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The Protean Ptyx: Nonsense, Non-Translation, and Word Magic in Mallarmé's 'Sonnet en yx'

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In the summer of 1868, the young Stéphane Mallarmé was living in Avignon and working as a schoolteacher. In poor health, both mentally and physically, his limited income combined unhappily with his natural profligacy to create a somewhat precarious existence for the poet and his young family. To make matters worse, Mallarmé was frustrated at his inability to write the great work he had recently envisaged, the vast, multiform masterpiece he referred to as 'Le Livre'—The Book—and which, he intended, would encapsulate the post-Christian values of the age ('L'explication orpique de la Terre'—'The Orphic explanation of the Earth'—as he would later describe it to Verlaine).¹ Missing the cosmopolitan *milieu* of Paris and resenting the Provençals as uncultured rustics, he wrote to his friend Eugène Lefébure, asking him to make enquiries as to where a good hammock might be obtained, reasoning that if one can't write poetry, one might at least relax in the shade. The letter continues:

Enfin, comme il se pourrait toutefois que, rythmé par le hamac, et inspiré par le laurier, je fisse un sonnet, et que je n'ai que trois rimes en *ix*, concertez-vous pour m'envoyer le sens réel du mot *ptyx*, ou m'assurer qu'il n'existe dans aucune langue, ce que je préfé[re]rais de beaucoup afin de me donner le charme de le créer par la magie de la rime.²

[Finally, for it could nonetheless be that, swayed by the hammock, and inspired by the laurel trees, I might write a sonnet, and since I only have three rhymes in *ix*, do your best to send me the true meaning of the word *ptyx* or to assure me that it doesn't exist in any language, which I'd much prefer, for that would give me the charm of creating it through the magic of rhyme.]

¹ Letter of 16 November 1885. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, 2 vols, ed. Bertrand Marchal, 2nd edn (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 1, p. 788. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

² Letter of 3 May 1868. Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, 2nd edn, 1, pp. 728–9.

The poem that Mallarmé was working on was his 'Sonnet en yx' ('Ses purs ongles très haut dédiant leur onyx'), and the first half of this chapter will survey how Mallarmé's editors and explicators, from the 1890s to the present, have responded to the problematic *ptyx*. Is it indeed a term invented by the poet 'through the magic of rhyme', or is it in fact a real, albeit foreign word, whose meaning is part of Mallarmé's design for the poem? Should we read it either as an instance of nonsense or as non-translation? The second part of the chapter looks at a third way—and another type of magic—in which the protean *ptyx*, adopted firstly by Alfred Jarry and subsequently by the avant-garde Collège de 'Pataphysique, slips its moorings altogether from any discourses of the poet's intention, moving from the category of the untranslated to the untranslatable.³ The chapter will conclude by comparing these three versions of the *ptyx* through the lens of C. K. Ogden's interwar critique of 'word magic'.

The sonnet, as it would eventually appear in Mallarmé's *Poésies* (1887) runs like this:

Ses purs ongles très haut dédiant leur onyx,
 L'Angoisse ce minuit, soutient, lampadophore,
 Maint rêve vespéral brûle par le Phénix
 Que ne recueille pas de cinéraire amphore
 Sur les crédences, au salon vide: nul ptyx,
 Aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore,
 (Car le Maître est allé puiser des pleurs au Styx
 Avec ce seul objet dont le Néant s'honore.)
 Mais proche la croisée au nord vacante, un or
 Agonise selon peut-être le décor
 Des licornes ruant du feu contre une nixe,
 Elle, défunte nue en le miroir, encor
 Que, dans l'oubli fermé par le cadre, se fixe
 De scintillations sitôt le septuor.⁴

An English version, translating for sense and overlooking the constraints of rhyme and metre, might run like this:

³ Regarding the apostrophe applied to certain uses of the term 'Pataphysics', see 'L'Apostrophe de Pataphysique', *Subsidia Pataphysica*, 0 (1965): 84.

⁴ Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, 2nd edn, 1, pp. 37–8. There are some major differences between this version and the original draft composed in the summer of 1868. On the issue of the *ptyx*, however, the two are close enough: 'nul ptyx, / Insolite vaisseau d'inanité sonore' (1868) versus 'nul ptyx, / Aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore' (1887). It may be an emptied-out trinket or a strange vessel, but the important thing is that the *ptyx* represents resonant emptiness. For the draft version, see Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, 2nd edn, 1, p. 131.

Her pure nails dedicating on high their onyx,
 Anguish, this midnight, holds up, like a lamp-bearer,
 Many a vesperal dream burned by the Phoenix
 Which is not gathered in any funerary urn
 On the sideboard, in the empty drawing-room: no ptyx
 Abolished trinket of sonorous emptiness,
 (For the Master has gone to draw tears from the Styx
 With this sole object by which Nothingness is honoured).
 But near the vacant casement to the north, a glimmer
 Dies away perhaps in accordance with the decor
 Of unicorns hurling fire at a nymph,
 She, departed naked in the mirror, while
 In the oblivion bounded by the frame is fixed
 So soon the scintillations of the septet.

It is not hard to see why Mallarmé might have hoped that *ptyx* was his own invention. One of his earliest commentators, Téodor de Wyzewa, hymned it as a ‘mot purement euphonique et dépourvu de tout sens’ [‘purely euphonic word, devoid of all sense’].⁵ Yet while it might be without sense, it is certainly not without function in the poem. Its role as a ‘trinket of sonorous emptiness’—the ‘object by which Nothingness is honoured’—seems to rest on its failure of representation, or, to put it another way, on its being a nonsense word. In its meaninglessness, Mallarmé’s *ptyx* represents Nothingness in the world of referents, language purified of signification. (One reading of the poem’s opening phrase—‘Ses purs ongles’—takes it as a paradoxical pun about the poem itself: ‘C’est pur son’: ‘It is pure sound’).⁶

‘Pure sound’ would be overstating the meaninglessness of *ptyx* here—on a variety of planes, even nonsense words carry some interpretable sense. Performing a linguistic examination of a nonsense letter from Edward Lear to a friend (‘Inky tinky pobblebockle abblesquabs? – Flosky!’ etc.), Jean-Jacques Lecercle notes that the analysis proves fruitful when approaching the text from phonological, morphological, and syntactic positions. Treating Mallarmé’s poem in the same way, we can see clearly that *ptyx* belongs to the same Greek morphological register as its rhymes, *onyx*, *Phénix*, and *Styx*. We may or may not, in addition, accept Michael Riffaterre’s suggestion that *ptyx* implies its own mysteriousness ‘since *y* and *x* are the signs of conventional abstractness and of algebraic unknowns.’⁷ Meanwhile, syntactically, A. R. Chisholm has pointed out that the word’s context

⁵ Téodor de Wyzewa, ‘M. Stéphane Mallarmé’, *Le Figaro*, 8 December 1892, p. 1.

⁶ See, for example, Roger Pearson, *Unfolding Mallarmé: The Development of a Poetic Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 204.

⁷ Michael Riffaterre, *The Semiotics of Poetry* (London: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 18.

leads us to interpret it as being an equivalent to *amphore* in the previous line, i.e. On the sideboard there is no amphora, no *ptyx*, to hold the ashes of the Phoenix. 'Thus,' concludes Chisholm, 'we are compelled [...] to interpret *ptyx* as some sort of container.'⁸ René Ghil takes the reading slightly further, stating that Mallarmé invented the word 'auquel il donna le sens de vase, d'urne' ['to which he gave the sense of vase, or urn'].⁹ In Lecercle's assessment, however, while we can look at the morphology or syntactic context of nonsense words and pull out successful readings, 'No such thing happens [...] when we reach the level of semantics. Here the linguist's impotence is complete.'¹⁰ We should not get beyond ourselves: *ptyx* is still a nonsense word—a placeholder rather than a lexical item—and any meaning we attribute to it will be, of necessity, indistinct.

Except that, contrary to Mallarmé's expressed preference that it should be merely a piece of *faux* Hellenism, *ptyx* really *is* an ancient Greek term. Liddell-Scott-Jones, the standard Greek lexicon, lists it—with a caveat, of which more later—as *πτύξ* meaning *fold*, or by extension things that are folded: writing tablets, hilly country, the folds of song (i.e. sinuous songs). We find it today in words like *trptych* for a three-panelled, folding artwork. With this in mind, since the early twentieth century, a considerable body of Mallarmé scholars have been unwilling to accept that the poet wasn't perfectly aware of *ptyx*'s meaning when he wrote the sonnet. As Paul Allen Miller puts it, we need not 'take Mallarmé's profession of ignorance at face value, [when] his capacity for exaggerated self-deprecation was legendary.'¹¹ Emilie Noulet is less circumspect, briskly dismissing the Lefébure letter:

Rappelons d'abord la lettre de Mallarmé à Lefébure où il feignait de ne pas connaître la signification du mot. Pure coquetterie de celui qui, pendant ce temps, recueillait les mots d'origine grecque!¹²

[Let us first remember Mallarmé's letter to Lefébure where he pretended not to know the meaning of the word. Pure coquetry from someone who, during this period, was collecting words of Greek origin!]

Meanwhile, Gretchen Kromer suggests that Mallarmé might not have been familiar with the word when he drafted the poem in 1868, but after working closely with classical languages in the 1870s and 1880s, he 'did intend *ptyx* to have a

⁸ A. R. Chisholm, 'Mallarmé: "Ses purs ongles..."', *French Studies* 6.3 (1952): 230–4 (p. 231).

⁹ René Ghil, *Les Dates et les oeuvres: Symbolisme et poésie scientifique* (Paris: Crès, 1923), p. 222.

¹⁰ Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *The Violence of Language* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 3.

¹¹ Paul Allen Miller, 'Black and White Myths: Etymology and Dialectics in Mallarmé's "Sonnet en yx"', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 36.2 (1994): 184–211 (p. 187).

¹² Stéphane Mallarmé, *Vingt poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*, edited by Emilie Noulet (Paris: Minard, 1967), p. 183.

meaning in the *second* [1887] version of the sonnet.¹³ This theory, echoed by Miller, overlooks an obscure piece of evidence.¹⁴ In a newspaper article published a few years after Mallarmé's death, the journalist Octave Uzanne recounted the poet reciting the 'Sonnet en yx' in his later years and explaining to a bemused listener that *ptyx* had been invented simply because he needed a rhyme for *Styx*:

N'en trouvant point, j'ai créé un instrument de musique inédit. [...] Le *ptyx* est insolite, car il est inconnu; il résonne avec sonorité, puisqu'il rime avec un majestueuse opulence; il n'en demeure pas moins un vaisseau d'inanité, puisqu'il n'a jamais existé. Et l'on dit que je ne suis pas clair!¹⁵

[And finding none, I created a unique musical instrument. [...] The *ptyx* is strange because it is unknown; it resonates with sonority because it rhymes with a majestic opulence; it remains a vessel of emptiness because it never existed. And people say I'm not clear!]

Still, if one is prepared to distrust the youthful Mallarmé writing to a friend in loneliness and frustration, it is no harder to distrust the mature poet in his days as an admired and convivial *salonnier*.

What these interpretations insist is that, whether in the schoolroom or in later life, somewhere along the line *ptyx* became meaningful to Mallarmé. Thus, far from being a neologism or nonsense word, these critics argue, we should read Mallarmé's *ptyx* as an instance of non-translation, a Greek term dropped knowingly into a French text. This being the case, their argument runs, its original sense is part of Mallarmé's intention for the poem: not only *can* we translate it, but we *should* if we want to understand the sonnet fully. Surprisingly, however, there is little agreement on what the correct meaning should be.

In 1926, in the same issue of *Nouvelle revue française*, within a few pages of each other, Paul Claudel states that the *ptyx* is a bottle or carafe, while Henry Charpentier writes bluffly that it is a sea-shell.¹⁶ Charpentier's argument is interesting both because it is explicit, not to say combative, in calling out de Wyzewa by name and rejecting the idea of *ptyx* as a nonsense word, and because Charpentier is the first to identify the term as real Greek:

Le *ptyx* n'est pas un mot vide de sens, composé expressément et arbitrairement pour exprimer le pur néant. [...] C'est tout simplement la transcription littérale

¹³ Gretchen Kromer, 'The Redoubtable PTYX', *Modern Language Notes* 86.4 (1971): 563–72 (p. 571), my emphasis.

¹⁴ Miller, 'Black and White Myths', p. 187.

¹⁵ Octave Uzanne, 'Choses et personnes qui passent: heure d'automne', *Echo de Paris* (5 October 1905), p. 1.

¹⁶ Paul Claudel, 'La Catastrophe d'Igitur', *Nouvelle revue française* 158 (November 1926): 531–6 (p. 532); Henry Charpentier, 'De Stéphane Mallarmé', *Nouvelle revue française* 158 (November 1926): 537–45 (p. 543).

du mot grec qui signifie la coquille, la conque creuse où l'on entend le bruit éternel de la mer.¹⁷

[The *ptyx* is not a word devoid of sense, composed expressly and arbitrarily to express pure nothingness. [...] It is quite simply the literal transcription of the Greek word which signifies shell, the hollow conch shell in which one can hear the eternal sound of the sea.]

There are serious problems with Charpentier's claim, which we will come to in a moment, but this did not stop it becoming almost an orthodoxy among Mallarmé's editors and commentators over the next half century. Kurt Wais, for example, repeats it when he writes in pleasing compounds of the poem's 'eigenartige leerrauschende Muschelgefäß auf der Kredenz' ['peculiar empty-roaring shell-vessel on the sideboard'].¹⁸

Then, in 1940, Noulet provides the etymological evidence that was conspicuously absent from the earlier non-translationists. She begins by parroting Charpentier:

Le contexte aidant, on peut en déduire que 'ptyx' désigne une conque, un de ces coquillages qui, collé à l'oreille, fait entendre le bruit de la mer.¹⁹

[Aided by the context, one can deduce that *ptyx* designates a conch, one of those shells that, when you hold them to your ear, produces the sound of the sea.]

To support this claim, however, she cites an instance in the *Thesaurus linguae graecae* in which St Basil refers to the valves of an oyster as πτύχας. The problem with this is that the citation represents a single usage instance—not a definition—and a transferred sense at that. This is rather as if future etymologists, two thousand years hence, should cite Keats as proof that *bride* was once an English word denoting a Grecian urn. Noulet's next step is equally problematic. A bivalve oyster shell has the hinge which makes it a plausible metonymic referent for *ptyx*—this is presumably what Basil was getting at. Meanwhile, a conch shell produces the auditory illusion of the sea which one might call 'resonant emptiness'. But an oyster and a conch are two completely different shells. A conch then is patently not a *ptyx*, whether or not Mallarmé was familiar with the Greek word. Nevertheless, during the mid-century, the idea that the *ptyx* was some type of shell had plenty of heavyweight supporters, among them Mondor and Jean-Aubry's *Pléiade Oeuvres complètes* and Henri Nicolas's Larousse collection.²⁰

¹⁷ Charpentier, 'De Stéphane Mallarmé', p. 543.

¹⁸ Kurt Wais, *Mallarmé: Ein Dichter des Jahrhundert-Endes* (Munich: Beck, 1938), p. 405.

¹⁹ Emilie Noulet, *L'Oeuvre poétique de Stéphane Mallarmé* (Paris: Droz, 1940), p. 454.

²⁰ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 1490; Henri Nicolas, *Mallarmé et le Symbolisme* (Paris: Larousse, 1965), p. 43n4.

Meanwhile, Charles Mauron reads *ptyx* more straightforwardly as *fold*, which he takes as a reference to the poem's rhyme scheme.²¹ This gives rise to a satisfyingly productive reading as the sonnet—originally entitled 'Sonnet allégorique de lui-même'—does indeed fold in on itself in a number of curious ways.²² Firstly, it switches several times between looking outwards from, and inwards onto, the empty room. The first quatrain and the first tercet appear to be looking out into the darkness, while the second quatrain and the second tercet describe objects within the room—the sideboards, the mirror—and the poem hinges like a panel painting around these changes of view. The final tercet proclaims itself as a repetition, a defunct mirror image of the seven stars—the Great Bear—in the even greater emptiness outside (and of course the seven stars, doubled by reflection in a mirror, make fourteen, potentially representing the lines of the poem). At the same time, another significant fold divides the poem into two parts. In French poetry, a rhyme is described as feminine if it ends in a silent *e*, and masculine if it doesn't. So for the first eight lines of the sonnet, the *-yx* rhymes are masculine, while the alternate lines which end in *-ore* are feminine. But for the final six lines, Mallarmé keeps the same sounds, but inverts, or mirrors, the masculine or feminine endings. Thus *-yx* becomes *-ixe* and *-ore* becomes *-or*.

For another critic, Robert Greer Cohn, thinking of the *ptyx* as a fold would allow us to read it metaphorically as the undulations of a line of handwriting.²³ Kromer, meanwhile, arriving by a different path at a similar place, hears the echo of a phrase from Aeschylus—*en ptychais biblōn* ['in the folds of books'] (*Suppliants* l. 947)—and thus sees the *ptyx* as a metonymic reference to *Le Livre*, Mallarmé's unwritten masterpiece.²⁴

It is not the intention of this chapter to take up a position in this debate; rather, the aim of the preceding survey is to demonstrate that after a century of argument and conjecture, no consensus has been reached on whether the mysterious *ptyx* is nonsense or non-translation. Instead there have been trends, in line with the intellectual currents of their time. The first wave of commentators, beginning in the *fin-de-siècle* period were content to preserve the mysteriousness of the term, to take Mallarmé at his word when he claimed ignorance of *ptyx*'s meaning. In 1925, Pierre Martino was still urging the reader to resist the urge to explain, to *translate*, too much in Mallarmé's poetry:

il faut se garder de les trop bien expliquer. [...] Les traductions juxtaliniéaires et précises de ces poèmes risquent d'être bien sottes, d'autant que le poète s'est

²¹ Charles Mauron, *Mallarmé l'obscur* (Paris: Denoël, 1941), p. 164.

²² Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, 2nd edn, 1, p. 131.

²³ Robert Greer Cohn, *Towards the Poems of Mallarmé* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), p. 142.

²⁴ Kromer, 'The Redoubtable PTYX', p. 572.

amusé parfois à insérer dans la trame de ses poèmes de singulières incongruités, fort bien dissimulées.²⁵

[we must resist the urge to over-explain. [...] Interlinear translations and glosses run the risk of being quite asinine, especially since the poet sometimes amused himself by inserting singular, well-disguised incongruities into the weft of his poems].

Within a year, however, Charpentier would kick off an era of *ptyx*-as-non-translation such that, by the early 1950s, Chisholm could write: 'I think it is reasonably safe to say that most modern commentators [...] accept the meaning "sea-shell".'²⁶ Nevertheless, twenty years later Chisholm would publicly disown this position, as later readings—Cohn in the mid-1960s, Kromer in the early 1970s—are less reductive, more speculative, not to mention more grammatological.²⁷ It is hardly surprising that Derrida himself should have got in on the act with a 1974 essay on Mallarmé. While not expressly concerned with the 'Sonnet en yx', he argues that Mallarmé's writing in general,

is organized in such a way that at its strongest points, the meaning remains *undecidable*; from then on, the signifier no longer lets itself be traversed, it remains, resists, exists, and draws attention to itself.²⁸

Riffaterre too sounds a distinctly 1970s note when he mocks the earlier definitional accounts as being born out of 'a nostalgia for referentiality'.²⁹

Taking the two editions of the Pléiade *Oeuvres complètes* as a gauge, we can see the move away from non-translation in the latter half of the twentieth century. While Mondor and Jean-Aubry's 1945 text quotes Noulet at length, Bertrand Marchal's second edition, appearing in 1998, gives short shrift to this type of reading:

trop de commentateurs se sont échinés à trouver un référent au mot, alors que ce mot qui n'existe pas, ce mot créé par la magie de la rime, [...] est la figure même de ce sonnet nul, allégorique de lui-même.³⁰

[too many commentators have slaved to find a referent for the word, whereas this word which doesn't exist, this word created by the magic of rhyme [...] is the very figure of this null sonnet, allegorical of itself.]

²⁵ Pierre Martino, *Parnasse et Symbolisme (1850–1900)* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1925), pp. 124–5.

²⁶ Chisholm, 'Mallarmé: "Ses purs ongles..."', pp. 231–2.

²⁷ A. R. Chisholm, 'Mallarmé and the Riddle of the Ptyx', *AUMLA: Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association* 40 (1973): 246–8 (p. 246).

²⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'Mallarmé', trans. Christine Roulston, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 110–26 (p. 114), Derrida's emphasis.

²⁹ Riffaterre, *The Semiotics of Poetry*, p. 18.

³⁰ Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, 2nd edn, I, p. 1190.

After a century of interpretation, we are back, resolutely, with de Wyzewa's opening position. What the *ptyx* resembles most of all is a mirror, reflecting back the critical values of the age: from the mid-twenties onwards, critics projected Modernism's characteristic non-translation onto the poem; for the poststructuralists of the 1970s and later, the *ptyx* as free-floating signifier, cut off from any signified, proved an irresistible interpretation.

What this type of survey makes clear, however, is how little it matters whether the term is taken as nonsense or non-translation. If we take *ptyx* as an invented word, we can still get as far as picturing it as a vessel of some sort, a carafe possibly, or maybe an urn. If we treat it as non-translation—a known word from another language—we can take our pick from a shell (conch or otherwise), a writing tablet, a piece of handwriting, an in-the-abstract fold... The surprising thing is that it doesn't exactly bring more clarity to declare that *ptyx* is a real word. If anything, looking at the list of suggested meanings, it brings less.

The 'Sonnet en *yx*', however, has given rise to another strand of influence, one fundamentally opposed to interpreting or translating the word *ptyx* to any degree, instead assigning a quasi-religious importance to its meaninglessness. This strand of criticism belongs in the pataphysical school, and has its origins with the avant-garde playwright and novelist Alfred Jarry.

Beginning in the early 1880s and running until his death in 1898, Mallarmé had held a weekly salon at his home in Paris. These gatherings brought together many of the major figures in late nineteenth-century culture—Yeats, Rilke, Verlaine, Debussy, and Wilde all attended—while another visitor, Arthur Symons, considered the salon to be pre-eminent among Mallarmé's achievements:

In estimating the significance of Stéphane Mallarmé, it is necessary to take into account not only his verse and prose, but, almost more than these, the Tuesdays of the Rue de Rome.³¹

Describing the influence these Tuesday evenings had on the younger writers who attended, Symons claims:

It was impossible to come away from Mallarmé's without some tranquillising influence from that quiet place, some impersonal ambition towards excellence, the resolve, at least, to write a sonnet, a page of prose, that should be in its own way as perfect as one could make it, worthy of Mallarmé.³²

From the middle of the 1890s, one of these impressionable visitors was the young Alfred Jarry.

³¹ Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* [1899], revised and enlarged edn (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1919), p. 183.

³² Symons, *The Symbolist Movement*..., p. 188

Several decades later, the German historian Alfred Haas would recall an evening when he and Jarry were the last stragglers in Mallarmé's drawing room and the ageing poet described to them his theory of the structure of the sonnet:

Un matin, vers deux heures, alors qu'il n'y avait plus là, en dehors de moi, qu'Alfred Jarry, mort aussi depuis, il nous décrivit et nous loua inlassablement, avec des images sans cesses renouvelées, la structure du Sonnet. Les quatrains étaient deux groupes de colonnes et les deux tercets les côtés du fronton qui couronne le tout.³³

[One morning, around two o'clock, when no-one was left except for myself and Alfred Jarry, now dead also, [Mallarmé] was describing and tirelessly praising to us, with endlessly inventive images, the structure of the Sonnet. The quatrains were two groups of columns and the two tercets the sides of the pediment which crowned the whole thing.]

When Jarry's controversial literary output achieved first notoriety then indifference, Mallarmé remained a reliably supportive figure, both idol and mentor. And when Mallarmé died in 1898, Jarry was distraught. He cycled twenty miles to attend the funeral, in borrowed, bright yellow, women's shoes, his muddy trousers still tucked into his socks.³⁴

It was during this period, the summer of 1898, that Jarry was composing his prose masterpiece, the novel *Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll, pataphysicien* (although it remained unpublished until 1911, four years after Jarry's death). The novel's second section, entitled 'Elements of Pataphysics' includes a chapter on Faustroll's companion, the bumfaced baboon Bosse-de-Nage, and in particular on his language. Bosse-de-Nage can say only one thing—'Ha ha'—but over the course of the novel he will mean a great variety of things by this utterance. Thus, the pataphysical precept being elucidated in this chapter is, as Paul Edwards summarizes, that 'a word deprived of any meaning can therefore be used to convey any meaning'.³⁵ For followers of the *ptyx*, we are in familiar territory.

Perhaps it should come as little surprise, then, that in the book's third section, when Faustroll and Bosse-de-Nage set off in their skiff on a quasi-Homeric voyage around the imaginary islands of Paris, one of their stopping points should be named the Isle of Ptyx. Like the majority of the novel's chapters, 'De l'Île de Ptyx' is explicitly dedicated to one of Jarry's artistic heroes, in this case, naturally, Mallarmé.

The isle of Ptyx is fashioned from a single block of the stone of this name, a priceless stone found only in this island, which is entirely composed of it. It has the serene

³³ Albert Haas, 'Souvenirs de la vie littéraire à Paris.' *Les Soirées de Paris* 24 (May 1914): 251–74 (p. 258).

³⁴ Alastair Brotchie, *Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life* (London, MA: MIT Press, 2011), p. 231.

³⁵ Paul Edwards, 'Faustroll: Portrait of the Author as a Pataphysician', in Alfred Jarry, *Three Early Novels*, translated and introduced by Alastair Brotchie, Paul Edwards, Alexis Lykiard, and Simon Watson Taylor (London: Atlas, 2006), pp. 119–26 (p. 122).

translucency of white sapphire and is the only precious stone not ice-cold to the touch, for its fire enters and spreads itself like wine after drinking. Other stones are as cold as the cry of trumpets; this has the precipitated heat of the surface of kettle-drums. [...] The lord of the islands came towards us in a ship [*vaisseau*]: the funnel puffed out blue halos behind his head, magnifying the smoke from his pipe and imprinting it on the sky. And as the ship pitched and tossed, his rocking-chair jerked out his welcoming gestures. From beneath his travelling-rug he drew four eggs with painted shells, which he handed over to Doctor Faustroll after first taking a drink. In the flame of the punch we were drinking, the hatching of the oval embryos broke out over the island's shore: two distant columns, the isolation of two prismatic trinities of Pan pipes, splayed out in the spurt of their cornices the quadridigitate handshake of the sonnet's quatrains; and our skiff rocked its hammock [*hamac*] in the newborn reflection of the triumphal arch. Dispersing the hairy curiosity of the fauns and the rosy bloom of the nymphs aroused from their reverie by this mellifluous creation, the pale motor vessel [*vaisseau*] withdrew its blue breath toward the island's horizon, with its jerking chair waving goodbye.³⁶

Ptyx, then, in Jarry's creative appropriation, is neither shell nor container. Instead it is variously an island, a stone, a metaphor for Mallarmé himself—crystalline, Parnassian—for his warmth and his uniqueness. The passage rehearses Mallarmé's architectural theory of the sonnet, expounded to Jarry in the small hours, and presents the poet in the beloved rocking-chair from which he would hold court at his soirées. (Symons, too, remembers 'above all, the rocking-chair'.)³⁷ Some of the language in this episode—the skiff's *hamac*; *vaisseau* as the sole, repeated term for Mallarmé's boat—is tantalizing, holding out the faint but improbable chance that Mallarmé might, at one of his salons, have read out the earlier version of the poem (in which the *ptyx* is an 'insolite vaisseau' ['strange vessel']), or even described himself under the laurel trees of Avignon, swaying in a hammock as he composed it. It is important that for Jarry, in his vignette of the Ile de Ptyx, the *ptyx* is a metaphorical blank slate: not something to be read or translated but something to be written on; not decoded but reinvented. It is a sign to which any meaning—multiple meanings, even—can be affixed, but which is, for Jarry, intimately concerned with his personal experience of Mallarmé. Most importantly of all, in the act of naming, the *ptyx* has been promoted to a proper noun. If, in Mallarmé, it was untranslated, in Jarry it has become untranslatable. By enshrining the term in *Faustroll*, Jarry would inadvertently ensure that the *ptyx* would cease to belong solely to Mallarmé's literary and critical estate. Replicating itself,

³⁶ Alfred Jarry, *Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician: A Neo-Scientific Novel*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor, in *Three Early Novels* (London: Atlas, 2006), pp. 117–218 (pp. 162–3); Alfred Jarry, *Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll, pataphysicien*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 8 vols (Monte Carlo: Éditions du Livre, 1948), 1, pp. 195–320 (p. 244).

³⁷ Symons, *The Symbolist Movement...*, p. 184.

becoming slightly altered at the same time, there is a strain of *ptyx* that would become intimately associated with Jarry.

Thus it came to pass that after Jarry's own death in 1907, pataphysics, his fictional science—the science of imaginary solutions; the science of exceptions—began to take on a life of its own.³⁸ In the 1920s and 30s, René Daumal, falling in and out with the Surrealists, saw in its paradoxes the basis of his own emerging mysticism.³⁹ Then, on 11 May 1948, in Adrienne Monnier's bookshop in Paris, the Collège de 'Pataphysique—the long-running avant-garde collective which has seen Marcel Duchamp, Jean Baudrillard, and Umberto Eco among its members—came into being. According to the official history of the Collège, those present at its foundation were Oktav Votka, Maurice Saillet, Mélanie le Plumet, and Jean-Hugues Sainmont.⁴⁰ It is a claim, however, which typifies the Collège's mischievous relationship with the archival record. Votka, le Plumet, and Sainmont are all pseudonyms for the same person: Emmanuel Peillet. It is easy to see how, in its semantic uncertainty, the *ptyx* should exemplify the type of epistemological slipperiness which is effectively the founding principle of pataphysics, and it is unsurprising then that another of the Collège's founder members, Dr Irénée-Louis Sandomir (another pseudonym for Peillet) should pen an etymological exegesis of the word in one of the Collège's internal publications.⁴¹

Sandomir's essay is an exemplary instance of the type of 'learned and inutilious research' which the Collège declares as its *raison d'être*.⁴² It hinges on the caveat with which *ptyx* appears in Liddell-Scott-Jones, namely that none of the extant classical sources which use the term actually uses it in the precise form *ptyx*, which would be the nominative singular. We can find forms *ptykhos*, *ptykhi*, *ptykha*, and infer by declension rules that there must have been a form *ptyx*, but *ptyx* itself is absent from the record.

Thus the word *ptyx* exists and doesn't exist. It cannot be found in any of the currently known literature; but it is a necessary form and one without mystery. This means that we simply can't talk about it in terms of uncertainty, but equally we can't speak of its reality. Here is something much more striking than the imaginary we imagined.⁴³

³⁸ Jarry, *Doctor Faustroll*, p. 145.

³⁹ See, for example, René Daumal and Julien Torma, *Pataphysical Letters*, trans. Dennis Duncan and Terry Hale (London: Atlas, 2012); René Daumal, *Pataphysical Essays*, trans. Thomas Vosteen (Cambridge, MA: Wakefield, 2012).

⁴⁰ Alastair Brotchie, ed., *A True History of the College of 'Pataphysics*, trans. Paul Edwards (London: Atlas, 1995), p. 11.

⁴¹ Irénée-Louis Sandomir, 'Exégèse du mot *ptyx*', *Opus Pataphysicum* 86 (1959): 91–5.

⁴² Brotchie, *A True History of the College of 'Pataphysics*, p. 77.

⁴³ Irénée-Louis Sandomir, 'Exegesis of the Word *Ptyx*', trans. Dennis Duncan, *Journal of the London Institute of 'Pataphysics* 4 (2011): 13–16 (p. 13).

Ptyx then exists in an in-between space—part fact, part conjecture; a liminal zone of certainty without proof—that is the natural territory of pataphysics. In much of its organization (its rituals; its intricate hierarchy of dataries, satraps, and provediteurs) the Collège is modelled in parody of large-scale social institutions. Like Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, it has a calendar of its own, based on the birthday of Alfred Jarry (8 September 1873), with thirteen months of twenty-eight or twenty-nine days each, each month with a name taken from Jarry's works. So what we might call 1 January 2000 CE, to the Pataphysician would be 4 Décervelage [Disembraining], 127. Not only that, but just as the Christian liturgical year is organized into its calendar of saints' days, so every day of the Pataphysical year is the feast of something or other. The second day of the year—9 September (vulg.)—is the feast of the Abolition of St Ptyx the Silentiary. It is also the date of Mallarmé's death.

What we are seeing here is a third way for the *ptyx*, neither nonsense nor non-translation, but something different. Firstly, in Jarry's *Faustroll*, individuation—the proper-noun *Ptyx*, its own unique island—then, within the Collège, sanctification. In the pataphysical world, the *ptyx* is protected from becoming trapped in the ordinary codes of signification. And yet Derrida's comments on the proper noun *Babel* are also ideally suited to *Ptyx*:

Now, a proper name as such remains forever untranslatable, a fact that may lead one to conclude that it does not strictly belong [...] to the language, to the system of the language, be it translated or translating.⁴⁴

But, Derrida continues, *Babel's* proper noun status is problematic: it both names a place and describes a state, the former deriving from the latter.⁴⁵ The pataphysical *Ptyx*, presents exactly the same duality: it is a name now—and thus untranslatable—but the name, and its significance, come directly from its earlier life as a common noun—its ancestral DNA which persists within it. Another dual citizenship then—between naming and meaning—for the always-in-between *ptyx*.

The pataphysical gesture of sublimating a term from common noun to saint's name offers the perfect example of what C. K. Ogden, across the Channel, was describing as 'word magic'.⁴⁶ A lengthy chapter, penned by Ogden, of the 1923

⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'Des Tours de Babel', in *Difference in Translation*, ed. and trans. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 165–207 (p. 171).

⁴⁵ The story as it appears in Genesis implies that the tower's name is derived from the Hebrew verb *balal*, to mix: 'Therefore is the name of it called Babel: because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth' (Gen. 11:9). (Modern philologists would label this a folk-etymology, however; the name is thought to come from the Akkadian meaning 'Gate of God'.)

⁴⁶ Initially outlined at considerable length in C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism* (London: Kegan Paul, 1923), and developed further in C. K. Ogden, 'The Magic of Words', *Psyche* 14 (1934): 9–88, and C. K. Ogden, 'Word Magic', *Psyche* 18 (1938): 19–95. References given here are from the abbreviated discussion in the second edition of *The Meaning of Meaning* (London: Kegan Paul, 1927).

work *The Meaning of Meaning* argues that the words of a language, and certain words in particular, acquire a connotative value—what Ogden terms an 'affective resonance'—above their straightforward meaning.⁴⁷ Vincent Sherry eloquently summarizes Ogden and Richards's position as the critique of

a mode of verbal sensitivity that has reduced language, in effect, to a series of material vibrations. Under this critical heading, the separate counters in a linguistic construction operate like notes in a musical score. The individual words move the auditor/reader into those subcurrents of feeling that are more powerful than an idea or a meaning attached consciously [...] to the logos.⁴⁸

Furthermore, for Ogden and Richards, this enchantment with the non-semantic quality of words—the carapace, the verbal husk: what we might now call the signifier—has had disastrous effects for society.⁴⁹ In the wake of the First World War, the authors clearly held word magic responsible for more than just problems in philosophy: 'In some ways the twentieth century suffers more grievously than any previous age from the ravages of such verbal superstitions.'⁵⁰

At its simplest, we might see the 'Word Magic' section of *The Meaning of Meaning* as a critique which is deeply hostile to modernist non-translation. After all, why embed a word untranslated from its original language into your poem if not to draw on the affective power of doing so—of its sound, of the connotative implications of its source culture? But poetry belongs to a different ethical order to philosophy: its commitment is not to unambiguous expression. Mallarmé's desire that the poet 'Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu' ('Le tombeau d'Edgar Poe')—'purify the dialect of the tribe' as Eliot translates it in 'Little Gidding'—implies a different mission to that of language reformers like Ogden and Richards.⁵¹ And one need not look far in Richards's poetry criticism to find that the characteristics he admires in, say, Eliot are close to those he and Ogden excoriate in other types of writing.⁵²

⁴⁷ Ogden and Richards, *Meaning of Meaning*, 2nd edn, p. 42.

⁴⁸ Vincent Sherry, *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 72.

⁴⁹ Ogden and Richards, *Meaning of Meaning*, 2nd edn, p. 42.

⁵⁰ Ogden and Richards, *Meaning of Meaning*, 2nd edn, p. 29.

⁵¹ Ogden and Richards would soon be engaged in their own project to purify the dialect of their tribe by means of Basic English, a form of English stripped down to 850 words in which all things should nevertheless remain communicable. See, for example, the good-humoured *chutzpah* of Ogden's 'Anna Livia Plurabelle' translation (C. K. Ogden, 'James Joyce's Anna Livia Plurabelle in Basic English', *transition* 21 (1932): 259–62).

⁵² See, for example, 'Mr. Eliot's Poems', *New Statesman* (20 February 1926): 584–5: 'Only those unfortunate persons who are incapable of reading poetry can resist Mr. Eliot's rhythms. The poem as a whole may elude us while every fragment, as a fragment, comes victoriously home' (p. 585). Vincent Sherry also points out the self-unravelling nature of Ogden and Richards's critique which, thanks to their urbane, literate, and allusive writing style, reveals the appeal of the principle they set out to reject.

There is a strand of modernist non-translation then that draws on the word magic which exists in tongues other than its own. ‘*Shantih shantih shantih*’: it plays on the quasi-mystical implications of unfamiliar language, importing this occult power into a literary culture which has come to reject the traditional forms of religious incantation (the Latin mass or the rote-learned psalms and services). Reading Mallarmé’s *ptyx* as Charpentier and Noulet would have us, this is exactly the type of word magic at play in the ‘Sonnet en *yx*’, where a word from classical Greek that might have been translated instead wasn’t, its foreignness deployed as an overtone, resonating above the strict semantic meaning of the poem. If, rather, we allow that Mallarmé intended to invent the word himself, it seems there is a more powerful form of word magic at play. The emphasis now falls on the form, the carapace, of the word: its sound, its appearance—an unusual, Hellenic cluster of letters. Sense is reduced to something nebulous, something that can only be guessed at by extrapolating from the words around it. But it falls to the Pataphysicians to turn the *ptyx* into word magic’s limit case, isolating it from its surroundings, declaring it a one-off, making it explicitly mystical. In its canonization as a saint whose only history is as a jug, a book, a line of poetry, the magical, mystical *ptyx* has become not a conch, but a shell without a kernel.