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Robert Boncardo, *Mallarmé and the Politics of Literature: Sartre, Kristeva, Badiou, Rancière*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018. x + 252 pp. Bibliography and index. £75.00 (hc). ISBN 9781474429528; £19.99 (pb). ISBN 9781474429535.

Review by Joseph Acquisto, University of Vermont.

Robert Boncardo's study provides a clearly written and helpful guide to writings on Stéphane Mallarmé by several key thinkers of the twentieth century who engaged his thought in their own efforts to reshape the relation of literature to politics. The book delivers more than it promises in the title, since in addition to a chapter on each of the writers mentioned in the subtitle, there is also a short chapter on Jean-Claude Milner, and the conclusion substantially engages the ideas of Quentin Meillassoux. Each chapter is more expository than argument-driven and provides ample and accurate argument summaries with frequent quotations, always in English translation, from the works at hand. Collectively, the chapters demonstrate the variety of ways in which thinkers have used Mallarmé's writing as a vehicle to articulate new understandings of community and the political and, in turn, the way in which seeing Mallarmé through this sort of lens may yield insight into his poetry. Boncardo recognizes from the start that "Mallarmé has been a distinctly ambivalent figure politically" (p. 2), which is evident in the variety of readings considered in this study, from those who, like Milner, see Mallarmé as a political reactionary, with evidence stemming from his early elitism about the potential audiences for serious art, to those who, like Julia Kristeva, Alain Badiou, and others, see revolutionary potential in the poet's work on language itself. This productive tension between plausible but opposite readings of Mallarmé leads Boncardo to a key question: "Did the negativity of [Mallarmé's] poetry manifest a disdain for ordinary people's prosaism, or a liberation of fundamental human capacities?" (p.18). The introduction lays out this terrain and positions Boncardo's study in relation to another recent book addressing these questions, Jean-François Hamel's *Camarade Mallarmé*. [1]

The tension between two contrasting readings of Mallarmé's political potential is evident in Jean-Paul Sartre's analysis, as Boncardo demonstrates by exploring Sartre's claims that Mallarmé is an "agen[t] of the...counter-revolution' in the aftermath of the June days" and also "the hero of an ontological drama"—the guise in which he supposedly qualifies as a 'committed poet" (p. 27). Boncardo traces how, for Sartre, the attempts of the post-romantics to distance themselves from bourgeois ideology only revealed them as more firmly ensconced in it: "when the post-romantics set out to institute a new nobility through a practice of negativity, they betrayed their participation in bourgeois ideology. A nobility based on the practice of distinction is no nobility at all, only a subset of the bourgeoisie. From beginning to end, postromantic French poetry was thus a bourgeois phenomenon" (p. 43). Against this backdrop, Mallarmé's poetry

“plays out, again and again, the same experience of radical deception experienced by the human subject as it ‘flings itself wildly into the Dream which it knows does not exist’. Necessity is absent from the world; it is only a lure than makes us crash all the more surely against the rock of contingency” (p. 63). Sartre’s Mallarmé thus both participates in and, in some ways, overcomes the limitations that Sartre identifies with Parnassianism and Symbolism in a way that keeps both of Sartre’s contradictory postulates at play simultaneously: “Mallarmé *is* both ‘the hero of an ontological drama’ and an ‘agent of the counter-revolution’. The very political ambivalence of his poetry has to do with the fact that both of these theses are true” (p.71). Boncardo traces the evolution of Sartre’s position, from earlier works such as *Mallarmé, or The Poet of Nothingness*[2] to later remarks, notably in a 1959 interview where Sartre underscores the importance of the notion of the communion of a people: “Sartre is able to admit that he is ‘in complete sympathy with Mallarmé.’ And indeed, that he is sympathetic to the poet is ultimately unsurprising, for the utopian dream of ‘the communion of a people’ through the mediation of literature is precisely the project he himself had proposed in *What is Literature?*” (p.73).

Chapter two gives an account of Julia Kristeva’s *Revolution in Poetic Language*,[3] only a third of which, as Boncardo notes, has been translated into English.[4] Boncardo’s goal in the chapter is to “track the stages of Kristeva’s argument and evaluate her attempt to both comprehend and surpass ‘comrade Mallarmé’” (p. 81). As such, much of the chapter is given over to a summary of Kristeva, whose project Boncardo helpfully outlines as, first, to “explain why Mallarmé’s writings are politically significant,” then, “present a model of the social world such that a ‘revolution in poetic language’ becomes both thinkable and possible,” and, finally, to “demonstrate why, despite the transformative power of Mallarmé’s writings, their political impact has hitherto been negligible” (pp. 99-100). The revolutionary potential in Mallarmé is related, for Kristeva, to the fact that, for her, as Boncardo notes, society is “a set of imbricated, homologous structures, all of which are linguistically constituted and thus constantly at risk of being dissolved” (p. 100). Like Sartre, Kristeva reads the personal and the political as entwined in Mallarmé’s poetry, viewing “Hérodiade,” for instance, as “a work in which wider anxieties in Third Republic France about the stability of the family—and, by derivation, of the paternal law—are reflected in Mallarmé’s personal, poetic trajectory” (p. 107). But “an effective mass politics incorporating the creativity of texts like those of Mallarmé [...] has quite simply not existed” (p. 103), according to Kristeva. Boncardo notes the limitations of her approach by expressing his skepticism about her assertion that the literary works of Philippe Sollers can accomplish such a literary and political project.

Chapter three, on Badiou, is a particularly valuable contribution in that Boncardo traces, with exceptional clarity, important shifts in Badiou’s long-standing but varying engagement with Mallarmé from early works such as *Theory of the Subject* through *Being and Event* and the chapter “A French Philosopher Responds to a Polish Poet,” which was included in *Handbook of Inaesthetics*. [5] The ambiguity often at play in discussions of Mallarmé and politics is a feature of Badiou’s treatment as well: “Both comrade and class enemy, Badiou’s Mallarmé will thus be an ambivalent figure for Badiou, as he was for Sartre and *Tel Quel*” (p. 124). Badiou thinks with Mallarmé, we might say, and often against other attempts to engage Mallarmé philosophically. Boncardo notes that while Badiou explicitly claims to maintain poetry and politics as “distinct truth procedures,” “we sense a palpable gap between principle and practice. In both *Theory of the Subject* and in essays written after *Being and Event*, Badiou consistently reads Mallarmé in light of specifically political concerns” (p. 125). If Badiou continues to think poetry and politics together, the exact nature of his engagement with Mallarmé undergoes an important shift:

“In *Theory of the Subject*, Mallarmé is read [...] as playing a role analogous to that of the Maoist militant, who also seeks to preserve and activate the true political capacity of the people. On the other hand, his poetry’s ‘structural dialectic’ marks him out as an incorrigible conservative [...]. With *Being and Event*, [...] Mallarmé’s significance radically changes: Badiou conceives of [Mallarmé’s poetic operations] as entirely adequate to themselves *qua* thought-poems of the event, the key category of Badiou’s later thought, including his political thought.” (p. 125)

Boncardo illustrates the shift by highlighting the change in Badiou’s reading of “Un coup de dés”: “In *Theory of the Subject*, the swift disappearance of the event was read in light of a project that sought to *make* it disappear. In *Being and Event*, [...] to insist upon the event’s fragility is not to distrust its concept; rather, it is to be as intellectually rigorous about it as possible. In political terms, while the first of Badiou’s Mallarmés set out to make political action seem impossible, the second poetically inscribes its exacting conditions of possibility” (p. 151). The last part of the chapter outlines Badiou’s arguments against Czesław Miłosz’s critique of Mallarmé, which turns on a question of poetry’s particular audience for Miłosz and poetry’s universal “generic humanity” (p. 159) for Badiou: “It is not that modern French poetry has no links with the world, but rather that it has changed the very status of what the world is” (p. 168). Thus Badiou, by arguing for a different way of being political from what Miłosz advocates, advances a seemingly paradoxical critique of Miłosz, claiming that those who would, as he does, “reduce Mallarmé to ‘a hermetic poet’ are complicit with the status quo; with a *doxa* that privileges what is most immediately obvious and which therefore partakes in the essentially repetitive, or circular, nature of ideology” (p. 169).

After a short chapter that lays out Jean-Claude Milner’s argument in *Mallarmé au tombeau*[6] that claims that “Mallarmé was a resolutely counterrevolutionary figure who buried the Romantic tradition that had yoked literature to politics” (p. 175), Boncardo turns in his last chapter to Jacques Rancière’s *Mallarmé: The Politics of the Siren*, a work written “against the entire interpretive tradition we have explored in this book, at the same time as it reinscribes its major motifs within the coordinates of Rancière’s novel account of artist modernity” (p. 191).[7] By focusing on Mallarmé’s figuration of the crowd, Rancière identifies a complex relation between the present and future publics of literature: “Since ‘the crowd’, its ultimate addressee, is not yet ready for it, ‘the new poem’ vanishes from the public stage in order to cultivate ‘the latent grandeur’ that only a crowd still to come’ will be able to recognize as its own. This, then, is ‘the politics of the siren’, at once elitist and egalitarian” (p. 201). This “new poem,” as Boncardo underscores, “is not a new invention in versification: it is ‘a new Eucharist, a purely human transformation of the human abode’ that responds to the death of God, the exhaustion of Catholicism and the manifold inadequacies of the state and the market” (p. 204). Boncardo traces Rancière’s engagement with texts such as “Igitur” and “Un coup de dés” and the way in which they “attempt to respond to the productive contradictions” of what Rancière labels the “aesthetic régime of art” (p. 221).

Boncardo demonstrates, at the start of the conclusion, how Rancière manages, best perhaps among all the thinkers considered in this study, the way the fundamental contradictions at issue in the question of the political stakes of Mallarmé’s poetic project play out: “Rancière certainly shows the form of ‘solidarity’ that a literature like Mallarmé’s has with an egalitarian politics; yet he also demonstrates why this ‘solidarity’ is inextricable from a specifically literary elitism, which disables the poet’s political capacities” (p. 227). Boncardo contrasts this approach with that of Quentin Meillassoux, who “makes the extraordinary claim that Mallarmé was the only utopian of the modern age to have actually succeeded in his aims” (p. 228), via Mallarmé’s secular

reappropriation of the Eucharist as productive of true Presence. For Boncardo, Rancière ultimately wins the day against Meillassoux, but perhaps more generally as well, “for what Rancière fundamentally aims to do [...] is to render intelligible why modern literature would see itself not only as able, but also as singularly required, to propose a utopian solution to the political ills of modernity” (p. 237). Boncardo relies on Rancière’s reading to maintain that “Mallarmé’s egalitarianism and utopianism [...] are] structurally indissociable from his elitism” (p. 243), and thus he provides an argument that would underscore the productive tension between those two poles of reading Mallarmé politically rather than attempting to reconcile them or to privilege one over the other. Boncardo thus steers clear of the danger of oversimplifying either Mallarmé or any of the readers presented in this study and demonstrates that the most compelling questions related to Mallarmé and politics are to be found in those who retain those productive tensions and construct their readings from them. This book will serve as an excellent introduction to the work of all these theorists on Mallarmé, and is of most value in the chapters, such as those on Sartre and Badiou, that clearly trace the evolution and changes in approach over the course of a single thinker’s career and the extent to which there is continuity or rupture in that development. Boncardo offers many important insights both into Mallarmé’s *oeuvre* and into the ways in which that *oeuvre* helps these theorists reorient and remap the very definition of what we understand the political to be, in its relationship to modern literature and beyond.

NOTES

[1] Jean-François Hamel, *Camarade Mallarmé: Une politique de la lecture* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2014).

[2] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Mallarmé, or The Poet of Nothingness*, trans. Ernest Sturm (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988).

[3] Julia Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1974).

[4] Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

[5] Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009); Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005); Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

[6] Jean-Claude Milner, *Mallarmé au tombeau* (Paris: Verdier, 1999).

[7] Jacques Rancière, *Mallarmé: The Politics of the Siren*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010).

Joseph Acquisto
University of Vermont
jacquist@uvm.edu

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