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## There Is No Present



*Suicide or abstention, to do nothing, why?—Time, unique, in the world, since, because of an event I will have to explain again and again, there is no Present—no, a present does not exist.<sup>1</sup>*

“There is no Present”: an assertion that never fails to inspire surprise. It violates every good sense that seems to know about the present—that it exists—and that it is the only thing of which we may be certain: inasmuch as we ourselves exist. Each of us, whether in the confines of some dreary dungeon or in the open air, is in the presence of that which is: concrete walls or the battle blue sky. The human being, withdrawn into the uppermost solitudes, remains within the presence of a present—even if it be that of an absence. Moreover, it would suffice to simply turn on the television to see, with one’s own eyes, the infinite wealth and richness of the present: for it is spread out throughout the entire world and is there at every level of life, from the microscopic amoeba to the nuclear warhead. Though it is unclear whether there will be a present the day the world explodes.

In addition, this good sense would add that the present is that and only that which is or exists—if only because the past no longer is and the future is not yet . . . present. And here, once and for all, the philosophical tradition would fortify this good sense, even though it itself remains the arch enemy of common sense. For philosophy has,

from its very conception, conceived the present (the "now"), as the normative measure of the existence of time. Only that which now is—that is, is present—is. To be sure, the definition itself would call attention to the tautology involved here. But good sense as such, rarely requires us to take a closer look.

Now the poet, like the simple quidam (which the poet is at bottom), would never ask himself what either time or the present are. He never asks the philosophical question, par excellence, of essence. Rather, he would merely ascertain the nonexistence of some thing, commonly called the *present*. But is this truly an ascertainment—an established fact? Certainly we could have an affidavit drawn up by some official notary who would note, with his own eyes, that a chair is missing from the table. But—and here we must emphasize the *but*—the present is never simply a piece of furniture. It can never simply be absent such as the absence of a spoon from a place setting. Indeed, no one has stolen it; and, if it has disappeared, it has not gone elsewhere—to some other place—setting. And then, can we even speak of it as being lost in the same way as Proust speaks of the "Searching for Time Lost" or *Remembrance of Things Past*. This, of course, would signify that once upon a time, in a place far far away, there was a present (time); but which, at present, no longer exists. The very formulation of this loss is already aberrant insofar as it must call upon the present to explain its nonpresence.

"There is no Present;" the very sentence seems suicidal. Simply because the present, by definition, names everything that is. A thing is able to not be present, and, at the same time, not be nothing: thus it becomes a memory, myth or image. But the present, if it itself is not (present), swallows everything whole with non-being. Could it be then, that this declaration by Mallarmé represents nothing more than the very culmination of nihilism?

On the whole, such a thought would correspond with our image of the poet madly in love with nothingness, with some small suppressed thing of naught, with the resonance of empty space and every other absence.<sup>2</sup> This, of course, on condition that we know of what this "nothingness" speaks. Nothingness, after all, signifies that which is not. However, we must ask from whence comes such negation? Is it anterior or posterior to nothingness? And who is able to validate its validity or force—perhaps even its "Being?" Who, in such a sentence, could speak here and assert, "There is no Present?" The poet? Indeed, but in asserting such nonpresence, must not he himself be present? Perhaps—perhaps—he also signs his nonpresence and thus the very sign of suicide?

As we have already remarked, the present is not a thing. We can neither place it before us for our admiration nor remove it if it happens to be loathsome to us. Is it then, nothingness—like the thing of naught or like the abscurity of every fork or chair?

As soon as we think to seize this strange “thing” that is the Present, we fall deep into a hole. For these words that compose “There is no Present” are themselves present—at least insofar as we may read them. But the word that would assert the opposite is unable to render present that which it articulates. Such difficulties have always been present in philosophical thought: for, if the present names that which is, then it itself is (in a certain sense) “nothing.” It is nothing with respect to something present. And if the present names that which only “is” in time, then time itself is determined, at the very beginning, as a notion of temporality; that is, Being as presence. This inextricable circularity gave birth to *Being and Time*.

Certainly, Mallarmé was not a philosopher. Therefore, we must renounce, once and for all, the application of our “philosophical” scapel. For the appellation of any so-called nihilism may very well turn against the one who articulates it. We must be satisfied with a reading without prejudice: we must remain naive. And rightly so. For Mallarmé, to explain (in spite of everything) this “event” that constitutes the want of any present, spoke of a naive traveler who imagined himself deep within a tunnel. “From without, like the cry of space, the traveler hears the distress of the whistle. ‘Probably,’ or so he would convince himself, ‘we are traveling through a tunnel—the *epoch*—at long the last one, stealing under the city before the all-powerful station of the virginal central palace, which wreathes.’ The underground will endure, O impatient one, your train of thought to prepare an edifice of high glass, swept with the wing of Justice.”<sup>3</sup> The image of the tunnel was not entirely rejected by Mallarmé. Rather, he simply wished to warn the impatient traveler (i.e., the modern human being, who is always in a hurry and forever hateful of wasting time), that the “underground will endure.” In every case, it is a question of time. Perhaps there will be an end to the tunnel, or a way out. (Here we think of the cave in Plato’s *Republic* and the manner in which presence is perceived: the escape from darkness and the emergence into the illumination of day.) Yet, and this is the essential point, at present, “there is no Present.” *At present* means at this time or the epoch in which “we” are. Thus, with this notion of epoch, we would glimpse that sense which must be given to the want of any present. It is possible that Mallarmé had in mind the original meaning of the Greek word *epochè*, which signifies a pause or suspension. And yet, he never really needed to have recourse to this

etymological root. The epoch refers to a time that endures longer than a single moment—longer because it is more *stable*. The epoch remains more stable even when the times themselves are unstable and revolutionary. This is so because a higher identity rules over the epoch. It is a law or destiny that gives to every event, as to the whole of humanity, its character, its special stamp and mark.

The epoch is still ours. And here, let us underline that which is peculiar in the tale told by the traveler. It is precisely the use of the definite article with the word *epoch* that strikes us as strange. Clearly, this is not an anatomized discourse on history, laid out, etherized, upon the table. It is not a course on pathology whereby a postmortem is performed and every epoch is tagged accordingly: Antiquity, Middle Ages, Modernity, and so on. Nevertheless, a certain view of History is implicated—but not as an object. On the contrary, History itself is the “subject” of the experience and this directly implicates the subjectivity of the traveler. Let us note, precisely, the preeminently historical terms in which the traveler speaks. He travels through the epoch “as” he might travel through a tunnel. In other words, he takes the train and hopes to arrive (perhaps on time?) at the end, which, naturally enough is called the *omnipotent palace*. At the time (during the latter half of the nineteenth century), train stations resembled royal palaces, and hence the name *central palace*. Moreover, train stations were the heart and lungs of the city. And such tunnels were contemporary with the railroad. In a conference given at Oxford, Mallarmé wrote: “Nature takes place and to it we shall not add: save for some cities, railroads and a few other inventions that form our means and production.”<sup>4</sup> The particular epoch is definitively one of means and production—and from it we would coin the term *materialism*. Yet this materialism is no longer that one by which we are daily beaten over the head, neither with an ideological club nor any other instrument of punishment. We cannot simply say that everything is material. Rather, we must see that everything we would add to “Nature” and that everything one might realize—including oneself as laborer or personnel or the human resource—is constituted as means—as *technè*.

Is there nothing more than this then? . . . But it is precisely here that the poet would rise up and rebel. It is precisely here that there is . . . nothing: “We know, confined in an absolute formula, that there is only what there is. However unrestrained to spread, under pretext, the decoy, would accuse our in consequence, refusing the pleasure we want to take: for this *beyond* is the agent of it and the motor I would say if only I wasn’t loathe to effect, in public, the impious disassembling of fiction and consequently of the literary mechanism, in order to display

the principal piece or nothing.”<sup>5</sup> There is only what there is: a rather ex-acting tautology in which we see the mark of Western nihilism or what Heidegger called the *oblivion of Being*. For if such is the case—and it could be otherwise only with great difficulty—then there is nothing left of Being. In other words, there is no Present. There is only what there is—whether such being is natural or manufactured (*technè*). The rest (that is, the “other thing,” the “beyond”)—is nothing.

It is not certain that Mallarmé has rescued this “nothing” by simply giving it the role of “principal piece” in the literary mechanism. Yet the mere fact of speaking about such a mechanism or about any machine (one totally disassembled to display its “motor”), exudes a subtle influence over such a materialistic epoch. And we might ask whether pleasure itself (already similar to the “pleasure of the text” that is so dear to the modern critic), is sufficient to bring into being that which is not? More specifically, by putting into production the “poietic” process as defined by Plato? Furthermore, we wonder if this process is able to be determined as fiction?

But this question would carry us far away from where we should remain at present: “There is no Present.” Nevertheless, by referring to the epoch and the return to the literary process, we understand that much better the need to differentiate between the present-as-now and the present of presence. That is, when Mallarmé speaks of there being no present, he does not mean that there is nothing or that at present, nothing is. But rather, that this “now” is a false present or a present without presence. Plato said as much when he referred to the visible world or world of appearances as a phantasmagorical nothingness—as a world of “idols.” Presence wants a present in such a way that it is not one: it is a “nonbeing” or *mè on*. At bottom, Mallarmé’s formulation is quite similar to the one formulated by Rimbaud. “The true life is absent.” Here it is sufficient to substitute the word *present* for *true life*.

At the same time, this want constitutes the only possible present offered to the human being: *the epoch*. The epoch is one of “distress;” it is the midnight of the world—and the disapp-errance of the present: it is the epoch of the oblivion of Being. Certainly, other images may also come to mind. Yet it suffices us to cite that page of Heidegger where he comments on the following line by Hölderlin: “Long is / The time, but the True comes into / Its own.”

Long is the destitute time of the world’s night. To begin with, this requires a long time to reach to its middle. At this night’s midnight, the destitution of the time is greatest.

Then the destitute time is no longer able even to experience its own destitution. That inability, by which even the destitution of the destitute state is obscured, is the time's absolutely destitute character. The destitution is wholly obscured, in that it now appears as nothing more than the need that wants to be met. Yet we must think of the world's night as a destiny that takes place this side of pessimism and optimism. Perhaps the world's night is now approaching its midnight. Perhaps the world's time is now becoming the completely destitute time. But also perhaps not, not yet, not even yet, despite the immeasurable need, despite all suffering, despite nameless sorrow, despite the growing and spreading peacelessness, despite the mounting confusion. Long is the time because even terror, taken by itself as a ground for turning, is powerless as long as there is no turn with mortal men. But there is a turn with mortals when these find the way to their own nature. That nature lies in this, that mortals reach into the abyss sooner than the heavenly powers. Mortals, when we think of their nature, remain closer to that absence because they are touched by presence, the ancient name of Being. But because presence conceals itself at the same time, it is itself already absence. Thus the abyss holds and remarks everything.<sup>6</sup>

It was necessary to include this rather long passage from "What Are Poets For?" simply because it makes clear (though perhaps not within the visible spectrum of light) the want of any present already perceived by Mallarmé. Heidegger—indeed in deference to Hölderlin, but also striking out on his own—relates the want of any present to the want of any god. Something Mallarmé never did. Yet both are very similar in their perception of the epoch. Like Mallarmé, Heidegger preached patience: we must not yield too quickly to the illusion that we see the end of the tunnel. The underground shall endure, o impatient one—and shall endure that much longer simply because we believe we have finished with it and its "distress." This is no accident—such as a sudden eclipse of sense—but a destiny that will endure: long is the time as is the tunnel. And we, perhaps, have only come halfway.

Heidegger spoke of a possible turning. But this can occur only if the "mortal" takes his place in "his proper being." The epoch is only able to turn if we ourselves engage in the turning. Yet this turning does not lead to a place of rest. Rather, it leads directly to the Abyss, or at least within its proximity. This is possible because the human being

(contrary to the God) is closer to the want or absence; because we are concerned with and care for presence. Perhaps this strange way of reasoning would appear to be a dialectical detour. But, in fact, it is nothing of the sort: to be concerned with and to care for presence does not mean that we ourselves are present. On the contrary. If the question of presence concerns only mankind—and it does, for we have very few texts written by the hand of God or scratched in the dirt by some hoove or paw—it is because mankind in a sense, is deprived of presence. We are in “need” of it; but this is not some simple need that might be satisfied by going to market. No, it is a need that Heidegger thought in terms of a double-appropriation. For this reason, he would call man—*Dasein*: the man of Being inasmuch as the Being of man. Being itself (presence) is in need of Being-there that it may appear as such. Consequently, when this “need” is experienced as a simple necessity (that is, one among others: shelter, food, clothing, culture, and coffee), then, we might say, obscurity has reached the stratosphere. In the same spirit, Heidegger “defined” *Dasein* by a radical negativity and finitude before having replaced this term with the even more neutral word *mortal*. The human being, closer to nothing in his or her “identity,” desires presence that much more and thus is that much more concerned with it. But because this presence is suspended—which is the very definition of the epoch—it is itself already an absence. Hence, this “There is no Present” constitutes the only possible presence. It is from this possibility—and only from this possibility—that one is able to find a pathway to one’s proper place.

Quite honestly, I have developed this line of thought without having entirely subscribed to it. Without having bought into it. Indeed, I would like to know what provoked it and made it necessary. And what could possibly justify it “at present.” And what could unsettle it—because it must be unsettled. Yes, it is necessary if only because we hardly wish to be swallowed by an abyss . . . more mysterious and, above all, more insensible than our present pain. Today we are no longer able to *believe* that a long wait shall be sufficient. Nor do we believe that the “long time” will be able to turn about once it has reached its halfway point. Nothing authorizes this logic of extremes—save the eschato-logical.

The eschatological is the logic of the worst: of the apocalypse, which literally means the un-covering. Yet at the same time, nothing is able to unsettle such a logic because it rests upon a belief. There is a religion of thought, or at least of Heidegger’s. Whatever he may have said concerning the onto-theological structure of Western philosophy—from Plato to Nietzsche—he still slid into the same old rut

as Plato. For Heidegger, the “present” world of modern technology constitutes the utmost oblivion of Being—of presence. The “true life” or rather, true presence has withdrawn itself; but where or when—we do not know. Was it from the time of the Greeks? Or perhaps the future? Or both? Still, such representation would still be possible (though nontheologically) if Heidegger had not identified “true” presence with the presence of God and, by way of consequence, the want of any present with that of any god. That this god no longer has anything to do with the god of metaphysics—with the demiurge of Plato or the Absolute Spirit of Hegel—does not prevent it from being modeled on the same model. That of the whole and full presence of a thing to itself. And this want, regardless of what Heidegger may have written with respect to the abyss (*Abgrund*) of Being, remains just that: a want. Of course, it is one that may—and even ought in a certain respect—turn wholly and fully around.

Nevertheless, the want of any present cannot be fully explained by the want of any god. Even in the spirit of Hölderlin, it is not sufficient to simply rue the “evanescent” gods, who, “at that time / [were] truer.” The gods had “their” time and now their time is come: we must not wait for some new generation of deities. Neither nostalgia nor constant expectation are able to endure the intensity of the present age; neither can endure this time of want—this solemn and *sacred* night. But what exactly is it that is missing that makes our time one consumed with the Present? In the sixth stanza of the poem entitled, “Bread and Wine”—and thus before the seventh that says, “We’ve come too late,” and asks, “What are poets for in a time of distress?”—the poet speaks of a want, but not the want of God:

Where are they? Where do flower the Glorious, the  
Feat’s Crowns?

Thebes has long since faded and Athens too.

The illustrious arms no longer clank in Old Olympia.

Nor roll the chariots in their aggressive game. . . .

Why the silence of these old and sacred theatres?

“Where are they?”—Here Hölderlin does not call solely to the evanescent gods; rather, he would first address himself to the people: those who, to receive the Immortals, to be worthy of them, would lean upon one another in “powerful order.” And thus uplifted, they would erect their sound cities and noble temples. These peoples (the plural was mandatory for Hölderlin), are the Greeks; these ancient craftsmen who lived upon a land that was itself “constructed” (fourth stanza). Thebes, Athens and Corinth are not mere names that represent a local



and picturesque color or even a simple recollection of "antiquity." The Greeks really were the ornamental crown of the great and ancient Feat: they crowned the Feat, that is, the ceremonial visitation of the gods, precisely by celebrating their role as divine host. In Ancient Greek, crown or *stephanos* signifies that which wreathes and thus gives contour and countenance and even configuration. The walls of the city or Acropolis are never those of a prison. They are a limit (*peras*) that gives place to and opens up. Such was how the Greeks experienced presence in its essential finitude. Likewise, "the aggressive game" (*Kampfspiel*) has little to do with what we call *war*—which, as it were, is nothing more than an anonymous slaughter whereby the battle is fought with human means and human material. Heraclitus called *polemos* the "father of all"—the very one by which and with which each man was measured. Here each man would discover his limit and thus his proper place. The *polemos* revealed who was mortal and who immortal; who was a master and who a slave. Meeting face to face, the Greek athletes were no longer concerned with the sport of it all: in fact, they never entered into competition as such simply because the best (*aristos*) would always win. They stood face to face to find their identity. Each sought, by a combination of audacity and limiticity, not only to save face—but to find it. It was in this way that the Greeks entered into the presence of presence.

Entire peoples confronted one another in the same way. Oftentimes we stand with remorse and look back upon the Greek city-states that exhausted themselves with their futile feuds. We lament that they never knew how to handle and dominate the heedless and rebellious ones! That they were never able to unite and thus impose a universal empire such as the Romans were to later establish with their *pax romana*. And yet, the universality of Roman "civilization" already carried with it the poison of imperialism—a poison that had infiltrated even the splendid democracy of Athens. For here we must not forget that Athens imposed its "democratic" empire with terror, deportation, and the random massacre of its indigent population. To be sure, the *polemos* soon lost its spirit (we wonder if it ever had it) and thus its great feat.

And what was this great feat? That men should meet the gods and with them stand shoulder to shoulder and face to face—just as did the many peoples to build their cities. Still, what do we really know about this great feat; this bold factum? Do we see the silence through the clamor of celebrations and through the uproar of the persevering festival? Is it possible to arrive at such a feat without the peoples? And are there still such peoples? Is there even a many-headed multitude?

Can we speak of the whole of humankind as such? A certain Stephanos Mallarmé would tell us the following: "There is no Present, no—a present does not exist . . . the Whole of mankind wants to disclose itself, for want—of everything." That there is no Present because "the Whole of mankind wants to disclose itself" seems to be a gratuitous assertion. Yet it is one that corresponds rather well with the contempt and arrogant attitude—the supremacy—that the poet was supposed to have felt for the ignobile vulgus. Indeed, this particular image of the poet seems to be supported by "public" opinion—including criticism. To illustrate the aristocratic attitude of this "prince of poets," one often cites the text that bears the title, "Artistic Heresies: Art for Everyone." We must remember though that it was the time of Marx and social upheaval caused by modern industrialism. Nevertheless, Mallarmé seems to have snugly wrapped himself up in that Parnassian doctrine of "art for art's sake." Even the conclusion he comes to at the end of his text is convincing: "The hour that now sounds is serious: culture is carried out by the people and great doctrines shall go out about the world. If there be any vulgarization, may it be that of the good and not of art. And may your efforts never lead to such a deformed thing—to the *poet worker*—so sad it is for the artist of the race."<sup>7</sup> Despite this awful word *race*, Mallarmé does not show himself to be against the common people. In fact, he even quotes, quite notably, the words of Baudelaire: "To abuse the multitude is to humiliate oneself." Mallarmé protests, principally, against the outrageous and nonsensical idea that began to grow in the minds of his contemporaries: "to think it indispensable to teach poetry in the schools." For, he believed, such teaching would irresistably lower "poetry to the rank of a science."

Hölderlin, on the contrary, believed it was necessary to teach poetry. At the beginning of his *Remarks Concerning Oedipus*, he wrote the following: "The lack of any modern poetry is most certainly the fault of the school and of the trade. Unfortunately, the way that he [the poet] must walk cannot be calculated or even taught; and then, once it has been learned, it is not always able to be repeated—safely and practically—again and again." Yet between the time of Hölderlin and that of Mallarmé, the concept of science had collapsed. Even if Mallarmé still had in mind the idea of science as Absolute Knowledge—a Hegelian idea that very few poets had at the time—his contemporaries referred to something entirely different: the ideology of a progress that levels everything not positive—everything that is unproductive such as art. For example, poetry being valuable only as a technique for the production of "beautiful" language. Between this "technique" and the *technè*

or *mechanè*—the height to which Hölderlin wished to elevate poetry—there is a gulf. When he spoke of the “regulated rules” of the Sophoclean tragedies, by this he did not understand a totality—rigorously codified or not—of literary recipes and mechanisms. Moreover, the regulated rule necessarily needed to be allied with “the living sense—which can never be calculated”—and which no technique could accomplish. It is for this reason, considering the current state of affairs in both our schools and our own culture, that we would do well to follow Mallarmé’s advice. We might consider teaching the art of reading and writing before attempting an “analysis” of literary works: because for the ordinary illiterate, such works shall remain but dead and decayed letters strewn across the page; they shall remain an object of disgust.

We can continue our critique of “vulgarization”—even though the latter consists less in casting pearls before swine than in transforming the pearls into something swiney. Metaphor we extend to the entire domain of art: for has not the institution of the museum had, for an immediate consequence, the transformation of living works into objects secluded from sense, that is, from their “presence”?

But this is not our sea of troubles. Though if it were—we would need to interrogate the status of the work of art at a time when presence expresses itself in a way other than as a work or even as a thing. In all actuality, Mallarmé abandoned at a very early age his “aristocratic” notions. So much so that he did not deem “Art for Everyone” dignified enough to include in his collection of prose, as has mentioned Henri Mondor. Yet is it only because he blamed it for “the somewhat invective tone which he was careful not to use from the moment he was master of his style?” Is it simply a question of style? Does “Art for Everyone” constitute an “important, if not surprising, testimony to his precocious artistic convictions and to the firmness with which he was to conform to them?” Or does this judgment itself—this question—simply testify to the blindness of criticism? A criticism that refuses to see that Mallarmé overturned all his “artistic convictions”?

Fortunately, Mallarmé did not merely write minor texts that he threw, as it were, into an oubliette and that were only later exhumed by his pious disciples. Quite notably, he wrote “The Restricted Action” in which he disclosed, for lack of a better word, his *political* position. The following would be the best way not to read this text: as a justification written, a posteriori, by the poet in his inner sanctum—by a poet whose mind had already assimilated the aristocratic contempt for everything that emerged from the multitude. It is true that Mallarmé laid claim to the term *aristocracy*—but on what terms? Let us read the

following quote taken from “*La Cour*” (The Court): “Aristocracy, why not articulate this term in the presence of the maddening cries of democracy: reciprocity of those states indispensable to the national conflict and by which something stands upright; they clash and interpenetrate, and are without virtue if either one is missing.”<sup>8</sup>

There is no aristocracy without democracy; no democracy without aristocracy. “The coin, unearthed from the ring, presents both heads and tails: the former, a serene figure; while the latter, a universal and brutal figure.” Such is the *double state* of politics, which may very well be analogous to the “double state of every word.” Perhaps here we hear the faint echo of Heraclitus’s *polemos*? To speak of aristocracy without uttering democracy “consists in speaking ill of the City.” And so the reciprocal relationship is true—yet this we refuse to see. How strange indeed our sightlessness that makes a mire out of our “democracies”—how “foul!” (to use the expression used by Rimbaud in his poem “Democracy”).

Let us repeat, but this time in French, what Mallarmé wrote: “Il n’est pas de Présent, non—un présent n’existe pas. Faute que se déclare la Foule, faute—de tout.” If there is no Present, it is not the Crowd’s fault; it is for want of (*de*) a Crowd. In French, the word *faute* has a totally different meaning when followed by the preposition *à* or *de*. In the first case, the Crowd or, as here translated, that is, interpreted, the “whole of mankind” is guilty. In the second case, which here, following the French syntax, is the correct, the want of present is not due to the Crowd; on the contrary, there is no Present *because* the Crowd is wanting or, at least, cannot disclose itself.

This minimal difference changes everything, and we wonder if criticism has not been a bit too hasty: instead of attributing to the poet a fictive contempt for the Crowd, the critics should first be less contemptuous for the syntax. Mallarmé, who described himself as a “syntaxist” (*syntaxier*), wished to be understood even by children, provided that these knew French syntax. As for the accusation of being “obscure,” the same accusation that would be later leveled against Heidegger, Mallarmé once responded: “In effect, the danger is equally great, whether such obscurity comes from the poet or the reader.”<sup>9</sup> Before going directly to the meaning, we—readers—have still to learn the basics in every language: I mean, syntax, the systematic order that gathers each single element of a particular language to constitute an organic “whole” and not a random collection of letters and “significations.” These never are the primordial elements and can emerge only as the results of the *binding* act of syntax.

Thus, not only is the “Whole of mankind” not nothing, it is “everything.” And it is precisely because this everything is wanting—let us call it the great de-feat—that there is no present. But why does the Whole not disclose itself? Because—and here we enter into a certain circularity—it is the want of any present that prevents the Whole from disclosing itself.

If the whole of mankind does not disclose itself, it is because the Whole is wanting. It is the Whole that wants to speak properly (properly speaking) and wants to properly disclose itself. (The capitalization of *Whole* like, in French, *la Foule*, indicates that it is an entity of which we speak and not a haphazard and heterogenous gathering of individuals). Yet how could it disclose itself and with what word? The Crowd has seemingly spoken up and simply taken the word—as it once took the Bastille—though, in all actuality, that which it has taken, it does not have. And thus the silence of the sacred theaters of old is perpetuated unto the present—even if this silence sinks away into the noisy noise of the media. Defeat, but no victory. The want of any word is also the want of any present (and of any presence). Only the poet dare say what the Crowd would disclose:

This haggard crowd! claims: We are  
The sad opacity of our future ghosts.<sup>10</sup>

At present, we are the absence of any present: “our Future ghosts,” specters that will come—back (*des revenants à l'avenir*). Contemporaries, we shall never be—not even of ourselves: “Naive is he who would himself proclaim his own contemporary; deserting, usurping with equal impudence, when the past ceased and the future would delay or when both would intermingle with perplexity; always with an eye on covering up the a-part.”<sup>11</sup> Disrupture—what I call the a-part—is another way of specifying the present when it is wanting; when it is trapped between a past that is “fled” and a future that would delay.

However, we must take care. The poet is not fundamentally different from the crowd. Perhaps he is its condensation and incarnation; its deification and “coronation”—that is, if we remember the “ornamental crowns of the ancient feat” that were the Greek peoples. “Crowns,” but only insofar as they were wreathed with a holy Word. For this reason, when the Crowd does not disclose itself, the Crown, that is, the poet grieves. He dwells in mourning; abstention (“to do nothing”) is equal to suicide; withdrawal from the multitude is not proper to the poet as it is to an umbrageous and prideful personality who refuses to intermingle. The poet does not withdraw from the time

in which he lives, rather time itself withdraws as does the Whole of mankind. This time that draws away—the epoch—remains our own. It was Nietzsche's too and to it he referred as "the desert [that] spreads." Time of the desert—of the present—which, from itself, deserts; disrupted, besieged by a lifeless past (of old values, idols, and cadavers of capital) and a future that would delay—desperately. Nothing—nobody—can be his or her own contemporary, even if we still believe to be from "our" time. Even if we read, daily, the daily newspaper—newspapers that each day carry some new news of failing banks, of revolution, dissolution—war!—always in flux; always carried by the current—affair. Here *current* does not carry the sense of "contemporary." Perhaps we are left with only a "sad opacity"; for even the most lucid journalist cannot be but haggard and perplexed before the question of presence however little one may examine the mode of "presence" and so-called current affairs.

And yet, to withdraw oneself from such a day (from the daily world of the newspaper that Mallarmé never stopped interrogating) would be for the poet, "the equivalent of not being." "For me," he once confided to a journalist, "the poet who resides in a society that doesn't allow him to live, is similar to the man who isolates himself in order to en-grave his own tombstone."<sup>12</sup> In recognition of his own solitude, he once claimed: "I believe that poetry is made for the ostentatious display and supreme pleasure of society; one so constituted that glory too has its place—though the people no longer seem to have any notion of it." The religion of art shall be the religion of the future. But only for that society which knows how to deify itself and yet, which, because the Self equals "the principal piece or nothing," deifies nothing. This explains why, for Mallarmé (just as for Nietzsche and Heidegger), the political and social question is one founded in *fiction*. This in no way devaluates the question, because fiction itself is founded in "literature." *Society* may very well be an empty term—"the heritage of philosophers"—and "nothing in fact may exist," which corresponds to "the injunction awakened by its august concept." "To discourse on it is equal to not treating any subject or to silence oneself by distraction": "Nothingness or the irruption into emptiness."<sup>13</sup>

At an interval of fifteen years, the "Restricted Action" responded not to the prose of a young and "aristocratic" Mallarmé who also refused to embrace the inept idea of an "art for everyone," but to Rimbaud's injunction: "Poetry shall no longer submit action to its own rhythm: it [poetry] will be *in advance*." For Mallarmé as well, "action is not life, but only a way to squander some force—a sort of exasperation." And to this word (by Rimbaud) Mallarmé would add, rather

ironically, the following: "But this generation does not seem very concerned—even beyond its lack of interest in politics—with the desire for physical exertion. Except," he would go on, "with the monotony of winding along the pavement between one's shin bones, according to the machine presently in favor, the fiction of continuous dazzling speedway." (We know that the poet preferred sailing to every other sport; however, he was enchanted not so much by bicycles as by their female riders—especially when the wind raised their skirts.) Leaving this sort of primitive action aside, we may ask what does it mean to act, if it does not begin with the simple act of smoking? Let us be serious or philosophers and respond with Mallarmé: "To act, without this and for whoever does not begin with the simple act of smoking, signified, visitor, I understand you, philosophically, to produce over much a movement which, in return, gives you the sensation that you were the principle of it; therefore exist, you: of which, beforehand, no one believes himself certain. This practice encompasses two ways; or, by a will, unknowingly, which withstands a life, until the manifold eruption—to think, that; otherwise, the outlets within reach now within a forethought, newspapers and their whirlwind, determining therein a force in a sense, whatever diverse contradiction, with the immunity of the null outcome."<sup>14</sup> After having played naive, that is, the ape, Mallarmé aped the philosopher—and found along the way, the common-place: the modern world of Cartesian coordinates. To act: to believe one is the cause of an effect which, in return, gives rise to the feeling of having been—the cause. And thus to exist in and of oneself. This is the vicious circle that defines the philosophical and vulgar scene—of "good sense."

However, Mallarmé did not stop here. He discerned an alternative that corresponded to the "double state of every word": "essential"—it was thought as act (to be sure an anticipation of Heidegger!)—"unrefined and immediate." Thus it is only in the press and journalism that we are able to say everything; if only because there are no consequences. It is the medium where everything amounts to the same thing: where the nothingness of the result is obtained already in advance.

What remains to be contemplated: the "action" in question is very soon *restricted* . . . to paper. ("Because contemplation, without any traces, becomes evanescent.") In some cases it is restricted to the Book; in the best of cases, to the poetic "coronation." But the Book needs no one, no subject, no *agent*: "Inasmuch as the author is separated from the impersonalized volume, so too is the approach of any reader. Know then, that between the human accessories, the Book takes place all

alone: done, being."<sup>15</sup> This happens in such a way that the "suicide or abstention"—the *to do nothing*—is at the very root of every *essential* action. Here we say, "to do nothing" precisely because there is nothing to do; because it is already *done, being*. In a sense, to stand aside and to be published are the same thing. Moreover, we must remember that Mallarmé was always published in newspapers: he who supposedly scorned such "sewers."

To understand Mallarmé, we would do well to grasp that which Marx called "the positive sense of negation brought back to itself." Although Mallarmé's thought is not dialectical, it is, perhaps, more profoundly engaged in negativity than any metaphysics. Furthermore, in this respect, there is good reason to reconsider the end of the "Restricted Action." Such that it becomes a question of a "triumphant overturning" at the very heart of the "principal piece"—that is, *nothing*. In this way, it would reveal itself under the auspice of an *apparent* alternative—and only apparent. "Restrain yourself," the poet would say, "abstain yourself, withdraw into your Dwelling place, into your own existence and ask yourself" whether "it is not better—only to risk over a total state the least incomplete surrounding, certain conclusions, extreme, about art which might irrupt, like a diamond, in this time forever, in the integrity of the Book—to play them, though and with a triumphal overturning, with the silent injunction that nothing, shuddering in the unscious side of the hour, with the pages shown, clear, obvious, finds it ready; even though this might be another that must illuminate."<sup>16</sup> What is the difference between "risking" extreme conclusions concerning art and putting them into play? None, except that between-times, a triumphal overturning has taken place: one that would "shudder in the unscious hour." This hour that speaks under the auspice of an or: *now or never*. Now never excludes never, rather, it includes it: whereas the "time for ever"—when such conclusions were risked—such a now was excluded. The now that holds, like the hand that handles, is the time of the essential act, when nothing finds the hour ready, when the hour is deferred; and always for the simple reason (the triumphal overturning) that it is the hour of nothing. Or rather, it is the hour of the principal piece, irrupting in the Book, and even in the sentence itself. For, between the word *nothing* and the negation that normally follows immediately after, there are inserted at least a dozen words.

The hour (now or never) is nothing other than the epoch—this epoch in which there is no Present. Indeed, the hour "is incessant as well as never" and is characterized by urgency. And never has its urgent and incessant character been more pressing than today. At the



same time, it would incessantly defer itself and refuse its own arrival. It would hold itself—in suspense—just as would the epoch. It—the hour—is the present moment—the now—that holds off and delays. “For whom or what are we waiting?” asked Nietzsche, “The grandiloquent heralds and trumpeting trumpets? And what pleasure in this noise! There is a silence that smothers us; too long have we lent an ear.”

Yes, what are we waiting for? The end of the world? The second coming of Christ? Or for nothing and nobody? Are we waiting for—Godot? Heidegger would say that waiting is without object. And yet, in our waiting, we hear the silence that would smother us; this silence that we never cease to silence with our “universal reporting.” Such reporting fills in the emptiness of every word, as if it were a septic tank or sewer. “Express yourself!” or so an election poster proclaimed. But what? A self that remains reduced, in advance, to its “daily nothingness”? Again and still, this nothing is to be disclosed; perhaps the Whole of mankind shall have the power to speak it. Still and again, with what word? If speaking is equivalent to the “silent return of a coin to another’s pocket”? Could we, if we were to everywhere cease our wanting, and at every hour, cease our speaking and “self” expression, hear the silence that smothers us? And this voice crying in the desert: “The desert spreads?” But “riddle upon riddle! What was once the cry ‘The desert spreads . . .,’ now threatens to turn into chatter. The threat of this perversion is part of what gives us food for thought. The threat is that perhaps this most thoughtful thought will today, and still more tomorrow, become suddenly no more than a platitude, and as platitude spread and circulate. This fashion of talking platitudes is at work in that endless profusion of books describing the state of the world today. They describe what by its nature is indescribable . . .”<sup>17</sup>

The risk, most certainly, is great: for it concerns the transformation of the “cry” of thought into a simple “manner of speaking.” Even Heidegger, who never cried out, saw his own thought transformed into chitchat and prattle. For example, the prattle that marks the “want of any thought” in rock music and every other “absence of thought!” Let us be careful, then, not to identify the “desert” with everything that emerges from some pseudo-“decline” of Europe or the West and that corresponds to the technicalization of the planet. On the other hand, let us not believe that this desert or decline can be stopped by a simple return to those good, old-fashioned values of humanism or “culture” or to an agrarian society: that perfectly pastoral utopia. No returns, no exchanges. No return whatsoever is possible and this—maybe—is the desert—the exile of the expatriated is merely the first sign of its arid encroachment. It began with the first grain of “occidental” thought

and since then, hasn't ceased to spread. Moreover, we are left without the possibility of being able to predict its end—nor is it desirable. How can we arrest the devastation of the earth? What measures could we take: administrative? political? social? Should we organize international colloquiums? But then, how can we take measures against that which has no measure and which destroys all measure? "The desert spreads," even in the shadow of abundance. Nor will it suffice to simply irrigate, as did the Israelis, to turn the desert into a green garden rife with flowers. Furthermore, we wonder whether such a desert could be crossed—in much the same way as the Jews crossed the Red Sea? But such a crossing implies two sides or "shores." Where is the "other" side? Where is the "line," over which we must cross to be saved?—to be welcomed into the Promised Land? Does nihilism have such sides? Are we able to cross over its line (as thought Ernst Jünger): "In no way is the Line—thought as the sign of the Zone of nihilism brought to completion—something merely placed before man; something that might simply be crossed. Consequently, the possibility of a *trans lineam* gives way as well as does any crossing that might lead us there."<sup>18</sup> We cannot travel through this desert as we might travel over an ocean or through a tunnel; no shore is within sight. In effect, it would appear that this desert has no shore at all: "The devastation of the earth may put man within reach of a higher archy of life; primarily as the organisation of a state of uniform happiness for all men."<sup>19</sup> Or so Heidegger wrote, while thinking of the last man described by Nietzsche: "We have invented happiness,' the last men claim, while blinking." Invisible desert or caricature that spreads all the more vigorously because, by itself, it remains unseen or because it would appear as its opposite: as the cornucopia of abundance. And this an abundance of consumption brought within reach of every hand, of everything—including that which is not coined. The Desert: the "there is no Present" that would give itself over as the only present. And from such "giving itself over," every other present is held to be a fiction, myth, or mystification. Here it would be wrong to become indignant, for present nihilism speaks the truth about the epoch: "There is no Present"—while, at the same time, it would deride it.

The Desert—silence of the sacred theaters, though no longer perceptible as such, smothered in advance by the noisy noise of cultural "manifestations." Either on the burning or icy earth, we see the last man—and the last vestige of the dance—leap and bound—man who makes everything look small, for want—of everything. A species that is indestructible, like the flea. This land, this earth stripped of

every god and filled with fleas; land without land, without any inhabitants and yet, overpopulated, overexploited, and overequipped.

What is there to do? Perhaps, there is nothing to do. Whether suicide or abstention, nothing to do, why? Why poets in such a desert? Why poets who commit suicide?—Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Hölderlin, Trakl—the list is long, even though each poet did not actually take his own life. Mallarmé once wrote that Rimbaud “cast away his dreams, either by his fault or theirs, and purged himself of poetry.” And Mallarmé, his whole life long, continued to dream of the Book; to describe his solitude simply as “the case of a man who isolated himself in order to engrave his own tombstone”—or those of other poets. Certainly this is the aristocratic attitude of a poet who considered the “contemporary epoch as an interregnum”; a poet who refused to “mingle” in it other than by sending, every now and then, “his calling card, a sonnet or stanza to the living; so that, by them, he would not be vilified; especially if they suspected him of knowing they had no place.”<sup>20</sup> But such reserve as this was moderated by an even greater secret, by an even greater fear, the incessant temptation to commit suicide: “Victoriously fled, sweet suicide . . . ”

Hölderlin also experienced this temptation to commit “sweet” suicide—like the death of Empedocles rejoining the great fire. But Hölderlin fought against this urge and “victoriously fle[d]” this “great transport, eternally hostile to man; this energetic transport that always is en route towards the other world.” He came to learn of the turning round of Time, wherewith the want of any god gave comfort. Such was revealed by his *Remarks on Antigone*, and this, under the figure of Zeus’s turning into “father of Time” or even “father of the Earth.” Yet does a Present open up in such a rending a-part; or in such destitution? “The constant coursing of the hours”—counted, as it were, by a Niobè now become “equal to the desert”—may very well contain the only possible allotment that is vested in whomever stands fast and refuses to flee toward the other world. But also who refuses the meta-physical urge, this desire to transcend, whereby the earth may appear as only a phantom with respect to a “true life,” “absent” down here on terra firma.

This flight has opened up the way to the desertification of the earth; and it is against this that Nietzsche vociferously protested. Ever since the time of Plato, the human being has been a stranger upon this earth. But it will not suffice to simply renounce this will to transcend: that thus, we might find our way back, our return. It shall not suffice to worship and exalt the “body” to end our exile. Perhaps, in fact, our first step shall be the renunciation of any will to “return.” Perhaps it

will be to take care and keep ourselves—"Take care and be there," wrote Mallarmé. But first, we must take care to not believe ourselves already "there," finally there.

Upon this path we must make our stand and stay and, more than ever, keep our guard. Such vigilance, even vis-à-vis the "withdrawal," remained for Mallarmé, a voluntary and almost heroic attitude. It characterized the poet who went unrecognized by his contemporaries and who, without contempt, adopted, certain measures of retaliation or, at least, of outspoken defiance. "To keep oneself," according to the "Restricted Action," while waiting for better days to come—and then, precisely *while waiting* "to publish." On the one hand, this implies a certain consent with respect to the state of things and a certain "wait and see" attitude that is always able to turn into "collaboration." On the other hand, this implies that we are ready with a rather heavy dose of illusion, for nothing assures us that the worst has come to pass. In effect, does this waiting not partake in a general and planetary movement: of fiery transport or impassioned nonmovement; this infinite movement by which the epoch exhausts itself in its search for an orbit—forever out of balance and greedy for assurances and absolute certainties? On this decisive point, even Heidegger would disappoint us inasmuch as we would only need to prepare ourselves for an enigmatic "turning of time." A turning we are never able to accomplish with will power alone; for precisely this voluntarism and this "action-for-action's-sake" prohibits our access to Being. Thought itself is of a preliminary order; that is, it is only able to prepare and, even, only able to prepare the preparations for a prefiguration of change. And this change, this small mutation, itself shall be but a small step; unable, by itself, to do anything as long as a "sign" has not come from a "big" step . . . And so, while waiting, we wait . . . It is in this half-heroic posture—and half-grotesque—that the sectaries of the Master find themselves; each one justified in his immobility by the extreme prudence of a philosopher who had not always been as prudent and who, for some time, kicked himself in the pants (without openly admitting it) for having believed the moment come, for having saluted the dawning of a new age, for having been "revolutionary"—that is, horribly hoodwinked. A time, "a Present" seemed to exist; a German present that would have put an end to the confusion, that would have stood up by itself, that would have been on the lips of all the people finally present; a people finally re-united in the same mystical body, the same magical communion: "There it is, we have arrived!"

*Returned* from such excessiveness and errantry, we now understand that Heidegger remained apart from everything, that he returned

from everything, except, paradoxically, from those to whom he (re)turned in the most profound way: the first Greek thinkers. However, at the twilight of his life, he declared: "Only a god can save us." Here he expressed the ground or root of that which must be called a *belief*. And his waiting—even if Being is supposed to replace the ancient gods that have "flown"—resembled much too much the waiting for the Messiah: so much so that we *Moderns* might have difficulties in following such a slippery path. The West—that is, if this word still has a sense; if it is not already overloaded with a pernicious mixture of bad conscience, otherworldliness, and the underworld, and overcoated, as it were, with good intentions—has, as a result of its murderous eschatologies, fallen into discredit. Eschatologies that other peoples pay at their expense and not ours—while we, tortured or serene, assist in the collapse of everything in which we had, some time ago, placed all our hopes: communism, revolution, liberation—ideas that shook the world and continue to shake it—except our own, to which nothing more can happen; our ends of history, our tomorrows which sing all this—this, in which we are no longer able to believe (and for good reason); finally we have unburdened ourselves, more or less, at the expense of others—Africans or Cubans—who are unable to do anything, but . . . who will kill each other for some time to come, without understanding what has happened to them; the fallout of a History that has come to an end—but an end only for *us* . . .

And yet, who are we? Are we those to whom nothing more can happen? Or rather, are we those, unique in our historical position, to whom *nothing happens* or for whom there is no Present? And for whom—because this does happen and because it does overturn *everything*—the possibility of having an experience is reserved?

## Notes

1. Stéphane Mallarmé, "L'Action restreinte," *Oeuvres Complètes*, p. 372; hereafter *OC*.
2. This sentence refers to the following one by Mallarmé: ". . . *aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore*."—Trans.
3. Mallarmé, *OC*, pp. 371-372.
4. Mallarmé, "La Musique et les Lettres," *OC*, p. 647.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 647.
6. Martin Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?" in *PLT*, pp. 92-93.
7. Mallarmé, *OC*, p. 260.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 415.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 869.
10. Mallarmé, "Toast funèbre," *OC*, p. 54.
11. Mallarmé, "L'Action restreinte," *OC*, p. 372.
12. Mallarmé, *OC*, p. 869.
13. Mallarmé, *OC*, p. 419.
14. Mallarmé, *OC*, p. 369.
15. Mallarmé, "L'Action restreinte," *OC*, p. 372.
16. Mallarmé, "L'Action restreinte," p. 373.
17. Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking*, p. 49.
18. Heidegger, *Zur Seinsfrage*, French trans. in *Questions I*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), p. 233.
19. Heidegger, "What Is Called Thinking."
20. Mallarmé, *OC*, p. 664.