

The Poet on Strike Against Society

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Abstract: The present work is an excerpt from *Profils perdus de Stéphane Mallarmé*. This particular essay deals with the relation of Mallarmé to society, strikes, workers, and so forth, and their relation to (anti)politics.

Keywords: poet, Mallarmé, anarchism, strike, worker

In 1891, the journalist Jules Huret published eight groups of interviews under the title, *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire* that were published daily between March 3rd and July 5th in the *Écho de Paris*. Each group of interviews in the series was centered around the main representatives of an identifiable literary movement at the time.¹ The third in this series is dedicated to "Symbolists and Decadents," and it opens with an interview and reflections on two figures that Huret considers the movement's *Precursors*, first among which we find Mallarmé.² The article appears in the *Écho* on March 14th, with a post-scriptum added on the 19th of the same month.³

From the very outset of the interview, Mallarmé draws attention to the irreducible fragmentation, the division and dispersion warping contemporary French society at the time. He deems the "organization of the social" to be, in his words, "unfinished. [*Organisation sociale inachevée*]. The poet thus concludes that, in such a world, art can find no real place or true role: "in a society without stability, without unity, no stable art, no definitive art can be created." In such conditions, there can be neither masters and figureheads, nor schools and movements: "From this unfinished organization of the social, which at the same time accounts for the worried restlessness [*inquiétude*] of our minds [*esprits*], emerges that unexplained need for individuality which finds its mirror image in the literary movements and works [*manifestations*] of our day."⁴ Huret, on the other hand, believes in movements and groups, in schools of art. His vision of the literary universe finds itself, in other words, fundamentally negated here.

For the measured tone with which the poet expresses his view of things should not soften the blow of their radicality. It is up to the reader to be attentive, to draw the right conclusion: Mallarmé wants no part or stake in poetry such as it is or has become. He largely follows without

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1 Huret's interviews took place against the cultural backdrop of a wild proliferation of different, antagonistic aesthetic manifestos, schools, anti-schools, and groupuscules in the early years of the Third Republic that the journalist seeks to catalogue for the readership of the *Echo de Paris* (e.g., Decadents, Symbolists, *Fumistes*, Parnassians, Psychologists, Neo-Realists, Naturalists, Spiritual-Naturalists). See Grojnowski 1999, pp. 9-38. [Translator's note]

2The second such "precursor" was Paul Verlaine. (Translator's note)

3 Mallarmé 1998/2003, pp. 697-702

4 Huret 1999, p. 101.

rejecting certain aspects of its evolution, but his equanimity on the matter is part of a strategy of alliances, and does not entail any commitment. One grasps this in singling out the sparse statements where the poet sums up his own axiomatic poetic principles: “For me, the case of a poet in this society which will not allow him to make a living is the same as that of a man shutting himself up alone to sculpt his own sepulture. [...] [P]oetry is made for the highest and most opulent ceremonies of a solidly established society. [...] [I]n an era such as ours, [the poet] is on strike against society.”⁵

The word *strike* [*grève*] is important. At the end of the nineteenth century, workers’ protests reinvented the form of the strike in France, anarcho-syndicalism—which was the majoritarian radical current in factories at the time—having turned the strike into the ultimate weapon in working-class struggles. More and more explicitly, the path towards the social revolution lay through the general strike. Whence the programme adopted by the Federation of Syndicates during its 1888 congress: “the general strike, which is to say the complete stoppage of all work, which is also to say: revolution, this alone can lead workers to their emancipation.” And let us note the equivalence drawn here between those two terms, *general strike* and *revolution*, such that the latter adds little if nothing to the former. The general strike replaces the revolution, especially as conceived by Marx: the seizing of the power of the State and the destruction of its machinery, its forms. Mallarmé followed closely these events, regularly read the anarchist press.

By declaring himself on strike against the whole of society, for Mallarmé, the poet is a figural precursor of the general strike; in the strictest sense of the term, he is the *avant-garde* in the wider struggle. His strike announces the end of society in its present organization. Two caveats are necessary, however, both of which upend the game.

First, the poet goes on strike by continuing his work, not interrupting it. One finds, for instance, the following dictum dated April 1894 in Henri De Regnier’s notebooks: “the only person who has the right to call themselves an anarchist is me, the poet, because I am the only one making a product that society does not want and in exchange of which it will not give me enough even to survive.”⁶ One might justifiably see the link here to Mallarmé’s earlier proclamation in 1891: the strike against society [*la grève contre la société*] is accomplished through the continuance of work, in contradistinction with the workers’ strike which puts a stop to it.

Second, the people will not follow the lead, the movement [*le peuple ne suivra pas*]. That much is evident from the anti-progressist manifesto

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5 Ibid., p. 104.

6 Henri de Régnier, *Cahiers inédits* (Paris : Pygmalion, 2002), p. 385. Cited by Roger 2014 <http://www.fabula.org/colloques/document2443.php>.

that is the text titled “Conflict”.⁷ What we find there is a description of the waning moments of a group of workers’ Sunday, more specifically a group of road workers. “Rumor has it they are road workers [*chemineaux*],”⁸ writes Mallarmé using an antiquated orthographic form—*chemineaux*—which, without realizing it, also allows him to call forth a name which in present-day French⁹ continues to ring in our ears: *cheminots*.¹⁰ Just as they do today, these workers were on the minds and occupied the imaginations of the *litterates*, who saw figured in them an image of modern manual labor, distinct from the work of peasants or artisans while still close enough to the latter for a kind of type to be cast and conserved: that of the ideal worker. “Treasured as the unspecified workers *par excellence*,” as the poet put it in a turn of phrase that continues to ring true in our own time. The story recounted here is that of the workers’ evening, of their interminable discussions followed by the repose of a nap nourished by “a considerable number of little drinks”. *Proof by appeal to Sunday* [*une preuve par le dimanche*], one might call it, with the weekly interruption of labor, the manner in which this cessation unfolds, affording a glimpse of what a general strike might look like. *It entails going to sleep, which, in turn, is equivalent to a kind of death: a stop, a wait and a “momentary suicide,” etc.* such is the summary that Mallarmé offers to us.

The replies to Huret’s inquiries thus take on a different light. When the poet declares that he is going on strike against society he constitutes society as a totality of which the prose poem, “Conflict,” reveals the constitutive law: *there will be no general strike*. That term, *strike* [*grève*], resonates so deeply and intensely that it turns out to be a kind of reversible glove [*doigt de gant*]. Mallarmé is not unaware that the worker’s strike is a form of struggle that is at once a symptom of social division and a refusal of that same split in society. By calling off work, by suspending labor, it seeks to transform the conditions of labor itself. It is possible that a worker’s strike might carry within it, however explicitly or not, the seeds of revolution, except that in going on strike against the servitude of labor one is not going on strike *against* society as such. Quite to the contrary, it is the proof that one believes in that society enough to want to change it.

In turn, the poet’s strike manages to arrive at a position of authenticity by affirming that society will not be changed.¹¹ And yet,

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7 First published in 1895 in the *Revue blanche*, reprinted in *Divagations* (OC, II, p. 104-109)

8 Mallarmé, 2007, p. 42.

9 When I was writing my book, the trains were on strike and there was much discussion about the special status of railway workers.

10 According to the TLF, one of the earliest occurrences of the vocable “cheminot” designating an employee of a railroad company dates back to 1911.

11 The verbal regime here is that of the reflexive “se transformera,” which, to the degree that such

to withdraw or abstain is not the same thing as to wallow in inertia, but rather to engage in an active form of subversion. The poet is, in Mallarmé's estimation, an "outlaw" – outside of the law, *hors la loi*, precisely because he does not oppose it. Not content to simply take note of his own exteriority, the poet intends to construct a linguistic space [*espace de langage*] radically extraneous or external to social space, which is of course also a linguistic space. It is not enough for him to define his own individuality as a point that is off-line or off-plane. His goal, rather, is to create a multidimensional object, even if that means creating [it as] a verbal tomb.

When a strike is defined as a continuance of work, that connection constitutes a paradox. We might be able to resolve this enigma, if we could understand that what is at stake is language (*la langue*). Whosoever goes on strike against society begins by going on strike against that society's language, against the words and grammars it uses to cover up and conceal its inner division. But that requires (a form of) labor. To trouble and suspend the fake transparency of everyday language, to remind readers and speakers that its apparently irresistible dominance is always and only ever dependent on force-of-habit, to accept that by breaking with this habitus one runs the risk of being accused of obscurity, this is the work and the duty of the language striker [*gréviste de langue*]. By stepping away from gloriously direct interventions as a poetic spokesperson—of which Victor Hugo was, in the nineteenth century, the very model—Mallarmé affirms a negative politics. Or, an anti-politics.

This anti-politics chooses the nothing. Rather than constructing for itself imaginary modes of negotiation with laboring people, and rather than denying, in so doing, the impossibility of contact,¹² this anti-politics will abandon society to itself.

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Translated by Robert St. Clair

verbs are frequently deployed to avoid the passive voice, could be read as introducing a problem of agency with respect to the transformation of society (i.e., *by itself*, society will not change) as well as one of possibility (i.e., it cannot *be changed*). [Translator's note]

¹² As the poetic subject states in the same text, "a contact can, I fear, not intervene between men" [*un contact peut, je le crains, n'intervenir entre des hommes*]. OC, II, p. 108.

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