



MALLARMÉ'S CHOREOGRAPHY: AN INTERPRETATION OF "UN COUP DE DÉ"

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In the last decade of the nineteenth century, Loïe Fuller arrived at the *Folies Bergères* in Paris. It was there that she captured Mallarmé's attention, who later:

... theorized the ways in which the dancing body might provide a model for symbolist poetics. He credited dance with an economy of form akin to that of poetry and acknowledged the body's gestural potential, the elegance with which 'une écriture corporelle' might offer alternative forms of communication to the written word. (Jones, p. 13)

In "écriture corporelle", words written by Mallarmé in one of his essays about dance, Susan Jones identifies the Greek origin of the word "choreography", derived from "choreo" for dancing (Borrer, p. 25) and "graph" which means writing (*ibidem*, p. 43). The aim of this article is to make evident the transposition of this "bodily writing" into Mallarmé's poem *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, as well as to propose a different reading of the term "choreography" applied to this poem.

The first issue we are confronted with regarding the development of this study was set forth by Mallarmé himself when he, in relation to dance, asked: "Que peut signifier ceci' ou mieux, d'inspiration, le lire" (Jones, p. 16). In order to translate dance into written text, we must search for a way of interpreting it.

Though dance has many codifying systems, they seldom attribute any sort of specific interpretation to a given movement.¹ Moreover, if we consider a movement in dance to be equivalent to a word in a text, it is important to note that that word is in constant change, for it is never performed the same way, either by two dancers or

¹ One of the few cases is Ballet Mime, a group of commonly used gestures in ballet that have a concrete meaning. Interestingly enough, the most widely known gesture is the one that describes "dance".



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by the same dancer at different points in time. As such, we can establish that dance is subject to dimensions of subjectivity and corporal semantics.

In his study, Frankenbach has displayed the importance of subjectivity for symbolist poets, who seek to test "the limits of semantic permeability" (Frankenbach, p. 138). Expanding on this, Frankenbach states that:

For Mallarmé, the multivalent possibilities for a word's meaning became its most important attribute, one that transformed not only writing, but reading as well, moving each from a focus on "meaning" to one on "process". This disruption of signification went beyond the mere etymological development of a word, extending to its history in usage and its accumulated associations and convergences with other words. (*ibidem*, p. 138)

The accumulation of meanings that results from this disruption overpowers the word in such a way that its graphic representation loses value, becoming a mere suggestion or metaphor. Consequently, Mallarmé virtually grants each word the same shape-shifting ability, which is inherent to movement, onto his words, which in turn makes it susceptible to the process of aberrant reading proposed by Umberto Eco.

The terms "suggestion" and "metaphor" were handpicked, as they reflect the relationship between dancer and word when confronted with Mallarmé's essay on dance, where he wrote:

... that the dancer is not a woman dancing, for these juxtaposed reasons: that she is not a woman, but a metaphor summing up one of the elementary aspects of our form ... and that she is not dancing, but suggesting, through the miracle of bends and leaps, a kind of corporal writing, what it would take pages of prose, dialogue, and description to express, if it were transcribed: a poem independent of any scribal apparatus. (*ibidem*, p. 144)



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The ephemeral nature of dance imparts another obstacle for a comparative literary study. As ascertained by Jones,

[Mallarmé] sees in the dancing body a phenomenon that may suggest verbal signification but, unlike the written word, which is produced by the body yet leaves it at the moment of the production of writing on the page, her physical presence at every instance in the dance is simultaneously the sign itself and its production ... (Scott, p. 16)

In addition, dance is a dynamic art, expressed through fleeting moments that cannot be revisited and reanalysed, whereas every moment of the poem is readily accessible to the reader at any given time during his reading. The mutability or instability of meaning in Mallarmé's word also aims to mimic this fleeting sensation as the "reader-spectator must decipher anew the boundaries between text and object" (Frankenbach, p. 144).

The second issue we must confront is how Loïe Fuller's dance influenced Mallarmé's poetry. In her "Serpentine Dance" (fig. 1), the element of subjectivity, already discussed, was heightened by the constant disappearance of the human figure





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between the moving silks that she manipulated (Jones, p. 23). Perhaps in a more daring innovation, Fuller decided to remove the scenic elements that clutter the stage in a traditional ballet, leaving the stage empty. The removal of the surrounding visual noise centred the spectator's attention on the performance at hand.

Fig. 1. Loïe Fuller performing the "Serpentine Dance". Photograph by Isaiah West Taber, 1897.

As Scott has noted, "in conventional reading and writing, the page goes largely unnoticed" as its traditional role is to "[accommodate] as many words as clarity and legibility would allow" (Scott, p. 138). It therefore comes as a shock when we witness Mallarmé applying the same principle of decluttering used by Fuller on her stage to the pages of *Un coup de dés*. This removal of visual noise is important because, on the one hand, it exalts the choice of words while metaphorically counteracting the semantic density of each word. On the other hand, it presses on the semantic instability of the mallarmean word, allowing them to breathe and manifest over the surrounding and seemingly blank space (fig. 2).

On the other hand, the novelty of nothingness can also dissuade the reader from



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paying attention to the text. Its metaphorical portrayal of silence is a rarity in literary work, which Mallarmé was well aware of as he affirmed that "les 'blancs' en effet ... frappent d'abord" (*ibidem*, p. 139).

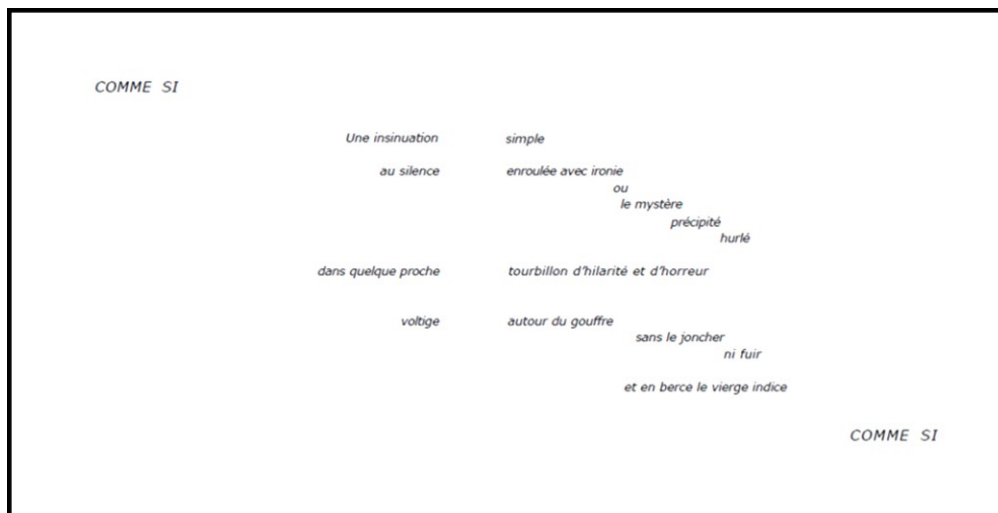


Fig. 2. Page 7 of "Un coup de dés" where the decluttering of the page is made evident.

According to Jones, the dispersion of words throughout the pages "... distinctively suggests the movement of the swirling dancer, where the disrupted poetic line alludes to the physical disposition of textual markers and encourages the 'bodily' engagement of the reader in the reading process" (Jones, p. 23). The poem further alludes to the dancer through the presence of words related to the human body, such as "pieds", "bras", "tête" and others, and alludes to the dance by the use of words that provide the idea of movement, such as "vent", "flots", "passer" and "torsion", amidst others.



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Perhaps more interesting is how not only the disposition of the words reminds us of a moving body, but how the text suddenly stacks on three occasions as if to represent a decay of movement and/or velocity. These occasions are the verses "et immobilise" on page 8, "enfin" on page 10 and "flétrie" also on page 10. The choice of words and the briefness of each verse is also representative of the stagnation of action, a sudden depression in continuity. These verses stand out from the rest of the poem because they are the only three that are vertically blocked by the preceding and following verses, by which I mean that they are not vertically exposed to any sort of blank space, be it above them or immediately after them. Whereas the other verses have space to breathe, these three verses feel constrained (fig. 3).

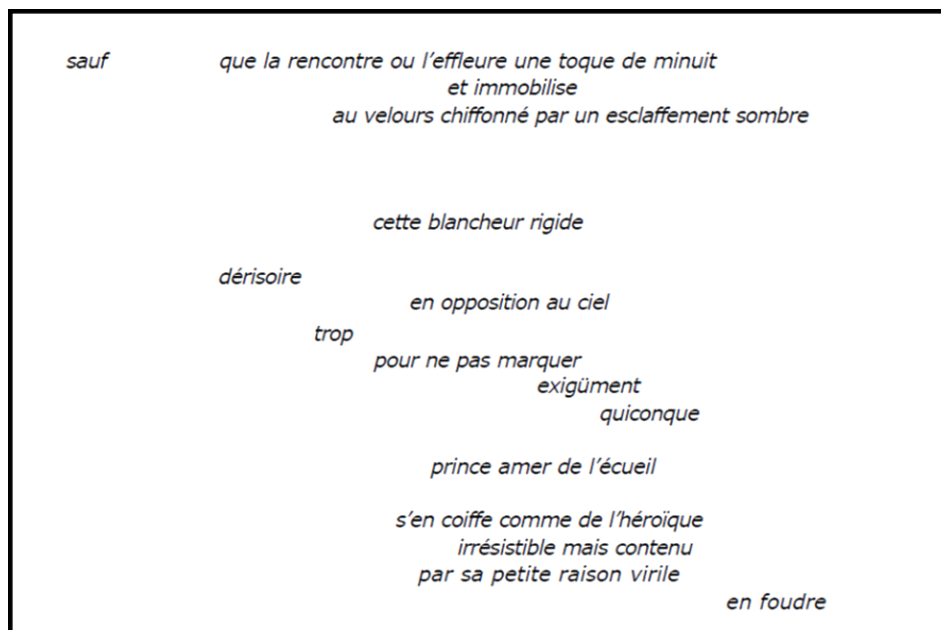


Fig. 3. Right half of page 8 of "Un coup de dés". Visually, it is noticeable that every verse has a space either directly above it or below it that allows it to escape from the strict horizontalness of text. The exception, as already noted, is the verse "et immobilise".

Scott tries to interpret the arrangement of the verses, stating that:



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In spatializing, in this way, the normally horizontal and consecutive dynamics of language, Mallarmé is attempting to illustrate diagrammatically the complex processes of human thought, to give expression to the irregular and evanescent meanderings of reverie as well as to the more consistent and consequential logic of rational thinking. In exploring the tensions between impulse and argument, desire and knowledge, Mallarmé tries to be sensitive to all features, however small, of the mental landscape. (Scott, p. 142)

Moving forward, Scott explains that "... Mallarmé's abandonment of punctuation is significant since it promotes infinitely greater fluidity of movement between phrases" (*ibidem*, p. 145). This small deviation from a literary convention approximates the written word to its spontaneous nature in its spoken form, which, once more, closes the gap that separates the word from the movement.

By stepping away from the page, the words begin to blur and set forth the idea that we may be looking at a picture. Though it is said that this notion was inspiration to Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, there is the issue that this poem is not composed of a single page, but twelve pages. This says something about the author's intentions towards the interpretation of the poem since we must now repurpose Mallarmé's question regarding dance to his own poetry: "'Que peut signifier ceci' ou mieux, d'inspiration, le lire".

The obvious answer to how the poem should be read would be from left to right and top to bottom, but for this to provide us with any sort of enjoyable reading we have to assume that the basic unit of reading is not the page, but the two pages that are immediately available to the reader. Even so, there is much about the poem that keeps us wondering.

As if the semantic complexity and subjectivity of the words were not enough to confound the reader, they are also graphically represented in different sizes, and



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further contrasted with the use of italics, which, according to Scott, serves"... to express the complex interaction of various strands of thought or calculation" (*ibidem*, p. 140).

Considering this from a dance perspective, there are various possibilities of interpretation: (1) each font could potentially represent, or be represented by, a dancer on stage; (2) they could represent the various elements that appear conjugated in a single dancer, as would be the case for Loïe Fuller, distinguishing her body from her costume; (3) they could be an attempt of adding a perception of spatial depth, whereby the bigger fonts would correspond to a proximity of the dancer to the audience, and the smaller fonts the opposite.

Scott also depicts the poem as "... an attempt to spread the impact of a single page over twelve, to create the impression of simultaneity within sequence" (*ibidem*, p. 140). This surely seems to be the case, as the very title of the poem is spread out along the pages of the poem. But the title itself might hold yet another clue to how the poem is meant to be read.

Although it is not wrong to present the French negative as "jamais ne", it is also possible to place them in the usual negative order "ne ... jamais". In coordination with the idea of simultaneity proposed by Scott, there may be an implication that the words can also be reversed. The relationship between the "throw of the dice" and "chance" is, therefore, symbiotic and a metaphor for a number of other dualities. Mallarmé himself introduces this concept by ending his poems with the verse "Toute Pensée émet un Coup de Dés", which would therefore imply that *la pensée jamais n'abolira le hasard*, as well as *le hasard n'abolira jamais la pensée*.

Scott was quick to point out that the thought represents language, order and reason, and the page represents chaos and chance, the place where our unconscious



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mind can manifest itself into consciousness (*ibidem*, p. 146). Silva expands on this notion by arguing that even though the blank space is representative of silence and void, the absence of colour in white may also result from the presence of every colour (Silva, p. 283).

Un coup de dés therefore represents any form of manifestation or expression that combats inertia, and *le hasard* represents any innovation that counters prescriptive tendencies. *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* is Mallarmé's motto.

As we have seen, the notion of choreography, or at least of writing that alludes to dance, is scattered throughout the text. It takes part in the selection of words and in the disposition of those words that evokes the idea of movement, but this poem is not a true choreography as we understand the term. If I have extended myself on making evident many aspects that compose his work, it was simply to reveal how a choreography can be retrieved from it. By allowing myself the same semantic freedom that he has invested in his words, I suggest "choreography" be read as "written dance".

Scott's suggestion on how the poem should be read converges with the curiosity of the reader when faced with such an abstract form of writing. To experience the poem as a whole and all at once, the reader's eyes must effectively dance with the words from one edge of a page to the other, while also noting that the words, scattered like the landings of a throw of dice, are dancing and transforming from page to page, almost as if by chance.

Furthermore, a font by font reading, which is how the reader ultimately collects the title of the poem, elicits a physical response from the reader who is compelled to jump from page to page, back and forth, in search of the matching fonts. Add to this the theorised inversion of the text and the invested reader is faced with as many



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interpretations as the back and forth turn of pages. Imagine that reader, and you will understand that, in turning and jumping between pages, he has also become a dancer.

Mallarmé's poem has defied not only writing conventions, but also reading conventions. In doing so, *Un coup de dés* reveals and reshapes the reader's dance which is usually concealed by the time it takes him to read two full pages and then turn the page. All the above-mentioned characteristics of this text speed up the process of page turning, hence making the physicality of reading evident.

Through this process, Mallarmé has forced the reader to physically engage in the reading of his poem, effectively suggesting the transformation of the reader into a dancer, which is the true choreography of his work. If we consider the title as a plea to the manifestation of artistic expression or a call to arms against prescriptivism, then he has once again physically activated his reader.

I would argue that the ability to physically engage a reader is unique to Mallarmé's work, as it is more common for scholars to identify pictorial and musical markers and elements throughout texts, though it should be noted that there is a lack of comparative literary studies related to dance.

In conclusion, Mallarmé successfully fulfilled the transposition and translation of a "bodily writing" in *Un coup de dés* by recreating dance's subjective and chameleonic nature. In doing so, he has exceeded the semantic capacity of the word and the page by ultimately targeting the reader to perform a dance in coordination with his own creation.



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NOTA BIOGRÁFICA

Daniel Drake Cascão é licenciado em Línguas, Literaturas e Culturas Inglesas e Francesas pela Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas da Universidade Nova de Lisboa. Artista performativo, é também bailarino profissional formado em dança clássica e contemporânea, tendo trabalhado em vários palcos europeus. Procura aliar a sua formação artística e académica para escrever artigos nas áreas das artes performativas e da literatura comparada.

BIOGRAPHIC NOTE

Daniel Drake Cascão has a bachelor's degree in English and French Languages, Literatures, and Cultures by Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas of Universidade Nova de Lisboa. Performing artist, he is also a professional dancer trained in classical and contemporary dance, having worked on several European stages. He seeks to ally his artistic and academic studies to develop articles in the areas of performing arts and comparative literature.

RESUMO

Num ensaio sobre a dança, Mallarmé escreveu sobre uma "écriture corporelle" ou uma "escrita corporal". Estudos focados no seu poema "Un Coup de Dés" têm aludido à inversão desta ideia, sugerindo que Mallarmé procurou escrever o corpo ou, por outras palavras, soletrar o movimento de um bailarino pelas páginas. Um trocadilho com a palavra "coreografia" sugere possíveis interpretações ligadas à dança, à literatura e à interligação entre estas.

ABSTRACT

On an essay about dance, Mallarmé wrote of an "écriture corporelle" or a "bodily writing". Studies focusing on his poem "Un Coup de Dés" have alluded to an inversion of this idea, hinting at how Mallarmé could try to write the body or, in other words, spell the movement of a dancer through the pages. A quibble on the word "choreography" suggests possible interpretations connected to dance, literature, and the interconnection between these.