

BOOK REVIEWS

Arnar, Anna Sigrídur. *The Book as Instrument: Stéphane Mallarmé, and the Transformation of Print Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. xi, 395 pp. Illus. (some col.) Cloth, \$45.00 (ISBN 978-0-226-02701-2).

Kelly, Jerry, Riva Castleman, and Anne H. Hoy. *The Best of Both Worlds: Finely Printed Livres d'Artistes, 1910–2010*. New York: The Grolier Club; Jaffrey, NH: David R. Godine, 2011. 188 pp. Col. Illus. \$45.00 (ISBN 978-1-56792-431-2).

Reviewed by MICHAEL THOMPSON

Stéphane Mallarmé's quiet, slightly tragic life and inauspicious teaching career understate both the vast influence he had on French publishing and literature at the turn of the twentieth century and the influence he later had on the larger world of modern, post-war, and contemporary art in the United States and Western Europe. The deepest roots both of conceptualism and of the fine press tradition can be traced back to the work of Mallarmé and of those with whom he collaborated.

His life (1842–1898) began in Paris, and by the time he was married at the age of twenty-one he had lost his mother, father, and younger sister. His son Anatole would eventually die at the age of eight. His bereavement became evident in his early poetic works, but it did not prevent him from becoming a noted symbolist thinker, art critic, translator, host of a famous literary salon, prolific correspondent, and abiding advisor to young writers—including, among others, Paul Valéry. He learned English early in life and derived his modest income primarily from teaching the language in provincial and then Parisian secondary schools.

Mallarmé's enduring reputation as an innovator and a precursor to significant artistic movements in the twentieth century derives largely from his later works, primarily his oblique poetry. But his earlier poetic efforts were influential as well, and his efforts to merge literature with the visual arts are generally considered—at least by bibliophiles—to have set the stage for the more ambitious programs of art dealers Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler and Ambroise Vollard. These efforts began in Paris, where Mallarmé moved in 1873, and where he forged a relationship with Edouard Manet that endured until the artist's death

Michael Thompson (1555 Sherman Ave., Ste. 362, Evanston, IL 60201) is a lawyer in Chicago and a Lecturer at the University of Chicago Law School. He is a past president of the Caxton Club and currently the Vice President of the Fellowship of American Bibliophilic Societies.

in 1883. It was with Manet that in 1875 Mallarmé created his best known book, *Le Corbeau*, or “The Raven,” Mallarmé’s translation of Edgar Allan Poe’s famous symbolist poem. Manet had worked on book illustration before, most notably the previous year with Charles Cros and *Le Fleuve*, but *Le Corbeau* was Mallarmé’s first book. It was produced in Paris in 240 copies, each signed by the translator and the illustrator.¹

The next year Mallarmé and Manet published *L’Après-midi d’un Faune*,² Mallarmé’s Arcadian idyllic poem which would inspire Debussy’s symphonic prelude, which in turn would inspire a ballet choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky. Limited to 195 deluxe copies, it was a strikingly beautiful but very small book, with a frontispiece on diaphanous chine volante, several copies printed on japon paper, gold stamping on the cover, and two silk cords bound in as markers. This book was so exquisite that it made a cameo appearance in J. K. Huysmans’ 1884 novel, *A Rebours*, about an elderly bibliophile named Des Esseintes, who upon retiring to his library “found a fanciful delight in handling the miniature volume, the covers of which, in Japanese felt, as white as curdled milk, were fastened with two silk cords, one China pink, the other black.”

The Book as Instrument is an excellent and exhaustive study by art historian Anna Sigrídur Arnar of Mallarmé’s work as a maker of fine books. A tighter organization would have improved Professor Arnar’s *The Book as Instrument* enormously, and would perhaps have made it somewhat shorter, but despite this minor criticism, Arnar does a good and thorough job of placing Mallarmé within the literary and cultural milieu of *fin de siècle* France. Her extensive research with difficult French manuscript material adds much to the scholarship about Mallarmé and his continuing influence on today’s artists. Professor Arnar notes the irony created by, on one hand, the juxtaposition of *Le Corbeau*, *L’Après-midi d’un Faune*, and several other exclusive editions³ produced by Mallarmé, priced well beyond the level needed to permit mass consumption, and on the other hand, by Mallarmé’s broader view that the multiple components of a book, *viz.*, words, design, illustrations, and the possibility of public and private readings, make it the medium best suited to accommodate, in her characterization, “the diverse abilities of the reading public” and to become thereby “a catalyst for profound social change.” Arnar argues that the physical book was for Mallarmé

1. Edgar Allan Poe, *Le Corbeau*, trans. Stéphane Mallarmé (Paris: Richard Lesclide. Impr. Alcan-Lévy, 1875).

2. Stéphane Mallarmé, *L’Après-midi d’un faune* (Paris: Alphonse Derenne, 1876).

3. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Les Poésies de Stéphane Mallarmé: photolithographiées du manuscrit définitif*. . . (Paris: Editions de la Revue Indépendante, 1887). Edgar Allan Poe, *Les Poèmes d’Edgar Poe*, trans. Stéphane Mallarmé (Brussels: Edmond Deman, 1888). James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Le Ten O’Clock de M. Whistler*, trans. Stéphane Mallarmé (London and Paris: La Librairie de la Revue Indépendante, 1888). Stéphane Mallarmé, *Villiers de L’Isle-Adam* (Paris: Librairie de l’Art Indépendant. 1890).

the *instrument spirituel* of choice for involving the public at large in the creative process. She reports, for example, that Mallarmé was fond of newspapers, a medium not limited in the number of copies, not made with fine materials, not illustrated by major artists, and not highly esteemed either in the nineteenth century or now for its literary value, because he felt newspapers were a democratizing force that, through fluidity of form and portability, were fully engaged with society as a whole. A properly designed and well crafted book should do the same, Mallarmé argued in an essay he published in 1895.⁴

Mallarmé sought to reach the public through his poetry and translations because he viewed a poet's role to be one of cultural leadership, examining the values of the human condition and purging the language of the arts of its banality. As a leading symbolist, along with Charles Cros, Paul Verlaine, and other literary figures working in the time between Baudelaire and Valéry, Mallarmé used language in a way that would suggest an underlying meaning without delineating it precisely, thus assigning to the reader an active role in completing the entire artistic experience and, in turn, producing a different artistic experience within each reader. Such planned circumlocution engendered adverse critical response, most famously from Marcel Proust, who argued that the symbolists failed to use the precision made possible by the French language, and who identified Anatole France as the writer to make the best use of the language's inherent strengths. Mallarmé's literary challenge to mimesis had adverse ramifications for his success, and like his friend Manet, who had significant works of visual art rejected by the authorities of the Salon of the *Académie des Beaux-Arts*, Mallarmé had literary works rejected by a number of French publishing houses, including the journal *Le Parnasse Contemporain*, which had on its editorial jury none other than Anatole France.

A central thesis of *The Book as Instrument*, however, is that Mallarmé was not, as Proust asserted, an aloof aesthete composing texts that only the cognoscenti could interpret. Rather, the argument is that Mallarmé was using innovation in language, typography, and illustration to jolt the public out of a bourgeois complacency and induce them to experience the reading of texts in a new way. Illustration, for example, should not simply portray whatever was already stated in the text but should accompany it as a separate and alternative way of revealing the same subject matter. And the typographical arrangement of the text itself, at least as envisioned by Mallarmé in his own later publications, should also be used to convey part of the message.

Mallarmé took or tried to take an active part in the design and the typography of his books, although his success with this varied. With the first, very

4. Stéphane Mallarmé, "Le Livre, Instrument Spirituel," *La Revue Blanche* (1 July 1895), 3–36; reprinted in *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Bertrand Marchal, 2 vols. (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade/ Gallimard, 1998–2003).

expensive production of *Les Poésies de Stéphane Mallarmé* in 1887,⁵ the printer, Edouard Dujardin, gave Mallarmé complete control. This did not happen when working with Ambroise Vollard on Mallarmé's penultimate book, *Un Coup de Dés Jamais n'Abolira le Hasard* (*A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*),⁶ a mysterious, mathematically-constructed abstract poem. Mallarmé expressed concern that the original artwork of Odilon Redon, which had been commissioned by Vollard, would interfere with Mallarmé's own typographical experimentation. He had arranged the text across each opening of the intended book, spanning the gutter, to represent the listing and rolling of a sinking ship in heavy seas. On the deck of the ship stands her master clutching a pair of dice but hesitating to complete the throw. Just before Mallarmé's death, Arnar reports, he reached an agreement with Vollard to move Redon's illustrations to separate pages that would be a different color from those on which the text was printed.

Vollard's publishing endeavors eventually evolved to comprise a large body of grand *livres d'artistes* that contained original work by established artists whose work in other media was featured in his gallery. The books were issued in loose gatherings so their generally wealthy buyers could commission a unique designer binding, frequently at a significant cost but not infrequently resulting in an enhanced book worth more than the sum of its parts. This approach to French book making was criticized by some, notably Walter Crane and others considered by French collectors to be the consummate graphic artists of the time, who felt that the books thus produced were so individualistic that their various components, *viz.*, illustrations by noted artists, colophons signed by the author, the artist and in many cases the publisher, and even bindings signed by the binder, did not achieve an aesthetic coherency.

Un Coup de Dés was to be Vollard's first book after having published portfolios of lithographs by the artists in his gallery for a number of years, and he may have considered it, with its arresting *mise-en-page* as envisioned by Mallarmé and with its minimalist text providing only a basic framework for deriving at best a highly individualized meaning, a risky beginning. Mallarmé's death in 1898 led Vollard to cancel his plans for publication of the proofs, which included the Redon lithographs, that had by then been prepared, and Vollard's next publication, and indeed his first book, was the elegant and much more conventional *Parallement* (1900) by Paul Verlaine, with illustrations by Pierre

5. *Op. cit.*, note 3.

6. The catalogue entry in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France for this unpublished book reads: "*Jamais Un Coup de Dés N'Abolira le Hasard* [Texte imprimé] : poème : [épreuves d'imprimerie] / par Stéphane Mallarmé; [trois lithographies d'Odilon Redon] [Paris] : [A. Vollard] , [2 juillet 1897]." And in the Notes: "Poèm précédemment paru dans "Cosmopolis" en mai 1897."

Bonnard. The only publication of *Un Coup de Dés* during Mallarmé's life was in the periodical *Cosmopolis*, where it was not illustrated and where it did not follow Mallarmé's typographical specifications. Although Mallarmé did not approve of its handling, even this publication attracted enough attention and had sufficient impact that over a hundred years later a copy of the magazine was included in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *Inventing Abstraction*.

A similar fate met Mallarmé's last book, which contained elements of what would eventually become Dada, surrealism, concrete poetry, multimedia installations, and performance art. Known simply by the descriptive title *Le Livre*,⁷ it now resides as a series of notes in the Houghton Library at Harvard. Mallarmé intended the text to be printed but left unbound so that it could be read publicly while being organized by the presenter in front of an audience. While the sequence of reading was not prescribed, the audience would comprise a prescribed number of people seated in a prescribed pattern during a prescribed number of performances. In Arnar's analysis: "The audience is therefore envisioned as integral to establishing meaning in the work, and thus its members abandon their role as passive recipients of spectacle or drama." Mallarmé mentions at one point that 480,000 copies of the book should be printed with advertising sold to defray the costs of production, a development that had recently been pioneered by newspapers, and that the resulting excess of printed folios should be distributed to the audience members at each performance. In this way, a portion of *Le Livre* can become and remain part of the life of each witness to the event.

Through such programs of participation, Mallarmé generally sought to weaken the authority of the artist and the author. A passage written by his son-in-law, Dr. Edmond Bonniot, in *Notes sur les Mardis*, is translated by Arnar: "[Mallarmé] would not want its meaning to be completely barren to anyone; in this fashion, it is like [a house]maid [hearing] a piano piece by Schumann [and finding] it beautiful because she is not an enemy of harmonious chords." Arnar's exposition on Mallarmé's notes for *Le Livre* is the most thorough scholarly treatment of this work to date, and a compelling read for anyone interested in this idiosyncratic poet or in the earliest stages of conceptual or performance art.

Mallarmé's planning for *Le Livre* illustrates the importance of a contemporary intellectual debate with which he was actively involved. On one side, purists' argued for "*l'art pour l'art*" ("art for art's sake") and, on the other, more politically engaged artists argued that art must serve some social function. James McNeill Whistler was a leader among the former, and in his *Ten O'Clock Lecture*, which was translated and published by Mallarmé,⁸ he argued that art was not just a narrative form but was a scientific arrangement of form and color,

7. Published posthumously as: Jacques Scherer, *Le "Livre" de Mallarmé* (Paris: Galimard, 1957).

8. *Op. cit.*, note 3.

beautiful, useful, and complete in and of itself without the need for an external reference. Whistler's practice of naming his artworks after musical forms (nocturne, symphony, harmony, etc.) is illustrative of this view since music is generally free from any intuitive notions of natural representation. The purists' view originated and was more prevalent on the Continent where it was associated with Mallarmé and others in his nineteenth century literary coterie. In contrast, and in England, William Morris and others in the Arts & Crafts Movement argued that art needs to be accessible and constructed in conformity with the traditions of quality craftsmanship that existed before the industrial revolution. As a socialist, Morris felt art had moral consequences in society and that fine craftsmanship was a method of relieving the tedium of the grim life engendered by factory work. The debate about *l'art pour l'art* continued throughout the twentieth century, notably between Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, and remains unresolved today.

If one were to look only at Mallarmé's first two books, *Le Corbeau* and *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, one might be tempted to recognize him as an artist for whom fine craftsmanship is paramount, but clearly his later work with *Un Coup de Dés* and *Le Livre*, as well as his choice to become a translator for Whistler, points more towards the development of conceptual art and its variations and to a long line of twentieth century artists beginning with Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp is particularly relevant here due to the two books he made in connection with *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (*The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* [*The Large Glass*]), Duchamp's famous and influential multimedia painting on glass which was the eponymous focus of the recent landmark conceptual art exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, *Dancing Around the Bride: Cage, Cunningham, Johns, Rauschenberg and Duchamp*. Beginning in 1914, Duchamp assembled in five commercial photographic supply boxes sixteen photographic images of notes and one drawing that had been prepared in anticipation of his work on *The Large Glass*. Called the *Box of 1914*, the materials were placed loose in each box and could be read, by design, in any order chosen by the reader. None of the five (known) boxes was signed, dated, or identifiable through a title page or colophon. After the actual multimedia painting was finished, it was severely damaged in shipping, literally shattered, and Duchamp prepared another edition of facsimiles of notes used for its planning and creation and called this edition *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* (*The Green Box*). It was published in 1934 in an edition of 320. As the selection of the same title implies, for Duchamp *The Green Box* was not merely a memorial to the damaged original work but a re-creation of it in words. Once again, the contents of *The Green Box*, viz., one color plate, ninety-three notes and facsimiles, and the green flocked cardboard box itself, could be used and read by the reader in any order.

While Duchamp reported that in working on *The Green Box* he maniacally

cut, tore, and wrote out each element of the assemblage so as to replicate each original note exactly, and while successful (one assumes) in this feat of mimesis, the end result could not be said to have met the pre-industrial standards of craftsmanship of William Morris or even of Mallarmé's earlier books, nor would it be appropriate to evaluate it by those standards. In contrast, fine craftsmanship is much in evidence in *The Best of Both Worlds: Finely Printed Livres d'Artistes, 1910 – 2010*, a catalogue from an exhibition at the Grolier Club in 2011. *Syr Ysambrace* (1896), published by Morris's Kelmscott Press, and *Parallelement*, published by Vollard in lieu of Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dès*, are the only two books included as illustrations in Jerry Kelly's fine and informative Introduction. Each book is cited as an antecedent produced before the century from which the authors made their seventy-seven selections of "the best." Mallarmé eventually makes an appearance in this book, but it is as a poet, not as an *avant garde* designer, and it is in a typographically conventional publication from Albert Skira in Lausanne, with original etchings taken from designs by Henri Matisse.

Perhaps it is no surprise that Mallarmé didn't receive the tribute accorded by Mr. Kelly to William Morris and the team of Vollard and Bonnard, because it is clear that the criteria used for the selection in *The Best of the Both Worlds* exclude the work of Duchamp, Ed Ruscha, Dieter Roth, Marcel Broodthaers, and various other conceptual artists who did much with the book during this period, often even with the codex, as a medium of artistic expression. Choosing the term *livre d'artiste* rather than either *livre de peintre*, which is preferred by Professor Arnar, or the more modern and encompassing term Artist's Book, Kelly explains that the books selected for the show had to exhibit both the craft of fine bookmaking and the inclusion of fine original art. In assessing the first criterion, the curators, Mr. Kelly, Riva Castleman, and Anne H. Hoy, looked to the paper (usually mould-made or handmade), the quality of the presswork (usually letterpress), and the appeal of the typography and the design. Some books were excluded for not meeting just a single criterion. Matisse's *Jazz* (1947), for example, which Kelly describes as "one of the greatest (if not *the* greatest) *livres d'artistes* of the period," didn't make the cut because its handwritten text failed the typography test. While he didn't mention it, that presumably also explains the absence of standard favorites like Fernand Leger's *Cirque* (1950) and Larry Rivers' *Stones* (1960).

This exhibition and its accompanying catalogue constitute a subjective yet well defined and transparent look at an important bibliographical genre, and such a look, at the end of the day, is probably what any look at this material can at best accomplish. The jurors bring a significant amount of experience and skill to the task: Mr. Kelly is a book designer active in New York and often involved with the high-quality publications of the Grolier Club and other organizations; Ms. Castleman is a former Director of Prints and Illustrated Books at the

Museum of Modern Art and the author of a well-respected reference work, *A Century of Artists Books*; and Ms. Hoy is an art historian who teaches at NYU and CUNY and is a former curator at the International Center of Photography. The list of seventy-seven books they have agreed upon as constituting the best in both fine art and bookmaking is worth knowing even if another expert or group of experts might have come up with a different list, might have used different criteria, or might have found some way to include *Jazz*.

While subjective, however, this list is not by and large controversial, and it includes many books that would have been included on anyone's top seventy-seven list. Matisse's *Poésies* (1932) is one and Picasso's *Les Métamorphoses* (1931) is another. Later in the era the curators chose Jasper John's *Foriades/Fizzles* (1976) and Barbara Kruger's Whitney Fellows *My Pretty Pony* (1988). All good choices, and all well known. More interesting, however, was the imprimatur given to several books that are unfamiliar. First among these, in my view, is Terry Haass' *Germinal* (1958), a small book with etchings printed by an artist with whom I was previously unfamiliar but whose work I found thoroughly charming.

Perhaps more difficult to understand, however, is the heavy reliance on Limited Edition Club books, which account for seven of the seventy-seven choices (although I would not quibble with the quality of these books)—a high percentage made more conspicuous by the inclusion of only one book each from prolific book makers like Georges Braque, *Theogonie* (1955), and Marc Chagall, *Les Sept Péchés Capitaux* (1926), out the roughly dozen or so fine books illustrated by each of them. Other surprising omissions were André Derain's *Pantagruel* (1943) and Giorgio de Chirico's *Calligrammes* (1930), the latter of which evinces some interesting typographical experimentation very much like that of Mallarmé in *Un Coup de Dés*. But, after all, this is their list and not mine.

Typographical experimentation was not entirely absent from this exhibition, but it is fair to say that William Morris would have been more pleased with the show than Stéphane Mallarmé. Recognizing the tradition of fine craftsmanship from William Morris and tracing it through his artistic progeny in the twentieth century was the goal here, and it is a goal that was well achieved. As an exhibition catalogue, the book does not contain a great deal of new scholarship other than the selection itself, but it is nevertheless a very useful if not original research tool for bibliographical information about the chosen books. It contains a series of five valuable indices, by artist, by author, by title, by printer, and by publisher, and I only wish every exhibition catalogue were this well organized.

Both of these books are useful references that belong in any library of *livres d'artistes*, *livres de peintre*, or artists books, whatever one might choose to call them.