

Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés* and the Poem and/as Book as Diagram

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Abstract:

*Modern poetics takes one crucial turn through Ezra Pound's notion of the "ideogram," a concept that had a lasting impact through the Imagists and their influence. The ideogram borrows from Pound's ideas about Chinese characters, their ability to condense complex representation into a figured form in an economic but resonant image. By contrast, the compositional technique embodied in French poet Stéphane Mallarmé's unique work, *Un Coup de Dés*, can be characterized as "diagrammatic," driven by semantic relations expressed spatially in a distributed field. This essay explores that diagrammatic work and its implications as a compositional technique.*

Few works of poetry have made a more dramatic case for the poem and/as book as a diagrammatic expression than Stéphane Mallarmé's renowned *Un Coup de Dés*.¹ Initially issued in the May 1897 issue of the British publication, *Cosmopolis*, the work was produced in a second edition by the *Nouvelle Revue Française* in 1914. That later edition is considered by most Mallarmé scholars to more closely resemble the manuscript and instructions conceived by the poet in advance of his death in 1898. Paul Valéry saw those manuscripts, lying on a window sill at the house in which he visited the aging poet.² Valéry left a suggestive, rather than detailed, description of those papers covered with calligraphic glyphs anticipating the typographic treatment Mallarmé envisioned for the work. Photocopies have been published of the marked up manuscript, itself in the collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, but even that is still an unreliable testimonial for editorial events that might have followed had the poet lived to see the project finished. An edition created by Michael Pierson and published in 2004 by Ptyx attempts a most faithful rendering of the edition originally planned by Ambrose Vollard. Discussions of the poem are always subject to qualification, therefore, since the work does not exist in any form authorized by Mallarmé or produced under his final supervision. Further and final changes or alterations to either the textual composition or its graphical expression could have entered in the process, and so we have to qualify all critical discussion by an understanding that the "poem" in question is only tentatively the work Mallarmé imagined.

Such reservations are more appropriate to this poem than to many others, however, since its fundamental tensions are dynamic ones that circle around questions of being and nothing, chance and constellationary order,

¹ The Mallarmé bibliography is extensive, Robert Greer Cohn's *Mallarmé's Masterwork: New Findings* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1966) remains a milestone. See also Michael Pierson's edition of *Un Coup de Dés* on vellum with Ptyx (2004) and Anna Arnar, *The Book as Instrument* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

² Richard Candida Smith, *Mallarmé's Children: Symbolism and the Renewal of Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

and the human “master” who struggles to mediate sense within the ongoing conflicts of these conditions. Because the poem is so completely about this process, as well as embodying and expressing it, the character of self-referentiality implodes in a state of dynamic incompleteness that is only further sustained by the fact that we are engaging in a state of the poem that is neither final nor definitive.

The *Cosmopolis* and N.R.F. editions of 1897 and 1914 offer points of departure. The spatial drama of the work is evident in all its iterations, and the intention on the part of the author to articulate the poem within and across the spaces of a book is clear. And it is that specific attention to spatial and graphical articulation that makes *Un Coup de Dés* the unique example that proves a significant point: that poems are, by their nature, structure, and expression, diagrammatic works par excellence. They are literary works whose meaning depends upon the spatialized relations of embodied in their texts and whose spatial relations are rendered meaningful by their graphical expression. Rather than considering *Un Coup de Dés* to be an anomaly in the history of poetic work, I would suggest that its diagrammatic features demonstrate that it is exemplary, showing explicitly what is usually left implicit in discussions of poetic works—that a poem is a spatial work whose operation is diagrammatic.

The distribution of phrases in *Un Coup de Dés* does not follow strict linear rules. Poems never do, even when their lines are laid out one after another, the features of poetic works emphasize the articulation of verbal elements in space. Rhyme, meter, and textual echoes in content, meaning, associative value, or any of the many ways that poetic composition functions, put the elements of poem into multiple configurations in relation to each other. This is one of the fundamental distinctions between prose and poetry, even if prose discourse manages such spatial associations in the same way that a symphonic work might – through theme and variation, phrase, narrative, mood, etc. But the discursive structure of poetry depends to a high degree on the ability of the language to be read in multiple relations.³ We can describe this activity as a logic (set of structuring principles) or a meta-logic (a higher order set of principles organizing the graphical presentation at a conceptual rather than compositional level). I would suggest that not only are such operations always at work in poetic form, but that they are the quintessence of poetic expression as an aesthetic activity. I put this discussion in deliberate contrast to Ezra Pound’s insistence on the poem as an ideogram, with all the implications of static, fixed, visual reference inherent in the image and invoked through a chain of references to images. Interesting to speculate on how different the course of Anglophone modernism would have been if it had been inspired by the idea of “the diagram” rather than the “ideogram.”

And I put it into deliberate relation to the larger discussion of diagrams with which I have been concerned—as a way to condense and distill the principle points of my argument: graphical principles, graphic variables,

³ Johanna Drucker and Jerome McGann, “Images as Texts: Pictographs and Pictographic Logic,”
<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/~jjm2f/old/pictograph.html>.

and the properties of graphical forms are integral to meaning, not incidental to it or merely in its service, and the ordering principles that structure graphic expression are dynamic, performative, and probabilistic in their operation (rather than static, representational, and mechanistic). I won't repeat those arguments in detail here, but rather employ them in the analysis of the diagrammatic features and activities of *Un Coup de Dés*.

In April, 1892, the American logician and philosopher Charles S. Peirce published an essay in *The Monist* titled "The Doctrine of Necessity Examined." Peirce's arguments in this piece focus on "the common belief that every single fact in the universe is precisely determined by law." That common belief, referred to as mechanistic materialism, proposed that only human ignorance, inadequacy of view, and limitations of our perceptual capabilities, kept us from being able to grasp the full order of the universe and its workings. Heavy theological issues were at stake. Either the universe was the fullest expression of God's will constituted as laws governing all action and events, or not. Could the existence of probability be reconciled with such a unified vision of deterministic laws? If so, what was the role of chance and how did it operate in a universe governed by mechanistic laws with predictable and consistent outcomes? If every antecedent could be linked to what physicist John Tyndall, in his theory of conservation of energy, called its "equivalent consequent" and turn each "consequent" to its "equivalent antecedent" then how was the concept of free will to be reconciled with the belief in such mechanical principles?

Peirce took time to write this essay, and publish it in newly-established (*The Monist* was first issued in 1888) quarterly of the philosophy of science, shows that the topic was prominent in public debate at the time.⁴ The development of natural philosophy, or empirical sciences, had been associated from its earliest modern roots with questions of how to reconcile theology and precepts of the new discipline. Repeatable and testable hypothesis, scientific method, the tools of observation and analysis, the work of laboratory experiments and the emergence of laws of physics, in particular, were fundamental furnishings of the modern world. Sir Isaac Newton's three laws of motion and force had become the foundation of classical mechanics. The mechanistic world view could also be cast as deterministic—though such a move was a matter of debate—giving rise to the conviction that the regularity of physical laws implied regular relations of cause and effect.

The rise of classical mechanics grounded in Newton's three laws of motion coincided with the development of the science of statistics. Newton's *Philosophia Naturalis Principia Mathematica* was published in 1687, less than two decades after the appearance in 1662 of John Graunt's *Natural and Political Observations Made upon the Bills of Mortality*. Associated with the assessment of the strength of the nation state, statistics (the name reveals the link to this original focus on the *status*) had as a corollary the domain of probability, which had also received a significant impetus in the 17th century when Blaise Pascal and Pierre de Fermat were hired by a nobleman who found himself losing too much at cards. Statistical analysis became a tool of

⁴ <http://monist.buffalo.edu/> 8/2/2011.

analysis in the service of bureaucracy and administration, so that large amounts of quantifiable information could be assessed for patterns and trends. But probability was a more fraught field from the outset, since it came with an association with prediction (odds of an outcome in a series of events) as well as about “degrees of belief”.⁵ Jakob Bernoulli, author of *Ars Conjectandii (The Art of Conjecture)*, posthumously published in 1713, insisted that probability was a state of mind or belief as much as it was a description of conditions in the world. The implications of this were particularly relevant in 18th century judicial processes in which questions of certainty were mainly brought to bear on credibility of evidence, rather than on the statistical likelihood of events or outcomes.

Materialist science raised the spectre that the universe must conform to universal laws of causation beyond the ken of human beings. As these were universally true they might be the expression of something other than the rule of a Divine “Artificer,” to use the designation assigned by physicist John Tyndall. In 1874 Tyndall made a famous address to the British Association of Astronomical Sciences suggesting that the study of laws of conservation of energy brought “vital as well as physical phenomena under that law of causal connection which, so far as the human understanding has yet pierced, asserts itself everywhere in nature.”⁶ Suspect or not, such analogies between the social world and the natural, physical world caught public imagination. Tyndall’s implication that the “Power” shaping this world might be mechanistic natural law, not Divine purpose, showed how deep the rift between physical sciences and theology might become. Not all scientists or subscribed to such a binarism, and James Clerk Maxwell, working close to Tyndall’s own field, was keen to reconcile his Presbyterian beliefs with his observations and theoretical insights in thermodynamics.

Maxwell’s work brought the worlds of thermodynamics, the science of energy, and the idea of probability into a synthetic argument—one that also struggled with concepts of Free Will within a deterministic universe. Shifting from a mechanistic determinism to a probabilistic model through the invention of his “Demon,” Maxwell was able to suggest that the Second Law of Thermodynamics had only a *statistical* degree of certainty—not a mechanistic and deterministic one—while preserving the concept of will and agency. Free will, Maxwell suggested, could avail itself of the “instabilities and discontinuities in mechanical systems.”⁷ This “directing power” of will reappears in the figure of the Demon, who embodies the statistical—rather than deterministic—interpretation of the Second Law of Thermodynamics.⁸ According to the second Law, a closed system will move towards entropy until it arrives at a state of equilibrium. But if a Demon were introduced who sorted atomic particles in such a way as to keep the hotter ones separated

⁵ David Howie, *Interpreting Probability: Controversies and Developments in the Early Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.1.

⁶ Crosbie Smith, *The Science of Energy*, (London: Atholone Press, 1998) p.253.

⁷ Smith, *op.cit.* p.240 and also Deborah Coen, *Vienna in the Age of Uncertainty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); p.249.

⁸ Smith, p.249.

from the cooler, then equilibrium would never be achieved. The addition of a conscious decision-making entity using information as a basis of regulating the system was meant metaphorically, as a way to demonstrate that equilibrium was a statistic *probability*, not a mechanistically determined *necessity*. For Maxwell, this conclusion suggested that notions of free will could be reconciled to the idea universe governed by universal laws that were themselves formulated by an all-powerful God. They were not mutually exclusive. Making this point vividly clear, Maxwell's succinct catechism explaining the demon is modeled on the Church of Scotland's Shorter Catechism of 1648.⁹ "What is the chief end of the demon?" mimics "What is the chief end of man?" But the answer goes far afield: "To show the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics has only a statistical certainly."¹⁰

By the late 19th century, the crux of these debates pivoted on the need to reconcile a belief in a Christian God with the problems of the conservation of energy. Maxwell believed in a contrast between available energy channeled to good purpose and dissipated energy that was a waste to moral as well as physical purpose. Free-will, grace, and all gifts of nature were gifts from God and it was the duty of human beings to use these gifts to maximum effect.¹¹

Combinatorial relations governing probability could be calculated according to standard laws and rules, but none of these resulted in a way to guarantee the outcome. Chance could not be subject to mechanistic rules determining outcomes, only to degrees of their possibility or probability under set conditions. The actual event of any situation in which chance or probability was involved was thus not subject to strict deterministic rules. Gambling on odds, at the card table or in the insurance industry, was still gambling. Resistance to the use of actuarial tables, which had been developed by the Dutchman, Johann de Witt in the late 17th century, meant these statistically calculated odds were not used for calculating insurance rates until the early 19th.¹² Scientists caught up in theories of probability introduced notions of statistical doubt into their own observations, with the idea that rational principles could be used to govern the odds in decision-making processes. By the 19th century, the term "probable" was used to modify scientific investigations, and its meaning was both technical (calculated odds) and vernacular (chances of an occurrence grounded in degrees of belief). When Nicholas Bernoulli conceived the now-famous St. Petersburg problem—how much should a participant pay to engage in a betting game in which the payout for "heads" doubled with each coin toss but the "chance of a lengthy run halves with each extra tail," he intended the problem to demonstrate that the answer could not be determined mathematically. It had to be determined by assessing the relative economic status of the persons involved in the bet. A poor man should pay less than a rich man. And, as yet another mathematician in the famous family, Daniel Bernoulli, noted, the value of money varies according to circumstance. The idea of embedding statistical calculation of outcomes in human

⁹ Ibid., p.252.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.252.

¹¹ Ibid., p.252.

¹² Howie, *op.cit.* p.18-19.

circumstances of decision making underwent yet another change as the concept of “inverse probability” emerged in the work of Thomas Bayes and the Frenchman Marquis de Laplace. Laplace defended this development as “good sense reduced to a calculus,” but the ability to calculate probabilities back from outcomes (if you pull balls from an urn and they are of a certain color what are the odds of such colors being picked in the future) proved extremely useful in astronomical observation. Observation always involved error. Calculating the error distribution proved helpful in predicting positions of astronomical phenomena.

This tangle of intertwined threads of intellectual thought was not far from popular view in late 19th century European intellectual circle. Just as Heisenberg’s uncertainty principles and Einstein’s theory of relativity had a popular following and understanding in early 20th century arts, and as the theoretical formulations of concepts of electricity and magnetism had informed a literary and artistic world in the early 19th century, so the idea of chance had a visible profile in French culture. More important, weariness expressed for the effects of rationalism and materialism was central to symbolist aesthetics. The polarity of “Hasard” and “Constellation” that organize Mallarmé’s poem is consistent with the larger aesthetic vision of the poet and his circle.

The central duality expresses a tension grounded in problems of language and intellection, rather than spiritual and social ennui. *Un Coup de Dés* is not a poem of existential angst or despair, a desperate shout into the void or blankness from a human spirit crying out for meaning in a cosmic universe. No matter how appealing such clichés might be as a way to account for the enigmatic imagery of shipwreck, chance, water, and constellationary figures and stars, they have no real purchase on the poetic problem staged by the work. That problem is repeated expressed as a tension between the probabilities of meaning production and those of entropic dissipation held in dynamic play by the structure of a poem whose main—perhaps only—objective is to reflect upon the way poetry can be expressed in linguistic form as a field of potential meaning. Mallarmé shifts our engagement with philosophical questions of necessity (mechanistic determinism) onto the field of language where they problems of chance are all posed as challenges to meaning as form. If deterministic models held in linguistics, the problems of the arbitrariness of language would never have reared their scary heads with such vengeance.

Mallarmé’s poetics begin with a recognition of the contingency of language, the impossibility of securing meaning.¹³ In keeping with a contemporary 19th century sensibility, Mallarmé understood this inadequacy as a condition of the fall of language from its original grace—the fragmentation of original linguistic unity in some Edenic state that had given way to the growth of many tongues each in their own condition of imperfection.¹⁴ This is not only a problem for poetics, it is the fundamental problem on which poetry can be brought to bear. The task of poetry is to

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

¹⁴ Paul Allen Miller, *Black and White Myths: Etymology and dialectics in Mallarmé’s “Sonnet en yx.”*

expose this impossibility at the same time as demonstrating the possibility of configured meaning within the structure of a work. This brings probability back into a central position among Mallarmé's concerns. Cast into a discussion of time as a fiction in Mallarmé's work, this notion was explored by Nichols Rennie: "The fiction [of historical time] in no way changes the outcome, the destiny of the historical event. In terms of Mallarmé's poem, it will not abolish the random power of chance. . . The purpose of the fiction is not to intervene directly: it is a cognitive effort by means of which the mind tries to escape from the total indetermination that threatens it."¹⁵ Rennie somewhat overplays the hyperbolic rhetoric here, but the frame is correct. Citing de Man, Rennie goes on, " 'the outcome is determined by the start,' as de Man writes, but this occurs within an argument against determinism."¹⁶

Un Coup de Dés is a demonstration of and an argument for a poem as a probabilistic system. It presents various combinatoric possibilities for reading, and these are scored with graphic and typographical means. In this sense, it is a diagram. The presentation of the work makes spatial relations meaningful and uses spatial relations to produce meaning. Thus the spatial features such as movement across a gutter, clusters or word groups across an opening, or the fragmentation of the title phrase so that it is distributed through the work all participate in the production of signification. They help organize relations among semantic units, and orchestrate the temporal relation of phrases and deferrals through proximity and distance. The typographic setting serves as a memory device so that phrases set in large majuscules are read as a single unit even though separated by several pages, and likewise, the smaller registers of all caps or italic indicate a separate strain or theme within the whole. These changes signal difference, and thus establish frames, boundaries, groups, and distinctions. The famous use of white space as silence charges its volumes with a dynamic and kinetic function. The page is not an inert blank, but is that ethereal medium sustaining the energetic charge of the words in their field of relations, a concept borrowed from the conjurings of physicists in their study of the science of energy. As a theoretical work, *Un Coup de Dés* thus borrows from the speculations of scientific philosophy, its vocabulary and thematics combine the metaphysical and the physical investigations of chance and probability, energy and field, constellation and the void within which configurations are sustained.

A poem, like any other text (though aesthetic artifacts are, arguably, even more deliberately designed with this in mind), is probabilistic in several senses. A poem structure is deliberately combinatoric, articulating relations among semantic, rhythmic, graphic, thematic, and metrical and sound units so that they are mobilized outside the linear structure and as a spatial and temporal experience. They are also probabilistic in the most banal and pedestrian sense—that any artifact is only a stimulus for reading. Its content, form, meaning, message, effect, force, or argument is never

¹⁵ Nicholas Rennie, "Between Pascal and Mallarmé: Faust's Speculative Moment," *CL (Comparative Literature)*, Fall 2000, Volume 52, No. 4.; pp. 269-290.

¹⁶ Rennie, *op.cit.* p. 287.

transferred directly or deterministically to the mind of its reader. The cognitive processing of the work through the performance of reading produces a version of the work that is never self-identical and never a mechanical reproduction. A map of such readings, even by a single reader, would create a bell curve distribution in which outliers and averages would probably follow a fairly uniform statistical pattern. Thus in its combinatoric structure and in its performance as a cognitively produced experience, a work of poetry is probabilistic.

Returning to the tractable study of *Un Coup de Dés*, I suggest we approach it as a diagram. In so doing, we can make a case for the diagrammatic nature of poems in general in a way that the exceptional features of this piece demonstrate dramatically.

Un coup de Dés uses diagrammatic features conspicuously. Diagrams offer a very different model of poetic form than ideograms or pictograms, let alone conventional approaches to the understanding of metrics, line, rhyme, and such. A pictograph or pictogram proposes to be an image of a word or a thing. It is meant to communicate semantic value through visual means, and to function effectively, must, like any other sign, be part of a system of signs, or, at the very least, constrained by conventions that render it legible within a community of viewers. Likewise, an ideogram must exist in a similar set of conditions, but is understood as a presentation of an *idea* in visual form. Thus an ideogram has significant latitude in the degree of abstraction it can embody—showing non-visual entities and concepts such as “grief” or “madness” or “loss” as well as visual things or objects. The line between pictographs and ideographs is not hard and fast, and they share a common assumption about the one-to-one relation of sign to meaning that we are so familiar with in the grammatical construction of the copula habitually used to indicate this relation: the image *is* x. Ideograms and pictograms present themselves, conventionally, as representations. Whether of abstractions, ideas, emotions, things, entities, or events, the correlation they embody between what is represented and the visual means of representation is understood as singular, fixed, static, deterministic and mechanistic. In his famous mis-understanding and idealization of the ideogram, Ernst Fenollosa followed a long tradition of reading pictorial signs, glyphs, or characters from non-alphabetic traditions as fully self-evident and meaning producing. Taken up by Ezra Pound as an extension and demonstration of Imagist poetics, the concept of ideogram was used to anchor a theory of poetic communication in form as concrete. Abstractions were to be expressed with the greatest possible economy of means. Juxtaposition, collage, and visually specific evocative terms were the instruments of imagism. Anti-discursive and distinctly design to reject the thematic sentimentality and expansive, even decorative, rhyme structures of late Victorian verse, and as a reaction against the emotive strains of late romantic poetics, Pound’s concept of the ideogram dominated Anglo-American modernism. William Carlos Williams’ “No meaning but in things,” or, Archibald MacLeish’s succinct modernist formulation, “A poem must not mean but be,” express this formulation in their other iterations. Pound’s dislike of the Symbolist aesthetic is well-known, justifying his desire to get away from its vaguenesses and metaphysical aspirations. But the diagrammatic operations of Mallarmé’s work offer a radically different set of possibilities for poetic expression that

do not depend upon the representational and concrete vision of the ideogram, but instead, suggest a kinetic, mobilized field of articulated *relations* that express the belief that the very condition of poetic form is its suspension between the arbitrariness of language (“hasard”) and the temporary configuration of meaning (“constellation”) through the figure of the poet (“master”).

What a radical different approach this is! We grasp a diagram visually, processing the graphical features of its order, even if the relations sustained in diagrammatic forms don’t depend on graphical organization for their value. The relations are kinetic, to use the word more familiar to the late 19th century poet (dynamic is a 20th century word, associated with Futurism, speed, movement—while kinetic is a term associated with the same fields of physics from which models of probabilistic systems and their metaphysical challenges had arisen). Relations such as proximity, hierarchy, implied continuity, and so on can be described mathematically, but they are far more tractable for us in the graphical form they receive in poetic expression. The kinetic aspect of these relations resides in the performative reading, as well as in the way the graphical scoring provokes and supports such a reading. But we could easily assert that “A Red Wheel Barrow” or “Ars Poetica” or Ron Silliman’s “Bart” is as fully diagrammatic as *Un Coup de Dés* by virtue of the use they necessarily make of the graphical space through which they are structured. Mallarmé’s poem has the dramatically exposed suspension of a mobile, a sculpture whose elements hang in space and move around each other along an axis of equilibrium through which their entropic reconfigurings occur. In the case of *Un Coup de Dés*, that axis is the gutter between the pages of each spread, or panel. One can easily imagine the entire of the poem not as a series of such spreads, but as a set of openings around a 360 degree circle whose center is the spine of the book whose pages are radii. The words would not sit on the pages in that rendering or reading, but hang in the volume of the work.

Fanciful visions aside, the diagrammatic structure of *Un Coup de Dés* is apparent in both of its early graphical renderings. A few specific points of observation should make this structure evident from reading the text, and from that, the reader can extrapolate to the many possibilities inherent in this work.

The 1914 *N.R.F.* edition of the poem is organized into eleven panels. The first contains only the opening phrase of the title, *Un coup de dés*, “in all caps (or majuscules). The theme is announced, chance operations are present as the substance and activity of the poem. The arbitrariness of the linguistic system can never be abolished by any single language act. The poem stands as a momentary configuration, constellationary, produced by illusions of proximity the refute the reality of spatial distance for the moment of their perception. Hence the visual structure of the pages, clusters of words, references to stars, shapes that put phrases in relation to each other in multiple ways. But on that very first page, only the initial phrase of the theme. “A throw of the dice. . . .”

We turn the page, and on the second panel see first the next word in that phrase, “Jamais” (“Never”), followed by a clause that introduces the first syntactic suspension. Closure will be deferred, with the final words of the opening phrase only to be apprehended on page 5 (“N’abolira” “Will

abolish”) and page 9 (“Le Hasard,” “Chance”). This initial suspension of course structures the work, since the drive to reach closure keeps the reader in a state of anticipation. Meanwhile, however, the other themes and subthemes make their own appearances on the page. So on this second page, grouped into two clusters, the complementary parts of a theme and subtheme: “Even with cast in (the) eternal circumstances” “at the depth of a shipwreck”. The first phrase hangs in alignment with “Jamais” or “Never” above, as if on a line that drops from the center of that word through the optical center of the phrase below, while the “depth of a shipwreck” skews the balance, reconfiguring it with a list to the left that also servers to draw the reader forward into the momentum of the text.

Panel three continues the downward spiral movement quite regularly on the left hand page, but with greater back and forth emphasis on the right, so that a more kinetic effect is produced as the eye shifts across the page in an errant path. The rocking vessel referred to in the final phrases on this page suggest a mimicry in the text, not a graphical rendering of meaning in visual form, rather, the opposite, the use of language to reinforce the graphical value of the pattern on the page. The movement is already scored. The text only tells us how to read that motion. In this panel we see the enigmatic quality of the poem more explicitly than in the first two. The subject of the main sentence, “The abyss,” is an abstraction that is reified and then presented through a set of specific descriptions (whitening, stalled, furious) as if it were a raging wave. The theme of watery fury continues once we cross the panel, but not before a shift into a different metaphor organized in two word clusters. First the “desperately sloping incline” in two short fragments, and then “of its own wing” in a nearly iconic pattern of three one or two-word units. Does an Abyss have a wing? Can such a wing have a desperate incline? We follow the syntax into the mix of concrete descriptions of energy, activity, spatial relations only to find ourselves with a sentence phrase that cannot be readily subsumed under a known or singular reference. The interweaving of the description of spatial dynamics, water movement continues on the right panel, but returns us to the theme of the shipwreck, once again on the bottom right of the opening. Iconically, then, the boat image is in the same place on panels two and three, with air and water movements around it above, criss-crossing the page .

In panel four, the Master appears—the figure of the poet, who had “formerly grasped the helm,” we learn from a cluster of words on the right that detach themselves from the rest of the syntax on the left. There the Master confronts a “configuration” with a horizon at his feet. The fixity of horizon and configuration are put into immediate contrast with a swirling sequence of phrases describing movement, motion, winds, threats of and to fate and winds only to arrive at the phrase “the unique Number which cannot be another,”—in other words, the one casting of the die in each instance, the determined act of intervention in the probabilistic field. No punctuation helps structure the phrase sequences on this page. And except for “The Master” which is set apart typographically by its setting in majuscules, the rest of the phrases are only loose fixed. We can read across but also down, and as in the case of the original apposite description of the The Master facing him across the gutter, can also detach clusters into quasi-autonomous units of constellationary meaning. So “unique Number which

cannot" is separated by the gutter from "be another" and then from interlinear spacing on that right hand page from the next set of phrases which may or may not be a continuation of this image "Spirit / to throw it / into the tempest / to relinquish the division and pass proudly"—where? Our eye goes back across the gutter looking for continuation. The next word phrase "hesitates" hangs at the end and above "a corpse by the arm" which is only finished across the gutter again by "separated from the secret it holds." The phrases relate to each other across hinges of syntactic relation, not linear sequences. They pivot in their graphical space, configuring meaning contingently, rather than in fixed patterns. The shift of thematic register show the poet/Master in the midst of a changing field that references past ("former calculations") and present ("readies itself moves and merges"), storms and struggles, a unique Number that cannot be a Spirit, a corpse and a madman, and then waves flowing through the beard of the shipwrecked man—again occupying the lowest position on the page. This set of movements, juxtapositions, and temporary alignments is deliberately destabilizing. The poem sets a field of phrases in motion rather than fixing an image into a finite or static form. The act of poetic composition is a futile attempt to steady the arbitrary condition of language, to make a momentary configuration that can be grasped.

Panel five continues the same unpunctuated distribution of phrases in lower-case roman font that populated the previous panel, except that all of the fragments are on the left page except for the "N'Abolira" standing alone, in caps, on the lower right, as the next bit of the title phrase we encounter in our passage through the poem. The text on the left page has no sentences or finished thoughts. Qualifying phrases, verbs, prepositional phrases, nouns, hang in suspension with their thematic description of a struggle to hold on to a figure—here that of the old man, again, whose conditions and appearance suggest the shipwrecked person who is in the condition of being led "towards this supreme conjunction with probability" or chance. Neither imagery nor syntax are stable. The "hasard" has disrupted systematic conditions. The shipwrecked man, old, confused, helpless, only serves to organize our confusions around a point of singular reference so that the "supreme conjunction" registers as a human condition, not merely a metaphysical abstraction.

In an expression of perfect symmetry, the sixth, middle panel begins and ends with the same phrase, "Comme si," or "As if"—a propositional and conditional statement that is almost perfectly balanced on either side of the gutter, a balanced moment of equilibrium across the chaotic distribution of the poem to either side. The phrases are set in italic, intensifying the illusion of rapid movement. Self-referential to an extreme, the text suggests that "A simple/insinuation/into silence" is the site in which "the mystery"—that is, language's capacity to be arbitrary and to signify—swirls in a vortex or whirlpool (figured on the page by the arrangement of the scattered fragments around the gutter in the middle) that neither disperses nor scatters, but "cradles the virgin index"—a phrase designed to provoke multiple readings. What is a "virgin index"—a figure of contiguity without experience, fresh and unmarked by determined readings? Or an abstraction of another order? The image of the vortex has its roots in physics as well, with the many experiments of Maxwell, Thomson, and others creating

vortices in water tanks as a way to study energy conservation and patterns of thermodynamics.

On panel seven the italics continue, with the image of a solitary plume, spume, bit of wave on the upper left, alone on that side of the opening. The word “sauf” or “except” links this to the phrase clusters on the right which swirl around a figure of a cap of velvet darkness—an image of futility for the figure cannot register against the vast heavens except as a gesture of “petty reason.” Enigmatic, but configured, the sense of the phrases lead to panel eight, where the this “figure” of moves, sparkles, and coils. The language is replete with words that suggest a serpent—scales and a “slim dark tallness upright”—but again the mimetic qualities in the texts seem driven by the need for them to conform to the movement of the words on the page as much as the reverse. Motion and movement keep the poem from coming to rest, its movements still actively resolving. Meaning is suspended in a condition of chance.

In panel nine the first two fragments, set in italics, seem to continue and close the implications of the page before—“It was a stellar outcome” or “The outcome was stellar”—meaning constellationary (rather than superlative) while linking to “The Number.” A cluster of four groups of paired fragments, in majuscles interlineated with lower case qualifications—“Were it to have existed,” “Were it to have begun and ended” “Were it to have amounted,” and “Were it to have illuminated” elaborate a set of conditions that anticipate the presence of “LE HASARD.” Wrapping around this large definitive final word (still unpunctuated, however, so it can combine with any number of word fragments and phrases and float free of simple adherence to a single linear sentence, even as the reader has anticipated this closer for several panels) a series of phrases, disconnected syntactically, that invoke the indifference of the system of conditions to an outcome, even a cataclysmic or disastrous one. The “plume” of an earlier panel returns here to fall, as feathers do, in a backward and forward motion set in place by their resistance to air, and returns to some “original foam” from which its “delirium” had made it arise. In other words, the coursing climax of an event of chance operations has reached its (near) denouement in keeping with an image from thermodynamic exchange.

In the tenth panel typographic signals bring the association of three phrases “Nothing” “Will have taken place” “But the place” together visually. The rest of the panel arranges itself in piecemeal description of an “empty act” and “non-existent human outcomes” in a “region / of waves / in which all reality dissolves.” The human frame cannot hold and has only a temporary purchase against the larger scheme of cosmic conditions, linguistics, astronomical, and physical.

Another set of three phrases “Except” “Perhaps” and “A Constellation” form a typographic group. Indeed, they express the crucial *exception* to the terms of abyss and dissolution, scattering and fragmentation, in the form of a figure formed in a moment of organized perception. Redescribed in the smaller roman font as features incidentally created through “obliquity” and “declination”—astronomical terms—that are reinforced by invocation of the “Septentrion” or Big Dipper, and the north star in spite of whose cold indifference an enumeration of a “final account in formation” comes into view. The final line, “All thought expresses a throw of

the dice,” recapitulates the theme of the whole work, showing that thought as well as language is caught in the probabilistic system between chance and constellationary form.

Other things can and have been said about this remarkable poem—that it has a high number of unrhymable words, that it loosens its language from any allegiance to conventions of structure and poetic form, that it is autoreferential to a high degree in keeping with the strategies already envisioned in the 1868 “Sonnet en –yx,” that its sense is all internal, that it organizes its topography in typographical codes, that it attempts to create a temporal-spatial-musical composition using words whose sense-matter is made to be as incidental as possible in order to keep reference cycling back into the formal structure of its execution. Everything in the poem is “at play” says Penny Florence, forcing the scanning reader to perform “these seemingly empty motions.” But, as she goes on to show, they are not empty in the least, but rather the demonstration of conditional and temporary conditions of meaning held in suspension, waiting for the reading to configure them as a constellationary form within the probabilistic, combinatoric potential of the poetic field. Jean-Paul Sartre read the poem as a work of “unsettling negativity,” projecting his own existential anxieties onto its form. But the work is not negative, it is instead the expression of neutrality, of a belief in chance and probability as outside of human experience and control, and of language as an attempt, always inadequate but nonetheless essential and necessary, to configure meaning.

In summary, then, the argument I’ve put forth is that Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de Dés* makes a radical demonstration of the diagrammatic nature of poetic form. As an apparently anomalous work, it proves the rule, that the articulation of aspects of poetic expression is kinetic and/or dynamic, probabilistic, and that its graphical and spatial organization provokes a performative rendering, mobilizing the intellect to configure meaning through a set of relations among metrical, semantic, graphical, thematic, sound, and other features of the work. The apparent linearity, like the semblance of representation, is a reductive fiction in poetic rendering. Even if poetics dribbles off into a discursive banality at one end of its uncreative spectrum and becomes strait-jacketed into conventional templates and formats at the other, as an aesthetic artifact, a poem mobilizes its means and effects relationally, and the armature of form sustains the probabilistic, combinatoric potential of the work, making it available for the interventionary act of reading. A poem is not a static representation, it does not communicate meaning deterministically or mechanistically in any self-identical transfer of semantic value. Reconfiguring our conception of poetic expression into poem as diagram liberates the poetic act from the constraints of a modernist legacy of fixity into a contemporary mode of mobility in which value is construed as performative effect and play, not system, position, and structure. We may imagine this as the simple re-articulation of a post-modern perception, except that its origins are so deeply rooted in the alternative legacy of modernity—the symbolist aesthetic of self-referential poetics steeped in awareness of probabilistic materiality.