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Anna Sigrídur Arnar, *The Book as Instrument: Stéphane Mallarmé, the Artist's Book, and the Transformation of Print Culture*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011. xv + 395 pp. Colour plates, and halftones. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-226-02701-2.

Review by Helen Abbott, University of Sheffield.

Stéphane Mallarmé is well known for being a difficult poet whose creative output broke boundaries of language and form. His desire to create a new ideal form, which he termed *Le Livre*, never materialised in his lifetime, although as Anna Sigrídur Arnar's contribution to this field demonstrates, he made several significant steps towards this. Arnar's approach is refreshingly original and meticulously researched, taking as its starting point the cultural history of the book as a crafted artefact, and one which, with the advent of a writer like Mallarmé, begins to actively seek reader-oriented involvement. Arnar carefully negotiates the socio-historical dimensions of print culture during the second half of the nineteenth century in France, examining the purported collapse of the publishing industry against the rise of the newspaper industry alongside the status of etching and printmaking in the face of newly emerging technologies such as photography and film.

The opening chapter of Arnar's book offers an excellent synthesis of the critical reception of Mallarmé's work throughout the twentieth century in particular, unpacking how his work has been situated within diverse political spheres—whether as an author who embraced the working class, or as one who was anti-bourgeois, or as one who was politically disengaged. For example, Arnar examines Kristeva's well-known stance on Mallarmé as a revolutionary poet by exploring wider debates and competing narratives on the political implications of Mallarmé's modernism. This leads to a critical examination of Rancière's optimism with regard to Mallarmé's political engagement. Arnar then claims—persuasively—that “advanced poetry constituted for Mallarmé one of the few viable arenas where democracy could be expanded and fully realized” (p. 26).

In moving on in the next chapter to examine the status and legacy of the book as an art form, Arnar turns to the familiar debate regarding Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* and whether it is a “book” or an “album.” She contextualises this debate by examining the nineteenth-century literary marketplace as one which was flooded by amateurs, journalists and *feuilletonnistes*, thus degrading the status of the book. She contrasts the “book” to other newly-emerging commercial products such as the “album”, “almanach” or “*recueil*” by highlighting how “the term *book* became a kind of gold standard” (p. 30). For Arnar, Mallarmé reclaims the book from commercialized or industrialized media, not in direct opposition to these forms (like Baudelaire), but as a means to draw on new reading experiences and a different reading public. This carefully nuanced argument stands up well because it points towards the paradoxes that emerged in the later stages of the century as the newspaper continued its rise as a “chaotic yet fluid public site offering individuals mobility and freedom” (p. 49). Mallarmé promotes creative autonomy on the part of the reader against, for example, more authoritarian approaches of prescriptive artists (such as Wagner). This helps explain Mallarmé's own involvement in the press, via his publication *La dernière mode*, and how this supports, rather than contradicts, his planned deluxe publication of the hermetic *Un Coup de dés* poetic text accompanied by Odilon Redon's lithographs. Arnar carefully examines how Mallarmé's publication history sees his works printed on different grades of paper—from Imperial Japan

to Holland paper—and reveals his strategies for circumventing the market by claiming that previous publications were sold out, when in reality they had failed to sell at all.

What this all hinges on, then, is the status of an illustration within a printed book. Mallarmé, like many of his contemporaries, showed disdain for reproductive printmaking which led to commercialized publications. Mallarmé and his circle of artists, including Félicien Rops, Edouard Manet, and Auguste Renoir, began to promote the distinct notion of an original print as a work of art to be included within a limited-run deluxe publication. On the surface, this may not appear so dissimilar to the standard mode of illustrated books from the Romantic tradition that they disdained, but the “quality over quantity” approach changed the perspective, and overcame any apparent contradiction in Mallarmé’s statements about the illustrated book, such as his claim in an 1898 *Mercur de France* questionnaire in which “he publicly took a stand against the use of any kind of illustration” (p. 60). To support her argument here, Arnar presents a very rich survey of the history of illustrated books and printmaking, going back to Alfred de Musset and through to Alfred Cardart, and the etching revival as a process which legitimized the artist’s original print. She draws an important analogy between the engraver’s work, and that of the poet/author, as artists who work in black and white, resonating with the Mallarméan image from *Divagations* of the poet who “poursuit noir sur blanc.”[1] An important example of the strategies employed by such artists is Cadart’s 1869 *Sonnets et eaux-fortes* publication which showcased the work of artists and poets side-by-side: the plates were destroyed after publication so that quality control was ensured through its limited-edition status, with no possibility of a future reprint to devalue its original status.

The pivotal role of Manet in the development of Mallarmé’s creative output is examined in chapter four, against the backdrop of a publishing industry that was opening itself up to possibilities of independent publishing after the tightly-controlled era of the Second Empire. Arnar examines the extent to which the Mallarmé-Manet collaborations *Le Corbeau* and *L’Après-midi d’un faune* can be considered as *Livres de Peintre*, highlighting from the outset the financial failure of both projects because contemporary bibliophiles “tended to view them as makeshift amateur books” (p. 106). Arnar’s perceptive analysis of Mallarmé’s articles on Manet fuels a fresh view of both poet and painter as akin to workers-in-solidarity, working in collective modes. Mallarmé’s contretemps with the publisher Alphonse Lemerre, sparked by Lemerre’s rejection of Mallarmé’s *Improvisation d’un faune* for the third volume of the *Parnasse contemporain*, is significant here. Lemerre’s publishing house was seemingly a new “collective,” but as Mallarmé discovered it still used antiquated review systems in the form of an anonymous jury evaluating texts for publication. Mallarmé considered this problematic, because it was based on the flawed *Salon* jury system which had also resulted in the rejection of Manet’s works.

This dissatisfaction on the part of Mallarmé, Manet and their fellow emerging Symbolists, led to a sea change in the publication business, prompted in part by the relaxed censorship laws and the removal of the *brevet* publishing licence requirement after the fall of the Second Empire. A new type of artist collective was founded, producing independent periodicals such as *La Renaissance littéraire et artistique* which served as precedents for the more renowned periodicals *La Revue indépendante*, *Le Mercure de France*, and *La Revue blanche* of the 1880s and 1890s, and other stand-alone works such as *Le Corbeau*. Through this, Mallarmé and Manet “usurped the traditional role of the publisher” (p. 126) and learnt new strategies for disseminating their work by playing an active role in the production and promotion of works based in part on controlling distribution in order to heighten perceived value.

The problem with this strategy of independent publication, however, was that it led to isolation rather than success. This, in turn, challenged paradigms of reading, which Arnar examines in chapter five, touching on new modes which allowed readers to empower themselves, such as those elicited by *Un Coup de dés* through “Mallarmé’s idealist belief that reading represents a form of self-emancipation” (p. 143). In order to examine how this comes about, she reviews Mallarmé’s own experiences of educating readers in the French school system of the nineteenth century (both as pupil and later as teacher),

including the pedagogical issues surrounding *thème et version* practices, and Mallarmé's emphasis on bringing language to life. A shift from isolated individual reading to collective reading is explored in terms of small reading-groups (or tutorials), which for Arnar signal a link with Symbolist visions of enraptured groups of readers and emerging notions of the psychology of reading expounded by Paul Souriau, as part of a democratizing process which sees readers take on an active stake in the literary endeavour, rather than being passive consumers. For Mallarmé, this collective reading experience manifested itself in metaphors of religion or music, and Arnar draws strong links between Mallarmé's pedagogical texts and his critical and poetic writings by analysing the games he invented for teaching English grammar in relation to the "game of participatory reading" (p. 168) enacted by *Un Coup de dés*. This is a rich vein of analysis, offering a fresh angle on Mallarmé's most talked-about text.

In the following chapter, Arnar looks in detail at the processes Mallarmé went through to get *Un Coup de dés* published in book form during an extraordinary era for print culture. Focusing on two 1896 exhibitions, Arnar unpacks the competing visions of the modern book in terms of its social, aesthetic, technological and (inter)national implications. The *Exposition internationale du livre moderne* showcased five of Mallarmé's books, including his *Pages* (1891) collection of prose poems with a frontispiece by Auguste Renoir, alongside crafted books from all over Europe and the United States displayed in the gallery of Siegfried Bing. In essence, this exhibition revealed the weaknesses of French books in comparison to other high-value book products crafted, for example, by William Morris in England, but it nonetheless confirmed the availability of talent in France. A similar exhibition by Ambroise Vollard in the same year focused on artists' original prints, capitalizing on the growing interest in this market.

The key idea here was how the Parisian avant-garde "advocated a 'new' form of 'parallel' relationships between text and image rather than synthetic or decorative unity" (p. 195), and this, in turn, directly influenced the decisions made by Mallarmé when he prepared *Un Coup de dés* for publication with Vollard. Arnar's argument here is peppered with examples of the Odilon Redon trial prints for the publication, which she carefully analyses in terms of how they do not simply "illustrate" Mallarmé's ideas, but were designed to figure on separate pages from the text. This ensured both textual and spatial autonomy for artist and poet, in direct contrast to other illustrators of Mallarmé such as Maurice Denis and Fernand Khnopff whose drawings appeared alongside the texts of Mallarmé's poems. The "highly unorthodox" (p. 212) layout proposed by Mallarmé for *Un Coup de dés* tallied with new approaches to zoning the printed page by book designers and artists, but the limitations of the Parisian publishers was in part what encouraged Mallarmé to turn to the Belgian publisher Edmond Deman whose books privileged large margins and ample spacing.

The influence of mass-media design strategies are key here, both in terms of understanding how zoning worked, and in terms of understanding the emerging space for advertising, including in the form of the poster which exploited visual hierarchies by releasing it from the column boundaries of the newspaper, and the page/margin boundaries of the book. Arnar's argument comes to life here as she conducts a striking comparative analysis of the design of posters by Jules Chéret and the typographic layout of *Un Coup de dés*. Ultimately, Arnar suggests that Mallarmé drew on all these influences--of the illustrated art book, the newspaper, and the poster--to construct his vision of *Un Coup de dés* as one which actively involved the reader in the process of consumption of the text, demanding bodily and imaginative engagement with it. *Un Coup de dés* thus served as "a blueprint for participatory reading" (p. 239).

The textual space alone, however, was not sufficient in Mallarmé's eyes, hence his shift in focus towards the theatre or public spectacle for his notion of *Le Livre*. Arnar analyses Mallarmé's manuscript notes for *Le Livre* in chapter seven in terms of the proposed performance of the Book as staged spectacle. She also explores the poet's conflicting positions with regard to the theatre throughout his career, including his position on Wagner and the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Arnar's persuasive argument here hinges on Mallarmé's conception of the status of myths, fables and legends. The poet critiques the opera composer for his emphasis on historically-rooted Germanic legends which limit creative audience

responses, where Mallarmé expresses a preference for the openness of interpretation created by fairy-tales or fables. Similarly, Mallarmé critiqued Wagner's prescriptive design practices, favouring instead the more open design work of the "arranger," James McNeill Whistler. Arnar compares Whistler's "Ten O'clock" event to Mallarmé's Mardis gatherings in terms of their design and "staged" performance, albeit on different scales, going on to examine Mallarmé's experiences of delivering larger-scale lectures in Belgium and England in 1894. She likens Mallarmé's actual performed readings (public lectures, and his carefully-arranged Mardis for invited guests) to the performative concept behind the ideal of *Le Livre* by focusing on the rituals underpinning collective spectacles, mapped out by Mallarmé in mathematical terms. Whilst Mallarmé was ultimately promoting radical change in his project for *Le Livre*, he did not go as far as the anarchist movement (who demanded change straight away), nor did he rely on utopian visions of the future (who sought change in a forever delayed future). Mallarmé lived out the interregnum of fin-de-siècle art production by focusing on the possibilities for communication between audiences and the public at large. The book thus maintained a status that was not tarnished by the forces of existing political or cultural practices (whether Wagner's music dramas, or anarchist bombs).

In her concluding chapter, Arnar considers the afterlife given to the book "not only by published texts but in oral testimony and gossip that reverberated within avant-garde circles and beyond" (p. 279). She selects certain key "reroutings" of the book project: the Pataphysical visions of Albert Jarry; Marcel Duchamp's "book-boxes"; and Marshall McLuhan's views on the book in the age of new media. For Arnar, some of the more current reroutings of the Mallarméan ideal of the book are found in the large-scale book digitization projects by Google, and in new modes of reading afforded by the technological development of the Kindle, suggesting that "a process has been unleashed that will have inevitable consequences for the book that both builds on and exceeds Mallarmé's most ambitious visions for the book" (p. 294). Such a forward-looking conclusion is attractive and resonates strongly with previous attempts to bring Mallarmé into the age of new media (such as the multimedia CD-ROM version of *Un Coup de dés* published by Legenda in 2000).

As a book which is itself exceptionally well-crafted in its written language and beautifully-designed with a rich array of colour and black and white images, Arnar's study will make a major contribution to the fields of French literary symbolism, art history, and printmaking in the nineteenth century. She brings Mallarmé's views on the book to life via critically perceptive research and an extremely engaging range of materials so that the supposedly conflicting manifestations of Mallarmé's ideal Book as at once a work of art, a performance, and a newspaper are resolved through the underlying unifying idea of the democratization and diversification of readership opening up a creative space for interpretation through new forms of publication in the future.

NOTE

[1] Stéphane Mallarmé, "L'Action restreinte," *Divagations*, in Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), vol.2, p. 215.

Helen Abbott
University of Sheffield
h.abbott@sheffield.ac.uk

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