Passing Fashion: Mallarmé and the Future of Poetry in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

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"The flight of poetry is only parodied by the wing-span of an open newspaper."¹ Thus wrote Stéphane Mallarmé in 1893, voicing a defense of poetry against the “vulgar” literary sub-genre of journalism. Literary history has generally upheld this image of Mallarmé as the defender of high literature against the incursions of a debased, commercial language.² And yet nothing fascinated Mallarmé more than the nascent consumer society of fin-de-siècle Paris.³ The obvious

pleasure Mallarmé found in composing fashion chronicles for La Dernière Mode, and the numerous essays he in fact devoted to the subject of newspapers, suggest a more complicated relationship between literature and the forms of mass culture in his work.  

Mallarmé suggests the measure of this complexity in a fashion chronicle from La Dernière Mode where he refers to the printed detritus of a recent soirée—dance cards and crushed flowers, concert programs and menus—as a “literary” corpus, “ayant en soi l’immortalité d’une semaine ou deux.” This playful comparison between immortal literature and transitory fashion, which has all the marks of a specifically Mallarmean irony, nonetheless poses a “serious” question: what might mass culture and literature have in common?

Critics have commented extensively on the way in which the “built-in obsolescence” of the mass-produced commodity affected more general patterns of cultural memory in nineteenth-century France. In what follows, I suggest that Mallarmé’s fashion writing, read in conjunction with his reflections on journalism, constitute one of the period’s most lucid commentaries on the challenge posed to traditional forms of cultural memory—including poetry—by the evanescence of commodities. The strength of Mallarmé’s critique lies in the fact that he does not simply oppose the transitory nature of commodified mass culture to the “eternal” in art, but rather investigates the historical conditions underlying the emergence of this opposition itself.

Frankfurt school critics have interpreted nineteenth-century fashion, and by analogy the mass-circulation newspaper, as cultural expressions of the bourgeois soul in its very essence. “Classes and

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individuals who demand constant change,” remarks the sociologist Georg Simmel, “find in fashion something that keeps pace with their own soul-movements.” Simmel builds on Marx, who was among the first to analyze the “soul movements” of the bourgeoisie and the relentless dissolving energy of bourgeois rationality:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind. As Marx’s analyses of modernity suggest, the smooth functioning of the market depends upon an uprooting of historical “ossification” or tradition, and the conversion of objects and subjects—commodities, free market individuals—into readily exchangeable quantities. For Marx, commodities assumed their auratic, mystical quality precisely because they had erased their history, or repressed the material conditions of their production. As the commodity was cut off from its process of production, so the individual selling his labor on the free market was cut off from the larger social and historical processes of which he was a part. The cultural practices of fashion and journalism at mid-century were thus both responding to, while helping to create

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and reinforce, an increasingly mobile, historically uprooted and “commodified” subject.\(^8\)

Written from within the heart of the culture industry, roughly between 1874 and 1894, Mallarmé’s fashion chronicles and his essays on the contemporary press contain a brilliant analysis of the modern shape taken by subjectivity and its tendency to suppress historical understanding. In so far as his criticism strives to restore to experience an historical dimension that is increasingly excluded by the cultural forms of modernity, Mallarmé emerges as a lucid precursor to the materialist cultural critique developed by the Frankfurt school in the early part of the twentieth century.

I.

Trois semaines à Paris! Mais autant vaudrait dire trois siècles! En trois semaines les événements se précipitent, l’existence se modifie à un tel point qu’on serait souvent fort en peine de se rappeler ce qu’on a dit, fait ou pensé après un si long intervalle!\(^9\)

In one of his monthly chronicles of Parisian high-life for the Moniteur des Dames et des Demoiselles, social commentator Georges D’Albrays acknowledges the futility of reconstructing for his readers the details of a recent fête, “[qui] est presque du domaine de l’histoire ancienne.” The past is of no interest to the chronicler of fashion, and indeed the frenetic rhythm of fashion itself throws a veil of forgetfulness over even the most recent history. Weeks take on the ponderous, dead weight of centuries whose ossified contents would be of interest only

\(^8\) In this sense, fashion and newspapers can be seen as “technologies of the individual,” to borrow a concept developed by Michel Foucault in his discussion of discursive and disciplinary practices of control in Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979). Foucault suggests that the explosion of industrial and economic technologies in the nineteenth century developed in concert with new techniques for surveying, controlling, and increasing the productive potential of individuals. See also Jonathan Crary’s excellent study Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century, 9th ed. (Cambridge: MIT P., 1999). Tracing the emergence of a new viewing subject in the early part of the nineteenth century, Crary argues that advances in optical science worked toward “the adaptation of the eye to rationalized forms of movement” (113).

\(^9\) Moniteur des Dames et des Demoiselles, 1 aoû 1880, “Chronique.” Cited hereafter as MDD.
to the antiquarian; the fashion reporter confines herself to the
temporal medium of the living present and immediate future. Only
an eye—or a pen—which is itself in constant motion can avoid the
cold hand of history and keep pace with the daily metamorphoses of
fashion. Marguerite de Colombes, fashion writer for the Moniteur,
warns her readers to keep a sharp eye on fashion’s changes so as not
to fall into the trap of repose: “Vous aurez réussi pour un jour, pour
une semaine, mais ne croyez pas pouvoir reposer sur vos lauriers [. .].”

The circle of fashion, like the wheel of Fate, is kept spinning by a
capricious divinity who metes out sentences as arbitrary as they are
irrevocable according to “les goûts de son humeur mobile et change-
ante.” The fashion writer is accordingly placed in the role of oracle-
reader or, in keeping with modern times, a weather-reader who can
predict the movements of the heavens:

Les courriéristes sont pour la mode ce que les astronomes—s’il est permis
de comparer nos petites personnes à ces hauts bonnets de la science—sont
pour le temps: non seulement elles ne se contentent pas de décrire le
présent, ces audacieuses rédactrices; elles ont encore la prétention de
prédir l’avenir! The fashion writer is caught between times, shuttling back and forth
between description (dcrire le présent) and prediction (prédir l’avenir)
so as never to fall behind. In keeping with the etymology of the
“courriériste,” she not only “runs with” the latest news to convey it on
time but, paradoxically, attempts to outpace it. Emmeline Raymond
of La Mode Illustrée prods her readers into a race against time when
she predicts in advance the decline of the reigning tunique-style dress:
“Il y a un fait que je ne dois pas tarder à révéler à nos lectrices: suivant
tous les pronostics, la tunique durera seulement jusqu’à l’hiver
prochain [...]. Il faut donc se háter de porter tout ce que l’on possède
en fait de tuniques.” Between the fashion writer’s duty not to tarry
(ne . . . pas tarder) and the fashion wearer’s obligation to make haste
(il faut . . . se háter) the present disappears, or is lived only in the futile
mode of that which is bound for extinction.

The evanescent present of fashion as a continually receding
horizon is also, paradoxically, “eternal” in so far as each unique

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10 MDD, 1 mars 1880, “Chronique de la Mode.”
hereafter as RMP.
12 La Sylphide, 16 octobre 1874, “Courrier de la mode.”
13 La Mode Illustrée, 21 juin 1874, “Modes.” Cited hereafter as MI.
present cedes its place to the next in a cycle without end. The myth-
like temporality of fashion as a present moment that repeats itself to
infinity was not lost on the fashion writers themselves, who were fond
of comparing their labors to those of Sisyphus. “Je ne sais quel
philosophe appelle le cœur un recommenceur, joli mot qui convient
à merveille à la mode, cette recommenceuse éternelle…,” remarks a
fashion commentator for *L’Elégance parisienne*. Marguerite de
Colombes follows suit when she compares fashion to the wheel of
Fate: “La mode n’est véritablement qu’une roue qui tourne et nous
amène, à intervalles réguliers, les mêmes objets.” And Emmeline
Raymond laments to her readers:

Je commence à entrevoir que la besogne la plus fatigante du monde
pourrait bien être celle qui m’est dévolue. Il ne s’agit pas seulement de
faire rouler ici—à l’instar de Sisyphe—un rocher qui retombe sur moi
chaque semaine, mais aussi à m’occuper, en outre du rocher présent, du
rocher de l’avenir.

The revolution of *la mode* is like the rolling of Sisyphus’ stone, where
the very difference between progress and regress, advance and
retreat, loses all meaning. The vocabulary of this passage itself
reflects the endlessness of the task: the job which has been passed
down to the fashion critic (*la besogne . . . dévolue*) mirrors the cyclical
turn and fall of the rolling stone. As the critic, so the artist: the
fashionable woman, counsels Marguerite de Colombes, must “changer
sans cesse” her toilette: “La plus jolie robe du monde [...] ne plaira
qu’un temps; puis il faudra changer, trouver autre chose, et
recommencer à chaque saison nouvelle [...] ce labeur incessant, cet
effort constant de l’imagination.”

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15 *MDD*, 1 décembre 1879, “Revue critique des modes.”
16 *MI*, 15 février 1874, “Modes.”
17 Fashion’s cult of the irreplaceable, unique present is belied by the form of the
fashion journal itself, and the sheer monotony with which it repeats its material. Of all
the illustrated newspapers of the nineteenth century, the *presse de mode* is perhaps the
most difficult to track through the archives precisely because of the extraordinary
fluidity with which titles, texts and images circulated among different fashion journals
and editors. Identical material was reprinted under different titles months or even
years after its first appearance, such that one magazine appears to—and often quite
literally does—run into and blur with the next. See Jean Watelet, *La Presse illustrée en
18 *MDD*, 1 mars 1880, “Revue critique des modes.”
In the monotonous labor of fashion as described in these journals, time and change disappear as elements of internal, lived experience and reappear as a property of objects. Time is given visual, spatial form and appears as an image of frozen movement. In a related vein, T.J. Clark has argued that the forces of modernization in Paris in the 1860s constituted a drive towards reducing the city to “image” or “spectacle.” With Hausmann’s urban makeover, the expulsion of the working class and the shift from industrial to consumer capitalism in the 1860s, Paris’ past as a site of class conflict and historical upheaval was gradually erased and transformed into an aestheticized image. Paris became, Clark contends, “simply [...] an image, something occasionally and casually consumed in spaces expressly designed for the purpose—promenades, panoramas, outings on Sundays, great exhibitions and official parades.”

I want to suggest that fashion images were beginning to function in a similar way during this period. The past was transformed into a motley—but ultimately homogeneous—visual landscape whose pieces could be detached and recombined endlessly. As one reviewer remarked of the state of fashion in 1835:

Ne dirait-on pas [...] que la mode a jeté dans un immense kaléidoscope des découpages de toutes les époques, des fragments de tous les siècles, et qu’ensuite, de cette réunion d’objets créés à des années de distance, et réunis tout-à-coup, se formaient autant de nouveaux modèles, selon qu’il plaisait à la frivole divinité de tourner l’instrument, et au hasard de faire tomber ici ou là tel objet à côté de tel autre [...]?

The mythical wheel of fortune and the capricious goddess Fashion combine with modern optical experiments—the kaleidoscope—to create a literal “spectacle” of time. History freezes into a collage, a flat image composed of fragments and clippings (découpages): “du gothique avec du neuf [...], du caraïbe avec du persan, du Louis XV et du Périclès, du Napoléon et du Philippe-le-Bel.” Time is materialized as a fabric that can be cut and stitched together like the clothing featured in the images. In the December 1879 number of the Moniteur des Dames, Marguerite de Colombes similarly transforms time into a spatial field from which fashion gathers her images, 1830s hats alongside Empire furs: “Nous ne reprenons pas dans leur ensemble

20 Le Bon Ton, 30 janvier 1835, “Modes.”
tous les modèles d’une même époque, mais glanons de çi de là sans ordre et sans aucun souci de la chronologie.”

Emptied of their content, the juxtaposed temporal planes of the fashion image are as flat as the promotional paper dolls with changeable wardrobes distributed by the éditions de luxe.

Time takes on an oddly plastic character in fashion writing, as though it had itself become a commodity. In a February 1874 issue of La Mode Illustrée, Emmeline Raymond describes how fashion is able to take what is distant in time—winter, spring and summer—and telescope it into a single, punctual present:

Nous avons atteint la saison durant laquelle on s’occupe encore des toilettes d’hiver, tout en se préoccupant déjà des toilettes de printemps. Les velours, les satins, les bandes de fourrure, les dentelles [...] coudoient, sur les tables des couturières, les échantillons des étoffes qui nous seront imposé l’été prochain.

Time is literally embodied in material objects, past and present juxtaposed “elbow to elbow” on the sales tables. Fashion bends time to itself and twists it into shapes it couldn’t otherwise take; it allows time to accumulate so that winter and spring can, miraculously, occupy a single time frame. In his June 1880 chronicle of Parisian society, Georges D’Albrays comments that winter and summer amusements currently occupy the same present: “Si l’on continue à jouir des réunions mondaines de l’hiver, on n’entend point pour cela renoncer aux distractions qu’amène le retour de l’été. On cumule, voilà tout [...].” Fashion overrides time, allowing winter and summer to co-exist in space, “accumulated” like so many hats or gloves tucked away in the fashionable woman’s wardrobe.

21 MDD, 1 décembre 1879, “Revue critique des modes.”
22 See Watelet, pp. 128–129. The interdependence of fashion and popular spectacle is underscored by the periodical Aquarelle-mode, which proposed a special “Panorama de la mode” featuring cardboard figures that would give a “total” view (back and front) of the latest fashions.
23 The commodification of time is illustrated by the efforts of department stores, in concert with fashion magazines, to tie consumption to a seasonal or calendar rhythm. Michael Miller records the Bon Marché’s marketing strategy of distributing almanacs to their customers, who could henceforth plan their time around the department store sales. See Miller, The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869–1920 (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1981).
24 MI, 16 février 1873, “Modes.”
25 MDD, 1 juin 1880, “Chronique.”
II.

In the eight issues of *La Dernière Mode* to appear under Mallarmé’s editorship from September to December of 1874, the reader encounters the same temporal conceits as in mainstream fashion reporting. As we have seen through a sampling of other fashion magazines, the paradoxical formulation juxtaposing the eternal and the ephemeral could well serve as an emblem for the temporal regime of fashion as a whole. The repeated comparison between the labors of the fashion reporter and the labors of Sisyphus suggests that fashion imagines time as an infinite succession of pure presents, or as the eternal return of the same. At the same time, each present conceives of itself as “eternal” for the brief moment during which it reigns because it has no consciousness—no memory or foresight—of anything outside itself. Each present enjoys “l’immortalité d’une semaine,” to cite Mallarmé.

If *La Dernière Mode* repeats the standard metaphor of fashion as a mixture of the eternal and the transitory, it does so in an extremely curious way that bears closer examination. By turning time into an image, the rhetoric of fashion suppresses time as an element of lived experience and projects it outward as a property of objects. And yet through this very process of condensation and projection, the fashionable image confronts the reader as a rebus of sorts in which history lies embedded. Mallarmé mimics fashion’s construction of an eternal present, but in such a way as to break apart the hypnotic hold of immediacy and to reveal each present as a complex historical construction.

The magazine’s two principal columns devoted to recording the movements of urban fashion, “La Mode” and “Chronique de Paris,” are all structured by the temporal enigma of the fashionable. As the first number of his magazine appears when all of Paris is on vacation, Mallarmé calls attention to the curious temporal hiatus in which he finds himself as a chronicler of quotidian change:

> Trop tard pour parler des modes d’été et trop tôt pour parler de celles d’hiver (ou même de l’automne) [...] Aujourd’hui, n’ayant pas même, par le fait, sous la main les éléments nécessaires pour commencer une toilette, nous voulons entretenir nos lectrices d’objets utiles à l’achever: les Bijoux. Paradoxe? non: n’y a-t-il pas, dans les bijoux, quelque chose de permanent, et dont il sied de parler dans un courrier de Modes, destiné à attendre les modes de juillet à septembre? (711)
Suspended in the interval between two seasons (trop tard . . . trop tôt), the elements required to “begin” assembling a toilette are not yet present (sous la main); Mallarmé will thus span (entre-tenir) the empty interim by speaking of “finishing touches.” The temporal inversion by which the end precedes the beginning (achever/commencer) constitutes an elision of time altogether, or rather a non-time whose “paradoxical” symbol is an immortal jewel. The “permanent” or ageless quality of jewels makes them the perfect complement to aujourd’hui as an undefined space of waiting (destiné à attendre) where the temporal markers of “beginning” and “ending” appear uncannily reversible.

In the “Chronique de Paris” of the same issue, Mallarmé similarly underscores the temporal predicament of having to narrate (chronique) a non-existent past:

Chronique: mais sans passé? car nous arrivons avec notre seul avenir, inconnu. Le numéro préliminaire de la Dernière Mode a pour objet principal de rester sous les yeux du public presque de juillet à septembre; et, avec Paris, tout un mois, n’est-ce pas une période plus vague et moins définie que ne l’est, elle-même, l’éternité? Profitons de cette phase d’existence très-peu actuelle, par nous traversée aujourd’hui, pour prendre un ton général, qui ne messied pas au début de nos Causeries. (716)

Without past, and with its future a blank slate, this first issue of La Dernière Mode occupies an undefined space of passage (par nous traversée), an “un-real” phase of existence, a period “plus vague que […] l’éternité.” The punctual space of the present (aujourd’hui) is again a characterized as a form of non-time (très-peu actuelle), or a space of pure crossing and passage. The suspension of the present is translated into a rhetorical generality (un ton général) that, he suggests, befits the inaugural issue of a fashion journal, whose appearance is a temporal rupture in the normal course of time.

Having underscored the article’s status as temporally liminal, Mallarmé closes by positioning it as spatially liminal as well, placing the journal in which it appears “between” the seascape and the dreamy vacationer who flips through its pages: “[A]pparu dans cette saison de vacance comme à son heure exacte d’apparaître, ce Journal s’interpose entre votre songerie et le double azur maritime et celeste. . .” (719). The temporal figure of suspense and crossing is given visual expression in the cross formed by the horizon separating sea and sky and the vertical sheet of paper placed between viewer and ocean. Mallarmé plays on the ambiguity of “vacance” as both a break
in normal linear time and a kind of “vacancy,” emptiness, or temporal neutrality. By crossing the suspended time of “vacance” and “interposition” with “l’heure exacte” of the journal’s appearance, Mallarmé takes the tension within fashion between the eternal and the transitory and condenses it into a visual image.

What Mallarmé claims in this opening issue to be a temporal exception—the suspended time of summer—in fact turns out to control the rhythm of fashion as a whole. Because the fashion chronicle must be simultaneously “ahead of its time” and “timely,” it always runs the risk of arriving either too early or too late, and finds itself in the same temporal predicament posed by the inaugural issue of being either “trop tard” or “trop tôt.” The fashion writer searches in vain to position herself temporally vis-à-vis her object. Announcing the latest styles glimpsed at the fashion houses as the fall season begins, the editor reminds her readers that La Dernière Mode had already predicted their rise in a lithograph a year ago. And yet such exceptional foresight is perhaps not fitting to the fashion chronicler:

[D]evancer la mode de plusieurs saisons peut être considéré par quelques-uns comme une infraction à notre véritable devoir, qui est de la faire au jour le jour. Jetons les yeux sur le présent et, au lieu de prévoir, regarder [. . .]. (729)

To be too far ahead of one’s time (devancer, prévoir) is to be offbeat; the fashion writer’s predictions must be materially realized in the present moment of vision in order to be truly on time. Mallarmé attempts to reduce the delay between writing and actuality by directing the reader’s gaze from the journal’s predictions to the street, where “l’œil du passant les vérifie à tout moment” (729). Once again the image of fashion is inseparable from an ephemeral time of passing and passage: only the passant, one who is herself in continual motion or transit, is in a position to follow the fashionable at its own pace, “à tout moment.” To fix our gaze on the present is, however, an impossible imperative, since the present is always already in the process of changing into something else. Only a kind of immediacy-in-motion (the coup d’œil of the passant, rather than the mediation of writing) which takes in images as fast as they come—“à tout moment”—can be adequate to the perpetual metamorphosis of fashion.

Mallarmé’s chroniques consistently double back on themselves to reflect on the impossibility of finding a position, within time, from which to talk about fashion at all. Mallarmé thus shapes the space of writing (the space of the journal) into contradictory visual and
rhetorical “crossings” of the eternal and the transitory, expressed through metaphors of architectural suspension (s’interposer, entretenir, traverser). Accordingly, when he turns his attention to the fashionable object itself, it also occupies a non-time and non-space characterized by suspension. For Mallarmé, the wedding dress embodies the essence of fashion as a paradoxical crossing of the eternal and the timely:

[M]allarmé writes that the wedding dress “follows the mode and doesn’t” (suivant la mode et pas), literally suspended between assertion and negation. While it offers a glimpse of today (le goût du jour), it is also laced with references to the past (réminiscences vagues); while it suggests the eternal and the unchanging, it is also shot through with the latest details (des détails très-neufs). Employing one of his most resonant poetic terms, Mallarmé sums up these exquisitely suspended dresses as wrapped in a veil of “généralité.” This pivotal Mallarméen term designates a suspension—both temporal and spatial—of opposed terms, leaving their relationship unresolved and open like a floating veil.26

No longer simply an immediacy that passes away without a trace, nor an “eternal present” extracted from the flux of time like a jewel, Mallarmé’s fashionable image is a crystallization of the present as a complex, dialectical interaction between past and future. His descriptions of the latest ball dresses reveal fashion as full to bursting with time:

Les robes de ces solennités mondiales, c’est la fantaisie même, aventure parfois, hardie et presque future, qui se fait jour à travers des habitudes anciennes. (797)

Mallarmé describes the dresses as emerging out of the heart of time: glimpsed “through” the folds of the past, “almost” future, the fashionable image is poised in the present between the two. The

26 On the subject of the “veil” in Mallarmé, see Jacques Derrida, La Dissémination (Paris: Seuil, 1972). Derrida argues that Mallarmé’s writing refuses the dialectical closure or mediation of opposites imposed on it by “idealist” models of interpretation, and investigates the figure of the veil/hymen in his work as the signifier of “undecidability.”
specific dresses Mallarmé goes on to describe function as visual emblems of this dialectical medium, temporal movement telescoped into a punctual image. He admires the gowns’ “splendid” fabrics, shot through with threads of silver or powdered gold, “de la poussière de gemmes multicolores.” Such magnificent fabrics need no other ornamentation:

Pas d’ornementation inutile dans ce cas, ni de surcharges vaines, autres que les mille complications tirées de la façon seule de la jupe, volants, bouillonnés, placés comme ceci, comme cela, hauts, bas: rien de plus que ce prestige éparpillé et lumineux. (799)

Like the figure of the brilliant, many-faceted lustre Mallarmé revisits so often in his dance and theater criticism, the ball dress in its layered “complications,” swaths of fabric “scattered” “luminously” in all directions, embodies the temporal “complication” of the present in a striking visual image. Mallarmé evokes the fashionable image as a moment of suspense, a freeze-frame in which the historical constructedness of the image comes into focus. The routine rhetorical description of fashion as a flat patchwork of temporal découpages is transformed, in Mallarmé, into a living, moving medium pregnant with both past and future.

III.

Un désir indéniable à mon temps est de séparer comme en vue d’attributions différentes le double état de la parole, brut ou immédiat ici, là essentiel.

Mallarmé, “Crise de vers”

Mallarmé borrowed the temporal conventions of fashion writing and invested them with new meaning: by concentrating on the fashionable image as a temporally-charged entity, he shifted its focus away from the eternal present of commodity production and towards its

27 Mallarmé expands the trope of the “complicated” dress in his writings on theater, where the lustre and the ballet corps become condensed emblems for the narrative unfolding of spectacle. See, for example, “Crayonné au Théâtre”: “Seul principe! et ainsi que resplendit le lustre, c’est-à-dire lui-même, l’exhibition prompte, sous toutes les facettes, de quoi que ce soit et notre vue adamantine, une œuvre dramatique montre la succession des extériorités de l’acte sans qu’aucun moment garde de réalité et qu’il se passe, en fin de compte, rien” (296).
status as an historically-bound image. When we examine Mallarmé’s critical writing on journalism, we find the same temporally oriented method of interpretation at work, with similar results. Mallarmé by no means rejected the new forms of literary production and consumption heralded by the rise of the daily newspaper. On the contrary, his cryptic notion of le Livre, or the total work of art, borrowed features from the newspaper, most notably its typographical freedom.28 And he saw tantalizing possibilities in the democratization of literature promised by the serial novel or roman-feuilleton.29 But Mallarmé distrusted the tendency of market-driven cultural production—the latest news, the latest style—to deny its own historically contingent status, ushering in a cult of eternal youth whose inexorable logic dictated the pace of social and cultural life. By contrast, he set forth literature as a form of writing and practice of reading that foregrounds its own historicity. Mallarmé often described “literature” as taking place, not so much in an alternative social space, but in an alternative social time. It was this difference in rhythm or pace between market-based consumption and “literary” consumption that consistently held Mallarmé’s attention.

The rise of the daily newspaper or the “invention of journalism” in the second half of the nineteenth-century, says Thomas Ferenczi, instituted a revolution in the production, circulation and consumption of writing whose effects were cause for widespread concern by the time Mallarmé was penning his own reflections on l’universel reportage in the 1880s and 90s.30 On the occasion of its centenary in 1889, the venerable Journal des Débats expressed nostalgia for the French grand tradition in journalism. This substantial diet of politics and literature was being squeezed out by “[ces] deux éléments nouveaux, la hâte et la vitesse” inspired by the Anglo-Saxon “informa-

28 Mallarmé admires the staggered presentation of newspaper articles, which he accords a “charme...de féerie populaire” (379). Like a circus spectacle, the lead article is broken up over several pages, engaging the reader’s breathless attention “comme par un feu électrique” as he works his way to the dénouement. Mallarmé’s own poetic innovations will involve a similar “spectacular” typographical strategy.

29 In “Étalages,” Mallarmé suggests that the incredible popularity of the serial novel announces a new era in literature: “un concours pour la fondation du Poème moderne, tout au moins de Mille et Une Nuits innombrables: dont une majorité lisante soudain inventée s’émerveillera” (376).

Mallarmé’s tendency to cast the difference between journalism and literature as a difference in rhythm or pace is standard fare in the critical reaction to the adoption of the British format. But where his contemporaries were content to point out the deleterious effects of “haste” and “speed” on our ability to think, Mallarmé theorized a critical response to the shift in time-perception induced by the hypnotic reign of the commodity. If the idiom of journalism enshrined the present while effacing today’s historical rootedness in the past, poetry for Mallarmé was a cultural practice that promised to return to language its lost historical complexity.

The confrontation of these two modes of writing (“essentiel” literature and “brut, immédiat” journalism) is dramatically staged in the visual layout of the newspaper itself, where the literary roman-feuilleton running horizontally along the bottom of the page is screened off from the columned news items by a black border. Mallarmé compares the feuilleton on the first floor of the newspaper to boutiques lining the avenues of the shopping districts. This inclusion of “literature” within the format of the paper allows us to glimpse its difference from the rhythm of journalism:

Suggestion et même leçon de quelque beauté: qu’aujourd’hui n’est seulement le remplaçant d’hier, présageant demain, mais sort du temps, comme général, avec une intégrité lavée ou neuve. (376)

The visual emblem of the tirelessly repeated column reflects the way the newspaper organizes time: today is nothing more than an indifferent replacement of yesterday, and a forerunner of tomorrow. Each unit of time substitutes for the next and disappears without a trace. Literature, by contrast, makes a leap outside of time. According to a common “idealist” reading of Mallarmé, this description of poetry’s “integrity” reflects his belief in the timeless quality of literature, a “general” language cleansed of historical contingency.

But Mallarmé is much too subtle a dialectician to posit a simple opposition between the transitory and the eternal, or between journalism and literature. By equating the present of literature with the value of “generality” (aujourd’hui . . . sort du temps, comme général), he connects poetry to the historically complex, living image of fashion that emerged in La Dernière Mode. In the opening issue of his

magazine, Mallarmé draws an analogy between the non-time of summer and the “general” tone of the first issue. The dispersed, empty (vacance) time of summer marks a suspension or interruption of normal fashion-time, just as here literature breaks with the monotonous time of the newspaper. In speaking of wedding dresses, Mallarmé again stresses their ambiguous position within the time-line of fashion through the term “généralité”: the new must be wrapped in “vague” and “eternal” reminiscences, “envelopés de généralité comme par le voile.” Mallarméen “generality” is thus not simply reducible to the timeless or the eternal; it works as a dialectical medium interposed between “l’heure exacte” on the one hand, and timelessness on the other. Whenever Mallarmé uses the term “generality” as a way of describing temporal phenomena, he breaks through the fateful reign of the present, and clears a path for a critical and historical reading of cultural production. Through a close examination of one of Mallarmé’s richest treatments of the relationship between literature and journalism, his essay “Action restreinte,” I will suggest that his ascription of généralité to literature reasserts the value of historical interpretation, or the historicity of writing and cultural production, against the de-historicizing drift of commodification.

Mallarmé’s well-known espousal of poetic anonymity and the “elocutionary disappearance” of the modern poet is related to his concept of “generality.” Indeed, the values of anonymity and generality function very much the same way in Mallarmé’s prose. “Pour moi, le cas d’un poète, en cette société qui ne lui permet pas de vivre, c’est le cas d’un homme qui s’isole pour sculper son propre tombeau,” (869) Mallarmé told the reporter Jules Huret when asked to comment on the state of modern poetry. Mallarmé took up the Romantic trope of the poète maudit and interpreted it in his own way, emphasizing the isolation and solitude proper to the poet. But there was something new in Mallarmé’s emphasis on the poet as sculpting his own tombstone while still alive. It relegated the poet to the liminal space of the living dead and made poetry into a voice from beyond the grave.

Indeed, Mallarmé’s eulogies for dead poets often blurred the distinction between life and death by emphasizing the poet’s existence as a cloistered, “secret,” or suspended state radically cut off from his public or social persona. Mallarmé described Berthe Morisot’s death as merely deepening a retreat from the world which, as an artist, she had initiated while still living: the “supreme retreat” (535),
Mallarmé delicately named it. He described Villiers de l’Isle-Adam as having lived closed up in his apartment, surrounded only by a circle of initiates, and where the sound of the clock chiming the hours was suspended: “Minuits avec indifférence jetés, [...] le temps s’annulait, ces soirs [...]” (495). Or again, he imagined the poet as “on strike,” and the time of literature as an historical “interrègne.”32 “Omission,” “disappearance,” “anonymity,” “son mort comme un tel”: all of Mallarmé’s figures for poetic voice assume a withdrawal of subjectivity conceived in terms of immediacy. But if the poet is already dead—or at least in a state of suspension—while in life, it means that the “secret work” of literature doesn’t take place according to the time of the everyday, whose chief marker is the immediacy of the present. In emphasizing the poet as temporally separate from his époque, Mallarmé makes a claim for a posthumous perspective on cultural forms from within the heart of the present itself—that is, he makes a claim for a dialectically critical history.

Mallarmé’s most sustained engagement with the modern press is to be found in a series of three articles, published separately between 1892 and 1895, and grouped under the heading “Quant au Livre” in his 1897 collection of prose writings, Divagations. In the essay opening the trilogy, “Action restreinte,” Mallarmé challenges the traditional opposition between action and contemplation, which for his contemporaries translates into an opposition between the heady world of journalism and the retreat of literature. Recounting a dialogue with a fledgling fellow writer who confesses his “need to act,” Mallarmé recapitulates his young comrade’s conventional definition of “action”: “Agir... signifier...produire sur beaucoup un mouvement qui te donne en retour l’émotion que tu en fus le principe, donc existe [...].” (369). Action must produce a reaction, a mirror image or echo among one’s contemporaries, in order to affirm its own existence in the present. Mallarmé subtly dislocates this dichotomy by contending that “action,” far from being the privilege of journalists, is a generalized practice of writing. Whether journalistic or literary, “Ton acte,” Mallarmé asserts, “toujours s’applique à du papier”:

Cette pratique entend deux façons; ou, par une volonté, à l’insu, qui dure une vie, jusqu’à l’éclat multiple—penser, cela: sinon, les déversoirs à

Mallarmé envisions journalism as a field of conflicting forces, a “tourbillon” where a push in one direction is immediately countered and cancelled out, issuing in a “résultat nul.” The “haste” of journalism is contrasted to the “plénitude” of thinking (penser, which for Mallarmé is inseparable from literature): action as an immediate expenditure in the whirlwind of the moment as opposed to action as a long-term investment. If all “acts” must be “applied to paper,” or take the form of writing, the question of the difference between journalism and literature then becomes the question of how this act of writing gets read or interpreted differently by the two modes of discourse. For the journalist, action is effective only in so far as it elicits an immediate response: its effectiveness is measured only in the present, in the movement of action-reaction by which one is given the psychological certainty (émoi) of existing, of being a moving principle. The effectiveness of its “inscription,” we might say, depends upon its being read in the present; its future readers, or how its inscription enters the historical realm of tradition, is of little concern to the journalists of whom Mallarmé speaks. The thinker-poet, on the other hand, commits a kind of action to paper of whose fate and effectiveness he and his readers may be entirely unaware: “à [son] insu, qui dure une vie, jusqu’à son éclat multiple.” Mallarmé defines “thinking” as a practice that acts and works “unconsciously” (à l’insu) or independently of the writing self, not limited to the flurry (tourbillon) of the present but tending towards its future “multiple” “explosion” (l’éclat multiple).

Developing the image from Crise de vers of the “elocutionary disappearance” of the poet, Mallarmé reclaims for poets the “right to accomplish nothing,” if action is limited to the process by which one seeks a “sentiment” of self as an active historical cause (370). Literature’s mode of taking place is such that its effects always carry beyond the circumscribed present of its enunciation or reception; this is why the autonomous literary work not only entails the “omission” of the author, but also of the reader:

Impersonifié, le volume, autant qu’on s’en sépare comme auteur, ne réclame approche de lecteur. Tel, sache, entre les accessoires humains, à lieu tout seul: fait, étant. (372)
This passage has been cited as Mallarmé’s supreme statement of art for art’s sake, asserting the radical autonomy of language and its separation from the world of human projects. I would suggest, on the contrary, that by detaching writing from the present he opens up a space that allows us to reflect on the work of art as a culturally complex object, composed of a mixture of historical determinants and tendencies whose future direction—or “éclat multiple”—remains open to interpretation.

The image of fashion as a charged space of passage between past and future had already attracted Mallarmé’s critical eye in La Dernière Mode. As opposed to the rhythm of journalism in which today disappears without residue, to be replaced by the “nouvelle” of tomorrow, Mallarmé calls critical attention to the survival of traces of the past in the present, and its historical openness upon the future, in every instance where a cultural object comes to light. If Mallarmé displaces the axis of interpretation away from reader and author as historically rooted consciousness, it is in the name of a kind of cultural transmission whose historical effects—what Mallarmé calls the work’s “éclat multiple”—can never be measured by the period of the present in which the work was produced.

All of Mallarmé’s favorite visual metaphors for the functioning of writing—nuée, pli, toile, dentelle, constellation—involves, as is well known, the insertion of “white space” or distance between its different compositional elements. While this distance has often been interpreted synchronically, as a description of the multi-layered or overdetermined manner in which poetry generates meaning, not enough attention has been paid to the way in which Mallarmé employs white space diachronically, as a figure for historical distance, lapse, latency. One of the most frequently quoted descriptions of poetic language, from “Le Mystère dans les Lettres,” figures poetry as a bejeweled grotto, a gleaming web of reflections:

Les mots, d’eux mêmes, s’exaltent à mainte facette [...] indépendamment de la suite ordinaire, projetés, en parois de grotte, tant que dure leur mobilité ou principe, étant ce qui ne se dit pas du discours: prompts tous, avant extinction, à une réciprocité de feux distante ou présentée de biais comme contingence. (386)

Calling for an interpretive model based on “distant reciprocity,” “projection,” and many-sided echoes, literature breaks through the fetishized present and challenges “la suite ordinaire” of the newspaper’s monotonously repeated columns. Mallarmé’s description of the Book
as a web or a piece of lace in “Action restreinte,” a network of latent or suspended relationships, can then be read as an allegory for the work of art in its layered historical density:

Ce pli de sombre dentelle, qui retient l’infini, tissé par mille, chacun selon le fil ou prolongement ignoré son secret, assemble des entrelacs distants où dort un luxe à inventorier, styrge, nœud, feuillages et présenter. (370)

The knotted lace of writing is structured through gaps (entrelacs) and the distance they insert between the different threads. Understood synchronically, all of these possible formal relationships are latently present within the whole, and Mallarmé’s vision of the poem as a timeless, self-reflexive linguistic jewel appears confirmed. But understood diachronically—a move which this essay devoted to historical “action” permits us to make—the history of a given piece of writing depends upon how this always incalculable “surplus” (luxe) of “sleeping” relationships is “inventoried” and “presented”—interpreted—in its endlessly open future.

Mallarmé interrupts the process of commodity production and consumption by making of poetry an object whose value cannot be fixed in the economy of the present in which exchangeable goods circulate. At the end of “Action restreinte,” Mallarmé expects his young interlocutor will dismiss his novel theory of a literary “action” so restrained as to escape all notice (“tu traites mon indication comme une folie . . .”). The value of any literary action, however, remains to be determined, and Mallarmé recognizes the risk he runs:

[R]isquer sur un état à tout le moins incomplet environnant, certaines conclusions d’art extrêmes qui peuvent éclater, diamantairement, dans ce temps à jamais, en l’intégrité du Livre—les jouer, mais et par un triomphal renversement, avec l’injonction tacite que rien, palpitant en le flanc inscient de l’heure, aux pages montré, clair, évident, ne la trouve prête [. . .]. (373)

Writing is a “risk” and a “game,” played with the knowledge that its results may not come to light (éclater diamantairement) until much later—and that the book is never closed as to how those “conclusions” are interpreted and integrated into history, whether literary or otherwise. In his writing on fashion, Mallarmé trains his reader to “jeter les yeux sur le présent” and to interpret it as a constellation in which past and future are critically implicated. Here, the “diamantine explosion” of the book similarly bursts through the frame of the present, making a break with its “état . . . environnant” to reveal itself as an historical object still under construction.
Siegfried Kracauer once wrote that Walter Benjamin’s mode of thinking wages a perpetual battle with the facade of the present, breaking open the “immediate” appearance of social and cultural formations to reveal their historical constructedness:

Benjamin hardly ever tackles constructs and phenomena when they are in their prime, preferring instead to seek them out once they have entered the realm of the past. For him, living constructs and phenomena seem jumbled like a dream, whereas once they are in a state of disintegration they become clearer. (260)

Benjamin is an incomparable critic of that which is distant in time: what has already begun to decay, to lose the opaque covering lent by immediacy, to become “unnatural” in the eye of the observer. By focusing on decay, Benjamin shatters the spell of the present that prevents the fascinated gaze from making connections or constructing histories. Mallarmé, writing from within the “jumbled dream” of the late nineteenth century, intuited the dangers of this dream and attempted to trace out an alternative interpretive economy not beyond it, but operating alongside of it.33 “Mal informé celui qui se crierait son propre contemporain,” he warns in “Action restreinte.” Mallarmé’s critique of the contemporary, his novel concept of a posthumous criticism carried out from within the heart of the present, reveal him as an invaluable link in the ongoing effort to understand—and historicize—our own modernity.34

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33 For an excellent analysis of the co-existence of “residual,” “dominant,” and “emergent” cultural practices within cultural systems, see Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1977).
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