Retranslating Mallarmé: "Un Coup de Dés," Concrete Poetry, and the Plurality of Visual Translation

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Abstract: This paper conducts a survey of the translation history of French poet Stephane Mallarmé's famous visual poem, "Un Coup de Dés Jamais n'Abolira le Hasard" (1897). In tracing this poem's path from unfinished typographic experiment, through dozens of translations, and into the terrain of visual art, this article poses questions about the role of fidelity in poetic translation and the productive friction between visual poetry and its literary context.

Keywords: Visual poetry, concrete poetry, experimental poetry, fin-de-siècle literature, print culture studies, translation studies, Stéphane Mallarmé

> "Mallarmé is notoriously difficult to translate. It is depressingly easy to pick holes in existing translations, and to be aware of the shortcomings of one's own."
>
> — Toby Garfitt, in *Forum for Modern Language Studies* (1998)

To understand the many lives of Stephane Mallarmé's "Un Coup de Dés Jamais n'Abolira le Hasard[1]" — a proto-modernist visual poem written in the final years of the nineteenth century, remaining unpublished before the poet's death due to its unique typographical demands, and then cast into dozens of different incarnations of varying degrees of fidelity and creative license over the following hundred years — we need to start from the vantage point of the textual future this poem so aptly predicted. Mallarmé's book-length poem, composed in collaboration with the Didot typesetting firm, was unique in its use of multiple typefaces at different sizes and weights across the text, which cascaded, much like the poem's titular dice, across the open spreads of the book. This typographic feat was ultimately a failure, but one whose ambitions were satisfied half a century later by the poet-designers of the Concrete Poetry movement. This visual poetic program, brought to fruition across multiple national literary cultures, offers in its success an apt lens with which to view the trials of Mallarmé's colossus, especially in its attempt to vault out of the specificity of language into the immediate expressive potential of visuality.

An utopian international movement with its genesis in the heady political era of the mid-twentieth century, in its manifestos Concrete Poetry expressed a desire to "aim at the least common multiple of language" and to produce poems as universally legible as airport or traffic signage (Hilder 4, 36). Poets, working from a great variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, sought to speak in one voice, that of the *concrete*, as opposed to the abstract (4). One thinks of the paintings of the deceptively named abstract expressionists, whose sheer materiality and non-figurativity brought the referent of their paintings within the paintings themselves. No exterior conceptual apparatus – even one as simple as recognizing an image to be that of a boat, or human face – was required. These were paintings about paint; to quote the oft-quoted McLuhanism, the medium was the message. It was in the tangible, the concrete, that a common humanity was to be found: *materiality*, the movement asserted, *is universal.* While inspired by contemporaneous movements in art, however, Con-

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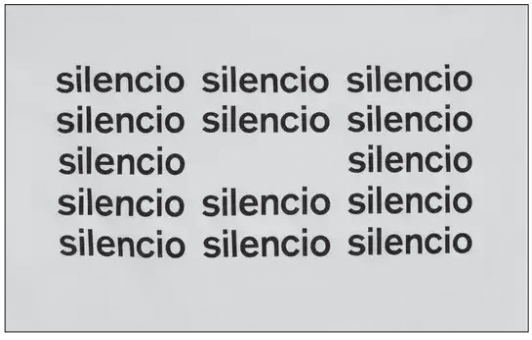
crete Poets happened to be just that: poets, writing in their various mother tongues. While these poems made use of language in largely non-linguistic ways, playing on not the meaning but the shape of words and letters, there still was a fundamental lexical meaning at work. What results from this dovetailing of poetic intention is, as the testimony of the translators of concrete poetry will soon show us, a nearly insoluble problem. This article will argue that in the collision of visual poetry's visual and semantic obstinancy — its desire to be both a poem and an image — we arrive at a mess whose only solution might be *more* dovetailing, more proliferation, and an increasing and unending splitting of the poetic organism. In tracing the outlines of the ever-expanding textual array of Mallarmé's poem and its twentieth-century descendents, I will suggest that this runaway poetic production is, in its own right, a fulfilling of the poem's then-impossible aesthetic and poetic aims. Lastly, as subsequent generations of translators attempt to translate, or re-translate, or even *de*-translate these texts, they produce an multi-linguistic spray of poetic re-interpretations whose textual acrobatics might reveal to us the larger shape of translation as a creative practice.

1. Stuck between text and image

In "Translating Concrete Poetry," published in 1987 in the Spanish literary journal *Ilha do Desterro,* Kirsten Malmkjaer examines this lexical-visual divide. "The concrete in concrete poetry," Marlmkjaer writes, "is the linguistic items used, and these were purportedly used in such a way as to eliminate from them any semantics," instead refashioning "language as material, purely and simply (34). This elimination, at least for the more spare and minimalistic concrete poems, was undoubtedly successful. Take, for example, this unnamed poem by Eugen Gomringer:



Eugen Gromringer, *Untitled.* 1956.

The immediate fact that one must use an image to cite a poem instead of simply retyping it is revealing: the majority of the meaning generated by this poem is graphic or visual. The word, itself a cognate for English readers, has a basic semantic level – silence, omission – that is employed by its material arrangement, with its central absence ringed by markers of this absence itself. This poem would function if the word were not a cognate for the reader; one could simply provide a word gloss such as, for a German reader, *silencio* = *Shweigen*. What Malmkjaer notes as particularly remarkable about this poem is that its internal logic would still function if one did translate each "silencio" into another language; lexical and graphical meaning, in this poem, have a stable and basic relationship. This is not the case for much concrete poetry that breaks words down into their component parts, such as the poem "Lifeboat" by Ernst Jandl that, by shedding the outside letters of the word *drown*, reveals its motivational opposite, *row.*

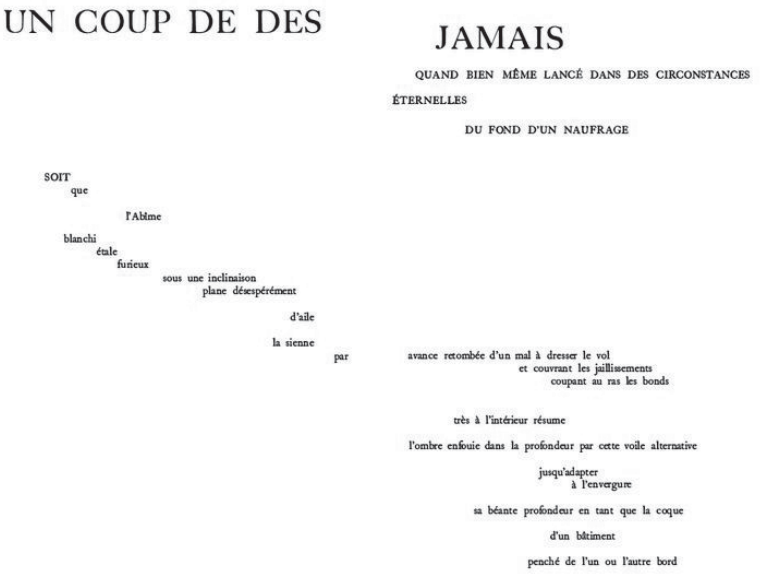
Could this poem function if translated in the same German anthology? It seems not. The German word for drown, *ertrinken,* does not bear the same relation to that for row, *reihe.* A German reader wanting to make meaning of "Lifeboat" would then need two texts, the original and a gloss for the

two English words that form the poem. One cannot translate the English poem into a German equivalent; in the case of "Lifeboat," such a one-to-one translation is doomed to fail. What is at stake here is the gap between visual and semantic meaning that concrete poetry highlights so well. As a poetics aiming for the "lowest common denominator" of language, it often illustrates the failure of this very reduction; more often than not, a poem cannot recreate and explain a poem within that poem's form. What is needed is a multiplicity of texts – perhaps, in the case of "Lifeboat," the reader would the original text, a definition, and some attempt to recreate in German, if not the exact meaning, the graphical-semantic function of exposing a term within its opposite. To perform all of these tasks within a single poem seems rightly difficult, if not impossible; wordplay, as Malmkjaer notes, *does not translate* (41).

This chasm between graphic and semantic meaning has not been closed since the explorations of concrete poets in the mid-twentieth century, nor was this blockage the first. Malmkjaer stresses that "this art form is neither more nor less translatable than any other type of poetry" (41) – the use of opening a larger discussion of translation with the example of concrete poetry is that this particular form foregrounds most aggressively the radical divide between marks and meaning.

Poets working in visual modes have found both frustration and creative fecundity in this duality of language, as have their translators. To translate is to attempt the transmutation of one thing into another, to be an alchemist of language; and when attempting to turn one metal into another, one often ends up with an worthlessly adulterated alloy of the two.

2. Mallarmé's white whale



Page from Mallarmé's *Un coup de Dés jamais n'Abolira le Hasard.*

It is sobering, when thinking of the difficulty of translating a simple concrete poem from English to German, to take a cursory glimpse at a poem whose linguistic and visual complexity breeds such claims as the lamentation of Garfitt above. The quantity of articles in literary journals bemoaning the impossibility of translating the French Symbolist writer (Waldie), essaying to revamp the entire field of translation around him (Garfitt), or offering their own attempt to translate his opus (Aldan, Coffey, Davies, Mulrooney, Cleveland, Blackmore, Waldie) paints Mallarmeì as a leviathan pursued by a chorus of wailing Ahabs.

For at least six decades, translators have left their barbs in *Un coup de Dés jamais n'Abolira le Hasard.* The poem, first written and designed by Mallarmé in 1897, has a mythic history that continues to be writ; the most recent visible attempt to translate the poem was published in 2015, over a century since the genesis of the original. A cursory glance over this poem's publishing history shows a saga of translation, re-translation, and remediation, from handwritten drafts, to turn-of-the-century literary journals, to HTML coding on the Internet.

My examination and understanding of the poem's history is throughout indebted to D. J. Waldie's "The Ghost of an Obsession: Translating Mallarmé's *A throw of the Dice will never abolish Chance*," published in *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* in 2001, which provides a translator's view at the perplexing poem's history. I doubt that I have managed to include every translation of the poem, but this omission only makes this history more remarkable. With each new decade, a new translation appears, each claiming either implicitly or explicitly that *it* is the final, authoritative version. Yet the prized whale again swims away, to test the mettle of yet another translator.

In early 1897, Stéphane Mallarmé shows the first handwritten draft of *Un coup de Dés* to fellow Symbolist poet, Paul Valéry. He has gone to great length indicating what typefaces to be used and the precise arrangement of the poetic lines. Some months later in May of that year, the poem was published in provisional form, radically constrained to fit the format of a magazine, *Colossus*. Mallarmé requests that a preface be attached to the poem that serves as a kind of legend or guide; in the preface, Mallarmé both explains the poem to the reader as well as noting its provisional form:

> Only certain very bold instructions of mine, encroachments etc. forming the counterpoint to this prosody, a work which lacks precedent, have been left in a primitive state: *not because I agree with being timid in my attempts; but because it is not for me, save by a special pagination or volume of my own, in a Periodical so courageous, gracious and accommodating as it shows itself to be to real freedom, to act too contrary to custom.* (UbuWeb, emphasis mine)

Mallarmé thus frames this edition as a preview, a "primitive state" of things to come, and acknowledges both the limits of the medium – "Periodical" – and poetry itself, the "custom" he refers to. The motif of the limiting container into which *Un coup de Dés* must be provisionally stuffed recurs again and again in the poem's history.

It is now July 14th, 1898; Bastille day. The poem has been typeset by the firm of Didot – whose signature typeface is well known in its digital form today – on twelve landscape-oriented sheets, twenty-three inches wide. This, still, is only a draft; Mallarmé has gone through the proofs and marked up, meticulously, minor errors in spacing and typeface selection. It is unknown whether a second, final printing was performed; two months later, on September 9th, Mallarmé dies after a sudden seizure. The project to publish a 200-edition run of *Coup de Dés*, managed by art dealer Ambroise Vollard and featuring decorative lithographs by Redon, is abandoned.

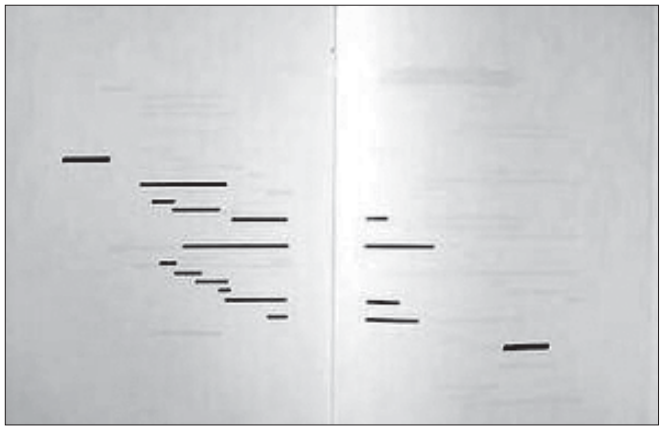
Sixteen years pass until, in 1914, the poem is republished. Mallarmé's son-in-law, Dr. Edmond Bonniot, oversees a new publication of the poem. If Mallarmé considered the poem's publication in *Colossus* to have done insufficient justice to the work, this second publication would have been a greater disappointment: it is published without decorations, in a different. regularized typeface, with an altered arrangement of lines, in a much smaller format. It is after this publication that the poem lays dormant for the longest period of time.

In 1953, Gardner Davies' publishes *Vers une Explication Rationelle du Coup de Dés,* and this explanatory text is followed twelve years later by a new translation by Brian Coffey. The poem is translated yet again in 1971, but between these two translations a new project is undertaken, one that is not a translation in the purest sense, but is instead a variation, or re-imagination.

In 1969, Marcel Broodthaers, a Belgian poet-artist, publishes a book titled *Un coup de Dés jamais n'Abolira le Hasard.* In this book, he has reproduced Mallarmé's poem with one alteration: he has replaced every poetic line of the poem with a thick black graphic line of the same length, thereby "attend[ing] to the structure of Mallarmé's work with far greater concentration than any typographer's

reworking could do" (Drucker 115). By doing so, he has effectively reduced the poem to one of its modes of meaning-production, one that, if Mallarmé's extensive markups on the Didot printing is evidence, is integral to the poem. Johanna Drucker, in *The Century of Artist's Books* (1995), describes this poetic function:

> Broodthaers reduces Un Coup de Dés to its structure – or to put it another way he elevates the structure of the work to a concept worthy of study in its own right, thus acknowledging Mallarmé's own fetishistic attention to this aspect of his work. Rendering the structure concrete, visible, almost tactile, Broodthaers offers a conceptual analysis of Mallarmé's poem across the distance of a nearly a century. (Ibid.)



Marcel Broodthaers, *Un coup de Dés* (1969)

Here we see the gap between graphical and semantic meaning not covered over, but celebrated. Broodthaer's variation on Mallarmé's poem "elevates" one component of its graphical meaning, the weight and placement of its poetic lines, and effectively submerges all other aspects of the poem. What is especially interesting, here, is the way in which Broodthaers replicates not only the form of the text itself but the structural and medial logic behind the original poem. The Museum of Modern Art's catalogue information on Broodthaers' work details this mimicry:

> Mallarmé's poem was published in three different editions with varying paper types; Broodthaers copied this approach, and all three of his variations are represented in MoMA's collection: one with translucent paper, one with standard paper, and one on individual aluminum plates. (MOMA)

This structural and formal attentiveness goes above and beyond that which is found in the previous publications; of course, there are no words in Broodthaers' piece aside from the title – it is a pure concrete poem, devoid of semantic meaning.

In 1971, translator D.J. Waldie made his first, ultimately failed attempt at *Un coup de Dés* as "a callow, miserable graduate student in comparative literature" at the University of California (Waldie 180). He returned to the poem nineteen years later with a translation published by Greenhouse Review in 1990. Waldie's work in ensuring complete fidelity is impressive, and his version is the first to have accurate page size, the correct typographic arrangements, and the original Redon decorations. It is printed by Gary Young, master printer of Greenhouse Review Press, and Felicia Rice, master printer of Moving Parts Press, and heralded as a "recreation in translation" of the original (182). At last, it seems, the struggle is over.

Nine years later, in the final year of the second century of Mallarmé's poem's existence, Daisy Aldan's translation of *Coup de Dés* published by Michigan's Sky Blue Press. Six years after this publication, in 2005, the poem is translated again by Basil Cleveland and put online, as .pdf, on

UbuWeb alongside another translation by Christopher Mulrooney. Four years after this digital version, a new translation appears in traditional form: in 2009, Oxford World's Classics releases a collection of Mallarmé's poems, including a new translation of the poem by E.H. and A.M. Blackmore. Page formatting is, unlike Waldie's obsessive accuracy, wildly inaccurate; the book is a 5x7" paperback, a format bemoaned years earlier by Waldie for making the poem "almost unreadable" (180). It indeed seems cramped to reduce twelve-by-twenty-three-inch wide sheets into seven-by-ten inches – as detailed further below, the poem when bound necessitates printing across the facing pages – especially when the text size itself is hardly altered. What is further problematic, however, is the anthology's publication on Amazon's Kindle eBook platform.

In "The Virtual Codex from Page Space to E-space," Johanna Drucker unpacks the utopian language of eBook promoters and examines what, if anything, eBooks and e-readers can bring to the experience of reading. Handheld devices such as Amazon's Kindle, Indigo's Kobo, and tablets like Apple's iPad and its iBooks claim to revolutionize the outdated codex form, making "conspicuous promises of improvement" over the "'limitations' of paper-based books ("Virtual"). However, as Drucker observes, these e-readers appear most interested in reproducing the "kitsch" elements of paper books – redundant and non-functional visual features like page- turning animations (Ibid.). What, Drucker asks, can these e-readers do *differently* than physical books? With the exception of superficially integrated interactivity – which usually, like the ability to annotate, further apes the functions of paper books – it seems that eBooks reproduce, not transcend, the "limitations" of the traditional paper-bound codex.

In the Oxford World's Classic's eBook version of *Stéphane Mallarmé: Collected Poems and Other Verse,* this limitation is aggressively foregrounded when one takes into account the particular nature of *Un coup de Dés.* The poem, when contained in bound form, is intended to be read not page by page but *across both pages*. This has been done by most previous translations in order to preserve the uniquely wide format of the original; by splitting each original broadside across the open face of two smaller pages, the reader can follow the text across recto and verso as a "single visual unit" (Waldie 182). How does one perform this same recto-verso reading on an e-reader, like the Kindle or Kobo, that only displays one page at a time? More pressingly, how would one know to read the poem in this way without the connection between pages being visually apparent, as is the case when opening a book? To read across two pages, skipping back and forth to follow each line, would be radically counter-intuitive. It seems inescapable that the reader of the eBook version of *Un coup de Dés* would be reading an entirely different poem, one made even more discontinuous than the original – especially if they made use of perhaps the one functional advantage of eBooks, the ability to resize text. Did the publishers of *Collected Poems and Other Verse* think of their choice to release the book in digital form as anything other than straightforward republication? What is occluded by assuming an easy transfer between physical book and e-reader is the way in which information, when translated between different media, itself changes.

It appears that my previous definition of "translation" suffers from a narrowness of scope; it defines translation and translators in too limited a way as *conscious acts by definable agents*. It conceives of a community of self-described translators who are discrete entities from the rest of the publishing process, and defines translation as the willful adaptation of text. Broadening this scope sheds a great deal of light on Mallarmé's poem and the greater publishing system of which it is an artefact, and it is to this widening that I devote the following sections of my essay.

What I find particularly illuminative in this history of translations and re-translations are publications that *did not consider themselves translations*, and the ways in which, without setting out to do so, these acts and agents translated and transformed a poem uniquely configured to show their alterations. In this sense, Broodthaers' variation and the Oxford eBook publication stand out as particularly unique in the publication history of *Un coup de Dés*; the less transparent the repackaging of Mallarmé's poem, the more we are able to see the packaging itself.[2]

3. Translation, remediation, and loss

By conceiving of translation not only as an authorized literary practice, but as a textual and bibliographic process often performed blindly and inadvertently, by machines as often as by human agents, I want to emphasize in the publication history of Mallarmé's poem its more hidden translations – the translations not from one language to another, but between media. These translations were accompanied by a particular kind of loss or reduction that goes beyond simple semantic meaning.

In this way, my use of translation converges with the concept of adaptation or *remediation.* In the introductory essay to their *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Jay David Bolter, and Richard Grusin sketch out a preliminary definition of the term that is of great use to my discussion. To perform a remediation is, colloquially, to repurpose – it is to "take a 'property' from one medium and reuse it in another" (45). Property, in this sense of content, is framed initially by Bolter and Grusin with the concept of film adaptations of classic literary works; however, it is the shift of their discussion to the particularities of remediation in contemporary digital media that bears our particular attention. Here, they discuss the process in which "an older medium is highlighted and represented in digital form without apparent irony or critique," with the attempt on the part of the digital media to "erase itself" (45). Here, we can think of two extreme models of remediation in *Un coup de Dés* history, that of Broodthaers' art book and the eBook publication of Oxford's *Collected Poems*. While the former strives to foreground its medium, the latter seeks transparency:

> In these cases, the electronic medium is not set in opposition to painting, photography, or printing; instead, the computer is offered as a new means of gaining access to these older materials, as if the content of the older media could simply be poured into the new one. Since the electronic version justifies itself by granting access to the older media, it wants to be transparent... so that the viewer stands in the same relationship to the content as she would if she were confronting the original medium. Ideally, there should be no difference between the experience of seeing a painting in person and on the computer screen, but this is never so. *The computer always intervenes and makes its presence felt in some way, perhaps because the viewer must click on a button or slide a bar to view a whole picture or perhaps because the digital image appears grainy or with untrue colors*. (45, emphasis mine)

What is particularly interesting about this conception of remediation is how it can be applied, in reverse, onto the phenomenon of translation. Language is, after all, a medium, and translation is the attempt to "pour" content from one linguistic container to another. This pouring between language or media, however, is not without spills. The difference in media always "makes its presence felt," such as the loss of functionality inherent in the eBook version of *Un coup de Dés* – exactly the blockage of having to "click on a button or slide a bar to view a whole picture" – or the untranslatability of a certain poetic phrase, which can only be rendered in "untrue colors" or, in the case of Ernst Jandl's "Lifeboat," not at all (45). This opacity, however, can be used to great effect; Broodthaers' version effectively blocks lexical meaning, its black bars throwing the poem's visual and material structure into sharp relief. Furthermore, by printing the poem on translucent paper, he gives the reader a trans-temporal view of the poem's overarching structure and the relationship between individual pages, drawing them further away from immersion in the poem. This translucency, paradoxically, renders the medium *opaque.* This opacity, in both cases, comes with loss. For the eBook, this loss is of continuity or fidelity to the original; for Broodthaers' version, the linguistic meaning of the poem is abandoned. In a fascinating extra-textual addition in the official gallery showing of his work, Broodthaers compensated for this loss by providing an audio recording the poem read by himself. This audio- lexical accompaniment was something of a legend for the poem, allowing readers to at least attempt to follow along and read back into the black lines of censure the original lexical content.

That loss has been all along a theme of this essay is not surprising; in remediation and translation, minimizing loss is the chief concern. Before closing this essay, I would like to address this central concern and the ways in which translators have sought solutions to what is, seemingly, a necessary

failure of translation. One response to this loss will find, within the limiting contingencies of translation, a promising productivity and multiplicity.

4. Loss and recovery

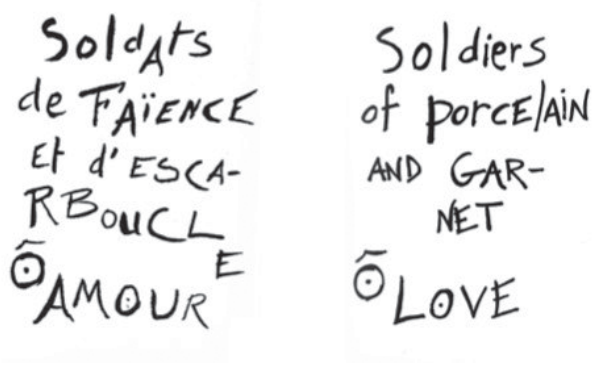
Translators whose work I consulted stressed over and over the effort taken to preserve the qualities of a poem, and when unable to avoid loss, bemoaned their inability to do so. It is a sad reality of translating that any translation must lose something of the original, and the translator must decide what will be lost. These choices are frustrating and anxiety-inducing for the translator who wants to maintain fidelity, but must decide in what area this fidelity will lie. This dilemma has been written on extensively, and continues to vex translators, particularly those of rhyming poetry:

> Writers who have recommended the translation of poetry into prose have done so because they were thinking of *one particular function* of the translation, to show how the lines may be construed... The reader who seeks the music and the majesty that may lie in a pattern of words is the reader who can never be put off with a prose translation. (Savory 82, emphasis mine)

Attempting to preserve the exact meaning of a verse poem will nearly inevitably lead to jettisoning the rhyme and meter, while trying to keep the rhyme and meter will necessitate some alterations in semantic sense. Which aspect of the poem to be faithful is often up to the discretion of the translator; this responsibility is a momentous and anxious one and is largely dependent on the work's perceived audience.

What are the sacrifices contingent to the translating of a visual poem? As will be shown in the case of Malmkjaer's "ø" poem, concrete or visual poetics are no easier on their translator than those of a lyrical nature. The co-existence of a multitude of translations of Mallarmé's *Un coup de Dés* confirms this fact, and suggests that each translation or remediation privileges one aspect of the text, jettisoning the others. What the eBook gains through its loss, perhaps, is no more than portability; but what of the Broodthaers version? By elevating the role of structure, what does it necessarily foreswear? This is a valuable manner in which to examine the various translations of the text, and other visual or concrete poems: To which aspect of a text does each translation attempt to be faithful, the semantic or graphical meaning? Is it possible, like in the old joke, to answer "yes," and have it both ways?

Faithfulness to both visual and lexical meaning can in fact be found in vestigial forms. Impressive in its diligence is a 1980 translation, by Anne Hyde Greet, of French symbolist Guillaume Apollinaire's 1918 collection, *Calligrammes.* This collection features around a dozen concrete poems, many of which make use of several font faces. The poems are presented in facing translations with remarkable effort, through the selection of typefaces, to preserve the poems' visuality. Where the translator's efforts become truly exemplary, however, is where *handwritten* poems are translated in a close approximation of the poet's hand:



Apollinaire, trans. Greet, 152

If translation is a kind of remediation, and if remediation by necessity is a process of loss, this is a conscientious minimizing of that loss. It is an attempt to maintain both levels of meaning, lexical and visual, and to not, as so often done, subordinate the latter to the former. This is no doubt made easy by the relative brevity of the poem; such depth of mimicry toward a poem of *Un coup de Dés*'s length would take considerably more rigour. Also facilitating the translation in semantic terms of the Apollinaire poem is its relative grammatical simplicity: it is a description followed by a declaration. Mallarmé's poem, however, is much less straightforward: "MIGHT ONE BE... MIGHT ONE BEGIN AND END... MIGHT ONE BE FIGURED... MIGHT ONE SHINE... NOTHING... " (qtd. in translation in Waldie 184). In the discourse of Mallarmé translation, it is this syntactical oddness that makes the poet especially difficult – or, to use the phrase of Garfitt, "tantalisingly mysterious" (345). This mysteriousness or ambiguity is, to understate, as problematic as it is "tantalising."

How could one really say which translation of a word or phrase in French is more accurate when constellations of meaning are both highly personal and flexible over time? When Mallarmé declares that "ONE MIGHT BE FIGURED," how could we tell the poet meant the same thing as we do, over a hundred years later? In "Translating Concrete Poetry," Kirsten Malmkjaer uses the example of a single lexical character to highlight the insurmountable indeterminacy of translation:

> ... It may be remarked that should I decide to compose a concrete poem thus: ø, then it is doubtful whether a Danish readership, even if well versed in the theory of concrete poetry, would be able to erase from their consciousness the fact that ø means island – language just isn't like that, or language users aren't – and I hypothesize, therefore, that a Danish readership would bring to this poem and uneradicable association. (36)

Pertinent to this claim is the concrete poet's desire to achieve a universality through basic, "lowest common denominator" language (Hilder 4). If, as Malmkjaer shows, even these basic components of language are fraught throughout with varying associations, how can any poet – or translator – make this claim? Translators of Mallarmé find themselves stymied at the poet's use of such troublesome single characters such as the first word of the poetic line, "A la nue accablante tu." "For a start," writes Garfitt, "is the opening word 'A' to be read as a preposition or as an auxiliary verb? Bertrand Marchal has done readers of Mallarmé a great service in his brief but clear and incisive commentaries…," and so on and so forth (346). How, if translators fill entire pages arguing over the meaning of a single printed character, can one proceed with the gargantuan task of an entire poem? Wouldn't the ambiguity multiply exponentially with every line? How, as suggested by Malmkjaer, can we account for what's happening in the receiving subjectivity, itself an intricate network of linguistic associations? Can we ever determine accuracy in a semantic sense? Graphical fidelity seems to be at least marginally more achievable: Waldie, in the article accompanying his translation, celebrates that "for the first time, the spreads of pages were as broad and tall as Mallarmé specified," and discusses the great empirical effort of measuring "every page and line of type from the most complete set of original proofs" (182). Is semantic meaning as measurable? A more pressing and vital question is: *why bother with these notions of fidelity at all, even if they are determinable?*

It is probably possible to empirically assess, in a comparative survey, the competitive and combative translation history of *Un coup de Dés*. One can, like Waldie, take a ruler to the pages and lines to determine which translation most effectively minimizes its loss. One could consult historical language usage documents to try to determine the constellation of meanings accessible to Mallarmé, and compare this linguistic data to that of the translations. However, this approach simply recreates the discourse of fidelity that seeks to find the one, authoritative translation that manages to maintain both visual and semantic meaning. I feel that to do this would be missing the point, in part because of the inescapable subjectivity of the latter type of fidelity, but in part because poetry *isn't* about precision, or mutability. The sheer volume of translations of Mallarmé's poem seems to indicate, in reverse correlation, the impossibility of ever landing on the one objectively accurate reproduction; could not this infinitely unfolding nature of the poem, its breathing life into countless new texts, be

a quality best left unhindered? Does the poem's immutability call for a similarly fecund model of translation?

What I have left for further exploration in this discussion is a methodology of translation and an interpretative hermeneutics that seeks to release, not contain, the explosive compression of poetry. Models of this approach can be found in Toby Garfitt's "A Plural Approach to Translating Mallarmé," in which the translator creates five alternate versions of the same poem, each, like Broodthaers, elevating one aspect of the text. The poems that result, such as a purely homophonic rendition of the original French, are less translations than responses, new texts that pay homage to the plurality and ambiguity of the original.

The most explosive implication of this process is one that I do not have space here to fully explore. This methodology of plurality suggests that *no literary text by itself is complete*, original or translation – all call for further explorations, all represent but a single angle of approach. This ethos is reflected in Roland Barthes' *S/Z,* a book-length interpretation of a short story by Honoré de Balzac that attempts to exhaust or wring out all possible sites of meaning; Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style*, which retells the same brief anecdote in ninety-nine different ways; and in bpNichol's "Translating Apollinaire," a open-ended project that calls for an endless stream of permutations generated by translating and re-translating a single poem.

What is being constructed in projects like these is a new interpretative or hermeneutic model, one of maximalism, that seeks to topple the despotic reign of the singular and heroic critic, translator, or author by calling for a fragmentary, democratic, and pluralist criticism. This new model embraces plurality, immutability, and versatility; it is a hermeneutics of exhaustion that strives to create an exponentially growing, ever-opening, *inexhaustible* text.

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Notes

[1] This title is typically translated as "A Roll of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance," or slightly less commonly as "A Throw of the Dice," et cetera.

[2] The 2015 Wave Books republication of Mallarmé's poem — printed and bound with a level of care consistent with the press's other publications — makes the interesting choice of typesetting the text in a sans-serif, rather than serif, font. This is a slight change, but one with a very palpable effect on the poem's atmosphere; it carries the poem into the idiom of the later Concrete poets, as well as calling to mind the lighter-than-air falling of text across space in web-based textual ecosystems. (To further add to the continued proliferation of *Un Coup de Dés,* Wave also commissioned a new translation for this edition, by Jeff Clark and Robert Bononno.)

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