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Trevor Stark

Total Expansion of the Letter: Avant-Garde Art and Language After Mallarmé

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At the opening
of Trevor
Stark's new
book is a
faded
photograph by
Paul Nadar of
the poet



Stéphane Mallarmé in 1895. Seated at a writing desk, with a shawl around his shoulders, he meets our gaze with an inscrutable expression. His pen is laden with ink from the bottle before him, but it hovers in the writer's hand somewhere above the empty white page. It is an apt image to lead us into *Total Expansion of the Letter: Avant-Garde Art and Language after Mallarmé*, a rich and absorbing exploration of the stakes for radical art and language in modernity, read through the prescient thought and seminal practice of this uncompromising poet. As we later learn, Mallarmé cautioned writers who sought to "draw from an inkwell with no Night the vain layer of intelligibility" (101). We are to be grateful for Stark's undaunted investigation into the impossibilities of language and the resulting void in such formidable company.

Total Expansion of the Letter presents a series of closely researched and cogently theorized new readings of pivotal moments in the histories of European modernism and the avant-garde. The wide-ranging arguments are skillfully woven together with the threads of Mallarmé's poetry and thought. They take us from early Cubist painting and collage to "simultaneous poems" and dance in Zurich Dada and on to Marcel Duchamp's lasting preoccupation with chance and the gamble, ending, briefly, with the Situationist International and French unrest of May 1968, all "after Mallarmé." Each of the book's four substantial chapters develops an uncommonly sophisticated account of the radicalism of these decisive moments. They will be valuable in the classroom and stimulating for scholarship. More profoundly, together they are a sustained meditation on the aesthetic, theoretical, and political implications of the poet's insistence on language without foundation, without telos, "haunted by emptiness" (31).

Stark's first chapter lays the groundwork for thinking about the contingency of language and its implications for representation in modernism. It takes as its starting point Pablo Picasso's "crisis" at Cadaqués, Catalonia, in the summer of 1910, which yielded his spare, monochrome reductions of the object in paint. Tracing the early and subsequent theorization of Cubism, the author builds on Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler's reading of Cubism through Mallarmé to craft a new assessment of the "failure" of these works. Mallarmé's painstaking struggles with language's deficiencies underpin Stark's own critique of semiological models for reading Cubism and phenomenological perspectives for the whites, blanks, or voids of Paul Cézanne. Stark concludes his consideration of the "muted object" of Cubism by drawing thought-provoking analogies with the "void of syntax" in Mallarmé.

The second chapter considers Picasso's and Georges Braque's Cubism in the *papiers collés* and foregrounds the anonymity of such works. Mallarmé's conception of language as impersonal, aleatory, and contingent is deployed to illuminate the tension between abstraction and social content in the collages. Together, these first two chapters make a persuasive case for the value of attentively revisiting such well-worn historical terrain. They also equip the reader with some revitalized critical means with which to turn to the focus of the rest of the book: Dada and Duchamp.

Stark's third case study makes a significant contribution to scholarship on Zurich Dada by focusing not just on the vital form of the simultaneous poem (a poem for multiple voices at once) but also specifically on a relatively neglected aspect of its materiality—its notational scoring. Stark argues convincingly that attending to the simultaneous score helps to situate Dada in relation to wider experiments in music and especially in dance. He considers the well-known simultaneous poem *L'amiral cherche une maison à louer* from such perspectives. But he goes further by investigating a much less known but equally important manuscript score for Tristan Tzara's simultaneous poem *Froid lumière* of about April 1917, as well as overlooked fragments in Tzara's archive, identified as parts of a simultaneous poem for twenty performers, *La fièvre du mâle*, performed in Zurich in 1919.

Stark has written insightfully elsewhere on Hugo Ball's Catholicism (in *October* 146, Fall 2013, in connection with Ball's fraught relationship with the conservative political theorist Carl Schmitt). If I were pushed to quibble with anything in this impressive study, I wonder if a discussion on Dada-era Ball at the end of this chapter defers too much to the telos of Ball's eventual conversion (or reversion) in 1920, the narrative arc that so determined the retrospective editing of Ball's diaries as *Flight Out of Time* (1927). Stark finds in Ball's *Krippenspiel*, a Dada brutistic nativity play of 1916, an antipode to Mallarmé's insight, after Wagner, that "the structure of ritual could be made to function again only if it was self-consciously emptied of all claims to transcendence" (256). I am not sure that the *Krippenspiel* makes such claims. Stark's larger work to bring the score of the

simultaneous poem in Dada, and indeed the fragment, to the fore is compelling, however. He suggestively considers the simultaneous scores' function as propelling the poems into a "zone of indeterminacy between music, theatre and dance" (202), finding in their ruptures "a mimetic form appropriate to a broken social whole" (231).

Stark's book culminates with perhaps the most brilliant essay of all: a trenchant reading of Duchamp's pleasingly futile gambling "work" and the development of his roulette "system" in the casinos of Monte Carlo in 1925. Developing a closely theorized and intricate argument around the relation of chance, labor, and money in Duchamp, Stark finds a touchstone in Duchamp's intense engagement with Mallarmé's poetry. In this case, that engagement is especially with *Un coup de Dés* (usually translated as *A Throw of the Dice*), evidenced by a surviving manuscript fragment from Duchamp's time in New York in 1915. Stark identifies in the two a "shared preoccupation with chance as a constitutive limit to every human attempt to fix meaning in communication" (263). Reading dialectically some of Duchamp's keenest propositions on chance, failure, and indifference together with Mallarmé's builds a case for the significance of practices that are "radically useless to capital" (307) in the face of alienated labor.

Total Expansion of the Letter does an immense service to studies of the European avant-garde from Picasso to Duchamp. It brings fresh, beautifully nuanced, and important perspectives even to this well-trodden ground, while maintaining unstinting attention to salient detail. It is that most pleasing of studies: rooted both in fruitful archival research *and* propelled by sustained and theoretically sophisticated arguments that—it is to be hoped—will urge new generations of scholars toward rigorous engagement with the avant-garde from which we still have so much to learn, perhaps now more than ever.

The book's thesis requires some dedication from the reader to follow its intricate paths and interconnections. But it rewards the effort. This is a book that could have been arcane, pedantic, impenetrable, and also desolating. Instead, the elegance of the writing makes it a joy to read and the deft argument satisfying to reflect on. But more than this, after decades of anguish in the field over the "failure" of the historical avant-garde, there is a quiet insistence throughout Stark's text on the radical possibility he finds in Mallarmé "to make 'failure' over into a principle of productivity through which to create *in spite* of the present" (341). It turns on a protagonist who sees, in the absence of a "primordial ground of meaning," that all that remains is "the vain, but fundamentally human acts of conjoining words and people," and who sites the resulting void "in the shadow of total war" (257). Yet for all this, and for a book so eloquent on horror and on failure, this is a surprisingly hopeful read.

Attending to the avant-gardist work of the fragment, collage, simultaneity, dance, and games of chance has been important for generations of scholars. But doing so with such persistence in the space (or, perhaps more accurately, in the void) freed up by Mallarmé's theory of language allows for a cumulative and ultimately exhilarating refiguring of the *social* terrain of such work. For Stark shows that where language for the poet of one century was bound into its own conditions of failure, there could yet be found in such groundlessness the possibilities in the next century for community, for relationality, and for sociability. Not just in spite of but precisely because of the dearth of hope for a recovery of the avant-garde project, Stark's Mallarmé provides sustenance and lessons for our own time, when language and community seem ever more under threat.

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