

MIM@LOGICS

Mimologiques: Voyage en Cratylie

by Gérard Genette

TRANSLATED BY THAÏS E. MORGAN

with a Foreword by Gerald Prince

MIM@LOGICS

GENETTE

NEBRASKA

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Failing Natural Languages



The true writer is a man who does not *find* his words.¹

© If an autobiographical letter to Paul Verlaine is to be credited, Stéphane Mallarmé did not attach great value to his *Mots anglais*: “a neatly done piece of work and that’s all, about which it is unbecoming for me to speak.”² But should we believe him? For Paul Valéry, quite on the contrary, this book “may well be the most revealing document we possess concerning his secret research.”³ Others have found in it “the source of all his poetry,”⁴ and this hypothesis has inspired more than one commentary. Perhaps the *Petite Philologie* of 1877 merits neither such disdain nor such honor. It is a telling document, to be sure, and not only for the Mallarméan theory of language but more generally for the Cratylan imagination at a turning point in its history. But this document, far from being

In the French title of this chapter, “Au défaut des langues,” the word *défait* is rich in connotations relevant to Genette’s argument. First, it can denote the “flaw” or “imperfection” in a mineral or precious metal. Applied to languages, this meaning is central to secondary Cratylism, or the attempt to motivate language in relation to things no longer through the hypothesis of a divine or natural origin but “artificially” through belated human intervention. In this sense, the “flaw” in languages is a *felix culpa*, since it legitimates the philosopher’s and the poet’s (re)invention of a more mimetically exact or correct (*juste*) verbal system.

Second, the *défait* in languages is a “default” or “lack” in mimetic exactitude or correctness (*la justesse*), which threatens the assumption that language can be used as an instrument of truth either in philosophy or in poetry. This idea entails a network of economic metaphors: the “default” in verbal mimesis must be “compensated for” and also “remunerated” by the invention of a better (more strictly motivated and less arbitrary) sign system. Words are tokens (“coins”) of meaning that have been exchanged or circulated so long without careful attention to exact correspondence between sign and referent that language has become misleading and/or arbitrary in relation to the objects it is supposed to designate.

Third, *défait* in the sense of a “flaw” or “failing” in languages carries metaphysical undertones that implicitly return us to the Socratic question of the original error of the divine name-maker and law-giver. For Christian thinkers, too, this “failing” in languages became implicated in the notion of original sin—the falling away of humanity from God and of human language(s) from Nature (unity); see Genette’s discussion of the myth of Babel in chapters 4, 6, and 8. Here, I have most often translated the key word *défait* by the more general term “failing” so as to evoke all the foregoing connotations.

self-sufficient, lends itself to interpretation only in light of its context — certain other pages by Mallarmé — and its situation: the very special relation of a poet to an idiom that is neither his mother tongue nor his natural language for writing (even if, in this case, he knows it well enough to teach and to translate it). As much and more than the article on Wagner, this book could be subtitled *Réverie d'un poète français* {Reverie of a French poet}.⁵ English as dreamed of, in short, or — to paraphrase yet another Mallarméan title — *English as seen from here*.

Now then, the complete title is *Petite Philologie à l'usage des classes et du monde: Les Mots anglais* {Short Book of philology for classroom and general use: English words}.⁶ The publisher announced a second volume under preparation, devoted to the *Étude des règles* {study of Rules}, or to grammar, and several other allusions in the text confirm this promise — which would never be kept.⁷ The baptism of the whole enterprise as philological⁸ and its immediate restriction to the lexicon alone indicate clearly enough the ambiguity of the work, which extends and deflects the Cratylian tradition at the height of historical linguistics. Typical of the nineteenth century is the awareness of the plurality of natural languages and, at least for the Indo-European family, their complex network of kinships and differences. "What is English?"⁹ The inquiry will focus not, as in the past, upon language *in general* {*le langage*} but on *one* natural language {*une langue*}, situated in its place in the general historical chart¹⁰ and defined more by its filiation than by its structure. On the final page Mallarmé belatedly tries for a typological characterization in the manner of Schleicher, but he does so with a purely rhetorical, or ludic, air: English will be simultaneously "monosyllabic" (isolating) like Chinese, "and even interjectional, one and the same Word often serving as both verb and noun"; agglutinative in its compound words; and inflected in a few vestigial case endings and verb conjugations. Elsewhere, and with a cooler eye, Mallarmé sees it as above all monosyllabic and "radical": "Whoever wants to speak wisely can say only one thing about English, which is that this idiom, thanks to its monosyllabism and to the neutrality of certain forms capable of marking several grammatical functions simultaneously, presents its Radicals almost in their naked state."¹¹ But this is not the essential point, and as characteristic as it may be, this structural feature is merely an effect that refers back to its historical cause: "a result mainly achieved in the shift from Anglo-Saxon to English."¹² This shift, a crucial moment in a diachrony that goes back to the primitive Indo-Europeans of the Oxus Valley, itself results from a historical event: Hastings,¹³ the conquest of England by William's Normans, the encounter and the progressive fusion of the two tongues.

Therein lies the key, and the true answer to the initial question, "What is English?" It is a mixture of Anglo-Saxon and French-Norman. We will return to this, but it should be noted immediately that such an answer, despite its obvious historicism, is conceivable only in the eyes of a linguistics still caught in the cate-

gories and the implicit valorizations of an older attitude, for which the essence of a natural language resides in its lexicon. In order to clarify things in this respect, it suffices to point out that J.-P. Thommerel, in his *Recherches sur la fusion du franco-normand et de l'anglo-saxon*,¹⁴ after having counted only 13,330 Germanic words against 29,854 Roman words, nevertheless endorsed Abel-François Villemain's opinion: "The English language is still today a wholly Teutonic tongue," for the German words constitute "the essential, indispensable part of the language system; without them there would be, as it were, no more than an undigested list of nouns, adjectives and verbs, without number, or tense, or modes, or persons."¹⁵ This grammatical awareness of natural language, which gives the premier role to the construction of sentences and to relational words, is obviously absent from *Les Mots anglais*: "It is best to pass over the Grammar in order to think only about the Lexicon."¹⁶ Albeit methodical and theoretically provisional, this neglect is no less typical. It comes in fact less often from a deliberate decision than from an unnoticed slippage. Here, Mallarmé asks himself "what is Language?" and answers "the life of words"; elsewhere, he switches from one category to the other in the same sentence, clearly identifying natural language with the lexicon.¹⁷ This valorization of the word (but not of the *noun* here, since, as we have seen, the distinction, for Mallarmé, is not always pertinent in English)¹⁸ is a characteristic feature of mimologism, and therein lies the other face of *Les Mots anglais*. The question "What is English?" thus definitively boils down to another question: What is the English lexicon?

So defined, the English idiom offers the inquiring poet-linguist a rather rare and, as we shall see, obscurely emblematic spectacle: that of a *double* language, in which the respective heritages of Northern Old French {*langue d'oil*} and Anglo-Saxon are mingled and compounded without ever fusing, according to secret laws. This "Anglo-French dualism"¹⁹ is at first translated by the well-known division that reserves Norman, tongue of the conquerors, for the political and seignorial vocabulary, and conquered Anglo-Saxon for the "humble and private" realities. Thence come those "parallel" vocables that designate in both languages the living animals of peasant reality (*ox, calf, sheep, swine*), and the meat offered "on the lord's table" (beef {*boeuf*}, veal {*veau*}, mutton {*mouton*}, pork {*porc*}): a classic example of sociolinguistic cleavage or social resistance to the fusion of languages.²⁰ But what interests Mallarmé above all is the aesthetic aspect of the phenomenon, the picturesque juxtaposition of the idioms, the immediate expressiveness of their division²¹—and even more, its strange poetical investments: those bilingual doublets, "unique modes of rhetoric" characteristic of the language of Chaucer, which originate in an obvious need for direct translation (*act* and *deed* {*acte*}, *head* and *chief* {*chef*}, *mirth* and *jollity* {*joliment*}), and those adjectival framings (*the woful day fatal*), from which derives "one of the most exquisite forms of style in modern English poetry."²²

But this segregative and redundant dualism is joined by another, with subtler although entirely spontaneous effects: that resulting from the inevitable absorption of one natural language by another, from the forced anglicization of the French words adopted since the eleventh century, "our words hindered by the strange obligation of speaking a tongue other than their own." Mallarmé devotes an entire chapter (book 2, chapter 1) to these adulterations of form and to the "laws of permutation" that regulate them.²³ Here, a natural language is seen not next to its rival but behind it, by virtue of etymological transparency: *napperon* under *apron*, *chirurgien* under *surgeon*, *asphodile* under *daffodil*, and so on. These are adulterations of forms but also of meanings, whence those misleading vocables, the famous *faux amis* {false cognates; literally, "false friends"} where the resemblance of the signifiers dissimulates the conflict of the signifieds: "library," which is and is not *librairie* {bookstore}, being, without being, *bibliothèque* {library}; "prejudice," not *préjudice* {harm} but *préjugé*; "scandal," not *scandale* {outrage} but *calomnie* {slander}. Such words institute an odd to-and-fro movement of identities and differences from one language to another. "Most often extension or restriction are what can happen, as well as the passage from a proper acceptation to an almost rhetorical figure" (that is, metonymy); this spontaneous tropology is constantly at work in all natural languages, but here it plays above their borderline. Finally, there are double adulterations, "truly bizarre cases in which signification and orthography are merged in order to form new products"; this is the well-known mechanism of popular or "folk" etymology, where an opaque term — in the present case, opaque because foreign — finds itself reinterpreted, hence remotivated, by means of a paronymic collision. The collision may be partial, as when *femelle* becomes "female" (versus "male"); *lanterne*, "lanthorn" (from "horn," *la corne*, used as glass); or *écrevisse*, "{shell} fish" — if you like, "crayfish". Or it may be complete, as in *asparagus*, "sparrow grass"; *buffetier*, "beef-eater"; *Bellerophon*, "Billy Ruffian"; and that masterpiece of phonic transposition, the famous signboard *Chat Fidèle* {The Faithful Cat}, which has become "The Cat and the Fiddle." These "felicitous wordplays" are genuine plays on languages, an ironic, pre-Joycean subversion of the very concept of translation and of the signifying relationship.²⁴

Such is English, a completely original formation, "neither artificial nor absolutely natural," the "graft" of a "virtually finished" language on a "nearly finished" language,²⁵ a language with a double base and a false bottom, perhaps with two usages, one of which would be pure play — pure poetry.

☺ But of these two basic stocks, one is clearly privileged — not, as we have seen, inasmuch as it commands the joining of words and the construction of sentences but inasmuch as it is the original, the earliest treasury of "words of the soil." It is the "Gothic or Anglo-Saxon" element to which Mallarmé devotes his

Book 1 {of *Les Mots anglais*}, and the whole of the mimological inquiry is the subject of the first chapter. In itself, this *parti pris* is by no means peculiar to Mallarmé, since we have already observed it at work in John Wallis.²⁶ But we shall see further on that in passing from the earlier author to the later one, this restriction, already contrary to Cratylan universalism, takes on a still greater and more paradoxical significance.

Once the field has been thus narrowed down, the mimetic principle, the *correctness of words* {*la justesse des mots*}, is rediscovered at work. It comes up with regard to onomatopoeia, whose state of "inferiority" in present-day natural language Mallarmé (like de Brosses) clearly detects, but which he sees as "perpetuating in our idioms a process of creation that was perhaps the first one of all"²⁷ — words so pristine that they escape all history (all filiation) and appear to have been "born yesterday. Your origins? one asks them; and they merely display their correctness" (this is the gist of Socratic eponymy). How can one talk about their origin, since these "right words {*mots justes*}, issuing fully formed from the instinct of the very people who speak the language," are simply the origin itself of everything *that speaks*? Mallarmé hardly specifies the nature and the workings of this mimetic correctness, unless it is by a highly discreet, almost dubious, recourse to the principle of organic vocal imitation dear to his predecessors in the past century, alluding to the "relations between overall signification and the letter — which, if they exist, do so only by virtue of the special use, in a word, of one or the other of the speech organs."²⁸ He is still more reserved when he describes the link "between the spectacles of the world and the spoken word charged with expressing them" as "one of the sacred or perilous mysteries of Language, and one that it will be advisable to analyze only on the day when Science, mastering the vast repertory of all idioms ever spoken on earth, writes the history of the letters of the alphabet across the ages and approximately what their absolute signification was, sometimes divined, sometimes misunderstood by men, the creators of the words."²⁹

Sometimes misunderstood: this is the very hypothesis of the law-giver's error, invoked by Socrates against Cratylus, and the foundation of what we have agreed to call secondary mimologism: namely, that the elements of language have an "absolute signification" — in other words, a natural one — but that the words of the actual lexicon can betray it. This includes the English language, itself not always above reproach: "Yes, *sneer* is a nasty smile and *snake* a perverse animal, the serpent, *sn* therefore³⁰ impressing a reader of English as a sinister digraph except, however, in *snow*, etc. *Fly? to flow?* but what is less soaring and fluid than the word *flat*?" In any case, the expressive "link" between word and spoken word, alluded to just now, was not given in natural language but "established by the imagination" thanks to the "magisterial effort" of alliteration: that is to say, a factitious imitative harmony, even if its process is said to be "inherent in the

northern genius." Here Mallarmé's secondary Cratylism appears already nearly fully fledged: the poet (or the "erudite prose writer") is to be entrusted with compensating for the mimetic inadequacy of natural language. But this is to anticipate.

Limited, then, to an idiom within an idiom, and not without possibly premonitory precautions, the mimetic principle will undergo anew a series of reductions that will restrict, but probably also concentrate, its effect. First, there is a crucial separation of the phonemes into vowels and consonants according to a very widespread metaphorical equivalence that sees "something like flesh" in the vowels and the diphthongs, and "something like a skeletal frame that is difficult to dissect" in the consonants.³¹ Here we rediscover the "consonantal skeleton" of Semitic vocables and Indo-European "roots," in which is centered the power of signification. "What is a root? An assemblage of letters, often consonants, displaying several words of a natural language as if dissected, reduced to their bones and their tendons, removed from their ordinary life, so that a secret kinship between them may be recognized."³² *Bones* and *tendons*, framework and musculature: the site of all power lies there. The vowels, of "middling importance" at least in the "northern languages,"³³ retain only a purely grammatical function, as variations on and derivations from the semantic *theme* furnished by the consonants alone: "On the inside, vowels or diphthongs; there is nothing simpler than these, with their relative insignificance, which receive the effort of the voice straining to differentiate the grammatical value of the word."³⁴ Clearly, "grammatical value" is closely linked to insignificance, which amounts to the presupposition of a radical antinomy between grammar and signification. Thus, as in de Brosse, the vowels, pure morphemes, are henceforth out of semantic play.

But a new distinction will now subdivide the consonants themselves, not according to their mode of articulation but according to the position they occupy in the word. The final consonants "appear as good as suffixes that are not always discernible"; "these end consonants coming to add something like a secondary sense to the notion expressed by those at the beginning. What? not yet Affixes: no, but indeed very ancient endings, rough and abolished." They are thus confined, in their turn, within a grammatical function as simple agents of inflection. There remains, then, the initial consonant, the last refuge of semanticity: "It is there, *in the attack*, that signification truly resides"; "the initial consonant remains immutable, for in it lies the radical power, something like the fundamental meaning of the word."³⁵ The consonant and not, as in Wallis, the consonantal group: there is here an extreme reduction, therefore, that leaves to the consonants of the second and third rank merely a subordinate semantic value, nuance, or modulation. Jean-Pierre Richard quite rightly compares this decisive valorization of the initial position to another, parallel or homothetic, valorization: that of the initial position in the verse line, itself also baptized as the *letter*

of attack.³⁶ "I despise you," writes Mallarmé to F. Champsaur, "solely because of the capital letter removed from the verse line; the letter of attack there holds, in my view, the same importance as the rhyme." Elsewhere, he calls it the "alliterative key,"³⁷ and the inferential role of this musical metaphor is quite plain. The first letter of the word, as of the verse line, is indeed "the key that harmonizes it" (Richard), the key signature at the head of the score that gives the pitch, that regulates and dominates the semantic alliteration. It is this "dominant Consonant" through which he will attempt "to explain the Signification of more than one vocable"³⁸—thus does Mallarmé himself define his purpose. As for words with an initial vowel, necessarily doomed to contingency and arbitrariness, they will have the merit of discretion: "Everyone will notice how few words having a vowel for the initial letter belong to the original English—that is, to the Anglo-Saxon base; it is mainly a consonant that performs the attack in the vocabularies of the North."³⁹ Let us leave it at that, then.

The system of semantic values attributed to the consonants in initial position is presented, as everyone knows, in a list (called a *table*) of vocables grouped by families⁴⁰ (plus, each time, an accessory list of "isolated" words that defy this grouping) according to their consonant of attack, the latter being themselves arranged no longer in alphabetical order but according to a phonetic classification: labial, guttural, sibilant, dental, aspirated, liquid, and nasal. Here we need to recall the features of these values.⁴¹

— *b* signifies heaviness or roundness: "meanings, diverse and yet all secretly linked, of production or childbirth, fecundity, amplitude, puffiness and curviness, boastfulness; next, of bulk or ebullience and occasionally of benevolence and blessing... significations more or less implied by the basic labial."

— *w* indicates oscillation, perhaps on account of the "vaguely double nature of the letter," whence wateriness, fainting, and whimsy; whence weakness, charm, imagination. But Mallarmé seems more sensitive to the "diversity" of this family than to its unity. The group *wr* is assigned, as in Wallis, but equivocally, to the sense of torsion.

— *p*: piling up, stagnation, sometimes a clear-cut act. The groupings with *l* and *r* do not seem to produce any specific meaning.⁴²

— *f*: strong and fixed grip; *fl*: flight, whence through "rhetorical transposition" light, flowing; *fr*: strife or estrangement, and various other things.

— *g*: desire; *gl*: satisfied desire, whence joy, light, gliding, enhancement; *gr*: seizing of the desired object, crushing (cf. Wallis).

— *j*: very rare in first position, "placed nowhere but before a vowel or a diphthong, it thus shows a tendency to express some lively, direct action rather than possessing in itself alone one of these meanings"—which is to say, no doubt, that its position always *directly* before the vowel is what gives it this value.

— *c*: “swift and decisive attack,” spirited acts; *cl*: to clasp, cleave, clamber up; *cr*: crash, cracking (cf. Wallis); *ch*: violent effort.

— *k*, before *n*: knottiness, knuckles; “moreover, notice the group *kin, kind, king*, whence springs a notion of familial benevolence.”

— *q*, before *u*: quick and violent movement.

— *s*: to place or, on the contrary, to look for. Here again we find the well-known principle, previously encountered in de Brosse, of the equivalence of “opposite meanings.” Mallarmé had announced this beforehand: “The tacking back and forth in the signification can become absolute to the point of matching an authentic analogy in interest; it is thus that ‘heavy’ seems suddenly to rid itself of the sense of *weightiness* which it marks, in order to supply *heaven*, the sky, high and subtle, considered as spiritual abode”; to separate is to equalize.⁴³ But the important aspect of the significations comes from their diverse groupings — *sw*: swiftness, swelling up, absorption; *sc*: scission, gash, scraping, shock; *sh*: shooting forth; shadow, shelter, and, “contradictorily,” the action of showing; *st*: stability, as “in many natural languages” (cf. Wallis), instigation, “perhaps the principle meaning of the letter *s*”;⁴⁴ *str*: strength, yearning (cf. Wallis); *sl, sm*: slackness, slipperiness, sneakiness; *sm*: honesty, smiles; *sr*: very delicate work; *spr*: springing out (cf. Wallis);⁴⁵ *spl*: split.

— *d*: steady action without showiness, dullness, obscurity; *dr*: an effort that drags on.

— *t*: stop, stasis, a fundamental signification “admirably expressed by the combination *st*.” Admirably, but in flagrant infraction of the general principle of the predominance of the initial position. Whence *th*: objectivity (in demonstrative and second person pronouns, and the definite article); and *tr*: moral trustiness, whence truth.

— *h*: direct and simple movement; hand, heart, head; power, domination.

— *l*: longing without result, slowness, lengthiness, dullness; but also to leap, listen, love.

— *r*, “articulation par excellence”: raising, removal, richness, rending, radicalness.

— *m*: “power to make, therefore virile and maternal joy”; measure, duty, number, meeting, mingling, mediator; by “transfer,” inferiority, mildness, mad.

— *n*: neat and incisive character; nearness.

One cannot help being struck by the heterogeneity of these items, an aspect that Mallarmé takes a perverse delight in emphasizing:⁴⁶ only *b, w, g, c, d,* and *t* seem provided with a stable and coherent signification. This diversity in interpretation should be compared with two other characteristic features, equally deviant with respect to the Cratylan tradition. First, there is the extreme restraint concerning physical motivations. The only one that is clearly indicated

remains doubtful: this is the "double nature"—graphic, in the present case—of *w*, which would determine its value of oscillation. The link between the bilabial articulation of *b* and its value of puffiness is suggested in a highly uncertain way, and that between the "swift and decisive" nature of the attack *c* and its signification of spiritedness is hardly drawn more clearly. Even values as univocal as those of *g*, *d*, or *t* are given without any attempt at explanation; they are *a fortiori* the most heterogeneous. There is nothing that recalls the traditional motivations, from Plato to Nodier, of the values attributed to *r*, *t*, *l*, and the groups *gl* and *st*. The significations are simply noted and recorded, just as the (rudimentary) statistics of the word lists suggest, and not without some confusion. Indeed, it is typical for the semantic interpretations to come after the catalogues of vocables,⁴⁷ which therefore function not simply as illustrative examples (chosen as such) but as the real material for observation.⁴⁸ The approach of this chapter is properly inductive, whence its often uncertain and almost hesitant character. Here, the signification of the letters is offered no longer as *absolute* but indeed as relative to the (often capricious) givens of an existing corpus. The connection between this multiple signification and the physicality of the signifiers is not intended to be properly mimetic, or even otherwise necessary: things just are that way in English, and nothing more. And when by exception Mallarmé observes a more widespread value, such as *st* = stop, he carefully refrains from declaring it to be universal; it is merely attributed to "many natural languages," and the "kinship of these idioms" is directly inferred from that. This is a typical illustration of the trammels imposed on the Cratylan imagination by historical linguistics. The relation *st* = stop is no longer a fact of nature, extensive with all of human language; it is more modestly, and definitively, an Indo-European root.

Thus, Mallarmé tacitly renounces, simultaneously, the two key principles of Cratylism—universality and mimeticism—without, for all that, renouncing its overall trend or, above all, its deep desire. On the one hand, he poses the "correctness of words" (in the English language); on the other hand, he assigns to every English consonant one or several meanings whose correctness almost nothing confirms and still less guarantees and which could ultimately be based on pure convention. So we have—once again contrary to Socrates' hypothesis, and apparently against all logic—"right" (necessary) words composed of arbitrary elements.

In this paradoxical form of mimologism are combined (at least), on the one hand, the *feeling for onomatopoeia*, or mimetic correctness, with respect to a large number of English words,⁴⁹ and, on the other hand, the impossibility of *explaining* (and therefore grounding) this correctness at the level of the linguistic elements. This is quite close to the situation foreseen and criticized by Socrates, predicting the discomfiture of anyone who claims to explain the derivative forms (by the simple ones) without being able to explain the simple ones (by

the most basic ones), and who ends up talking only "nonsense." In fact, for Socrates, these elements of language will become the only solid ground for mimetic motivation, a ground too often abandoned by the name-maker. For Mallarmé—not, to be sure, in practice but in theory—the problem here is that the necessary foundation slips away, as if the English lexicon had in part been for the foreign observer the site of an illusion or, more precisely, of a mirage.

Finally, then, we must (re)turn to that peculiar feature of *Les Mots anglais*, perhaps the most peculiar and probably the most important—in any case, the most paradoxical: that it is (partly) a mimological reverie applied to a foreign {étrangère} language (and, what is more, to the "strangest" {plus étranger} stuff in this language). To assign, implicitly or explicitly, a special—nay, even exceptional—mimetic virtue to a natural language is not, once again, a new thing, since this was Wallis's main intention regarding English. And, after all, national prejudice readily inspired several inflections of this type in Gèbelin and Nodier (of whom the latter experienced the feeling for onomatopoeia with respect to the French dictionary), and in another area (that of syntax) in the classical supporters of the order of French words—not to mention the spontaneous Hellenism of the *Cratylus*. But just so, in all these cases and in many others, the valorization always focuses on the "mother" tongue—let us say, perhaps more exactly, one's own proper tongue {la langue propre}—as an image, faithful to a more or less exceptional degree, but always an image, of the one natural language {la langue en soi}, therefore always privileged as the quintessential language, whose high degree of mimeticism in a way represents the fundamental mimeticism of all language.⁵⁰ If need be, many degrees and many fluctuations in the excellence of language in general could be admitted, but to exclude oneself by excluding one's own idiom or by assigning it an inferior rank in this scale of values is quite obviously an act contrary to mimological desire. Cratylus said, in essence, "Natural language is right," meaning by this his own language, modestly considered to be the only one. Most of his heirs said, "Natural languages are right and are, besides, basically identical; (so) look at mine." Wallis explicitly said: "My language is the only right one, the others are an odious hodgepodge," a chauvinism born no longer, as among the Greeks, from the conqueror's disdain but from resentment vanquished. In all these cases, the identification of the linguistic principle with the mimetic principle remains intact (I do not say complete) through the quite natural intervention of one's own language. Clearly, such is no longer the case when the mimetic value finds itself, albeit implicitly, reserved for a foreign idiom, projecting a *contrario* onto other languages and especially onto one's own the shadow of the reverse failing.

Ⓢ For the moment, such an interpretation might seem very extreme; in a sense it is, and we need to correct it immediately, or at the very least qualify it, before (re)producing the texts, other than *Les Mots anglais*, that argue for it.

First, let us remark that the chart of the originary lexicon includes no trace of subjective mimologism, unless the very aptitude for mimeticism should be considered as a feature (the only one) of Anglo-Saxon *Volksgeist*. The sole hint in this direction is fugitive and a bit oblique; it is the description, previously mentioned, of alliteration (and hence of imitative harmony) as a process "inherent in the northern genius." As for labeling onomatopoeia the "very soul of English," it goes without saying that this formula applies to the idiom without necessarily implicating its speakers.

This description of the English language calls into question the nature (the "soul") of this language and the (linguistic) point of view that inspires such a judgment. A first question, then, would be whether or not the English language is especially mimetic. We do not pretend to answer this question here, or even to decide if it really has meaning. Let us merely note the agreement between a native speaker⁵¹ and an outside observer, and the widespread impression of an especially high number of onomatopoeic terms and words whose structure resembles that of onomatopoeia, or expressive exclamations, in this language. The very marked monosyllabism is evidently a familiar part of this impression, and Mallarmé, like Wallis, refers to it constantly.

Another question, which must first be posed in the most general way, is whether the impression of mimeticism, true or false, is stronger in regard to one's own language or a foreign language. Here again, the answer is not obvious, and opinions seem divided. It is conceivable that the very opacity and the greater intensity (phonic or graphic) of a foreign word might lead, through an effect of exoticism, to an overvaluation of its expressive value. This would be a special case of the "explorers' illusion," and such a meaning could be wrung from Mallarmé's statement: "A word is never seen so steadily as from the outside, where we are; that is to say, from abroad, the foreign side {*de l'étranger*}."⁵² But conversely, the familiarity of one's own proper language, the transparency of its vocables, the almost innate, sometimes exclusive, obviousness of their signification can promote belief in their naturalness, and it is quite plainly this tendency that is expressed in classical Cratylism. Mallarmé mentions this fact in regard to his "fellow poets" and appraises it in the following rather ambiguous terms: "It is a fact that those reclusive in their meaning or faithful to the sonorities of the language whose instinct they glorify have a secret distaste for, as it were, admitting any other; from this angle and more than anyone else, they remain patriots. A necessary infirmity that perhaps reinforces, in them, the illusion that an object uttered in the only way that to their knowledge it can be named, springs forth itself, ingenerate; but, what a strange thing, is it not?"⁵³ The object springing forth ingenerate at the mere utterance of the vocable believed to be uniquely capable of designating it: this is indeed mimologism of one's own language—but treated here as an illusion and an infirmity, an illusion but one necessary to the poet. In short, it is the idea, common in our day, that the poet, at least,

needs to believe or to make others believe in a motivation for language—for his own language. We will encounter this again in a moment, in a text just slightly more recent, but so subtilized that it will be nearly reversed. It is not yet time to follow that text's beckoning in this other direction; let us note here that such a critique of Cratylan "patriotism" confirms the presence (conscious or not) of an opposite attitude in Mallarmé, which inclines him instead to emphasize the mimetic features of a foreign language. For him, therefore, the "foreign" point of view really seems the most favorable to the Cratylan illusion.

But this conclusion must still be dialecticized. We have already come across that preliminary text in which Mallarmé envisages a possible "misunderstanding" of elementary significations by words—even English ones: *sn*, the sinister digraph, is thoroughly out of place in *snow*, as is the soaring *fl* in *flat*. These criticisms, which herald others, confirm that no natural language is without its failings and that "correctness" is not a matter of the idiom. Conversely, one finds here and there a few Cratylan reveries on French or Frenchified proper nouns (note this restriction): *Voltaire*, the "arrow's departure and bowstring's vibration," an ideal eponym for that "archer consumed by the joy and anger of the brilliant dart he looses"; *Théodore de Banville*, "a predestined name, as harmonious as a poem and as charming as a stage set"; *Hérodiade*, "that gloomy word, red like an open pomegranate," to which Mallarmé claimed to owe all the inspiration for his poem of that name.⁵⁴ These are applications to his own language of that "worship of the vocable" or "infatuation with the power of words" which until now we have seen invested solely in English as he dreamed it.

☉ But the chief text, in which Mallarmé's most profound—and also most paradoxical—linguistic thought is expressed with all its force, is obviously the famous passage from "Crisis in Poetry" {"*Crise de vers*"}, which really must be quoted one more time, after so many others.

Languages are imperfect because multiple, the supreme one is missing: to think is to write without accessories, without even whispering, but since the immortal word remains tacit, the diversity of idioms on earth prevents anyone from uttering words which, otherwise, were they to appear in a single flash, would be truth itself incarnate. This express prohibition holds sway over nature (one stumbles on it with a smile), to the effect that we have no grounds for equating ourselves with God; but, then, from the aesthetic perspective, I regret to see how discourse fails to express objects by means of keys that would correspond to them in coloring or in aspect—keys that do exist in the instrument of the voice, among languages and sometimes in one language. When compared to the opacity of the word *ombre* {shadow}, the word *ténèbres* {gloom} does not seem very dark; how disappointing is the perversity that contradictorily assigns dark tones to *jour* {day}, bright

tones to *nuit* {night}. We long for words of brilliant splendor in sound and sense or, conversely, for words whose light has died in sound and sense; for a luminous succession of elements—*Only* let us remember that were it so, *verse would not exist*: philosophically speaking, verse remunerates the failing of natural languages, being their superior complement.⁵⁵

Faced with this inexhaustible text, we will point out first its unambiguous formulation of the Hermogenist argument—the very one that Saussure will take up later⁵⁶—for the plurality of natural languages, “imperfect since there are several,” the imperfection or “flaw” here clearly being the absence of *correctness* (“truth”): that is, of mimetic necessity. The diversity of the idioms “prevents [anyone] from uttering the words which otherwise (if there were only one natural language on earth) might take the form of one single stroke, itself materially truth”: that is to say, the very image of the thing. Here again, note that linguistic unity and motivation are linked to the point of identification in a line of thinking more plausible than it is rigorous. The plurality of natural languages does not absolutely preclude the mimetic hypothesis (and we know how often the Cratylan tradition has refuted this argument). Conversely, the unity of human language does not necessarily entail its correctness; perhaps it only gives the illusion of correctness. Whatever the case may be, the strong hypothesis of mimologism is very explicitly repudiated here: not being “unique,” language cannot be “perfect.”

The reversal, however, does not go as far as absolute conventionalism, since Mallarmé still maintains the mimetic *capacity* of the phonic elements of language, “touchkeys corresponding (to objects) in coloring or in rhythm, which exist in the instrument of the voice.” If natural languages are not accurate, they could be so at least partially, on the condition that those touchkeys, the vowels and the consonants, be correctly used.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, save for erratic exceptions “among the languages,” and maybe more numerous “within one of them” (symbolically, in this case, English), “discourse”—that is, real natural language—“fails to express objects” in this manner. A double illustration of this failure, significantly borrowed from his own native language, is the “perversity” of the pairings *jour/nuit* {day/night} and *ombre/ténèbres* {shadow/darkness}, where the “darkest” timbres are assigned to the brightest objects and vice versa. This linguistic misdeal gives rise to disappointment and regret. We find here again, therefore, the position previously indicated at the beginning of *Les Mots anglais*: the mimetic capacity of the phonemes, too often “unrecognized” by the lexicon. This position, let us recall, is exactly that of Socrates in the second part of the *Cratylus*, who without hesitation assigns a value of hardness to the sound *r*, then criticizes the word *sklērotēs* {hardness}, which should have been something like *skrērotēs*.

However, three features distinguish Mallarmé’s attitude from that of Socra-

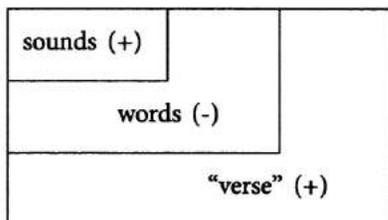
tes. The first, which we have already pointed out in *Les Mots anglais*, is a greater hesitation in the assignment of basic symbolic values and a very great reserve as to their physical motivation. One day, says Mallarmé, maybe all of this will become an object of scientific inquiry,⁵⁸ but for the moment conjectures are uncertain and inadequate; thus, the values of light at play in *jour/nuit, ombre/ténèbres* are easily guessed at but not specified. The second distinguishing feature is obviously the exception—highly discreet here, but which we saw illustrated in *Les Mots anglais*—made for *one* natural language, one that is not our own. No such exception is found in Plato—quite the contrary. Let us remark, however, that English tends to play in the Mallarméan system the role held in the *Cratylus*⁵⁹ by the “language of the gods,” borrowed from Homer: the role of a nostalgic or consolatory myth into which are projected from afar all the virtues in which one’s own language is lacking as a *real* natural language—the one that I write in and speak in. A linguistic paradise lost or, if you prefer, a *linguistic utopia* almost recognized and accepted as such. For Mallarmé, therefore, English (as he dreams of it) is the site and the object not of true *jouissance*, but of regret: the specular image of a lack. And all things considered, as certain reservations allowed us to foresee, all of this—I mean the whole game—has little to do with real English as it exists and is spoken. And all other natural languages, or rather any *other* language, would have done just as well—that is, served the office of “supreme” language: the very one that is “lacking,” and whose lack and (in the strong sense) *failing* {*défaut*} are embodied, if I may say so, in real language. Moreover, the English-French relation could ultimately be reversed, the supreme language always being, for every natural language, the one facing or opposite it.

By thus situating English in Mallarmé’s linguistic reverie, perhaps we avoid a rather strong temptation, which is, by exploiting the dates, to reduce its different aspects to kinds of diachronic stages.⁶⁰ First of all, there would be Mallarmé the naive mimologist in *Les Mots anglais*, converted a few years later to a more realistic attitude. We have already seen that nothing of the sort occurred, and that the author of *Les Mots anglais* was no more naive (nor more fanciful) than the one of “*Crise de vers*,” and that he merely pretended he was, while taking care to drop a few contradictory clues here and there—which have not always been picked up. At the risk of going too far in the other direction, then, let us say this: *Les Mots anglais* is a fable or symbol, a *contrario*, of the universal *failing in natural languages*.

A universal but not incurable failing or, more precisely, one not impossible to compensate for. Here the third difference between Socrates and Mallarmé’s secondary mimologism becomes manifest, a difference which, moreover, further justifies this term. Once the failing of the language system (the error of the law-giver) is established, Socrates more or less contents himself with warning Cratylus, and everyone else, against an instrument as misleading and definitively discredited as this one. On the same bases and according to the same values,

however, a reform of the language system could be undertaken or advocated, or at the least dreamed about, which would give or return to it all the rightness of which it is presumed capable. Here we have secondary Cratylishm in the full and also the obvious sense, in the wish to (re)establish artificially a nonexistent or vanished ideal state. A few traces or outlines of this are found in such authors as de Brosse and Nodier: for them, it is strictly a question of correcting the language system. Mallarmé's attitude is comparable but more subtle and oriented in an entirely different direction: "verse" is charged, "philosophically," with "re-munerating" the default of natural languages: that is to say, not with correcting it—poetry does not alter the language; it does not decide to call *nuit* {night} *jour* {day} and vice versa—but with *compensating for* it through some use of an order and a level ("superior complement") other than that of natural language, which for Mallarmé is always that of words. To compensate for, but also to recompense, since the failing of natural languages is the *raison d'être* of "verse," which exists only for—and *from*—this compensatory function. If natural language were "perfect," "verse" would have no reason for being; or, if you prefer, language itself would be a poem: poetry would be everywhere and consequently nowhere. More specifically, a spontaneous poetry—a naturally mimetic language system—would render useless the poet's art, which is the creation of an artificially motivated (artificially natural, all in all) language system: "verse." This is confirmed still more clearly by the following rejoinder in the "spoken sketch" by Francis Viéélé-Griffin, a report (we hope) of a real conversation, in which Mallarmé ascribes to his interlocutor a thought that is his own: "If I understand you, you rest the poet's creative privilege on the imperfection of the instrument on which he must play; a natural language hypothetically inadequate to translate his thought would do away with the literary writer, who, for that reason, would be named Mister Everyman?"⁶¹

The secondary mimologism that Mallarmé illustrates here, then, is no longer a Cratylishm of natural language but a Cratylishm of "verse" that surmounts a Hermogenism of natural language and more precisely of words, which itself surmounts a (semi-)Cratylishm of elementary sounds. In this integrative structure each level is opposed in value to the one it integrates; the accompanying diagram schematizes things in a necessarily approximative way.



"Verse," therefore, is charged with reestablishing, at a level justly described as "superior," the accuracy of which phonemes are capable and which words have betrayed. Unable to "correct" natural language by altering the words, one arranges them into more comprehensive units that will form something like synthetic vocables, collectively right and necessary, "the verse being nothing but a perfect, comprehensive, ingenerate word."⁶² *Comprehensive* because composed of several words from natural language; *perfect* and *ingenerate*—two adjectives we have met previously—because approximating the originary or the mythical correctness of the language system. Or to turn to the most famous formulation: "Verse that out of several vocables reforges a total word, new, alien to natural language and as if incantatory . . . denying, with a sovereign gesture, the element of chance left to the terms despite the artifice of their retempering, alternating in the sound and the sense."⁶³ The *element of chance* [*hasard*] in these terms, which the sovereign gesture of the "verse" denies (without annulling it, since it *remains* there), is what we call the "arbitrariness" of the sign, the nonnecessary character of the connection between *sound* and *sense*. What a note of 1869 says about the "Word" {*Verbe*} might, then, be applied to "verse": "a principle that develops itself through the negation of all principle, chance."⁶⁴ "Chance," also states a letter to François Coppée, "does not enter any line of verse."⁶⁵ Failing to abolish chance, which, besides, it perhaps disdains, "verse" surmounts it by integrating it, in the manner of Hegel, like a throw of the dice in which every face may remain indeterminate but the total is ineluctable.

This overly facile metaphor will not excuse us from looking a little more closely at what, for Mallarmé, this "sovereign" synthesis consists of, which the word "verse" has so far designated in a somewhat sibylline manner (hence our awkward quotation marks). That the issue here is not merely regular verse in the narrow and traditional sense ("official" verse, Mallarmé says) is explicitly confirmed by the following reply to Jules Huret: "Verse exists everywhere in language where there is rhythm, everywhere—except in advertising posters and the back page of the newspaper. In the genre we call prose, there are verses, sometimes admirable ones, in all sorts of rhythms. But, really, there is no such thing as prose: there is the alphabet and then there are verses, more or less closely knit, more or less diffuse. Every time there is an effort at style, there is versification."⁶⁶ Mallarmé, then, defines as "verse" a *poetic language*⁶⁷ that extends very widely beyond official poetry. But neither should this term be stretched into an overly wide sense, extending to any syntagm or any sentence. The following statement by Jean-Pierre Richard might lead to such an interpretation: "The pessimism of the word in Mallarmé is . . . succeeded by a{n} . . . optimism of the verse *and of the sentence*."⁶⁸ Or else the parallel with Abelard suggested by Édouard Gaède: "a nominalist with respect to words and a realist with respect to sentences."⁶⁹ The idea that each sentence adjusts at its level the failure of correctness in the words

it integrates would be perfectly conceivable (there was something of this in the diagrammatic mimologism of the *ordo naturalis*); but such is not Mallarmé's way of thinking. For him, not every sentence is verse (otherwise, the poet would find himself "Everyman" again); at the very least, as we have just seen, an "effort at style" and rhythm is necessary. An effort: verse is *worked*.

The definition of this work, theoretically and practically, belongs no longer to Mallarmé's poetics of language but to his poetics simply and plainly—his poetics of verse and of the poem, albeit in prose; rather fortunately for us, then, it is out of our field of inquiry. As a matter of fact, it remains largely unformulated by Mallarmé himself and is thus almost entirely in his practice. For attempts at more precise articulation of the principle of "remuneration" with regard to *jour* and *nuît*, I refer the reader to Roman Jakobson and a few others—all this being, as was realized a bit late, already in Albert Thibaudet. Unfortunately, the examples, here and there, are taken not from Mallarmé but from Jean Racine or Victor Hugo. To tell the truth, they illustrate a somewhat superficial idea of "remuneration," consisting of what Jakobson calls a "phonological palliative" for the discord between sound and sense. Thus, says Thibaudet, "the dark timbre of *jour* will be brightened up in a verse of monosyllables with the interstices bathed in light: '*Le jour n'est pas plus pur . . .*'"⁷⁰ Of course. These corrective harmonies have a nice effect, but it is a little difficult to reduce Mallarmé's poetics to that. His poetics is of another order, and maybe indefinable; Valéry will say this later on (as we shall see). Without slipping (too quickly) from one to the other, it is advisable to ponder this cautionary note: the necessity of Mallarméan verse is different from the verbal mimeticism (quite crude, when all is said and done) whose failing it remunerates: perhaps, all in all—*felix culpa*—a welcome failing. Language, even poetic language—especially poetic language—has better things to do than to imitate the world. To paraphrase Proust, mimological reverie lies on the threshold of the poetic life: it can usher us in; it does not constitute it.

© Finally, then, Mallarmé's position is the exact opposite of the Romantic concept of spontaneous creation, illustrated for example by Nodier's *Dictionnaire des onomatopées françaises*, and no doubt nothing is more contrary to his "artless" poetics than the very widespread temptation to apply the symbolic values of *Les Mots anglais* to his poems.⁷¹ This is so not only because of the unwarranted passage from one natural language to another, and the excessive generalization of values detected solely in the initial position, but also, and more radically, because Mallarmé's poetic work is itself situated, as deliberately and firmly as possible, at the level of the verse line and not of words. The very notion of the "Mallarméan word" seems regrettable to me. Probably, there are, in Mallarmé as in all writers—moreover, this is widely known⁷²—words privileged by frequency and/or structure; but in his poems, there is no Cratylan game at the

level of the words, since he recognized the impossibility, and maybe the futility, of that too. It would therefore be a strange diminishment of his poetics to reduce it, following the unsophisticated taste of the day, to effects of alliteration, imitative harmonies, homophonies, and other anagrams. As he reminded De-gas, it is indeed "with words" that he wrote his poems, and by letting them take "the initiative."⁷³ But an initiative is not a decision, and the poem does not equal the sum of its words. Likewise, one can observe that the "spatial" poetics of *Un Coup de dés* does not rely on any graphic mimologism.⁷⁴ Here, poetic creation absolutely transcends the linguistic given, bestowing—in a familiar phrase—a *purere* meaning on the words of the tribe.

So, Mallarmé's linguistic speculation ends up in a veritable scission of language into what he calls the "double condition of the spoken word, unrefined or immediate here (in everyday language), essentialized there"⁷⁵—in poetic language. The first state of language, serving only to "narrate, teach, even describe"—in short, for "universal reporting"—merely fills the "function of an easy and representative currency." The arbitrariness of the sign is no drawback, since this completely fiduciary function wears out in a circulation similar to that of a "coin," which one constantly exchanges without ever trying to *convert* it: therein lies the Hermogenist's necessary sacrifice. The second condition, which Mallarmé still calls the Enunciation {*le Dire*}, or the Word {*le Verbe*},⁷⁶ does not put up with any such "element of chance" (that of linguistic convention) and seeks to (re)constitute, at a "higher" level and in a "higher" form, the irrefrangible necessity of a perfect, "supreme," and, if you like, divine language.⁷⁷ Hence the emblematic value of the linguistic "dualism" manifested by English, as we have seen. A little (very little) like the Anglo-Saxon base in modern English, poetry is a language within a language, being its purest form and the one most faithful to the original truths. The idea of a double language is not, as a matter of fact, completely new (nothing ever is in this story, where History merely shifts the emphases around); we found a few premonitions of it previously in Diderot and others. It will not remain without its echoes, either; let us listen to some of them resonate.

© As is well known, Paul Valéry's poetic thinking took shape from the first as an extension of Mallarmé's, as a reflection on the *example* offered by the man who had been his master teacher and in whom he admired above all else what he called "the identification of 'poetic' meditation with the mastery of language, and the minute study in himself of their reciprocal relations." In a revealing statement further on, Valéry remarks: "Mallarmé understood language as if he had invented it."⁷⁸ So one can say that his own poetics of language is articulated as a reprise and a new elaboration of Mallarmé's idea of *double language*.⁷⁹

In particular, everything goes along as if the experiment of *Les Mots anglais*,

whose importance to Valéry we have seen, had spared him from any of the temptations of primary Cratylism. It would be hard to find a trace of it in him, even in those reveries on words in which he every so often indulges like everybody else. Here are two instances, *a contrario* as it were, both in regard to foreign words. The first one concerns the Scandinavian word for "thank you," *tak*, "which makes the noise of a watchcase when snapped shut." The second one, more developed, evokes the port of Anvers, from which André Gide was writing letters to Valéry: "ANTWERP! a Baudelaire, all wild and black lies in that word. A word full of spices and pearls unloaded, under a rainy sky, by a drunken sailor, in the doorway of a tavern. . . . The rose-colored lantern attracts the Negroes to the sad streets where the woman in underclothes tramples through the mud. And the prolonged echo of songs in a distant language, aboard boats enshrouded in silence. As you can see, I am letting these foreign words carry me off to you."⁸⁰

Upon closer inspection, it is easy to see that neither of these two reveries follows the paths of the mimological imagination. The first one does compare the sound of a word to a noise, but this noise has no relationship with its signification: *tak* is therefore not (heard or understood as) an instance of onomatopoeia — or if it is, this onomatopoeia has adopted the wrong object and is already an illustration of the failing of natural languages. Conversely, the second one turns away entirely from the resonances of the vocable in order to evoke images of the city that it designates, without claiming to find a necessary relationship between them. A phonic description on one hand, a semantic description on the other, and no possible interaction. "There is no relationship between the sound and the sense of a word. The same thing is called HORSE in English, *HIPPOS* in Greek, *EQUUS* in Latin, and *CHEVAL* in French; but no manipulation of any of these terms will give me an idea of the animal in question; no manipulation of the idea will yield me any of these words — otherwise, we should easily know all languages, beginning with our own."⁸¹

Again, we recognize the Saussurean argument of the plurality of natural languages, in the service of the thesis known as the arbitrariness of the sign. The term itself appears elsewhere, redoubled by its Mallarméan equivalent: "We realize that there is hardly an instance in which the connection between our ideas and the groups of sounds that suggest them each in turn is anything more than arbitrary or purely chance." Also: "Each word is an instantaneous coupling of a *sound* and a *sense* that have no connection with each other."⁸² Valéry's Hermogenism is apparently seamless. For him, any natural language reduces to a system of conventions: "The French language is a system of conventions among the French people. The English language . . . among the English people."⁸³ This line of thought about natural language, as is known, had been corroborated very early on by his reading of Michel Bréal's *Sémantique*, published in 1897, which was reviewed by Valéry for the *Mercure de France* of January 1898. In this article

we find one of the earliest formulations of his linguistic conventionalism ("the signs of language are absolutely distinct from their meaning; no rational or empirical pathway can lead from the sign to its meaning"), and the sketch of a general theory for "all symbolic systems taken together. Algebra, written music, certain types of ornamentation, cryptography, etc. can be subjected to semantic analysis."⁸⁴ This is more or less Saussure's program for a general semiology, including his distinction between "signs that are entirely natural (mime, for example)" and "systems based upon the arbitrary nature of the sign."⁸⁵ "Considered from the viewpoint of the significations, all these systems and language must lead, in my opinion, to a major distinction among the modes that are matched up with mental states. Let us designate by *a* and *b* two of these matched states, such that if *a* is given, *b* is given. In certain cases it will occur that a relation other than that of sequencing between *a* and *b* can be found. In these cases *b* can be construed with the help of *a*, and reciprocally, *a* with *b*. It will follow, in general, that any variation in one of the terms will determine a variation in the other. But in other cases, it will occur that the two terms proposed will have between them only a pure sequential relation. One can then say that this association is symbolic or conventional. Language is formed out of this second kind of relation."⁸⁶

A letter from Valéry to Gustave Fourment, just a little later, develops and illustrates this opposition, whose terms are now labeled, as was previously the case in Nodier, as *rational* (for motivated signs) and *irrational* (for arbitrary signs). An example of the first kind is "all metaphors. I touch the warm stove; *afterward* I think of a woman's ass. The shared term is the warmth, the smoothness of the enamel, etc. Conversely, I might pass from the abovementioned backside to the pleasant warmth of a stove. . . . The verbal metaphor would be this one: *vol* {flight} is like *val* {vale}; *sol* {soil} is like *cil* {cilium}. But the ideas corresponding to these words do not go along with the slight variation in their sound; they differ *subsequently* much more. I will give you a rather curious example. Draw a small house: this is the hieroglyphic system. Well! you can pass directly from this object to a real house; make it larger and color it in, and it's finished. Write the word *maison* {house}, and you can tinker with it as much as you like, but if I do not know the *signification* of this picture riddle or sound riddle, I will never be able to read it. The drawing, inasmuch as it represents the objects, is not irrational. Language is."⁸⁷

Irrational signs are baptized here, in accordance with scientific usage (and contrary to the literary connotations of the term), as *symbols*: "Languages in general are all symbols." One can infer from this that the plan of studying "symbolic systems" in general, mentioned above, anticipated Saussure's highly controversial restriction of semiological analysis solely to "arbitrary" signs, deemed able to realize better than the others "the ideal semiological process": in other

words, the a priori identification of the semiotic with arbitrariness, in which an anti-Cratylian valorization of the conventional can be seen. This is, let us recall, the furthest point that Hermogenism can reach: not only to "state the fact" of the conventionality of the sign, more or less resignedly, but to attribute to it a sort of fundamental superiority over any other mode of representation. In Valéry, the Hermogenist *parti pris* is clearly linked to a very explicit epistemological conventionalism, evidently inspired by Raymond Poincaré, and to a no less flaunted aesthetic conventionalism. The sciences are indeed "useful conventions" for Valéry, and we know how the major failing of history or of philosophy lies in not recognizing their own conventions at all. In literature, formal rules please him because they are arbitrary ("Rhyme has the great advantage of infuriating simpleminded people who naively believe there is something more important under the sun than a convention"), and classicism appeals to him because it "is recognized by the existence, the clarity, the imperative character of {its} conventions."⁸⁸ His preference for the established nature {*thesei*} of language is clearly expressed in the *Cahiers*: "The greatest progress was made the day conventional signs appeared. . . . The immense improvement lay in the conventionality."⁸⁹ This is the exact opposite of the decadence of language according to de Brosses: true language begins with arbitrary signs; all that precedes is prehistoric and shows us nothing about its essence. Moreover, in any field, "the origin is an illusion."⁹⁰

The same rigor is found again in other aspects of the discussion: there is, for example, no trace of that valorization of the word, of that overestimation of the lexicon in the functioning of natural language, which is still so evident in Mallarmé. The mistrustful declarations regarding such terms as *Temps* {Time}, *Vie* {Life}, "and all the others," which are useful only in proportion to the "swiftness of our passage," like "those light planks that are thrown across a ditch, or across a mountain crevice," are familiar, and it would be foolish to dwell on them. It is no more necessary to dwell on the words "on pain of seeing the most lucid discourse decompose itself into enigmas and more or less learned illusions."⁹¹ Isolated words (and "likewise, a great number of word combinations") are fiduciary, incontrovertible, and "insolvent" values.⁹² This critique does not arise only from a sort of fundamental "skepticism" with regard to language; more precisely, it takes aim at the traditional linguistic attitude that reduces natural language to a collection of vocables. If a word that is "clear when one uses it is obscure when pondered," this is not exactly because its use is based on an imposture but because the "weighing" of meaning in dictionaries refers to a fictive state of the word furnished by the set of its definitions and by its virtual uses. It is the actual—that is, contextual—use that removes the word's "enigmas" and determines its meaning each time: "Once words are isolated, we look at them—we seek to substitute for them the indeterminate set of their relations—whereas

this set is determined in the act of composition."⁹³ Therefore, it is not the word that makes meaning but the sentence (and so forth).

This leads to the following conclusion, as un-Cratylian as it can be: "*There is no such thing as an isolable word.*"⁹⁴ Within the lexicon, Valéry makes the same break with the classical valorization of the noun. Preference goes to verbs ("The majority of verbs express *true* things, while substantives are ... a paradise of hollow formations") and to grammatical connectives: "What characterizes the language system are not the substantives, the adjectives, etc., but the words of relation, the *if* {*si*}, *that* {*que*}, *now* {*or*}, and *therefore* {*donc*}.⁹⁵ This is obviously the lesson of comparativism. The ideal linguistic system would ultimately be a language without words, made entirely of combinations of minimal elements as abstract as possible, the farthest away from the singularity of the proper name or the noun, that Cratylian object par excellence. Here is a picture of the deterioration of language: "It becomes less articulated. The sentence gives way to the word — and the word becomes a proper name. And here is a picture of its progress: "Language as combinations was able to develop only when it became constituted into short and simple elements. If it contains words with very complex signification — like those words of primitive peoples that are translated by three sentences in a modern language — its combinatory is impracticable. It gradually changed in such a way as to render its words more and more combinable. As a result, the possible became firmly established, being nothing but the combinatory capacity of a system."⁹⁶ In Valéry's "perfect language," which is obviously a "philosophical" language in the style of Leibniz, there is no longer any room for resemblance.

☺ You are probably wondering what such a resolute rebel is doing in Cratylian country. It happens that we have so far considered only one facet of his doctrine, that part which holds good exclusively for what he calls "*ordinary*," or "common," or "*demotic*" language or simply "prose," and which, at its ideal limit, would be the most functional and the most transparent of the instruments of thought, even substituting itself for that thought and taking away its entire *raison d'être*: "If the language system were perfect, man would cease to think. Algebra does away with arithmetic reasoning."⁹⁷ We are therefore at the extreme opposite of Mallarméan "perfection," the lack of which is resolved in the poem. Valéry's system is more complex (in this respect), for he entertains two anti-theoretical perfections, both apparently meriting the term "absolute language" or "pure language."⁹⁸ Over against algebra there is what Valéry, suddenly renewing ties with the Homeric-Platonic tradition, does not hesitate to call the "language of the gods": "The poet is a peculiar type of translator, who translates ordinary speech, modified by emotion, into 'language of the gods.'⁹⁹

As in any system with a polar axiology, the main thing is first not to confuse

the two poles in the name of their equal value but rather to acknowledge that the two perfections are antithetical, incompatible, and exclusive: to distinguish between them at any cost and by almost any means whatsoever. Sometimes this distinction is really so stark, and so little substantiated, that Valéry seems to intend to set aside a different language for each one of these states. Thus, he attributes to Mallarmé the intention "of keeping the language of poetry always firmly, and almost absolutely, distinct from the language of prose," and he declares in his own name: "For me, since the language of the gods should be as distinct as possible from the language of men, all means of differentiating it should be retained so long as they also conduce to harmony."¹⁰⁰ In fact, poetry does not aim to be another natural language but, in a well-known formula, "a language within language": that is, a different use of the same natural language. More subtly, what poetry implies is "a decision to change the function of language."¹⁰¹ Of what, then, does this *poetic function* of language (as Jakobson will later say) consist?

A first answer, a purely functional one in fact, consists in saying that the aim of the poem is to create in the reader a certain state, baptized the *poetic state*: "A poem is ... a sort of machine for producing the poetic state of mind by means of words."¹⁰² Of course, such a definition cannot escape tautology unless the poetic state is in its turn defined and described otherwise than as the effect produced by the poem; therefore, it must also be possible for this state to be produced by something other than the poem—even if its specificity must suffer. This is just the case in Valéry, who describes it on at least two separate occasions¹⁰³ as an "emotion" capable of transfixing any spectacle or moment of existence whatsoever, by "musicalizing" it: that is to say, by making its elements "resonate through each other" and correspond with each other "harmonically." Thus is born a "*feeling of the universe*," a perception of a "*world*," in the strong sense, or a "complete system of relationships, in which creatures, things, events, and acts, although they may resemble, *each to each*, those which fill and form the tangible world—the immediate world from which they are borrowed—stand, however, in an indefinable but wonderfully exact relation to the modes and laws of our general sensibility. At that point, the value of these familiar objects and creatures is in some way altered. They respond to each other, they combine with each other quite otherwise than in ordinary conditions. They become ... *musicalized*, somehow commensurable, resonating through each other."¹⁰⁴ These privileged perceptions, then, are dominated by the feeling of relation and harmonic unity, and this feeling is clearly euphoric in itself. Its relation to the poetic message remains to be defined.

A first definition, of a Proustian type, is present in Valéry: like the ecstasy of reminiscence, the euphoria of the poetic state is essentially fortuitous and ephemeral; one can neither provoke it nor prolong it at will. The poetic state, like the dream (to which it is also akin in other features), is "wholly *irregular*, in-

constant, involuntary, fragile, and we lose it, as we acquire it, *by accident*. There are times in our life when this emotion and these highly precious formations do not manifest themselves. We do not even think them possible. Chance bestows them on us, chance takes them away."¹⁰⁵ We therefore need to find a way to "restore the poetic emotion at will, outside the natural conditions where it is produced spontaneously, by means of the artifices of language." This means is the poem. "All the arts have been created in order to perpetuate and change, each according to its nature, an ephemeral moment of delight into the certitude of an infinity of delightful moments. *A work of art is no more than the instrument of this potential multiplication or regeneration.*"¹⁰⁶

The analogy with Proust's approach is quite striking, but it should not disguise an important difference. In Proust, the literary work can perpetuate the ecstasy of memory because it constrains itself in principle to transmit it by describing it and by giving a strict equivalent for it in the form of metaphor. On this point, Valéry's position is much more hesitant. All the texts just cited seem to imply such a transmission, and so the necessity for the poet himself first to feel the poetic emotion that he claims to communicate. Doesn't he justify the very term *poetic states* by the fact that "few among them are finally fulfilled in poems"? (On the other hand, it is true that nothing proves that these poems had any relation of content with the emotion that "fulfilled" itself in them and that produces an analogous state in their readers.) But here is a more ambiguous remark: when Valéry talks about the ways of "producing *or* reproducing a poetic world," he implies at the very least that one could produce it without reproducing it. And above all—corroborated as we know by a hundred other anti-Romantic professions of faith on this subject—he says: "A poet's function... is not to experience the poetic state: that is a private affair. His function is to create it in others."¹⁰⁷ If, then, it happens that he creates it without having experienced it, this could still mean one of two things: either his poem is a sort of feigned transmission, a fictive description of the poetic state; or the poem in itself constitutes a (verbal) object capable of eliciting a poetic state in its reader, as independently from its subject matter as from the circumstances of its composition. This last interpretation seems the most consistent with the overall context. Naturally, it entails a direct application to the poem of the properties just now attributed to the poetic state, or more precisely to its cause: musicalization, the harmonic resonance of the elements, capable of engendering a "feeling of the universe": that is to say, a lively consciousness of relations. Used in this way, the recourse to the poetic state appears no longer as a tracing back to the cause but instead as a metaphorical description: a preliminary sketch for a description of the poetic message.

The *poetic state*, therefore, is also a state of language: there is a poetic state of language that differs from the "normal" state of everyday language. A new

detour, a new comparison, will enable us to pin down the nature of this difference and thus of the specific operation that produces the poetic message. This time, the comparison is borrowed directly from the musical domain, to which the terms "musicalization" and "harmony" previously referred. Its clearest formulation is found in one of the texts on Mallarmé: "Just as the world of pure sounds, so easily recognized by our hearing, was selected from the world of noises to stand in opposition to it and constitute the perfect system of Music, so the poetic mind would like to do with language."¹⁰⁸ We meet with it again, considerably developed, in Valéry's two lectures on poetry, where the notion of the *musical universe* enters to throw a sidelight on that of the poetic state or universe. The world of *sounds* stands in opposition to that of *noises*, in which we ordinarily live, through a contrast between "the pure and the impure, order and disorder." But the "purity" of the sounds (which stands in opposition to the forever mixed-up and confused character of natural noises) is only a means in the service of "order": that is to say, the constitution of a regulated network of relations. The sounds are defined as "elements that have relations between them which are as palpable to us as these elements themselves. The interval between two of these privileged noises is as clear to us as each one of them."¹⁰⁹ Whence their capacity for reciprocal and generalized evocation ("*a sound evokes, of itself, the whole musical universe*"); whence the feeling of the *universe*—that is, a coherent system—which they infallibly elicit.¹¹⁰

The poetic state will then be to the ordinary state of language what the world of sounds is to that of noises: a state in which the internal relations will be as regular and as perceptible as those of music. An ideal illustration is furnished by Mallarmé's poems: "These marvelously polished little compositions imposed themselves as types of perfection, so sure was the movement from word to word, verse to verse, from rhythm to rhythm, and so strong was the sense that each poem gave of being an absolute object, as it were, produced by an equilibrium of intrinsic forces, shielded by a prodigious number of reciprocal forces from those vague impulses to alter and improve which the mind in the act of reading unconsciously devises when faced with the majority of texts."¹¹¹

But in performing this transposition from the musical to the poetic, we have overlooked a considerable obstacle, which Valéry by no means overlooks and which we could already glimpse in that qualifying phrase quoted earlier: "so the poetic mind *would like* to do." This obstacle lies in the fact that the separation between noise and sound—the physical, technical separation that the musician finds already in place when he starts his work—has no equivalent in the domain of language: "The poet is deprived of the immense advantages possessed by the musician. He does not have before him, at the ready for the service of beauty, a set of resources made expressly for his art. He must borrow *language*—the public voice, that collection of traditional and irrational terms and rules, oddly

created and transformed, oddly codified, and very diversely understood and pronounced. Here, there is no physicist who has determined the relationships among these elements; there are no tonometers, no metronomes, no inventors of scales and theoreticians of harmony. On the contrary, there are the phonetic and semantic fluctuations of vocabulary. Nothing pure; but a mixture of totally incoherent auditory and psychic sensations."¹¹² So, the musical metaphor has the function not only of describing the poetic state of language but also, and rather, that of illustrating *a contrario* the poet's difficulties: "Nothing gives a better idea of the difficulty of his task than a comparison of his initial givens with what the musician has at his disposal. . . . Far different, infinitely less favorable is the poet's endowment."¹¹³ Or, to approach it from another angle, this comparison has the effect not of throwing light on the difference between poetry and prose (according to the implicit formula *poetry : prose = sound : noise*) but rather of obscuring and taking the edge off it by insisting on the unity of the linguistic material common to the two types of discourse. In fact, therefore, *poetry : prose ≠ sound : noise*—because in a certain fashion and on a certain plane, *poetry = prose*, whereas *sound ≠ noise*.

This difference between poetry and music or, if one prefers, this identity (of means) between poetry and prose will be illustrated in its turn by a new comparison: the well-known parallel between poetry and dance, borrowed from François de Malherbe. It, too, is presented as a relation of four terms: *poetry : prose = dancing : walking*. Or, more precisely, just as dance utilizes for other ends "the same organs, the same bones, the same muscles" as walking, but "differently coordinated and differently motivated," so poetry utilizes for other ends (and with other coordinations and motivations) the same linguistic material as prose.¹¹⁴

Apparently, then, this new detour has no other function than to illustrate the (partial) inadequacy of the first one, and to substitute an exact comparison for a lame one. In fact, the comparison of poetry and dance is going to supply us, as an unexpected bonus, with a new piece of information regarding the essence of the poetic message: the difference in function between walking and dancing is that the latter "goes nowhere"; it is "a system of acts . . . whose end is in themselves"; it aims not at a goal to be attained, an object to be taken possession of, but a state to be produced, a euphoria to which it does not *lead* but which coincides with it, consists of it, and dies away with it in such a way that one can only prolong or renew the one by prolonging and indefinitely repeating the other. In contrast, "when the man who is walking has reached his goal . . . when he has reached the place, the book, the fruit, the object of his desire, the desire for which has drawn him out of his state of repose, at once this possession definitively cancels his entire act; the effect swallows up the cause, the end

has absorbed the means; and whatever the act was, only the result remains."¹¹⁵

Now the same happens with language: in its ordinary use (prose), it is also merely a means that is absorbed into and canceled by its end. Its only goal is to be *comprehended*: that is, "completely replaced by its *meaning*." "I ask you for a light. You give me a light: you have understood me."¹¹⁶ In other words, your "comprehension" of my sentence *consists of* something completely different from it: an act of yours that removes from it all reason for lasting and for reproducing, and so abolishes it. "And here is the counterproof for this proposition: the person who has not understood *repeats* the words, or *has them repeated* to him." Or again, I could have pronounced my sentence in a certain way that is itself perceptible and noticeable, "with a certain tone, and in a certain timbre of voice—with a certain inflection and a certain languor or briskness." In that case, even if you have understood it, the sentence survives its own comprehension, returns in you, causes itself to be reiterated, "can yet go on living, though with an altogether different life. It has acquired a value; and it has acquired this at the expense of its finite signification. It has created the need to be heard and understood again. ... Here, we are on the very threshold of the poetic state."¹¹⁷ Such, in effect, is the mark of the poetic message: it refuses to cancel itself out in its signification. "The poem ... does not die for having lived: it is expressly designed to be reborn from its ashes and to become indefinitely what it has just been. Poetry can be recognized by this property: it tends to get itself reproduced in its own form; it stimulates us to reconstitute it identically."¹¹⁸

Herein is posed, therefore, the great difference—the only crucial one—between the message of prose and the poetic message: the first is abolished in its function, the second survives itself and reproduces itself perpetually in its form: "If I may be permitted a word drawn from industrial technology, I should say that poetic form is automatically salvaged."¹¹⁹ This cardinal thesis has an obvious consequence, or rather another possible and equivalent formulation: prose discourse is essentially translatable, and poetic discourse essentially untranslatable.¹²⁰

All of this is well known and has declined long since into doctrine. On the face of it, this theme of the indestructibility (I choose this somewhat awkward term for its neutrality) of the poetic text is simple and unambiguous—whence perhaps its success. In fact, we are going to see it specified in Valéry—and perhaps in others—into two quite divergent and finally almost contradictory variants.

The first is that of the "intransitivity" or, if one prefers, the autonomy of the poetic form in relation to its signification. We have previously encountered this in passing, when it was a question of the value taken on by a sentence "at the expense of its finite signification"; the need for repetition is in inverse proportion to comprehension, and the most solid instance of this is that "the person who

has not understood repeats, or has the words repeated to him." Ultimately, then, the obscurity or the total insignificance of a message could be a sufficient condition for its poetic value: "It should not be forgotten that for centuries poetic form was used for the purpose of spell-casting. Those who took part in these strange operations must have believed in the power of the spoken word {*parole*}, and far more in the efficacy of its sound than in its signification. Magical formulas are often meaningless, but their power was not thought to depend on their intellectual content. Now let us listen to verses like these: '*Mère des souvenirs, maîtresse des maîtresses* {Mother of memories, mistress of mistresses} ...'; or '*Sois sage, ô ma douleur, et tiens-toi plus tranquille* {Be wise, o my grief, and keep yourself more calm} ...'. These words work on us (at least on some of us) without telling us anything much. They tell us, perhaps, that they have nothing to tell us."¹²¹ X

autonomy of form
 This autonomy of form is itself articulated in two ways. One way (as we have just seen) is through the *secondary* and nonpertinent character of signification in poetry. The "quasi-creative, fiction-making" role of poetic language "is evidenced most clearly by the fragility or arbitrariness of the *subject*"; "first and foremost was not meaning, but the existence of the verse": this is the well known apologue of Mallarmé explaining to Degas that poetry is made "not ... with ideas, but with *words*."¹²² Sometimes the autonomy of form is articulated through its multiple character, through the *polysemy* of the poetic message — a theme that has itself also, since then, turned into a cliché. "*There is no true meaning to a text*": Valéry applied this to "*Le Cimetière marin*" in regard to Gustave Cohen's commentary, and it essentially holds good for the poetic text.¹²³ We come back to it again when Valéry responds to the new commentary by Alain on *Charmes*: "My verses have the meaning attributed to them. The one I give them suits me alone and does not contradict anyone else. It is an error contrary to the nature of poetry, and one that might even be fatal to it, to claim that for each poem there is a corresponding true meaning, unique and conformable to, or identical with, some thought of the author's. ... Whereas solely the content is exigible from prose, here it is solely the form that commands and survives."¹²⁴ Recalling the statements on the essential translatability of the prose text, we see a perfectly symmetrical opposition taking shape between the polysemy of the poem and the polymorphousness of prose. The peculiar property of prose is always to tolerate *several forms for one meaning*; that of the poem, in contrast, is always to propose *several meanings under one single form*.

Poetic "meaning" is therefore either multiple, or of secondary importance, or else ultimately absent. In all these cases, the form remains autonomous and stands on its own; it cannot be linked to such an evanescent function. Up to this point, therefore, Valéry's theory of poetic language is as un-Cratylian as his theory of "ordinary" language. But here is an unexpected reversal that is going

to lead us back to Cratylishm, or nearly: it is the second variant indicated for the central theme — that of the indestructibility of the poetic message.

☺ In actual fact, the reversal arises from an almost imperceptible slippage, which can be reconstructed roughly as follows: since the poetic form is not, like the other one, sacrificed to its meaning, it is not *subordinated* to it; it enjoys an (at least) equal importance. This equal importance is illustrated by a new comparison: the image of the pendulum. We have seen that, once “comprehended,”¹²⁵ the poetic text requires resumption in its form: in the poetic experience, the mind thus goes from form to meaning, then returns from meaning to form (or “sound”), and so forth, like a pendulum. “Between Voice and Thought, between Thought and Voice, between Presence and Absence, oscillates the poetic pendulum. It follows from this analysis that the value of a poem resides in the indissolubility of sound and sense.”¹²⁶ The slippage indicated has therefore led us from autonomy to equality, from equality to equilibrium, from equilibrium to perpetual oscillation, and from oscillation to inseparability, or indissolubility. At the start the poetic form was independent of its content; at the end it is substantially joined to it. The distance covered disguises the volte-face, but the volte-face is there. Departing from an ultraformalist poetics, we find ourselves back in a (quasi-)Cratylid poetics: that is, in the definition of poetic language as *motivated* language.

For it goes without saying that the *indissolubility of sound and sense* is the motivation of the sign. This is confirmed, should it need to be, by the way in which this text leads into an argument already familiar to us. Let us go over this development: “The result of this analysis is to show that the value of a poem resides in the indissolubility of sound and sense. Now this is a condition that seems to demand the impossible. There is no relation between the sound and the meaning of a word. The same thing is called HORSE in English . . . (etc.)” This is indeed the opposition of poetic mimologism to the ordinary conventionality of natural language, and suddenly here we are (again) in familiar territory. That this return is not merely a chance mishap, a metaphorical concatenation, or a simple slip of the pen is indicated by many analogous and, furthermore, well-known statements such as Roman Jakobson’s use of the following formula from Valéry: “The poem — that prolonged hesitation [still the oscillation of the pendulum] between the sound and the sense.”¹²⁷ To tell the truth, other statements are more forceful. Thus, regarding the lines from Baudelaire cited above, Valéry again shifts from the “equal importance” of sound and sense to their “indivisibility” and the “possibility of their innermost and indissoluble combination.” Elsewhere: “The sound and the sense, no longer separable, correspond to each other inexhaustibly within our memory.”¹²⁸ Elsewhere still: “The art {of poetry} implies and demands an equivalence, a perpetually exercised exchange between

form and content, between sound and sense, between act and matter."¹²⁹ The equivocation in this position is as if concentrated here in the ambiguous term *equivalence*, which, strictly speaking, designates the equality of value and importance, apart from any resemblance, but which in fact almost inevitably gives us to understand: similitude. We will find a parallel equivocation in Jakobson.

Here we are, then, on the threshold of a neo-Cratylian poetics that would, as in Mallarmé, charge poetic language with correcting the conventionality of natural language. But we will not remain on this threshold, for Valéry's position here is even more guarded than that of his master teacher.

A first reservation: the arbitrariness of the sign is now (recognized to be) so strong that it apparently stands in the way of any kind of correction. Contrary to Lessing's wishes, the poet cannot really *transform* his conventional signs into motivated signs: "This... seems to demand the impossible"; "That is to ask for a miracle." Apparently, all he can do is to give his reader the illusion of motivation: "It is the poet's business to give us the *feeling* of an intimate union between the spoken word and the mind," "to produce a powerful *impression*, sustained for a fixed period of time [in short, momentary], that there is I know not what harmony between the perceptible form of a discourse and its *exchange value in terms of ideas*, that the two are conjoined in I know not what mystical union"; "A poem... should create the *illusion* of an indissoluble compound of *sound and sense*."¹³⁰

Next, a second reservation: even by way of an illusion, Valéry shrinks visibly from the idea of a poetic form that would be the *image* of the meaning. We should recall here that at least in principle, a motivated sign is not necessarily a sign by resemblance. Cratylian speculation, of course, has never known how to draw this distinction very well and, to tell the truth, has most often misunderstood it; but for a long time tropology has dealt with figures of speech motivated by other types of relations (contiguity, inclusion, contrariety, and so on). We have seen that Valéry readily evokes an (illusion of) motivation for the poetic form, rendered "inseparable" or "indissoluble" from its content, but we have not yet run across any statement that clearly specifies this motivation in terms of mimesis. The furthest step in this direction consists of using the words *harmonie* {harmony} or *accord* {concord}, which evidently connote in standard usage a sort of partial resemblance. But they are modalized each time by a very characteristic style of hedging: "*I know not what harmony*," "a *certain* indefinable concord."¹³¹ These clauses (and especially the second) are not simply careful wordings, as a major text from *Tel Quel* confirms: "The power of verse lines stems from the *indefinable* harmony between what they say and what they are. 'Indefinable' is basic to the definition. This harmony should not be definable. When it is, it is *imitative* harmony—and that will not do at all. The impossibility

of defining this relation, combined with the impossibility of denying it, constitutes the essence of the verse line."¹³²

Imitative harmony—which Valéry scorns, not without practicing it himself on occasion¹³³—is obviously the poetic form of vulgar mimologism. But just what would a *nonimitative harmony* be? It could easily be defined, by arguing from the musical origin of the term (as with *concord*), as a relation not of resemblance but of regulated difference, one capable of engendering an aesthetic pleasure. But to define it in this way (or in any other way) is already, let us note, to contravene Valéry's formula, which posits, in the manner of an ancient paradox, that any definable harmony, even if nonimitative, is by definition imitative. What must be looked for instead, therefore, is what a *nondefinable* harmony consists of. But the futility of such a question is glaringly obvious. Valéry's poetics ends, deliberately, in an aporia. Perhaps the moment has come to recall this cruel remark: "Most people have such a vague idea of poetry that the very vagueness of their idea is, for them, its definition."¹³⁴ At the least, applying this criticism to its author, one might say that in Valéry the vagueness "enters [consciously, which makes it worth something] into the definition."

But on the whole, it is a question not of vagueness but rather of a sort of irreducible core of contradiction: the very one, of course, already noticed, between a "formalist" poetics that decrees the autonomy of the poetic form, and a neo-Cratylian poetics that advocates the indissolubility of sound and sense. Up to this point, these two divergent aesthetics had remained separate in their formulations, scattered in that "chaos of bright ideas" which the Valéryan text is also, and perhaps more than any other. When they inadvertently coincide, their synthesis can only be a paradox.

Ⓢ Perhaps there may be another way to resolve this contradiction, but nothing indicates that this solution was in Valéry's mind at any time, and I advance it with all proper disclaimers. Let us recall the properties of the poetic state that enabled the comparison with the musical universe to be brought out—and that were afterward abandoned along the way: structural unity, relations between the elements as perceptible as the elements themselves. These features obviously apply to the poetic text. Such tightly woven relations "of word to word, verse to verse . . . rhythm to rhythm" necessarily inspire in the reader the impression of "an absolute object, as it were, produced by an equilibrium of intrinsic forces, shielded by a prodigious number of reciprocal forces from those vague impulses to alter and improve" (I am continuing my consideration of the text on Mallarmé, cited above, in a new light). Such is the *necessity* of the poetic text, clearly a "purely formal" necessity—that is, "intrinsic" to the form. But the temptation seems to be strong to interpret a necessary and thus motivated form *in this sense*

(through the mere "equilibrium of intrinsic forces") as necessary and motivated *in another sense*: to wit, as the expression of a certain content. From the internal (musical) necessity of a form, one would then switch, surreptitiously, to the necessity of its signifying function,¹³⁵ and therein would lie the key to the "illusion" of mimeticism in poetry — and, incidentally, the key to Valéry's poetics.

Yet it should be remembered that for Valéry this internal immutability of the poetic message is itself illusory: it is an impression of the reader who, unaware of the series of tentative efforts and substitutions from which the work of art arises, does not imagine it (might be) different, and believes it "completed." But in reality, "a poem is never finished — it is always ended by accident," and "a finished sonnet" simply signifies "abandoned sonnet."¹³⁶ No text is therefore unmodifiable, and the internal necessity of its form is always imperfect. The illusion of mimeticism would arise, then, from an illusion of completion. A double misapprehension — a doubly "graceful attribute with which the reader endows his poet: the reader sees in us the transcendent merits of virtues and graces that develop in him."¹³⁷ The true Cratylian magicmaker, the truly "inspired one," is not the poet but the reader.

Once again, a like (re)solution is nowhere made explicit as such in Valéry. The contradiction remains unresolved between a very sharp formalist and conventionalist *parti pris* and a sort of hereditary reflex for valorizing mimesis. Today, this contradiction is still at the heart of all "modern" poetics, and we will discover it again. Maybe we should be satisfied, then, to have caught in Valéry a glimpse of what a Hermogenist poetics might be — a poetics *without illusion*.

© Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of poetic language appears in the first chapter of *What Is Literature?* in the context of the famous theme of the writer's "commitment" {*engagement*} and the need to explain why such commitment does not concern, "or, at least, not in the same way," painting, sculpture, music, and even poetry.¹³⁸ For poetry is "on the side of painting, sculpture, music" in a division that opposes all these arts as a group to Literature alone, which is obviously reduced to "prose."¹³⁹ The principle behind this division is not aesthetic, in the full sense (a difference between the "materials" — acoustic, plastic, verbal, and so on), but properly semiotic. The arts utilize, or rather handle and arrange, *things* that "exist in themselves" and "do not refer to anything outside themselves." In contrast, literature (excluding poetry) deals only with *significations*, and it alone holds this position: literature is "the empire of signs."¹⁴⁰

These signs, which are plainly linguistic, will once more be reduced here to their single lexical dimension: prose is an activity that utilizes *words* as signs. As the opposite, poetry will therefore be defined as an activity — or rather as an *attitude* — "that looks upon words as *things* and not as *signs*. For the ambiguity of the sign implies that one may traverse it at will like a pane of glass and pursue

the thing signified across it, or turn one's gaze toward its *reality* and look upon it as an object."¹⁴¹ Clearly, Sartre here (for the most part) takes the term "sign" in the current sense (one object representing another), which is approximately the one that Saussure attaches to the term "signifier." To be more precise: I specify *here*, because other uses (as in "the empire of signs, or prose") refer more to the Saussurean sense of the sign: that is, to "the totality formed by the signifier and the signified." I also say *for the most part*, because as we will very soon discover, and perhaps have already discovered, the problem is no longer the ambiguity of the sign but that of the word *sign*—unless these are one and the same thing.

To consider the word as an object would then be (provisionally) to set aside its signification and to treat it as a pure phonic and/or graphic "reality," analogous (or at least parallel) to those acoustic or plastic realities handled by music or painting. Such graphic/phonic aggregates would be for the poet what sounds are for the musician and colors for the painter. Therein lies "formalist" poetics in its crudest—and, as everyone knows, its most untenable—version. Sartre is perfectly well aware of this, too, and immediately justifies his theory by saying that "signification alone . . . can give words their verbal unity; without it, they are scattered into sounds or into strokes of the pen."¹⁴² It would be pointless to raise the counterexample of concrete poetry, the ever open possibility of an activity that would effectively utilize the phonic and/or graphic material of natural language for artistic ends. The implicit reply is that this material would then no longer consist of "words," or at least that these words would no longer exist as such. Signification is essential to the definition of the word; it is therefore by definition impossible to treat or consider it as a *pure object*, as a pure thing.

At this point, it becomes clear that the initial opposition between *thing* and *sign*, understood as a rigorous alternative between two exclusive terms, leads to an aporia. Either one has to give up the fight prematurely, or one has to backtrack and make the dilemma somewhat more tractable. First, let us observe that the opposition was asymmetrical, or lame, in any case, since "signs" can only be a certain species of "things": those that do not exist (solely) "in themselves," or rather *for* themselves, but (also) refer to something else outside themselves. A piece of blank paper is a "thing"; a bank note is both a thing (a printed piece of paper) and a monetary sign. Therefore, the opposition *thing* versus *sign* actually opposes things that are nothing else but that (pure things) to those that are also signs: the sign-things. But asymmetry does not prevent the opposition from being exclusive, if one posits that a word must necessarily be considered either as pure thing or as sign-thing. As we have seen, the first hypothesis was excluded by definition, but it is also clear that the second one, in an apparently intolerable cancellation of all opposition between prose and poetry, throws us back entirely upon "prose." Sartre has to invent a third hypothesis, then, which is as follows: "If the poet comes to a halt before words, as the painter does be-

fore colors and the musician before sounds, this does not mean that they have lost all signification in his eyes. . . . It is only that {signification} becomes natural, too. It is no longer the goal always out of reach and always aimed at by human transcendence; it is a property of each term, analogous to the expression of a face, to the slightly sad or gay meaning of sounds and colors."¹⁴³ In this signification "become natural," it is not hard to recognize the Cratylian *physei*, which (re)appears at the appointed time to offer a third path between the insignificance of "things" and the significance—implicitly defined as artificial and conventional—of "signs." The opposition between these two types of significance will be thematized and provided with a terminology later on in a text to which we will have occasion to return.¹⁴⁴ This is the distinction between *signification* (conventional) and *meaning* (natural): "Things do not signify anything. However, each one of them has a meaning. By *signification* should be understood a certain conventional relation that makes a present object into the substitute for an absent object; by *meaning*, I denote the participation of a present reality, within its being, in the being of other realities, whether present or absent, visible or invisible, and by degrees in the universe. Signification is conferred upon the object from outside by a signifying intention; meaning is a natural quality of things: the first is a transcendent relationship between one object and another, the second a transcendence fallen into immanence."¹⁴⁵

So there we have the symbolist theory of poetic language felicitously reformulated: the words of prose have a signification; those of the poem, like things, like sounds and colors, have a meaning. One notices immediately that the insignificance of things is posited only provisionally, inasmuch as it opposes the significance of signs. As a matter of fact, the third term has been substituted for the first, and there are finally no more than two terms, which are the two significances: that of instituted signs, or signification, which makes up (among others) the "empire" of prose; and that of things, or meaning, which is, or can be, the material of art and of poetry.¹⁴⁶

About this poetic significance, we know only that it is *natural*, a natural "property" or "quality" of things. It should be carefully distinguished from those marginal semiotic uses that can be made of certain objects upon which one "confers the value of signs by convention," as in the "language of flowers." The signification of "faithfulness" attributed to white roses has nothing to do with their "frothy profusion" or their "stagnant sweet perfume"; it does not belong to them but is "transcendent," "conferred from the outside," as it might have been conferred upon any other species of flowers: such is the arbitrariness of the sign. On the contrary, the naturalness of meaning is the immanent relation between a thing and the significance with which it is "impregnated." For example, the yellow rift in the sky above Tintoretto's Golgotha does not *signify* the agony of Christ but is both yellow sky and agony. For another example: "Picasso's attenu-

ated harlequins, ambiguous and eternal, haunted by an indecipherable meaning, inseparable from their lean stooped-over forms and the faded-out diamond shapes on their tights, are an emotion that has made itself flesh and which the flesh has absorbed like a blotter drinking up ink."¹⁴⁷ Likewise: "The signification of a melody—if one can still speak of signification¹⁴⁸—does not exist outside the melody itself, unlike ideas, which can be adequately rendered in several ways" (one recognizes here an echo of Valéry's definition of prose).

These illustrations, borrowed from art, may still seem quite vague; in fact, they merely express a confused, almost ineffable, intuition of what a signification "fallen into immanence" might be, once it has been "made into a thing," like the agony of Christ "which has turned into the yellow rift in the sky and which, as a result, is submerged in, coated over by the particular properties of things, by their impermeability, their extension, their blind permanence, their externality, and that infinity of relations which they maintain with other things."¹⁴⁹ In this typically "Sartrean" discourse, the semiotician on duty might have a little difficulty recognizing his tools, but he has to go through all this before arriving at formulations that are clearer, probably too clear. Here is a parallel instance taken again from *Saint Genet*: "[Signification] can prepare for an intuition, can orient it, but it seems unable to furnish the intuition itself, since the signified object is, theoretically, external to the sign; [meaning] is by nature intuitive; it is the odor that impregnates a handkerchief, the perfume that vanishes out of an empty, musty bottle. The abbreviation '17th' signifies a certain century, but this entire period, in museums, is suspended like a piece of gauze, or a spider's web, from the curls of a wig, or escapes in whiffs from a sedan chair."¹⁵⁰ The examples of Louis XIV's wig or of a sedan chair, with their "immanent," inherent, or at the least *adherent* meaning, aptly illustrate what a "natural" significance might be. Better still, they throw light on the definition mentioned above—one that requires a little further attention: "*participation* of a present reality . . . in the being of other realities, present or absent." Between the sedan chair and the meaning "17th century" there exists a necessary relation of "participation," since the chair actually belongs to the century from which it comes. This is a relation of part to whole (synecdoche), or equally well one of effect to cause (metonymy): the object in the style of Louis XIV is basically an *index*, in C. S. Peirce's sense, of the Great Century—a *vestige*.

Something in this choice of examples slightly (temporarily) disturbs our Crautyan habits. For once, the necessary semantic relationship is one not of resemblance but of contiguity or, as Beauzée said, of "coexistence." For once, the model for the natural sign is the index and not the "icon," still in the Peircean sense of an image or reflection. What is more, this specific choice was implicit not only in the examples but already within the very definition. For the moment, then, it is as if for Sartre natural significances boil down to signs motivated by

contiguity, to the exclusion of all other types of motivation. This seems to raise the question of a completely new version of Cratylism.¹⁵¹

But a considerable obstacle presents itself here. The notion of a sign by contiguity, or participation, is perfectly clear outside the linguistic sphere, but what becomes of it when one wants to transpose it—as one really must in the case of poetry—into the functioning of language? Take the poetic utterance that Sartre has just explained by introducing his distinction between meaning and signification: “In producing his first poem as an object” [above, he said “like a thing”], reasons Sartre, “Genet transforms the *signification* of the words into *meaning*.”¹⁵² Let’s take a look at this. That first “poem” is the syntagm *moissonneur des souffles coupés* {reaper of gasping breaths}. To answer our question, Sartre’s analysis ought to show how these three or four words, which begin as conventional signs in natural language, become, or here at least give the illusion of becoming, indexical signs or natural metonymies linked by “participation” to the things they designate. In fact, there is nothing of the kind in these six otherwise dazzling pages, which turn entirely upon an altogether different idea: that of “the syncretic interpenetration of meanings” in the poetic word and the poetic syntagm.¹⁵³ Thus, the poetic mode of meaning, which is one of “indeterminacy,” “indistinctness,” and “syncretic unity,” forbids us to choose between *couper les souffles* {literally, “to cut breaths”; idiomatically, “to cause one to gasp”}, used in this verse, and *couper les tiges* {“to cut the stems of flowers”}, inferred from *moissonneur* {reaper}: “Right out of the blue the two meanings spread through each other and coexist, neither fusing together nor contradicting each other.”¹⁵⁴ Breaths are at the same time flower stems: wind, plant, respiration, all at once “in a sort of tourniquet”—until the final operation that will *execute* the signification beyond this syncretic unity, disclosing that a gasping breath is nothing, that a reaper of nothing is no one, and that in this way, with all content canceled out, Genet’s verse simply meant: *nothing*. But this double demonstration concerns the nature of the relationships between signifieds (*moissonneur de tiges*—*moissonneur de souffles*) in the poem, not that of the relationships of signification between signifiers and signifieds (*moissonneur*—“one who reaps”). The interpenetration of meanings has been substituted for the participation of meaning (for meaning as participation), but this substitution is neither legitimate nor efficacious. For all that, the critic can yet rightly argue—in a last echo of the theme—that “*moissonneur* is still completely impregnated with the smell of ripened wheat”; evidently Sartre cannot demonstrate this argument—and apparently he is no longer worried about it, as if he had changed his mind along the way. And maybe it would be very difficult for him simply to make what he means explicit.

Indeed, if the mimetic relation between word and thing is subject to debate, at least it is clearly definable: one can grant or deny that *moissonneur* resembles a reaper; what is at issue is more or less clear. But how can a relationship of

"impregnation" or "participation" be granted or denied here? What are we to *understand* by these terms? The only conceivable relation of this type would be the onomatopoeic one that apparently unites the word that imitates the noise with the object that produces this noise. Thus, one could say—very hastily—that the noise-word *cascade* (according to Nodier) participates in the (noisy) object, "cascade." But one immediately sees that the relationship of participation in fact unites the two "objects," the cascade and its noise; and that the linguistic relation lies elsewhere—between the noise and the word; and that it is not participatory but (if one wishes) imitative. Here *cascade* would designate the noise of the cascade through onomatopoeia and the cascade itself through metonymy—that is, through a relationship of participation *between the signifieds*. But between signifier and signified the only possible motivated relation remains the mimetic one. Let us return to our (word) *moissonneur*. It resembles (or doesn't) a reaper: this is a direct imitation. Or else it resembles (or doesn't) a noise produced by the reaper, or by his scythe, or by whatever one wishes: this is an indirect imitation. But the reaper does not produce the word *moissonneur*. One can say, therefore, and even reiterate, that the word *moissonneur* is impregnated with the smell of ripened wheat, or any other odor, but this would-be metonymy will remain what it is: a metaphor. Words have no odor.

The variant sketched out in *Saint Genet* thus turns out to be illusory; it is necessary to return to "classical" poetic Cratylysm, to poetic language defined as mimesis. Besides, the text from *What Is Literature?*, as if it had foreseen the uselessness of the detour, passed directly from the general notion of "natural signification" to the particular one of the mimetic relation. First, the poet is "outside language": he maintains a "silent contact" with things; then he turns toward "that other species of things which words are for him" in order to discover their "particular affinities with earth, sky and water and all created things. Short of knowing how to use it as a *sign* of an aspect of the world, he sees in the word the *image* of one of these aspects." *Affinity* remained ambiguous: is it resemblance or "participation"? But the telltale word is obviously *image*, whose italics formally oppose it to *sign* and which sanctions the return to a pure mimetic relation, as the following statement does again, a bit further on: "language is for [the poet] the Mirror of the world." Image, reflection: this is indeed mimesis, a "magical resemblance," but artificially (re)created in the poetic message, beyond the failing of natural languages: "The verbal image that he chooses for its resemblance to the willow or the ash tree is not necessarily the word which we use to designate these objects."¹⁵⁵ It can be the reverse—"willow" for ash, "ash" for willow—as if Mallarmé had dared (or deigned) to call night "day," and vice versa; it can be anything else: the poetic image recreates language.

Thus endowed with a mimetic function, the poetic word begins, for Sartre, to exist "by itself" in a tangible and, as Valéry said, "physical" manner: "Its

sonority, its length, its masculine or feminine endings, its visual aspect compose for him a fleshly face that *represents* signification rather than expressing it."¹⁵⁶ In this way, paradoxically (we encountered this paradox earlier in Valéry, but in a less ingenuous form, and will meet it again in Jakobson), far from increasing the transparency of the vocable, its very mimetic virtue seems to be the necessary and sufficient condition for its aesthetic autonomy and opacity. The more "semblant" the poetic word is, the more *perceptible* it becomes. I say *Florence*, "and the strange object that thus appears possesses the liquidity of *fleuve* (river), the soft fulvous fire of *or* (gold), and, for the finishing touch, abandons itself with *décence* (decency), and, through the sustained diminution of the silent *e*, indefinitely prolongs its very reserved opening out."¹⁵⁷ Indeed, the "poetic" word is a strange object, whose whole tangible existence is as if insufflated by the (partial) objects of its signification. The "poetic" word releases a typical series of lexical associations—Socratic etymology or Leirisian gloss¹⁵⁸—in which the mimetic illusion, without power over the whole noun or name, decides to divide and conquer in order to rule, syllable by syllable, fragment by fragment, over a shattered vocable. The "poetic" word is a mirror—a broken one.

☺ At the outset, the Russian Formalists have a completely clear, if not entirely specific, idea of what they call "poetic language" (*poeticheskij jazyk*). In opposition to everyday language, the language of pure communication in which phonic, morphological, and other forms have no autonomy, the function of communication in the poetic mode of language recedes into the background and {the} "language resources acquire an autonomous value."¹⁵⁹ This autonomy of the poetic word in relation to its function is manifested by a greater *perceptibility*: "Poetic language is distinguished from prosaic language by the palpability of its construction."¹⁶⁰ The perceptibility of the form became, as we know, one of the major themes of Formalist theory in all domains. This includes the domain of "literary evolution," whose driving force was taken to be the erosion of old forms as they become habitual, hence transparent, and the need to substitute for them new, hence perceptible, ones: "The new form does not appear in order to express a new content, but in order to replace an old form that has already lost its aesthetic character"¹⁶¹—and this also occurs, for example, at the level of dramatic constructions or narrative devices. As I have said, this generalization diminishes the specificity of poetic language but gives it in return, as in Valéry, an exemplary value: poetry is literature par excellence, art par excellence, defined by its deliberate rupture with any "practical" function.

Roman Jakobson's early analyses do not stand out at all in this context, unless it is for their sometimes greater Formalist intransigence. Thus, in "La Nouvelle Poésie russe," he says that in poetry "the communicative function, proper to both daily language and emotional language, is reduced ... to a minimum.

Poetry is indifferent in respect to the object of the utterance, just as practical, or more accurately objective ... prose is indifferent, but in the opposite direction, in respect to, let us say, rhythm."¹⁶² Poetic devices such as neologism or phonic repetition apparently have no *raison d'être* other than promoting or emphasizing this "opacity" of the verbal forms in the poem.¹⁶³ The neologism "produces a dazzling euphonic splash, whereas the old words age phonetically, too, being worn out by frequent usage, especially because their phonic constitution is only partially perceived. One easily loses awareness of the form of words in daily language, which dies, becomes petrified, whereas one is compelled to perceive the form of the poetic neologism." Similarly: "We do not perceive the form of a word unless it is repeated within the linguistic system. The isolated form dies; likewise, the combination of the sounds within a poem: ... we see it only through the repetition."¹⁶⁴ This position is confirmed a few years later and is, above all, justified within a typically conventionalist axiology:

But how does poeticity manifest itself? Poeticity is present when the word is felt as a word and not as a mere representation of the object being named or as an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and internal form, acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality.

Why is all this necessary? Why is it necessary to make a special point of the fact that sign does not merge with object? Because, besides the direct awareness of the identity between sign and object (A is A_1), there is a necessity for the direct awareness of the inadequacy of that identity (A is not A_1). The reason this antinomy is essential is that without contradiction there is no mobility of concepts, no mobility of signs, and the relationship between concept and sign becomes automatized. Activity comes to a halt, and the awareness of reality dies out.¹⁶⁵

This text is thoroughly exceptional in the history of poetic theory. Not only is the poetic sign presented here as essentially "different" from its object, but this difference is also deemed superior to that of daily language, in which the erosion of habit automatizes, and thereby naturalizes, the semantic relation. Above all, this differentiation is exalted as an instrument for awakening the consciousness of reality. A Hermogenism of fact but also of value is asserted, therefore, whose liberating virtue could not inconceivably be compared to certain Brechtian formulas on this subject. In any case, it is clear that the *perceptibility* of the poetic word is in no way linked here to just any mimetic function — quite to the contrary. Later on, in "Linguistics and Poetics," the poetic function is still defined, among the six functions of language, by "the set ... toward the message as such, focus on the message for its own sake," and not for the sake of its relation, of whatever order this might be, with its object. On the contrary, Jakobson

immediately specifies that this function, "by promoting the palpable aspect of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects"—a dichotomy that leaves the message completely free to organize itself "for its own sake" and according to preferences totally independent of its signification, as the following example well illustrates: "Why do you always say 'Joan and Margery,' yet never 'Margery and Joan'? Do you prefer Joan to her twin sister? — 'Not at all, it just sounds smoother.' In a sequence of two coordinate names, and as far as no problems of rank interfere, the precedence of the shorter name suits the speaker, unaccountably for him, as a well-ordered shape of the message."¹⁶⁶

Let us work on this example and its commentary a little more. The "well-ordered shape of the message" here is really a question of pure internal arrangement, of rhythm and euphony, without any possible "interference" from the respective positions of "rank" between the two persons meant by the two proper names, twin sisters who are equally liked: clearly, the situation was carefully calculated. The question, therefore, is really one of *formal* affinity. In order to appreciate this fully, another example of "well-ordered shape" has to be adduced, borrowed from another, nearly contemporary essay: "Such a sequence as 'The President and the Secretary of State attended the meeting' is far more usual than the reverse, because the initial position in the clause *reflects* the priority in official standing."¹⁶⁷ And Jakobson goes on to talk about a "correspondence of order between signifier and signified." So there we have, in opposition to the purely formal order of "Joan and Margery," an order that imitates the hierarchy of contents and that belongs to the class of iconic signs that Peirce has baptized "diagrams," or "icons of relation," in opposition to "images," or simple icons. This example belongs to a series of illustrations of the mimetic capacities of common language at the syntactic (as in this case), morphological, and phonic levels. "The President and the Secretary of State" is an utterance of "ordinary," "daily," "prosaic" language, dominated as such by the function called "referential," focused on the "context" or object of discourse. Its evidently mimetic arrangement is in no way a poetic fact; on the contrary, its expressiveness fosters its referential function, and the question here is no longer the euphonic principle of the "precedence of the shorter name," to which this utterance is completely indifferent—just as the poetic utterance (the one illustrating the poetic function) "Joan and Margery" was indifferent to mimetic appropriateness, even at the risk of a serious misunderstanding ("Do you prefer Joan?"). In short, between a prosaic utterance and a poetic utterance, it is the former that aims, as far as possible, at mimetic expressiveness, and the latter that shies away from this. The prosaic utterance "reflects" or traces its object; it puts its diagrammatic transparency at the service of the "cognitive" function. The poetic utterance is more autonomous, less tied down to its content, therefore less transparent and

more perceptible as an object; therein lies its function. So goes, once again (one last time), Formalist poetics, or the poetics of Hermogenes.¹⁶⁸

But this distinction represents merely one facet of Jakobson's theory. In order to see (gradually) the obverse side, we need only return to and continue the reading of "Linguistics and Poetics," moving on to the second, then to the third example of the poetic message.¹⁶⁹ The second example is "Horrible Harry." Why "horrible" instead of "terrible," "frightful," and so on? Because, as Jakobson directly remarks, "horrible" and "Harry" are in a relationship of paronomasia: we are still, then, at the purely formal level. If the person were called, say, "Ingrid," the appropriate expression of disgust would obviously be "Ignoble Ingrid," and so forth. The agreement exists between the two verbal units, and nothing else. However, here is the justification that Jakobson attributes to his speaker: "Horrible fits him better"; "him" obviously represents the person, not the pronoun. The alliteration is therefore felt (by whom?) as an *imitative* harmony. Now for the third example: "I like Ike." Jakobson gives this a phonic analysis at first, then he adds: "The first of the two [vocalically] alliterative words is included in the second . . . a paronomastic image of the loving subject [I] enveloped by the beloved object [Ike]." Once more, but this time explicitly by the analyst, paronomasia is described as producing an "image": the relation between the two verbal units reflects the relation between the two individuals.

Here we are (again) in familiar territory: poetic language no longer deviates from the expressive potentials of natural language; it respects and exploits them. One step further, and it will be said, as so often previously, that it develops them, or at least that it shows them off more. This step is taken a little further on: "Poetry is not the only area where sound symbolism makes itself felt, but it is a province where the internal nexus between sound and meaning changes from latent to patent and manifests itself most palpably and intensely."¹⁷⁰ Or else: "The autonomous iconic value of phonemic oppositions is damped down in purely cognitive messages but becomes particularly apparent in poetic language."¹⁷¹ One final step, and the situation just described (referential mimetic language versus autonomous poetic language) reverses itself totally: mimetic poetic language versus conventional prose. The reference to Mallarmé is thus pivotal, and as a matter of fact it appears in both texts,¹⁷² followed by the well-known remarks on the way in which French poetry can "get around the difficulty" of the pair *jour/nuit* {day/night} by glossing over the "defect" {*défaut*} through an appropriate phonic context or, conversely, by adapting the signifieds to the resonant color of the signifiers: "chaleur lourde du jour, fraîcheur aérienne de la nuit" {heavy heat of the day, airy freshness of the night}. The poetic relevance of these comments, mentioned here for their Cratylan tenor, will not be reexamined. If we add to these the quotations from Pope ("The

sound must seem an echo of the sense") and from Valéry ("The poem [is] a prolonged hesitation between sound and sense"), Jakobson's conversion to poetic mimologism will clearly appear — with the slight difference that the role granted to the mimetic capacities of natural language is probably much greater here than in Mallarmé, and certainly much greater than in Valéry: "Sound symbolism is an undeniably objective relation founded on a phenomenal connection between different sensory modes, in particular between visual and auditory experience."¹⁷³

I have used the term "conversion" in order to emphasize the divergence between the two theses, but this term should not be taken too hastily in a uniformly diachronic sense. Tempting as it is to think so, it would be hard to establish that Jakobson's position on this point changed between 1920 and 1960, and that a more personal interpretation of the poetic phenomenon gradually emerged from attitudes shared by the Formalist group. In actual fact, the connection between perceptibility and mimeticism is already suggested in the 1935 lecture "The Dominant," which attempts to define the hierarchy of the different linguistic functions within the poetic work: "In the referential function, the sign has a minimal internal connection with the designated object, and therefore the sign in itself carries only a minimal importance; on the other hand, the expressive function demands a *more direct, intimate relationship between the sign and the object*, and therefore a greater attention to the internal structure of the sign. In comparison with referential language, emotive language, which primarily fulfills an expressive function, is as a rule closer to poetic language (which is directed precisely toward the sign as such)."¹⁷⁴ Clearly, the position here is qualified through the interposition of "expressive" language between the referential and the poetic, with an increasing importance of the signifier each time. Referential discourse dissociates itself from the signifier; the expressive function makes it more prominent through the expressive link itself; the poetic is deliberately "oriented" toward it. But the connection is even closer, as early as 1919, in "La Nouvelle Poésie russe": "In emotional and poetic languages, the verbal (phonetic and semantic) representations attract more attention to themselves, *the link between the acoustic aspect and the signification* becomes closer."¹⁷⁵ Therefore, it can be said that these two themes coexist in Jakobson's discourse from the beginning.

Maybe this coexistence is less paradoxical than it seems at first glance, at least in theory. Indeed, on one hand the "arbitrary" signifier is perceptible because it is arbitrary and therefore made prominent by its very lack of motivation, its mimetic inadequation, ultimately its incongruity, which is a form of defamiliarization (*ostranenie*). Previously, Lessing had said that the conventional sign provokes "an awareness of the sign that is stronger than that of the thing designated."¹⁷⁶ And didn't Mallarmé, in a highly critical way, see vocables like *jour*

and *nuit* as “perverse” in themselves?¹⁷⁷ But, on the other hand, the mimetic sign (or the sign considered as mimetic), theoretically “transparent” through its mimeticism, is in fact unusual and therefore perceptible for this very reason, especially if it produces a contrast and an exception within the context and/or within the system: this is another *ostranenie*, the opposite of the preceding one and perhaps equally effective.¹⁷⁸ As always, then, these theoretical rationalizations are perfectly reversible, and the positions actually determine each other and must be evaluated on an altogether different level, that of biases and deep valorizations. It is at this level (unarticulated, and often unthought) that the Formalist attitude enters into conflict with Cratylian desire—to the great advantage, here, of the latter.

Moreover, in Jakobson, the positive investments of these two factors are not at all comparable: in a way, the “Formalist” position is a *point of honor*, a position of principle, whose practical (technical) application remains weak. In contrast, the mimetic valorization penetrates all the elements of Jakobson’s poetics, and especially the most important (by far): the principle of recurrence. As we have seen, this appears already in 1919, as one means among others for underscoring the idea of form, under the category of phonic repetition. The 1966 essay “Grammatical Parallelism and Its Russian Facet” considerably extends its modalities (phonic, grammatical, and of course metrical) and its field of action across Hebrew, Chinese, Ural-Altai, and Russian folk poetics, with the invocation of those “great advocates of parallelism,” Herder and Hopkins.¹⁷⁹ Quite beyond any simple phonic and grammatical recurrences, the issue here is a “generalized parallelism,” according to Gerard Manley Hopkins’s thesis that the whole art of poetry “boils down to the principle of parallelism”—confirmed by the very etymology of the word *versus* (return): “We must consistently draw all inferences from the obvious fact that on every level of language the essence of poetic artifice consists in the recurrent returns.”¹⁸⁰

This principle of generalized recurrence, obviously inspired by a specific consideration of the most traditional forms (folkloric or not) of poetic creation—whose application to some works of another order might have disconcerted the specialists—is again encountered at the center of “Linguistics and Poetics,” where, as we will see, it does a bit more than compete with the “set toward the message” as a distinctive feature of the poetic function: “What is the empirical linguistic criterion of the poetic function?” Expanded and reformulated in terms of structural linguistics, poetic parallelism here becomes the well-known projection of “*the principle of equivalence from the [paradigmatic] axis of selection onto the [syntagmatic] axis of combination*. Equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence.”¹⁸¹

There is a substitution, indeed even a supplantation, here that perhaps has not been noticed as much as it deserves to be. If we ask ourselves what Jakob-

son's definition of the poetic function is, two answers come to mind equally: the *autotelism of the message* and the *projection of equivalence*. The first is properly theoretical, springing from the general scheme of the six linguistic functions; the second is presented as a simple "empirical criterion," a sort of rule of thumb, a handy means of "recognizing" a text with the poetic function. But this division neither sufficiently nor satisfactorily defines the relationship between the two criteria. Apparently, repetition is only a technical *means* for producing the autonomy of the form (according to the observation suggested back in 1919); but then we may wonder how it happens that the instrument here is more conspicuous, easier to "recognize" than the result aimed at—at the least, it is an index of low efficiency when the effort eclipses the effect. We can wonder, too—as we did above regarding the nature of the semantic relationship—whether the means designated is to such a degree the only conceivable one that its presence might become *the* decisive empirical criterion. What about the other poetic *devices* formerly pointed out by Jakobson himself (like neologism in Velimir Khlebnikov)? Moreover, what about the opposite device, or the systematic absence of repetition? The (greater) perceptibility of recurrent features, like that of mimetic ones, is an easily reversible principle. We know very well that the complete opposite has been maintained with as much probability: to wit, that difference alone is perceptible and that monotony engenders anesthesia. Once more, then, a spontaneous preference covers itself up (poorly) with a retroactive rationalization but gives itself away in the rush of reaction, since hardly is the theoretical criterion posited when it is definitively wiped out in the face of the empirical criterion which is supposed to embody or illustrate it and which it in fact serves to introduce.¹⁸² Moreover, we are really dealing with the same valorization—in the present case, here (repetition) and there (mimeticism), a valorization of *sameness*.

Indeed, the crucial term *equivalence* is remarkably ambiguous, in French as in English, something we previously appreciated in Valéry. In structural terms it designates here, very broadly, the relation maintained by all the terms capable of occupying the same slot in the chain. In this sense, a defective utterance such as "The child — in its cradle" can be completed by a thousand "equivalent" verbs, among which are "goes to sleep" or "wakes up": "The selection is produced on the basis of equivalence, similarity and *dissimilarity*, synonymy and *antonymy*."¹⁸³ But for ordinary consciousness, equivalence equals similarity, and in fact, when he needs an example to illustrate the notion of selection, Jakobson spontaneously resorts to "semantically cognate verbs — sleeps, dozes, nods, naps," the selection being exercised from that point on only among stylistic variants of the same term. This shift from paradigmatic equivalence to semantic equivalence is clearly already at work in the 1956 essay "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbance," where the function of selection

is interpreted in terms of similarity and related to the "metaphoric pole" of language, with metaphor established as the cardinal figure of poetic diction. "Generalized parallelism," therefore, becomes generalized equivalence (in the strong sense), on all planes and in all dimensions: "the principle of *similarity* underlies poetry," apparently without brooking any opposition.¹⁸⁴ Formal recurrences, described in principle as semantically neutral or, rather, ambivalent ("the metrical parallelism of the verse lines or the phonic equivalence of rhyming words prompts the question of semantic similarity *and contrast*"; "in poetry, any conspicuous similarity in sound is evaluated with respect to similarity *and/or dissimilarity* in sense"),¹⁸⁵ are eventually interpreted in the sense of a reciprocal and generalized symbolization: "The projection of the *equational principle* onto the sequence has a much deeper and wider significance. Valéry's view of poetry as a [prolonged] hesitation between the sound and the sense . . . is much more realistic and scientific than any bias of phonetic isolationism. . . . *Similarity* superimposed on contiguity imparts to poetry its thoroughgoing symbolic . . . nature. . . . Anything sequent is a simile. In poetry, where similarity is superinduced upon contiguity, any metonymy is slightly metaphorical and any metaphor has a metonymical tint."¹⁸⁶

This offers an altogether remarkable condensation of Jakobson's poetics: textual recurrence (formal similarities spread out over the space of the text) induces a sort of parallel recurrence at the level of the signified, which is metonymized metaphor, or similarities of meaning spread out over the space of the content. Ultimately, therefore, a veritable symbolical volume with three dimensions is established within the poem. In actual fact, it constitutes the poem as a horizontal network of signifying equivalences (phonic, metrical, grammatical, intonational, prosodic) that refers to another horizontal network of equivalences signified by means of a series of (vertical) semantic equivalences between each form and each meaning (images), and between each group of forms and each group of meanings (diagrams) — a hyperbolic and flawless state of the Baudelairean "forest of symbols." At this point, the punctilious distinctions of the old rhetoric lose their relevance: the figural link (metaphorico-metonymical) plays vertically as well as horizontally among signifieds, among signifiers, between signifieds and signifiers. Thus, it can be concluded that "the relevance of the sound-meaning nexus is a simple corollary of the superposition of similarity upon contiguity"¹⁸⁷ — and perhaps vice versa: the principle of repetition becomes in its turn a corollary of the mimetic principle, and the poem becomes an infinite play of mirrors.

☺ "Well now," said Maurice Barrès, "scratch the ironist and you find the elegist."¹⁸⁸ Perhaps modern poetic theory might be quite aptly depicted by risking the following parody: *scratch the Formalist and you find the Symbolist* (that is to say, the Realist), and, pushing it a little further, *scratch Hermogenes and you*

(re)discover *Cratylus*. There is even something of this in Saussure: scratch the author of the *Course in General Linguistics* and you find the dreamer of anagrams; and what nicer application of the "principle of equivalence" could there be than the paragrammatic dissemination of the theme word within the poetic message? We know how Jakobson, among others, welcomed these hypotheses, and how he applied them to the last "Spleen" and to "The Abyss" by Baudelaire.¹⁸⁹ Modern poetic consciousness is very largely "governed" by the principles of equivalence and motivation, and the majority of today's theoreticians and critics could be cited in this respect, without excepting, here and there, the humble author of this book. Beyond all the episodic antagonisms and across many displacements of emphasis and balance, we encounter, all over the place, the following triple valorization of the analogical relation: between signifiers (homophonies, paronomasias, and so on), between signifieds (metaphors), between signifier and signified (mimetic motivation). To a great extent such a convergence is probably an index of "truth," but it is also, and maybe above all, a sign of the times and a period theme. It is inevitably accompanied by a choice, conscious or not, within the poetic corpus, which a statistical study of the quotations and the objects of analysis would eloquently demonstrate. Our "poetic language" is the language of a certain poetry,¹⁹⁰ and—to keep to just one counterexample—it is easy to imagine what Malherbe, so hostile to all "repetition," so bent upon opening up to the utmost the sonorous and rhythmical range of the verse line and the stanza, would have thought of our generalized similarity. Aside from a few contrastive and coded effects of alliteration and imitative harmony, French poetry of the neoclassical age was governed instead by a principle of dissimulation, or maximal differentiation.¹⁹¹ A poetics founded through and through on the "demon of analogy" is a typically Romantic and Symbolist idea. It is modern in this sense, which is to say that it is neither eternal (and universally valid) nor very modern, and maybe it already betrays a certain backwardness (ever the bird of Minerva) in relation to poetic practice—but that's another story. As aesthetic resurgence and last (?) refuge of mimologism, this idea of poetic language as compensation for and challenge to the arbitrariness of the sign has become one of the fundamental articles of faith in our literary "theory." In fact, the very idea of poetic language (in general and whatever the specifics) is dominated by this metaphor gone astray which always arises from the dichotomy between poetry and "ordinary language," and which mythically transposes to the linguistic plane (the relation between signifier and signified) characteristics of discursive organization which in fact belong to an entirely different level: figural, stylistic, prosodic, and so on. Surreptitiously, the phenomenon of discourse thus becomes a phenomenon of natural language, and the "art of language" a "language within language."¹⁹² Today, this idea has become so familiar to us, so natural, so transparent, that we have some difficulty imagining that it is one

theory among others, that it did not always exist, that it will not exist forever. This doctrine does not go without saying, however, for it is clearly a phenomenon of history; it already belongs to History or, when all is said and done, to the past. The very act of beginning to perceive it and making it (in its turn) into an object of discourse is perhaps the sign of this, if it be true that "the mere perceptibility of the present is already the future."¹⁹³

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Thaïs E. Morgan is an associate professor of English at Arizona State University. To enhance the English-language edition further, Gerald Prince, author of *Narrative as Theme: Studies in French Fiction* (Nebraska 1992) and *A Dictionary of Narratology* (Nebraska 1987), has provided a foreword briefly describing Genette's career and the particular values of this book.

