

Intonation, Interpretation, and Meaning in Mallarmé's 'Petit Air II'

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What is in an intonation? Given that poetry, despite its origin as an art to be read aloud, is now most often read in silence, can an unabashedly vocal phenomenon such as intonation contribute to our understanding of a poem? Does it locate itself in meaning or only in performance? In this essay I propose to move toward an answer to those questions via an attempt to read a short poem by Stéphane Mallarmé, about which there has been critical debate about what exactly is to be found there, whether it is a straightforward statement of sorts about what poetry can and cannot do, or whether its systems of meaning are far more complicated than a straightforward paraphrase could hope to convey. Intonation, I will argue, is a crucial feature that the poem forces the reader to consider in order to posit an interpretation; in turn, the poem as case study provides not just an example of how intonation might fruitfully be drawn upon to elicit a compelling reading, but also of the way that the singularity of Mallarmé's approach to poetic process allows us to articulate what is at stake in discussions of poetic intonation more broadly. My discussion will appeal briefly to Mallarmé's conception of music as a way to theorize the way intonation shapes our interpretation of 'Petit Air II' in far more than an incidental way; I aim to show that the final lines of the poem lead us to suspend interpretation between two distinct but conjoined possibilities. I will argue that poems such as 'Petit Air II' compel us to become not just readers but *intoners*, a vantage point that will take us to the limits of what poetry can and cannot do.

Mallarmé's poem 'Petit Air II' ['Little Air/Melody II'], composed in 1893 and first published in 1899, is a heptasyllabic Shakespearean sonnet that describes a bird and compares it to the voice of the poet. For Gardiner Davies, writing a couple of generations ago, the meaning of 'Petit Air II' is straightforward and transparent: 'Le développement du petit poème est simple, presque linéaire : il ne contient que la description de l'exploit du cygne auquel, à deux reprises, le poète tient à s'identifier' ['The development of the little poem is simple, almost linear: it contains only the description of the exploit of the swan with whom, twice, the poet insists on identifying'].¹ Davies sees the poem as a companion piece to 'Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui' ['The virgin, the vivacious and the beautiful today'], another sonnet that features a bird as figure of the poet; for Davies, 'Le vierge...' recounts a failure to achieve a poetic work, whereas 'Petit Air II' recounts success.² But things are never as simple as they seem in Mallarmé. Indeed, there is no critical consensus about what kind of bird is evoked in 'Petit Air II', with many, including Bertrand Marchal, following Davies and seeing the bird as a swan,³ even though, as Antoine Compagnon has pointed out,⁴ there is no textual proof of this, despite the fact that it sings only once in the poem and however convenient the identification of the bird as swan renders the comparison of the poem to 'Le vierge, le vivace...'. More recent critical attention to 'Petit Air II' has articulated a far more complex sense of the stakes involved in the poem. Philippe Marty, for instance, identifies a tension in the poem that relates to form and the ephemeral, implicitly highlighting a way in which 'Le vierge, le vivace...' and 'Petit Air II' are similar in that both, when all is said and done, leave us with a poem, a lasting set of graphic and syntactic signs:

¹ Gardiner Davies, 'Petit Air II'. *Synthèses* 22 (December 1967-January 1968): pp. 52-56, p. 55.

² See Davies, p. 56. Graham Robb is right to point out that the bird in 'Petit Air II' 'is no more triumphant' than the one in 'Le vierge...': 'Its song is unheard, its flight or emigration interrupted. At least the swan [in 'Le vierge...'] retained the movement of its neck' (p. 130).

³ See Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, edited Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, Edition de la Pléiade, 1998-2003), I: p. 1183. Hereafter abbreviated as OC.

⁴ Antoine Compagnon, 'Apories mallarméennes' in André Guyaux, ed. *Mallarmé : Actes du colloque de la Sorbonne du 21 novembre 1998* (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1998), pp. 95-121, pp. 106-7.

La contradiction qui est au cœur de ‘Petit Air II’ pourrait être formulée ainsi : il s’agit de dire l’inouï, l’éphémère, l’oral, l’inconsistant, le non-articulé, mais de faire en sorte en même temps que cet inarticulé articule, structure le poème, car la poésie, si elle éclate et vient au monde comme voix, ne peut durer que comme forme.⁵

[The contradiction that is at the heart of ‘Petit Air II’ could be formulated thus: it is about saying the unheard, the ephemeral, the oral, the inconsistent, the unarticulated, but to do it in such a way at the same time that this unarticulated articulates, structures the poem, since poetry, if it explodes and comes into the world as voice, can only last as form.]

This contradiction announces itself in the poem in terms of silence and voice and the potential persistence of the voice beyond the enunciation of the speaker or singer, poet or bird.

Questions of voice lead inevitably to questions of intonation, without which anything we might mean by voice would be reduced to a monotone that risks significant reduction of possibilities of meaning. As I hope to demonstrate, questions of intonation lead back inevitably to questions of meaning; rather than allowing us to shift our focus from a poem’s meaning to its aural qualities, intonation deepens the urgency of problems of meaning, and brings us to new possibilities in terms of coping with, or indeed thriving upon, a plurality of interpretive possibilities that makes us question a straightforward opposition between sound and sense.

Lawrence Kramer underscores that humanizing aspect of intonation and pushes it a step further to identify it with subjectivity: ‘Subjectivity exists only where the world has churned up the waves of voice. Expression is a map of the world, but a map that can only be sensed, not seen’.⁶ And Garrett Stewart seeks to complicate the opposition between the body as site of reading aloud and the mind as the site of the work of silent reading and interpretation by reminding us that the body ‘is a

⁵ Philippe Marty, ‘Voix et vocation: Sur *Petit Air II* de Mallarmé’ in Michel Collomb, ed. *Voix et création au XXe siècle*. (Paris: Champion, 1997), pp. 143-57, p. 148.

⁶ Lawrence Kramer, *Expression and Truth: On the Music of Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), p. 118.

place not separable from the space of “understanding”, though standing under it’.⁷ Reading at the level of sound is integral to our interpretation of poetry not ‘in order to recover some sensual ontology of music before language’, but rather because reading this way

offers one way of knowing the specificity of the text, the irreducible fact of that particularized semiosis known as language and maximized in literature [...] The read text in this sense is so far from a given, from being given to us, so little a product and so much a production, that language itself has offered up a new way of formulating it. (p. 17)

According to Stewart, what is needed in order to move past the often unhelpful body/mind distinction when it comes to reading poetry is a term that locates itself not beyond but, in a sense, within the opposition: ‘Between *epos*, as voice, and *graph*, as mark, we need a third term, a third position—a site, all but a breathing space, for the reader’s silent voice’ (pp. 138-9). In this he is close to Roland Barthes’ exploration of the relations between music and language in ‘Le grain de la voix’ [‘The Grain of the Voice’], where he attempts to articulate an ‘espace [...] très précis où une langue rencontre une voix’ [‘very precise space where a language encounters a voice’].⁸

Whether one reads a poem aloud or silently, then, intonation plays a role that is intimately linked to meaning making by playing a vital role in how we construe that meaning in our engagement with the words of the poem; in that sense, intonation is not simply secondary to meaning. For my purposes in this essay, I consider intonation on what Natalie Gerber has called ‘the simplest level’, where ‘intonation can be described as what we hear. It is the rise and fall of the pitch of the voice in spoken language’.⁹ It is a ‘characteristic of language in use, not of language in

⁷ Garrett Stewart, *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 17.

⁸ Roland Barthes, ‘Le grain de la voix’ in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Eric Marty (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1994), Volume II, pp. 1436-42, p. 1437.

⁹ Natalie Gerber, ‘Intonation and the Conventions of Free Verse’, *Style* 49:1 (2015): pp. 8-34, p. 10. Gerber goes on to distinguish tonality and tonicity in terms of the segmentation of a line of speech or poetry in her discussion of intonation and free verse (pp. 11-31). My own concern remains with the primary aspect of intonation, the rise and fall of pitch.

isolation' (10), and is thus bound up with contexts in which meaning is being constructed by the listener or reader. Such is often the communicative function of intonation when considered in everyday utterances, but if we accept the uncontroversial assumption that poetry is not about 'communication' in the everyday sense, intonation is removed from a strictly communicative context and placed inevitably back among the elements we need to consider as part of a poet's expressive repertoire when we attempt to construe meaning from a poem. Intonation is bound up, as even this cursory glance at some of the theoretical questions posed or implied by intonation has suggested, with notions of voice, subjectivity, modes of reading, and more, and so even performance-oriented discussions of how best to vocalize Mallarmé's poem will always lead back to questions of interpretation, which are ultimately my primary interest here. Before venturing further into this terrain, let us look more specifically at the poem that I have suggested can help us gain insight into the way intonation impacts meaning. Here is 'Petit Air II':

Indomptablement a dû
Comme mon espoir s'y lance
Éclater là-haut perdu
Avec furie et silence,

Voix étrangère au bosquet
Ou par nul écho suivie
L'oiseau qu'on n'ouït jamais
Une autre fois en la vie.

Le hagard musicien,
Cela dans le doute expire
Si de mon sein pas du sien
A jailli le sanglot pire

Déchiré va-t-il entier
Rester sur quelque sentier! (OC I: p. 35)

[Indomitably must
Like my hopes flung after it
Have burst in ether and been lost
With the fury and silence of its flight:

Voice foreign to the wood
Or else unechoed, bird
That in a single lifetime could
Never more than once be heard.

The haggard musician,
It still expires in doubt
If not from his breast but my own
More grievous sobs came gushing out:

Tattered but entire, shall
He still pursue some chosen way!^{10]}

While there are suggestive paths one might follow to begin interpreting the poem, most notably the relationship it seems to posit between bird and poet and the intriguing relation of sound and silence, we should be wary, for reasons I shall discuss further below, of beginning with an attempt to paraphrase what the poem appears to be communicating. Such an approach leads to more questions than answers,¹¹ and ultimately to the realization that the poem contains ‘an entanglement of recognizable but strangely modified or underdetermined motifs’.¹²

What, then, is at stake in this poem? As Roger Pearson has indicated, while there are echoes here, in the title of the poem as well as the choice of a seven-syllable metre, of the *Ariettes oubliées* [*Forgotten Ariettas*] of Paul Verlaine, Mallarmé’s poetic project is quite different from Verlaine’s in that vague impressionistic musicality is

¹⁰ Translation by Henry Weinfeld in Mallarmé, *Collected Poems* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 64, slightly altered.

¹¹ Henry Weinfeld names just a few: ‘Whether the bird dies (‘expire’) in midflight; and whether the music that is breathed out and that dies away (‘expire’) is an extension of nature or a construction (or reconstruction) of reality’ (*Collected Poems*, p. 209). The list could be extended at length.

¹² Graham Robb, *Unlocking Mallarmé* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 125.

not the effect that Mallarmé is pursuing.¹³ Rather, the questions one might infer from this poem are far more abstract and theoretical: 'How can a poet 'sing' without lapsing into nonsense or empty silence? Just how 'petit' can an 'air' be before it simply ceases to be?' (231).

Beginning to answer these questions via the lens of intonation sends us to the end of the poem (and it is here that the bulk of my analysis will be focused), since the reader must make a decision about the status of the final two lines: is this a question or an exclamation? The exclamation mark provides a strong suggestion, but not definitive proof, of an exclamation, whereas the inversion of the subject and verb in 'va-t-il' strongly suggests a question made emphatic by the exclamation mark. Will the bird remain on the way? This is the question that the poem would pose if we read an interrogative structure in the last lines, but this is also the question that our very question about the intonation itself poses: question or exclamation? Is the bird of the poem remaining (exclamation) or is the poet posing a question about it (question)?¹⁴ Any oral reading of the poem needs to take a stand on the matter, since the intonation would rise at the end if the reader presents the lines as a question, whereas intonation would begin high and descend if it were an exclamation. Degrees of subtlety might be conveyed with greater or lesser changes of relative pitch, but a rise in pitch on the final word of the poem would definitely connote a question according to the conventions of French intonation. Impossible, then, not to take a stand on the question in the very voice one uses to bring the poem off the page and into the air, barring a sort of performance where one would recite the poems several ways, one after the other; impossible too, on the other hand, to be completely confident that the lines are indeed exclamation or question. Does intonation lead us to an impasse?

Surprisingly, the interpretive ambiguity has not prevented many commentators on the poem from making a definitive pronouncement on the status of those last

¹³ Roger Pearson, *Mallarmé and Circumstance: The Translation of Silence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 231.

¹⁴ Weinfeld's translation preserves the ambiguity. Other translators, such as Peter Manson, opt for a version that suggests an exclamation: 'blown apart will all of him / still hit the road!'. Stéphane Mallarmé, *The Poems in Verse*, translated by Peter Manson (Oxford: Miami University Press, 2012), p. 155.

lines. Gardiner Davies indicates that ‘Le dernier couplet forme une sorte d’épilogue qui nous apprend le sort du corps de l’oiseau, à la suite de son exploit dans l’espace. Il ne s’agit pas d’une interrogation, comme d’aucuns l’ont supposé, mais bien d’une affirmation, avec inversion du sujet’ [‘The final couplet forms a sort of epilogue that informs us of the destiny of the bird’s body, in the wake of its exploit in space. It is not an interrogation, as some have supposed, but indeed an affirmation, with an inversion of the subject’] (p. 54).¹⁵ Paul Bénichou concurs, asserting that ‘*va-t-il* n’est pas ici interrogative, mais exclamatif, selon la ponctuation même qui clôt le sonnet: exclamation amère, équivalent à “il va donc rester !”’ [‘*va-t-il* is not interrogative here, but exclamatory, according to the very punctuation that closes the sonnet: bitter exclamation, equivalent to “he is thus going to remain!”’].¹⁶ For Philippe Marty the last lines are

ni une assertion, ni une interrogation, mais, semble-t-il, une espèce d’optatif, exprimé par un futur. [...] La voix n’a pas de place dans l’ici et le maintenant, seul est actuel l’élan du poète. Ce temps actuel est situé entre un événement défunt [...] et une forme à venir (le poème). Dans cet entre-deux où se fait le poème, « rien n’aura lieu que le lieu ». Il appartient au lecteur de décider si ce lieu-là est propre à conserver (*aufheben*) la voix étrangère, l’altérité—à maintenir ouvert l’élan ou désir vers l’altérité : le « déchiré » du vers 13 laisse entendre un « désiré ». (pp. 150-1)

[neither an assertion, nor an interrogation, but, it seems to me, a kind of optative, expressed in the future tense. [...] The voice has no place in the here and now, the only thing here in the moment is the surge of the poet. This present time is situated between a defunct event [...] and a form to come (the poem). In this between space where the poem is made, ‘nothing will take place but the place’. It is up to the reader to decide if that place is adequate to conserve (*aufheben*) the foreign voice, alterity—to keep open the surge or the desire toward alterity: the *déchiré* of line 13 suggests a *desire*.]

¹⁵ Y.-A. Favre follows Davies, indicating straightforwardly that ‘les deux derniers vers ne sont pas interrogatifs, mais affirmatifs’ [‘the last two lines are not interrogative, but affirmative’] (p. 513), and that the poem recounts a poetic success that responds to ‘Le vierge, le vivace...’. See Mallarmé *Œuvres*, edited by Y.-A. Favre (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1992), pp. 513-14.

¹⁶ Paul Bénichou, ‘Sur un sonnet de Mallarmé’ in James Patty ed., *Du romantisme au surnaturalisme : Hommage à Claude Pichois* (Neuchâtel: A la Baconnière, 1985), pp. 271-80, p. 276.

While Marty goes much further than those who simply assert that the last lines are either a question or an affirmation, he still is able to identify the optative as a definitive resolution of the interpretive difficulty. Still, his own development of that choice leads him back, implicitly, to the possibility of a question, as he assigns the readers the task of deciding whether the voice that is thematized in the poem will be conserved, and of course cedes control over these interpretive issues to those readers.

This kind of interpretive move, which doubles back to see the last lines as a kind of question even though the critic has identified it as an optative, points toward the path that Mallarmé's poems invite us to follow. Any attempt to take a definitive stance on the status of these last lines will need to resort to simple assertion, acknowledging, as Davies does, the possibility of an alternate reading but simply rejecting it outright in the service of a supposedly clear and/or definitive interpretation of the poem. (After all, nothing precludes the words being taken as a question, a fact that all the poem's interpreters acknowledge before going on to dismiss that possibility out of hand.) At first glance, intonation too would force us to make such a decision, since someone reading the poem aloud would need to decide, or, failing that, the contours of the voice would make the decision for the reader, since the intonation must take on the curve either of a question or of an exclamation.

Intonation can, however, do precisely the opposite of foreclosing competing interpretations. If we see the act of intonation as 'giving voice' to the poem, it becomes a vital part of Mallarmé's poetic project, which was anything but simple. Roger Pearson has argued that, throughout his entire output, Mallarmé is informed by a 'consistent and coherent view of the poet's role', which is 'an obligation to break the silence of a god-less universe and to confer upon that silence some kind of lasting pattern, to "translate" it into what Mallarmé calls the "Idée ou rythme entre des rapports"' ['Idea or rhythm among relations'] (p. 5). If poetry is ultimately about breaking silence, intonation clearly has a key role to play, since non-silent language is necessarily intoned, thus introducing all the problems of meaning and interpretation that we have begun to explore with the seemingly simple question of whether what is at hand in 'Petit Air II' is a question or an affirmation. Immediately

implied in Pearson's description of Mallarmé's project is also a certain conception of music which can serve either to align it with language in order to show continuities or to maintain a distinction between the two that would give the ultimate communicative advantage either to the one or to the other.¹⁷ In other words, this simple question leads into the very heart of what is at stake in questions of poetic interpretation in the late nineteenth century and in our own day, and 'Petit Air II' is shown to be anything but a simple take on the poet's task.

An important idea that emerges from this conception of the poetic task as 'breaking silence' is the crucial role of the reader as something like a creative partner with the poet, a role for which Mallarmé opens up plentiful space in his poems and which is abdicated, I would argue, when interpreters attempt to shut down creative possibilities by reducing Mallarmé's poems to a purported clarity or simple paraphrase.¹⁸ Rather, the most compelling readings feature the reader as a kind of listener or even performer, a role that is highlighted in poems such as 'Petit Air II', whose very syntax calls for interpretation along the lines of an intonation that is aware of the multiple possibilities even as it recognizes that any actualization, any bringing forth the poem out of silence into voice, will *de facto* opt for a certain

¹⁷ I discuss questions related to these in more detail in Joseph Acquisto, 'On Artistic Form and the Spiritual: Mallarmé, Schönberg, and Kandinsky on Poetry, Mystery, and Music', in *Thinking Verse 2* (2012), pp. 68-87.

¹⁸ Antoine Compagnon argues against such a tradition of Mallarmé interpretation whereby there would be a kind of key to unlock the clear and paraphraseable meaning in the poem: 'Le plus souvent, et à peu près exclusivement dans la tradition française, les interprètes font l'hypothèse que la difficulté—notamment l'ambiguïté—peut être levée, car elle est de l'ordre de l'obscurcissement ou de l'occultation du sens' (p. 104) ['Most often, and almost exclusively in the French tradition, interpreters create the hypothesis that the difficulty—notably the ambiguity—can be removed, since it is in the order of obfuscation of the occultation of meaning']. And again: 'Les « malins » que les poèmes de Mallarmé rendent inquiets sont les lecteurs « sérieux » en quête de sens unique, et ces demi-savants sont plutôt moins bien traités par le poète que les lecteurs précédents, oisifs et charmés. Le demi-savant est ce lecteur qui se rend compte du conflit entre le son et le sens, et réclame la clef de l'énigme' (p. 117) ['The "clever ones" who become worried by Mallarmé's poems are the "serious" readers on a quest for a single meaning, and these half-baked poetry experts are rather less well treated by the poet than the preceding readers, lazy and charmed. The half-baked expert is that reader who is aware of the conflict between the sound and the sense, and asks for the key to the enigma']. He opposed to this tradition interpreters such as Malcolm Bowie who acknowledge the resistance of Mallarmé's poems to such reduction.

interpretation.¹⁹ I will have more to say below about how intonation, or rather, interpretation seen as intonation, might do that without foreclosing other interpretations.

At a most basic level, then, there is something to be heard in this poem that belongs both to the ‘voix étrangère’ [‘foreign voice’] and to ‘silence’, whether they are construed as the same or different, a silent voice or a voice opposed to silence. Several formal features of the poem encourage the reader to enter the conversation about the poem’s meaning, but tentatively, or even approximately. These include those semantic and syntactic oppositions such as voice/silence and bird/poet, where each term likely says more than we initially suspect and enters into a complex relationship with the other member of the pair. They also include an aural feature that elicits comment in analyses of this poem, the rhyme ‘bosquet/jamais’, the only *rime pauvre*, with only one phonetic element in common, of its kind in Mallarmé’s *Poésies*. Marty reads this rhyme as the audible manifestation of the coexistence or fusion of the *voix éclatante* and silence, which becomes a figure of the poem itself as ‘le lieu d’un échange, d’un dialogue entre une voix (non-articulée, inaudible, originelle) et une réponse-forme (articulée, figée, durable)’ [‘the place of an exchange, of a dialogue between a voice (non-articulated, inaudible, originary) and an answer-form (articulated, fixed, durable)’] (p. 144). But what is the relationship of the bird to its song, and, by extension, of the bird to the poet? Roger Pearson reads the bird as ‘the emblem of the poet’s soaring and untameable aspiration and goes on to ask why, ‘if this bird is the symbol of perfection’, it is ‘associated with the one defective rhyme in the whole of the *Poésies*’ (p. 232). Removing the debate from a discussion of poetic failure or success,²⁰ Pearson reads a mimetic effect in the poem’s rhyme

¹⁹ This approach is consonant with David Nowell Smith’s contention that ‘any reading that attends to poetry so as to hear its points of breakage and voicing will of necessity become a *melodics*’. David Nowell Smith, *Sounding/Silence: Martin Heidegger at the Limits of Poetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), p. 99. Exactly what can be voiced, and how, is what is constantly at issue in ‘Petit Air II’.

²⁰ He cites Graham Robb’s reading of this rhyme (in *Unlocking Mallarmé*, p. 133) as an indication of the poet’s misstep in ‘thinking that an ideal could be attained without the machinery of verse’

and claims that ‘the defective rhyme precisely displays the inimitability of the imaginary bird’s perfect song’ (p. 232). What we would be left with on this account is an imperfect translation of the ideal, or perhaps an affirmation that it is precisely the imperfect nature of language that gives birth to poetry in the first place.²¹ It is that imperfection that brings us out from the silence of the ideal (whether it is the silence of the inexistent or the silence of the inaudible-qua-inexpressible).

And yet, the poem remains, and is all we have.²² What can intonation bring to this discussion of the meaning there may be in ‘Petit Air II’? First, it brings us back to the poem as a voiced phenomenon and allows us to see intonation as a way of making meaning from the text. Peter Kivy has recently argued that silent reading and reading aloud are not in fact opposites but rather, one might say, part of a continuum. In a claim that he extends not only to poetry but even to prose, Kivy suggests that silent reading

is not discontinuous with its historical predecessors. It is completely continuous with them and with their history. Reading silently, viewed in this way, is not an ontological change from the work/performance ontology. It is just the next logical step, into a performance of a different kind, a silent performance, but clearly recognizable as *performance*.²³

and Antoine Compagnon’s indication of the aporetic nature of the relation between the ideal bird and the defective rhyme.

²¹ Mallarmé writes in *Crise de vers* about the lack of correspondence between, for instance, the word ‘jour’ whose sounds are sombre whereas the sound of ‘nuit’ is bright and notes that if there were in fact perfect correspondence between words and things, poetry would not exist: ‘Seulement, sachons *n’existerait pas le vers*: lui, philosophiquement rémunère le défaut des langues’ [‘Only, let us be aware that *verse would not exist*, verse which philosophically corrects the imperfections of languages’] (OC II: p. 206).

²² I have analyzed elsewhere the play of presence and absence of the poem itself as opposed to the objects it purportedly ‘represents’ in Mallarmé’s poem ‘Surgi de la croupe et du bond’ [‘Surged up from the croup and from the leap’]. See Joseph Acquisto, ‘Cross-referencing Bowie: Layers, Networks, and Music in Mallarmé and Proust’, in Naomi Segal and Gil Rye, eds., *When familiar meanings dissolve...: Essays in French Studies in Memory of Malcolm Bowie* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), pp. 135-50.

²³ Peter Kivy, *The Performance of Reading: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literature*. Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2009, p. 18.

Reading a poem is necessarily a performance for Kivy because ‘even when you read a poem silently to yourself, you must, in your reading, “hear” the sound of the poem in your mind’s ear, be very conscious, in other words, of its sound if it were recited. [...] [A] poem must, even when not recited, be “voiced”, in scare quotes—“voiced” in the mind’s ear’ (pp. 55-6). Is it then the case that we cannot rest content with the ambiguity of the intonation of the last two lines of ‘Petit Air II’? Does this inner performance necessitate a definitive decision about those lines?

I would argue that intonation does not, but rather that it opens up interpretive possibilities not otherwise immediately apparent in the poem, especially around questions of skepticism and doubt. As Malcolm Bowie has indicated about Mallarmé’s more difficult poems: ‘That which the poet knows fully is thought worthy of the reader’s inspection only when accompanied on the page by the things half-known and the uneasy conjectures from which it has emerged’.²⁴ As a first step toward what this kind of interpretation entails, we can expand Kivy’s notion of silent voiced performance in order to include the notion of reader as listener: if the poem is voiced internally, that performance implies an audience who is also the same silent reader. So in addition to the sound/silence opposition, a self/other is also posited. In the case of both pairs, what we have is not in fact an opposition but a two-in-one, not a deconstruction of the binary so much as a sense that the poem is the space (and the sound) where both can operate simultaneously and in the same consciousness, which becomes conscious of these questions of interpretation on account of the process initiated by the silent reading and the questions of intonation that it forces us to consider.

In a sense, we come full circle with this poem once we begin considering questions of intonation, since initially attention to intonation forces recognition of the ambiguity of the last lines, but taking the next step to seeing intonation as a crucial aspect of ‘voicing’ the poem to oneself does not limit the interpretive possibilities in the poem. Rather, intonation opens up possibilities by allowing us to read ‘backwards’ in the poem to identify other potential oppositions at work here,

²⁴ Malcolm Bowie, *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 41-2.

including success or failure (of the bird and/or poet) and the already mentioned silence and sound.²⁵ This mode of reading sends us back ultimately to the first word of the poem, ‘indomptablement’ and the related term ‘hagard’,²⁶ since what is at stake in the questions we have been posing is the extent to which this poem itself allows itself to be ‘tamed’ by interpretations that would establish definitive meaning by closing off other possibilities.

Looking back to the first stanzas of the poem, we realize that the hesitation between question and exclamation implied by the final lines allows us better to highlight the suspension of meaning inscribed into the very syntax of the poem’s lines. When reading the poem, the eyes or the voice will linger a bit on the final words of each line, a technique that in more conventional poems allows the reader to process the unit of meaning contained in the line. In this poem, however, whatever inflection or pause the reader introduces at the ends of the lines only serves to highlight the suspension of meaning, even at the grammatical level. After the first line, ‘Indomptablement a dû’, we await both the infinitive that needs to follow this construction and, crucially, the subject of the sentence. A reading that respects the line division will therefore emphasize the suspension of meaning, an effect that is created not purely by the slight rise in pitch that typically marks the last syllable of a line but rather by the incongruity that the reader necessarily experiences between that rise in pitch and the lack of a fully formed syntactical unit. While the expected infinitive arrives in line 3, the search for the subject is prolonged until at least line 5, leaping over the stanza break toward the first word that might be considered the subject of the verb in line 1, ‘voix’ [‘voice’]. Reading further, however, reveals another possibility in line 7, ‘l’oiseau’ [‘the bird’]. It would perhaps

²⁵ Cf. Philippe Marty’s characterization of voice in this poem: ‘Nous appellerons « voix » ici cela même qui défait le poème comme objet et comme forme et l’ouvre vers autrui ; nous essaierons de montrer la voix comme l’au-dehors du poème [...]. La tâche du poète consiste alors à faire en sorte simultanément que la voix ne fasse pas éclater le texte, et que le texte à son tour n’étouffe pas la voix’ [‘We will call “voice” here that which unmakes the poem as object and as form and opens it towards the other; we will try to show the voice as the outside of the poem [...]. The task of the poet consists then in ensuring simultaneously that the voice does not make the text explode, and that the text in turn does not stifle the voice’] (p. 144).

²⁶ ‘Hagard’ was a term of falconry, ‘applied to old falcons that could no longer be tamed’ (Robb, p. 132).

make more lexical sense for the voice to burst rather than the bird, but the answer to the implied question of the subject of these two stanzas remains suspended, as does the voice at the end of each line.

Reading backwards from the end of the poem, the conceptual requirement of holding more than one possibility in mind at once becomes clear: a reader will likely give similar inflection to both 'voix' and 'l'oiseau', since both come in the same initial position in those respective lines. The intonation already reveals, then, what the search for meaning will attempt to reconstruct when interpreting the text: that the poem sets up a willful blurring of the bird and the voice that will animate the entire poem. And indeed, when we reach the third stanza, we see that it is in fact likely that the bird, and not the voice, which has burst, since it is about the 'hagard musicien' ['haggard musician'] that the poem asks whether he will remain on a path; here it is impossible to assimilate completely the 'musicien' to the 'voix', since the latter is feminine and cannot be referred to by the masculine pronoun 'il'. This is not to say, however, that, conceptually, the musician and his voice are not in fact united. If they are, though, the unification is accomplished despite rather than on account of the syntactical links established in the poem. Impossible, then, to proceed other than in the realm of the both/and, and the suspension constantly enacted by the intonation of the line ends reinforces that necessary openness when it comes to positing an interpretation. The difficulty in privileging one interpretive pathway over another is reinforced not only by the frequently recurring slight rises in intonation at the line ends but also by the fact that, due to the compact structure of the seven-syllable lines, nearly half of the words of the poem, 28 of its 61 words, arrive in the crucially important initial or final position in each line. In the absence of distinctions arising from the placement of far fewer words in these initial and final positions than one would find in, for instance, a poem in the twelve-syllable alexandrine line in common use in this period, the relative inflection that a reader gives to certain words becomes all the more important, and the distinctions among them all the more subtle.

The most effective reading of the poem is one that enacts all of these possibilities by, to begin with, creating the conditions for their emergence at that moment, for instance, when one must decide how to intone the final verses. That question

immediately sends one back further in the poem where other questions begin to emerge; the reader must in turn find a way to give them voice, to intone those questions of meaning that lie dormant in the poem no less than the exclamation-or-question does, virtual on the page until activated by the voice that leads to the two-in-one of the consciousness, the same kind of two-in-one that leaves us, like the bird and/or its voice itself, both suspended in the air and on the ground.²⁷

Following this kind of reading, the central symbol of the poem becomes destabilized even further. If the bird has been associated (not unproblematically, given the lack of explicit connection between them) with the poet, and the poet is now associated with the reader through the creative act of giving voice to the poem, then to some extent the reader is figured by the bird as well. What does it mean to ‘rester sur le sentier’ [‘remain on the path’]?²⁸ The path is the way to somewhere, as Philippe Marty reminds us:

Le sentier est « ce qui mène vers », non ce qui arrête et enferme. [‘Le vierge’ et ‘Petit Air II’] disent ainsi réalisée l’ambition du poète d’enfermer une voix vive dans une forme, tout en la maintenant voix vivante. Tout au moins disent-ils la possibilité de cette réalisation, car l’affirmation trop haute de la victoire verserait le poète définitivement vers le figé, la forme ; seul le doute tenu jusqu’au bout, le doute scellant le poème, exprimé dans l’optatif des deux derniers vers du quatorzain [...] le doute seul garde le poème ouvert au moment même où il se referme. (p. 145)

[The path is ‘that which leads toward’, not what stops and encloses. [‘The virgin’ and ‘Petit Air II’] proclaim that the poet’s ambition of enclosing a live voice in a form, all the while keeping it alive, has been accomplished. At the very least they proclaim the possibility of this accomplishment, since an overly loud affirmation of victory would move the poet definitively toward the fixed, toward form; only doubt maintained till the end, the doubt marking the poem with its seal, expressed in the optative of the two last lines of the poem [...] only doubt keeps the poem open at the very moment when it closes.]

²⁷ This characterization of the consciousness is informed by Hannah Arendt’s remarks in ‘Thinking and Moral Considerations’ in *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), pp. 159-89. See pp. 186-9.

²⁸ The expression is particularly significant since it is the only variant related to word choice; an earlier version had ‘tomber’ [‘to fall’] instead of ‘rester’. See OC1: p. 1184.

From the perspective of intonation, another way to put this would be that the problem of giving voice to the poem is one of how to give meaning via intonation without at the same time foreclosing other meaning. I have been suggesting that while the actual act of voicing the intonation involves a decision as to whether the final lines are a question or an exclamation, the process of intoning, not only as a question or exclamation but also in terms of the extent of the rise or fall by which one would mark those intonations, is the road by which we are led to these questions, and thus to the consciousness of how the poem both comes to an end and allows larger questions of meaning to remain open and undecidable. One of the advantages of performance is, after all, that it allows us to hear a work differently on the occasion of each particular performance. Is there a way to give voice to all of the possibilities at once? No, and in that sense the ideal performance would be silence, but such an ideal, from the perspective of poetry, is not worth having at all, since it would abolish the poem itself. In this, poetry is brought back in a crucial sense to music; in both cases, any desire for a purported ideal of transparent meaning would cancel the entire art form.

To become aware of the sorts of complexity I have been outlining here is to be what I will call an *intoner* of a poem. The term *reader* carries, of course, the connotation of interpretation as well as echoes of both the silent and vocal reader. The term *intoner*, by contrast, takes the vocal reading as its starting point but, as I have already suggested, does not end there. Rather, it takes the set of concerns raised by vocal reading back with it into the act of interpretation, posing questions about the limits of intonation but also seeing those limits as new vistas of interpretive possibility, so that meaning is not foreclosed but rather opened by the process of intonation. It is in fact through the limitation initially imposed on interpretation that these new possibilities emerge, since, after all, the intoner cannot fully ‘céder l’initiative aux mots’ [‘cede the initiative to the words’] (OC II: 211), since the words in this case call on the intoner to inflect them, meaning that the intoner takes back some of the initiative that had been ceded.²⁹ Via intonation, even

²⁹ A recitation of the poem would thus create the space of interaction between the speaker and the words of the poem. Commenting on Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Derrida, David Nowell

the silence of silent reading becomes resonant, and it is in the resonance of that gap between the ideal and language that poetry happens. The tension in Mallarmé between, on one hand, the desire to cede initiative to the words and, on the other, to ‘orchestrate’ (and thus impose greater control over) the reading of the poem intensifies in his final period with the famously innovative visual layout of ‘Un Coup de dés’ [‘A Throw of the Dice’], with the interactions among its varying typefaces, font sizes, and white spaces suggesting the influence of the layout of a musical score. The comparison is warranted by Mallarmé’s reference to music in the preface to the poem: ‘La parole se profère en tant que sons à l’intelligence, dans l’air, pour ainsi dire et musicalement’ [‘The word is uttered as sounds for the intellect, in the air so to speak and musically’] (OC I: p. 403). The musical reference was added to a later draft of the poem; the initial draft reads as follows: ‘La parole se profère libre dans le domaine des sons et de l’intelligence, et, pour ainsi dire, y suspend son vol à l’esprit’ [‘The word is uttered free in the domain of sounds and intellect, and, so to speak, suspends its flight on the mind’] (OCI: p. 402). Neither disappearance of the poet nor fully realized musicalization of language, late Mallarmé poetry is something else, a suspended flight, so to speak, and this is how Mallarmé complicates the notion of intonation and how he uses it, in ‘Petit Air II’, as a vehicle for demonstrating how intonation both constrains interpretation and opens it up. In order to read such a poem effectively, we need to follow Garrett Stewart’s indication, quoted above, that ‘between *epos*, as voice, and *graph*, as mark, we need a third term, a third position—a site, all but a breathing space, for the reader’s silent voice’ (pp. 138-9). Working through Mallarmé’s poem has helped point the way to how that silent voice of the reader needs to negotiate between sound and silence in order to articulate meaning.

Paradoxically, then, by focusing on the performed sounds of the poem, we ultimately return to its most abstract and even philosophical content, the question of the ideal and its relation to the human process of artistic creation. Are such

Smith indicates that ‘just as poetry is never “pure poetry”, voice is never “pure voice”, also a condition of language, conditioned *by* language. [...] “Diction” is no longer an individual’s “way of saying”, but the means by which the language says itself through us, in us’. David Nowell Smith, *On Voice in Poetry* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 66-67.

philosophical concerns inscribed in the poem? Most commentators seem to suggest that they are, since once one establishes a link between the bird and the poet, the entire situation portrayed in the poem takes on symbolic significance. But to what extent should the bird and the poet be identified? And how much metaphysical significance should we assign to the 'là-haut' and its inaudible sounds? Here again, making pronouncements with too much certainty risks foreclosing the meaning by narrowing the field of possibilities. In that sense, the doubt which the intoner encounters when faced with the question of how to give voice to the end of the poem is revealed by that act of intoning to be fundamental to the structure of the poem itself. As Philippe Marty remarks, 'Si la voix entendue par le poète de "Petit Air II" expire et laisse un doute, c'est l'existence même de ce doute, non sa résolution en certitude fixe, qui compte' ['If the voice heard by the poet of 'Petit Air II' expires and leaves a doubt, it is the very existence of this doubt, not its resolution in fixed certainty, that counts'] (pp. 145-6). The question of the end becomes emblematic of the challenges inherent in interpreting all that precedes it. To read this poem well requires that one read it backwards, doubling back at any time one is convinced one has found the definitive meaning.

With what are we left then, by the end? According to Roger Pearson, very little, at least at first glance:

The upward movement of hopeful aspiration is replaced by a descent into doubt, an expiration that surges up from the poet's breast only to issue forth as a glottal spasm (from the etymology of *sanglot*) before plummeting to earth. [...] This heptasyllabic Shakespearean sonnet duly ends in bathos and the prospect of this paltry poem as a mere tatter of paper lying in the road, not a 'Billet' inviting us to the dance but simply a piece of litter. (p. 233)

And yet it is not just the detritus of the ideal that we see before us on the page, as Pearson goes on to indicate: 'Caught between aspiration and doubt, impossible victory and certain defeat, the user of language forgoes the airless heights of silence and in plummeting into the abyss of 'dubious' words [...] may yet achieve some permanence and entirety in a text' (p. 234). It is that permanence that resists the silence into which the poem necessarily falls when it ends, and the words of the poem transform the silence from which they emerge (the moment before the poem

begins) into a different kind of silence at the poem's end.³⁰ What happens in between is the intoned language of the poem, the play of words that poses the questions and posits the relations we have been exploring. Intoning the poem, and listening to what the words have to say when they are intoned as opposed to sitting silently on the page, brings the poem back further toward the domain of music, as suggested by the title 'Petit Air', but not in the sense of Verlainean musicality and its sonorous verbal soundscapes whose sound becomes more important than their sense. Rather, the poem brings our attention back to the voice in its manifestation as song, first of the bird and then of the poet. To call a bird's sound a 'song' is already to anthropomorphize it, applying an interpretive category which we impose on the other and then appropriate back for ourselves when we apply it to the poet by way of comparison. Intoning the final lines of the poem thus becomes analogous to interpreting the poem as a whole, deciding when the voice rises and falls and using our own voices as intoners to give voice to the poet's words, thus appropriating the voice of the other as we co-create the poem along with the poet.³¹ Intonation thus helps us to understand the poetic exercise by steering us away from the ideal, which, as we have seen, can never be poetry's goal at any rate, given that its medium is language. By returning us to the intonational contours of the words that are necessarily present even in silent reading, intonation opens up the realm of interpretive possibility by, at first, demonstrating the need to decide in favour of one possibility over another but then, in a second move, inviting or even forcing us to make room for the voice in our interpretative activity in a way that accounts for

³⁰ One could even argue that a key characteristic of modern writing is how it articulates that move from silence to work and back to silence. I address these questions in Joseph Acquisto, 'Listening to Silence in Pascal Quignard's *Vie secrète*', in *L'Esprit Créateur* 52: 1 (Spring 2012), pp. 83-95.

³¹ Cf. Philippe Marty: '[Mallarmé] sait comment la voix humaine peut séduire et emporter : « le miracle de chanter : on se projette haut comme va le cri ». [...] Le poème s'annonce dans le silence, mais silence qui est écoute active d'une voix complètement supérieure, à laquelle parle un langage autre toujours déjà passé au moment où le poème commence' ['[Mallarmé] knows how the human voice can seduce and sweep one away : "the miracle of singing: one projects oneself high as the cry goes." [...] The poem announces itself in silence, but a silence that is active listening to a completely superior voice, to which speaks an other language, always past at the moment when the poem begins'] (p. 154).

the variety of potential hidden within, but eventually revealed by, the intonational contours at play in our reading (in both senses) of the poem. Expression and meaning, then, are not separate categories but are intimately entwined, as Lawrence Kramer indicates:

Expression is always a matter of music at some level, even where gesture is at stake. If we understand musical expression, we understand expression as such. [...] In its musicality, expression is the performative medium that animates the animate. It is what makes meaning meaningful. That it does these things is the basis of its link to art. (*Expression*, p. 81)³²

In other words, by posing questions about intonation, we are also at the same time posing questions about meaning, in the sense not only of *what* the poem means but *how* it means, and opening up the possibility that expressivity itself can become a kind of meaning. The final lines of 'Petit Air II' dramatize this process.

So what is in an intonation? The final lines of 'Petit Air II' show that, as in the case of a piece of music whose performance (which, in French, is *interprétation*) will be different each time without any one performance considered definitive, the poem's vitality depends to an important extent on its ability to call into question any interpretation that claims to be definitive at the expense of others. Still, the poem does this without simply veering into incoherence; in that sense, the poem's form is an important guarantor of the possibility of meaning, the potential success of intoning the poem. Intonation navigates between the semantic openness and the formal structure of the poem, showing us the possibilities inherent in the open text while remaining within the limits of the possibilities suggested by the poem's text as, we might say, script or score. Looking at the poem through the lens of intonation brings to light the need to grapple with lyric poetry's heritage as oral art, a heritage which was largely replaced by silent reading by Mallarmé's day but which haunts and informs the act of meaning making in the lyric in important ways. Meaning must remain front and centre in the discussion of intonation because Mallarmé's

³² See also Kramer's *Interpreting Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), where his goal is to demonstrate that 'hermeneutics needs to be musicalized if it is to work free of the self-imposed restraints that have hobbled development' (p. 3).

gesture that initiated this analysis, the inclusion of an exclamation mark where one would have expected, and where many do read, a question mark, moves the poem further away from a model of ‘communication’ which, as Natalie Gerber has shown, is often the realm in which intonation is discussed, since changes in pitch are used to communicate emphasis, irony, and sentence type.³³

At the same time, of course, intonation also gives voice to doubt, serving as the catalyst for the potential unworking of any interpretation we may be tempted to put forward or, relatedly in the case of ‘Petit Air II’, any connection between the ideal and poetry. Paradoxically, intoning the poem both posits an interpretation and also creates space for seeing that particular interpretation as one among many. Intonation is not a mere impasse, nor a means by which we reach inevitable aporia as the only result of an attempt to interpret a poet like Mallarmé. Rather, by routing our interpretation through the intoning voice of the reader, it allows us to be ‘on the way’ to meaning, remaining there not because we have failed to achieve the goal of arriving but because the way is the terrain of interpretation, and thus of the whole poetic enterprise if it is not to lapse into silence. And it is there we must remain, not like the cadaver of the bird in the poem but as the living voice *of* the poem. It is that voice that we hear hesitating or, better, alternating between question and exclamation at the end of ‘Petit Air II’. Transferred into the domain of meaning-making, the intoner poses a question about what the poem means, but ends up affirming, as an exclamation, a claim about meaning. Such an exclamation in no way cancels the doubt that remains from the question. Rather, we could say that it affirms the question *as* exclamation, as affirmation of the suspension in which this poem leaves us in our encounter with it ‘on the way’ of the poem and of poetry.³⁴

³³ See Gerber, pp. 15-21 especially. The essay also points the reader to a substantial body of critical work on intonation in verse that extends the questions beyond the ones that interest linguists and shows the link between empirical work on intonation and its useful application by literary critics.

³⁴ Cf. Compagnon: ‘Tel est le pari de Mallarmé : le vers créera le poème, le son suggérera le sens : la compacité prosodique suscitera un sens adéquat’ [‘Such is Mallarmé’s wager: the line will create the poem, sound will suggest sense: the density will give rise to an adequate sense’] (p. 120).

That is the sense that the sound suggests here, the sense that the intoner brings to bear every time the poem is read.³⁵

³⁵ Many thanks to Natalie Gerber, David Nowell Smith, and Clive Scott for their helpful feedback on this essay.