CHAPTER 3

Silence and Art

Mallarmé, Andreiyeff, and the Silence of Empty Spaces

When we turn to the relation between empty space and silence, we encounter the unique contribution of the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé, who believed that a poem was more than a mere arrangement of words. He asserted that a poem needed to be seen as a composite, made up of words taken in conjunction with the blank spaces between them. He went on to introduce these blanks into his own poetry, in order to establish a rhythmic movement between his words and the spaces between them, just as a composer of music would use pauses between notes.

Here is Mallarmé’s justly famous presentation of his aesthetic:

I say: a flower! and, out of the forgetfulness where my voice banishes any contour, inasmuch as it is something other than known calyces, musically arises, an idea itself and fragrant, the one absent from all bouquets.¹

Mallarmé clearly believed that Symbolist poets abandoned any sense of authorship in favor of granting this initiative to the words themselves. Language takes over once the poet realizes that he or she can no longer directly communicate anything meaningful, for instead it is the words themselves that will control the ripples of meaning, that in turn will spread out around the space of a word when it is taken in isolation from the poet’s intention.

Like his contemporaries the French Impressionist painters, Mallarmé instructed his followers to “paint not the thing, but the effect it produces.”² He diminished the literary authority of the subject of a poem by leaving it out of his poetry altogether, in favor of creating compositions of shadow and effect—preferring evocation, allusion and suggestion over precise description.

According to Mallarmé, meaning always is the effect of a play between the words. The white of the page is thus charged with meaning; moreover, it is the precondition for any meaning to emerge. Furthermore, the open spaces in his last poem Un coup de dés (A roll of the dice) written in 1897 indicate that the text can never coagulate into any definitive meaning. The words may refer to

¹ Quoted in Richard Harland, Beyond Superstructuralism, 169.
one another, but together they do not form a closed structure. Here the artist’s subject, namely the object of their attention, loses its traditional place of centrality and prominence in favor of the artist placing emphasis instead on the experiential process of creativity itself. It is in this context that the phenomena of negative space and silence take on heightened significance.

Mallarmé was thus able to make the evocative nature of his poetry visible by emphasizing the empty spaces between his words and his lines. With these breaks he attempted to symbolize the lacunae of sequential thinking alongside the gaps which are to be found in all human communication. As he explained:

The intellectual framework of the poem conceals itself but is present—in the space that separates the stanzas and in the white of the paper: a significant silence, no less beautiful to compose than the lines themselves.3

Where before these empty spaces were merely gratuitous blanks between words, Mallarmé brought his readers to an increased awareness of their essential role in poetry as limits, where nothing can lie beyond them. In consequence the silent spaces become genuine and just, testifying to their negative force.

For example, with Un coup de dés Mallarmé indicated in his preface to the poem that its white spaces were intended to “even out and scatter” the words across the page, in order to make possible a unified vision of the entire page and to indicate the rhythm of its lines. The visual presentation of the poem, then, was intended by its author to have an impact on how it sounded when it was read aloud. In contrast to the prevailing custom of reading poetry with a theatrical ornamentation which was then in vogue, when Mallarmé read his poem in public he did so in a low and even voice. This form of reciting poetry had an extraordinary impact on the young poet Paul Valéry, who heard in it “embodied silences,” “whispers and insinuations made visible,” and a new language that seemed to shine out of the paper like stars.4

Mallarmé introduced innovative ways of seeing silence as a positive force for creative interaction. In order to recognize such a newly charged role for silence, though, he was obliged to break with the tradition of classical realism. If left unimpeded, though, this tradition would have continued to limit silence to an invisible and passive background role, rendering it essentially meaningless and useless.

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3 See Kern, ibid., 173.
4 See Kern, ibid., 174.