then imagizes poetry. While the apparent polarization of rhetorical reversal might seem to simplify, it is meant to imply that the two pieces also complicate each other. "Le Démon" and "Le Mystère" essentially do the same work. The difference is that the two operate according to the sides they oppose respectively, thereby using the other as analogy in order to criticize it. "Le Démon de l'analogie" is then the poem to which "Le Mystère" refers, a poem that always and already criticizes itself. Likewise, "Le Mystère" is the analysis "Le Démon" demands, that is, an analysis that always and already points to its own insufficiency, the insufficiency of analysis *in general*.

How is it "Le Démon de l'analogie" evokes this analogy? From the first stanza of "Démon," the narrator – who, as in Poe and Baudelaire, also subversively symbolizes the story's author – solidifies the role of "la parole" (spoken word) in the poem as *antagonist*: "Des paroles inconnues chantèrent-elles sur vos lèvres, lambeaux maudits d'une phrase absurde ?" (85). "Words" are inherently "foreign," no more than the "cursed tatters" of an "absurd sentence." Notice, though, that these words are spoken, and recall the dialectical opposition highlighted by polemic in "Le Mystère": spoken vs. written; critical vs. musical; *good* vs. *bad*. The "word" here is important also in that it refers to all

words, constituting synecdoche. In this way it suggests the “generality” that Mallarmé also emphasizes in his essay. This general character is also extremely important because it directly refers to the opening of Poe’s “The Imp of the Perverse” and Baudelaire’s “Le Mauvais vitrier.” The general, theoretical tone that characterizes these stories’ openings is mirrored in Mallarmé’s own. The difference in Mallarmé is his emphasis on reduction. What was in Poe extremely prolix, and Baudelaire slightly less so, is in Mallarmé accomplished in one sentence. And a question no less. The interrogatory formula also simultaneously refers to the questions that end Poe’s and Baudelaire’s respective stories, and whose comparison revealed so much about their interrelated modes of meaning making. By commencing with an interrogation turned inward, Mallarmé further emphasizes the extent to which the “words” of his poem are understood as interrogating first and foremost themselves. Beginning the poem with this interrogatory reference emphasizes its circularity yet again.

Another important aspect of this analogy is that it is semi-anthropomorphized, turned into an instrument that is in turn anthropomorphized as it “sings” across “lips.” The musical analogy with “singing” resonates throughout the poem, a kind of refrain that will be shown to become haunting and eerie as it steadily drives the narrator toward insanity. Like Poe’s “Imp,” responsible for inciting in its literary victim the predilection for perversity that leads to the predicament detailed by the story, Mallarmé’s musical analogy is demonic because it persists, despite its inherent potential for meaninglessness. This maddening potential is referred to in the story as “le vide de signification” (Mallarmé, 86), an incredibly important phrase because it simultaneously conjures the potential for meaning symbolized by blank emptiness – recall Mallarmé’s insistence “au

blanc” (288) at the end of “Le Mystère” – and its own purported lack of meaning *using analogy*.

And yet, the analogy connecting words and music is incredibly important to Mallarmé’s polemic in “Le Mystère.” Recall that Mallarmé’s synthetic argument hinges on an analogic relation between the Written and Music, toward which all Spoken word must in turn aspire: “L’écrit [...] prend [...] ses droits en face de la chute des sons nus : tous deux, Musique et lui, intiment une disjonction, celle de la parole, certainement par horreur de fournir au bavardage” (285). Once again, though, this analogy (as discussed above in “Le Démon”) is complicated by its own potential for meaninglessness. The poem’s narrator, for whom this analogy is important, is horrified by his own ability to perceive the analogy’s linguistic inanity at the same time as its infinity of reference. The richness of his understanding of written word as music is rendered false and empty by its own rhetorical construction, yet infinitely self-multiplying by the analogy that defines it.

Also key to an understanding of the use of analogy in “Le Démon” is its “absurd phrase” (Mallarmé, 85) to which it refers, and which seems in context a non sequitur. As a result, the poem’s purported plot (albeit an utterly abstruse one) involves the narrator’s coming to terms with the implications of this phrase, that is, his own emotional analysis of it. This phrase, “La pénultième / est morte” (286), is emphasized in the body of the story’s text much the same way those purportedly formal attributes are emphasized in “Le Mystère.” It occupies space, surrounded by the blank page so pregnant (or perhaps “Virgin” [288]) with meaning. The myriad potential for meaning in this sentence is also enhanced by its self-referential nature. The penultimate syllable to which the narrator refers, that is, “la penultième” itself, is “nul.” This “nul” both sounds like “nul,” meaning

“nothing,” and is in fact “nul,” that is, it means nothing outside its discursive context. Thus the absurd sentence referred to in the opening stanza becomes a linguistic Möbius strip that inherently and perpetually refers to nothing more than itself.

Yet as Möbius strip, it refers to a plethora of meanings and references beyond itself. It’s own critical inward turn opens it up to a vast array of meanings that frighten the narrator as he is forced to imagine them. Consider the visual way the word’s *accent grave* and *accent aigu* point back and toward each other, implying an arc that visually enacts the word’s Möbius strip quality, while at the same time centralizing the penultimate syllable, “nul.” That said, the word’s visual symbol comprises yet another aspect of the varied, moving, and pointing repertoire of symbolic gesture to which Mallarmé suggests with “Le Démon” every word – written and spoken – is subject. Even the physical construction of a word, its visual impact, cannot escape analogy’s demon.

Recall Mallarmé’s similar visual and rhetorical emphasis on “Lire—” during the synthesis of his polemic in “Le Mystère.” The word “lire” is important precisely because of its reduction, its lack of grammatically normalizing context, which in turn ordains the consideration of all this lack symbolizes. In “Le Démon” Mallarmé does something similar by representing the cursed phrase visually in the text, physically detached and yet self-referentially complete. Its words in this context assume a texture of meaning that cannot be avoided. The words *as written* become objects, artifacts just like the antique instruments that themselves become objects at the poem’s conclusion. This transformation will be examined shortly.

The dénouement “Le Démon’s” arcane “plot” subtly points to occurs in the prose-poem’s final paragraph, when the narrator looks up to find himself physically amongst

the objects of analogy he earlier fancied, as result of the demonic phrase, “descending” (Mallarmé, 86) upon him:

“Mais où s'installe l'irrécusable intervention du surnaturel, et le commencement de l'angoisse sous laquelle agonise mon esprit naguère seigneur c'est quand je vis, levant les yeux, dans la rue des antiquaires instinctivement suivie, que j'étais devant la boutique d'un luthier vendeur de vieux instruments pendus au mur, et, à terre, des palmes jaunes et les ailes enfouies en l'ombre, d'oiseaux anciens.”

(Mallarmé, 87)

The ancient stringed instruments that were before only analogy – “Je fis des pas dans la rue et reconnus en le son *nul* la corde tendue de l'instrument de musique, qui était oublié [...]” (86) - now hang on the walls of a shop, the yellow palm leaves and wings of ancient birds buried in shadow – “[...] et que le glorieux Souvenir certainement venait de visiter de son aile ou d'une palme et, le doigt sur l'artifice du mystère [...]” (86) – now on the ground before him, part of some carpet or inlay. The sudden and unanticipated congruity of analogous and real – the contemporaneity of *thought* and *seen* – is unbearable to the narrator because it somehow represents – for it cannot “verify,” which term Mallarmé deftly criticizes in “Le Mystère” – the horror of the paradox he recognized early in the story with regard to the absurd sentence itself: namely, that in its own self-annulment, this phrase actually reveals an infinity of analogous tangents, which persist indefinitely.

Interestingly, the melancholy and confusion the narrator experiences as result of his epiphany contrasts with the beauty of the analogies the phrase initially elicits. As the prose-poem progresses, the infinity of meaning self-annulment gestures to becomes

increasingly clear to the narrator. Rather than serenade, the phrase begins to “torment” (Mallarmé, 87): “Harcelé, je résolu de laisser les mots de triste nature errer eux-mêmes sur ma bouche, et j'allai murmurant avec l'intonation susceptible de condoléance” (Mallarmé, 87). With the infinite potential for recurrence finally symbolized by reification, the narrator seems to lose himself utterly, calling himself “condamnée à porter probablement le deuil de l'inexplicable Pénultième” (Mallarmé, 87). His epiphany is so troubling that it elicits the admittedly strange though somehow compelling response of just *fleeing*: “Je m'enfuis, bizarre [...]” (Mallarmé, 87). Note the extreme compression of this phraselet. All grammatical filler is removed in favor of the discord created at the junction of verb and adjective. But the question remains: how can one “flee” words, escape their omnipresence and omnipotence? “Le Démon” as poem asks this very question; “Le Mystère” as essay asks it as well. The “answer” involves the double kind of irony noted in “Le Mystère.” Much as “Le Mystère” criticizes critique using words in turn critical of themselves, “Le Démon” refers to reference using words that in turn refer to themselves, the referential act understood to be one of analogy.

What is perhaps most important is the *nature* of this irony as element in “Le Démon.” Like the discussion of Baudelaire’s “Le Mauvais vitrier” suggests supra, this irony is complex and richly emotional, so much so that an inability to grapple with its rich emotionality elicits the narrator’s bizarre flight at the poem’s conclusion. He simply does not know how to respond to so much complex irony. His *moving* (that is, emotional) response is concretized ironically by the prose-poem, in which the narrator ambles continuously from beginning to end. He is always moving, while the infinity of meaning he contemplates is always moving as well. This is a prime example of the poem’s power



to suggest multiple meanings within itself. The narrator's movement, like the capacity for analogy, is somehow "instinctively followed" (Mallarmé, 87), yet this instinctive movement has no clear direction or aim, which is what frightens the narrator. The lack of directionality constitutes a lack, while simultaneously projecting *in its lack* an infinity of possible directions.

The emotionality associated with the narrator's epiphany and attempted escape is mirrored throughout the text, and, as in Baudelaire, it begins to take on a critically moralizing air. Consider this sentence, which immediately refers to both Baudelaire's disdain for academic discourse, and Mallarmé's injurious claim about "grammarians":

"Je ne discontinuai pas de tenter un retour à des pensées de prédilection, alléguant, pour me calmer, que, certes, pénultième est le terme du lexique qui signifie l'avant-dernière syllabe des vocables, et son apparition, le reste mal abjuré d'un labeur de linguistique par lequel quotidiennement sanglote de s'interrompre ma noble faculté poétique." (Mallarmé, 87)

The "quotidian" tasks of "linguistics" are reduced to mere "labor." In contrast, the "poetic faculty" is elevated to the plane of the "noble." This diametric opposition is Baudelaireian in its ironic application of moral value. Can the poetic as a faculty that crumbles beneath an old string instrument be rightly called "noble"? The tragedy is here ironic; a Poeian inability to control the perverse auto-reflection that necessarily accompanies any kind of self-aware meaning making – analogy construction – freezes the artist in his tracks. This tragedy still suggests what Mallarmé gestures toward as *good* in "Le Mystère" – an emphasis on those constructions that permit an infinity of interpretation over simplification via reduction to lowly coherence. As in Baudelaire, an

ethics of creativity is both proposed and critiqued. The power of this moralization as clarified by Mallarmé's "Le Mystère" in relation to "Le Démon" can be further viewed as analogous – including analogy's infinite tangential meanings – to the relationship between Baudelaire's "Notes nouvelles" and "Le Mauvais vitrier." The sets of works complete each other respectively, while further permitting a more meaningful – that is, more tangential – interpretation of the other author's set.

And yet, in the face of meaning's potential, the virgin's nuptial potential, the confounding potential of the "Idea," (Mallarmé, 288), irony persists: ironic that the very words used at the behest of the story itself simultaneously communicate their own incomprehensibility, pointing to a reading's own perverse potential to render the story itself meaningless, simply a string of sonic chatter, nothing more than its own style of assembled pitch and rhythm. As intended, the possibility for comprehension is perched precariously; the poem's true plot reveals itself: what is at stake is not just the narrator's ability to comprehend, but *comprehension itself*. And it teeters at the very point where it simultaneously renders itself impossible: *words themselves*. The story is interstitial – recall the "brisure" from which "le blanc revient" (Mallarmé, 288) – in that it occupies a kind of potentiality of *infinite* comprehension. It operates simultaneously, jumping according to a *reading's* intent, rather than its own. Irony again: this ceding of analogy, this renunciation, is in turn a locus of meaning, which is the story's power: in referring, it refers away from itself in order to augment itself – it refers while remaining anti-referential – it constitutes the infinity it mourns.

## Conclusion

The conclusion the above essay necessitates necessarily does not conclude. It is an anti-conclusion. Referring to themselves by referring to each other, the texts discussed point to a referential multiplicity of meaning – both a physical void and implied infinity – beyond themselves, an infinity no conclusion could possibly use words to delimit (that is, describe). An anti-conclusion points at this infinity. By pointing, it paradoxically raises more questions than it answers. But it raises questions of particular importance, namely: how does one reconcile language’s desire to communicate with the damage communication does poetry as ideal? The present analysis asked this very question in reference to Poe, Baudelaire, and Mallarmé, but it did not offer a satisfying answer. Unfortunately, its conclusion won’t offer one either. The texts mentioned seek to resolve conflict in this question themselves by first aggravating it; they also suggest that the question’s insidious quality lies in its ability to *conceal itself* in discourse. The question, like Mallarmé’s “cursed phrase” thus answers itself by being asked. These texts suggest the question is a self-referential one *par excellence*. Its best answer, the answer that does the very work the question necessitates, is the question’s own restatement.

By revealing how critical discourse – its rhetorical form – prevents the question mentioned from being asked, the three poets discussed criticize not only poetry’s descent into the quotidian, but also the elevation and near-apotheosis of *critique itself*. The present essay aimed to show this “critique of critique” to be ironic because of its inherent paradox. Another important question thus asks itself: how can critical language be critical of critique? That is, how can critical discourse successfully serve its own annulment? Again, rather than answer this question, the texts mentioned answer it by *asking it*. They

answer this question by *performing it*. Rather than explicitly answer, these texts use critical language to critique critical language, thereby necessitating a statement of the question in response to it. I would that, like Baudelaire suggests regarding Poe, this ironic gesture is not without “une légère impertinence.” In that the present essay showed how such a meta-critical usage annuls itself, it points to the meta-irony of the three authors’ use of irony. But it is perhaps worth concluding this essay by acknowledging that the three authors get the last laugh.

The present essay’s discussion of Mallarmé in particular acknowledges their laugh. Mallarmé answers both of the questions asked in this conclusion by showing them to both reveal and subvert the same ultimate opposition. In analyzing Mallarmé’s answers, this essay suggested he, like Baudelaire and Poe, moralized his opposition so as to clarify it. That is, whether rhetorical language is ultimately proven *bad* or poetical language *good*, their polemical opposition is most important because it fosters dialectic. The conversation between these two sides answers the question of their opposition while multiplying the implications of the very same question. The ability to ask more questions is thus shown in Mallarmé to be the ultimate goal of any worthwhile critique – that is, questioning itself. Restoring language’s “mystery” thus constitutes an emphasis on question over answer. Note that pitting question against answer conforms in an interesting and subversive way to the same moralized opposition deduced in Mallarmé. I would suggest that a restoration of mystery is shown by Mallarmé, Baudelaire and Poe to involve precisely the question that always and forever asks another as its answer. Thus the best question – the only question – is the question that questions questioning.

If this essay is critical of a critique of critical language, it also inevitably renders itself meaningless. A confounding multiplication of the question asked supra presents itself. This confounding multiplication *frightens*. Mallarmé suggests this when the narrator of “Le Démon de l’analogie” “flees, bizarre.” I would suggest the present analysis performed this frightening multiplicity by questioning more than answering. Yet the provocative spirals of self-/critical discourse also answer the infinite questioning of meta-critique. Critical language is only successful in that it is *constantly and infallibly critical*. The only critical language is the language that, while recognizing its self-referential capacity, is never *content* with itself. Thus, the present conclusion constitutes a critique of the essay it concludes. For, despite the fact this essay asks how critical language can criticize critique, it employs the very same critical rhetoric it annuls by asking. Note that the word “criticize” implies it *makes* something critical; the act of criticizing inevitably also makes what it refers to critical of itself. If this essay was successful, it includes the key to its own critique. I would suggest that, in discussing Poe, Baudelaire and Mallarmé, the present essay justifies its own self-/critique.

A question asked in the essay proper bears repeating: how can one escape words? That is, how can language – words themselves – escape the words that delimit (describe) it? The textual relationship between Poe, Baudelaire and Mallarmé suggest the only conceivable answer to involve the *renunciation* of escape’s possibility. To reveal the beauty hidden in language – to preserve it by revealing it – is to engage language head-on. Since escape is not an option, the protection of language’s beauty involves constant and radical protest. In concluding, the present essay can only aspire to have joined in this

protest – to have taken part in the very protest Poe, Baudelaire and Mallarmé – internally  
and in relation to one another – always and forever incite.

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