

# MALLARME'S CIGAR-SONNET: PART 1

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Toute l'âme résumée  
 Quand lente nous l'expirons  
 Dans plusieurs ronds de fumée  
 Abolis en autres ronds

The whole soul summed up  
 When slowly we breathe it out  
 In several smoke-rings  
 Vanishing in other rings

Atteste quelque cigare  
 Brûlant savamment pour peu  
 Que la cendre se sépare  
 De son clair baiser de feu

Bears witness to some cigar  
 Burning cunningly so long  
 As the ash detaches itself  
 From its bright kiss of fire

Ainsi le chœur des romances  
 A la lèvre vole-t-il  
 Exclus-en si tu commences  
 Le réel parce que vil

Thus the chorus of romances  
 Flies to the lip  
 Exclude from it if you begin  
 The real because (it is) base

Le sens trop précis rature  
 Ta vague littérature.

Too precise a meaning erases  
 Your vague literature.

When Mallarmé published this sonnet in 1895, he referred to it as "a game" or "a jest" (*un jeu*), but since then no one has been able to satisfactorily explain just what this game consisted of. I suspected that, here as elsewhere in Mallarmé's hermetic works, the game was really a word-game with metaphysical overtones. In other words, the poem contained some kind of hidden letter-manipulative process, which, when correctly performed by the reader, would allow access to Mallarmé's hidden message.

Of course, since cryptogrammatic poetry is extremely rare, it was necessary from the outset to hypothesize that Mallarmé had the capability of doing the unlikely: that is, of incorporating a letter-manipulative scheme in a natural-language poem. It was also necessary to assume that his scheme was rational, and could somehow be figured out without external instructions. Obviously, the first step would be to find some point of entry into the presumed word-game, that could yield an initially promising result.

**The Entry-Point.** The suggestion that came to me was that, in lines 7 and 8 of his text, Mallarmé was not only describing a cigar that burns properly only when its ash is periodically removed, but was also hinting at an analogous process of letter-subtraction, in which all the letters of *la cendre* (ash), or *la cendre se*, should be removed from the phrase *son clair baiser de feu*, where they all appear at least once. In this way, the letter-manipulation would directly simulate what the poem was

overtly describing. Similarly, what was left behind following this subtraction (in other words, the difference letters) would represent the cunningly burning cigar, or some intermediary phase in the poem's cryptogrammatic process:

son clair baiser de feu		Fig. I: The
n cla er de	(la cendre is subtracted)	Initial "Flick-
so ir bais feu	(residue, or difference)	ing of Ash"

The resultant eleven letters, as they stand, spell out three legitimate words: evening (soir), bay-colored objects (bais), and fire (feu), and can be rearranged into a number of other recombinations, some of them potentially meaningful in the context of the poem. Apparently, our first operation has been performed successfully--but where do we go from here?

**Background.** It is well known that Mallarmé approached literature from a different perspective than most other writers. Beginning in his early 20's, he espoused hermeticism as his guiding doctrine, and deliberately set out to create works that embodied both an overt and a covert component. To do this, he developed an elaborate micro-representational technique employing a variety of familiar word-play devices, such as anagrams, homophones (puns), pictograms, letter-arithmetic, and clever structural analogs (logograms), all of which could be integrated within the same natural-language context. In this way, Mallarmé succeeded in creating what amounted to both a novel linguistic technique, and a new literary genre, which has posed enormous challenges to his posthumous analysts.

In the domain of prose, Mallarmé's late essays embody a series of cryptopuzzles, one per phrase, which collectively constitute an enigma-history of the highlights of Western civilization. That is to say, each phrase is esoterically focused on some historical or topical event, whose identity and characteristics must be elicited through logological/phonological analysis, by matching the phrase's features with key facets and coincidences of its hidden subject.

Mallarmé's late poems are also highly constructive in nature, and several of them embody a unique device he appears to have invented, which I have dubbed the Text Reversal Overlay Diagram, or DORT/TROD. This is fashioned by overlaying a backwarded version of the text atop its forward version, following removal of all interword spaces, and results in a two-tier diagram which permits ready identification (for example) of the poem's central letter or phrase. In the case of the Cigar-Sonnet, this central phrase turns out to be *se sepe De*, and it is not difficult to infer that its physical centricity was used analogically by Mallarmé as a clue to its key logological role. As it turns out, centricity plays an important role in Mallarmé's constructive methodology, and he uses the same device in several other poems as well.

**The New Linguistic.** But what was the ultimate purpose of these elaborate constructions, and the laborious process of concealment and calculation that underlay them? One answer lies in Mallarmé's novel theory of language, which he imbued with an entirely new representational dimension. In other words, rather than depend entirely on language's descriptive faculty (as most writers do), Mallarmé decided

to explore its analogic and simulative capabilities, by using those parts of language that we normally discard (such as homophones), or employ only for fun and games (such as anagrams, pictograms, letter-arithmetic and the like). Within Mallarmé's scheme, the extraneous phonemes and word-games would function as an integral part of his composition's expressive capacity, completely integrated with the covertext that concealed them. In this way, simulation would transcend description as the stratum which carried the composition's essential meaning, and without which it could not be fully understood. Mallarmé was well aware that this approach would impose enormous burdens on his reader-analysts, but his dedication to hermeticism was uncompromising, and so he went to his grave not knowing whether, or when, his system would ever be deciphered.

**The Great Arcanum.** But there was another, even more immediate reason underlying the hermetic conceptualization of many of Mallarmé's late poems, since he used their cryptic constructs to enshrine and protect a personal secret which, had it become known, might have caused him acute embarrassment. This was because the great Mallarmé, the leading French intellectual of his time (and perhaps of all time), was a comet worshipper, and regarded comets not only as his personal divine signs, but also as the embodiment of his deceased family members--a very ancient belief known as *catasterism*. All in all, about a dozen of his poems contain cometary imagery, and reveal (upon analysis) a detailed astronomic knowledge of comets, making them (aside from the cryptogrammatic process itself) the single most prevalent theme in his mature works. As a poet, Mallarmé viewed comets metaphorically and metaphysically, but he also managed to imbue his comet-poems with disguised facts and figures that he could only have obtained from astronomical literature, and which demonstrate that he was quite capable of viewing comets in a scientific as well as a literary sense.

One class of comets that particularly intrigued him were the sungrazers, which came to prominence in the early 1880's, when astronomers hypothesized that certain spectacular comet-sightings (such as those of 1843, 1880, and 1882) really represented returns to the Sun of fragments of a much earlier comet (that of 1106), which had undergone nuclear disintegration as it rounded the solar orb. The great comet of September 1882 likewise broke into four sub-nuclei after rounding the Sun, and in addition passed directly between the Sun and the Earth, thus proving itself to be (in Mallarmé's eyes) a kind of celestial intermediary. It is this event which loomed large in Mallarmé's metaphysical iconography, and he returned to it again and again with great descriptive ingenuity--as well as to a comparable event which took place on June 30, 1861, when the tail of Tebbutt's Comet swept across the Earth, causing some unusual atmospheric effects (weak sunlight, combined with an early sensation of dusk).

**The Secret Language.** When we subject line 5 of the Cigar-Sonnet to an interpretive reading, based mainly on its homophonic content, it yields an entirely different message from what appears on the surface. For example, *atteste* may be read as *at teste* (at head/crucible), while *quelque* may similarly be phoneticized as *quelle queue* (some tail/sequence). Next, *cigare* is interpreted (in accord with its prosodic pronunciation) as *ci/si gare eux* (yes/here shunt them). It is the use of

the word *shunt*, combined with *head/crucible* and *tail/sequence*, which signifies the line's esoteric meaning, since the reference is to a sungrazing comet at perihelion, being rapidly shifted, or shunted, from an incoming to an outgoing path around the Sun.

But how does a comet relate to a cigar? One answer arises when we view a diagram of the Solar System, on which the orbit of Halley's Comet has been superimposed, and note that this orbit is cigar-shaped. Furthermore, the burning tip of this cigar can readily be identified as that portion of the orbit near the Sun, since this is the only point at which the comet becomes visible, through process of solar incandescence. The comet's tail, which develops at this point, always blows away from the Sun, and so represents the smoke, while the ash is analogized by cometary debris which forms its dust tail, or remains behind in orbit as meteoric fragments. Thus, when the comet is near the Sun, it appears to burn (even though no oxidation is involved), and the boiling off of dust and gas from its surface simulates the removal of ash from a burning cigar (this is hinted at by *vole-t-il*, a homophone of *volatile*, in line 10).

It should not be too difficult to recognize, therefore, that the letter-subtraction operation in Fig. I is not simply a piece of random word-play: rather, using letters as particles, it physically replicates what happens when a sungrazing comet is caressed by the Sun's "clear kiss of fire" and sheds its superfluous ash.

The *Fairy's Kiss*. Even more specifically, this letter-subtraction can be taken to suggest the strange occurrence of June 30, 1861, when for many hours, sunlight reaching Earth was filtered through several million miles of dust from the tail of Tebbutt's Comet. Of course, this "ash" was invisible (because it was so diffuse), and similarly, by placing (or "supposing") the letters of *la cendre* beneath those of *son clair baiser de feu*, we also cause them metaphorically to disappear, via the identity of figure and ground, or via the subtraction process itself, which cancels out like letters (in subtrahend and minuend) through a logical-and.

The importance of this comet's tail-sweep to Mallarmé may be inferred from another stanza describing it, which occurs in his poem *Madame Mallarmé's Fan* (published in 1891):

...Limpide (où va redescendre	Transparent (where is going to redescend
Pourchassée en chaque grain	Pursued in every grain
Un peu d'invisible cendre	A little invisible ash
Seule à me rendre chagrin)...	Only to bring me grief)

It is not too difficult to recognize in this "little invisible ash" both the penitential ash of Western religious tradition, and the comet-tail of 1861, which, by sprinkling the Earth with its fairy-dust, appeared in Mallarmé's eyes to have censed or purified it. Less than a year following this event, Mallarmé had completed his first cometary poem ("Apparition"), in which he describes the comet metaphorically as "the fairy with hat of light," having "sunlight in (its) hair," and commemorates the occasion on which he saw it as "the blessed day of your first kiss."

At virtually the same moment in time (late 1861 to early 1862), Mallarmé began work on the prose essay ("Artistic Heresy: Art for All") in which he articulated his theory of a two-tier literary style. Thus, the evidence shows that this remarkable confluence of events, which also coincided with the awakening of Mallarmé's great intellectual ability, was triggered by a never-before-suspected astronomic occurrence which marked the major turning-point in his life and career, and which he thereafter commemorated in a variety of hermetic poems.

**Sifting the Residue.** The foregoing discussion may serve to suggest the metaphysical significance of the eleven letters (*soir bais feu*) which fell to the bottom line in our subtraction of ash (Fig. I), since analogically speaking they constitute the residue which remains after the Sun's "bright kiss of fire" is screened or filtered through the comet's dust-tail, and so therefore analogize the effect on Earth of this extremely rare event. These letters can be rearranged in a variety of ways, such as *baiser si fou* (kiss so mad), which appears not only to recapitulate the minuend (*son clair baiser de feu*), but reaffirms the association between kiss and comet that runs throughout Mallarmé's hermetic verse. What he is alluding to, in part, is a medieval metaphysical concept known as the "death of the kiss", which he applied to a sungrazing comet's close perihelion encounter, when it is almost lured to destruction by flying directly through the Sun's corona. Here the comet is the lover, while the Sun represents the metaphysical love-object toward which it is inexorably drawn, in an astronomic ritual of cosmic renewal, i.e., the comet's return to perihelion marks the regeneration of time, the completion of one great cycle, and the beginning of another.

This concept is reiterated in several places in Mallarmé's cometary poems, as for example in *Rondel II* (published in 1889), where he says

Un baiser flambant se déchire	A flaming kiss tears itself
Jusqu'aux pointes des ailerons	Right to the very wingtips...

Similarly, in the closing couplet from *Petit Air II* (published posthumously in 1899) we find virtually the same concept, expressed in slightly different terms.

Déchiré va-t-il entier	Torn, all of it is going
Rester sur quelque sentier!	To remain on some path!

Once again, the allusion is to Comet 1882 II, which "kisses" the Sun by passing very close to it, and at the same time is torn to fragments which, while receding from the Sun, follow exactly the same orbital path as did the fragments of Comet 1106, its progenitor 776 years before. Even this poem's closing exclamation mark (a rarity for Mallarmé) conveys the same symbolic message, since it represents a pictogram of the comet at its high point above the Sun, where its tail would appear to stand straight upright. Once again, as in the *Cigar Sonnet*, the spectacular tail is codified as *quelle queue* (*quelque*). This demonstrates that, in his cometary poems, Mallarmé returned to the same phenomena again and again, describing them each time in slightly different terms.

Another way of rescrambling the eleven residue letters (*se subir à*

foi) seems even more pertinent to Mallarmé's personal experience, and to the change he underwent as a result of Comet 1861 II. Although *subir* (to submit, to undergo, to experience) is not normally a reflexive verb, the meaning here is nonetheless quite clear, and it hints at a religious conversion, i.e., "to submit oneself to faith." From this point onward in his life, Mallarmé became more and more obsessed with his secret comet-religion, and regarded comet-sightings as his own personal omens. Strangely enough, they seem to have had a benevolent effect on his career, since it was shortly after the disappearance of the "String-of-Pearls" comet of September 1882, that Huysmans began work on *À Rebours*, the book that made Mallarmé a household name throughout France, when it was published in 1884.

Finally, we come to an anagrammatical arrangement of the eleven residue letters which seems to point the way toward a continuation of the poem's cryptogrammatic process. This new rearrangement is *sei: four bias* or i.e., *basis four*, in which *sei* is simply the Italian for the number six. In other words, we are being given a hint that the sixth step in the process of decipherment may include a shifting or slanting operation, involving a bias of four--perhaps a modified form of the Caesar cipher of antiquity in which each letter of plaintext is substituted by a letter standing a fixed number of places before or behind it in alphabetic sequence.

In part, the ability of dealing effectively with Mallarmé's cryptic constructs stems from a knowledge of the high degree of specificity with which he was able to imbue them. In other words, his statement, in the poem's closing couplet, that "Too precise a meaning erases your vague literature," is merely a smokescreen: in reality, Mallarmé's hidden allusions are always precise, and (in the case of his historical puzzles) can usually be tracked down to a specific event, which occurred on a specific date, in a specific place and time (in a cryptopuzzle on Mahler, we are directed to the premiere performance of Mahler's First Symphony, which took place in Budapest on 20 November 1889, at 8 p.m.). Hence, in this poem, when Mallarmé speaks of "some cigar," we can be pretty well assured that he has a specific cigar in mind, and that the extraction of its name from the cryptogram represents a specific solution of the puzzle he posed.

*The Next Steps.* It is now time to outline the nine-step decipherment of Mallarmé's hidden message, including the sixth step introduced above.

- 1 Select minuend phrase (son clair baiser de feu)
- 2 Select subtrahend phrase (la cendre)
- 3 Subtract subtrahend from minuend, forming a residue (soir bais feu)
- 4 Add H to the residue letters (needed for a D in the hidden cigar name)
- 5 Alphabetize and group the augmented residue: ABEF HIIO RSSU
- 6 Perform the "four bias" transformation, obtaining a new set of letters
- 7 Rearrange these letters to form the hidden cigar name
- 8 Subtract ash (la cendre) a second time, from the cigar name
- 9 Analyze the resultant ultimate residue letters

The first three steps were taken in this article; the remainder will be described in more detail in the sequel.