

# THE MALLARME CRYPTOPUZZLES

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The French poet and essayist Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) had a varied career as a writer and pedagogue. Employed as a teacher of English in the French school system, he produced, in addition to his literary output, a variety of didactic works such as "The English Words," "The English Themes," "The Ancient Gods," etc., which may have been used to complement his classroom activities. He also translated several of the poems of Edgar Allan Poe into French prose, and at one point single-handedly wrote a ladies' fashion magazine, La Dernière Mode. In addition, he produced quantities of "occasional" and dedicatory verse which graced his extensive personal correspondence.

Mallarmé's claim to fame rests on his poetry and "esthetic" prose, which is considered the most difficult in French. He early acquired the reputation of a hermeticist, but was not known as a cryptographer, puzzlemaker, or logologist - that is, no consistent logical system was ever detected within his works. At the same time, his later writings continued to remain obscure; these included a number of fairly brief prose essays which were distinguished by their strange stylistics - in particular, a circumlocutive quality which went round in endless non-sequiturs without ever seeming to "get to the point." This left many readers convinced that there really was no "point," and that Mallarmé had created a kind of literary flim-flam, designed merely to baffle and bemuse his audience.

Another Mallarméan mystery concerns a work he (apparently) did not write, but merely discussed. This was the projected "five volume" book, sometimes called Le Livre, which he said (in 1885) represented "the Orphic explanation of the Earth...the literary game **par excellence**." Since he never published any work fitting this description, nor left a comparable manuscript behind him at death, many scholars concluded that Le Livre did not really exist, but was simply a figment of Mallarmé's imagination. No attempt was made to connect Le Livre with his late prose writings, even though one of these was called Quant au Livre ("As for the Book"), while another was entitled Le Livre, Instrument Spirituel. The reason, as noted above, was that these writings did not seem to explain **anything**, let alone the Earth's "Orphic" constituency; aside from some vague allusions to hermeticism, and some cosmetic name-dropping, they seemed to have no coherent topical content.

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My researches have disclosed, however, that there is one single and comprehensive solution to both of these literary mysteries, and it resides in the cryptogrammatic system: Mallarmé devised, which enabled him to imbue his "innocuous" prose writings with layers of concealed meaning. In order to effectuate this system, Mallarmé designed each phrase within these writings as an individual puzzle, focussed on some well-defined historical or topical subject; for example, one might deal with the history of astronomy, and another with the Tudor Dynasty in England. Each phrase therefore becomes a compact vignette which codifies or encapsulates the essentials of the subject, and which in turn has to be developed or reconstructed into a more conventional exposition, based on a correlation of the phrase's characteristics with those of the subject - but the correlation cannot be done until the subject has been **identified**, the greatest challenge of the cryptophrases.

The essence of this cryptosystem lies in the codification techniques Mallarmé developed, and the skill with which he used them for representational purposes. Here, students of logology will find themselves on fairly familiar ground, since these techniques include anagrams, homophones, pictograms, "letters as numbers," and clever structural arrangements, as well as more standard philological devices - etymologies, word-cognates, and the like. The unusual aspect, however, is the degree to which Mallarmé was able to integrate and combine these often conflicting parameters, while at the same time maintaining some semblance that the phrase in which they were embodied represented "normal writing." The existence of this cryptosystem went undetected, in part, because of Mallarmé's concealment skill, and because it represented a unique and unprecedented literary phenomenon - i.e., never having existed before, no one believed that it could exist, and so, despite numerous clues thrown out by Mallarmé, these writings were never approached on a cryptogrammatic level.

**Categories & Classifications** The cryptopuzzles may be divided into two general types: those Mallarmé created, and those he found, since it is not accurate to describe a single-word puzzle as "created." In order to uncover the representational potentiality hidden in single words and expressions, Mallarmé apparently subjected the entire French language to scrutiny in light of his system, so that he might have a supply of "ready-made" puzzles available to plug into his cryptoprose compositions, as and when needed. Thus, he imposed on conventional language an entirely new usage, which is as far removed from ordinary literature as is oratory from the barking of a dog.

Because of the complexity and compaction of Mallarmé's cryptoprose, and the wealth of historical-topical information referenced therein, it is not possible to solve its component puzzles casually, while ensconced in the comfort of one's armchair, since numerous trips will be needed to libraries and other data-repositories in search of key facts. Furthermore, since all of his referenced topics date from the late 19th century or earlier, information on them may no longer be current, and hence his would-be analysts are

forced into the role of historical researchers. In addition, it appears as though one of Mallarmé's objectives was to force his analysts to relive history, in order to fully understand the way in which he codified it.

**Text-Reversal Diagram** The single most important component of Mallarmé's methodological apparatus is the Text Reversal Overlay Diagram<sup>®</sup> or TROD, which may be constructed (for any cryptophrase) by placing the phrase's backward version atop its forward or normal version, once all spaces have been removed. In the Figure at the left, we illustrate how such a diagram might be constructed for the specimen phrase INTO THE CRYPT. This arrangement creates, in effect, a symmetrical or mirror-image overlay, in which portions of the original phrase may be juxtaposed against its backwardation, so as to facilitate the assemblage of significant letter-clusters or "configurations."

Furthermore, it is possible to represent each letter in one of two ways, majuscule or minuscule, thus further enhancing the TROD's representational capability; this is especially important when letters are used as pictograms. It is also possible, for demonstration purposes, to show only certain letters in the diagram, while replacing others with blanks or dashes, so as to enhance our visual recognizance of configurations thus highlighted. In this way, the TROD becomes an expressive and flexible device, which can illustrate multiple aspects of the subject it represents.

**The Aural Moire** Another important component of certain cryptopuzzles is their dense overlay of homophones, which are designed to evoke a wide variety of contrasting interpretations. Most of these homophones are in French, but Mallarmé, who was bilingual, also made extensive use of English, as well as other languages (to the extent that he knew them). Dissection of these aural ambiguities was intended to be challenging, and hence each potential "reading" must be carefully explored as a possible key to hidden meaning.

**A Sample Puzzle** For example, in the puzzle-phrase *à la merci des bas farceurs* ("at the mercy of low jokers"), the first two words, *à la*, may also be read as "Allah," thereby suggesting a Moslem theme, while the first three words may be aurally reconfigured as *à lame erre six*, which can mean "six wander to the blade (or wave)." Now, this interpretation may seem just as mysterious as the original phrase, and it was meant to be, since it represents only an intermediary step toward a complete solution - but it is a necessary step in fully exploring the puzzle's potentiality.

It is therefore essential that the analyst have some background in French phonology, plus access to a dictionary of homophones that can help him or her unravel the various aural strands Mallarmé interwove. One of the striking characteristics of these puzzles is that Mallarmé wasted very little auditory material, and hence if there seems to be some clever meaning hidden in a prominent homophonic interpretation, there usually is - but it is up to us

**The Role of Number** As part of his cryptogrammatic system, Mallarmé also developed ways of exploiting a phrase's numerical characteristics, through use of devices such as the following: 1) numerical values of letters; 2) positions of letters within the phrase; 3) typographical resemblance between certain letters and numerical digits, etc. In fact, the role of number in Mallarmé's system is so extensive as to permit one to describe it as Pythagorean in concept; hence, the term **word game** is not quite adequate to describe the cryptosystem, which utilizes words, letters, numbers, sounds, and spatial relationships, all in a multilingual context.

**Extent of the Task** At the present time, no one knows exactly how many cryptopuzzles Mallarmé created, but a rough idea may be gained by scanning the material in his Complete Works entitled "Variations on a Subject," plus "Music and Letters" - a total of about 85 pages of cryptoprose. One of the paradoxes here is that it was apparently far easier for Mallarmé to create (or discover) these puzzles than it is for us to decipher them. He spent the final 30 years of his life on this task (working, prior to his retirement in 1894, mainly at nights and on weekends), while it may take analysts of our own era, and of the century to come, a much longer time to fully explore their mysteries. Hence, one might say that, as of today their cryptogrammatic surface has barely been scratched.

**The Hermetic Paradox** Considering the enormous amount of time, labor, and talent Mallarmé lavished on the development of this system, it might well be asked why he never made it public, nor attempted to capitalize on it for his own advantage - let us say, by publishing "Prof. Mallarmé's Puzzle Book," which could have brought him additional fame and francs. In other words, toward the end of his life, when it appeared that no one might ever discover his system, why did he not at least step forward and say "I have created cryptograms..." thus stimulating some effort to decipher them? Why was he apparently content to go to his grave without seeking recognizance for what may represent his most original accomplishment, and with no assurance that the nature of his system would ever be discovered?

The answer to this important question is closely linked with the character of hermeticism as an intellectual and spiritual discipline, and with its central paradox, which is its desire, at one and the same time, to **communicate** and to **conceal**. Since obviously both of these objectives cannot be simultaneously satisfied, hermeticism usually devolves into a process of **difficult** communication, of which a literary cipher might represent a plausible (though uncommon) example. As in any mystery-religion or secret society, the literary hermetic has arcana to transmit, but only to those who prove themselves qualified as postulants - in this case, 1) by correctly sensing the existence of the cryptosystem, and 2) by deciphering it through trial and error. Hence, although Mal-

larmé provided numerous tantalizing hints and clues in the cryptoprose concerning its hermetic infrastructure, he regarded overt disclosure of his methods as a profanation which would destroy his system's sacred or numinous character, and so render it non-viable as an arcanum. Of course, once the first puzzle is solved, the existence of the system is thereby demonstrated, opening the way for decipherment of the remainder.

**Properties of the Cryptophrases** Since Mallarmé's cryptopuzzles, and our recognizance of them, are still fairly new, many of their unique properties and characteristics are still being charted. What Mallarmé created may be termed a **meta-language** that occupies a unique category, which one may call Logo-Linguistics®; obviously, its characteristics are centered around those of the TROD. In other words, the spatial juxtaposition of letters arising from the TROD's two-tier, two-directional arrangement of Mallarmé's original phrase creates an entirely new range of expressive possibilities, which may be interpreted through logology, analogy, and use of pictograms. This mode of language stands quite apart from ordinary usages, since its purpose is not to describe, but rather to simulate and encode.

One startling characteristic of the cryptopuzzle is its apparently limitless domain of applicability, when correlated with its appropriate subject. This means that, just when the puzzle's representational capacity appears to be exhausted, some new and vital facet comes to light; hence, the puzzle-context seems to manifest a capacity for quasi-organic "growth", as one penetrates deeper into its relationship with the real-world subject it was intended to reflect. This is why it is extremely difficult to define the point at which the puzzle is completely "solved".

Based in part on this characteristic, one may also hypothesize two beliefs that Mallarmé held in mind while developing his system:

a) No matter what "external" subject was chosen for codification according to the parameters of his system, there existed, somewhere, a verbal construct capable of uniquely representing it;

b) For every verbal construct, there existed some "real-world" subject that it would uniquely codify, according to the parameters Mallarmé devised.

Now we know that, since the origins of the human species, both history and language have been subject to continual evolution, and words have progressively developed to represent new ideas and entities. What Mallarmé seems to be postulating, however, is an **esoteric** relationship between the evolution of language and the occurrence of historical events **corresponding** to it, similar to certain kabbalistic theories which held that progressive stages in human history could (or would) be represented by rearranging the letters of the Torah.

Of course, it is far too early, at the present time, to thoroughly evaluate either of these hypotheses, but placing them under scrutiny helps to illuminate Mallarmé's well-known statement that

"everything in the world exists to end in a book," so as to manifest "the connections between all things" (Le Livre, Instrument Spirituel).

**Material To Come** Our next installment will present a topical analysis of the cryptophrase cited above (**á la merci des bas farceurs**), which is taken from Paragraph 1 of Mallarmé's 1896 prose work "Mystery in Letters." But before perusing our analysis, we suggest that readers who believe themselves skilled in logological techniques attempt to determine for themselves its subject, by applying the various methodologies we have so far discussed, including a) dissection of homophones, b) exploration of anagrams, and c) construction of the TROD, bearing in mind that the overall objective is a correlation of the puzzle's logological characteristics with the subject's salient features.

*Editor's Note: Because of the length of the next article (12 pages to fully explore á la merci des bas farceurs), we would like to solicit in advance how many readers would like to see it published in whole or part (or not at all); we solicit your expressions of interest or disinterest.*

## ACRONYMANIA

An acronym is an abbreviation in which the first letters (or first syllables) of the words in a name or phrase are joined to create a pronounceable "word", such as NATO for North Atlantic Treaty Organization or MOPED for motor pedal. (In initialisms, such as RPM, the letters are spelled out.) Although huge acronym and initialism dictionaries have been published, Don Hauptman's Acronymia (A Laurel Book by Dell Publishing, 1993; \$5.99 paperback) is the first book to examine them in detail: invent a taxonomy, sketch the history, suggest criteria for judging quality, and supply examples from many fields and languages.

Hauptman also devotes a couple of chapters to the topic of acrostics. Acrostics, which he calls acronymic redefinitions, are phrases created out of words, such as KNIFE: Keen Necessary Implement For Eating. (More generally, acrostics are found in the form of poems in which the first letters of each line spell out a word or phrase.) Thus, acrostics and acronyms are two sides of the same coin. But note that the motivation is different: acronyms are created for the serious purpose of saving space (linguistic compression), but acrostics are most often created to amuse and beguile.

A final word to the wise, containing a subliminal message: bibliophiles urge you to heed instruction 'secure benefits of organized knowledge'.