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R. Howard Bloch, *One Toss of the Dice: The Incredible Story of How a Poem Made Us Modern*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2016. 320 pp. Illustrations, translation of “Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard” by J.D. McClatchy, bibliography, and index. \$27.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-8714-0663-7.

Review by Marshall Olds, Michigan State University.

In 1896, the new monthly *Cosmopolis* invited a contribution from poet Stéphane Mallarmé. With *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* (One Toss of the Dice Never Will Abolish Chance), the magazine’s editors likely received more than anticipated. In May 1897, Mallarmé’s work appeared, a single poem of some 800 words but printed over twenty-one pages, deploying a wide variety of typefaces, fonts, and point size, italicized or not, across lines of varying length (one to nine words), offset with different margins, and so containing much more blank than printed space. Some pages contain a single word, two are blank. The fledgling periodical made an honest effort at printing the strange work, but Mallarmé nevertheless complained: the margins were too narrow, and the alignment did not allow reading lines across the gutter, from verso to recto, as was intended. Still, it was so striking a work that *Un coup de dés* became an important icon in modern literature and art. The title is not the poem’s first line but rather a sentence that runs throughout (pp. 1, 3, 9, 17) like a colored thread in a fabric, interlacing with other sentences that one can join together or not. Even with this aleatory sentence structure, one returns inevitably to this guiding thread, printed in the largest and heaviest font. All paths lead to this sentence that reenacts its own meaning as well as the poem’s action. Rolling dice pass through all numeric possibilities but will stop at a point that seems inevitable in its finality but is in fact the embodiment of, and refers back to, the indeterminacy that produced it. The final word, *hasard*, refers etymologically to a dice game.

Un Coup de dés recalls Alfred de Vigny’s poem, *La bouteille à la mer* (1854), where a ship’s captain, caught in a storm and as his ship is going under, flings a bottle into the waves hoping that the message it contains will survive to reach the shore. In the *Coup de dés*, the captain’s ultimate gesture is to throw a pair of dice. No personal message has gone out. The result will be that final number given by the black dots on their white background, inversely evoking a stellar pattern of stars against the night sky. That constellation will be the only sign of the past disaster. The title sentence as found printed throughout the text provides an outline of the Big Dipper, the constellation Ursa Major. The poem’s visual layout enveloping that sentence evokes the pitch and turbulence of the waves.

Cosmopolis was an ephemeral publication. It would cease publication in 1898, having run under three years. Also, it was printed on a paper stock that would not last. As a physical object, the poem was soon gone. Mallarmé died the year after publication and never finished the proofs for a second, and definitive, edition. It had made such an impression, however, that it survived among the avant-garde as a kind of underground legend. Two important features of the work were retained in the oral archive: thematically, the role played by chance in artistic creation, and, formally, the way that visual form could reflect content. The sustained interest led to republication in 1914, by which time evidence of its

influence had begun to blossom. Significant early activity included Guillaume Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, discussed in informative detail by R. Howard Bloch, which fueled what would become concrete poetry. Concerned more with chance were Max Jacob's book of poems *Le cornet à dés* (The Dice Cup), begun around this time, and, in a transfer to the visual arts, Pablo Picasso's *collages* that brought together disparate compositional materials including partial cuttings from print sources. A notable example from 1912 displays a truncated newspaper headline prominently situated on the canvas that reads, homophonously, "Un coup de Thé."

Professor of French at Yale University, R. Howard Bloch has primarily focused his scholarship on the social and cultural significance of medieval literature and art. He has one other foray into the nineteenth century, a book on the encyclopedic popularizer, l'abbé Migne.

In his lively presentation of Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, Bloch proposes a history leading us to what he argues is an important instance of how a literary work can be seen as the cultural forerunner of new ways of thinking. Bloch's aim here is not to appeal to Mallarmé scholars with a new exegesis of this striking work, though he does indeed offer a serious reading of the poem, nor does he argue for a particular interpretation of modernity much beyond pointing out familiar landmarks of indeterminacy, such as Nietzsche's nihilism, Einstein's relativity, and the World Wide Web. Rather, Bloch's goal is to bring forward a little-known work (in the US) for the benefit of an English-speaking readership. It is the type of presentation that one could envision preparing for one's Dean or for undergraduates to show the innovation and continuing relevance of French literature.

Bloch's approach is a mix of biography (Mallarmé's quiet and largely uneventful life), buttressed by anecdotes involving friends and acquaintances, which are colorfully *d'époque* though often unrelated to either Mallarmé's poetry or our modernity (e.g., Judith Gautier's love affairs), descriptions of contemporary events (e.g., the Franco-Prussian war and restaurant menus during the siege of Paris), and intellectual/cultural history that is most germane to Mallarmé (e.g., the Church Fathers and St. Augustine).

Bloch is refreshingly well informed about Mallarmé's life at the summer home in Valvins, the result, one senses, of having spent considerable research time there at the Mallarmé archival museum. One comes away from Bloch's book with a clearer sense of the variety and importance of the artistic community—writers, musicians, composers—that comprised the poet's company during the summer months, maintaining the type of exchanges that he had in Paris during the rest of the year: "Eventually, other artists would come to summer near Mallarmé in what was a country version of a Parisian salon along the banks of the Seine" (p. 113).

Another Mallarméan landmark is the mythical *mardis*, the Tuesday evening gatherings at the rue de Rome that brought together much of the literary, artistic, and musical avant-garde. Again, Bloch is well informed as to who attended among the great, and the not so great, the squabbles that arose among some of the *mardistes*, even leading to duels. This can make for amusing reading but, as an introduction to the new esthetics in all the arts that Mallarmé was in large part responsible for disseminating, it at times loses sight of what (to me) was important, and I found myself missing the excited and elevated tone of an Edmund Wilson (*Axel's Castle*).

In *One Toss of the Dice*, we don't get to the poem itself until page 163. Until that point, there is precious little discussion of Mallarmé's verse. Lines are given from the juvenilia, occasioned by the death of his mother and then his sister, providing early instances of *plume* and *aile* that will reappear some thirty years later in *Un coup de dés* (though it is unclear why we are given the Latin etymology of the English word "pen" on page forty-two that Mallarmé does not use). Bloch is absolutely right to insist on the centrality of these words and their images to the poetry, an observation that might have been more effectively grounded and nuanced by turning to some of the prominent instances in the verse where they

appear over the intervening three decades, exception made for Bloch's discussion of the *éventails* where the wing motive also recurs: "Les fenêtres," "Sainte," "Don du poème," "Le vierge..." Other missed opportunities include images of domestic life ("Brise marine," "Don de poème"), Second Empire interiors ("Ses purs ongles"), the poet's fondness for cigars ("Toute l'âme résumée"). Beyond the feather and wing, pertaining to *Un coup de dés*, are poems suggesting shipwreck ("Brise marine," "À la nue," "Salut"), and constellations ("Le vierge," "Ses purs ongles").

The point here would seem that the "story" of this last great poem does not include the story of how it came to be (although Bloch does point to a rough channel crossing in 1863 as a possible source [p. 57]) or as it is tied to the poetical œuvre up to this point. Relying on Mallarmé's 1885 autobiographical letter to Verlaine, in which he tells of his lifelong dream of writing *le Livre*, or *l'explication orphique de la terre*, Bloch sees the *Coup de dés* as the final iteration of attempts to realize this dream. The last? Mallarmé would die only a year later, leaving the complex *Hérodiade* unfinished. Mallarmé was, after all, the author of the enigmatic prose poem, *Le Pénultième est mort*.

Bloch is not alone in holding this point of view. In this, he retraces the steps of the late Robert Greer Cohn, among the leading figures in Mallarmé studies, who saw all of Mallarmé's work as part of the Book and leading to the last great poem. In a note on page forty-seven, unfortunately referring to material apparently deleted from that page, we learn that Bloch is a former student of Professor Cohn who died, Bloch tells us, just as this book was completed.[1] As such, Bloch's *One Toss of the Dice: The Incredible Story of how a Poem Made Us Modern* could be seen as an homage to his teacher.

In his *Toward the Poems of Mallarmé* (1965), Cohn made a detailed study of Mallarmé's *Les Mots anglais* (1877), an interpretative analysis of how combinations of letters in English carry semantic value and reflect the meaning of the words containing them, sound echoing sense. This reflection came from his activity as a *lycée* English teacher, from his lifelong interest in philology and from his prolonged poetic exploration of ways in which French words can generate multiple meanings, as through etymons and homonyms. Cohn maintained that Mallarmé exploited in French the orthographic peculiarity that he saw in English. Cohn uses these insights in his close reading of the poetic œuvre, including his extensive exegesis (complementing his 1949 study) of *Un coup de dés*. To my knowledge, Cohn is the only critic to have taken this path until Bloch. I hasten to add that in no way is Bloch obliged to cite all his sources, his book not intended as original literary scholarship but as a cultural understanding of a unique literary artifact. Still, this poet is of abiding interest largely because of his poetry, and mention of Cohn's groundbreaking and highly original study might have been made to direct readers interested in following up on the rich critical literature surrounding this poem, perhaps included in a list for suggested further reading.

Taking up this line of analysis, Bloch augments Cohn. Putting to work the poet's analysis of the letters F, S, L, M, and N, all used alliteratively in intense clusters, and following the page layout that imitates the ship's movement, Bloch takes us skillfully through the shipwreck (of language, he argues) and, via a syntax, more common in English than in French that evokes English's ancient roots, to the safe haven of the Ursa Major constellation, formed by the typographical arrangement of the poem's main sentence. The star giving Ursa Major its cultural importance throughout the ages is the North Star, where North, for Mallarmé per Bloch, recalls the Northern, Aryan roots of English words, guarantor of their authenticity and proximity to Truth (p. 261).

Cohn saw Mallarmé's influence as ubiquitous in the modern world, and wrote about it frequently. Likewise, Bloch points to a wide spectrum of certain, probable, and possible instances of this last poem's influence on twentieth-century literature, painting, and music. He also looks to science and technology from Einstein to the World Wide Web. The point here is, more importantly, as Bloch rightly says, that Mallarmé's revolutionary work can be seen to prefigure the formal innovation in the arts and in scientific thinking that characterizes the 120 years of Western culture since it first appeared.

Translator J.D. McClatchy is also on the Yale faculty. His translation follows skillfully and sensitively the movements of this difficult work. I saw only one instance to which I would firmly object: his rendering of “l’unique Nombre” by “a unique Number” (p. 172), dropping what is clearly a superlative in the original. Some gestures might surprise. For example, McClatchy gives “moiling and merging” (p. 173) for “s’agite et mêle” in an apparent attempt to follow Bloch’s analysis of the alliterative importance of the letter M. Mallarmé is known for his sometimes abstruse vocabulary—one thinks of *ptyx*, for instance, where both surprise by the rare and comical effect were intended: “Aboli bibelot d’inanité sonore.” Much more frequently, though McClatchy surprises agreeably as he keeps pace in what is difficult and deceptively perilous going:

celui / son ombre puérile / caressée et polie et rendue et lavée / assouplie par la vague et soustraite / aux durs os perdus entre les ais / né / d’un ébat / la mer par l’aïeul tentant ou l’aïeul contre la mer / une chance oiseuse / Fiançailles / dont / le voile d’illusion rejailli leur hantise / ainsi que le fantôme d’un geste / cancellera / s’affalera / folie (p. 196).

this one / his boyish shade / caressed and polished and restored and washed / made supple by the waves and freed / from the hard bones lost between the planks / born / of a revel / the sea enticing the sire or the sire against the sea / an idle chance / Betrothal / whose / veil of illusion / fluttered their obsession / like the phantom of a gesture / will tremble / will collapse / madness (p. 174).

NOTES

[1] Such errors can be imputed in part to the author; others fall less forgivably to inattentive proofreaders, such as the misspelling throughout of painter Degas’s name—three times alone on page 144, as well as in the index.

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