A LA MERCI DES BAS FARCEURS

PAUL MAXIM
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*Editor's Note: This is the promised sequel to "The Mallarmé Cryptopuzzles" published in the August 1993 **Word Ways**.*

An unusual method for recording and teaching history was devised by the French writer Mallarmé (1842-1898) who in the late 1860s began to create a body of work he later called "the Orphic explanation of the Earth." This consisted of a series of cryptopuzzles, disguised as normal-looking prose phrases, each of which was esoterically focused on a specific historical or topical subject. These phrases were then woven into an essay which gave no hint of its underlying historical content, but rather seemed to baffle and bemuse the reader through its combination of non-sequitur with verbal legerdemain. The key to these puzzles lies in their correlation of wordplay techniques with the salient characteristics of the subject being described; in other words, Mallarmé developed a synthetic representational system which allowed him to use language in two modes or senses simultaneously, so that the latent historical/topical content of these puzzles was completely concealed behind the façade of their "cover-text."

It is not known exactly how many such puzzles Mallarmé created over the final 30 years of his life, but estimates run as high as 7000; the puzzles are found in some of his last-published works, such as **Variations sur un Sujet** (1895-96). To date, very few of them have been fully deciphered, but enough is now known about his methodology to permit its documentation and diagnosis. Apparently, his confidence in his verbal-intellectual skills was so great that he felt he could find, or devise, a short French phrase which (according to the rules of his system) would serve to esoterically represent any topic whatever: conversely, he appears to have subjected most French words and idiomatic phrases to analytic scrutiny, so as to ascertain which "topics" they could inherently **reference**. Of course, he chose recognizable subjects: the Tudor Dynasty in England, the history of astronomy, the U.S. Civil War; hence, it is clear that, through the aggregation of these cryptophrases. his intent was to construct an enigma-history of the highlights of Western civilization for his readers to decipher. Unfortunately, since his system was so novel and complex, and so skilfully concealed, its existence did not come to light until just a few years ago, which means that an enormous amount of work, on the part of many analysts, will be necessary before all the puzzles can be reconstructed - that is, before the background data underlying each puzzle can be documented, and correlated with Mal-

larmé's techniques for representing it.

The Crimean War Puzzle   As an illustration of how this system works, I present herewith Mallarmé's puzzle on the Crimean War, which consists of a 22-letter phrase: **à la merci des bas farceurs** (at the mercy of low jokers). At first glance, this doesn't seem outwardly suggestive of the Crimean conflict, but closer scrutiny reveals that letters 3 through 8 may be anagrammed into CRIMEA. Then there are a few significant homophones, such as "Allah, mercy" (for **à la merci**), representing the cry for assistance of the Turkish Sultan as he was being pummeled by the Russians *in 1853. At the right end of* the phrase, **farceurs** is homophonic for "far sir," *suggesting that the English and French troops who* fought in this conflict were a long way from home; we shall note later that it also pertains to a specific combatant. In the center of the phrase, **des bas** can mean "stockings" and is also homophonic for **débat** (struggle, conflict), so that the opening portion of the phrase can be read interpretively as **à la mer,** see **débats** (by the sea, see combat). An alternative reading yields "on sea six days..." (**à la mer six** day...), which alludes to the fact that it took the Allied fleet six days to cross the Black Sea from Varna to the Crimea (September 7 through 13, 1854). This system of phonic overlays is intrinsic to Mallarmé's method, and draws upon the fact that English was his second language; hence, he found no difficulty in combining speech-sounds from the two languages into a kind of Franglais, which appears throughout his puzzles, but is here especially significant, since it was the British and French *who bore the brunt of the Crimean fighting.*

An Analytic Device: The Text Reversal Overlay Diagram[R].   One of the major technical tools for analyzing Mallarmé's puzzle-texts is the so-called Text Reversal Overlay Diagram, abbreviated DORT/TROD[R]. This is constructed by removing all interword spaces from a text segment, overlaying it by its own reversal, and then consecutively numbering all character positions therein, beginning at lower left and ending at upper left. In developing this diagram, we are at liberty to represent each letter by a minuscule or majuscule, or replace any letter by space or dash, so as to bring forth (develop)

```
        30        25
        |         |
SRUECRAF SABSED ICREMALA
alamercidesbasfarceurs
    |     |     |     |
    5    10    15    20
```

the configurations inherent in this arrangement which illustrate specific facets of its subject. Obviously, by doubling the data-content of his puzzle-text Mallarmé enormously increased its representational possibilities, and many of the individual logograms inherent therein exploit the superposition of one line of data upon another.

The Battle-Front Configuration   By selecting key letters from the diagram and replacing others with dashes, we can construct the logogram shown here, which represents the Russian forces (at top, or North) defending Sevastopol against the combined assaults of the Four

```
-RU-----S--S--I--E--la
A-A---------A--A------
  |     |     |     |
  5    10    15    20
```
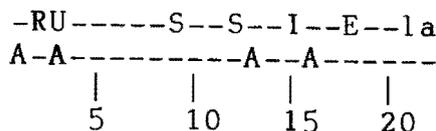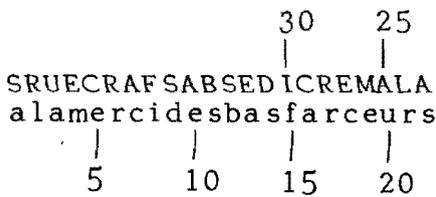
Allies, designated here by four majuscule A's. This configuration accurately reflects the fact that, for eleven months, Sevastapol was attacked from the South, with battle-lines running roughly East-West. The logogram works, in part, because the letters **RUSSIE, la** are inherent in the backwardation of Mallarmé's original phrase, but are spread out therein, so as to suggest Russia's vast, sprawling domain. The presence of these letters in backward sequence also suggests that, in the mid-19th century, Russia was the most backward nation in Europe, since it still maintained a feudal aristocracy, an absolute monarchy, a religious atmosphere reminiscent of the Middle Ages, and the old Julian calendar.

In addition to representing the Four Allies (Britain, France, Turkey, Sardinia), the four majuscule A's also signify the Four (diplomatic) Points on which this War was concluded, which (temporarily at least) halted Russia's southward expansion against the crumbling Turkish Empire. Hence, Mallarmé's logogram encapsulates not only the principal military, but also the diplomatic aspects of this conflict.

Lord Raglan's Configuration Lord Raglan, the supreme British Commander, had lost his right arm at the Battle of Waterloo (18 June 1815), and so his official portraits typically depicted him with a sword extended in his left hand, and with his right sleeve pinned to his chest. Now, when we inspect the central **R** on the lower line, we note **lame** immediately to its left (which would be Raglan's right side, as he faces us), while to its right is **cide**, the common Latin stem for "killing" or "killer"; obviously, Raglan's left hand was the one that signed his war orders. Hence, we are led to the conclusion that the **R** was meant as a pictogram of Raglan himself, with its slant leg representing the sword typically extended in his left hand. The same slant angle also suggests the sleeve seam of a Raglan coat, which extends from armpit to collar, so as to make it easier for a (one-armed) man to don.

$$\begin{array}{cc} 40 & 35 \\ \downarrow & \downarrow \\ \text{ruecrafsa} \\ \text{lameRcide} \\ \uparrow & \uparrow \\ 5 & 10 \end{array}$$

The top line of the logogram contains the backwardation of **A.S. farceur**, which was apparently intended to suggest "Anglo-Saxon far sir," specifically applicable to Raglan, who was a knight and K.C.B. As in the case of **RUSSIE,la**, the phrase is backwarded to suggest the British state of military unpreparedness prior to the Crimean War – i.e., they had the most backward army in Europe, and their troops endured terrible suffering simply through lack of adequate provisions and supplies, a condition for which Raglan was widely blamed.

On June 18, 1855, the British under Raglan stormed the Redan, and were repulsed with heavy losses: in other words, the "A.S. far sir(s)" suffered a **reversal**. Raglan blamed himself for this defeat, and his depressed condition, aggravated by acute dysentery, brought about his death on June 28. This circumstance is also potentially represented in the logogram, by anagramming its upper line to **rue fracas**, which "weighs down" its lower line, while the lower can itself be rearranged into **la merde ci** ("this shit

here"). Hence, the entire logogram can be viewed as suggesting the circumstances that brought about the death (cide) of **lame R.**

If **s** (not shown in the diagram) is added to the left of **ruecrafsa**, these ten letters become anagrammable to **fracasseur**; this is a coined French word, formed by analogy with **chasseur** (huntsman), and would mean "warrior". Then, by rescrambling its ten letters, combinations may be obtained such as **sure fracas, rues fracas** and **fracas ruse,** all of which appear applicable to the assault of June 18, 1855. In other words, Mallarmé is playing on an historical curiosity: the fatal day (June 18) which cost Raglan his right arm in 1815, cost him his life forty years later, through a poorly planned assault (farce). It is strategic clues such as this which link the puzzle with historical reality, and show the degree of detail that Mallarmé's system was able to encompass.

The Extended Anagram Those who have followed the analysis to this point will have noted that Mallarmé employs **anagrams** as one of his principal representational tools. This is neither novel nor unusual, since they have long represented a favorite wordplay device, and a means for "mystically" sifting data-arrays for hidden meanings. The unusual aspects of Mallarmé's anagramming include its covert character – i.e., the fact that it all takes place below the surface of what appears to be a literary composition, plus its comprehensiveness. This suggests that, prior to employing any word or phrase in one of his puzzles, he thoroughly sifted it for **all** its inherent anagrammatical recombinations. This is an extremely onerous task, which becomes more burdensome as the length of the data-array increases, since the number of possible recombinations quickly becomes astronomical.

Scanning the puzzle's entire 22-letter array, there are several recombinations inherent therein which seem peculiarly pertinent to Lord Raglan's role in the Crimea, such as the following: S. Crimea Bled a Fracasseur, Crimea Bled A.-S. Fracasseur, A.-S. Bled: Rues Crimea Fracas; Crimea Fracas-Ruse Bled A.S.; Bled as Crimea Fracasseur: Leads Crimea Fracas-Rebus; Crimea Fracas-Rue Bled Ass. Needless to say, the last of these could be taken as an allusion to the acute dysentery that sapped Raglan's life.

Battle of the Alma The first battle fought by the Allied forces after landing in the Crimea took place on September 20 1854, when they crossed the Alma River, which runs West to East, and empties into the Black Sea on the Crimea's west coast. Here, the British and French attacked from North to South, with the British bearing the brunt of the combat, since the bulk of the Russian forces were arrayed against them. These circumstances are accurately reflected in the diagram, in which the backwarded **farceurs** lie "to the north" (that is, above) ALAM, an anagram for "Alma", at the extreme left (West) of the diagram. This was one of the major battles of the War, and resulted in the death of about 11,000 men – a circumstance reflected by the anagram **farce sur Alma** (mincemeat on

```
44        37
|          |
sruecraf
ALAM
|    |
1    4
```

Alma). Here, by writing ALAM in majuscules, we are able to simulate the heights just to the south of the river where the Russians lay in wait for their invaders.

Siege of the Malakoff   Since the configuration is symmetrical, everything which appears on one side also appears, upside-down and reversed, on the other as well. This is why, moving to the right side of the configuration, we see MALA on its upper line, surrounded by seven letters which can be anagrammed to spell **creuser** (to dig, to hollow out, to trench). This logogram therefore is intended to represent the siege of the Malakoff, the principal Russian fortress, which was located at the extreme right of the battlefield, as viewed by the English and French to its south.   There is a very good reason why the final four letters of **Malakoff** are not shown in the logogram, since the top of the fortification was continually blasted away by the Allied bombardment, and had to be rebuilt again and again.

```
 28   23
  |    |
reMALA-
 ceurs
  |    |
 19   22
```

The Flagstaff Bastion   This was the centerpiece of the Russian fortifications south of Sevastopol, and is graphically described in Tolstoy's "Sevastopol Sketches" (December 1854), where it is called "the terrible Fourth Bastion." The French knew it as **Bastion du Mât** (Mast). It was somewhat more dangerous than the other fortifications, since, thrusting further south, it formed a salient angle in the Russian line, and so was exposed to a crossfire from SE and SW.   In Mallarmé's logogram, the Flagstaff is represented by a majuscule F in position 37 (upper line), where it pictogrammatically signifies a flag and staff, while just below it is a minuscule i in position 8; this is another pictogram, which represents an Allied cannon firing northward.   F is located three positions to the right of the c in the backwarded **Farceurs**, and so represents the musical interval of a "fourth"; similarly, the alphabet-interval between F and i is also three places, or a "fourth." This may seem like a relatively minor detail of the puzzle, but it is an important one nonetheless, since it calls into context Tolstoy's narrative, one of the most significant surviving artifacts of the war.

```
   37
    |
c--F
  i
    |
   8
```

The Programmed Instruction, and the "Game of Six"   An important characteristic of Mallarmé's cryptopuzzles is that, even though they manifest many common elements, each is unique and presents its own special challenge which defies rote solution; Mallarmé referred to these individualized features as **jeux à côté** (side games). In addition to this, Mallarmé devised these puzzle-phrases so as to refer to themselves, as well as to some external subject, thus providing the capacity for their own modification and manipulation. This concept of a language-segment containing implicit instructions for its own modification was quite advanced, and did not occur again until the era of the stored-program computer.   In the Crimean War puzzle, the concept of a side game manifests itself in a homophonic reading of the entire phrase as **à lame erre six des bas farceurs**, which may be interpreted as "to the blade/wave/lamella wander six (or C) from **bas farceurs**," or "to the soul

(l'**âme**)...," etc. Hence, the apparent object of this game is to take "six" components from **bas farceurs**, or some component resembling "6" (or "C"), and move it to **lame** at the left end of the phrase, in accord with the concept of "lamination". A key anagram on **bas farceurs** is "fracas rebus", describing many logograms extractable from this puzzle. There are four possibilities for logologically fulfilling such an instruction:

1. The only letter in **bas farceurs** which resembles "6" in shape is "b" and this resemblence is even more pronounced in the case of Russian **beh** ($\textit{6}$). When this **b** "wanders" to **lame**(r), the result is **blamer** (to blame), or **blameR**; however, since configuration **lameR** has already been identified as alluding to Lord Raglan, configuration **blameR** must likewise refer to him as well, and specifically signifies the censure that was heaped on him by the British press during the winter of 1854–55 over the miseries of the Crimean troops.
2. When the "c" of **farceurs** "wanders" to **lame**(r), the result is **clamer** (to exclaim, to cry out).
3. When the "r" of **farceurs** is inserted between **la** and **me**, it forms **alarme**.
4. The most original solution to this "game of six" is to employ the **F** of **Farceurs**, since as an ancient Greek numeral (digamma) it has a value of 6; when planted between **a** and **lame**, it creates "aFlame." The **F** is also a pictogram for a flag and staff, as well as the initial of **Français**.

Considering steps 2–4, it will be seen that we have a sequence of three six-letter words (**alarme**, **clamer**, **aFlame**), coupled with the concept of "planting the flag" (originally at the head of **Farceurs**) in a word-fragment (**alaM/Mala**) which was used (on the right upper line) to indicate the "better part" of Malakoff. Viewed collectively, therefore, it appears as though this game's ultimate objective is to reference the fall of the Malakoff, and the capture of Sevastopol, on September 8-9, 1855, since the Russians, in fleeing the city, left it aflame (this was described by Tolstoy in the third, and last, of his "Sevastopol Sketches," the work that brought him fame). Hence, the phonological/logological climax to Mallarmé's puzzle mirrors the climax of the war, and is arrived at through a similarly painstaking process.

Florence Nightingale   Mallarmé's puzzle also contains a wide variety of anagrammatic references to Florence Nightingale, who emerged as the heroine of the war, bearing such appellations as The Angel of Mercy and The Lady with the Lamp. The ten letters at the left can be anagrammed into **CURSE A LAME/MALE**, suggestive of the press attacks against Lord Raglan, or alternately into **CURES A LAME/MALE**, which appears to reference the nurse. This intimates that Raglan and Nightingale are reciprocally inverse subjects of the puzzle – i.e., one went to the Crimea to kill, as ordered by his Government, while the other went to cure, as ordained by her conscience.

```
44   40
 |    |
SRUEC
ALAME
 |    |
 1    5
```

In the next figure, the "far sirs" on the upper line, having

suffered a reversal, and being "laid low" (à bas) by wounds
and disease, are lying in the Scutari hospitals,
immediately above an open sewer, which is sign-
ified by anagramming the 11 lower-line letters to
alas, merde-ci. Next, the lower-line letter may be
rearranged into **deals a merci, I'd clear same,
m'ladies care, caried meals, cared: a smile,
sad care mile, eased la crim, ladies' cream,**
or **dea's miracle**. Here, Nightingale is referred to as Dea (Goddess)
because of the great power she acquired, and the popular reverence
in which she was held, while the miracle alludes to the fact that,
by closing the sewers and initiating other sanitary reforms, she
lowered the hospital mortality rate from 47% to 2%, thus saving
countless lives. It will be noted that this logogram employs all
22 letters of the original phrase; it is the original phrase folded
back upon itself, like a folding hospital bed.

```
   44        34
   |         |
  sruecrafsab
  alamercides
   |         |
   1         11
```

Omitting the s in position 11, the first ten letters of the lower
line can be rescrambled into such arrangements as **deal a merci,
laid a crème, alae de crim** (Crimean wings), or **Mercia dale**; this
last is a reference to Nightingale's country home in Lea Hurst,
Derbyshire, a part of ancient Mercia. Some other rearrangements
yield **lice mar dea** and **lice mar 'ead**, alluding to the head lice
which were omnipresent in the trenches and hospitals, while **claimed
ear** suggests the attentive sympathy Nightingale's proposals for
sanitary reform received from Queen Victoria; this led to a new
medical era for the British army. As in the case of Lord Raglan,
all 22 letters in the original phrase can be rearranged into at
least one anagram specifically indicative of Nightingale: **dea's
far base – cures la crim**. There appears to be a specific reason
why this puzzle contains such a profusion of anagrams pertaining
to her: in 1855 someone discovered that **Florence Nightingale** could
be rearranged into **flit on, cheering angel**, a felicitous anagram.

Summary and Conclusions Mallarmé's esoteric representational
devices can be itemized as follows: (a) the Text Reversal Overlay
Diagram; (b) anagrams, pictograms, logograms; (c) homophones
(multilingual overlaps of similar-sounding phonemes, with different
meanings; (d) other types of letter-games (transfer, insertion or
deletion of letters, letter arithmetic, letter fusion/fission); (e)
numerical and structural relationships; (f) cryptograms; (g) simul-
ation and analogy. The logograms can be extremely expressive,
and can be correlated with specific historical episodes, but require
detailed subject-knowledge to properly interpret. Hence, the analy-
sis of these puzzles requires not only a capacity for wordplay,
but a good deal of background research. However, its rewards
can be commensurate, since it provides an opportunity for matching
wits with one of the outstanding minds of the 19th century, and
participating with him in reconstructing the most original aspect
of his work. This is the challenge that Mallarmé left for posterity,
and his system of historical puzzles constitutes one of the last
great unexplored domains in the field of hermetic literature.