RAVEL’S *TROIS POÈMES DE STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ*: A PHILOSOPHY OF COMPOSITION

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Unless otherwise acknowledged, all translations are my own

On 2 April 1913, Ravel wrote to the board of the Société musicale indépendante (SMI) outlining a ‘stupendous proposal for a scandalous concert’ (‘projet mirifique d’un concert scandaleux’). The first two items on the programme—Schoenberg’s *Pierrot lunaire* and Stravinsky’s *Three Japanese Lyrics*—would ‘make the audience howl’, he wrote, but the last ‘would send them out whistling tunes’: ‘2 poésies de S. Mallarmé: Maurice Ravel’. In support of his proposal, he sardonically offered two critics as references who could testify to the ‘genius’ of the said Maurice Ravel: his implacable antagonists Pierre Lalo and Arthur Pougin.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The following day Ravel wrote to his friend and pupil Roland-Manuel confirming that he was composing ‘2 songs … based on texts by Mallarmé’, and inviting him to guess his chosen poems.[[2]](#footnote-2) ‘You’ve won only a dozen macaroons, dear friend’, he wrote again on 12 April. ‘Indeed, the first poem is “Soupir”. But the superior plated lady’s watch was destined for the person who would also get the second one, which is “Placet futile”.’[[3]](#footnote-3) Two songs soon became three: by the end of August Ravel had ‘just finished “Surgi de la croupe”’, and was revising ‘Placet futile’.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Ravel’s letters of early April were sent from Clarens, where he was holed up with Stravinsky, working on a re-orchestration of Musorgsky’s *Khovanshchina*. Stravinsky recalled that he played Ravel his newly composed *Japanese Lyrics*, and the latter ‘was bitten by them immediately and decided to write something similar’.[[5]](#footnote-5) This interaction may indeed have been an immediate prompt for Ravel’s songs, or at least their final form for chamber ensemble. But Ravel’s *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* also realize a lifelong fascination with that poet, his language, technique, and aesthetic. He would later claim, ‘I consider Mallarmé not merely the greatest French poet, but the *only* French poet, since he made the French language, not designed for poetry, poetical. It is a feat in which he stands alone.’[[6]](#footnote-6) His seizing of this particular moment to translate his profound admiration into a tangible homage was undoubtedly prompted by the publication of the then-definitive edition of Mallarmé’s *Poésies*, which was issuedby the *Nouvelle revue française* early in 1913.[[7]](#footnote-7) (This publication explains the near-simultaneous composition of Mallarmé settings by Ravel and Debussy.[[8]](#footnote-8))

Ravel’s Mallarmé *Poèmes* represent perhaps his most ‘challenging’ music. Its three enigmatic texts are realized in a musical language that often sails close to the wind of atonality. It’s not surprising, then, that they have attracted the attention of numerous analysts: Robert Gronquist, Peter Kaminsky, and Christopher Madden have considered questions of pitch structure and harmonic design, while Barbara Kelly focused principally on sonority and timbre, and Michel Delahaye offered a detailed reading of just ‘Soupir’, suggesting inspiration from Scriabin’s theories of key and colour correspondences (the poem offers a series of colour-based descriptions). Michel Edwards and Mathilde Vallespir offer more detailed analyses of the poetry relative to the songs (Vallespir’s article deals only with ‘Placet futile’), while Stephen Huebner has touched on Ravel’s relationship with the poetry of Mallarmé (and others) in a wide-ranging chapter on the composer’s literary influences.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Yet such is the richness and complexity of these songs—and these poems—that multiple investigative pathways remain unexplored. Musical studies have thus far paid little attention to the history of the poems themselves, and their trajectory towards the printed and musical page. Mallarmé’s poetic models, his sketches and revisions, and the poems’ passage through the maelstrom of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literary criticism all must be considered as relevant background, informing the choice and the perspective of a composer whose passionate devotion to his favourite poets was coupled with an astute critical eye and scholarly rigour: as we will see, this bears particularly on his choice of ‘Placet futile’. In this aspect, the present study takes a lead from the recent work of Stephen Rumph, whose exposition of the literary contexts of various of Fauré’s song cycles makes a persuasive case for a more acute and nuanced literary engagement on the part of Ravel’s former composition teacher than previous studies have often allowed.[[10]](#footnote-10) Particularly important, too, is the concept of structure in Ravel’s songs, and the interplay of musical and poetic design. While earlier studies have focused primarily on pitch-based analysis, the present essay offers readings based on structural dimensions, musical processes and long-range harmonic direction, read against the formal outlines and symbolic content of the poems themselves.

In the 1920s, Ravel twice used the verb *transposer* to describe his intentions in his Mallarmé songs: the 1928 ‘Autobiographical Sketch’ reads, ‘I wanted to transpose Mallarmé’s poetry into music, and in particular that preciosity, so full of meaning and so characteristic of him’,[[11]](#footnote-11) while a 1924 interview given in Madrid similarly asserts, ‘in [my *Trois Poèmes*] I transposed the literary procedures of Mallarmé, whom I personally consider France’s greatest poet.’[[12]](#footnote-12) This question of ‘transposition’ is a fascinating one, and consideration of what Ravel intended by his repeated use of that word has been central to the studies of Kaminsky and Kelly.[[13]](#footnote-13) The inextricability of form and content is a defining characteristic of Mallarmé’s poetry: his chosen forms are not simply containers for the sentiment, but often themselves make it manifest. ‘Transposing’ or ‘translating’ a work from one medium to another is necessarily more complex when form and expression are so inextricably merged: as the philosopher Alain Badiou succinctly put it, ‘What the poem says, it does.’[[14]](#footnote-14)

The present study considers how Ravel ‘transposed’ not just Mallarmé’s imagery and his poetic structure, but also his processes and perceivable intentions. A dual grounding here in literary and musical narratives offers a more detailed and nuanced context to probe broader questions of artistic practice. This is an essential foundation for approaching a composer who frequently cited literary influences above musical ones, and who (as we will see) more than once declared that his most important lessons in composition came from Edgar Allan Poe – one of whose great disciples (and translators) in turn was Mallarmé. In his Mallarmé *Poèmes*, this study argues, Ravel realises long-held aesthetic preoccupations with the nature of form and the compositional process.

# “Soupir”

Soupir

Mon âme vers ton front où rêve, ô calme sœur,

Un automne jonché de taches de rousseur,

Et vers le ciel errant de ton œil angélique

Monte, comme dans un jardin mélancolique,

Fidèle, un blanc jet d’eau soupire vers l’Azur !

—Vers l’azur attendri d’octobre pâle et pur

Qui mire aux grands bassins sa langueur infinie

Et laisse, sur l’eau morte où la fauve agonie

Des feuilles erre au vent et creuse un froid sillon,

Se traîner le soleil jaune d’un long rayon.

[My soul toward your brow where, calm sister, / An autumn strewn with russet spots is dreaming, / And toward the restless sky of your angelic eye, / Rises, as in some melancholy garden / A white fountain faithfully sighs toward the Azure! / —Toward the tender Azure of pale and pure October / That mirrors its infinite languor in the vast pools, / And, on the stagnant water where the tawny agony / Of leaves wanders in the wind and digs a cold furrow, / Lets the yellow sun draw itself out in one long ray.[[15]](#footnote-15)]

It’s not entirely surprising that Roland-Manuel correctly guessed ‘Soupir’ as one of Ravel’s chosen song texts. It was one of Mallarmé’s better-known poems, reprinted in many journals and articles in the decades between its first publication in 1866 and the 1913 NRF *Poésies*. *‘*Soupir’ appeared in Mallarmé’s 1887 *Album de vers et de prose* and the 1893 *Vers et prose*, as well as in volume 3 of the monumental *Anthologie des poètes français du XIXe siècle* published by Lemerre in 1887–88. An 1898 study by the anonymous ‘H.B.’ took the poem as its point of departure, describing it as ‘well-known’, and using it to epitomize what the author termed Mallarmé’s ‘constant exchange’ between ‘the idea and the symbol’.[[16]](#footnote-16) ‘Soupir’ was reprinted, *inter alia*, in *La Lanterne* (19 May 1908); in a long study of ‘La Femme et le sentiment de l’Amour chez Stéphane Mallarmé’ by Paul Delior in the *Mercure de France* (16 July 1910; the article also quoted from ‘Placet futile’); and in another extended article by Eugène Marsan in the *Revue critique des idées et des livres* a few months later.[[17]](#footnote-17) The publication of the 1913 NRF edition of the *Poésies* was announced in *L’Intransigeant* (11 February 1913) in a very brief article that nevertheless found space to reprint this poem alone.

Dating from 1864, ‘Soupir’ is the product of a period in which, in Heath Lees’s words, Mallarmé was consciously attempting to ‘musicalize his poetic language … fusing his poetry’s main musical gestures with its evolving architecture’.[[18]](#footnote-18) The poem consists of ten alexandrines (12-syllable lines), rhyming AABBCCDDEE. An arch-like structure rises to the climactic central phrase ‘vers l’Azur!’ (ending line 5), then fades in a single long exhalation in which, as Lees observes, ‘the opening, musicalized, upward flight of the poem is transformed into cold reflection and disillusionment which dies away lugubriously through the long “n” sounds that pervade the last line.’[[19]](#footnote-19)

Mallarmé’s conceptual arch is also embodied in the poem’s syntax. Lines 1–5 are active, driven by the aspirational verb ‘monte’. Lines 6–10, which comprise a long prepositional phrase, invert this motion: action becomes stasis, and the vigorous ascent becomes a drawn-out decline towards the deadened furrow. As Lees observes, the long dash (*tiret*) at the beginning of line 6 is not merely a striking visual marker of the division, but may also suggest a different voice, in the manner of French printed dialogue.[[20]](#footnote-20) The break across lines 5–6 is also evident in the quality of the poem’s rhymes: four out of the five paired lines employ *rimes riches* (reprising the final three vowel or consonant sounds (e.g. *angélique*/*mélancolique* and even *rayon*/*sillon*), but across that apex of lines 5–6 (that is, the two ‘C’ rhymes) the rhymes are merely *suffisantes* (*Azur/pur*).

The arch of ‘Soupir’ is also realized through the mirroring of subject matter and assonance, a technique towards which the direct repetition of the keystone phrase ‘Vers l’Azur’ draws our attention. Thus lines 4 and 7 share imagery of the garden (‘le jardin mélancolique’ in line 4, the ‘grands bassins’ of line 7), and the active verb *monte* of line 4 finds its inversion in the passive *mire* of line 7. Lines 3 and 8 are similarly reflexive, with line 3, arching ‘towards the restless heavens’ of an ‘angelic’ eye, matched with the ‘dead water’ of line 8: eternity becomes death, action is stilled. (There are also subtle euphonies here: the echoing effect of ‘Et vers / Et laisse’; the more striking congruity of ‘le ciel’ and ‘laisse’; and the chime of ‘angélique’ against ‘agonie’, with its opposition of the soft and hard *g* and the dimming of the bright [e] to the dark [ɔ].) Lines 2 and 9 form an obvious parallel through their subject, the rich autumn colours of line 2 turning to the dead, dry leaves blowing on the wind in line 9. Lines 1 and 10 are linked metrically (in both the caesura falls after eight syllables, rather than at the midpoint), while the verb *rêve* of line 1 is answered by the flattened, hopeless *traîner* of line 10.[[21]](#footnote-21)

This twining of formal structures and expressive content also reflects the poem’s connections with the Parnassian movement. ‘Soupir’ was published on 12 May 1866 in *Le Parnasse contemporain*, the first, flagship volume of the Parnassians. Parnassian poetry prioritized elegant form and perfection of rhyme: Théodore Banville’s influential *Petit traité de poésie française* (1872) asserted: ‘In every poem, the good construction of the phrase is in direct proportion to the richness of the rhyme.’[[22]](#footnote-22) Mallarmé’s relationship to the Parnassian aesthetic is a complex one—he later consciously distanced himself from it—but in the formal qualities of ‘Soupir’ its traces are clear.[[23]](#footnote-23) The poem’s autumnal setting also reflects the Parnassian ideal of a detached nostalgia, in which emotional expression is honed through formal restraint.

Ravel’s setting of ‘Soupir’ falls broadly into two parts: bars 1–16, with their string harmonics and Dorian modality; and bars 17–37, in which the broken-chord accompaniment gives way to tortuous chromatic motion and complex chordal sonorities, before the final three bars (35–37) restore the opening texture. Although the musical descent from the apex of the arch begins at bar 17, Mallarmé’s symmetry (5+5 lines) is mirrored in Ravel’s setting: with some varied bar lengths in the final phrases, its 37 bars comprise 145 crotchet beats; the poetic line 6 (reprising ‘Vers l’Azur…’) begins at bar 19 beat 2 (beat 74), immediately after beat 1 straddles the song’s precise midpoint (counting by regular crotchet beats).

A further metric equivalence may also be drawn from the preponderance of three-bar phrases across the song, particularly from around its midpoint. Bars 18–24 divide into two 3-bar groups (bars 18–20 hovering on the oscillating *f*–*e* bass, bars 21–23 returning to a *G* pedal). This articulation locks in from bar 26: bars 26–28 repeat a sighing figure in piano chords; bars 29–31 place bell-like triple-octave F♯s above a dominant pedal; bars 32–34 reprise the exposed chromatic descent (in just the lower voice – the second clarinet – in bar 34), and bars 35–37 restore the sonority and modality of the opening (see Appendix: Figure 1). Except for bars 32–34 (with their changing metres), these groups each mark out twelve beats, suggestive of the 12-syllable alexandrines of Mallarmé’s poem.

The meticulously calculated proportions evident in other of Ravel’s works—particularly the observance of midpoints—strongly suggests that this precise division was deliberate. [[24]](#footnote-24) However Ravel’s song otherwise makes little attempt to emulate the literal symmetries of Mallarmé’s poem. Kaminsky and Madden have both made the case for an ABCBA arch form, with the opening string figurations reprised in the closing bars (A), the chromatic descending motives of bars 17–23 recapitulated in bars 32–34 (B), and the octatonic chordal passage of bars 24–31 representing a (C) passage, the apex of the arch (the transition into each (B) section is effected through the same *g*/*b’* ‘pivot’ dyad, though the instrumentation differs).[[25]](#footnote-25) There is merit in this formal reading, in that the reprising of the B and A material in compressed form matches the poem’s progressive deadening of imagery. In terms of balance and proportion, however, the devotion of four parts of this musical five-part form to the second half of the poem (bars 17–37) makes this an oddly teetering arch, hardly likely to elicit the approval of the high-minded Parnassians.

Further layers of Ravel’s poetic and musical structure emerge if we consider the interlocking musical processes that function across the song, as set out in Figure 1. Marking the divisions by the setting of Mallarmé’s paired lines, we find bars 1–12 devoted to lines 1–4 (the A and B rhymes), bars 13–21 devoted to lines 5–6 (the C rhymes), and bars 22–37 completing lines 7–10 (the D and E rhymes): the song thus divides 12+9+16 bars.[[26]](#footnote-26) Dividing the song by its main musical paragraphs, however, articulates the proportions differently again. The two most audible musical transitions fall at bar 17, then with the restoration of tempo and the vocal re-entry at bar 26 (with the ascent on ‘Et laisse….’): these mark out a sequence of 16+9+12 bars.[[27]](#footnote-27)

A third reading of musical events suggests another reciprocal proportioning, as 16+12+9 bars, the divisions marking the departure from the tonic at bar 17 (following its arrival at bar 13; the first paragraph thus divides 12+4), and the initiation of a motion back towards it at bar 29. Here, the bass octave Cs (present from bar 24), which underpin the crucial phrase ‘Et laisse…’ at bar 25, suggest an effective augmented sixth, as the B♭s of bar 26 are respelled as A♯s in bars 27–28, with the dominant B the implied resolution of both voices in bar 29. This passes in turn to a *g*♯–*c*♯–*f*♯ falling fifths progression in bars 31–33, the *f*♯ sliding down to *f* and thence to the tonic in bars 34–35. The undercutting of the arrival of the dominant pitchat bar 29 with the sung verb ‘erre’ is a telling touch of Ravelian irony, as the harmonic divagations begin to turn homewards (see Ex. 1).[[28]](#footnote-28)

**Example 1 Ravel, ‘Soupir’, bars 26–29**

**A close up of a map

Description automatically generated**

Reading these divisions alongside one another also reveals other symmetrical markers: the song’s top vocal note, *f“*♯*,* is reached twice, via the ascents to ‘Fidèle’ in bar 13 (poetic line 5; see Ex. 2) and ‘Et laisse’ in bar 26 (line 8; see Ex. 1).

**Example 2 Ravel, ‘Soupir’, bars 12–13 (voice only)**

A picture containing sky

Description automatically generated

The opening 12-bar setting of the first two lines thus mirrors an effective final paragraph of 12 bars (bars 26–37), while the twelve bars preceding the tonic arrival at bar 13 are also answered by the twelve-bar approach to the dominant, across bars 17–28. All these different divisions and relationships are shown in Figure 1.

This mirroring responds to an intrinsic element of Mallarmé’s poetic design: the subversion of the antecedent-consequent line pairs across the second half of the poem. The antecedent line 5, whose end marks the poem’s midpoint, has no ‘consequent’ response, in poem or song: rather, line 6—the second ‘C’ rhyme—is another effective antecedent, whose response comes in line 7 (despite its new rhyme sound). The poem’s patterning of antecedent/consequent lines thus flows ACACA / ACACC; in Ravel’s setting we hear the lines grouped as AA BB C / CD DE E. Line 8—Ravel’s bar 26—is accordingly an antecedent musical line, initiating a new thought and new material. The final line becomes an additional consequent (or weak) line, continuing the slow, drawn-out descent and answering the pair of effective antecedent lines across the midpoint.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The bar totals 9, 12 and 16, in various permutations, thus represent various potential structural configurations of Ravel’s ‘Soupir’. Their related internal divisions (3x3, 3x4, 4x4) and arithmetic possibilities, and the way they interact on different musical and poetic levels, suggest a sophisticated compositional response to Mallarmé’s Parnassian poetry. The poem’s intricate rhyme scheme and metric elegance, its rhythmic play and technical virtuosity, and the careful mirroring of imagery and assonance across the poem are all reflected, not in a precise musical rendering of a balanced and symmetrical arch form, but in a series of interlocking processes, employing parallel proportions in shifting configurations.

# “Placet futile”

Placet futile

Princesse ! à jalouser le destin d’une Hébé

Qui point sur cette tasse au baiser de vos lèvres ;

J’use mes feux mais n’ai rang discret que d’abbé

Et ne figurerai même nu sur le Sèvres.

Comme je ne suis pas ton bichon embarbé

Ni la pastille ni du rouge, ni jeux mièvres

Et que sur moi je sens ton regard clos tombé

Blonde dont les coiffeurs divins sont des orfèvres !

Nommez-nous . . . toi de qui tant de ris framboisés

Se joignent en troupeau d’agneaux apprivoisés

Chez tous broutant les vœux et bêlant aux délires,

Nommez-nous . . . pour qu’Amour ailé d’un éventail

M’y peigne flûte aux doigts endormant ce bercail,

Princesse, nommez-nous berger de vos sourires.[[30]](#footnote-30)

[Princess! In envying the fate of a Hebe / Who appears on this cup at this kiss of your lips, / I expend my ardour, but have only the modest rank of *abbé*[[31]](#footnote-31)/ And shall not figure even naked on the Sèvres. / Since I am not your bearded lap-dog, / Nor lozenge, nor rouge, nor affected games, / And feel you look on me with indifferent eyes, / Blonde, whose divine coiffeurs are goldsmiths—/ Appoint me… you whose many berry-tinted laughs / Are gathered a flock of docile lambs / Grazing through all vows and bleating through all frenzies, / Appoint me… so that Love[[32]](#footnote-32) winged with a fan / May paint me there, fingering a flute and lulling this fold, / Princess, appoint me shepherd of your smiles.]

Nothing brings the young Ravel closer to us than reading the diary of his childhood friend, the Catalan pianist Ricardo Viñes. One of the most striking features of the latter’s journal entries through the 1890s is the emphasis on Ravel and Viñes’s focused literary as well as musical explorations. From afternoons spent trawling the riverside *bouquinistes* to their readings of Baudelaire and Poe, the diary testifies to the pair’s attentiveness to unusual works and authors, rare editions, and an active engagement with literary currents. As early as 1892, the 17-year-old Ravel was showing Viñes ‘a very bleak drawing he’d done after Edgar Poe’s *A Descent into the Maelström*. Today, as I watched, he did another one, also very dark, after Poe’s *Manuscript found in a bottle*.’[[33]](#footnote-33) In September 1894 he picked up ‘some unpublished writings’ of Poe’s at a bookstall; a few weeks later (10 October 1894), Viñes wrote, he went to the Ravels’ apartment to return some Baudelaire he’d borrowed, ‘and there I saw the six censored and forbidden extracts of *Les Fleurs du Mal*; needless to say, they’re the most beautiful. When Ravel has written them out, from a copy that a friend has passed to him, he will lend them to me so that I can copy them myself.’[[34]](#footnote-34) A month after that, they were talking ‘of literature and art, and [Ravel] said that the copy of [Aloysius Bertrand’s] *Gaspard de la Nuit* that I’d bought in London was very rare’.[[35]](#footnote-35) Roland-Manuel was later to emphasize the ‘fastidious depths’ of Ravel’s literary preoccupations[[36]](#footnote-36): when it came to the writers he loved he seems to have read voraciously and deeply, reaching well beyond the canon into marginalia and criticism. Baudelaire, Bertrand and Poe had thus become Ravel’s literary lodestars while he was still in his teens, while by 1896 he was sufficiently soaked in Mallarmé as to set his ‘Sainte’.

All this is particularly pertinent to the dense and fascinating history of Mallarmé’s ‘Placet futile’, which we pursue here because its web of connections suggest a reason for Ravel’s choice of this early sonnet. Mallarmé’s first published poem, it appeared—in an anterior version—in the journal *Le Papillon* on 25 February 1862, with the title ‘Placet’.[[37]](#footnote-37) (The petition is addressed to ‘Duchesse’, not ‘Princesse’, and there are a number of other small variants.) ‘Placet’ subsequently appeared in *Lutèce* (17–24 November 1883) and *La Décadence* (8 October 1886); it was also featured in Verlaine’s 1884 collection *Les Poètes maudits* (as was ‘Sainte’). Not until the photolithograph edition of Mallarmé’s *Les Poésies*, published by *La Revue indépendante* in1887, did a final version appear, titled ‘Placet futile’.

Like ‘Soupir’, ‘Placet [futile]’ was one of the most printed and discussed of Mallarmé’s poems. Camille Mauclair reproduced ‘Placet’ in a 1898 article in *La Nouvelle Revue[[38]](#footnote-38)*; Albert Fleury juxtaposed both versions of the poem in his 1899 study of ‘Paul Verlaine et Stéphane Mallarmé’[[39]](#footnote-39); and an extended article in *Le Temps* by Anatole France (15 January 1893) saw ‘Placet’ appear alongside ‘Soupir’. ‘Placet futile’ was also discussed in longer studies such as Albert Thibaudet’s important *La Poésie de Stéphane Mallarmé*, first published in 1912: here it appears in the midst of a chapter titled ‘La préciosité’.[[40]](#footnote-40)

In its first publication in *Le Papillon*, ‘Placet’ bears a dedication to Arsène Houssaye, the distinguished novelist, poet, and *homme de lettres*.[[41]](#footnote-41) Houssaye (1815–96) wrote extensively on the art, literature, and culture of the eighteenth century, and played an important role in the rediscovery and refashioning of the *fête galante* idiom. (His poem-tableau ‘Les Moissoneurs’ is dedicated to Watteau, for example.[[42]](#footnote-42)) Houssaye also managed the journal *L’Artiste* over a period of many years, and it was in that journal, on 1 December 1844, that a sonnet titled ‘À Madame du Barry’ and signed ‘Privat d’Anglemont’ first appeared:

Vous étiez du *bon temps* des robes à paniers,

Des bichons, des manchons, des abbés, des rocailles,

Des gens spirituels, polis et cancaniers,

Des filles, des marquis, des soupers, des ripailles.

Moutons poudrés à blanc, poëtes familiers,

Vieux-Sèvres et biscuits, charmantes antiquailles,

Amours dodus, pompons de rubans printaniers,

Meubles en bois de rose et caprices d’écailles ;

Le peuple a tout brisé dans sa juste fureur,

Vous seule avez pleuré, vous seule avez eu peur,

Vous seule avez trahi votre fraîche noblesse.

Les autres souriaient sur les noirs tombereaux,

Et tués sans colère, ils mouraient sans faiblesse,

Car vous seule étiez femme en ce temps de héros.[[43]](#footnote-43)

[You were of that *good era* of hooped skirts, / Of lapdogs, muffs, clerics, rococo, / Witty, refined, gossipy companions, / Girls, marquis, suppers, feasts. / White-powdered sheep, familiar poets, /

Old Sèvres and biscuits, delightful trinkets / Plump lovers, bedecked with vernal ribbons, / Rosewood furnishings and tortoiseshell ornaments; / The people, in their righteous fury, have destroyed it all, /

You alone wept, you alone felt fear, / You alone betrayed your newfound nobility. / The others smiled upon the black tumbrils, / And, killed without anger, they died without weakness, / For you alone were woman in this age of heroes.]

It is impossible not to read this poem as a prompt for Mallarmé’s, with its ‘precious’ eighteenth-century imagery (note the shared nouns *bichon*, *abbé*, *Sèvres*, *moutons* [*agneaux*]), its sonnet form—including *rimes croisées* for the quatrains—and syntactic affinities such as the repeated ‘Vous seule…’ of the tercets.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Alexandre Privat d’Anglemont (1815–59) was a Guadeloupe-born writer and poet, but he was not the author of this poem: rather, it was the work of his acquaintance, Charles Baudelaire. In the second volume of his *Confessions*, Houssaye recountsPrivat (‘then not known as d’Anglemont’, he notes) coming to see him with a ‘very dark young man’, who, at the end of the evening, ‘gave me a sonnet. “It is not my own, Monsieur”, he said to me, with theatrical gravity. But the sonnet was his; he had signed it “Privat”. … This dark young man … was called Charles du Fays—not yet Baudelaire.’[[45]](#footnote-45) By the end of the century the sonnet’s true authorship was thus known, though it was still a subject of debate: the critic Jules Levallois devoted several pages of his *Mémoirs d’un critique* (1895) to ‘À Madame du Barry’, and the poem crops up occasionally in other literary discussions around the turn of the century.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Mallarmé’s dedication of his ‘Placet’ to Houssaye suggests a quiet acknowledgement of his source of inspiration: given their acquaintance, and Mallarmé’s early devotion to Baudelaire’s poetry, it seems eminently possible that Houssaye may have privately confirmed the poem’s authorship to his younger colleague. ‘Placet’ must also pay tribute to Houssaye’s many writings on the age of Louis XV. (A letter from Mallarmé to Henri Cazalis of 24 May 1862 refers to his poem as ‘un sonnet Louis XV’.[[47]](#footnote-47))

One further tangential relationship may be drawn here, for Arsène Houssaye was also the dedicatee of Baudelaire’s *Le Spleen de Paris*. Baudelaire’s prefatory address to Houssaye evokes Bertrand—‘the famous *Gaspard de la Nuit* (a book known to you, to me, and to some of our friends; isn’t that sufficient to call it *famous*?), which gave me the idea to try something similar…’, and continues to his well-known plea for ‘a poetic prose, musical, without rhyme and without rhythm…’[[48]](#footnote-48) Ravel and Ricardo Viñes, like many others, were almost certainly put on the track of *Gaspard de la Nuit* by *Le Spleen de Paris*, while Ravel’s 1911 response to a questionnaire posed by the journal *Musica—*‘What should be set to music? Good verse or bad, free verse or prose?’—seems to echo Baudelaire: ‘It seems to me that, in dealing with things that are truly experienced and felt, free verse is preferable to regular verse’, he writes, describing Renard’s *Histoires naturelles* as ‘delicate, rhythmic, though rhythmic in a completely different way from classical verse.’[[49]](#footnote-49)

The ‘fastidious depths’ of Ravel’s reading strongly suggests that he could have known both versions of Mallarmé’s poem (the original ‘Placet’ and later ‘Placet futile’): whatever journal publications might have passed him by, he must have read *Les Poètes maudits*. It seems possible, too, that he was aware of the relationship between ‘Placet futile’ and ‘À Madame du Barry’, given his devoted perusal of Baudelaire. Houssaye’s *Confessions* are also volumes we may plausibly expect Ravel to have absorbed, particularly given his own devotion to the age of Louis XV. Ravel never set Baudelaire’s words (though he did use a Baudelaire epigraph for his two-piano ‘Habanera’ of 1895), but his choice of ‘Placet futile’ suggests a tacit homage to the older as well as the younger poet.

The 1884 first edition of *Les Poètes maudits* prints the date ‘(1762)’ beneath ‘Placet’. This date became accepted as Mallarmé’s own, a direct linking of his poem with the era of its inspiration (even the Gallimard *Œuvres complètes* of 1998 accepts it without comment). As it happens, however, that printed date was seemingly the result of a misprint: a proof copy for the expanded second edition shows the date 1762 amended to 1862, indicating merely the date of the poem’s composition (that correction appears in the 1888 revised edition of *Les Poètes maudits*).[[50]](#footnote-50) However, if Ravel had read the 1884 edition, this suggestive date may well have proved an additional prompt for his setting. The poem’s evocation of the eighteenth century by way of ancient Greece (Hebe, Cupid) must have instantly appealed to a composer who would describe his 1912 ballet *Daphnis et Chloé* as ‘the Greece of my dreams, which is closely related to that imagined and depicted by French artists at the end of the eighteenth century’.[[51]](#footnote-51) In ‘Placet futile’ the *fête galante* setting is imbued with additional playfulness through Mallarmé’s reduction of his characters to the elegantly stylized figures painted on Sèvres porcelain (Mallarmé himself linked the poem with Boucher and Watteau).[[52]](#footnote-52) As Vallespir observes, the poem itself is a pastiche, in both form and content, a quality of which Ravel would have been well aware.

But what is a ‘placet’? The fourth edition of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* (published, coincidentally, in 1762) defines the word as a succinct written request seeking justice, grace, or favour, addressed to an august personage. The earlier *Thresor de la langue francoyse tant ancienne que moderne* (1606) offers a fuller definition, emphasising the concision of a ‘placet’, which differs from a ‘requeste [requête]’ in being less ‘diffuse’, and refraining from enumerating all the merits of the petition. The 1873 *Dictionnaire de la langue française* adds one further meaning, noting that the word was also ‘formerly a type of short poem, in the form of a *placet’*.[[53]](#footnote-53) From this emerges an explicit formal and historical context for Mallarmé’s ‘Placet futile’: concise and elegantly phrased, though with a little more pleading than the 1606 definition allows, the poem acknowledges two distinct poetic forms, the sonnet and the *placet*.[[54]](#footnote-54) (The latter is plainly not a formal designation in the sense of a sonnet, but carries certain expectations as to length and tone.)

The contents page of the posthumously published editions of Mallarmé’s *Poésies* (Deman, 1899 and *NRF*, 1913) show *‘*Placet futile’ qualified further by the subtitle ‘sonnet irrégulier’. The irregularity lies in the rhyme scheme: the quatrains employ *rimes croisées* (ABAB), rather than the traditional *rimes embrassées* (ABBA), while the first tercet opens with the traditional paired rhymes (decisively marking the *volta*), but unusually carries the pattern into the second tercet, with the third line of the two tercets rhyming with each other, thus: CCD EED. This characteristic, together with the repeated ‘Nommez-nous…’ sees the tercets fall more clearly than is usual into a 3+3 pattern, rather than the 3+3 / 2+4 ambiguity typically implied by the *sonnet régulier* (CCD EDE, as in ‘Surgi de la croupe…’). Unusually, too, the ‘D’ rhyme (*-sés*) employs the same vowel sound as the A rhyme of the quatrains (*-bé*): though the rhymes of the quatrains are merely *suffisantes* while those of the tercet are *riches*, this chime softens the effect of the *volta*.

The *volta* is thus effected primarily through a shift of rhythm, pace, and internal assonances. The quatrains employ many one- and two-syllable words, giving a rapid, almost chattering rhythmic flow. The first line of the first tercet emerges organically from the preceding lines: the alliterative *n*spick up on the repeated *n* sounds of the preceding quatrain (particularly *ne/ni*), with the [ɔ̃] of *dont / sont / Blonde* echoed in the key word *Nommez*. However, the ellipsis following ‘Nommez-nous…’ immediately holds up the rapid flow of the quatrains, compelling the supplicant to pause and deliver the tercets with a different sense of pace and emphasis. The futility of the *placet* is perhaps subtly evoked here, in the reprise of the negative *n* in the active verb(*Nommez*)of the request itself.

Reflecting the nature of a *placet*, the poem is more direct in expression than ‘Soupir’, eschewing its expressive, adjectival vocabulary. Kaminsky describes it as a poem of apostrophe and appointment: from the opening ‘Princesse!’ to the final straightforward injunction, the intervening lines are effectively divagation (even the first two statements of ‘Nommez-nous’).[[55]](#footnote-55) In Ravel’s setting, we see this reflected in the vocal line of bars 25–26, where, as Kelly notes, the upward sixth of ‘Princesse’ (echoing bar 5; see Ex. 3 and Ex. 4) is joined with the downward sixth (fifth plus second) of ‘Nommez-nous’ (echoing bars 19 and 22): thus united, these two most characteristic vocal gestures encapsulate the petition.[[56]](#footnote-56)

**Example 3 Ravel, ‘Placet futile’, bars 5–11**

**A close up of a map

Description automatically generated**

**Example 4 Ravel, ‘Placet futile’, bars 25–28**

**A close up of a map

Description automatically generated**

As in ‘Soupir’, Ravel’s metric divisions are meticulous. Both quatrains comprise twenty-three sung beats. The tercets comprise three sung phrases: the three iterations of ‘Nommez-nous’ are set to the same melodic gesture, each a tone lower than the last (from *d''*♯ in bar 19, *c*''♯ in bar 22, then *b*'' in bar 25). Each phrase spans three bars, comprising ten dotted-crotchet beats, an arrangement that generates a sense of structural hypermetre in which the three sung phrases cut across the binary division of the tercets. Added metric complexity comes from the line divisions within the three phrases: the first encompasses the poem’s lines 9–11 (bars 19–21), the second, lines 12–13 (bars 22–24), and the third, line 14 (bars 25–27): that is, 3 lines + 2 lines + 1 line. The progressive *rallentando* notated across bars 22–27 is thus matched by the gradual relinquishment of tension in the text-setting, each successive musical phrase allowed to spread more easily across its three-bar span. In simple terms, by its most obvious musical paragraphs, the song comprises 11+7+10 bars (28 total). These divisions are immediately audible in the timbral shifts to solo piano accompaniment at bars 12 and 19, and the concomitant tempo changes (*Modérément animé* in bar 12; *1er Mouvt* in bar 19). As in ‘Soupir’, however, marking out the different musical processes suggests alternative ways of realising Ravel’s structure, and its relationship to Mallarmé’s poem.

If we consider long-range harmonic motion, what emerges is also a three-part structure, but one whose divisions fall differently from those noted above. In this reading, bars 1–8 constitute a movement towards the tonic (F), via the dominant and supertonic: *c*' is the first note, heard unaccompanied in viola (*pizz.*) and flute, before passing to the viola’s open C-string (bowed) in bars 2–3, and reiterated in the flute in bar 4. The cello then sustains the supertonic, *G*, in bars 5–7 (preceded by a Ravelian pair of fifths, *A*–*D* in bars 3–4). The pre-dominant harmony at the vocal entry, in bar 5, a straightforward ii9, is the first clear structural harmony. Bar 8 represents the culmination of this progression, implying a tonic chord over a dominant in subposition (though the tonic pitch itself is absent, and a flattened third and seventh are introduced on beat 2).

If bars 1–8 serve to establish the tonic, bars 9–16 then depart from it, establishing a new dominant on E, whose goal is the A minor harmony of bar 16. The passage begins with the first clear statement of the overall tonic in the bass (the *F*/*c* double stop in the cello), now unambiguously in the minor mode. This seeming arrival immediately becomes the next point of departure, the end of one phrase eliding with the beginning of the next. Coinciding with the poem’s first active verb, (‘*J’use* mes feux’), the *F* becomes an appoggiatura to the *E* that follows in bars 10–11 (the minor mode in bar 10, the major in bar 11) (see Ex. 3 above).[[57]](#footnote-57)As in the first musical paragraph, an effective dominant (E) is established at the outset; again, this resolves at the end of an eight-bar period: the A minor harmony of bar 16 is unambiguous in the piano chords across beats 1–3 (coloured by F♯s in the string and vocal line). The progression through this passage is achieved by stepwise bass movement through the white keys *F*-*E*-*D*-*B*-*Aˌ*, omitting the overall dominant *C*.[[58]](#footnote-58) Bars 9–16 are also characterized by their use of the melodic motif first introduced in bar 7 (there serving a bridging role, heard in the first violin and entering over a harmony unchanged from the preceding bars). From bar 8 this characteristic rising and falling figure dominates the texture, first in the flutes then (from bar 12) in the piano; from bar 17, it disappears.

The beginning of the final section (bars 17–28) is marked by a decisive initial harmonic shift to an F♯ bass (from the last beat of bar 16), a striking departure from the preceding white-key bass descent. As noted above, the song’s opening bars establish a dominant pedal; over this, the tritone is prominently featured, first as *f*''♯ in the fluttering dissonance of bar 1, then reiterated (*f*'♯) in the cello in bar 2. Bar 17 withholds the dominant in the bass, but gives instead just its tritonal opposite, with those bass octave F♯s, the dominant present in the half-diminished harmony above (thus inverting the C/F♯ arrangement of bar 1). This aural remnant of that opening tonal area thus establishes a new harmonic direction: now with the additional heft of the piano left-hand octaves, it heralds the eventual movement back towards the tonic. The series of paired fifths that follows across bars 17–25, shifting downwards by tones (see Appendix: Figure 2), is a typically Ravelian ‘holding sequence’; after a fleeting return to A minor in bar 25, a dominant bass finally arrives in bar 26. Even here, the tritone *f*'♯ persists, as the cello reprises the *f*'♯-*a*' thirds of bar 2: only in bar 27, with the move to the tonic in the bass, is it relinquished.

In this reading, the song’s structure thus consists of establishing the tonic (bars 1–8), departing from it (bars 9–16) and returning (bars 17–28); or, more fundamentally, a two-part structure of departure (1–16) and return (17–28). A basic division thus emerges of 16 (8+8)+12 bars, proportions that can hardly result from happenstance: they double the 8+6 form of the sonnet itself. The accompaniment thus drives the articulation of the poetic structure, marking the *volta* at the exact structural moment, in terms of the song’s overall harmonic direction.

To his pupil and amanuensis Roland-Manuel Ravel wrote, on 7 October 1913:

When you last wrote, I was finishing my 3 [Mallarmé] poems. In fact, ‘Placet futile’ was done, but I’ve retouched it. I am well aware of my audacity in attempting to render this sonnet in music. The melodic contours, the modulations, the rhythms must be as precious [*précieux*], as sculpted as the sentiment and the imagery of the text. Nevertheless, it was necessary to maintain the elegant deportment of the poem. Above all, it was necessary to capture the delightful tenderness that suffuses all of this. Now that it’s done, I’m a bit nervous…[[59]](#footnote-59)

Ravel draws Roland-Manuel’s attention immediately to formal processes (‘to render this sonnet in music’). His ‘elegant deportment’ is surely captured in the meticulous design and balance of these processes—the precise mirroring of the sonnet’s proportions, and the largely classical harmonic relationships that underpin these processes (readable through the bass, though often obscured by surface harmonic complexity). Although the changes of metre somewhat distort the precise proportional divisions if we count by beats rather than bars, such changes seem less important here: just as French poetry is predicated on the flexible accentuation of syllables within regularised line-lengths, so here the outward ‘deportment’ of the song – bar-, rather than beat-counts—marks the principal divisions.

In his wide-ranging article on ‘Text-music transformation in Ravel’s vocal works’, Kaminsky takes up the question of the relationship between Mallarmé’s original ‘Placet’ and the final ‘Placet futile’. In his reading, Ravel’s setting responds to the original title, in which the success or failure of the *placet* is not revealed: he argues that Ravel’s song represents an effective ‘Placet réussi’, the ‘success’ evoked through what he terms an ‘isomorphic’ processes of motivic transformation and accommodation. The verb *nommer*, which Kaminsky reads primarily through its meaning of *appointing* as well as *naming*, is the key for this transformative musical process.[[60]](#footnote-60) Madden similarly argues for a successful petition, and what he terms ‘gradual male empowerment’[[61]](#footnote-61) across the poem. Realized in Ravel’s song through motivic and harmonic transformation, Madden suggests that this success is implicit in the poem, emerging from aspects such as the alternation of masculine and feminine line-ends: as he puts it, ‘When Mallarmé breaks tradition by continuing to use the masculine rhyme from the quatrains in the first tercet, he pushes the feminine rhyme to the end of the tercets, suggesting the beginning of the man’s gradual empowerment in the second half of the sonnet.’[[62]](#footnote-62) Well, perhaps—but which character, thus defined, has the last word?

Discussion of that verb *nommer* inevitably points us towards Mallarmé’s most famous single ‘soundbite’: his statement, from an 1891 interview with Jules Huret, that ‘To name an object is to suppress three-quarters of the pleasure of the poem, which is founded in the joy of gradual discovery; to *suggest* it, that is the ideal.’ (‘*Nommer* un objet, c’est supprimer les trois quarts de la jouissance du poème qui est faite du bonheur de deviner peu à peu; le suggérer, voilà le rêve’.) Cited in innumerable essays and articles through the 1890s and 1900s, this is a quotation with which Ravel was presumably well acquainted.[[63]](#footnote-63) In this context, how might Ravel respond to the poet’s repetition, in ‘Soupir’, of this vital verb *nommer*?

One response lies in his constant skirting of the tonic pitch and key area, which are approached from various directions but never stated unchallenged. This may be heard in the avoidance of the tonic harmony around bars 8–10, where the first suggestion of chord I (bar 8) occurs fleetingly, over a dominant bass and lacking the tonic itself, and the second, in bar 9, immediately diverts to the minor mode (see **Ex. 3** above). Similarly, though the final three bars unmistakeably sketch a perfect cadence in F, the progression is masked by chromatic additions, including that persistent F♯ through bar 26. In direct, symbolic terms we may also consider the vocal line of bars 25–26 as relevant here (see **Ex. 4** above). As noted above, the crucial line ‘Princesse, nommez-nous…’ unifies the distinctive upward and downward leaps of a sixth. Interestingly, however, here these ascending and descending sixths move outwards from *b*''♮, a tritone distant from the tonic F: ‘Princesse’ surrounds the tonic, with its *b*''-*g*''-*e*'' movement, while ‘Nommez-’ leaps past it (*b*''-*e*'-*d*'*)*. This deliberate avoidance of the tonic pitch around this summative statement seems telling: it is never ‘named’ outright. The release of tension across Ravel’s final bars (in the progressive relaxation of textual rhythm, combined with the notated *un peu plus lent—ralentissez peu à peu—très lent—Encore ralenti* directions) could thus be read as a tacit relinquishing of the supplicant’s expectations, an acknowledgement of the inescapable hopelessness of his petition.

The harmonic goals outlined above also bear on this reading. The arrival at A minor that closes the second paragraph, in bar 16, accompanies the penultimate line of the second quatrain, which evokes the ‘closed’, impassive gaze of the Princess. This line is the focal point of the quatrain; the subsequent line (bars 17–18) elaborates the *placet* without advancing it. In musical terms, Ravel emphasizes the finality of this line, and the consequent ‘futility’ of the petition, by allowing it to form the point of arrival and closure for the middle section. This tonal area of A minor is foreshadowed in the song’s first bars (the A/E broken chords respectively in 1st and 2nd violin in bars 1 and 4). Tellingly, it is briefly referenced again at the song’s close, accompanying the final ‘Princesse’ in bar 25; the change of timbre here (the piano absent for just this bar) draws attention to the harmony.

But the inherent ‘futility’ of Mallarmé’s *placet* lies at a deeper level, in its very utterance. The poem’s evocation of courtly love has its locus in the notion of an unattainable beauty: this is the trope of countless troubadour’s ballads and poetic effusions through the centuries. Its form and content demand that the petition must be in vain: if the beloved could be won,thewhole premise collapses. In Mallarméen terms, we might further contend that the *placet* must inevitably be *futile* because the act of naming strips bare the magic of the whole interchange, and of the poem itself: by Mallarmé’s poetic logic, his Princess *cannot* consent to this act of ‘appointment’.

At a deeper level again, even questioning the success or failure of the petition(er) misses the mark, for (as Mallarmé’s original, unqualified title suggests), the outcome isn’t the point. The poem enacts its meaning: it both *is*, and is *about*, the formulation of the utterance. It’s a witty, tender, and amusing evocation of a game whose reward comes not so much in sensual gratification but in the finest metaphor, the boldest allusion, the most *recherché* Classical tag, the most perfect form.[[64]](#footnote-64) The *placet* is hermetic, self-contained; it exists without need or expectation of a response, of transformation or sublimation. What it is, it does.

# “Surgi de la croupe et du bond”

Surgi de la croupe et du bond

D’une verrerie éphémère

Sans fleurir la veillée amère

Le col ignoré s’interrompt.

Je crois bien que deux bouches n’ont

Bu, ni son amant ni ma mère,

Jamais à la même chimère,

Moi, sylphe de ce froid plafond !

Le pur vase d’aucun breuvage

Que l’inexhaustible veuvage

Agonise mais ne consent,

Naïf baiser des plus funèbres !

À rien expirer annonçant

Une rose dans les ténèbres.

[Risen from the crupper and the leap / Of an ephemeral ornament of glass, / Without garlanding its bitter vigil, / The neglected neck stops short. / I truly believe that two mouths never / Drank, neither her lover nor my mother / From the same Chimera, / I, sylph of this cold ceiling! / The vase pure of any draught / Save inexhaustible widowhood / Though dying does not consent—/ Naïve and most funereal kiss!— / To breathe forth any annunciation / Of a rose in the shadows.]

If both ‘Soupir’ and ‘Placet futile’ are reasonably approachable poems, ‘Surgi de la croupe et du bond’ is Mallarmé at his most opaque. Ravel’s setting similarly represents his own most abstruse musical creation, his furthest flight from tonality. What drew Ravel to what he himself described as ‘the strangest, if not the most hermetic of [Mallarmé’s] sonnets’?[[65]](#footnote-65)

First published in *La Revue indépendante* on 1 January 1887, as the second of three sonnets (alongside ‘Tout orgueil fume-t-il du soir…’ and ‘Une dentelle s’abolit’), ‘Surgi de la croupe…’ was included in the 1893 collection *Vers et prose : morceaux choisis* (as was ‘Soupir’ but not ‘Placet futile’). Unlike Ravel’s first two choices, whose reproduction in newspapers and journals was often cited as an example of Mallarmé’s most beautiful and evocative works, ‘Surgi de la croupe…’ was rarely reprinted except as a prime example of the poet’s impenetrability, as in this 1902 article:

This author, whose students place him above Homer, above Goethe, Racine, Corneille and Victor Hugo—in a word, they judge him superior to all other geniuses, French or foreign—concerns himself no longer with rhyme (or barely at all), disdains rhythm and clarity. The more enigmatic and obscure a phrase, the better. … He tramples syntax underfoot: it is too earthbound; he is concerned only with the *idea*. Here is how he translates it: ‘Surgi de la croupe et du bond …[etc.].’ This strophe evokes nothing in particular, which is as it should be. We understand nothing, thus, it’s beautiful; that’s the logic of his admirers.[[66]](#footnote-66)

In 1910, however, Rémy de Gourmont used this same first quatrain to make the opposite argument, writing, ‘is this really so obscure, really so enigmatic? Had the poet explicitly described the vase, with its anguished form, its sharp neck, deprived of its flower, and which, lacking a rose, seems abruptly shattered—would we see it any better, or with more melancholic pleasure?’[[67]](#footnote-67)

‘Surgi de la croupe…’ is a *sonnet régulier*, its rhyme scheme following the traditional pattern ABBA ABBA CCD EDE. The rhymes of the quatrains, however, are remarkable for their deliberate poverty: as Graham Robb observes, the masculine (A) rhymes are ‘among the poorest ever used by Mallarmé in the quatrains of a regular sonnet … The two mouths forming the kiss of rhyme … have never met.’[[68]](#footnote-68) The tercets, by contrast, are characterized by their dense *rimes léonines* (in which the final *four* assonances align). The sonnet is couched in octosyllables, which represented something of a departure from tradition, as the form typically belonged to the alexandrine.[[69]](#footnote-69) Here, one immediate effect of the octosyllables is to suggest a foreshortening that presages the key verb ‘s’interrompt’: that action is implicit in the poem’s metre.

One reading of this difficult poem centres around its play of symmetries and inversions. The vase’s rounded shape is suggestive of plenitude and promise, but this is denied: it remains empty, barren, holding neither water nor the flower towards which it aspires. The tercets, in particular, emphasize words connected with death, and thus nothingness: *veuvage*, *agonise*, *funèbres*, *expirer*, *tenèbres*.[[70]](#footnote-70) Against this emptiness, however, Mallarmé reveals the perfect symmetry of the object itself, reflected through the metaphor of two meeting mouths; and the final allusion to the rose, an ancient symbol of fulfilment, completeness, or perfection. Michel Edwards writes that the barrenness of the object is also contradicted by the very richness of description with which the poet endows it: it is elaborated by metaphor, by myth (*Chimère*), by ‘enigmatic allusion’, by allegory.[[71]](#footnote-71) The emptiness of the object is thus filled, not with water and flowers, but in sound, rhythm and allusion.

Mallarmé’s play of words and word-sounds inevitably invites a further level of symbolic interpretation. The proliferation of [o] sounds, notably in the quatrains’ A rhymes, suggests a visual evocation of completeness, of the circular mouth of the vase; the same sound is also present in the crucial word *rose*.[[72]](#footnote-72) While this wordis stated outright—and its advent subtly foreshadowed, as Robb notes, by the [z] sounds that occupy the corresponding fourth syllable in every line of the tercet[[73]](#footnote-73)—another presumptive key word is not. The poem offers a chain of words beginning with or emphasising the consonant *v* (*vase, verrerie, veillée, veuvage*, *breuvage*), and a series of expressive *i* vowels.[[74]](#footnote-74) Everywhere implied, in terms of both allusion and assonance, is the alliterative *vide* [empty], but this word is never named: Mallarmé denies us even the satisfaction of its articulation.

Ravel’s setting of ‘Surgi de la croupe…’ occupies twenty-four bars (involving several changes of metre). The setting of the first quatrain spans bars 5–8 (the voice entering on the upbeat to bar 6); the second encompasses bars 11–15. The delivery of the tercets begins in bar 16 and occupies the remaining nine bars. The song’s most audible inflection points are the shift to simple metre and bell-like textures at bar 9 (immediately following the first quatrain), and the reprise of the opening material and compound metre from bar 19 (this time entering mid-line). ‘Surgi de la croupe…’ thus represents the only explicit ternary form of Ravel’s *Trois poèmes*.

Unlike ‘Soupir’ and ‘Placet futile’, there is little to remark here in terms of metrical proportioning (the tempi indicated at the main transitions define no clear relationship from dotted and undotted crotchet or vice versa), except that the opening A section comprises eight bars and its reprise six, redolent of sonnet form. The verb *s’interrompt* that ends the first quatrain at bar 8 is highlighted by the ensuing end-of-bar cæsura, the B section then entering as an interruption, in conceptual as well as harmonic terms. As in ‘Placet futile’, a unifying gesture elides the transition between sections: there, it was the rising melodic figure that appears from bar 7 and dominates the central section; here, it is the prominent A♯–E♯ chimes, introduced from bar 5, which are then carried on enharmonically as B♭–F♮ in bars 9–14. Across the textural and harmonic disjunction between outer and middle sections, the vocal setting of the two quatrains also offers a degree of continuity in following the same gestural outline, each quatrain rising through a ninth then descending through a tenth (*d*'♯–*e*“♯–*c*’♯, then *d*'♮–e''♮– *c*'♮), the highest note of each phrase marking the syllable *mè-*.However, the two outer sections effectively present their own continuity across the central section’s interruption, through shared texture, musical content and bass: against the flatted bass pitches of the B section, the bass *F*♯ of bar 8 suggests a point of departure for the continuing stepwise bass descent of *E*, *D*, *C* from bar 19 to the end of the song (see Appendix: Figure 3).

The song’s ternary form most immediately suggests a response to the poem’s delineation of symmetry, through the visual evocation of the vase. The very appearance of Ravel’s score reinforces this, the upward arpeggio figures and sinuous melodic lines of the outer sections suggesting the leaping form of the vase and the curves of its mouth (see Ex. 5).

**Example 5 Ravel, ‘Surgi de la croupe et du bond’, bars 1—3**

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The corresponding sparseness in the staves of the central passage (which progressively fill as the strings take over from the piano in the first line of the tercet, from bar 16) can be read as matching the empty belly of the vase. Given Mallarmé’s preoccupation with the appearance of his poetry on the page, and the suggestive possibilities or symbolism inherent in the shapes of individual letters, words, lines, and strophes,[[75]](#footnote-75) it is entirely apt to view Ravel’s setting as responding to that visual patterning in his own medium.

Rémy de Gourmont’s 1910 article, mentioned above, links Mallarmé’s poetry with Monet’s art, with its ‘luminous points of colour’: ‘the words are chosen … like a painter’s colours’, he writes, citing the example of “Surgi de la croupe…”.[[76]](#footnote-76) Robb writes of the poem as a ‘still life’, while Jean P. Schmitt quoted from it in an 1898 article about the nature of beauty and form, via Rodin’s *Balzac*.[[77]](#footnote-77) Ravel’s setting of ‘Surgi de la croupe…’ similarly feels the most ‘painterly’ of his set: instrumental colour is more foregrounded here than even the two preceding songs. It employs more extreme registers and timbres: the only song of the three to use bass clarinet (to particularly striking effect in the closing bars), it also makes the most extensive use of the piccolo. The strings’ *sourdine* indication applies throughout the song, their role throughout being almost exclusively colouristic—tremolo, harmonics, sustained chords. Only at a couple of fleeting moments do their lines suggest melodic fragments. The opening bars play typically Ravelian tricks on the ear, as the opening arpeggio passes from piccolo to flute to viola, then clarinet against piano: as in his orchestration of the ‘Pavane’ from *Ma Mère l’Oye* or the opening of *L’Enfant et les sortilèges*, unusual combinations disguise distinct instrumental timbres. Melodic gestures pass more rapidly around the ensemble, so the ear is sharply attuned to changes of timbre: in the outer sections, there is hardly an instrumental combination that is sustained for more than a bar. The poem’s depiction of an ornate physical object, a thing embodying both history and beauty, is emulated in Ravel’s colouristic use of timbre, which elaborates and defines the form both in the ear and on the page, but also in the very lack of melody: the single repeated arabesque gesture itself suggests the poem’s stasis.

As in the first two songs, harmonic coherence comes from three principal components: first, the circle-of-fifths progressions that underlie the ‘B’ section, in particular; second, stepwise bass motions; and third, the juxtaposition of the tritonal opposites C and F♯. This last element flows directly out of ‘Placet futile’: there, F♯ served as a long-range appoggiatura to the tonic F (see Figure 2above), as well as taking on a substitute dominant function in place of C at the musical *volta*. This pull betweenF and F♯ is mirrored in the opening bars of ‘Surgi…’, the opening piccolo arabesque echoing ‘Placet futile’ with a subsiding *f*''♯**-***f*'' (see Ex. 5 above). Meanwhile, *C* is established in the cello’s first strummed chord (bar 1). From bar 5 bass and arabesque shift up a semitone, the bass now sustaining *C*♯, the arabesque ending on *f*'♯; bar 8 then resolves cadentially to F♯. Here, then, F♯ emerges as a tonal destination in its own right, a true equivalent and counter to the overall tonic C.

The triple-octave E♭ that opens the central section divides that tritone again, into two minor thirds.[[78]](#footnote-78) This passages layers several motions of fifths: above the piano’s triple-octave tolling bass ((E♭-)B♭-E♭-A♭) swing harmonically distant echoes in the string chords ((D)-A-D-G-C), and the bell-like alternation of triple-octave F and B♭ chimes in the piano’s right hand (seeEx. 6).

**Example 6 Ravel, “Surgi de la croupe et du bond”, bars 7–10**



By bar 16, the string chords and piano chimes should, by Ravel’s pattern, both converge on F, but here he breaks the chain, repeating the C harmony as the bass is allowed to continue its own progression by moving to D♭ (the enharmonic equivalent of the earlier C♯), stopping short of the G♭ (F♯) that would take us back to the conclusion of bar 8.

From this point (as the voice begins to deliver the tercets), above the bass D♭ the piano’s *b*'♭ becomes the launching point for a three-note sliding chromatic figure that passes up through cello and flute to emerge at the top of the texture in the piccolo at bar 19. Here the figure frees itself to reprise the arabesque; the chromatic motion passes to the bass, as cello and piano descend to the closing C. In the final bar, the piano returns to the bass *C*ˌof the opening as the voice sings the word *rose* on *f*'♯: for the space of one quaver beat the tritone is heard unadorned. These two opposed tonalities of C and F-sharp, perfectly dividing the octave between them, represent respectively the emptiest and ‘fullest’ key signatures. The echoing of F♯ in the last piano dyad and pizzicato violin chord unites the images of emptiness and fulfilment (see Ex. 7).

**Example 7 Ravel, “Surgi de la croupe et du bond”, bars 22-24**



If ‘Surgi de la croupe et du bond’ teeters on the edge of atonality (Mallarmé’s *Néant*, perhaps?), then, it never quite plunges into the abyss: between those symbolic tritone poles, as Figure 3demonstrates, harmonic coherence comes from the circle-of-fifths motions in the ‘B’ section, and the arc of the bass to and from F♯, ascending there in a strong cadential motion and returning to C by step, across the ‘interruption’ of bars 9–18.[[79]](#footnote-79)

# A philosophy of composition

Across all three of Ravel’s Mallarmé *Poèmes*, the principal articulation points in the poetry—changes of strophe, the midpoint of ‘Soupir’, the *volta* of the sonnets—are generally made audible with shifts of musical texture and/or tempo. However, these transitions do not necessarily reflect the broader architectural structures and proportions of the songs. Rather, Ravel dovetails his material, often blurring the aural effect of these transitional moments through the interaction of voice and instruments. Nevertheless, ‘Soupir’ and ‘Placet futile’ offer precise reflections of poetic structure in their proportional design, with a further echo of the sonnet form in the 8+6 bars that form the outer sections of ‘Surgi’. In ‘Placet futile’ the *volta* in the text is made audible with the change of texture and tempo. In ‘Surgi’ the transition back to the A’ section comes three bars after the textual *volta*, but this turning point is audibly observed, in its Neapolitan (D♭) bass, as well as its change of timbre and melodic gesture.

In the 1927 interview cited at the beginning of this study, Ravel elaborated his contention that Mallarmé alone rendered the French language ‘poetical’, arguing that ‘Others, even that exquisite singer Verlaine, compromised with the rules and the boundaries of a most precise and formal medium.’[[80]](#footnote-80) Ravel’s lecture on ‘Contemporary Music’, given the following year at the Rice Institute, described Mallarmé’s ‘unbounded visions’ as nevertheless ‘precise in design’.[[81]](#footnote-81) As Kelly writes, ‘giving freedom to the imagination stimulates purely musical preoccupations with design, detail and structure’.[[82]](#footnote-82)All three of Ravel’s chosen Mallarmé poems make deliberate and overt play with form, enlisting the structure of the text as a key element in delivering its content and meaning. The two sonnets also deal more explicitly with the nature of form *per se*, in which the very act of creating, crafting, or articulating the poem takes on symbolic weight. Thus, ‘Placet futile’ plays on the tone and constraints of the *placet*, set within the frame of the sonnet; the vase of ‘Surgi de la croupe…’ is a physical form—a still life, painted in words—in which the symmetrical vase, the perfect form of the *sonnet régulier* and the barrenness of the object itself are intertwined. Where ‘Placet futile’ and ‘Soupir’ enlist form in the service of poetic content, in ‘Surgi de la croupe…’ form and content are explicitly at odds: as Robb puts it, ‘With its linear, forward movement contradicted by the theme and prosodic conceits, the text can be compared to a telescope that sees back almost to the moment before creation.’[[83]](#footnote-83) The rose ‘will not consent’ to being ‘announced’, for across the entire span of the poem the word *rose* has no rhyme.

In ‘Surgi de la croupe…’, the opposition of perfection and emptiness is thus laid bare in the very existence and form of the poem, which, as Edwards writes, ‘makes manifest its existence, its completed creation, through activating, to their full value, the complex laws of the sonnet’.[[84]](#footnote-84) The rose will not be announced, but it is there nonetheless, undeniably present in the poem’s final line. The poem strips meaning to nothingness, but the very attempt to articulate *le Néant* becomes an act of creation: the sonnet exists, it has a form, measured, ornate, and carrying with it the weight of history (‘The sonnet demands its own history, its own dedicated monograph’, writes Banville [[85]](#footnote-85)).Edwards argues for ‘Surgi de la croupe…’ as representing the ultimate impossibility of Mallarmé’s search for *l’Idée*, or rather the paradoxical futility of this quest, which can be accomplished only through failure. Robb writes in similar terms, describing the sonnet as ‘an allegorical representation of the poetic machine’, and ‘a successful evocation of failure, in which the art of absence is practised in the “objects” of verse itself.’[[86]](#footnote-86)

A key argument of Robb’s *Unlocking Mallarmé* is that the poet’s word choices were often made through a process of reducing the possible options down to a single, inevitable choice, the one word that, by its resonances, shades of meaning, and visual form, could possibly fit into the complex poetic matrix. Such techniques inevitably suggest Mallarmé’s – and Ravel’s – hero Edgar Allan Poe, whose Raven’s inexorable ‘Nevermore’, Poe claimed, was devised through just such a process.[[87]](#footnote-87) In his essay ‘The Philosophy of Composition’, Poe declared that the composition of ‘The Raven’ ‘proceeded step by step, to its completion, with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem’. Ravel, in turn, claimed that ‘The Philosophy of Composition’ was ‘The finest treatise on composition, in my opinion, and the one which in any case had the greatest influence upon me’[[88]](#footnote-88): it was certainly one that resonated perfectly with this son of a distinguished engineer and inventor. Not long after completing his Mallarmé *Poèmes*, Ravel was quoted as saying, ‘My [Piano] Trio is finished. I only need the themes for it’.[[89]](#footnote-89) This is a *boutade*, of course, but one that suggests an important truth about his working processes: the ‘themes’ of this monumental work—whose scherzo takes the title and echoes the patterns of a poetic form elevated notably by Baudelaire—could be articulated, developed and supported only through a meticulously balanced formal scheme. Of his Violin Sonata, Ravel was similarly to argue that ‘I had already determined its rather unusual form, the manner of writing for the instruments, and even the character of the themes for each of the three movements before “inspiration” had begun to prompt any one of these themes.’[[90]](#footnote-90)

Ravel discovered Poe through Mallarmé’s and Baudelaire’s translations: Mallarmé translated Poe’s poetry, Baudelaire his prose. The three writers were for him inextricability linked, forming the core of his own literary persona.[[91]](#footnote-91) The 1924 Madrid interview cited early in the present study asserts that ‘My teacher in composition was Edgar Allan Poe … Poe taught me that true art is a perfect balance between pure intellect and emotion.’ Ravel then moves immediately to ‘tell you about my works. I have a predilection for my *Trois Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*, which will obviously never be a popular work, since in it I transpose the literary procedures of Mallarmé…’[[92]](#footnote-92) If the published article closely followed the direction of Ravel’s conversation, we can see how closely the two writers were linked in his mind, the thought of one prompting reference to the other. In his 1928 Rice Institute lecture, he linked Poe with Mallarmé even more directly: ‘The aesthetic of Edgar Allan Poe … has been of singular importance to me, and also the immortal poetry of Mallarmé – unbounded visions, yet precise in design…’[[93]](#footnote-93)

In his commentary to his translation of Poe’s poetry, Mallarmé describes Poe’s account of his creative processes (in ‘The Philosophy of Composition’) as a ‘pure intellectual game’ (‘un pur jeu intellectuel’). He quotes a letter from an acquaintance of Poe’s, which asserts that the process outlined in the essay was pure fantasy: ‘The idea came to him … that the poem could have been composed thus. He therefore produced his rationalisation … It amused and surprised him to see it so promptly accepted as gospel.’[[94]](#footnote-94) Ravel, however, was to write in 1931, ‘No matter how much Mallarmé claimed that it was nothing but a hoax, I am convinced that Poe indeed wrote his poem *The Raven* in the way that he indicated.’ [[95]](#footnote-95) Crucially, hoax or not, ‘The Philosophy of Composition’ itself is constructed with a precision and remorseless logic that retraces the process its creator claims for ‘The Raven’—rather as ‘Placet futile’, by enacting its form, answers its own question.

Mallarmé and Poe were unquestionably linked for Ravel, not simply because he had come to Poe’s poetry in Mallarmé’s translation, but because he recognised their shared qualities as technicians, unmatched in the art of masterly, relentless *choosing*. (One suspects that Mallarmé must have recognised this: perhaps his response to ‘The Philosophy of Composition’ was prompted in part by his own discomfort at feeling the veils with which he shrouded his own compositional processes so brilliantly stripped bare). Ravel himself emphasised the importance of ‘choice, yes, choice’ in composition, in a conversation with the violinist André Asselin, contrasting it with ‘Inspiration—what do you mean?’[[96]](#footnote-96)

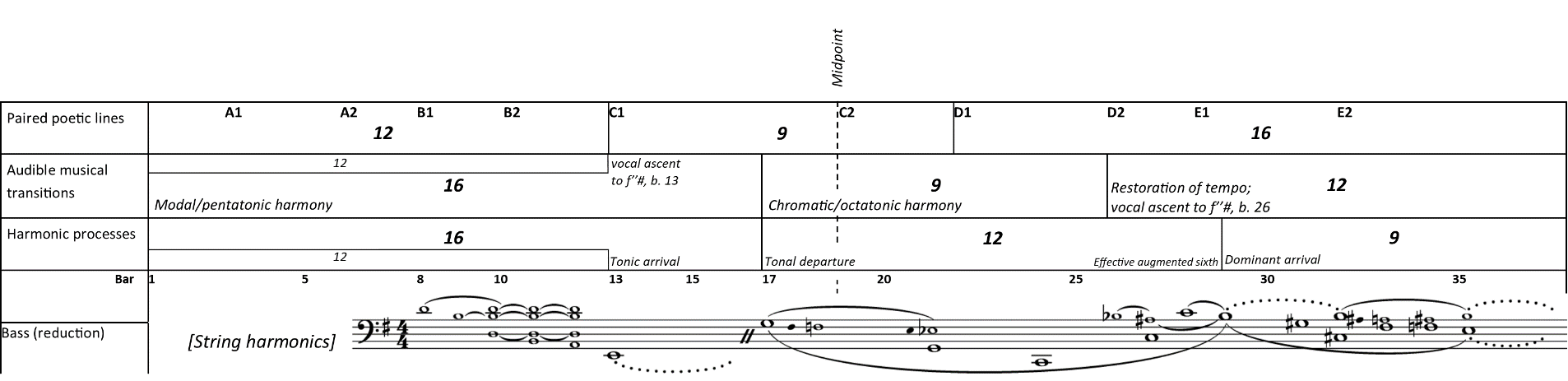
In ‘Surgi de la croupe…’, and the three Mallarmé *Poèmes* collectively too, we might thus sense an exposition of Ravel’s own ‘Philosophy of Composition,’ a setting of a poem that crystallizes the very act of creation, and its inescapable futility, the impossibility of realising the elusive *Idée*. In this light, Ravel’s choices and orderings of his three texts suggest correspondences of symbol and meaning, just as his settings offer related harmonic templates.[[97]](#footnote-97) In the quest for the elusive, visionary *Azur*, and in the ultimate negation of the perfectly formed *placet* (*futile*), Ravel’s choices and settings of texts for his *Trois Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* suggest a sophisticated symbolic progression. In 1913 Ravel decided to grapple on a large scale with a poet whose words had entranced him for some twenty years, one to whose processes, forms, games and ideas he had plainly devoted careful, analytical reflection; whose lucidity of thought and process – no matter what veils of abstraction may shade it – he felt chimed with his own. It is hardly surprising that in this of all composers’ musical response to this of all poets, the work that emerged ‘translates’ or ‘transposes’ far more than poetic content. Ravel turned his homage to his ‘favourite’ poet into an exploration and exposition of compositional process – one whose fulfilment comes, somewhat ironically, in its conclusion: the paradoxical and elusive ‘Surgi de la croupe et du bond’.

**ABSTRACT**

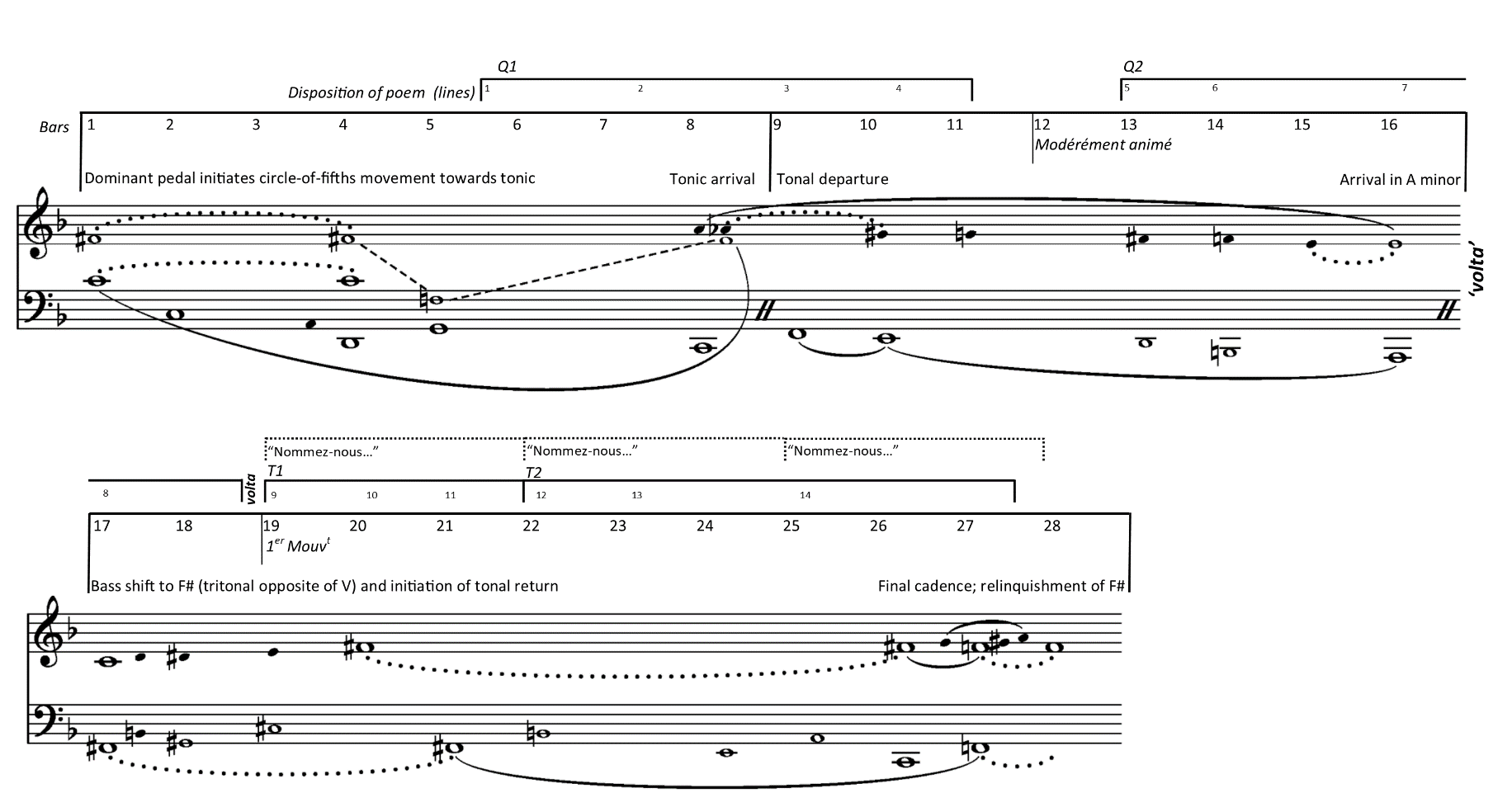
In a 1927 interview Maurice Ravel declared that Stéphane Mallarmé was ‘not merely the greatest French poet, but the *only* French poet, since he made the French language, not designed for poetry, poetical.’ Around the same period, he twice asserted that in his *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* (1913) he had sought to ‘transpose’ Mallarmé’s poetry into music. A crucial element of Mallarmé’s allusive poetry is the way it meshes content and form: his chosen forms do not merely contain the sentiment, but make it manifest. How much more complicated is the task of a composer seeking to ‘transpose’ a work from one medium to another, when form and expression are so inextricably intertwined? The present study considers how Ravel’s Mallarmé *Poèmes* sought to ‘transpose’ imagery and structure, and how tellingly these elements interact with Mallarmé’s reflexive poetic technique. It offers a detailed history and context for his chosen poems, suggesting a rationale for his choices, and outlining the aesthetic ideas that link them as a triptych. Exploring aspects of the songs’ harmonic and proportional design, as well as the symbolic properties of tonality, pitch and timbre, the study argues that Ravel’s Mallarmé *Poèmes* realize long-held preoccupations with the nature of form and the compositional process

**Appendix: Structural Diagrams**

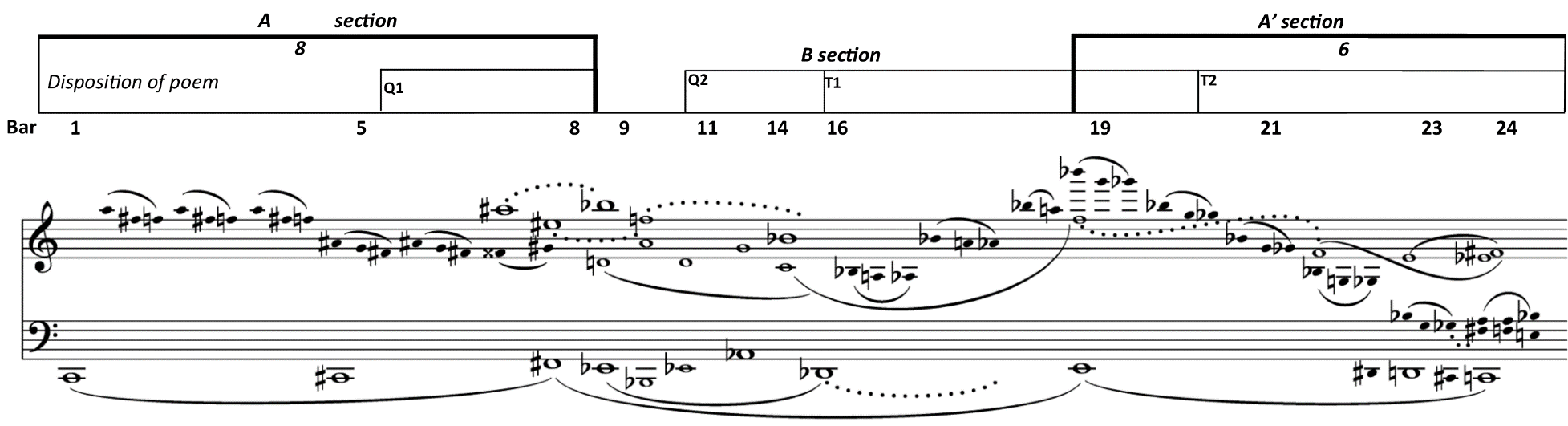
**Figure 1 Structural diagram of ‘Soupir’, showing different permutations of 9-, 12- and 16-bar groups.**

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**Figure 2 Voice-leading reduction of ‘Placet futile’, showing major musical and poetic events.**

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**Figure 3 Voice-leading reduction of ‘Placet futile’, showing major musical and poetic events.**



1. Arbie Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader: Correspondence, Articles, Interviews* (New York, 1990), letter 99. (References to this source are given by letter rather than page number to facilitate comparison with the French edition, *Maurice Ravel: Lettres, écrits, entretiens* (Paris, 1989).) In the accompanying letter, to Hélène Casella, Ravel wrote that he had been in ‘pitiful shape, because my work began to resemble a grave illness: fever, insomnia, lack of appetite. At the end of 3 days a song emerged, based upon a text by Mallarmé…’ Regarding the planned ‘concert scandaleux’ see Barbara Kelly, *Music and Ultra-Modernism in France: A Fragile Consensus, 1913–39* (Woodbridge, 2013), 1, 40–42; and Michel Duchesneau, ‘Maurice Ravel et la Société Musicale Indépendante: ‘Projet mirifique de concerts scandaleux’, *Revue de musicologie* 80/2 (1994), 251–81. In the event, Ravel’s and Stravinsky’s songs were performed at a concert of the SMI on 14 January 1914, alongside Maurice Delage’s *Poèmes hindous*; *Pierrot lunaire* was not heard in Paris until 1922. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, letter 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., letter 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., letter 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (New Haven and London, 2011), 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Olin Downes, ‘Maurice Ravel, Man and Musician’, *New York Times*, 7 August 1927; in Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, 450. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This was the first complete edition of Mallarmé’s *Poésies*: during his lifetime, the only collected edition was the *Poésies* of 1887, issued by *La Revue indépendante* in a run of just 47 exemplars (comprising lithographs of the hand-written poems), together with the 1887 and 1893 collections of (selected) *Vers et prose*; see Peter Dayan, *Music Writing Literature, from Sand via Debussy to Derrida* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 63n1. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The letter quoted in note 4 above observed that ‘we will soon witness a Debussy-Ravel match’: in what Debussy was to describe as a ‘phenomenon of autosuggestion worthy of communication to the Academy of Medicine’, both composers had not only decided to set three Mallarmé texts, but had selected ‘Soupir’ and ‘Placet futile’, in that order (Debussy’s third poem was ‘Eventail’); letter from Debussy to Jacques Durand, 8 August 1913; François Lesure and Denis Herlin (eds.), *Claude Debussy: Correspondance (1872–1914)* (Paris, 2005), 1651. Ravel had to engage in some hasty diplomacy with the poet’s son-in-law (his executor) to persuade him to extend to Debussy the permissions he had already granted Ravel. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Robert Gronquist, ‘Ravel’s *Trois Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*’, *The Musical Quarterly* 64/4 (October 1978), 507–23; Peter Kaminsky, ‘Of Children, Princesses, Dreams, and Isomorphisms: Text-Music Transformation in Ravel’s Vocal Works’, *Music Analysis* 19/1 (March 2000), 29–68; Christopher Madden, ‘Maurice Ravel’s Affinity for Stéphane Mallarmé: Symbolism and *Préciosité* in *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*’ (MA diss., Pennsylvania State University, 2011); Kelly, *Music and Ultra-Modernism*, 98–109; Michel Delahaye, ‘Symbolisme et impressionisme dans *Soupir*, premier des *Trois poèmes de Mallarmé* de Maurice Ravel’, *Cahiers Maurice Ravel* 4 (1988–9), 31–58; Michel Edwards, ‘Ravel et Mallarmé: Poésie et musique’, *Conférence* 28 (May 2009), 255–74; Mathilde Vallespir, ‘Pastiche et récriture: Mallarmé, Ravel, Debussy, le *Placet futile*", *Revue DEMéter* 3 (Centre d’Étude des Arts Contemporains, Université de Lille), December 2006; Steven Huebner, ‘Ravel’s Poetics: Literary currents, classical takes’, in Peter Kaminsky (ed.), *Unmasking Ravel: New Perspectives on the Music* (Rochester, 2011), 9–40. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Rumph, ‘Fauré’s “Parnassian” Song Cycle: *Poème d’un jour*, op. 21’, *The Musical Quarterly* 99/1 (2016), 89–133; and his forthcoming book *The Fauré Song Cycles: Poetry and Music, 1861–1921* (University of California Press, in press). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. André Révész, ‘El gran musico Mauricio Ravel habla de su arte’, ABC de Madrid, 1 May 1924; Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, 433. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See also Emily Kilpatrick, *The Operas of Maurice Ravel* (Cambridge, 2015), 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London, 2009), 81. (‘Ce que dit le poème, il le fait’, *Théorie du sujet* (Paris, 1982), 99.) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Translations of all three poems by Richard Stokes, in Graham Johnson and Stokes, *A French Song Companion* (Oxford and New York, 2000), 422–23. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. H.B., ‘Quelques notes sur la poésie, d’après Stéphane Mallarmé’, *Le Sillon* (10 January 1898), 666–72 at 667: ‘l’idée et le signe échangent constamment entre eux leurs qualités … Ces échanges entre l’idée et l’objet où elle s’incarne, et entre les diverses manifestations de l’idée, sont la forme la plus simple du Symbole.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Marsan, ‘Notes littéraires : Conclusions d’une enquête sur le Classicisme / Critique du Symbolisme (sur Stéphane Mallarmé, à propos de Rémy de Gourmont’), *La Revue critique des idées et des livres* 4/11 (25 October 1910), 220–31 at 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Heath Lees, *Mallarmé and Wagner: Music and Poetic Language* (Aldershot, 2007), 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Several commentators have observed a strong Baudelairean influence in ‘Soupir’, noting a gestural resemblance to the latter’s ‘Chant d’automne’ that becomes explicit in the two poems’ respective final lines (‘Chant d’automne’ concludes ‘De l’arrière saison le rayon jaune et doux!’). See, for example, Robert Sabatier, *Histoire de la poésie française: La Poésie du XIXe siècle*, vol. 2 (‘La Naissance de la poésie moderne’) (Paris, 1977), 297; Marie Rolf, ‘Debussy’s Mallarmé Songs’, in Richard Langham Smith (ed.), *Debussy Studies* (Cambridge, 1997), 179–200 at 192n20; Lloyd James Austin, *Essais sur Mallarmé* (Manchester, 1995), 34n24. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For an excellent discussion of the Parnassian aesthetic and its relationship to French song see Rumph, ‘Fauré’s “Parnassian” Song Cycle: *Poème d’un jour*’, *The Musical Quarterly* 99/1 (Spring 2016), 89–133 at 91–94. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For a discussion of Mallarmé and the Parnassians see Rosemary Lloyd, *Mallarmé: The Poet and his Circle* (Ithaca, 1999), 80–1 and 192, and Seth Whidden, *Leaving Parnassus: The Lyric Subject in Verlaine and Rimbaud* (Amsterdam, 2007), Chapter 1 (‘The Dominance of Parnassian Poetry’), especially 25–28Chapter 1. See also Mallarmé’s lecture on Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, which asserts that the ‘rather rusty sign of *Le Parnasse contemporain* … has been blown down’ (‘l’enseigne un peu rouillée maintenant du *Parnasse Contemporain* … le vent l’a décrochée’, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris, 1945), 491), and his ‘Crise de vers’, both dating from the late 1880s. On the other hand, an 1899 article by Albert Fleury in *La Revue naturiste* described Mallarmé as ‘peut-être un des plus beaux parmi les Parnassiens’ ;‘Paul Verlaine et Stéphane Mallarmé’, *La Revue naturiste* (December 1899),57–69 at 64. The article cited above by ‘H.B.’ opens by suggesting that ‘Soupir’ epitomises Mallarmé’s ‘Parnassian’ period; ‘Quelques notes sur la poésie, d’après Stéphane Mallarmé’, 666. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See for example Roy Howat’s exposition of the meticulous arch form of the ‘Passacaille’ from the Piano Trio, composed a year after the Mallarmé songs; Howat, ‘Symmetries Overt and Hidden in Musical Form’, *Symmetry: Culture and Science* 29/2 (2018), 265–77 at 270, and *The Art of French Piano Music* (New Haven and London, 2009), 49–50 & 183–85; as well as the significance of exact midpoints in the finale of the G major Concerto, the finale of the Violin Sonata and the scene of the Shepherds and Shepherdesses in *L’Enfant et les sortilèges*egarding the last of these – whose lopsided arch form is similar to that of ‘Soupir’ – see Kilpatrick, *The Operas of Maurice Ravel*, 135, 201–203). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Kaminsky, ‘Vocal music and the lures of exoticism and irony’, in Deborah Mawer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* (Cambridge, 2000), 162–87 at 173–75; Madden, ‘Maurice Ravel’s Affinity for Stéphane Mallarmé’, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The song is all in 4/4 metre, except for bars 31 (in 3/4) and 33 (in 2/4). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Bars 24–25 are given less structural significance here: they mark the end of a line of text (line 7), their tempo attenuation aptly painting ‘langueur infinie’. The ensuing new line of text, decisive melodic gesture and restoration of a tempo at bar 26 all suggest a more important formal articulation, even if the piano part at bar 26 emerges by augmentation from bars 24–25. The harmonic implications of these bars are discussed below. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Most of the music examples are reproduced from the piano-vocal score, for clarity and concision. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. This structural play is one that must have appealed to Ravel, who made constant use of such inversions of antecedent and consequent material; see Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, Chapter 12 (‘Rhythmic games in Ravel’), 175–86. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. In both the piano/vocal and chamber scores, Mallarmé’s *sens* (line 7) appears as *sais*; this is more suggestive of error than deliberate emendation (the engraver may have misread Ravel’s handwriting). Both scores also have *troupeaux* in place of *troupeau*. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Although it corresponds to the English ‘abbot’, the French *abbé* was used for a member of the secular clergy; the 1762 *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* defines the term as referring to ‘any man who wears an ecclesiastical habit’. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. The French *Amour* also signifies Cupid. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Nina Gubisch, ‘Les Années de jeunesse d’un pianiste espagnol en France (1887–1900): journal et correspondance de Ricardo Viñes’ (Diss., Paris, Conservatoire de musique, 1971), 123: ‘Maurice m’a montré un dessin très sombre qu’il a fait d’après *Une descente dans le Maelstrom* d’Edgar Pöe. Aujourd’hui, il a fait devant moi un autre dessin, très noir aussi, d’après le *Manuscrit trouvé dans un bouteille* de Pöe.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., 219: ‘j’ai vu les six pièces des *Fleurs du Mal* que l’on a interdites et condamnées; inutile de dire que ce sont les plus belles. … Quand Ravel les aura copiées, d’après une copie que lui a passée un ami, il me les prêtera à son tour pour qu’à mon tour je les copie.’ The six poems were censored two months after the original 1857 publication of *Les Fleurs du mal*. They were subsequently published in *Les Épaves* (Amsterdam, 1866), but were suppressed in France until 1949. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., 266: ‘nous avons parlé de littérature et d’art et il m’a dit que le *Gaspard de la Nuit* que j’ai acheté à Londres est très rare.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Roland-Manuel, *Maurice Ravel*, trans. Cynthia Jolly (London, 1947), 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Regarding the two versions of the poem, see Carl Paul Barbier, ‘*Placet*, 1862 et 1883—*Placet futile*, 1887’, *Documents Stéphane Mallarmé* 4 (Paris, 1973), 13–21. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Mauclair, ‘Souvenirs sur Stéphane Mallarmé et son œuvre’, *La Nouvelle Revue* 21/115 (15 November 1898), 443–57 at 445. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Fleury, ‘Paul Verlaine et Stéphane Mallarmé’, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Note Ravel’s later use of the word *préciosité* to describe Mallarmé’s poetry in his Autobiographical Sketch (see p. **\*\*** above), as well as the adjective *précieux* of ‘Placet futile’, in the letter to Roland-Manuel quoted on p. \*\* below. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Among the various surviving autograph sources for the poem is one bearing an autograph dedication ‘À A Houssaye’; below the poem the date ‘1862’ is written in tiny numerals. Sold by Sothebys, 15 Oct. 2015, and viewable online via <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2015/bibliotheque-stephane-mallarme-pf1543/lot.98.html>, this manuscript shows various interesting revisions, notably the scoring out of the first two iterations of ‘Nommez nous…’, with ‘Fais de nous’ scribbled above; the title ‘Placet’ is similarly amended to ‘La Prière du Gueux’. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Camille Mauclair’s study *Le Secret de Watteau* (Paris, 1942) would link ‘Placet futile’ explicitly with the *fête galante*, writing that it ‘exquisitely condenses’ the preciosity and grace of Watteau’s figures. After reproducing the poem (the text he gives is that of ‘Placet’, not ‘Placet futile’) he writes ‘and thus we come at last to Paul Verlaine’, and goes on to discuss the latter’s collection *Fêtes galantes* (255–56). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. The poem was later published in *L’Écho*, *Le Figaro* and elsewhere. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. See Bertrand Marchal’s commentary to ‘Placet futile’ in Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Marchal (Paris, 1998), 1149–50. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Houssaye, *Confessions* (Paris, 1885), ii: 241: ‘J’avais vu venir à moi un jeune homme tout noir qui accompagnait Privat … “Ce n’est pas de moi, monsieur”, me dit-il avec une gravité théâtrale. Le sonnet était de lui; il l’avait signé Privat … Ce tout noir … se nommait Charles du Fays—pas encore Beaudelaire [*sic*].’Dufays was Baudelaire’s mother’s maiden name, and during the mid-late 1840s he often signed himself ‘Baudelaire-Dufays’, or variants thereof. Editions of Privat d’Anglemont’s writings from the 1860s and 1870s include the sonnet without comment on its authorship. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Dispute about authorship sputtered on into the twentieth century, with some sources attributing the poem to Gérard de Nerval; however, modern critical editions concur in ascribing it to Baudelaire. In addition to Houssaye’s statement, as Maxine Gordon Cutler notes, a letter from Baudelaire to Banville of July 1845 mentions a ‘complicité’ regarding Privat d’Anglemont, and appears to refer to the three sonnets published in *L’Artiste* under that name; *Evocations of the Eighteenth Century in French Poetry* (Geneva, 1970), 159n55. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Mallarmé, *Correspondance*, ed. Henri Mondor and Jean-Pierre Richard (Paris: Gallimard, 1959) i:28. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Baudelaire, *Le Spleen de Paris*: ‘le fameux *Gaspard de la Nuit*, d’Aloysius Bertrand (un livre connu de vous, de moi et de quelques-uns de nos amis, n’a-t-il pas tous les droits à être appelé *fameux*?), que l’idée m’est venue de tenter quelque chose d’analogue… Quel est celui de nous qui n’a pas, dans ses jours d’ambition, rêvé le miracle d’une prose poétique, musicale sans rythme et sans rime… ‘ Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Y.-G. le Dantec, rev. Claude Pichois (Paris, 1961), 229. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ravel, ‘Sous la musique que faut-il mettre?’ *Musica* 102 (March 1911), 58–60 at 59*.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Dép. Rés. de livres rares, RES-8-NFY-678, viewable online at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1511315f>. The 1945 Gallimard edition of Mallarmé’s *Œuvres complètes* (ed. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry) describes the poem as it appears in *Les Poètes maudits* as ‘supplemented by the date 1762, thus looking back exactly a century before the poem’s composition … [For the 1887 *Revue indépendante* collection] Mallarmé removed this fictitious date…’ (p. 1415). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. ‘Autobiographical Sketch’, in Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Mallarmé, *La Dernière Mode* (New York, 1933), 28. In ‘Placet’, the second tercet begins, ‘Nommez-nous, et Boucher sur un rose éventail / Nous peindra…’ [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. *The ARTFL Project, Dictionnaires d’autrefois*, <https://artfl-project.chicago.edu> (accessed 12 July 2017). Various examples of such poems can be found through the Bibliothèque nationale de France’s *Gallica* database (www.gallica.fr), including a 1693 *Recueil des vers choisis* that includes three poems titled ‘Placet…’ addressed to the king, and one to ‘Monseigneur’, and a late eighteenth century collection (*Etrennes du Parnasse*, Paris: Fétil, 1770–90) that includes a ‘Placet’ addressed to ‘M. le Prévôt des Marchands’ requesting a mitigation of the supplicant’s taxes. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Vallespir notes that as the sonnet wasn’t a popular form in the age of Louis XV (it only became so fifty years later), Mallarmé’s choice of that form suggests a deliberate distancing from his subject; ‘Pastiche et récriture’, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Kaminsky, ‘Of Children, Princesses…’, 34. Vallespir elaborates on this, observing that the quatrains are both subordinate in function, establishing the situation and the problem before setting out the *placet* itself. The focus of the actual demand is withheld until the final hemistich of the last line ;‘Pastiche et récriture’, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Kelly, *Music and Ultra-Modernism*, 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Kaminsky also hears the F as ‘not a cadential goal but a passing-note to the bass E in bar 11’, ‘Of Children, Princesses…’, 35; the accompanying reduction defines it as a ‘passing tonic’. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. A parallel instance of a descending stepwise bass omitting the dominant occurs in Ravel’s sole published setting of one of Verlaine’s *Fêtes galantes*, the 1907 song *Sur l’herbe*. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Orenstein, *A Ravel Reader*, letter 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Kaminsky, ‘Of Children, Princesses…’, 34–38. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Madden, ‘Ravel’s affinity for Mallarmé’, iii. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Ibid., 41. Madden reads the *rimes croisées* as evocative of this masculine/feminine dialogue or power struggle (42), but doesn’t note their Baudelairean source (‘À Madame du Barry’). [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Jules Huret,*Enquête sur l’évolution littéraire* (Paris, 1891), 60. A quick search of Gallica shows the quote appearing (prior to 1913) in periodicals including *Le Temps*, *Messidor*, *La Revue*, *Études*, *La Revue hebdomadaire*, *La Mercure de France*, *La Revue des deux mondes*, *Comœdia, La Revue du Midi* and *La Revue savoisienne*, as well as in several monographs on poetry and Leo Tolstoy’s *What is art?* (in an 1898 French translation). The beginning of this statement (which does not appear in most of these publications) sees Mallarmé distancing his aesthetic from that of the Parnassians, who ‘take the thing in its entirety and reveal it’; see note 23 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. A matching sense of humorous tenderness comes through the bleating of sheep in Ravel’s bar 21: more subtle, perhaps, than the unrestrained *bêlements* that end *Noël des jouets* of 1905 but nonetheless apparent; less fantastic than the green sheep of *L’Enfant et les sortilèges*, but sharing a similar, almost childlike sense of stylised antiquity. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. ‘Autobiographical Sketch’, in Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Henry Coeffier, ‘Le Maître des Décadents’, *L’Écho des jeunes (journal littéraire)*, 1 May 1902, 56–57 at 56: ‘Cet auteur, que ses élèves placent au-dessus d’Homère, de Goethe, de Racine, de Corneille et de Victor Hugo, en un mot qu’ils jugent supérieur à tous les génies françaises ou étrangers, ne s’occupe plus de la rime, ou très peu, dédaigne le rythme et la clarté. Plus une phrase est amphigourique et embrouillée, meilleure elle est. … Il foule aux pieds la syntaxe. C’est trop à terre, il ne s’occupe que de l’idée. Voilà comme il la traduit : ‘Surgi de la croupe et du bond… [etc.]’ Cette strophe n’évoque pas grand’chose, c’est ce qu’il faut. On n’y comprend rien, donc c’est beau ; telle est la logique de ses admirateurs.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Gourmont, ‘Souvenirs de symbolisme: Stéphane Mallarmé’, *Le Temps*, 12 October 1910: ‘Est-ce vraiment obscur, vraiment énigmatique ? Si le poète nous décrivait avec des mots directs le vase à la panse tourmentée, au col aigu, qu’on a oublié la fleur et qui semble, faute d’une rose, brusquement rompu, le verrait-on mieux et avec plus de mélancolique plaisir ?’ The article also reproduces ‘Soupir’. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Robb, *Unlocking Mallarmé* (New Haven and London, 1996),91–92. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Louis Quichérat had argued in his *Petit traité de versification française* (Paris, 3rd ed. 1866) that eight-syllable lines were ‘less suited’ to the form, but Théodore Banville unhesitatingly declared in his *Petit traité de poésie française* that a sonnet could be written in any metre. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Edwards, ‘Ravel et Mallarmé’, 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Ibid., 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. As noted by Robert Greer Cohn, *Towards the Poems of Mallarmé* (Berkeley, 1965) 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Robb, *Unlocking Mallarmé*,90– 91 [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Notably in *agonise*; Michel Edwards has written in some detail about the significance of the *i* in Mallarmé’s poetic language (it is equally evident in ‘Soupir’), ‘Ravel et Mallarmé’, 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. This is most obvious in the stunningly modernist *Un coup de dès* of 1897, which employs different typefaces and font sizes and distributes text across each double page, with generous use of blank space. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Gourmont, ‘Souvenirs de symbolisme: Stéphane Mallarmé’. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Schmitt, ‘Le *Balzac* de M. Rodin’, *Angers-Artiste*, 28 May 1898, 12–14 at 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. E♭, together with the persistent A♯ / B♭ (see Figure 3),alsoforms part of the octatonic collection C-C♯-D♯-E-F♯-G-A-B♭, which comprises most of the song’s focal pitches. Present in every bar except two (bars 8 and 14), A♯ disappears at the moment of tonal resolution to F♯ in bar 8. This continual shifting of harmonic goals and resolutions, in an octatonic context, is reminiscent of ‘Le Gibet’ (*Gaspard de la Nuit*), with its more famously relentless B♭: in both pieces traditional tonal relationships are deliberately obscured while progressions of descending fifths underpin much of the harmonic motion (as in bars 23–25 of ‘Le Gibet’). Roy Howat and Steven Baur have also explored Ravel’s frequent recourse to octatonicism in his works of the late 1890s and 1900s: see Howat, ‘Modes and Semitones in Debussy’s Preludes and Elsewhere’, *Studies in Music* 22 (1988), 81–104 at 88, and *The Art of French Piano Music*, 29–31, together with Baur, ‘Ravel’s “Russian” period: octatonicism in his early works, 1893–1908’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 52/3 (1999), 531–92 . Kaminsky emphasises the role of octatonicism in the realisation of ‘Surgi…’ (‘Of Children, Princesses…’, 56–62), though its role here might be seen as more colouristic than functional, matching the foregrounding of timbral colour. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. To Henri Cazalis on 28 April 1866 Mallarmé wrote, ‘I am faced with two abysses … the first is nothingness’ (‘j’ai rencontré deux abîmes … L’un est le Néant’). The second abyss was, he wrote, within his own chest: he was worried about his chronic breathlessness, and feared that he would not live much longer. A subsequent letter of 14 May 1867 explores his ‘conception spirituelle du Néant’; Carl Paul Barbier and Lawrence A. Joseph (eds.), ‘Correspondance avec Henri Cazalis, 1862–1897’, *Documents Stéphane Mallarmé* vol. 6 (Paris, 1977), 308, 341. Mallarmé’s exploration of *le Néant* became one of the principal threads of his poetry; it is discussed *inter alia* by Eric Benoît, *Néant sonore: Mallarmé ou la traverse des paradoxes* (Geneva, 2007), Heather Williams, *Mallarmé’s Ideas in Language* (Bern, 2004), Pierre Brunel, *Les Poésies de Stéphane Mallarmé, ou, Échec au Néant* (Paris, 1998) andLarissa Drigo Agostinho, ‘Lire ou interpreter après la découverte du Néant’, in Thierry Roger (ed.), *Mallarmé herméneute* (Rouen, 2013), <http://ceredi.labos.univ-rouen.fr/public/?mallarme-hermeneute.html> (accessed 14 July 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Downes, ‘Maurice Ravel, Man and Musician’, in Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, 450. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, 45–46. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Kelly, *Music and Ultra-modernism*, 99. I have also touched on Ravel’s practice of self-imposed limitations, in *The Operas of Maurice Ravel*, 142ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Robb, *Unlocking Mallarmé*, 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Edwards, ‘Ravel et Mallarmé’, 270: […[il] manifest[e] son existence, sa composition achevée, en mettant en œuvre, et en valuer, les lois complexes du sonnet’. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. *Petit traité de poésie française*,Regarding the notion and significance of voice in the creation of Mallarmé’s (and Baudelaire’s) poetry, see Helen Abbott, *Between Baudelaire and Mallarmé: Voice, Conversation and Music* (Farnham, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Robb, *Unlocking Mallarmé*, 91–92. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. ‘The question now arose as to the character of the [refrain]. … That such a close, to have force, must be sonorous and susceptible of protracted emphasis, admitted no doubt: and these considerations inevitably led me to the long o as the most sonorous vowel, in connection with r as the most producible consonant. The sound of the refrain being thus determined, it became necessary to select a word embodying this sound, and at the same time in the fullest possible keeping with that melancholy which I had predetermined as the tone of the poem. In such a search it would have been absolutely impossible to overlook the word “Nevermore”. In fact, it was the very first which presented itself.’ Edgar Allan Poe, ‘The Philosophy of Composition’, first published in Graham’s Magazine 28/4 (April 1864). [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, 394.See also the unsigned interview printed in the *New York Times* on 6 January 1928; *ibid*., 454. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Reported by Maurice Delage, in H. H. Stuckenschmidt, *Maurice Ravel: Variations on his Life and Work*, trans. S. R. Rosenbaum (London, 1969), 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Orenstein, *A Ravel Reader*, 389. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Although Ravel’s literary pantheon also included figures such as Tristan Klingsor, Léon-Paul Fargue and Henri de Régnier (see Huebner, ‘Ravel’s Poetics’), his adoption of the three nineteenth-century giants in his teenage years gives them particular importance, as formative influences that shaped his creative practice for the rest of his life. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Révész, ‘El gran musico Mauricio Ravel habla de su arte’; Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, 433. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, 45.As Steven Huebner notes (‘Ravel’s Poetics’, 15), both these passages linking Poe and Mallarmé serve the same purpose: they immediately distance Ravel’s aesthetic from any perceivable influence of Debussy (‘I myself have always followed a direction opposite to that of Debussy’s symbolism’, he asserts in the Rice Institute lecture, and in the 1924 article, ‘My early stage was a reaction against Debussy, against the abandonment of form, of structure, and of architecture’. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. *Les Poèmes d’Edgar Poe*, trad. Stéphane Mallarmé (Brussels, 1888), 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, 394. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Ibid, 389n3. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. There are inescapable echoes here of Ravel’s much-quoted post-war reflection, ‘My objective, therefore, is technical perfection. I can strive unceasingly to this end, since I am certain of never being able to attain it. The important thing is to get nearer to it all the time.’ ‘Some Reflections on Music’, in Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader*, 38. See Steven Huebner, ‘Ravel’s Perfection’, in Deborah Mawer (ed.), *Ravel Studies* (Cambridge, 2010), 9–30. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)