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Peter Manson

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Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Monologue of a Faun'
A New Translation

Peter Manson

The poem which eventually became *L'Après-midi d'un faune* was first conceived as a short play or intermezzo. 'Le Faune, intermède héroïque', written in the summer of 1865, was to have comprised three scenes: the 'Monologue d'un faune' (translated here), followed by a scene of dialogue between the two nymphs, Iané and Ianthé, and a final monologue, 'Le Réveil du faune', spoken by the Faun after his siesta. In a letter of June 1865, Stéphane Mallarmé mentions that the work is still in progress and nearing 400 lines long. Only around 200 lines of this material survives. The dialogue scene, and the Faun's reawakening, exist only as heavily corrected and incomplete rough drafts. The Monologue is preserved in a much later fair copy, dating from 1873 or 1874, with the dedication '(copié pour le tyrannique Burty, par) – Stéphane Mallarmé'.¹ Philippe Burty (1830–1890) was a French art critic, a supporter of the Impressionists and an advocate of Japanese art. The text of this fair copy cannot be identical with that of the lost original of 1865. The surviving fragments show that the three scenes would have been linked metrically. The Monologue was to have ended with the incomplete line 'Adieu, femmes' – the line being completed, and the rhyme fulfilled, by the opening words of Iané in the dialogue scene which followed.

Mallarmé offered his Heroic Intermezzo to the Comédie-Française in late 1865, but was rejected on the grounds that the piece lacked narrative strength and would be of interest only to poets. Mallarmé's grandmother, Fanny Desmolins, had already chided him by letter for aspiring to the Comédie without considering any less prestigious venues. In the circumstance it seems impressive that the work got a hearing at all: Mallarmé was twenty-three years old and had published only a handful of short poems.

In completing its last line, Mallarmé severed the Monologue from its larger dramatic context and allowed the Faun's doubts about his encounter with the nymphs to remain unresolved. Within a year, the work would be shorn of stage-directions and rewritten as a poem for the page. The new version, 'Improvisation d'un faune', was submitted to the editors of the 1876 *Parnasse contemporain*, but was, again, rejected for obscurity.² By this time Mallarmé had already collaborated with Édouard Manet on the deluxe edition of Edgar Allan Poe's 'Le Corbeau/The Raven', and it was in a similarly opulent separate edition that the definitive text of *L'Après-midi d'un faune* would appear in April 1876, with Japanese-influenced woodcuts by Manet.

¹ It is possible to consult this manuscript online in a digital scan from the [Collection Henri Mondor at the Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Drouet](#).

² A previous translation of that work can be found on [my website](#).

Monologue of a Faun

from Mallarmé

*(A seated faun allows, first from one, then from his other arm,
two nymphs to escape.*

He stands up)

I was having Nymphs!

Is it a dream? No: the bright
ruby of lifted breasts still sets the immobile air
on fire,

(Inhaling)

and I drink the sighs.

(Stamping his foot)

Where are they?

(Pointing to the scenery)

O greenery, if you protect these mortals,
give them back to me, by April who swelled your nubile
branches (I languish still from such ills!)
and by the nudity of roses, o greenery!

Nothing.

(Striding about)

I want them!

(Stopping)

But if this fair plundered couple
were only an illusion of my fabling senses?

The illusion, sylvan, does she have the blue
green eyes, like water flowers, of the one more chaste?
and this one... lovestruck by the sweetness of the contrast,
was the wind of Sicily driving through your fleece?
No, no: the sea wind pouring a swoon
to the lips going pale with thirst towards the calices,
has, to refresh them, neither these contours so smooth
to touch, nor these hollow mysteries where you drink
of that coolness which the woods never had for you!...

And yet!

(To the scenery)

O dried-up gladioli of a marsh
ransacked by my passion, equal to the sun,
bulrushes trembling with sparks, tell
how I was coming to break the tall reeds, tamed
by my lip: when on the glaucous gold of distant
verdures flooding the marble of the fountains
a scattered whiteness undulates of a flock:

and that, at the sound of my flute to which I adjust a reed-pipe,
this flight... of swans? no, of naiads, saves itself.

I am...

But you burn in the tawny light,
with no murmur and without saying how the troupe
took flight, scared away by my flute...

(With head in hands)

Hold!

All of this denies me: and am I thus the prey
of my torrid desire, and as aroused as it might think
by the intoxications of its sap?

Would I be pure?

I, I don't know! Everything, on Earth, is obscure:
and this still more than all: for the evidences
of a woman, where must they be, my breast, that you might find them?
If the kisses had their wound: at least,
one would know!

But I know!

O Pan, behold the witnesses
of the frolic! On these fingers admire a feminine
bite-mark, that says teeth and measures
the happiness of the mouth where the teeth flourish.

(To the scenery)

And so, my woods of shaken laurel, confidants
of flights, and you, lilies, in modest silence,
are you conspiring? Thank you. My hand, ravishing, hurls
into the eternal sleep of the yellow water lilies
the stone that will drown their great scattered tatters:
for I can also gobble the green shoots
of the languid vine and tomorrow the useless
moss!

But let us scorn the vile traitors!

Serene,

on this fallen pedestal I want to talk uncut
of the perfidious ones, and by idolatrous paintings
remove again more girdles from their shadow:
just as, when I have sucked the brightness out of grapes
that my regret might be banished by the dream,
laughing, I lift the empty bunch to the summer sky,
and, breathing into its luminous skins, eager
to be drunk, I gaze through them till evening!

(He sits down)

Naiads, let us reinflate some divers memories!

My eyes, piercing the reeds, were following an immortal
neck, that drowns its burning in the wave
with a cry of rage to the forest sky:
and the troupe, from the streaming bath, disappears
into the swans and the shiverings, o gemstones!
I went forth, when at my feet are intertwined, garlanded
by the modesty of loving in this haphazard bed,

two women asleep in the ecstasy of being two.
I seize, without disentangling, them, and I steal away
to gardens, hated by frivolous shadow,
of roses poking shamelessly in the sun,
where our love might be the equal of the burnt-up air!

(Rising)

I adore you, fury of women, o fierce
delight of this white naked burden that slips
beneath my lip, drinking from fire, in a lightning-flash
of hatreds! the secret fright of the flesh,
from the feet of the malevolent one to the back of the timid,
on a cruel and perfumed skin, dampened
perhaps by the marsh with splendid vapours.
My crime was to have, without exhausting these malignant
fears, divided the tousled tuft
of kisses which the gods had mixed so well:
for, barely had I gone to hide an ardent laugh
under the happy folds of just one woman, detaining
with a frail finger, that her featherlike whiteness
be dyed in the brilliance of a sister catching fire,
the little one, naive and unblushing,
than, from my arms undone by lascivious deaths,
this prey, forever ingrate, frees itself,
without pity for the sobbing from which I was still drunk!

(Standing)

Let us forget them! Plenty others will avenge me
by their hair tangled up in the horns of my brow!
I am happy! Here everything offers itself: from the open
pomegranate, to the water that goes naked in its promenade.
My body, lit up in infancy by Eros,
gives off a red fire, almost as of old Etna!
Through these woods, which, at evening, have the colour of ashes,
flesh passes and lights up in the extinct foliage:
it is even said, in a whisper, that great Venus
going with naked feet, dries up the torrents,
in the evenings bloodied by her mouth, of roses!

(Hands joined in the air)

Sol...

(As if fending off with his parted hands an imaginary lightning-bolt)

But am I not struck by lightning?

No: these closed

(Letting himself fall)

eyelids, and my body weighed down by pleasure
succumb to the antique siesta of midday.

Let us sleep...

(Stretched out)

Let us sleep: I can dream of my blasphemy
without crime, in the arid moss, and as I love
open my mouth to the great sun, father of wines.

(With a final gesture)

Farewell, women: duo of virgins when I came.