On Artistic Form and the Spiritual: Mallarmé, Schönberg, and Kandinsky on Poetry, Mystery, and Music

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The turn of the twentieth century was a time of crucially important changes both in the way artists, poets, and composers produced their work and the way they conceived of their task and wrote about it in theoretical essays meant to shed light on what is at stake in artistic creation. Two notable areas of inquiry in these theoretical writings are new ways of approaching artistic technique, and reinterpretations by artists of the spiritual dimension of their art. While these two tendencies might seem opposed at first glance, as tending toward the material 'stuff' of art on one hand and toward the ineffable or transcendent on the other, the two modes of discussion are in fact strikingly similar for several key figures of artistic transformation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One could go further and argue, as I shall below, that conversation among artists about the 'spiritual' dimension in art at this time is an effort to divorce spirituality from its traditional association with religion in order to redefine the spiritual, paradoxically, in material terms. This is not to say that these artists are invested in material*ism*, but rather in the artisanal qualities of their work as artists, the formal considerations of how musical, linguistic, or painterly materials are combined. Mystery, one could say, becomes craft, but in a way that still makes room for a

Joseph Acquisto, 'On Artistic Form and the Spiritual: Mallarmé, Schönberg and Kandinsky on Poetry, Mystery, and Music'.
Thinking Verse II (2012), 68-87.
ISSN: 2049-1166.

redefined spirituality of art that locates mystery within the form of art itself and invites readers, listeners, and viewers to participate in artistic craft by completing the work that the artist has begun.

Much of this conversation about the transformation of artistic form and spirituality takes place in terms that oppose music and poetry as models for each other and for the other arts. I will argue here that two key modernists of the early twentieth century, Arnold Schönberg and Wassily Kandinsky, reframe their discussions of art's relation to form and spirituality in terms that stem from and extend debates a generation earlier about the relationship of music and poetry whereby each of those arts is transformed by theoretical reflection about the condition of the other. The key figure initiating this conversation across two generations is Stéphane Mallarmé, and the heart of my argument here is that it is Mallarmé who first revolutionizes modern artists' notion of the spiritual and who links that new understanding of spirituality explicitly to formal questions of artistic creation in ways that emphasize the craftsmanship of artistic practice through which this newly defined spirituality emerges. Mallarmé's restaging of the way music, poetry, spiritualism, and form interact in modern esthetic theory and practice looms large in the way Schönberg and Kandinsky discuss the current state of their art and the ways in which listeners and viewers perceive it.

Schönberg's 1912 essay 'The Relationship to the Text', published in the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter* [*The Blue Rider*] which was co-edited in Munich by Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, concisely encapsulates so many of the terms of this debate, and it is with him that I begin before turning back in time to Mallarmé. Schönberg begins his essay with an argument against understanding music in terms of the images it suggests to the mind, as opposed to understanding 'purely in terms of music, what music has to say' (141). The notion of purity returns regularly throughout his argument as a synonym for music understood in formal terms as the relation of tones. Rather than drawing on a comparison with pure poetry, Schönberg opposes music and poetry on the grounds that the poet cannot but use referential language whereas the composer is unique in crafting his art entirely non-referentially. Richard Wagner is his example of an artist engaged in the transformation of one artistic discourse into another. According to Schönberg:

> the impression of the 'essence of the world' received through music becomes productive in [Wagner] and stimulates him to a poetic transformation in the material of another art. But the events and feelings which appear in this transformation were not contained in the music, but are merely the material which the poet uses only because so direct, unpolluted and pure a mode of expression is denied to poetry, an art still bound to subject-matter. (142)

The problem that Schönberg identifies here is that the move from one art to another involves not a translation but a transformation, that is, an alteration of the basic experience. Schönberg highlights the impossibility of translation for Arthur Schopenhauer, who identifies the power of music to communicate in a way that goes beyond words and which is thus unable to be captured or represented in language. Schönberg quotes with admiration Schopenhauer's observation that 'the composer reveals the inmost essence of the world and utters the most profound wisdom in a language which his reason does not understand' (qtd 142), but notes that the philosopher is thus predestined to fail when trying to give an account of music's effects, since he has already indicated that those effects are ineffable. Schönberg himself thus retreats to the discourse of purity, claiming that 'the capacity of pure perception is extremely rare and only to be met with in men of high calibre' (142), a situation that holds disastrous consequences for those who wish to write about music. If even the most perceptive philosophers and composers are unable to translate music's 'most profound wisdom', all the less will the music critic be able to say something insightful about what he hears: 'Absolutely helpless he stands in the face of purely musical effect, and therefore he prefers to write about music which is somehow connected with a text: about programme music, songs, operas, etc.' (142).

Schönberg laments that, since many of his colleagues prefer to avoid 'shop-talk', 'there are scarcely any musicians with whom one can talk about music' (143). If translating music's higher meaning proves impossible precisely because that meaning is not expressible in words, and if discussing programme music really means addressing extra-musical concerns, we are left with an approach which risks falling into mere technical description of melodic and harmonic events and

structures in absolute music. I would like to suggest, however, that, by evoking fellow musicians rather than music critics only, Schönberg makes room here not for a merely descriptive formalism but an approach to artistic production as *craft*, an appreciation of the techniques and attention to detail by which the ultimately ineffable musical work is brought into being the first place. Although, as Job Ijzerman notes, 'Schönberg makes a clear distinction between the artist and the craftsman' whereby 'a craftsman "can" produce whatever he wants' but 'an artist "must", he feels an inner compulsion' (183), this distinction in the motivating force of an artist and craftsman does not necessarily imply such a sharp contrast in terms of production technique, and I will demonstrate how Mallarmé had, in the generation prior to Schönberg's, paved the way for a reconsideration of art as an artisanal practice.

The second half of Schönberg's short essay takes some surprising turns, as the author affirms, in a text whose very title is 'The Relationship to the Text', that since works of art are organic wholes, it is not in fact necessary to be familiar with the text of, for instance, a Schubert song in order to have a complete appreciation for it as a musical work, since any part will ultimately reveal the 'inmost essence' of the whole (144). Here Schönberg risks falling into an overly formalist account that seeks not to understand the *relation* of each detail, but rather to focus on single details now taken as representative of the whole. This dismissal of the importance of a detailed understanding of the poem in a texted work of music is accompanied by Schönberg's affirmation of visual artists whose work echoes music's nonrepresentational nature, such as Wassily Kandinsky, whose 'objective theme' is 'hardly more than an excuse to improvise in colours and forms and to express themselves as only the musician expressed himself until now' (144-5). Schönberg calls these new tendencies 'symptoms of a gradually expanding knowledge of the true nature of art' (145). Rather than remaining within this affirmation of formal description as an antidote to more fanciful descriptions of art, however, Schönberg goes on to endorse Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, published the year before Schönberg's essay, and which he indicates he read 'with great joy' (145).[1] A first glance at Kandinsky's text might call into question Schönberg's insistence on

[1] For details of Schönberg and Kandinsky's encounters beginning in 1911, see Kropfinger 9-11.

the importance of technique, since Kandinsky's discussion of the spiritual carries some potential resonance with Schopenhauer's ideas about art's expressive powers of a reality that is untranslatable into words, thus seeming to land us back where we began.[2] But here is the rather un-Schopenhauerian conclusion of Kandinsky's manifesto:

> Finally, I would remark that, in my opinion, we are fast approaching the time of reasoned and conscious composition, when the painter will be proud to declare his work constructive. This will be in contrast to the claim of the Impressionists that they could explain nothing, that their art came upon them by inspiration. We have before us the age of conscious creation, and this new spirit in painting is going hand in hand with the spirit of thought towards an epoch of great spiritual leaders. (112)

How, then, to reconcile the union of technique and spiritualism that Kandinsky prophesies and that Schönberg endorses? While these artists look toward the future, a look backward one generation in cultural history will give us another model for how the two may be integrated, and in precisely the realm that Schönberg denied as a viable model for other arts, namely, poetry. Rather than seeking, like the Abbé Bremond and other proponents of 'pure poetry', a form of poetic expression that denies referentiality in favour of an art form far more akin to music, Stéphane Mallarmé could be read as working out a poetics of craft that at the same time realigns poetry's relation to the spiritual or ineffable. In particular, Mallarmé removes it from theistic conceptions and accords a new importance to craft that works out the spiritual in quasi-referential and material terms.[3] In the rest of this essay, I would like to propose that the key to what Schönberg and Kandinsky situate in the future of art lies precisely in its immediate past, and that

[2] For an illuminating consideration of the role of the spiritual in Schönberg's musical evolution, see Covach.

[3] Bremond characterizes pure poetry in this way: 'Tout poème doit son caractère proprement poétique à la présence, au rayonnement, à l'action transformante et unifiante d'une réalité mystérieuse que nous appelons poésie pure' ['All poems owe their properly poetic character to the presence, the shining through, and the transforming and unifying action of a mysterious reality that we call pure poetry'] (Bremond 16).

Mallarmé provides a compelling case for reevaluating and indeed redefining the relation of the formal and spiritual in poetry, infusing a sense of craft with potential metaphysical significance that enhances the artist's attention to craft rather than claiming to surpass it. As we shall see, this tension between the formal and the spiritual is often expressed in terms that evoke music and poetry, not necessarily as representative of one side or the other, but of points of reference in the discussion of the relation of the two approaches to esthetics.

The earliest Mallarmé is a proponent of mystery in the arts; his tone is sometimes reminiscent of Schönberg's contention, quoted above, that the most appropriate way of perceiving art can only be found in 'men of high calibre'. Even such men may not gain access to the mysteries, according to the Mallarmé of 1862, who writes in his essay 'Hérésies esthétiques: L'Art pour tous' ['Esthetic Heresies: Art for All']: 'Toute chose sacrée et qui veut demeurer sacrée s'enveloppe de mystère. Les religions se retranchent à l'abri d'arcanes dévoilés au seul prédestiné : l'art a les siens' ['Everything sacred and which wishes to remain sacred is envelopped in mystery. Religions take refuge in mysteries revealed only to those predestined to them; art has its own'] (II: 360). Unsurprisingly, this first sentence of the essay is followed with a comparison to music, which Mallarmé offers as an example of an art appropriately shrouded in mystery, but the reason for this, he goes on to indicate, is that few are competent to read musical notation. Describing what is likely his own reaction to a printed score, he indicates that when seeing music notated 'nous sommes pris d'un religieux étonnement à la vue de ces processions macabres de signes sévères, chastes, inconnus. Et nous refermons le missel vierge d'aucune pensée profanatrice' ['we are taken with a religious surprise at the sight of these macabre processions of severe, chaste, unknown signs. And we close the missal, which remains a virgin to any profaning thought'] (360). Yet such a model depends on ignorance of the conventions of a particular art: this is religion in the lowest sense of mere mystification, as opposed to Schopenhauer's notion of the ineffable. It is true, though, that when Mallarmé shifts the subject of the essay to poetry, his concern is with a perfectly transparent and therefore simple literature that he opposes to a fully serious and well-developed art. Still, he expresses the difference in terms of *métier*: 'C'est que, la musique étant pour tous

un art, la peinture un art, la statuaire un art,—et la poésie n'en étant plus un […], on abandonne musique, peinture et statuaire aux *gens du métier*, et comme l'on tient à sembler instruit, on apprend la poésie' ['Since, music is according to everyone an art, painting is an art, statuary is an art,—and poetry is no longer one […], we abandon music, painting, and statuary to the professionals, and since we insist on seeming educated, we learn poetry'] (361). It is interesting to read these comments in light of a remark by Schönberg in his essay, where he laments that 'there are scarcely any musicians with whom one can talk about music' because 'musicians have acquired culture and think they have to demonstrate this [acquisition] by avoiding shop-talk' (Schönberg 143). The poet and composer come together here over the desire to see their respective arts discussed on their own terms, by those competent to do so rather than by a large public that risks importing extra-musical or extra-poetic matters into their view of the art. Despite a surface-level elitism, in light of Mallarmé's later writings on poetry it is most fruitful to see his comments in this early essay not as an effort to restrict access to poetry but rather to cultivate a sense of *métier* among those who are interested, in order to have fruitful discussion of poetry on its own terms.

Moving ahead more than thirty years, a trio of prose texts published in 1895-96 takes up the question of the spiritual in direct relation to the poet's sense of craft, often with reference once again to music. 'Crise de vers' ['Crisis in Verse'], a patchwork of texts originally published between 1886 and 1895, the year when it was given its form as the essay we know today, famously discusses both the question of free verse (the crisis referred to in the title) and larger issues of the metaphysical stakes of poetry. The pivotal moment in the essay between the first part, devoted to metrical questions, and the second, which takes up much larger questions about the nature and status of poetry, is a musical metaphor: 'Toute âme est une mélodie, qu'il s'agit de renouer' ['every soul is a melody, that one must renew'] (207-208). Mallarmé uses this affirmation to defend the *vers-libristes*' deviation from traditional metrical patterns, which, continuing the metaphor, he describes with reference to modulation, before turning to the question of a perfect language: 'Les langues imparfaites en cela que plusieurs, manque la suprême' ['Languages are imperfect in that, being multiple, the supreme language is missing']

(208). Here it is no longer a matter of having the language with which to describe or discuss poetry, but rather of the very language poets have to work with. Rather than lamenting the imperfections of language, poets should celebrate them, because poetry would not exist if language transparently revealed the world. It falls to poetry to compensate for the defect in language as its 'complément supérieur' ['superior complement'] (208).[4] We note that Mallarmé did not evoke music here in order to rehearse the debate of music or poetry's superiority or even to affirm their complementarity, but rather in order to justify innovation in poetic metrical practice. What Schönberg will see as a kind of defect in language, or at least a major limitation, that is, its inability to transcribe or translate the meaning of absolute music, is the very condition of the existence of poetry, not because of some putative 'purity' of poetic language, but because the poetic craft depends on, and is brought into being on account of, the gap between poetry and its supposed referent. This gap is of course the space in which the poem creates its own world, invested not merely with a semantic meaning but the whole overlapping series of phonetic, metric, and syntactic systems whose interaction Mallarmé did much to advance in his own verse technique which, while never cancelling meaning, highlighted the ways in which that meaning is entwined with, rather than merely expressed by, the raw materials of the words themselves.

If there is mystery in poetry for the author of 'Crise de vers', it is not an ineffable one that resists or is distorted by translation into language, but rather one that embraces that language, thus shifting the emphasis back once more to the craft of verse at the end of the essay, even as he continues his more abstract speculations on the nature of poetry. Once again, all of this is couched in musical parameters at first, since the poet indicates that when he attends concerts he perceives 'telle ébauche de quelqu'un des poèmes immanent à l'humanité ou leur originel état, d'autant plus compréhensible que tu' ['a sketch of one of the poems immanent to humanity or their original state, all the more comprehensible for being silent'] (212). Here we might be tempted to see Mallarmé as a good Schopenhauerian, reversing his typical metaphor in order now to see music as the

[4] I have analyzed Mallarmé's celebration of the imperfection of language more extensively in *French Symbolist Poetry and the Idea of Music*, pp. 89-96.

poem that could never be written in words. He goes on, however, to add that 'rien ne demeurera sans être proféré' ['nothing will remain without being proffered'] (212), and that poetry's current task is to achieve 'la transposition, au Livre, de la symphonie ou uniment de reprendre notre bien' ['the transposition, into the Book, of the symphony or rather to take back what is ours'] (212). While it is true that this passage hints at a kind of contest between music and poetry, a correct understanding of what is at stake in this 'transposition' removes the emphasis on competition between the arts in favour of a rethinking of the way in which they relate. Mallarmé is, as I have already argued, not defending the kind of 'pure poetry' to which Schönberg alludes several times in his essay. Nor is he advocating a kind of 'transcription' of the experience of listening to absolute music, that kind of translation that Schopenhauer and Schönberg agree is impossible without resorting to some sort of imagistic language that adds an element not truly present in the music while at the same time failing to account for what *is* actually there. This transposition, then, has nothing of the translation about it, and instead invites reflection on the craft of poetry, the working out in language of poetry's own formal material without reference to music, even though music may very well have served as an inspiration to the poet, as he implies here.

In light of what we have seen in 'Hérésies esthétiques', the attempt to 'reprendre notre bien' may simply refer to the ability to discuss poetry on its own terms, with an artistic status similar to that reserved for music and the other arts. On this account, it is conceivable to have a shared prestigious status between poetry and music, rather than a hierarchy between them. What Mallarmé is most concerned to achieve, here at the end of 'Crise de vers' no less than in the earlier essay, is a distinction between poetic and non-poetic language, the famous 'double état de la parole' ['double state of the word'] (212). In addition to their functional differences, what also separates 'l'universel reportage' ['universal reportage'] (212) from poetic language is the attention to craft that is brought to the latter. Despite the quasi-magical account that Mallarmé gives at the end of 'Crise de vers' where 'l'absente de tous bouquets' ['the one absent from all bouquets'] emerges from the poet having said, 'une fleur!' ['a flower!'] (213), the poet is no wizard but, rather, a skilled artisan, as witnessed by the constant rewriting to which Mallarmé subjected

his rather small corpus of exquisitely crafted poems. If Mallarmé in 1862 had condemned the notion of 'le *poète ouvrier*' ['the poet-worker'] as 'cette chose grotesque si elle n'était triste pour l'artiste de race' ['this thing that would be grotesque if it were not sad for the genuine artist'] (364), he will be eager to reclaim, in 1895-96, the poet as a kind of worker in the service of a mystery that is very much brought about and 'proffered' by human hands.

This same sort of complex relationship between mystery and craft is apparent in two other essays from the same period, 'Le mystère dans les lettres' ['Mystery in Lettters'] and 'Le livre instrument spirituel' ['The Book, Spiritual Instrument'], which also develop the relation of mystery and craft within the context of music. In the years immediately preceding the composition of these essays, Mallarmé was articulating a vision of music influenced less by Wagner than by explicitly religious music. In 'Plaisir sacré' ['Sacred pleasure'] (1893), which evokes Mallarmé's attendance at secular concert series such as the Lamoureux Concerts, he invokes the need of the 'multitude' to find itself 'face à face avec l'Indicible ou le Pur, la poésie sans les mots!' ['face to face with the Unsayable or the Pure, poetry without words!'] (236), thus suggesting that music appeals, perhaps in ways not unlike those proposed by Schopenhauer, on account of its immediate accessibility, unmediated by language or thought, as if it were possible to subtract the linguistic aspect of poetry and be left with something purer. The listener is still, however, caught in the same sorts of problems of translation of the experience that we encountered above, since the purportedly 'pure' experience of music remains inaccessible to thought without recourse to language. There are still echoes here of the early Mallarmé who worries that an all too easily accessible esthetic experience that is not earned by serious devotion to understanding art, is not a truly profound one; those earlier thoughts on art's accessibility are now mixed with Mallarmé's later recasting of accessibility in poems that resist transparent referentiality. In the sentence just quoted, music comes to play the role that an overly accessible poetry had played in the earlier essay, a witness to the essential changes that had been wrought in poetry by Mallarmé himself in the intervening thirty years, not really in terms of 'purity' but rather of complexity, the more artful arrangement of words on the page whose syntactical, semantic, and phonetic possibilities are expanded

far beyond anything that had come before, allowing for the active intervention of a reader in order to complete the creative act initiated by the artisan poet.[5]

Mallarmé explicitly acknowledges the question of the listener's role in 'De même' ['On the same'], an essay inspired by Mallarmé's attendance at the sacred music concerts of the Church of Saint Gervais, where there was a revival of Gregorian chant and Renaissance polyphony in both liturgies and concerts during Holy Week of 1893.[6] In his essay, the poet evokes Catholic liturgy, with its inaudible Latin text whispered by the priest while polyphony accompanies the liturgical action in a sort of drama that moves away from Wagner's mythologizing toward something more closely related to mystery. But a look at the first reference to mystery reveals that it has nothing of the traditional religious sense about it: 'Toujours que, dans le lieu, se donne un mystère: à quel degré en reste-t-on spectateur, ou présume-t-on y avoir un rôle?' ['It is always that, in the place, a mystery gives itself: to what degree does one remain a spectator, or does one presume to have a role?'] (243).[7] Here the 'mystery' is about the role of the listener in the creative act, a question which can easily be extended to the poetic process as well, in terms of the kind of meaning-making a reader of Mallarmé is asked to perform when confronted with a text that does not appear to make immediately apparent 'sense'. Mallarmé casts himself in the role of a listener for whom the voice of the children or men singing the motets 'évoque, à l'âme, l'existence d'une personnalité multiple et une, mystérieuse et rien que pure' ['evokes, in the soul, the existence of a multiple and single personality, which is mysterious and nothing else but pure'] (243). While cast in a sacred space, the mystery here is not directly

[5] On Mallarmé's difficulty as an invitation to readers 'to participate actively in the signifying process', see Reynolds pp. 89ff.

[6] For details of the musical revival at Saint Gervais, see Thomson pp. 80-81, and Nichols p. 66.

[7] Bertrand Marchal astutely characterizes Mallarmé's interest in Catholic liturgy in this way: 'L'intérêt de Mallarmé pour le catholicisme en général et le rituel de la messe en particulier n'est donc pas celui d'un esthète amoureux de la pompe ecclésiale, des ors et de l'encens, et avide avant tout d'émotions, mais d'un « dilletante » au sens propre du mot, d'un amateur soucieux des mécanismes religieux, qui pose sur ce qu'il considère comme une religion du passé un regard archéologique' ['Mallarmé's interest in Catholicism in general and the ritual of the mass in particular is thus not that of an esthete fond of ecclesiastical pomp, gold, and incense, and above all avid for emotion, but rather that of a "dilletante" in the proper sense of the word, an amateur concerned with religious mechanisms, who casts an archeological glance at what he considers to be a religion of the past'] (296).

related to any sort of beyond, but rather to the act of producing musical tones with the human voice, thus setting the stage for the elevation of artistic practice to the realm of the sacred. This is no mere secularization of mystery, however, nor is it an attempt to divinize the poet in an effort to make the artist some kind of new high priest. Rather, as I have been suggesting, Mallarmé reinvents the notion of the spiritual so as to emphasize the way art manifests itself in the material details of its production and, we may now add, reception or co-creation by a listener or reader. The 'purity' which the poet evokes in the lines just quoted describes what is, after all, a simply technical effect of polyphony, the ability to blend the tone of several voices singing independent melodic lines so that the whole sounds unified. Given Mallarmé's emphasis on his own role in the creation of this esthetic experience, we might go further here and suggest that the 'multiple and singular personality' also implies the active participation of a thoughtful listener or reader, whose active engagement in establishing meaning in the overlapping systems of semantics, syntax, meter, and so on, is necessary in order to bring the artifact that is the poem or the musical work into full existence. In this sense, Mallarmé's idea of music as 'rhythm between relations', which I explore further below, sets up music as a paradigm for reading poetry, in so far as making meaning from a poem requires attention to its non-semantic elements.

It is in light of these considerations of the way 'mystery' can be read in terms of technique rather than either poetic obscurantism or religious ineffability that we should understand Mallarmé's remarks in 'Le mystère dans les lettres', his response to Marcel Proust's accusations against symbolism in the article 'Contre l'obscurité' ['Against Obscurity'].[8] Once again, Mallarmé addresses the question of mystery in literature by an oblique entry through consideration of music, and once again he, like Schönberg, frames the question initially as one of translation:

> Les déchirures suprêmes instrumentales […] éclatent plus véridiques […] en argumentation de lumière, qu'aucun raisonnement tenu jamais ; on s'interroge, par quels termes du vocabulaire sinon dans l'idée, écoutant, les traduire […]. Une directe adaptation avec je ne sais, dans le contact, le sentiment glissé qu'un mot détonnerait, par intrusion. (232)

[8] In Proust 390-395.

> [The supreme instrumental tearings […] explode truer, in an augmentation of light, than any reasoning ever held; one asks oneself, by what kind of vocabulary terms if not in the idea, while listening, to translate them […]. A direct adaptation with, who knows, in the contact, the sentiment slipped in that a word would be out of tune or clash, by intrusion.]

Mallarmé's conclusion is that one must transcend this initial desire to translate what is present in the music; whatever he may have been jotting as he listened to music at the Lamoureux or Saint Gervais concerts was certainly not a transcription or translation of what he was hearing. He finds further common ground with Schönberg in his subsequent affirmation that what one must aim for is not translation but technical perfection within one art form, untranslatable to another. The result is not a 'contest' for supremacy among the arts but rather a willingness to take each art on its own terms and push its own formal limits. As we shall see below, Mallarmé's reflections imply a question about how formal specificity within each medium squares with his implied and explicit comparisons of non-referential poetry to music. What Mallarmé goes on to affirm in the essay is not an abstract engagement with mystery but, rather, a technical engagement with syntax: 'Quel pivot, j'entends, dans ces contrastes, à l'intelligibilité? Il faut une garantie—La Syntaxe' ['What pivot, I hear, in these contrasts, to intelligibility? We need a guarantee—Syntax'] (232-33). As in 'Crise de vers', where versification is the main technical focus, the 'spiritual' aspect of art is to be found in the mechanical details of its production as technique, and its reception, also represented here as practical action: 'Lire—Cette pratique' ['Reading—This practice'] (234). This is not to say, however, that following established procedures yields a demystified artistic product that is *merely* reducible to the craft of its composition by writer and reader: 'indéfectiblement le blanc revient, tout à l'heure gratuit, certain maintenant, pour conclure que rien au-delà et authentiquer le silence' ['unfailingly the blank returns, gratuitous before, certain now, to conclude that there is nothing beyond and to authenticate the silence'] (234). It is this play between utterance and silence that constitutes the dynamism of the reading and writing of poetry, taken, as Schönberg takes music, on its own terms in resistance to comparison to other art forms, even at the risk of falling into silence which, as both Schönberg and Mallarmé agree, is

preferable to deforming the esthetic experience by describing it with words inadequate to the task.

If both the composer and the poet refuse impoverished verbal description of esthetic experience, this is not to say that they resist all attempts to establish relations among the arts or between esthetic and other ways of experiencing the world. As we have seen, Schönberg affirms the organic unity of *Lieder* by claiming that the music itself contains the 'inmost essence' of the song. In his essay 'Le livre, instrument spirituel' ['The book, spiritual instrument'] (1895), Mallarmé begins by claiming that the book is 'l'hymne, harmonie et joie, comme pur ensemble groupé dans quelque circonstance fulgurante, des relations entre tout' ['hymn, harmony and joy, like a pure ensemble grouped in some searing circumstance, of the relations between everything'] (224). Here, by metaphorical substitution, the book becomes a piece of music. Mallarmé had already indicated this idea of a relational approach to music (and, by extension, poetry) in an 1893 letter to Edmund Gosse:

> Je fais de la Musique, et appelle ainsi non celle qu'on peut tirer du rapprochement euphonique des mots, cette première condition va de soi; mais l'au-delà magiquement produit par certaines dispositions de la parole; où celle-ci ne reste qu'à l'état de moyen de communication matérielle avec le lecteur comme les touches du piano. […] Les poëtes de tous les temps n'ont jamais fait autrement et il est aujourd'hui, voilà tout, amusant d'en avoir conscience. Employez Musique dans le sens grec, au fond signifiant Idée ou rythme entre des rapports; là, plus divine que dans l'expression publique ou symphonique. (*Corr* 6: 26)
>
> [I make Music, and I call by that name not the music that one can draw from the euphonic bringing together of words, this primary condition goes without saying, but the beyond magically produced by certain dispositions of the word; where it does not remain only in the state of material communication with the reader like the keys of the piano. […] Poets of all times have never done otherwise and it is today, simply, amusing to be aware of it. Use Music in the Greek sense, at base signifying Idea or rhythm between relations; as such, more divine than in the public or symphonic expression.]

All of the terms whose connections we have been tracing come together in these passages from Mallarmé's essay and letter. While he appeals to an abstract or metaphorical meaning of the word "music" here, separate from any actually heard or composed music, he does so in the service of actual poetry, since he is describing his compositional process here. It is thus not a question of pitting music against poetry in a battle for superiority, nor of simply eliminating the distinction between the two arts in an effort to demonstrate some higher synthesis, but rather of redefining the way we conceive both music and poetry. The spiritual is at stake in this definition as well, with the word 'divine' shifting from its typical Christian or even pagan connotations here in order to relate, once again, not to a metaphysical beyond but to the actual process of composition itself, which actively brings the 'rhythm between relations' into being. Mallarmé extends this consideration of poetic craft even to the typographical process, still expressed in terms borrowed from traditional religious vocabulary, including the 'miracle' of all words springing from the twenty or so letters of which they are composed, and the 'rite' of typographical composition (225), which allows the book to serve as the 'expansion totale de la lettre' ['total expansion of the letter'] (226). Once again, this spiritual act is completed by the reader: 'Un solitaire tacite concert se donne, par la lecture, à l'esprit qui regagne, sur une sonorité moindre, la signification : aucun moyen mental exaltant la symphonie, ne manquera, raréfié et c'est tout—du fait de la pensée. La Poésie, proche l'idée, est Musique, par excellence—ne consent pas d'infériorité' ['A solitary silent concert is given, by reading, to the spirit or mind which regains, with a lesser sonority, meaning: no mental means exalting the symphonie will be missing, rarefied and that is all—from the fact of thought. Poetry, near to the idea, is Music, par excellence—and admits of no inferiority'] (226). Here Mallarmé reaffirms poetry's referential aspect, again no mere transcription of esthetic experience but rather the experience itself, and inseparable from the artisanal process of both writing and reading, acts of co-creation according to Mallarmé.

Just as the poetic act is self-contained and independent of any relation to the other arts, a point on which Mallarmé and Schönberg are in agreement, the spiritual task of both poet and reader is to realize the poem *within* language itself, a

non-transcendent spirituality that locates the full esthetic experience in the words on the page as they are crafted and 'practiced' in reading. Roger Pearson has written of this particularly materialistic approach to the spirituality of poetry in Mallarmé: 'Already in 'Sonnet allégorique de lui-même' we find Mallarmé seeking to create a sense of that 'au-delà' which is *within* language: not an 'absolu' or an 'idéal' located in the outer space of theological or metaphysical longing, but a profound mystery at the heart of the language we unthinkingly spout from day to day' (155). Pearson goes on to note that Mallarmé had rejected Wagnerian opera for 'in a sense, saying too much, for being too narratively particular', whereas in 'La Musique et les Lettres', he 'condemns music for saying too little' (241). These criticisms open the way toward a different understanding of music in terms of the kinds of relationships or 'rythmes entre des rapports' ['rhythms between relationships'] that we have examined above, which include more abstract kinds of relationships, to be sure, but only insofar as these are created by the words on the page, by the syntactic, grammatical, phonetic, and other kinds of relationships brought into being by the craft of the poet assembling words on the page.[9]

These considerations allow us to reconsider Mallarmé's famous definition of poetry, which he included in a letter to Léo d'Orfer in June 1884: 'La Poésie est l'expression, par le langage humain ramené à son rythme essentiel, du sens mystérieux des aspects de l'existence; elle doue ainsi d'authenticité notre séjour et constitue la seule tâche spirituelle' ['Poetry is the expression, by human language brought back to its essential rhythm, of the mysterious meaning of aspects of existence; it thus confers authenticity upon our time here and constitutes the only spiritual task'] (Corr II: 266). While Mallarmé adopts the vocabulary of the spirit here, he does so in a way that places spirituality on the same plane with, and I would even say within the domain of, the material, artisanal aspects of artistic creation. The mysterious aspects of existence *can* only be expressed through language; any other kind of mystery would simply be unintelligible for Mallarmé, and as we have just seen, that is the kind of unintelligibility that he criticizes in music understood in ways other than the rhythms of relations, i.e. as music in the

[9] See also Pearson's reading of "Un coup de dés" as offering 'answers to these questions' of what kind of relationships Mallarmé may have had in mind (Pearson 239ff).

common meaning of organized tonal sound. Rhythm recurs here in this definition of poetry as the putting-into-rhythm of language, the ordering of an otherwise unwieldy substance by the skilled artisan whose work is, as we have seen, then completed by the reader. Composers, Schönberg would no doubt affirm, also work artisanally by organizing sound into the patterns we know as music, thus aligning the task of the poet and the composer but allowing Mallarmé to retain his notion of Music in the larger sense as these rhythms of relations, which in turn allows us to go beyond a notion of competition between the arts on the grounds of their purported relative 'purity'. Thus 'Music', as a set of relations, is at the heart of the question of defining poetry, while 'music', as actually composed pieces of music, exists quite separately from poetry. We can affirm much the same for spirituality: while it appears to play an important role for all three of the authors we have been considering, it does so only insofar as it is redefined as a particularly material spirituality, the bringing-into-form of the work of art.

A generation after Mallarmé was writing, Schönberg and Kandinsky will join him in affirming, within the spiritual discourse that appears in their writings, an emphasis on form and technique. This emphasis in turn allows us to understand what stands behind the metaphors of spirituality or the references to ineffability that they employ. To conclude, I would like briefly to return to Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, in light of the relationship between craftsmanship and spirituality as redefined by Mallarmé in the context of comparisons between music and poetry. Music in fact serves as the point of commonality between Mallarmé's reflections on poetry as we have been tracing them here and Kandinsky's remarks on art. At first glance, Kandinsky appears to uphold a strict division between the material and the spiritual, claiming that at the moment he was writing, 'after the period of materialist effort, which held the soul in check until it was shaken off as evil, the soul is emerging, purged by trials and sufferings' (7). This initial laying out of a dichotomy is ultimately misleading, however, since Kandinsky comes to affirm an art that involves the material infused with the spiritual, or he puts it, the 'how' and the 'what' of art:[10]

[10] Klaus Kropfinger notes that, in contrast to Theodor Adorno's contention that artists began thinking in terms of 'material' only in the 1920s, 'both Schönberg's *Theory of Harmony* and

> If the emotional power of the artist can overwhelm the 'how?' and give free scope to his finer feelings, the art is on the crest of the road by which she will not fail later on to find the 'what' she has lost, the 'what' which will show the way to the spiritual food if the newly-awakened spiritual life. This 'what?' will no longer be the material, objective 'what' of the former period, but the internal truth of art, the soul without which the body (i.e. the 'how') can never be healthy, whether in an individual or in a whole people. (20)

Here the material and the spiritual are fused. One may of course argue that any sort of visual art is a fusion of spiritual and material attributes, but I have been arguing that Mallarmé's account of the materiality of the process of artistic creation, what I have been calling its artisanal aspect, allows us to reconsider what the 'spiritual' means here. Divorced from any traditional notion of theistic spirituality and enhanced by these artists' attention to form, the spiritual character emerges from that form itself, or, better, is contained within it in an artwork brought into being by the artist and completed by the reader, listener, or viewer.

It is because of this reinterpretation of the spiritual along the lines of the artist's craft that Kandinsky can proceed to a technical discussion of painting, with consideration of such formalist themes as the language and form of colour, in the second half of his text devoted to the 'spiritual in art'. Before he does so, however, he briefly considers the two arts which have concerned us here, namely poetry and music. He remarks of Maurice Maeterlinck, for instance, that his 'principal technical weapon is his use of words' (32), and goes on to quote Schönberg about the 'definite rules and conditions which incline [him] to the use of this or that dissonance' (35, quoting Schönberg's essay 'Die Musik'). From this proposition of Schönberg's, however, Kandinsky goes on to affirm that 'his music leads us into a realm where musical experience is a matter not of the ear but of the soul alone' (35), which begins to lead us back to Schönberg's problem of the difficulty of addressing music on its own terms, without reference to external figures of musical representation or to the ultimately ineffable or untranslatable reality of music's

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Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art* bear witness to the fact that the aspect of material, bearing historical and consequently also mental or spiritual implications, had already arisen in both their thinking and writing before this time' (13-14).

effects as the composer sees them manifested in Schopenhauer. It is precisely here that what I have been arguing with reference to Mallarmé can help us avoid the false dichotomy between the spiritual and the technical, since Mallarmé reinterprets the spiritual in formal terms, as a material working out of the possibilities of form, completed by the practice of reading, or what Roger Pearson has called, in reference to Mallarmé's late style, the poet's 'art of combination, of "Musique"' (297). As we have seen, Mallarmé remarks on the formal and the spiritual should lead us to be suspicious of Kandinsky's claim about musical experience as a matter of the 'soul alone'. However influenced Mallarmé, Schönberg, and Kandinsky may have been by some form of spiritualism or spirituality in a more conventional sense, each is using the vocabulary of spirituality to an unconventional and nontraditional end that attributes a spiritual quality to the formal characteristics of poetry, music, and painting. Mallarmé's reflections on music, and his particularly subtle appropriations of religious music in its relation to poetic production, serve as a key tool in helping us puzzle out the innovative ways in which the great formal experimenters of their time understood the spirituality of their formal artistic task.

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