

Heath Lees. 2007. *Mallarmé and Wagner: Music and Poetic Language*. Aldershot, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing.

### Reviewed by David J. Code

Heath Lees's book *Mallarmé and Wagner: Music and Poetic Language* offers a relatively straightforward revisionist claim: that Mallarmé's familiarity with (and agonistic response to) the challenge of Wagnerian music drama cannot be solely attributed—as it sometimes has been—to a Damascene “conversion” contemporaneous with the “second wave” of French *wagnérisme* in the mid-1880s. The true roots of this central strand of the poet's thought, Lees argues, extend much deeper than this, even as far back as his formative years as a *Lycéen* during the late 1850s. Reappraised in this light, Mallarmé's “quest to re-appropriate music on behalf of poetry” (xv) must be seen as a crucial determinant not only of his few, explicit late responses to Wagner (notably the essay-cum-prose poem *Richard Wagner. Rêverie d'un poète français* and the sonnet “Hommage à Richard Wagner”), but of most of his major works starting from his first publications in the 1860s.

Several background chapters lay the groundwork for the defense of Lees's thesis. In chapter 1, questioning a tenacious cliché about the poet's “awakening” to Wagner at the Concerts Lamoureux in 1885, Lees offers evidence of Mallarmé's “informed awareness of musical events” (18) in the years before. Telling points of reference include his ongoing contacts with such leading musical figures as Augusta Holmès and the musical minutiae noted in *La Dernière Mode*, the magazine about fashion and current events Mallarmé himself edited for a short while in 1874. An informative overview of the spread of Wagnerian music and ideas into French culture during the 1860s and 1870s (in spite of the catastrophic public reception of the 1860 Paris production of *Tannhäuser*) leads into chapter 2, “Music and Mallarmé's Generation,” which opens a window onto the revolutionary developments in musical education that prepared a whole generation to become a new kind of audience for such distinctive nineteenth-century institutions as the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire and Jules Pasdeloup's Concerts populaires. A particularly valuable point of reference here is the *Manuel musical* of Bocquillon Wilhelm, whose presentation of the Guidonian basis of solfège Lees discusses at some length; the same chapter also touches briefly on the rise of scientific acoustics and the attendant belief that the Western tonal system could be seen as a “progressive elaboration of acoustic processes that were inherent in nature itself” (30). Finally, Lees provides

valuable glimpses into the emergent debates about the ambivalent benefits of musical “democratization”—debates which would leave their mark in the early Mallarmé essay, *L’Art pour tous*, which also featured his first reverential reference to Wagner.

Lees’s focus soon tightens in on more narrowly literary topics. A glance to the prescient (but somewhat clumsy) criticism of Wagnerian music drama offered by Mallarmé’s admired poetic precursor Théophile Gautier sets the stage for a much more extensive rereading of Baudelaire’s famous brochure *Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris*, during which Lees insistently reaffirms the degree to which Baudelaire captured, conveyed, and exemplified key aspects of Wagnerian aesthetics, as presented not only in the composer’s short *Lettre sur Musique*, but also in *Opera and Drama* (which was available to Baudelaire in English translation). Chapter 4 begins by elaborating further on Baudelaire’s transmission of Wagnerian principles—e.g., the leitmotif as the means of fusing “feeling with understanding” (88) and the new ideal of melody that replaced “the four-bar song mould of the ‘typical’ opera” with “a continuous performance of musical prose” (96)—before introducing Mallarmé’s close friends Catulle Mendès and Villiers de l’Isle Adam. Both of these writers represented what we might call the “first wave” of *wagnérisme*, which flourished long before the coalescence of a wider group of *littérateurs* around Édouard Dujardin would lead to the short-lived *Revue wagnérienne* in the mid-1880s. It is against the background of the poetic experiments of Mendès and Villiers, Lees suggests, that we must understand Mallarmé’s own “attempt to repossess music.”

The second half of the book traces this attempt in four chapters covering successive stages of Mallarmé’s literary output. Lees approaches the texts in light of a set of three closely related (and not entirely stable) oppositions: first, that between *l’effet* of language in its momentary, sensuous, expressive power and *l’effet* of the poem as a formalized structure; second, that between *la musique* as the sonorous property of language and *l’oubli*, the need to forget the promiscuous meanings attributable to words; and finally, between *musique* as a debased, traditional understanding of “verbal music” and *Musique*, the grander “Music” that can claim a mysterious basis in something like a fundamental tone (on the model of acoustics or counterpoint). After an analysis of several poems from the early 1860s, we reach the pivotal project—and crisis—of Mallarmé’s *Hérodiade*, which, as Lees puts it, “was to become for him the chimerical symbol of the marriage of music and poetic language in the theatre of the mind” (144). Lees begins his reading of *L’Après-midi d’un faune* by suggesting that this poem’s much more decisive success (albeit a success on a more modest scale than originally planned) can be seen as the result of a greater compromise with “openly

decorative musical charm” (150)—or, more simply, “euphonious musicality *per se*” (161). By comparison, he explains the failure of *Hérodiade* (which would remain incomplete) as the result of a more rigorous adherence to the ultimately irresolvable vision of a “completely musicalized language of gestural sound and sympathetic vibration” (173).

A discussion in chapter 7 of several roughly contemporaneous works (e.g., the *Prose pour Des Esseintes* and *Le Démon de l'Analogie*) adumbrates Lees's proposed explanation for the poet's eventual transcendence of this impasse—an evolution, we read, that hinged in significant part on a new attunement to the question of a receptive “congregation of audience members, all . . . united in spirit by the very fact of their participation” (198). It was the recognition of the power of this unifying transaction—as distinct from the obsessive, introverted pursuits that had led to crisis and incompleteness—that was, Lees argues, the true revelation of Mallarmé's experiences of Wagner's orchestral music in the 1880s. In the book's final chapter, Lees offers a new reading of the Wagnerian prose piece *Rêverie* and the *Hommage* sonnet, arguing that they are both, on the whole, far less ambivalent and resentful than they have occasionally been found. Going so far as to interpret the sonnet as a “grateful assimilation of Wagner's influence, as well as his next step beyond Wagner” (235), Lees claims that it was only with this ultimate assimilation that Mallarmé could finally realize his musically informed *poétique*, “overtaking Wagner himself,” in such works as *Un coup de dès n'abolira le hasard*.

A short review for a primarily musicological audience can hardly do full justice to this book, much of whose value resides in its accumulation of historical and interpretive detail. Still, although it has much to offer in all of its various sections, its ideal audience is, at times, not entirely clear. Musically speaking, it is not without some infelicities and simplifications. The emphasis on the iconic status of the leitmotif, for one thing, carries significant interpretive potential. But throughout, this idea takes a strangely one-dimensional musical cast: Lees tends to define leitmotif as primarily “rhythmic,” presumably since he is seeking to find connections with poetic rhythm. As a result, his description of the profound interest Baudelaire and subsequent Wagnerians had in the leitmotif concept is somewhat inadequate. The excursion into the scientific side of nineteenth-century musical thought is a digression whose direct relevance to the poetic points at issue is never clearly established (the proposed esoteric link between certain resonance experiments and poetry, via the single word *moire*, though appealingly imaginative, seems strained.) Some analogies are more intriguing: the idea that Mallarmé “aimed to regenerate his language by using his verbs the way Wagner used perfect cadences” (169) could conceivably prove a promising

way to compare the two artists' syntactical attenuation—just so long as we do not dwell too long on the essential incongruity of French verbs and musical cadences. Similarly hasty, but rather more problematic, is the easy resort to the language of sonata form to describe the structure of both *Hérodiade* and *Faune*. Without more detailed justification, the references, for example, to the “development section” of each poem (153, 168), weaken the musico-poetic argument rather than strengthening it. And in the occasional references to Wagner's music dramas—as in this brief discussion of *Tristan*, “all the musical phrases give the effect of floating in and out of each other, rising and falling, expanding and contrasting, filling the air with suggestive vibrations while keeping the changing world of different instrumental colors alive and active” (169)—this study of Wagnerian influence on Mallarmé can be said to shade over into a decidedly Mallarméan hearing of Wagner.

From the literary side, while there is undoubtedly something to be said for such emphatic prioritization of primary texts (e.g., Mallarmé's writings and those of his contemporaries), readers might wonder about the absence of more up-to-date critical-theoretical engagement. The close, resolutely literal reading of Baudelaire's *Tannhäuser* essay, for example, reads strangely in light of the well-known, far more refractory accounts of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (1991) and Margaret Miner (1995). (Although both of these authors are mentioned in the bibliography, neither leaves any trace on Lees's argument.) Similarly, though I would be the last to endorse any obligation to engage with the countless appropriations of Mallarmé by post-structuralist theorists—indeed, I have perhaps been too willing to sidestep such an obligation myself—it seems to me that without some sensitivity to the reasons behind, say, Derrida's interest in Mallarmé, the portrait of the poet and the readings of his art inevitably become imbalanced. Central to that interest, to put it crudely, was a sense of Mallarmé's exemplary confrontation with language as textual practice—in other words, with the dialectic of voice and writing—which all but falls away within Lees's determinedly Wagnerist, musical, and performative purview.

This is not to say that Lees's various readings, in the absence of this crucial critical dimension, are without value. As is the case with every close investigation of Mallarmé's poetry, each reader will likely emerge from this one with his or her own sense of the admixture of convincing and unconvincing *aperçus*. Quibbles over detail aside, for this reader one of the book's primary accomplishments is the more general, cumulative effect that emerges from the accounts of Mallarmé's earlier struggles. These pages impart a palpable sense of the terrible artistic strain Mallarmé subjected himself to as he attempted to balance an irreconcilable array of competing forces in the service of a truly new, truly “Musical” poetry. Still, what is missing (to return

to the point about Derrida) is any recognition of the role played, in this unbearable strain, of Mallarmé's unending obsession with a preeminently literary ideal that haunted his poetry in a way that created direct conflict with all musical affinities. This overweening ideal of an all-encompassing literary *Oeuvre* recurred in the poet's letters and critical writings under the incantatory name *le Livre*, or the Book. As Jacques Scherer ([1957] 1977) put it long ago, the Book bathed the whole of Mallarmé's fragmentary literary output in the retrospective light of its perpetual incompleteness (and impossibility).

Although it was to prove unattainable as a singular, monumental work, "the Book" inflected Mallarmé's completed poetic oeuvre with structural tendencies of a markedly different nature than the musical processes Lees identifies. Whether or not one accepts anything like the close affinity between virtual "book" form and the poetic form I have outlined in my own analysis of *L'après-midi d'un faune* (Code 2004)—an analysis that hinges on a dialectics between feeling and understanding very similar to that Lees emphasizes—there is no doubt that this poem's famous typographical differentiations are, as Lees passingly acknowledges, as much "formative" as "sensuous" (153); that the rigorous bilateral symmetries in the *Overture ancienne* to *Hérodiade* more closely resemble book-like structure (i.e., folded and foliated pages) than sonata form or any other musical process; that *Un coup de dès*, with its typographical play, is as profoundly engaged with questions of language's graphic materiality as it is with the musical and performative concerns for which Lees is quick to claim it as a success. Lees has, in short, valuably raised into greater prominence the depth and detail of Wagner's influence on Mallarmé's musical thought. But in directing his gaze so single-mindedly towards the Wagnerian "sun," he underplays the degree to which its rays were mingled, from the start, with the countervailing, darker emanations from the imaginary Book—the specifically literary ideal that left profound traces throughout all of Mallarmé's ongoing attempts, in verse and criticism alike, to repossess music for his own poetic language.

#### References

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