

Ivan Juritz – Project Description

[W]e cannot today – now that Mallarmé’s procedure is known – repeat the *Coup de dés*’s enterprise of encryption, unless as a parody, or as an immediately stale ‘trick’.

Quentin Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren*

The basic premise of this piece is the following: a Mallarmé scholar has discovered amongst the poet’s papers a primer for the English language (‘English in a Couple of Days’) that contains the whole of *Coup de dés*, but as marginalia. Mallarmé’s unpublished notes (so central to his legacy) include his attempt to learn English and his teaching of it; and I like the idea that these might radically overturn our interpretation of his work. The primer has the right associations (of primacy, originality) and makes use of blank space in a way that is entertainingly prosaic in comparison with Mallarmé’s hypertext. But it also has a strangely modernist quality: both the language primer and the modernist poem instruct the reader in how to read them *as they are being read*. While, generally, the former tries to minimize miscomprehension, the latter makes it into an aesthetic principle.

A Textual Source for Mallarmé's
Coup de dés

Editor's Preface

The following needs little introduction; I present here only a minimum comments on the text in its present form. Mallarmé's notes are found on only twelve double-page spreads of the primer (including, somewhat bizarrely, both the copyright page and back cover). Only those containing his marginalia are given here. Page numbers in Latin numerals on the bottom right of each double-page follow the original (and vital) pagination of the poem.

The larger part of the primer is given over to proverbs and idioms. Mallarmé seems to have had most trouble in translating these, as his faulty glosses on them make plain. This is not wholly surprising, as the idioms are in many places peculiar and of dubious origin; but it is striking that *all* of the sayings that appear in pages presented here made it into the poet's manual for teaching English (*Dossier des «Mots anglais»* – these are indicated with an asterisk).

Mallarmé seems to have ignored the advice given on the first pages of the primer – perhaps, as we might surmise from his loose translations of the same, not fully understanding it – and to have taken very much an 'alternative path through the text' ([III]). The present author suspects that the frustration of trying to learn English led the poet to use his marginalia for another purpose. Note the increasingly slack glosses given to English words towards the end, and the steady shift from exegesis to idle scribbling.

[...] UN COUP DE DÉS

ENGLISH IN A COUPLE OF DAYS

JAMAIS

NEVER TO BE REPRODUCED, EXCEPT IN CIRCUMSTANCES

QUAND BIEN MEME LANCÉ DANS DES CIRCONSTANCES
ETERNELLES

AGREED AND LICENSED BY

THE *NEUE FRAGE* FUND
DU FOND D'UN NAUFRAGE

[II]

SOIT

que

IT MAY BE that you have started with English before, but felt that you were getting nowhere.

l'Abîme

Many feel as though they are staring into the abyss – indeed, the experience of staring at the many
blanchi

étale

blank white pages spread in front of you may leave you feeling that there is no point in beginning.

furieux

sous une inclinaison

plane désespérément

You may feel furious, perhaps uninclined to begin, or even plain desperate. *COD* helps you to unlock ALL

d'aile

aspects of the language – from simple grammar and social repartee to mild invective – on your own.

la sienne

par

avance retombée d'un mal à dresser le vol

Those already at an advanced level may harm themselves by darting straight

et couvrant les jaillissements

to the end of the book, rather than covering what seems behind them.

coupant au ras les bords

Skimming these pages would be a mistake – cutting oneself free from the bonds

of ill-usage requires patience, and the semi-proficient student who wishes to gain

très à l'intérieur résume

a truly deep understanding of the language must work from start to finish. (More

l'ombre enfouie dans la profondeur par cette voile alternative

deeply buried shades of meaning will also be lost any alternative path through the text.)

jusqu'adapter

à l'envergure

The present edition of the primer had been updated and adapted to provide

sa béante profondeur en tant que la coque

wide spaces for the student's own work. As I learned at the university of Hull

d'un bâtiment

(where this course was first prepared) building on each lesson through their own

penché de l'un ou l'autre bord

examples pushes the student towards taking board what might otherwise be lost.

English in A Couple of Days

LE MAÎTRE

MASTERING idiomatic expressions.

surgi

inférant

What inferences can you draw from the following:

When the house is burnt
down you bring water*

de cette conflagration

A word before
is worth two after*

que se

Translating such expressions can prove a real menace.

l'unique Nombre que ne peut pas

(indeed, a certain number one cannot translate at all –

comme on menace

He that waits for dead man's shoes
may go long enough bare-footed*

might indeed give one cause to hesitate).

hésite
cadavre par le bras

plutôt

que de jouer

Such phrases are often rather more playful than they at first appear. Before supposing that you are talking to

en maniaque chenu

la partie

au nom des flots

a raving maniac, consider whether there is not some grey area (the current meaning of the word may explain only a part of it):

As broken a ship as this
has come to land*

un

naufnage cela

hors d'anciens calculs

Working out idioms – archaic and dated meanings

où la manœuvre avec l'âge oubliée

The exercise below includes idioms with 'archaic' (forgotten) meanings for certain words. For

jadis il empoignait la barre

these sayings, in fact, having previously grasped a word's meaning can be a barrier to understanding.

à ses pieds

de l'horizon unanime

A 'surer footing' – more stable ground – can be reach by giving oneself over to the words. You must be prépare

s'agite et mêle

au poing qui l'entreindrait

prepared to feel frustrated and mixed up, to not grasp the meaning immediately. The patient student is

un destin et les vents

fated to wind up understanding the phrase as long as it is remembered that the meaning of the word may

être un autre

be other than expected:

Esprit

You have wit enough pour le jeter

To drown ships in* dans la tempête

en reployer la division et passer fier

Vows made in storms,

are forgotten in calms*

écarté du secret qu'il détient

If you haven't even the remotest hold on the meaning of such phrases, remember –

Things that are not understood

are admired*

envahit le chef
coule en barbe

direct de l'homme

sans nef n'importe où vaine

[From a section entitled 'writer's cramp']

ancestralement à n'ouvrir pas la main

Only the Ancients didn't experience cramping of the hand into a an usable fist (using
as they did the instrument to us now useless – the inside of their heads – as the primary
writing tool (though their legs no doubt suffered a similar indisposition).

crispée
par-delà l'inutile tête
legs en la disparition
à quelqu'un
ambig
Advice for those who suffer from it
l'ultérieur démon immémorial

Writer's cramp is, to some, quite unambiguously the ultimate demon. Of course,
ayant

de contrées nulles
induit
having absolutely no control can induce one to feel one has prematurely inherited
le veillard vers cette conjonction suprême avec la probabilité

a septuagenarian's joints. It is highly improbable that this is the case.

celui
Time and again, the present author has found that a hand that is
son ombre puérile
caressé et polie et rendue et lavée

assouplie par la vague et soustraite
massaged is rendered cleanly supple; that the dull, seemingly inescapable pain that
aux durs os perdus entre les ais

gets deep into the bones can be gotten rid of by easing out the muscles.

né
d'un ébat
la mer par l'aïeul tentant ou l'aïeul contre la mer
une chance oiseuse

See whether you can forebear the temptation to be idle during this – Fiançailles
dont

Avail yourself of the chance to reflect on and engage with our idiom:
le voile d'illusion rejailli leur hantise
ainsi que le fantôme d'un geste

In every fault, chancellor
there is folly* s'affalera

folie

N'ABOLIRA¹

[V]

¹ With the absence of any detail in the primer that this might allude to, I am inclined to read it as a comment on the efficacy (or lack thereof) of the techniques for ridding the student of writer's cramp provided on the page before. This would accord well with Mallarmé's failure to complete subsequent exercises below (VII, IX and X).

Ambiguous expressions (cont.):

COMME SI

AS IF is an immensely helpful expression, but should be avoided by an

absolute beginner. When used on its own, it can carry an insinuation of

contempt. A misjudged application of of the phrase might invite a sudden silence.

These are only pointers: there is no certain approach for getting the balance right.

In the next section we offer a number of expressions that are either

simple
1. more simple;

enroulée avec ironie
2. less roundly ironic; or

3. may be quickly demystified

Any speaker, native or otherwise, would feel thrown by the

eruption of hilarity or horror on the part of one's interlocutor. If you feel you are

edging towards the unknown, you need neither flee nor feel distraught. One may

always ask for a clear and simple indication about tone during a lull in the conversation.

COMME SI

Space is provided for your own sentences below:

plume solitaire éperdue

sauf

*que la rencontre ou l'effleure une toque de minuit
et immobilise*

au velours chiffonné par un esclaffement sombre

For encounters both sombre and mirthful – fixed but not worn-out expressions

cette blancheur rigide

Youth and white paper take any impression*

dérisoire **If you be not pleased put your hand in your pocket
and please yourself***

en opposition au ciel

trop

When the sky falls we shall catch larks*

pour ne pas marquer

exigüment

quiconque

Must is a king's word*

prince amer de l'écueil

s'en coiffe comme de l'héroïque

irrésistible mais contenu

par sa petite raison virile

en foudre

soucieux

expiatoire et pubère

muet

Social graces:

Imagine you are excusing the behaviour of a child or adolescent. As young persons seldom speak for themselves, you may wish to make of their silence a theme for praise:

*The empty vessel makes the greatest sound**

*A word before is worth two after**

*Time and words can never be recalled**

*Glowing coals sparkle oft**

*Maidens must be seen and not heard**

*La lucide et seigneuriale aigrette
au front invisible*

*scintille
puis ombrage
une stature mignonne ténébreuse*

en sa torsion de sirène

par d'impatientes squames ultimes

rire

que

SI

If in fact you wish to indicate to your interlocutor that they have become a bore, you might opt for the following:

de vertige

*A deluge of words and not a drop of sense**

debout

*Lost time is never found again**

*le temps
de souffleter*

*bifurquées It ought to be a good tale that is twice told**

un roc

*Fling down the nests and the rocks will be gone**

faux manoir

tout de suite

évapore en brumes

*CAUTION is advised: false mannerisms can dry up amicable conversation with great speed. The speaker
qui imposa*

une borne à l'infini

may be taken as an 'imposition', or be seen as as overstepping the boundaries of good conduct.

[VIII]

[A page of the original poem is missing here and must have been inserted later]

C'ÉTAIT

You should now be relatively fluent with these. See how many sentences you can make beginning 'IT WAS':

issu stellaire

CE SERAIT

'IT WOULD BE' is also a useful expression. Try and make a small group of sentences with it below:

pire

non

davantage ni moins

indifféremment mais autant

This space is provided for your answers:

RIEN

de la memorable crise
ou se fût

l'événement

accompli en vue de tout résultat nul

humain

Take a look at what you have accomplished – being satisfied with your achievements is crucial.

N'AURA EU LIEU

une élévation ordinaire vers l'absence

Make sure you haven't opted for overly elevated diction, where this is absent in the original.

QUE LE LIEU

inférieur clapotis quelconque comme pour disperser l'acte vide

abruptement qui sinon

par son mensonge

eût fondé

la perdition

dans ces pages

du vague

en quoi toute réalité se dissout

[X]

EXCEPTÉ

à l'altitude

PEUT-ÊTRE

aussi loin qu'un endroit

of the exceptional distance you have covered – you may not be as far from sounding a native of the place

as you think.

[BACK COVER]

fusionne avec au-delà

hors l'intérêt

COD brings together your outside interests and the more essential points of grammar to create

quant à lui signalé

en général

an experience that is meaningful to both the specialist and the general reader. You can say

selon telle obliquité par telle déclivité

de feux

so long to those oblique descriptions, the uphill struggle with no light at the end of the tunnel.

vers

ce doit être

le Septentrion aussi Nord

“Northern Press Association must be our guiding star in language learning.

UNE CONSTELLATION

froide d'oubli et de désuétude

Forget the cold and unused grammars stacked on your shelves – here you won't

pas tant

qu'elle n'énumère

sur quelque surface vacante et supérieure

find surface explanations and empty rote learning, but a superior breed of

le heurt successif

sidéralement

primer, that gets successfully to the heart of its theme”

d'un compte total en formation

Daily Star

“A full account and sound training in the English language”

Observer

veillant

doutant Doubting how far you can go with English?

roulant

brillant et méditant

This guide, enlightening and thoughtful,

avant de s'arrêter

will, for those about ready to give up, most

à quelque point dernier qui le sacre

certainly hit the spot. You are safe at last –

Toute Pensée émet un Coup de Dés

All you need to know, in a *Couple of Days*