

actually dominant ideal is like the exercise of authority within a kingdom or a republic or a restless empire. Many beliefs are left unsatisfied by the reigning belief. The sovereign is sovereign largely by virtue of his maintenance of his ascendancy, and that to a large extent is a function of his confidence in his own legitimacy.

The present situation of belief is little different. The sovereign ideals of present-day Western societies seem to be at the height of their ascend-

ancy. Their realm consists however of many heterogeneous ideals coexisting in an unstable equilibrium. They are moreover afflicted with embarrassment. The standard-bearers carry an inheritance of which they would prefer to be free, but they cannot free themselves from it either in their own minds or in the minds of others. That is why their tenure is insecure. Therein lies one of the grounds for thinking that the dethronement of their ideals is not out of the question.

The Questions

The questions come flocking in
 Since you went away
 But you have smuggled the answers
 Under the clay.

Was it blind tact not asking
 The privileged things you knew?
 Was shyness mere friend to shyness
 Between us two?

I sort through a quick thief's scatter—
 Relics twice left behind.
 Photographs, letters, notes—
 Such jetsam-kind—

Yield me such crumbs as these:
 How one fast-shuttered day
 You faced this way or that
 Or wrote to say

Roses had blown too early
 Or lettuces shot up tall—
 Throw-away scraps of life
 And that is all.

Now others are quietly leaving.
 They wave back as they pass.
 Maybe their ghost-selves tell you
 How slow I was.

For answers get tired of waiting.
 The questions come thrashing round
 But deaf is the draughty sky, my dear,
 And dumb the ground.

J. C. Hall

POETRY

Mallarmé & the Language Obsession

By John Weightman

STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ died in 1898 at the relatively early age of 56, and has now had a posthumous existence of some 80 years. If we date his publicly effective career from 1875, when he settled in Paris, in the flat in the Rue de Rome which was to be his final address, he has been an important and active influence for just over a century. It was some time after moving to the Rue de Rome that he began to act as host at the Tuesday evening meetings there, the famous *mardis de la Rue de Rome*, which were attended over the years by a great many writers and artists, a number of whom—including Paul Valéry, André Gide, and Paul Claudel—were later to become celebrated in their own right.

During this century of his operative existence, Mallarmé's literary fortunes have waxed and waned and waxed again. In his lifetime, while he was looked upon as an amiable and puzzling eccentric by some established men of letters, such as Leconte de Lisle and Anatole France, who never took him seriously, he was admired and respected by a select minority of his contemporaries, particularly the younger ones, and they included not only writers but also painters and musicians; it is well known, of course, that his poetry inspired Debussy and that he was a friend of Manet. After 1884, when he received favourable mention in the Decadent novel *A Rebours*, by Joris-Karl Huysmans, as one of the poets appreciated by the hero, Des Esseintes, the quintessential aesthetic dandy, he also enjoyed a certain public notoriety. Attempts were made to parody his hermetic style, on the assumption that his obscure compositions might conceal comic or even obscene meanings. By the early part of this century, a few of his easier poems had gradually found their way into the anthologies, at the same time as his example was beginning to influence poets in various foreign countries. In France itself, his poetic creed was perpetuated, at first with only slight modifications, by his most eminent disciple, Valéry, whose dramatic monologue, *La Jeune Parque*, published in 1917, reads

in places like a pastiche of Mallarmé, just as some of Mallarmé's earlier works might have been mistaken for newly discovered poems by Baudelaire. In fact, the sequence—Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Valéry—must be one of the closest in the whole history of poetry.

Nevertheless, it is probably correct to say that, for a long time, Mallarmé's reputation was that of a relatively minor poet. For instance, he remained overshadowed by Baudelaire during the years when Baudelaire was being promoted to the position of chief French poet of the 19th century, in place of Victor Hugo who had seemed the dominant figure up to 1900 and beyond. Also, Mallarmé's three most notable poetic contemporaries—Verlaine, Rimbaud, and Lautréamont—have had their periods of pre-eminence, when they have seemed to push him into the background. Verlaine has always appeared more immediately poetic to the general public both within France and abroad. Rimbaud's extraordinary flowering before the age of twenty-one, his scandalous relationship with Verlaine, his renunciation of literature and his departure for Abyssinia surround him with an exotic appeal that has never declined and has given rise to what Professor Etiemble has called *Le mythe de Rimbaud*. Lautréamont was taken up by the Surrealists as a relatively unknown, enigmatic *révolté* and could appeal to them because of a violence that was totally missing from Mallarmé.

I THINK WE HAVE TO SAY, then, that while Mallarmé has always been important as a poet's poet, his general reputation has been slow to develop. There was a certain amount of interest in the 1930s, when Albert Thibaudet devoted the first full-length study to him and Roger Fry published his literal English transcriptions of Mallarmé's verse; but only since the 1940s has he come to be treated as a major figure, on a par with Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Rimbaud. Perhaps he benefited retrospectively from the fame of his disciple, Valéry. Certainly, it was a friend and