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## From the Music of Poetry to the Music of the Spheres: The Musical-Logocentric Vision in T. S. Eliot and Stéphane Mallarmé

All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music.

Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*

As early as the sixteenth century, in *An Apology for Poetry* Sir Philip Sidney denounces those who “cannot hear the planet-like music of poetry” (Leitch 362). By doing so, he alludes to a well-known concept dating back to ancient times. Sidney’s “music of poetry” bears much resemblance to the music of the spheres mentioned in the works of Pythagoras, Plato and Cicero. The great writers of antiquity believed that the universe was musically constructed and that there existed a kind of celestial music, the most beautiful of all sounds (Alldritt 121; Leitch 362). It seems only natural that such a concept is linked with poetry, whose roots are melic. The art of versification thus came to be regarded as analogous to music, and Sidney remains but one of the poets who believe that verse, as the supreme form of literature, should aspire to recover the supreme, unifying *melos* of the cosmos.

Three and a half centuries after Sidney’s death, his term “music of poetry” recurred in the title of an essay by a poet who is to contemporary literature what Sidney is to the English Renaissance. Given T. S. Eliot’s penchant for the Elizabethans, it is hardly surprising that he should draw on this particular source for the title of his lecture delivered at Glasgow University in 1942 and published in the same year. The essay contains numerous references to other authors, one of them being the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé. Again, the choice is what one might have expected of a poet as deeply influenced by the French symbolists as Eliot. Interestingly, however, the affinities between both poets’ view of the musical aspect of poetry are not limited to this one mention. A close comparison of “The Music of Poetry” and “Crise de vers,” an 1896 essay by Mallarmé, reveals so many striking parallels that one might in fact speak of the French and the Anglo-American poets sharing a similar conception, in which *ars poetica* is equated with *ars musica*.

What strikes even a reader who has a passing acquaintance with both texts is the musical nature of the vocabulary Mallarmé and Eliot use. In the former’s essay, one comes

across such terms as *orchestration, instrumentation, musicalité, accompagnements, concert, orchestre, instrument, orgues, clavier, flûte, viole, rythme, cadence, dissonances, euphonie, échos, mélodie, timbres, sonorités, accords, notation, symphonie, fugues, sonates*. This assemblage of melic terminology culminates in the word *music* being capitalized in Mallarmé's essay. Throughout the text, the author uses musical metaphors and comparisons while dealing with the condition of poetry. The poet is likened to a musician, composer or singer, and, consequently, the recipient of poetry is more of a listener than a reader, as references to the ear and the sense of hearing suggest. Finally, Mallarmé explains how, in an ideal poetic image, the essence of the thing presented arises "musically." Indeed, the whole essay seems to be pervaded by an aura of musicality.

"The Music of Poetry" differs from "Crise de vers" in being more straightforward and clear. The essay by Mallarmé, who is renowned for the obscurity of his writings and for what the critic Malcolm Bowie terms "the art of being difficult" (Leitch 844), is an example of what the French poet himself calls the "critical poem" (Leitch 842), a genre of theoretical text as stylistically dense and complex as his verse. Eliot, with his preference for order and hierarchy, never breaks down the distinction between theory and poetic practice. Therefore, one shall not find in "The Music of Poetry" the figurative language of Mallarmé with his musical metaphors. Instead, Eliot states directly that to him, as to his French predecessor, the work of the poet is, to a certain extent, that of a musician: "I think that a poet may gain much from the study of music: how much knowledge of musical form is desirable I do not know, for I have not that technical knowledge myself" (*On Poetry* 38). With his characteristic reserve, Eliot mentions that he is not uncritical of the connection between the two arts, and that it is "possible for a poet to work too closely to musical analogies" (38), which might result in artificiality. While avoiding Mallarmé's effusiveness, Eliot still uses expressions which have musical or aural connotations throughout the essay: *hear, listener, ear, sound* and *instrumental music*, to name but a few. A passage referring to his memories of W. B. Yeats reading his poems aloud makes it clear that to Eliot, as to Mallarmé, poetry is to be heard as well as, or maybe rather than, read.

Both poets inevitably deal with prosody, and both seem to suggest that an intuitive approach to it is the optimal one. To Mallarmé, metrical rules are something the poet has to guess rather than learn. Similarly, Eliot implies that the principles of prosody should be acquired through induction rather than deduction:

The only way to learn to manipulate any kind of English verse seemed to be by assimilation and imitation, by becoming so engrossed in the work of a particular poet that one could produce a recognizable derivative.... we may find the classification of metres, of lines with different numbers of syllables and stresses in different places, useful

at a preliminary stage, as a simplified map of a complicated territory: but it is only the study, not of poetry but of poems, that can train our ear. (27-28)

In admitting to his inability “to retain the names of feet and meters, or to pay the proper respect to the accepted rules of scansion” (27), Eliot echoes the French poet’s view of prosody as “*ce qu’il n’importe d’apprendre*” (Mallarmé 362).

Regarding prosody as restrictive, Mallarmé cannot help but consider the advent of *vers libres* a revolution. He even goes so far as to treat it as a kind of second French Revolution, and enthusiastically celebrates the breaking up of the poetic line as a “liberation” of verse, allowing for personal expression and individuality. As a successor to the French symbolists, Eliot inevitably touches upon free verse, a crucial part of their legacy, in “The Music of Poetry.” However, while Mallarmé lauds *vers-libristes* such as Verlaine and Laforgue, who depart from the classical French verse form – the alexandrine, Eliot seems to have reservations about such prosodic freedom, claiming that “no verse is free for the man who wants to do a good job” (*On Poetry* 37). The author of *Four Quartets* warns that “a great deal of bad prose has been written under the name of free verse” (37) and concludes that “only a bad poet could welcome free verse as a liberation from form. It was a revolt against dead form, and a preparation for new form or for the renewal of the old” (37). The difference in attitude is perhaps rooted in chronology: Mallarmé praised *vers libres* at a time when it was still a novelty, whereas Eliot’s essay, published almost half a century later, reacted to the period of intense practice of free verse, which by then had come to stand for consolidation rather than innovation. Interestingly, Mallarmé appears to have predicted Eliot’s skepticism, as he reassures the readers of “Crise de vers” that “*dans les occasions amples on obéira toujours à la tradition solennelle, dont la prépondérance relève du génie classique*” (363). Like Eliot, Mallarmé hints that the prosodic freedom brought about by his fellow symbolists might be only an *interregnum* prior to the establishment of new versification forms, as some regularity and similarity are essential as far as prosody is concerned.

Importantly, Mallarmé perceives the explosion of *vers libres* as inextricably linked with language. Free verse, a rediscovery of poetic form, entails a rediscovery of language itself. Thus, Mallarmé equates music with language, just as he equates music with poetry in the oft-quoted passage: “*ouïr l’indiscutable rayon – comme des traits dorent et déchirent un méandre de mélodies : où la Musique rejoint le Vers pour former, depuis Wagner, la Poésie*” (365). To Mallarmé, expressing yourself poetically equals bursting into song. By mentioning Wagner, whose influence is pervasive among late-nineteenth-century French poets and to whom Eliot, significantly, refers in *The Waste Land*, Mallarmé suggests that the poet should struggle to achieve in verse what the German

composer accomplished in music. The author of “Crise de vers” realizes that, unlike the musician, the poet is doomed to struggle with the constraints of the language and the impossibility of communicating one’s thoughts clearly through the verbal medium. The sounds of words may be related to their meanings, but the very existence of multiple languages indicates that this relation is not one of perfect correspondence. Mallarmé notes that, unlike God, we do not speak words which are themselves the things they name. While God can say “Let there be light” and there is light, *jour*, the French word for *day*, has a dark vowel sound whereas *nuit*, the French equivalent of *night*, has a light sound. There is no supreme, ideal language which would be perfectly in tune with itself, with no discrepancy between sound and sense; there is no verbal equivalent of the supreme music of the spheres. Poetry, however, is superior to language, redeeming its shortcomings and creating a new, total word, unknown to language, suspending the multiple facets of an idea so that its fragments balance in a kind of universal musicality. Verse should therefore aspire to the condition of pure poetry, comparable to the celestial music of the cosmos.

In pure poetry, according to Mallarmé, words themselves take the initiative in their clashes and rhymes while the poet is anonymous and absent, as in Eliot’s doctrine of poetic impersonality. The word, “*l’immortelle parole*” (Mallarmé 364), is thus central to Mallarmé’s theory, just as it is central to Eliot’s concept of poetic musicality. In his essay, the author of *The Waste Land* identifies the music of poetry with the music of the words. Like his French predecessor, Eliot delves into the alchemy of the word, examining the phonetic-semantic relation, to find out that no word is beautiful in itself, “from the point of view of *sound* alone” (*On Poetry* 32). This statement leads Eliot to conclude that

The music of a word is, so to speak, at a point of intersection: it arises from its relation first to the words immediately preceding and following it, and indefinitely to the rest of its context; and from another relation, that of its immediate meaning in that context to all the other meanings which it has had in other contexts, to its greater or less wealth of association. (32-33)

It is the poet’s task to take account of the whole anatomy of words, of their various connotations, of what they suggest rather than explicitly mean. This knowledge of all verbal connections is a prerequisite for creating, or better composing, the “musical poem” (33) as Eliot understands it:

My purpose here is to insist that a “musical poem” is a poem which has a musical pattern of sound and a musical pattern of the secondary meanings of the words which compose it, and that these two patterns are indissoluble and one. And if you object

that it is only the pure sound, apart from the sense, to which the adjective “musical” can be rightly applied, I can only reaffirm my previous assertion that the sound of a poem is as much an abstraction from the poem as is the sense. (33)

In his definition of musicality, Eliot makes suggestion an integral part of the poem’s “soundscape.” He thus puts great emphasis on allusiveness, one of the key features of symbolist poetry. So does Mallarmé in “Crise de vers,” noting that evocation, allusion and suggestion are more beneficial to poetry than description. To prove his view that reality cannot be presented directly, Mallarmé evokes, somewhat humorously, a book trying to enclose a palace, on which the pages have difficulty closing. He welcomes the advent of new schools of poetry which rely solely on the aforementioned techniques, and places their achievements in a musical context by comparing their poetic works to fugues and sonatas. In Mallarmé’s view, the task of poetry is to make allusions, to distil the essence of the thing – its idea, as the following oft-quoted passage indicates:

*Je dis: une fleur! et, hors de l’oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose d’autre que les calices sus, musicalement se lève, idée même et suave, l’absente de tous bouquets.* (368)

While Mallarmé celebrates suggestiveness as a novelty brought about by the symbolist movement, of which he is one of the leading representatives, Eliot sees it, in a historical perspective, as intrinsic to poetry in general:

This is an “allusiveness” which is not the fashion or eccentricity of a peculiar type of poetry; but an allusiveness which is in the nature of words, and which is equally the concern of every kind of poet. (*On Poetry* 33)

In fact, Eliot goes further in applying the tenets of symbolism to all kinds of verse. In “The Music of Poetry,” he seems resigned to the fact that the entire meaning of a poem can never be captured and paraphrased “because the poet is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist” (30). Significantly, he illustrates his skeptical approach to deciphering poetry by discounting attempts to unriddle the meanings of Mallarmé’s poems. In the symbolist vein, Eliot asserts the open-ended nature of poetry and its inevitable vagueness. He thereby extends the symbolists’ chief aim – to express the inexpressible – to poems overall. When Eliot claims that “poetry attempts to convey something beyond what can be conveyed in prose rhythms” and that “the poem means more, not less, than ordinary speech can communi-

cate” (31), he echoes Mallarmé’s transcendent desire to approach, through suggestion and allusion, “la musicalité de tout” (366).

It is precisely this universal musicality that the poet should aspire to. In “Crise de vers,” Mallarmé sets a poetic ideal which he likens, at some point, to the philosopher’s stone or a chimera. Mostly, however, his highest ambitions for poetry are expressed in terms of music, which to him is not only a system of sounds which appeals directly to the senses and emotions, but also a system of pure relations and intervals which has a structural rather than referential existence. According to Mallarmé, poetry should attempt to enact the correspondences between the earthly and the ethereal, and recreate the music of the spheres. He regards poetry as “un art d’achever la transposition, au Livre, de la symphonie” (367), the art of capturing, through symbols and suggestion, the essence of the great unifying symphony of the cosmos. Toward the end of “Crise de vers,” Mallarmé points to the word as a source of all music, including that of the spheres:

*ce n’est pas de sonorités élémentaires par les cuivres, les cordes, les bois, indéniablement mais de l’intellectuelle parole à son apogée que doit avec plénitude et évidence, résulter, en tant que l’ensemble des rapports existant dans tout, la Musique. (367-68)*

Mallarmé’s “intellectuelle parole” can be equated with the *logos*, a philosophical term derived from Greek, which stands for *word*, but also *speech*, *thought* and *reason*. It may also be associated with divine reason, a force unifying the universe. By composing the kind of poetry Mallarmé aspires to through “the mystery of the word, which may evoke the Word – the Logos, the poet seeks to commune with and to reveal the invisible, the infinite or the unknown” (Brée 3). The word becomes central to both Mallarmé’s and Eliot’s poetic theories, justifying their experiments with incantation.

The year 1942, in which “The Music of Poetry” appeared, also saw the publication of Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. Interestingly, while in the essay Eliot refrains from referring to ultimate metaphysical realities, in the poem he places Mallarmé’s ideas in a Christian context. The French poet’s musical-logocentric vision informs *Four Quartets*. It suffices to look at the beginning of “Burnt Norton,” the first quartet, to detect traces of Mallarmé. The poem opens with the image of a rose garden, in which

the bird called, in response to  
The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery

*(Complete Poems 118)*

Eliot's "unheard music" may be identified with the *logos*, the eternal word, which can only be heard in silence, the silence Mallarmé so often alludes to in "Crise de vers." In "Burnt Norton," this silence is associated with timelessness, stillness and redemption, and opposed to the quotidian motion and clamor of the world, which prevents humanity from experiencing eternity. It is, however, possible to attain stillness and timelessness through art, as the closing section of "Burnt Norton" suggests:

Words move, music moves  
 Only in time; but that which is only living  
 Can only die. Words, after speech, reach  
 Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,  
 Can words or music reach  
 The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
 Moves perpetually in its stillness.

(121)

Art offers a paradoxical combination of motion and stillness: every composition, whether verbal or musical, has a pattern, and can be performed endlessly. Poetry and music exist in and out of time, and in silence when they are not being performed. To Eliot, as to Mallarmé, poetry and music grow out of the temporary to reach the eternal *logos*. Eliot, like Mallarmé, realizes that the task of the poet is extremely difficult:

Words strain,  
 Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
 Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
 Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
 Will not stay still. Shrieking voices  
 Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,  
 Always assail them. The Word in the desert  
 Is most attacked by voices of temptation,  
 The crying shadow in the funeral dance,  
 The loud lament of the disconsolate chimera.

(121-22)

Significantly, Mallarmé also compares his poetic ambitions to a chimera. Both poets are thus aware of the unattainability of the ideal they pursue. However, neither of them can abandon his task as "the Word is the perfection moving the poem and the poet, too, in

his own empty desert” (Smith 267). To both poets, the words of the poem are also its music, which reaches into the silence and the *logos*. Eliot’s “unheard music” is thus Mallarmé’s “musicalité de tout,” and the silence which recurs in their works is parallel to the music of the spheres, a music too perfect to be audible to human ears.

In this quest for a poetic ideal which is at once elevated and inaccessible, Mallarmé seems more ardent and more desperate, steadily gravitating towards hermeticism. The evolution of Mallarmé’s conception of poetry and of his technique was a function of his pursuit of the Absolute: from clear, almost explicit symbols to obscure, equivocal ones. The poetry he practiced was increasingly hermetic, and his poetic idiom increasingly esoteric and accessible only to the chosen few. To him, poetry is sacred and thus the profane are denied access to its temple. Hence his penchant for the mysterious, which will discourage accidental worshippers and appeal to the true ones. To that end, the poet needs to invent “*une langue immaculée*” and “*des formules hiératiques*” (Lagarde 531). In search of this new language, Mallarmé dislocates syntax, multiplying appositions, ellipses and periphrases. Highlighting words, he recreates them and allows them to take control. In keeping with his idea of musicality, he arranges words according to their sonorous affinities. However, his attempts, ambitious and impressive as they are, entail a serious danger: poetry as understood by Mallarmé is at risk of becoming totally incommunicable and reduced to the silence he repeatedly refers to in his writings. Mallarmé neglects the communicative aspect of language, focusing on its aesthetic function. It results in the poet being separated from the general public. The lack of communication excludes the possibility of communion between the poet and his reader.

While Mallarmé steers his verse towards pure structure and abstract poetic constructs, composing a poetry which creates a world of its own, a poetry with no concrete references to the external world, Eliot is more meaning-oriented, and thus more rational, in his conception of the music of poetry. Like Mallarmé, he attaches great importance to form, which guarantees order where the forces of chaos seem to prevail. Importantly, however, Eliot does not dissociate the structure from the content, nor does he ignore the communicative function of language, thus avoiding “the mossiness of Mallarmé” (*To Criticize* 170). Eliot has a message to convey, and therefore his poetry cannot be devoid of subject matter. Musicality, to him, is a very broad term: it is not only the melodic properties of verse, but also a musicality of structure, which likens the poem to a musical composition. However, what it is not is a purely musical arrangement of words bereft of meaning. Rightness in poetry, according to Eliot, depends on a combination of sound and sense, and on no account should the former be divorced from the latter.

Though mysticism is but one aspect of this multifarious work, *Four Quartets*, the poetic culmination of Eliot’s idea of the music of poetry, is undoubtedly a religious poem,



in terms of content as well as form, with its mantra-like, liturgical repetitions of phrases and motifs. The religious context, so important to Eliot, is largely absent from Mallarmé's work. Throughout his life, the French poet worshipped only one cult – that of poetry – and practiced only one religion – that of the Ideal. He was the priest, the saint and the martyr of a poetry striving to capture the essence of things as opposed to contingent appearances. His revelations are poetic rather than religious. If Eliot associates the concept of the transcendent music of the spheres and of the Absolute with the sacred, Mallarmé remains secular. In the verse of the former, Christian beliefs replace the symbolist ideas which drive the work of the latter. In Bush's words, "Eliot's attraction to 'the music of poetry' has Platonic and Christian overtones" (168); Mallarmé, by contrast, is Platonic *tout court*. While the French poet is interested mainly in aesthetics, Eliot tends towards the realm of theology and ethics. To quote Bush again, "for the Eliot of the *Quartets*, music is not simply a formal property of verse; it is the emanation of a spiritual fountain" (168). Thibaudet's statement that "dans la poésie pure de Mallarmé, l'initiative est cédée aux mots, comme dans la mystique du pur amour, l'initiative est laissée à Dieu" (480) is applicable to the influence of Mallarmé on *Four Quartets*. In the poem, the word which, through the concept of the music of poetry, plays a crucial role in the symbolist poetics of Mallarmé becomes central to Eliot's Christian logocentric vision.

Despite Eliot's admiration for Mallarmé and the theory and idea of pure poetry, of which the French poet is a chief exponent, the author of *Four Quartets* does not succumb to Mallarméan hermeticism. Both these concepts, the hallmarks of Mallarmé's *œuvre*, are inextricably linked with the music of poetry. If Mallarmé's *poésie pure* is said to tend towards music, it means that the beauty of the poem's words struggles to be in harmony with the melody and sound the words convey. Mallarmé, who wanted to do with words what a musician does with musical notes, helped develop the idea that pure poetry was a form of music and expressed the essence of things. Though tempted by the possibilities of this kind of purity in verse, Eliot never crosses the borderline into incommunicability. In an introduction to his anthology of *Pure Poetry*, George Moore praises the works of Poe because they are almost "free from thought" (Cuddon 758). Another notable advocate of the concept, the Abbé Bremond, associates poetry with prayer, as it aspires to an ineffable and incantatory condition (Cuddon 758). Both Eliot and Mallarmé make use of the powers of incantation; however, it seems that while *Four Quartets* draws closer to Bremond's view, Mallarmé, opposed to a poetry of ideas, goes further in striving towards freedom from thought and, inevitably, from meaning in the strict sense of the term.

Unlike Mallarmé, a hermetic poet *par excellence*, Eliot, though drawn to a highly subjective use of language in poetry and the music and suggestive power of the words, does

not seem to aim at verse which is too obscure and in which the two aforementioned qualities are of greater importance than the sense. In *Four Quartets*, Eliot does “loosen words from their referents and places discursive syntax in the service of music,” but he “honors the cultural roots of language at the same time” (Bush 157). Or, as Donald Davie put it, Eliot’s poem “swings to and fro between the sonorous opalescence of Mallarmé and... a prosaicism so homespun as to be... positively ‘prosey’ or ‘prosing’” (194). Although *Four Quartets* is a post-symbolist poem permeated by the difficult music of Mallarmé, it would be a mistake to link it with the French poet without any reservations. In spite of his deep personal interest in the symbolist legacy, Eliot is careful not to sever the language of poetry from the outside world and refrains from creating poems which are as abstract and non-referential as musical compositions. Eliot did, in fact, hope that *Four Quartets* was “much simpler and easier to understand than *The Waste Land* and ‘Ash Wednesday’” (Dick 126). It might therefore be concluded that in writing his last poem Eliot, whose mother complained about the unintelligibility of her son’s verse, was driven by “an impulse to *himself* express a ‘commonplace message’ in a language any educated person’s mother could understand” (Bush 161) and that to combine in *Four Quartets* “a *Symboliste* heritage with an Augustan may have been Eliot’s most original act” (Kenner 439).

It is impossible to question Eliot’s reverence for what he refers to as “the labour of Mallarmé with the French language” (*Chapbook* 3), his elaborate, comprehensive idea of the music of poetry, his concept of the word, his experimental, incantatory syntax, in short, all that contributes to the disconcerting, transcendent nature of his verse. Yet the example of Mallarmé, though tantalizing, is not followed slavishly and uncritically by the author of *Four Quartets*. Despite the vital role his French predecessor played in Eliot’s view of poetry and the development of his technique, paving the way for his poetic practice, it was obvious that to follow Mallarmé all the way meant reaching poetic nothingness. Eliot’s ambition was “to write poetry which should be essentially poetry, with nothing poetic about it, poetry standing naked in its bare bones” (qtd. in Matthiessen 90). So far Eliot’s statement seems to describe the Mallarméan ideal of pure poetry. Yet the difference becomes clear as Eliot goes on to say that he aims at

poetry so transparent that we should not see the poetry, but that which we are meant to see through the poetry, poetry so transparent that in reading it we are intent on what the poem *points at*, and not on the poetry. (qtd. in Matthiessen 90)

He concludes that it is his intention “to get *beyond poetry*, as Beethoven, in his later works, strove to get *beyond music*” (qtd. in Matthiessen 90). In spite of his devotion to

the French symbolists, Eliot transcended symbolism and its intrinsic limitations, best summed up in what Georges Poulet said of Mallarmé:

From the beginning, therefore, poetry takes on the aspect of a mirage, a mirage in which one perceives himself on the horizon, not as he is, not where he is, but precisely as he is not and where he is not... poetry constitutes itself in a closed circuit. (237-38)

The abstract, pure aestheticism of Mallarméan poetry seems to be a *via negativa*, leading to a void. Eliot manages to bypass this lack of matter, this unrelatedness to life as well as the Mallarméan obscurity stemming from aesthetic perfection. Eliot wants to approach the unvoiced condition of music, but not at the expense of fixed associations and unequivocal references. This freedom from specific reference inevitably drives symbolist poetry to freedom from any meaning at all, which is something Eliot does not want. In *Four Quartets*, he succeeds in making use of the symbolist concept of the music of poetry, at the same time avoiding its traps. It is not so much “beyond music” or even “beyond poetry” as beyond symbolism that he gets, establishing the post-symbolist tradition.

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