Not a book of one's own: the Contes indiens and Mallarmé's silken self

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Abstract: While Marco Polo’s trips to China are remembered as « la route de la soie », this article shows that Stéphane Mallarmé’s Contes Indiens represent an imaginary road towards a literary self. To better inscribe his own ethos, the poet rewrites Mary Summer’s 1878 tales as if they were a rough stuff, to be sewed and embroidered with a few precious stones. In the end, Mallarmé emerges as author behind a borrowed mask of oriental otherness.

Résumé: Tandis que l’on se souvient des voyages de Marco Polo en Chine comme de « la route de la soie », cet article révèle que les Contes Indiens de Stéphane Mallarmé s’avèrent une route imaginaire vers un soi littéraire. Afin de mieux inscrire son ethos, le poète réécrit les contes de 1878 de Mary Summer, comme si ces derniers n’étaient qu’une simple étoffe à recoudre et embellir de quelques pierres précieuses. Au bout du compte, Mallarmé apparaît en tant qu’auteur derrière le masque d’emprunt d’un autrui oriental.

Keywords: Jewels, re-writing, Orientalism, Contes Indiens, Stéphane Mallarmé

On a famous picture taken by Nadar in 1896 (http://www.remydegourmont.org/vupar/rub2/mallarme/02.jpg), Stéphane Mallarmé is seen at his work table, comfortably warmed by Méry Laurent’s shawl – but the page on which the poet puts his fountain-pen remains a white one, still to be written. An earlier photography by Dornac (http://www.litteratur.fr/wp-content/uploads/2008/04/1895-vers-dornac-rue-de-rome-2.jpg), as part of a sequence « Nos Contemporains chez eux », presents Mallarmé posing, in 1893, with a seemingly white piece of paper in his hands. A few books are seen weirdly pilling up on a chair while, in the background, above the fire-place, a small photographic portrait of Charles Baudelaire plays a « mise en abyme » of the status of the author. These two pictures appear as reenactments of
Edouard Manet’s 1876 famous painting (http://www.histoire-image.org/photo/zoom/sio10_manet_001f.jpg): Mallarmé needs very little setting to inscribe himself as a poet and he is always represented with white sheets of papers and hardly any books. Within the whiteness of the paper – remembrance of Mallarmé’s own poetics as revealed in « Sur la philosophie dans la poésie » – the poet is both revealed and hidden: « L’armature intellectuelle du poème se dissimule et tient – a lieu – dans l’espace qui isole les strophes et parmi le blanc du papier » (Mallarmé 2003, p. 659). On Manet’s painting, Mallarmé’s imaginary is in fact suggested by the Oriental tapestry which can be interpreted and constitutes a space to be poeticized by the smoke of the pen-like cigar. That is to say that the painter has very accurately framed his friend’s aesthetics: while the silent room (cf. http://www.imageandnarrative.be/Images_de_l_invisible/Meitinger.htm) claimed by Virginia Woolf in her 1929’s essay is already at the core of Stéphane Mallarmé’s poetry, it appears that the process of borrowing and appropriating constructed the poet’s imaginary and set him as an author. And such is the case with the Contes Indiens.

The question of authorship is actually problematic, since in the posthumous edition of these tales in 1927, Dr Bonniet doubted the source, wondering whether Mallarmé could have known the Sanskrit and whether the original text was not in fact an English text translated by the poet. In other words, Mallarmé’s simple adaptation was then seen as a possible translation. In 1938 Jacques Scherer and Claude Cuénot gave a definite answer to Bonniet and described how Mallarmé’s friendship with Méry Laurent initiated the re-writing of Mary Summer’s 1878 Contes et Légendes de l’Inde ancienne. One afternoon between 1888 and 1892 (or even before since the date varies between scholars and sources), while enjoying the reading of Summer’s tales, Dr. Edmond Fournier complained to Méry about their lack of style. The hostess asked Mallarmé if he could adapt these interesting stories, and the poet accepted what was to him at the same time an enjoyable duty, an act of friendship, and a way to get paid for his writing. Cuénot states that Mallarmé tore out of Summer’s volume the four tales he wanted to work on, and went home with these remains of a book (Cuénot, p. 85). This process appears as highly significant: here, the book to be adapted comes to pieces, and only its translator will be able to rebind and recreate a whole out of these fragments. Let us not forget that the Latin etymology of the word « translation » suggests a kind of
transportation which the poet reenacts by carrying the pages to his own desk, and by later turning them into a new book. The *auctoritas* / authority of the literary agent lies hence in his ability to remember, attach and re-create, by transferring his imagination onto a borrowed text torn apart. One might even think that such a deconstructed method of working could have been the very first step towards the *Coup de dé*. As argued and developed at length in a previous article, what fascinated the poet in some scattered flying sheets of papers turned into a readable book, is the dialectical process between eroticism and aesthetics (Pouzet-Duzer, p. 121). According to Mallarmé, the perfect author shall indeed, like Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, carry his own palimpsest as a piece of cloth and embody himself an ideal book. « Son vêtement, avec la brusquerie d’un livre ouvert – il était lui, ce folio authentique, prêt toujours – apparaissait, aussi, de quelque profondeur de poches la candide réalité d’un papier » (Mallarmé 1945, p. 485).

Two years after this celebration of a passed-away friend, sat with one hand in his pocket and holding a mysterious sheet in his Rue de Rome apartment on November 22nd 1893 (http://www.photos-site.com/piasa/2.jpg), could it be that Mallarmé reenacts Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s posture? The autograph (http://www.photos-site.com/piasa/2a.jpg) inscribed by the writer on the picture he dedicated to Dornac and reproduced by Gayle Zachmann, suggests an eager play with the concept of representation:

*Voici, lieu des instants élus,*

*Que tu connais le photographe,*

*Il reproduit jusqu’à ton plus*

*Flottant songe et, moi, je paraphe* (Zachmann, p. xiv).

Obviously, the picture does not represent the process of writing and only attempts to capture the atmosphere of Mallarmé’s office, in a state of dream echoing Manet’s painting. Nevertheless, the autograph embodies an illocutionary act to the extent that, while writing on the photograph, Mallarmé noted the fact that he was marking it with his signature. Both the strophe and the big M. are then part of the signing moment, which implies an appropriation of the image. In other words, having possibly borrowed a certain pose from a friend of his, and letting Dornac choose the frame and the angle of the image, Mallarmé prevails in the end as the real author and
creator of his own literary persona: « Devant le papier, l’artiste se fait » (Mallarmé 1999, p. 669)

Leaving the construction of the artist to look at the paper itself, we shall discard the images to concentrate on the texts, arguing that the Contes Indiens are a perfect example of a written otherness borrowed and then transformed into the self. Part of these circumstance texts, translations, school books and other « besognes » written for financial purposes, they turn the poet into what he called a « littérateur pur et simple » (Mallarmé 1959, p. 342). Indirectly in the thematic of his poems – but very pragmatically in the case of the tales – Mallarmé follows the trends and belongs to a whole group of writers re-inventing China, Japan and India at the end of the nineteenth century. In March of 1887, the poet wrote to Emile Blémont to congratulate him for his Poèmes de Chine:

La voilà donc qui commence et par vos soins cette précieuse anthologie qu’il nous faut du loin et même du dehors, où les vers ne peuvent être traduits qu’en vers et peuvent l’être, vous le montrez: car c’est une traduction, cela, et je ne vois pas d’autre moyen d’en faire que de présenter pareille image, subtile autant, avec un brillant égal de couleurs ; mais surtout un art si pur d’ici qu’il en paraît, de ce fait seul, exotique. C’est vraiment parfait. (Mallarmé 1969, p. 92).

According to Mallarmé, exoticism emerges from the disconnection between the « here » and the « there ». Moreover, translation is assimilated to a bright metaphorical glazing – as if the original text represented some simple white China porcelain which Blémon covered with new colors. Re-painting old porcelains, the translator is then the artist who turns the artisan’s craft into art. Incidentally, in one of the letters he sent to Méry Laurent, Mallarmé went so far as to compare his own work on the Contes Indiens to that of an embroiderer:

J’ai repris fil à fil, comme une broderie, ce conte, le consolidant, et me suis permis d’y ajouter légèrement quelques traits de couleur orientale.
In this rich explanation of his re-writing process, Mallarmé mixes metaphors – but the depiction is all the more effective. The very first step was « sewing » in order to craft a stronger story: here the poet reveals that structure is extremely important to him. The ambiguity of the verb « reprendre » in such a context makes it possible to see Mallarmé’s work as « reparative. » Just like old torn socks need to be tightened up with threads, it might well be that the poet fills in narrative gaps and constricts the story. Yet, what sounded like a tapestry carefully threaded suddenly appears as a possible impressionist-like painting. Soft touches of orientalism shall suffice to color it and make it more believable. In other words, the exotic characteristics of the original tale were not sufficient, and it is through the artificiality of stylistic devices that Mallarmé could enhance its oriental aspect. Last but not least, it seems that the poet looks back on the now finished tale and proceeds to read it out loud, to better judge its musicality. The images of embroidery and of painting can then explain the apparent oxymoron of new and old: the little music « renewed » is the result of the allegorical fresh touch of oriental colors, while the deep everlasting tone remains a product of a well established and canonical structure. Consequently, Mallarmé’s rewriting appears as a very effective form of alchemy, which goes beyond any types of artistic dualities.

It is worth mentioning that Mallarmé’s own description of his process in the re-writing of one story is very accurate and applicable to the four of them. In his fascinating Grammaire générative des Contes Indiens, Guy Laflèche studies these very tales in details, and establishes that Mallarmé abbreviated Mary Summer’s 1878 texts via what can be seen as a condensation process, similar to the method used to produce a haiku. Yet, ironically, this transformation into Mallarmé’s idiolect asks for an increase of vocabulary. Laflèche’s very detailed and rigorous lexicography indeed establishes that Mallarmé’s tales are shorter than their originals, but written with a wider and richer choice of words (Laflèche, p. 73). In other words, just like Mallarmé had confessed to Laurent, the tales are sewn « tighter ». But the poet also re-painted them with more « colors », appropriating the translator’s role he described in his letter to Blémont.
The process of re-writing of the tales can itself be understood as a kind of translation, to the extent that there is a shift of sociolects, that the language of Mary Summer is transformed into Mallarmé’s. Let us not forget that this adaptation happens on a text already translated – and that Mallarmé’s product appears ultimately as a palimpsest of linguistic layers. Élizabeth Chalier-Visuvalingam indeed reminds us that some of Mary Summer’s tales were themselves possibly if not a translation directly from the Sanskrit – at least an adaptation from Burnouf’s 1856 translation of it (Chalier-Visuvalingam, p. 150). If we leave the metaphor of the silk and transfer its oriental shininess to that of the precious stones omnipresent in Mallarmé’s work, we could state that, just like the most perfect diamonds, the *Contes Indiens* have been refined more than once.

 Married to the ethnographer and Tibetologist Philippe-Edouard Foucaux – who wrote her book’s preface and was the translator the tale entitled « Le Meurtrier par amour filial » – Mary Summer (aka Marie Filon) was herself a Buddhologist. Her *Contes et Légendes de l’Inde ancienne* are certainly not meant to be read lightly in Méry Laurent’s Salons, since Summer obviously writes as a positivist researcher and scientist, willing to share her discoveries and linguistic skills with an enlightened readership of peers. When Summer does attempt to vulgarize ethnographic data and linguistic findings, her remarks take a rather condescending and judging mode:

> Nous réclamons l’indulgence du lecteur pour le tour un peu vif de cette nouvelle: la faute en est au conteur indien qui s’est laissé souvent entraîner par son ardente imagination. Les Orientaux ont une façon réaliste de peindre l’amour qui peut choquer parfois les susceptibilités européennes (Summer, p.112).

Each of her seven tales is followed by this kind of brief, conceited comment contextualizing the story and – most of the time – she stresses connections and analogies with canonical European literature (Shakespeare, Perrault etc.) Imitating if
not embodying the dominant scientific discourse, Summer also has the tendency to sound both patronizing and misogynistic:

_Dans l’Inde, plus que sous toute autre latitude, ces êtres charmants [=les femmes] sont irritables, quinteux, passionnés, fous ; ils ont besoin d’être tenus en tutelle et d’obéir à un joug._ (Summer, p. 151).

This is the reason why, if we were to follow one of Edward Said’s methodological devices and study Summer’s authority by considering her « strategic location », it would appear that her gaze comes from above and that her narrative choices always accentuate a position of power (Said 1979, p. 22). The tales are even presented with footnotes, in order to show that everything is well documented and to demonstrate that Europe has rhetorical tools to control the unknown and possibly wild Orient. As Tzvetan Todorov suggested in his preface he gave to the French translation of Edward W. Said’s _Orientalism_, when the other is considered as a concept, he is objectified: « Le concept est la première arme dans la soumission d’autrui – car il le transforme en objet (alors que le sujet ne se réduit pas au concept) » (Said 1980, p.9).

One of the most fundamental differences between Summer and Mallarmé’s writings of the tales has to do with this « strategic location »: the poet is not « above »; he is inside and nowhere at the same time. While even the title of her book shows that Summer attempts to historicize and categorize, _Contes Indiens_ stands as a brief and efficient title, capable of informing the reader while leaving open a dreamy range of possibilities. Moreover, Mallarmé does not write as a researcher or a scientist, nor as a translator: it is from his poetic self that the narration emerges. Instead of describing the landscape as does Summer, Mallarmé lets the characters act and speak, in a very direct way. This is the reason why, while his text might still be read as « exotic », this peculiar kind of exoticism surfaces from voices and from the intimacy of a self.

Out of the seven _Contes et Légendes de l’Inde ancienne_ , the poet selected four and kept all the titles but one, changing also the order of the tales. If we look at the text more closely and compare Mallarmé’s « Portrait enchanté » with Summer’s original « Meurtrier par amour filial », we notice from the very start that the poet refuses the idea
of a descriptive incipit. That is to say that, while Summer begins with some sort of a «once upon a time» setting – symbolically replacing these stories into a broader category of «fairy tales» – Mallarmé comes straight to the point by starting *in medias res*. Consequently, little is contextualized and exoticism emerges from the characters’ direct speech: here, voices matter more than any possible ticky-tacky scenery, inscription wins over description. This directness helps Mallarmé escaping the other-as-concept paradigm. To a certain extent, Mallarmé actually refuses the «Mystery of the East» as seen by the West and rejects the descriptive gaze forced by the outside.

Considering two excerpts from the above-mentioned two tales will help us better understand the specificity of the poet’s adaptation:

*Soudain Oupahara distingua au loin des pas furtifs ; il se cachà derrière le tronc du gros asôka qui formait le berceau. Il voulait, invisible, suspendre d’un premier coup d’œil celle qui venait à lui pleine de confiance. Apparemment elle avait bravé, en route, bien des dangers, car elle se précipita tout éperdue dans le bosquet et les noupouras qui entouraient sa jambe résonnèrent joyeusement. Elle ne vit personne et de ses lèvres, comme d’un luth plaintif, s’échappa un gémissement.* *(Summer, p. 99).*

*Oupahara distingue sur une poudre d’étoiles, prêtes à la revêtir d’éblouissantes sandales, la nudité d’un pas. Apparemment ce pas avait bravé plus d’un danger, car l’apparition, qu’il conduisait avec un silence rythmé, se précipita éperdue dans la salle de verdure; et seuls les noupouras résonnèrent joyeusement à mi-hauteur d’une jambe enfantine. Un gémissement, échappé comme à un luth plaintif, attesta deux lèvres humaines.* *(Mallarmé 1927, pp. 13-14).*

Mallarmé initially chooses the present over the literary «passed simple», letting the reader feel more connected to the action which takes place. The further sudden use of past tenses creates an intimate bubble, very similar to a stream of consciousness. Moreover, mystery prevails as the poet prefers a shadowy impersonal «apparition».
rather than the very precise « elle » chosen by Summer. If we look at the text carefully, we also notice that the first Oupahara hides himself to peep on the princess, while the second one is willingly letting the musical shadow surprise him. This quite simple inversion is recurrent in the adaptations: the pragmatic and goal-oriented characters from Mary Summer’s tale are turned into romantic if not symbolic beings. Mallarmé also adds musicality to Summer’s initial text by silencing the exotic « asôka » and letting the name of the future king echo with the mysterious « noupouras ». The sound of these « noupouras » and the suggestion of the lute in the original tale appear as very close to Mallarmé’s Faun’s poetic imaginary. Furthermore, the word embeds a merry and festive « hourah ! », suggesting the joyfulness of the love to come. « La nudité d’un pas » pursues the assonance and carries the nudity of silence celebrated by Paul Valéry’s eponym poem « les pas » from 1921. The sound of the word « pas », homonym of the negation surely appeals to Mallarmé’s wish to let the idea shine out of a structured nothingness. The poetic fascination might also come from the fact that what produces « footsteps » ( « le pied ») has been used since the sixteenth century to qualify versification. The word reminds us that, in the Antiquity, the rhythmic of the verses came from a beat of the foot on the accentuated syllabus, and this simple foot clap enabled a whole symbolic system of poetic measurement. Because he knows that both rhythm and poetry emerge from silent moments, Mallarmé wishes to come back to this simplicity. Mary Summer has, moreover, let the « noupouras » shine without any footnotes – and the poet’s imagination can freely inhabit this unknown exotic word. As a matter of fact, they possess the quality of bracelets and do shine like jewels – but they also function as musical instruments, originally tinkling and twinkling on Krishna ’s leg. These musical jewels echo and give Mallarmé’s text its rhythm, suggesting the musicality of the encounter to-be. The young woman is actually herself a simple literary suggestion, a metonymical fairy-like presence who could be vegetal, animal or spiritual and appears humane only in the very end. Presented in pieces through her footstep, her leg, her moan and finally her lips, the woman is very close to the feminine figures that inhabit Mallarmé’s poetry. This shadowy emptiness is reinforced by the Sanskrit etymology of the word « noupoura », originally describing the female apartments in a palace. Place of inaccessible desire, it represents an unknown and impenetrable vacuum, belonging both to the memory of a forgotten language and to a lost kingdom. A similar emptiness is omnipresent in Mallarmé’s writings, as Mary
Lydon has pointed out: « at the heart of Mallarmé's poetry, [...] we repeatedly encounter a vacuum, or more accurately an evacuated space, a space from which there has been a withdrawal, which that withdrawal has created » (Lydon 160). There is hence very little differences between the silent and mysterious queen of the tale as described by Mallarmé and the « Sainte », painted on the stained glass of an eponym poem:

\begin{verbatim}
Du doigt, que, sans le vieux santal
Ni le vieux livre, elle balance
Sur le plumage instrumental,
Musicienne du silence (Mallarmé 1992, 41).
\end{verbatim}

In the Indian tale, the musicality of the queen was related to her leg, whereas the finger here suffices. Nevertheless, what matters is that both women appear in a suspended mouvement which is a true moment – a momentum. This space of time is similar to an idyllic kairos, duplicating and pursuing the vacuum. While music remains, it appears in both texts as a silence paced by negations. The symbol itself emerges from such a dialectic between music and silence – and it is in this process that Mallarmé inscribes the possibility of the idea.

Just like the idea is present in the symbol but not automatically given, the way to an un-described yet represented « India » is to be found in the silent aspect of Mallarmé’s aesthetics. Man of words and brilliant translator who had a passion for linguistics and phonology, Stéphane Mallarmé played with silences and stillness to better set himself in a position quite similar to the one of the exotic or oriental subject who needs to be represented. As we have already pointed out, the Orient is usually silenced by the Western world to the extent that, as Said sums up by referring to Karl Marx’s citation : « Ils ne peuvent se représenter eux-mêmes, ils doivent être représentés » (Said 1980, p.11). While Summer follows perfectly such an agenda, commenting and footnoting the Indian custom’s, Mallarmé’s approach to the tales reverses the concept of representation. But to reverse representation and to directly « present », the poet needed an original text, and the adaptation, the re-writing process
appears as a chance. In the end, the reader is the one responsible for the comprehension of what is given to him. This way of considering reading is one of the typical aspects of the poet’s aesthetics, as Gayle Zachmann has argued: « the reading process for Mallarmé is a systematic reading of ‘indices’ that create meaning in the interstices » (Zachmann, p. 59). Beyond the Contes Indiens such a method explains why Mallarmé is usually seen by the mainstream as an unapproachable cryptogrammic writer. Incidentally, Jean-Paul Sartre pointed out:

\[ Jusque-là [= jusqu’à Mallarmé] le Verbe était l’intermédiaire entre poète et lecteur; à présent c’est une colonne de silence qui fleurit solitaire dans un jardin caché; si le lecteur escalade les murs, s’il voit des jets d’eau, des fleurs et des femmes nues, il faut qu’il sente d’abord que tout cela n’est pas à lui, n’est pas réuni pour lui. (Sartre, p. 62). \]

Since silence is the heart of Mallarmé’s poetry, the mediation between the poet and his readership appears as more visual than verbal. In Sartre’s description emerges the image of a distant and at first blindfolded reader, a stranger unfamiliar with the poet’s aesthetics. Ultimately, it is possible to peek in these marvelous gardens filled with fountains, flowers and naked women – but the secret key to this sight is a sense of dis-connection, an impression of non-belonging. So to say, Mallarmé’s writing is exotic, per se: just like remote cultures are easily exhibited and presented in museums, through a showcase, these texts need to be emblemsatically displayed under an invaluable glass of silence. And while the reference to the symbolic of the Medieval orchards shall not be forgotten, one might go so far as to wonder whether Sartre alluded to the Contes Indiens’ numerous and beautiful gardens themselves.

Mallarmé’s own take on the exotic is also noticeable in another narrative choice in the previously mentioned « Portrait enchanté »: the hero’s foster sister – daughter of the old woman who interferes between Oupahara and the princess in Summer’s version – vanishes entirely. Yet, this shadowy character is replaced by an invaluable jewel which plays a symbol-role in the text – and symbolizes Mallarmé’s poetry beyond it. While sealing the deal inside of the story, the precious stone also helps tighten the
narration. It appears as an invaluable gem which, at the same time, devours and binds. Moreover, the jewel plays the linking role of symbol between the two versions of the Indian Tales, since the themes to be found in the initial book are often very close to Mallarmé’s tastes: beyond imitation, the poet’s ethos flourishes. Not only do we find in these four tales two pure princesses very similar to the one in Hérodiade, some hazardous dices, a white poetic swan and some Loie-Fuller-like final dances, but the jewels shine throughout the whole stories. Obviously, even if in one of Summer’s tales the ancestor of « Le Petit Poucet » paves her way with pearls to trace it down, jewels and precious stones belong to the sphere of Mallarmé’s poetry. In other words, even before the poet decided to adapt the tales, the stories were mirroring Mallarmé’s own fascinations. This shining simplicity is noticed by Paul Valéry who writes, originally in italics:

*Mallarmé le précieux; Mallarmé le très obscur; mais Mallarmé le plus conscient; Mallarmé le plus parfait; Mallarmé le plus dur à soi-même de tous ceux qui ont tenu la plume (Valéry, p. 210)*

All these disjunctive nominal sentences let the name of Mallarmé echo – just like the multiple sides of a precious stone might reflect the same image. Here Valéry describes a poet he admires and uses the structure and the symbolic of the diamond to do so. In the end, Mallarmé appears as having all the possibly antagonists qualities of a beautiful stone. Only the conscience is « human » – but it could also be the logical result of the multiple reflections in the stone. Of course, the adjective « précieux » gathers several relevant meanings: it means precious but also valuable, very useful, valued and, in the case of friendship - even « dear ». The matter of « roughness to oneself » and of « obscurity » suggested by Valéry shows the possible drawback of the preciosity. On the one hand, it is precisely this side of Mallarmé which makes the everyday-reader find his poems very difficult to enjoy and which intimidates his translators. But on the other hand, Mallarmé’s writing appears as even more enjoyable to those who decrypt it – the « Happy few » in a very baudelairian way.
In a famous interview Mallarmé gave to Jules Huret in 1891, the poet metaphorically explained that precious stones could be useful stylistic devices – to the extent that they were not simply put together and described as they sometimes are in collectors’ albums:

– L’enfantillage de la littérature jusqu’ici a été de croire, par exemple, que de choisir un certain nombre de pierres précieuses et en mettre les noms sur le papier, même très bien, c’était faire des pierres précieuses. Eh bien ! non ! La poésie consistant à créer, il faut prendre dans l’âme humaine des états, des lueurs d’une pureté si absolue que, bien chantés et bien mis en lumière, cela constitue en effet les joyaux de l’homme : là, il y a symbole, il y a création, et le mot poésie a ici son sens ; c’est, en somme, la seule création humaine possible. Et si, véritablement, les pierres précieuses dont on se pare ne manifestent pas un état d’âme, c’est indûment qu’on s’en pare. (Mallarmé 1945, p. 872).

On the one hand, because he borrowed a text and adapted it, Mallarmé took the risk of unduly presenting himself as an author. But on the other hand, the difference established here between the collector and the creator overturns the dynamic. If we come back to the writing and to the re-writing of the Indian tales with this consideration in mind, it becomes obvious that Mallarmé, whose texts are truly poetic, knows what to do with the jewels while Summer misuses them. As a matter of fact, even the performative/mascarade aspect of the exotic is mastered by Mallarmé: very knowledgeable in the art of translation, the poet knows how to inhabit a text, how to disguise himself in its possibilities. And while Summer had to adapt the tales for her Parisian readership, Mallarmé focuses on the style and the form, puts the sparkle of poetry back where it belongs. As a way of concluding, if we follow the analogy of the jewel, Mary Summer could thus be seen as the very first Colombus-like colonizer figure, bringing home the rough precious stones as valuable displays of otherness, whereas Stéphane Mallarmé simply gives the gems a new shine by turning them into one of the peculiarities of his personal unique and dandy-like costume.
Bibliography

Mallarmé’s Works


Other references


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