

**Published in:**

**Home Planet News**

**(The Independent Literary Review), Issue No. 45, 1999**

Stéphane Mallarmé is often approached either with reverence due a god or with the disdain of ignorance. Happily, Daisy Aldan brings a lifetime of study, her own opus of poetry and critical work, and a true, intimate bilingualism to a masterful translation of the major verse poems of Stéphane Mallarmé, *TO PURIFY THE WORDS OF THE TRIBE*, a book with facing French texts that contains her unsurpassed translation of "A Throw of the Dice" and illuminating expositions of each poem.

Aldan has sometimes described herself as a "former school teacher." The demystification of these often unread, misread, and misunderstood poems testify to her democratic approach as a true pedagogue and to the difficulties of Mallarmé's very dense and crafted poems which are explicated with ease and generosity. The poetry of Mallarmé is certainly not for a coven of priestly erudities; written during a nineteenth century of smokestacks and alienation brings the history of Western thought and symbolism into the NOW of the poet, into his life and vision. Thanks to Daisy Aldan, Mallarmé's work can now be fully experienced in our language, which is no mean feat.

To carry forth his vision Mallarmé had to struggle with the material sordidness of his age:

**Let the dreary smokestacks ceaselessly  
pour smoke, and let a roving prison of soot  
Blot out in the horror of its dismal trains  
the sun dying in sulfur on the horizon**

**—The Sky is dead.—Towards you I hasten! Bestow, O matter,  
Oblivion of the cruel Ideal and of Sin  
Upon this martyr who comes to share the litter  
Where the contented herd of humans lies asleep**

But he cannot succumb to the temptation to join the crowd, to escape his responsibility as a poet:

**Where flee in this futile and perverse revolt?  
I am haunted! The Azure! The Azure! The Azure!**

Aldan, to her credit, serves Mallarmé by using her own poetic craft sparingly. In no way does she recreate the poems. Nor does Aldan aim to complicate matters by working out rhyme schemes that, in the end, would be extraneous and fail to do justice to the text. Mallarmé is, perhaps the most concise and replete of poets and to be faithful to his content in an aesthetically satisfying way needs no rhyme or foot counting, *a la français*. Aldan knows, well, when to stop.

"The Tomb of Edgar Poe" is an example of a perfectly clear translation without the distractions of second hand versification. Aldan has the capacity to keep very close to the original and the skill to move from one language to the other with the ease and rhythmic nuance that her talent as a poet makes possible:

**Just as eternity transforms him at last unto Himself  
The Poet rouses with a naked sword,  
His age terrified at not having discerned  
That death was triumphant in that strange voice**

**They, like a Hydra; vile spasm on hearing the angel  
Once give a purer meaning to the words of the tribe  
Loudly proclaimed the sorcery drunk  
In the dishonored flow of some foul brew...**

The famously difficult "Le Vierge, le Vivace et le Bel Aujourd'hui" also illustrates this capacity:

**Will virginal, vibrant and beautiful today  
shatter with a blow of its rapturous wing  
this solid lost lake where beneath the frost haunts  
the transparent glacier of unrealized flights!**

When Aldan paraphrases stanzas of this poem in the section devoted to exposition, she eschews brilliant interpretation and "the art of criticism." Her aim is simple: to make the poems comprehensible to the reading public. And she succeeds.

The book concludes with the innovative "A Throw of the Dice." Andre Gide called this "the most untranslatable poem in any language," but Daisy Aldan's translation, published in the fifties, was highly acclaimed and brought her fame in the French community. She was called a "Mallarmiste par excellence."

"The Throw of the Dice," a poem originally written on music paper, has varying typeface and the lines of the poem read from one page to the next, across the inner spine. Each type section (caps, italics, tiny print etc.) can be read as a separate poem but when everything is read as a whole, it is the main poem. Each page is, also, an ideogram, with visual appeal...sky, sea, bird, etc. In this poem Mallarmé attempted an evolution of consciousness and the freeing of Mankind, which was his mission. Daisy Aldan assures that we experience this.

*Reprinted with permission.*

For subscription information contact:

**Home Planet News  
P.O. Box 415, Stuyvesant Station,  
New York, N.Y. 10009**

4 issues, \$10.00/8 issues, \$18.00/\$50 for life