

## THE APOLLINIAN BASIS OF *L'APRÈS-MIDI D'UN FAUNE*

### INTRODUCTION

The Australian poet Christopher Brennan (1871-1932), to whom Mallarmé wrote 'Il y a entre vous et moi une parentée de songe',<sup>1</sup> was arguably Mallarmé's most insightful and accurate interpreter, albeit of his detailed exegeses only a handful remain, and these long inaccessible to the wider world beneath the sands of time and distance. It is in Brennan's spirit that the demonstration to follow will unfold:

I don't mind admitting that he is difficult. But I pass you my word that he is intelligible, and intelligible out of himself ... And I would further pass my word ... that he repays the trouble of understanding him ... There is the obscurity that comes when a poet reduces his poetry to its essential order and beauty, refusing to make a compromise with the reader and help him by the insertion of matter that has nothing to do with the essential rhythm. That is the obscurity of Mallarmé, and it were better to call it a difficult simplicity.<sup>2</sup>

Against this notion of 'difficult simplicity' is to be placed the 'difficult complexity' of many interpretations of the poems, including *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune* (hereafter *Faune*). Much critical ink has been spilt in explicating *Faune* in a segmented fashion; in discovering puns, homophones, overtones, and other word-plays; and in constructing schemes for its overall harmony. However, it is fair to say that a general consensus on a scenario for its coherence, radiance, and integrity as a wholly unified work of art remains to be achieved.

Most recently of the major interpreters, Pearson has produced a highly elaborate exegesis of *Faune* as a theory of language and poetry, in which 'Faune' acts as a homophone of 'phone'.<sup>3</sup> Pearson's scheme is flawed, as we shall see, but he does correctly identify the two modes of the faun's being with Apollo and Dionysius, an antithesis which undoubtedly provides the essence of the poem as eclogue. However, I would argue that he has chosen the wrong Apollo, and the wrong Dionysius. For Pearson, the Apollo of *Faune* is the Apollo of popular belief:

the sun-god who pursued nymphs and drove a chariot (or quadriga) pulled by swans, and the god of music and poetry who epitomizes an art that derives from divine inspiration and aspires to serenity and calm; Apollo, the begetter of lyric verse to soothe the soul .... The Faune's "Eglogue" can then be seen to unite the virtues of Apollonian order and Dionysian disruption, the calm control of a written text and the unruly noise of spoken verse.<sup>4</sup>

However, we can build a far more consistent and persuasive scenario for *Faune*, which would firmly connect Mallarmé with the poetical and philosophical currents of his time, on the premise that Mallarmé's Apollo is, on the contrary, the flawed and destructive Apollo of Blake and Keats, Nietzsche and Oswald Spengler, and Brennan and Robert Graves, amongst others; and, further, that Dionysius appears in *Faune*, as he does in Nietzsche, in his esoteric (spiritual) rather than exoteric (Bacchic) mode.

For the mystic William Blake, Apollo was, for the reason of his circumscription of the universe (cf. the crime described in *Un Coup de Dés* of daring to place 'une borne à l'infini'), the Great Satan, and Blake missed no opportunity to excoriate him throughout his creative life :

I have conversed with the Spiritual Sun ... I saw him on Primrose Hill. He said, "Do you take me for the Greek Apollo?" "No," I said, "that [and Blake pointed towards the sky] that is the Greek Apollo—he is Satan."<sup>5</sup>

Keats, in his poem 'Lamia', portrays the goddess-destroying Apollonius, an incarnation of Apollo as philosopher:

Do not all charms fly  
At the touch of mere cold philosophy?  
... Philosophy will clip an angels wings,  
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,  
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine—  
Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made  
The tender-personed Lamia melt into a shade.

Can we be more precise as to the nature of Apollo's delimitation of the universe? Spengler put it best:

This very spatiality (*Räumlichkeit*) that is the truest and sublimest element in the aspect of *our* universe, that absorbs into itself and begets out of itself the substantiality of all things, Classical humanity (which knows no word for, and therefore has no idea of, space) with one accord cuts out as the nonent, the  $\tau\omicron\ \mu\eta\ \omicron\upsilon\upsilon$ , that which *is not*. The emphasis of this denial can scarcely be exaggerated. The material, the optically definite, the comprehensible, the immediately present—this list exhausts the characteristics of this kind of extension. The Classical universe, the Cosmos or well-ordered aggregate of all near and completely viewable things, is concluded by the corporeal vault of heaven. More there is not. The need that is in us to think of space as being behind as well as before this shell was wholly absent from the Classical world-feeling.<sup>6</sup>

Mallarmé himself pointed out in *Les Dieux Antiques* that 'Le culte d'Apollon fut en Grèce de tous le plus largement répandu, a eut la plus grande influence sur la formation du caractère grec'.<sup>7</sup> It is evident from Spengler's description that the Apollinian<sup>8</sup> principle is exclusive of the Silence, which was of course an object of Mallarmé's (and of the Eastern religions which so influenced him) especial veneration.

For Christopher Brennan, 'The sun-god is the petty lord of noon/ and foolish in the blue pavilion wrecks/full pleasure on the garden of pure sense'. Brennan took the Hebrew goddess Lilith (a Lamia-analogue) as his principal symbol of the illimitable space that lies beyond the merely visible Classical cosmos, and its microcosmic aspect the unconscious mind. That is, She is cognate with the Silence; and the name of Mallarmé in fact explicitly bookends the long central central sequence 'The Forest of Night' (although he took the title from Blake) in Brennan's magnum opus *Poems 1913*.

Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* is at once a work of devotion to the moon goddess, and of sustained contempt for her mortal enemy Apollo:

The true poet must always be original, but in a simpler sense: he must address only the Muse—not the King or Chief Bard or the people in general—and tell her the truth about himself and her in his own passionate and peculiar words. The Muse is a deity, but she is also a woman, and if her celebrant makes love to her with the second-hand phrases and ingenious verbal tricks that he uses to flatter her son Apollo she rejects him more decisively even than she rejects the tongue-tied or cowardly bungler.<sup>9</sup>

The oeuvre of Poe also of course stands as a thundering *j'accuse* to the Apollinian world view.

The failure to recognise the negative aspect which Apollo bears in *Faune* can lead, just as it can in the case of Brennan, to crippling misjudgements such as this:

The words “rêve,” “amusions” ... “confusions fausses,” and “chant crédule” all indicate the faun’s rejection of the idea of art as genuine sublimation. This process of sublimation, which the faun ridicules, is symbolized by the large pastoral double flute...<sup>10</sup>

On the contrary, the faun is rather here reflecting, as we shall see, on the flute as a vehicle of Apollinian (and therefore inadequate) music. The transformation of the character of the flute from Classical/Apollinian to Western /Faustian (to use Spengler’s terms) is a fine example of the *shapeshifter* effect in the Journey of the Hero genre, to which *Faune* undoubtedly belongs, albeit in a form in which much is summarised and suggested.

Apollinism, with its materialistic and mechanistic bias, lent itself as a philosophy to the seventeenth and subsequent centuries, where it became closely associated with its *cousin germane* the Baconian-Newtonian world-view, which Blake abominated with the same vehemence as the Apollinian, and for similar reasons. Baconian-Newtonian science, as based on the principle of ‘simple location’, with its concept of the universe as mechanism, overwhelmingly to the exclusion of organism, led easily to Cartesian dualism, and the mind-matter schism which it was the task of Romanticism to heal. Newtonism, as engendered principally by the Neoplatonism of Sir Francis Bacon, shares common genes with Apollinism. In fact, we shall see that a helpful way of approaching *Faune* is in light of its development under the aegis of Wordsworth’s ‘We murder to dissect’ (‘Mon crime, c’est d’avoir ... divisé la touffe échevelée’).

Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* is of course a cautionary tale of the destructive effects of unopposed Apollinism. Dionysius appears in this work, not in his exoteric Bacchic mode of physical debauchery, but in his esoteric mode as the god of spiritual rather than physical intoxication. He was for this reason the tutelary deity of the Greek stage; and in this mode he appears in *Faune*. The perception of eroticism and physical drunkenness in *Faune* proceeds therefore from the error of literalism. This assertion, which it will be one of the principal tasks of the argument to come to justify, is clearly a major departure from the prevailing wisdom anent *Faune*.

## THE FINAL SECTION (1): SPIRITUAL INTOXICATION OF THE FAUN

Nijinsky’s act of simulated onanism in the final scene of Diaghilev’s ballet of *Faune* expressed an erotic interpretation of Mallarmé’s poem which prevails even now. The story is familiar: the Faune declines from idealist imagining to erotic reverie; he looks forward to seduction by wanton females; he falls into a drunken and eros-filled sleep at noon. The critical readings include mentions of cunnilingus and digital penetration. Chisholm’s typifies the prevailing reading of the opening lines:

le thème de la Sensualité apparait dans les vers d’ouverture et émerge souvent de la structure générale. Le Faune, frustré, par son propre assoupissement dans la chaleur du début de l’après-midi, essaie de remémorer un épisode érotique. Son être entier est tissu de sensualité vibrante...<sup>11</sup>

While Weinfield concludes anent the final line: ‘In the end, the faun accedes to his destiny as an animal...’<sup>12</sup> This paper will argue that, on the contrary, such interpretations of *Faune* issue

from a literalistic misreading of its symbols, the richness and power of which individually and ensemble have thereby been underestimated.

Let us begin with a novel interpretation of the final section of *Faune*, before examining the evidence in the preceding sections to support it.

Tant pis! vers le bonheur d'autres m'entraîneront  
Par leur tresse nouée aux cornes de ma front.

'Tant pis' is generally taken to refer to the lines that have gone before, overlooking the fact (the demonstration of which must abide a later stage of this argument) that there is nothing therein, if interpreted correctly, that could be appropriate. On the other hand, 'Tant pis' could plausibly refer to what is to come. A more appropriate translation might then be: 'Others will lead me toward pleasure/By their tresses tied between the horns on my forehead. Too bad!' Again, this is desire vanquished and not surrendered to. Let us leave for now this reading as a suggestion only, and proceed.

Et notre sang, épris de qui le va saisir,  
Coule pour tout l'essaim éternel de désir.

In these lines from the final stanza, 'coule' is generally taken in its intransitive sense of 'flows'. Thus Bosley translates: 'Our blood, enthralled to be a prisoner,/ Flows for the timeless swarm of all desire'. And Weinfield: 'And that our blood, seized by each passing form,/ Flows toward desire's everlasting swarm'. And Woolley: 'My blood, for her who will, flows sweet and warm,/ To satisfy desire's ageless swarm'. However, the syntax would appear to favour a reading of 'coule' in its transitive sense, with 'l'essaim' as its object. One of its principal meanings in this sense is 'to bring down', 'to cause to founder', as a reef might a ship, or a rifle a bird. Now let us examine 'épris'. We shall note below, in a quote from a letter from Mallarmé to Cazalis of striking relevance to *Faune*, that Mallarmé uses 'épris de' in the sense of 'taken with', 'captured by', in a spiritual or intellectual rather than physical sense: and the context is of the capacity of poetry to be captured by love, which Mallarmé sees as inferior to the captive (poetry). This powerfully suggests an alternative meaning here, which is consistent with the opening stanzas of the poem: of poetic engagement with a goddess, and potential seductress, overcoming any feeling of desire in her object. The variant *Improvisation d'un Faune* (1875) offers cogent support to this reading:

Tu sais, ma passion, que, pourpre et déjà mûre,  
Chaque grenade éclate et d'abeilles murmure;  
Et notre sang jaloux de qui le vient saisir  
Altère tout le vol ancien du désir.

Here, 'altère' expresses much the same process as does 'coule', albeit less emphatically. Clearly, the bee-like 'swarm' or 'ancient flight' of desire is being modified in some way.

Here is more evidence. Consider the reference to the myth of Venus and Vulcan. The commentators have generally taken the former to appear in *Faune* as an erotic seductress. Pearson interprets it thus:

His passion, having reached a sobbing climax ... now bursts forth, like the blood-red juice of ripened fruit or a lava flow upon Mount Etna ... It is as though in his volcanic eruption of desire he has momentarily been visited by Venus herself, bride of Vulcan and goddess of beauty, 'la reine'.<sup>13</sup>

But can this be justified?

A l'heure où ce bois d'or et de cendres se teinte  
Une fête s'exalte en la feuillée éteinte:

Etna! C'est parmi toi visité de Vénus  
 Sur ta lave posant ses talons ingénus,  
 Quand tonne un somme triste ou s'épuise la flamme.

In the myth of Venus and Vulcan, the volcanic fires of Mount Etna, wherein Vulcan dwells with his forge, *contra* Pearson subside when Venus returns to him. This is conveyed explicitly here by 'éteinte' and 'ou s'épuise la flamme'. In *Monologue d'un Faune* (1865), the first incarnation of *Faune*, we read that the gross flesh is transformed: 'Par ce bois qui, le soir, des cendres a la teinte,/La chair passe et s'allume en la feuillée éteinte'; while *Improvisation d'un Faune* gives a beautiful description of Etna's final flicker of activity upon Venus' return:

Etna! c'est quand de toi que déserte Vénus  
 Sentent régner ta fête en ses flancs ingénus,  
 Tonne la quiétude et soupire la flamme.

Pearson's reading of it here, like that of many other critics, is then demonstrably wrong: there is no 'lava flow', no 'volcanic eruption', and no erotic excitement. Cohn mentions the myth in passing while neglecting to describe the effect of Venus' arrival on the fires—a crucial omission.<sup>14</sup> The fire of noon has passed, and the leaves are 'extinguished'. This gold is the gold of afternoon, and hence also of autumn. In *Les Dieux Antiques*, Mallarmé put forward the principle of the 'double évolution solaire',<sup>15</sup> whereby morning corresponds to spring, noon to summer, afternoon to autumn, and night to winter. Afternoon-autumn is, mythically, the time of wisdom: hence, for example, Christ's death on the cross at 3 p.m.; and the widespread veneration in Celtic lore of the hazel, the flowering of which occurs in the period August 5 to September 1, as the tree of wisdom.<sup>16</sup> Everything points here to a quelling of the fires of passion with the acquisition of wisdom. The Faune's triumphant 'Je tiens la reine!' celebrates, by this interpretation, his embracing of spiritual love through imagination and poetry, and not physical lust, as the commentators generally have concluded. In *Monologue d'un Faune* Venus here is associated with the rose, a symbolism which indicates that the rose in the opening lines of the poem ('la faute idéale des roses') is also to be interpreted in a spiritual rather than grossly physical way, as indeed it is widely in myth and legend. In the earlier versions of *Faune* the time presented here was night; but Mallarmé evidently recast it as afternoon in the final version for consistency, with the night remaining immanent in the Faune's sleep ('l'astre efficace des vins'). Those who would hold to the erotic interpretation of Venus in *Faune* will need to explain, in *Monologue d'un Faune*, this glorious apparition of Venus in the night of ashes and extinction, when 'la chair passe':

Par ce bois qui, le soir, des cendres a la teinte,  
 La chair passe et s'allume en la feuillée éteinte,  
 On dit même tout bas que la grande Venus  
 Dessèche les torrents en allant le pieds nus,  
 Aux soirs ensanglantés, par sa bouche, de roses!

In the final lines of *Faune*, the Faune succumbs to the 'fier silence de midi ... en oubli de blasphème' on 'le sable altéré' and opens his mouth 'à l'astre efficace des vins'. Let us at this point briefly note that noon is the hour par excellence of Apollo, as Mallarmé well knew; and that the commentators have yet convincingly to explain the significance of 'l'astre efficace' in relation to the wine. It will become evident in the argument to come that the Faune's 'sleep' represents a spiritual victory of night over noon. Spengler's observation is of the highest significance here: 'At night the universe of space triumphs over matter, at midday the surroundings assert themselves and space is repudiated'.<sup>17</sup> In the same context Spengler

refers to ‘the Ionic flute, the instrument of high noon’. ‘Ivresse’ is a key symbol in *Faune*, of spiritual (not physical) intoxication.

#### FIRST ITALICISED PASSAGE: THE FAUN UNTRANSFORMED

There are indeed two fauns standing in opposition in his poem; but they are not the spiritual and physical fauns in the way that Pearson argues, but rather the untransformed and transformed respectively, with the italicised sections describing the former. This reading of the states is diametrically opposite to Pearson’s. It is the nature of the transformation that we must now investigate.

The italicised passages portray the undeveloped subject, as dominated by the Apollinian world view. In the first passage, the ‘marécage’ has a dual symbolic significance. Firstly, it is a reference to Aristophanes’ *The Frogs*, where the marsh is explicitly named as the place where Apollo cuts the reeds for his aulos (a flute-like instrument). To the same end, it is also visually symbolic: and here is another radical departure from the conventional reading of *Faune*. Let us note, in the introductory lines, the stellar quality of ‘les fleurs d’étincelles’, beyond which might lie the Silence (‘tacite’). Note also that the marsh is ‘calme’. There is a suggestion here of the visible bodies of the tranquil night sky. Let us note now the Apollinian sense of triumph in the phrase ‘roseaux domptés/Par le talent...’ The interpretation of the following lines which powerfully suggests itself in light of this scheme, is that ‘l’or glauque’ is the greyish-gold light of dawn; the oddly bulking ‘blancheur animale au repos’ (is this not a curious image for a group of active nymphs?) is the dawning sun itself (Cohn remarks that it is ‘an astonishing expanse of sensual whiteness in the woods’<sup>18</sup>); and that Mallarmé introduced the image of the ‘verdures dèdiant leur vigne à des fontaines’ to provide a perpendicular backdrop to the dawning, just as there is in nature. The equivocation between ‘cygnes’ and ‘naiades’ serves to suggest both a partial submergence in water and a climbing into the sky. All of this serves to characterise the dawning marsh as solar Apollinian in nature.

This Apollinian character begins with the dawning sun (‘au prélude lent où naissent les pipeaux/Ce vol de cygnes...’). However, the introductory three lines of this passage—unitalicised, as descriptive of the transformed faun—tell us that he is now in the habit, not of consorting with the sun as of old, but of plundering the night sky (cf. the ‘nuit ancienne’ of the opening lines) for its riches:

Ô bords siciliens d’un calme marécage  
Qu’à l’envi de soleils ma vanité saccage,  
Tacite sous les fleurs d’étincelles...

The use of ‘Sicilian’ in a sensual context in *Monologue d’un Faune*, the first incarnation of *Faune*, can enlighten us as to its significance here. In the earlier poem, the potential of the imagination for sensual arousal is being contrasted with the absence of goddess-forms in the imagination of the Apollinian, before the description, as in the final version of 1876, of the transcendence of these opposites by the imagination in inspired creative mode: ‘qu’éprenait la douceur du contraste./ Fut le vent de Sicile allant par ta toison?’ The night in *Faune* (1876) bears a shell of sensuality, beyond which it is the task of the poet to penetrate. This is of course consistent with Mallarmé’s general Oriental tendency toward transcendence.

The second line describes the faun’s voracious filling of his sun-like (hence Apollo-like) emptiness with the riches of night: an activity on which the suns can only look in envy. This solar emptiness, which he yearns to fill, of the faun at the beginning of his quest is affirmed in *Monologue d’un Faune* (‘Qu’à l’egal du soleil ma passion saccage’). In *Improvisation d’un Faune*, Mallarmé emphasises the faun’s unreason as contrasted with the

reason—the reason of day, which destroys the soul—of Apollo (‘Qu’à l’égal d’été ma déraison saccage’). Blake contemned Apollinian reason, as W.B. Yeats tells us:

It means with him the faculty that entices us to claim exclusive reality for our own sensations, and build up selfhoods ... to promulgate “laws of prudence” for their protection, and call them the “laws of God”. It is what we call materialism ... It closed up the thoughts and forms and lives within the narrow circle of their separate existence, whereas before they had “expanded and contracted” at will, hiding them from the light and life of God, and from the freedom of the “imagination which liveth forever” ... As soon as reason had set bounds to life, the “laws of the numbers” began, and multiplicity endeavoured to take the place of unity, continually struggling with that from whence it came.<sup>19</sup>

The relevance of this also to *Un Coup de Dés* (‘sa petite raison virile’, and its instrument ‘LE NOMBRE’ which imposes ‘une borne à l’infini’) is plain. Novalis, whom of all the German Romantics Brennan considered the most akin to Mallarmé, wrote in the same vein:

Die Götter verschwanden mit ihrem Gefolge—Einsam und leblos stand die Natur. Mit eiserner Kette band sie die dürre Zahl und das strenge Maß. Wie in Staub und Lüfte zerfiel in dunkle Worte die unermeßliche Blüte des Lebens.<sup>20</sup>

This stellar symbolic interpretation of the marsh is supported by the otherwise hardly explicable later lines ‘sous un flot antique de lumière./Lys!’ The lily can only represent a star, such as worshipped in a religious way by the pre-Hellenic ancients (this is the significance of the Septentriones in *Un Coup de Dés*), and not as rationalistically examined by the Greeks (the night sky as studied by the Master in *Un Coup de Dés*). Mallarmé was aware of the Oriental religious significance of the water lily, as presenting a visible face to the world, yet having its roots deep in the invisible. We look here to Swedenborg’s system of correspondences, wherein the stars correspond to clusters of truths in the mind. Christopher Brennan was employing the same symbolism in poem 43 of his magnum opus, the livre composé *Poems 1913*:

What do I seek? I seek the word  
that shall become the deed of might  
whereby the sullen gulfs are stirr’d  
and stars begotten on their night.

The exclamation mark is styled on the male genitalia, and it indeed may function in this role in ‘Lys!’, as Cohn suggests:<sup>21</sup> for the erect member is an esoteric symbol and lily-analogue, in that it is starkly visible on the surface, while having its roots way, way deep in the unconscious. However, Cohn’s physically erotic reading of this passage is wholly misjudged, as we shall see.

## SECOND ITALICISED PASSAGE: THE FAUN UNTRANSFORMED

The Faune’s self-critical retrospection continues in the second italicised passage. Peering through the reeds, he spies a group of nymphs bathing in the pool. Mallarmé’s use of the verb *darder*, ‘to shoot forth’, ‘to spear’, ‘to dart’, with its acknowledged solar connotations, is consistent with the scenario I have outlined. The nymphs are no longer the swan-like ‘animale blancheur au repos’, but plausibly represent here the natural world, which is always feminine in myth, and universally has its roots in what cannot be seen, which is the Silence. The nymphs disappear, diving down in a rage (the natural world in its organic wholeness is repelled by the Apollinian world view, and proves finally intractable by it). The Faune comes upon two nymphs entwined in love—their response to ‘the misfortune of being two’—and

bears them away to a sun-scorched mountain top. This is a powerful statement of the Apollinian error:

»*Je les ravis, sans les désenlancer, et vole*  
 »*À ce massif, haï par l'ombrage frivole,*  
 »*De roses tarissant tout parfum au soleil,*  
 »*Où notre ébat au jour consumé soit pareil.* »

The 'roses dessicated of their perfume in the sun' portrays the Goddess (the universal symbolism of the rose) destroyed—like Keats' Lamia—by Apollo. A strong case can be made for the appearance of 'massif' here in its sense of 'mountain' rather than 'garden' or the like. Certainly, a mountain top, with its naked proximity to the sun, would be far more homely for Apollo than a garden. Mallarmé used in the opening lines of *Monologue d'un Faune*, instead of 'bois' (*Faune*), 'massif' in its sense of garden or thicket or copse; while in the second italicised passage he used 'jardins'. In *Improvisation d'un Faune* we find 'massifs' and 'torrent', respectively, with the latter suggesting a mountain torrent. In *Faune*, finally, 'massif(s)' has become 'bois' and 'jardins'/'torrent' has become 'massif'. It is of great interest that the geographical sense of 'massif' seems to have come into popular usage in 1873,<sup>22</sup> that is, three years before the appearance of *Faune* (1876), and eight years after its first incarnation. The scenario may well be that Mallarmé lighted upon 'massif' in its newly minted sense as the *mot juste* for the second italicised passage, and removed it from the opening lines, where it bore its older meaning, to avoid confusion.

The nature of the Faune's crime is now, on reflection, clear to him:

»*Mon crime, c'est d'avoir, gai de vaincre ces peurs*  
 »*Traîtresses, divisé la touffe échevelée*  
 »*De baisers que les dieux gardaient is bien mêlée.*

This is a crime against love. The word 'divisé' suggests 'cleave', whence 'clever'. This is the cleverness of Apollo, which is excoriated in Wordsworth's apophthegm 'we murder to dissect', under the aegis of which the italicised sections of *Faune* unfold. Brennan translated Novalis as saying: 'If all humanity were one pair of lovers, the difference between mysticism and non-mysticism would cease'.<sup>23</sup> The notion of spiritual transformation deriving from the transcendence of opposites is an ancient mythic theme. Mallarmé was intimately familiar with Homer's *Odyssey*, in which the opposites are symbolised by Scylla and Charybdis; and with the myth of Jason and the Golden Fleece, where the Symplegades ('Clashing Rocks') fill the same role. Blake believed that contraries—good/bad, positive/negative, love/hate, and so on—are vital for human existence, but that rationalism divides and opposes them, viewing them as negations. He wrote (*Jerusalem* 10, 7-16):

And this is the manner of the Sons of Albion in their strength:  
 They take the Two Contraries which are called Qualities, with which  
 Every substance is clothed, they name them Good & Evil  
 From them they make an Abstract which is a Negation  
 Not only of the Substance from which it is derived  
 A murderer of its own Body: but also a murderer  
 Of every Divine Member; it is the Reasoning Power,  
 An Abstract objecting power, that Negatives every thing  
 This is the Spectre of Man: the Holy Reasoning Power  
 And in its Holiness is closed the Abomination of Desolation.

Cohn acutely observes: 'the *mal d'être deux* is the principle of negation that separates, as in "nous ne serons jamais une seule momie" (*Tristesse d'Été*)'; but he concludes falsely that

'*mal d'être deux*: implies the frustrated conjunction. They are not a true amorous couple but merely juxtaposed'. They are indeed the real thing, as everything in the context affirms.

'Gai de vaincre ces peurs traîtresses' is echoed in *Un Coup de Dés*, in the Apollinian 'prince amer de l'ecueil', ('prince bitter from the hidden dangers'), with his 'petite raison sterile', who puts his faith in 'Le nombre' against the dangers of the world, and commits thereby the crime of imposing 'une borne à l'infini'. In *Improvisation d'un Faune* we find the variant 'sans épuiser les peurs/Folâtres...', which is descriptive of the failure to be mourned in 'Sans pitié du sanglot dont j'étais encore ivre'. This hard-won, brutally honest exercise in self-knowledge could hardly, one would judge, be the object of 'Tant pis!'

What, precisely, is the meaning of these challenging lines?

- » *Car, a peine j'allais cacher un rire ardent*
- » *Sous les replis heureux d'une seule (gardant*
- » *Par un doigt simple, afin que sa candeur de plume*
- » *Se teignit a l'emoide sa soeur qui s'allume,*
- » *La petite, naive et ne rougissant pas)*
- » *Que de mes bras... &c*

The image here is of a man placing his head under the skirts of a female, on the point of laughing. However, I would argue that is not an erotic laugh, as many critics hold, but rather the triumphant laugh of Apollo/Newton in his victory over the feminine principle. Pearson's erotic interpretation of this passage leads him to read 'un doigt simple' as referring to digital penetration,<sup>24</sup> while Walker also mentions cunnilingus.<sup>25</sup> According to the scheme I have presented, this 'rire ardent' is rather the triumphant laugh of an Apollinian or Newtonian scientist, who thinks, by intellectually penetrating beneath the surface of nature (the head disappearing beneath the skirts), to conquer the ultimate truths of the universe. The girl's lone-ness is suggestive of what A.N. Whitehead called the principle of 'simple location' as the basis of Newtonian science, according to which an event—a collision of two moving bodies, say—can be analysed purely in terms of itself, without any reference to the event's wider connections in space and time, thus denying the organic unity of the universe.<sup>26</sup> The colours white and red which Mallarmé has allocated to her and her sister are the colours—widespread in myth—of the new and full moons: white of the maiden, red of the fully mature woman as mother and wife. The virginal nature of the girl invaded here is a correlate of the cold and passionless world of which the Newtonian scientist, in his naivety, is a master; while the red with which he is attempting to imbue her suggests his delusion that this world is really the true world in all its amplitude, the world of libido and will, of birth and growth and death, of the visible and invisible, of which Woman (here, the older sister) is a symbol. We are to imagine a Newtonian scientist poised with 'un doigt simple' pointing towards the sky as he makes his ultimately sterile demonstration. In *Monologue d'un Faune* we find the variant 'un doigt frêle', where the adjective ('frail', 'feeble') must give great trouble to the notion of digital penetration, while being entirely consistent with the scene I have outlined here. Mallarmé evidently settled on 'un doigt simple', to convey the simple-mindedness of the Newtonian scholar in supposing that his sundering of an event from the context of space and time in which it occurs—his neglect of organism, which Darwin's theory, for example, would powerfully correct—could possibly give that event any meaning.

But the faun did not laugh, for:

- »... *Que de mes bras, défaits par de vagues trépas,*
- » *Cette proie, à jamais ingrate se délivre*
- » *Sans pitié du sanglot dont j'étais encore ivre. »*

This is the sadness of the Apollinian as reality hits home. Brennan felt it too:

Where star-cold and dread of space  
 in icy silence bind the main  
 I feel but vastness on my face,  
 I sit, a mere incurious brain,  
  
 under some outcast satellite,  
 some Thule of the universe,  
 upon the utter verge of night,  
 frozen by some forgotten curse.

#### FIRST UNITALICISED SECTION: THE FAUN TRANSFORMED

Let us now, having established the nature of the untransformed faun as portrayed in the italicised reflective sections, return to the beginning of the poem to examine what the transformation has brought forth. Simply, the opening passage, so often the subject of elaborate attempts at explanation, is a meditation on the creative imagination. The nymphs are held aloft in the faun's clearly visualising imagination ('Si clair/Leur incarnat léger, qu'il voltige dans l'air...'). The imagination is so completely vivid and faithful—were the nymphs he saw before reality or a dream? ('Aimai-je un rêve?'). His doubt (of the primacy of the Apollinian world view, which had previously held him in thrall) has developed under the unifying embrace of ageless night ('Mon doute, amas de nuit ancienne'). In Swedenborg's system, the tree symbolises perceptions in the mind. The Faune's imaginal world is so detailed and faithful to reality that he is contemplating, in effect, the real world ('Mon doute ... s'achève/En maint rameau subtil, qui, demeuré les vrais/Bois mêmes'). These branches are literally ramifications of the central idea. Cohn is therefore mistaken in sensing a duality here: 'there is a jump from one category of apprehension, the analytic faculty—"maint rameau subtil"—to another, the direct sensing of nature—"les vrais bois"'.<sup>27</sup> The roses (always in myth a symbol of the Goddess) are materially absent, but imaginally there, in a triumph of the creative moment ('bien seul je m'offrais/Pour triomphe la faute idéale de roses'). 'Faute' should here be read in its sense of 'absence'.

But, the imagination... does it not have dangers? May these nymphs not be just a figment of desire, fanciful rather than imaginal? The cold blue eyes of Apollo do not imagine like this:

Faune, l'illusion s'échappe des yeux bleus  
 Et froids, comme une source en pleurs, de la plus chaste

The 'cold blue eyes' make the identification with Apollo beyond doubt. Brennan recognised this Apollinian tendency in himself: 'Last, since a pinch of dust may quench the eyes/ that took the azure curve of stainless skies...' An acquaintance remarked the young (Apollinian and untransformed) Brennan's 'cold, blue eyes that were rather staring + that never softened'.<sup>28</sup> These very same tears will be reprised in 'Sans pitié du sanglot dont j'étais encore ivre'. And Brennan suffered them too:

What gems chill glitter yon, thrice dipt  
 In dusky Styx, or tears unshed  
 The spheres, in icy exile stript,  
 Congeal in midnight's gaze of lead?

These are the Pythagorean spheres whose shape the watching eye—now afflicted with tears as its Apollinian world view is shattered by Lilith—has assumed.

But is the alternative to cold Apollinian imagination-less reasoning not just the raw sensuality of the imagined female body ('tout soupirs'), which lies ready to seduce and devour one like a Blakean vortex? Certainly not, for there is also the creative imagination. It is mandated neither by the context, nor by Mallarmé's poetic practice, to identify these two psyches, the Apollinian and the sensual, with the two nymphs, as so many critics do. I offer this translation of the following lines:

But no! through the motionless and languid swoon  
 Suffocating with warmth the cool dawn, if the dawn struggles,  
 Murmurs scarcely any water which does not turn my flute  
 To the thicket damp with harmony; and the lone wind  
 From out the two pipes ready to be exhaled before  
 It disperses its sound into an arid abundance,  
 Is, at the horizon not stirring with any ripple,  
 The visible and serene man-made breath  
 Of inspiration, which regains the sky.

Note that the faun plays his flute, not Apollo-like in the rays of the sun, but in a moist thicket. The mention here of inspiration, allied with imagination, recalls the philosophy of Blake, as W.B. Yeats explains it:

This means that Imagination, the great force that surrounds us within and without, coming to us in the form of Inspiration, has power to perform what are miracles in comparison with our own strength, and to make the most egotistic sensation of all in the world of Time, that of the sexual organ whose symbol is the plough, into an expansive emotion leading to the true Centre, the great mental opening which leads to the Unlimited in the world of Eternity.<sup>29</sup>

This is of striking relevance to *Faune*. For Mallarmé, like Blake, imagination and inspiration could act upon the raw libido to conquer it, and, treating it as hypostatic to a higher emotion, transmute it into an indicator to eternity. It is also of interest here that, in the Tree of Life of the Qabalah (with which Mallarmé was of course familiar), the element of water is an attribute of the Sephirah of Chesed, or Mercy. Shakespeare was surely thinking of this in Shylock's 'The quality of mercy is not strained, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath'. The faun now partakes of universal love, instead of the sterile cleverness of Apollo.

There follows the first italicised passage, where the Faune reflects on the defective world view of his former self.

## SECOND UNITALICISED SECTION: THE FAUN IN TRANSFORMATION

Now we return to the present:

Inerte, tout brûle dans l'heure fauve  
 Sans marquer par quel art ensemble détala  
 Trop d'hymen souhaité de qui cherche le *la*:  
 Alors m'éveillerai-je a la ferveur première,  
 Droit et seul, sous un flot antique de lumière,  
 Lys! Et l'un de vous tous pour l'ingénuité.

He determines to waken himself to 'la ferveur première' by the light of a star, as symbolised by the lily, as we have seen. This is entirely consistent with the 'nuit ancienne' of line 6, and 'l'astre efficace' of the penultimate line. This 'lys' will be 'l'un de vous tous pour

l'ingénuité': that is, stripped of its burden of Apollinian associations. The Septentriones of *Un Coup de Dés* and the sonnet in '-yx' bears the same significance. We are here in the world of Graves' White Goddess. Mallarmé may well have been thinking specifically of the Oriental tradition.<sup>30</sup>

It is important to be clear about these few lines, as they will determine the longer passage to follow. The faun can only waken to 'la ferveur première' if he first appropriately tunes his pipes (note the colon after 'la'). 'La' is the note 'A', which is universally used for tuning musical instruments. First one string or pipe is tuned to A, and then the others are tuned against it, or against another, in pairs. The second point to note is that the Greek flute, or aulos, was double-reeded and double-bodied, so that the two pipes extended from the mouth like the arms of a 'V'. The player could then sustain a drone on one pipe, while playing a tune with the other—like the bagpipes, in fact. This explains 'Trop d'hymen'—for the faun is attempting to tune his instrument to 'A', first finding it on one pipe, then failing to find it on the other. The reason for the faun's failure is, as the lines to come will confirm, that these are still the pipes of Apollo, which are as yet unsuitable to the new task, and will have to be reborn—so the Faune utters in his exasperation—by some other lake in a new form (this reborn flute is the one played upon by the Faune in the damp thicket in the opening passage). 'Trop d'hymen' resonates with the two lover-nymphs which the old, undeveloped faun would have sundered in his criminality; but Cohn's reading is entirely mistaken:

This tuning up refers to both the musician and the seeker after the simpler harmony of the flesh. *Trop d'hymen* is the hyperbolic desire for two (or many) nymphs, with a suggestion that it is the excessiveness of his (typically creative) desire that makes him lose the reality. The "Alors m'éveillerai..." refers to his acute erotic tension within which he remains pure and intact (though unintentionally) and his whole person stands up rigid with desire.<sup>31</sup>

Williams on the other hand is essentially correct:

But the la, A, is the tuning note, the pitch against which all others are measured, the absolute pitch. To achieve that absolute pitch is the "trop d'hymen" for which the faun wishes and also that desired by the poet who aims for the perfect work.<sup>32</sup>

In the next stanza, the merely sensual ('le baiser ... l'amour') experience of art, as it presents its visible surface to the senses, is argued to be inadequate. The sensuality of a kiss is not what the faun feels, but rather 'une morsure mystérieuse' located in the heart ('mon sein'). Pearson and others read this as a physical bite, but *Faune* is not realist but symbolist poetry. This passage from a letter of Mallarmé to Cazalis on 14 May 1867 is of the highest relevance here:

Il n'y a que la Beauté—et elle n'a qu'une expression parfaite, la Poésie. Tout le reste est mensonge—excepté pour ceux qui vivent du corps, l'amour, et cet amour de l'esprit, l'amitié ... Pour moi, la Poésie me tient lieu de l'amour, par ce que elle est éprise d'elle-même, et que sa volupté d'elle retombe délicieusement en mon âme.<sup>33</sup>

'Ceux qui vivent du corps' might perfectly describe the Apollinist, for whom 'the material, the optically definite, the comprehensible, the immediately present' defines the physical world of their concern.

It is clear then that 'Mais, bast!' can only refer to the faun's attempts at tuning the pipes. Like Keats, Novalis, Brennan, Graves, and so many other artists, Mallarmé possessed a mysterious and instinctive affinity for the goddess, and a keenly-felt appreciation of the potential of Apollo to do her harm. Novalis said: 'We are more closely connected with the

invisible than with the visible'.<sup>34</sup> This arcane intuition of the Faune has chosen the pipes of Apollo for its expression. Having given up re-tuning them, he now is resigned to playing them—albeit he is now transformed—as an Apollinist, as of old, and a 'sonore, vaine et monotone' tune emerges, which prompts him to reflect that 'we betray the beauty all around us by false confusions between it and our credulous song'. The 'mundane dream of a back or a pure flank' on which the tune is based suggests a Greek statue; or the head-and-shoulders of the nymphs as they protrude from the pool: at any rate, an art of realism and superficiality. Walter Pater described Greek Apollinism as being animated by 'the spirit of a severe and wholly self-conscious intelligence; bent on impressing everywhere, in the products of the imagination, the definite, perfectly conceivable human form, as the only worthy subject of art.' While Spengler wrote:

We find that the history of the Classical shaping art is one untiring effort to accomplish one single ideal, viz., the conquest of the free-standing human body as the vessel of the pure real present ... We have failed hitherto to understand the emotional force of this secular tendency of the Apollinian, because we have not felt how the *purely material, soulless body* ... is the object which archaic relief, Corinthian painting on clay, and Attic fresco were all striving to obtain until Polycletus and Phidias showed how to achieve it in full.<sup>35</sup>

We can now fully appreciate why the faun exclaims 'Tâche donc, instrument de fuites, maligne/Syrinx, de reflleurir aux lacs où t m'attends!'. These pipes, as instrument of Apollo, will not do: they must arise again by some other lake, in a form appropriate to the Faune's new art of depth (what Spengler called Western or Faustian art). It is the reborn pipes upon which the Faune plays in the opening passage of the poem.

An accurate interpretation of 'Pour bannir un regret par ma feinte écarté' is crucial to the understanding of the following lines. Central to it is 'feinte', ('dissimulation'). The Faune's 'rumeur' has not been expression of his true self, but rather has been a mechanism for averting the regret he feels at not being able to produce the art he now, in his transformed state, would like to:

Moi, de ma rumeur fier, je vais parler longtemps  
Des déesses; et par d'idolâtres peintures,  
A leur ombre enlever encore des ceintures:  
Ainsi, quand des raisins j'ai sucé la clarté,  
Pour bannir un regret par ma feinte écarté,  
Rieur, j'élève au ciel d'été la grappe vide  
Et, soufflant dans ses peaux lumineuses, avide  
D'ivresse, jusqu'au soir je regarde au travers.

'Peintures' clearly means, rather than concrete paintings, the 'depictions' described in the 'rumeur' of the dissimulating Faune. 'Ombre' refers to the 'shady regions', or pubis. 'Mallarmé uses 'ivresse' ('drunkenness'), as we have seen above, as a symbol of spiritual exaltation: Dionysius in his esoteric (Nietzschean) rather than exoteric mode. It is of great interest that in myth a drug often helps the Hero on his way. In Homer it is moly, the drug given by Circe to Odysseus to assist him in his underworld journey. In *Faune* it is wine, the effect of which is not however to be understood in its mundane and exoteric sense of physical drunkenness. In the last three lines above, the faun turns, having shed his fakery, from music to the imagination as a means of effecting his new art. What then was the precise nature of this dissimulation? The faun, in his incapacity to invoke the unknowable through art, has attempted to rationalise the infinite through words, represented here as the mysterious regions

of the goddess, who symbolises nature in its totality: the visible aspect of the infinite from which we are born.

Brennan describes, in his poem ‘Lilith’, a strikingly similar reversion:

I sicken with the long unsatisfied  
 waiting...  
 —And shall I not take heart? if no divine  
 revelation star me with the diadem  
 hermetic, magian, alchemic gem,  
 shall I not feel the earth with firmer tread  
 if abdicating to the viewless dead  
 the invaluable round of nothingness?  
 Kingdom awaits me, homage, swords, liesse,  
 battle, broad fame in song: shall I  
 confide all hopes to scanty shapes that fly  
 in dreams, whom even if they be all I know  
 not, or fore-runners of the One?

Note here the goddess associations of ‘round of nothingness’ and ‘the One’. This passage is closely germane to the lines we have just examined in *Faune*. In the Journey of the Hero genre, such a reversion does not signify a failure of the quest, but rather is an expression of the Refusal of the Call, an exceedingly common stage in this genre, from which the Hero almost always emerges with renewed resolution.

There follows now the second italicised passage, which is introduced by the line ‘O nymphes, regonflons des SOUVENIRS divers’. Why exactly did Mallarmé capitalise ‘SOUVENIRS’. A reasonable answer may be that he was trying to draw attention to it, and to its dependence on ‘regonflons’. This verb of course has precisely the same meaning, in this context, as ‘soufflant’ in the preceding stanza. The inference is clear: that the Faune’s act of blowing into the grapeskin and gazing through it the afternoon long, represents allegorically the act of creative imagining. The value of ‘ivresse’ in the allegory of *Faune*, as a characteristic of the esoteric Dionysius, could now not be clearer.

## FINAL SECTION (2): THE FAUN TRANSFORMED

We now arrive at the point at which this exploration began. Everything in the poem has lead up to the faun’s reflective acknowledgement of his crime of attempting high-mindedly to analyse the love of the nymphs under the scorching Apollinian sun. To take ‘Tant pis!’ as referring back to this realisation would therefore be misguided. The failure expressed in the preceding lines to carry through with the analysis is emphatically welcomed by the faun as marking the abandonment—albeit traumatic—of his undeveloped Apollinian former self. No, ‘Tant pis!’ can only refer forward to the failure of the seducers to enact their desires on him.

In the last stanza of the poem, the faun is now ‘empty of words’. This refers back to the ‘rumeur’ which was mere dissimulation, as a prelude to his relinquishing of that ruse for pure dreaming and spiritual intoxication, just as here in the final lines. Unthinkably for an Apollinian, he sleeps at noon. The nature of the ‘blasphème’ is now clear: it is the evil against the Divine—and how vehemently the works of Blake endorse this point of view!—which the Apollinian/Newtonian world-view represents. The sands are now ‘altéré’ as being, spiritually though not literally, under the sway of night. The ‘astre efficace’ is cognate with the ‘nuit ancienne’ of the first stanza, and the artless ‘Lys’ of the pool, and further, with the Septentriones in *Un Coup de Dés*, as symbolic of the broadly religious rather than coldly

rationalistic outlook. It is now abundantly clear that Mallarmé has taken wine as a symbol of the esoteric rather than exoteric Dionysius, of spiritual rather than physical intoxication.

## SUMMARY

The faun in his afternoon sleep is the poet in the act of creative imagining. The negativity that so many have read into the poem is due principally to the failure to identify the Apollinian error at its heart. *Faune* is in fact a fine example of the Journey of the Hero genre, with the faun successfully achieving a spiritually developed state in which raw eros and the constrictions of Apollo are vanquished, albeit much is compressed and suggested rather than explicitly described. Mallarmé has woven a web of symbols—the sun, the wine, the pipes, the lovers, and so on—which seamlessly and indefectibly interlock and shimmer to create a single, unified whole, as no exegesis attempted hitherto has been able to demonstrate. ‘I am true as truth’s simplicity, and simpler than the infancy of truth’, says Shakespeare’s Troilus. The Geist of *Faune* is simple, albeit difficult to penetrate at first, just as Brennan maintained; and the poem is expressive of a most profound and general truth about the mind’s engagement with the world with which it is one.

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<sup>1</sup> John Foulkes, ‘Mallarmé and Brennan: Unpublished letters and documents from the Moran Collection in St. John’s College Cambridge’, *French Studies*, XXXII (1), (1978): 34-5

<sup>2</sup> A.R. Chisholm and J.J. Quinn (eds.), *The Prose of Christopher Brennan* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1962), 147

<sup>3</sup> Roger Pearson, *Unfolding Mallarmé: The Development of a Poetic Art* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 123

<sup>5</sup> *Blake Records*, edited by G. E. Bentley jnr (Oxford, 1969), 313-4. Quoted in Peter Ackroyd, *Blake* (Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995), 323

<sup>6</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 111-2

<sup>7</sup> *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1205

<sup>8</sup> Like Spengler’s translator C. F. Atkinson (1922), I use the term ‘Apollinian’ (< German *Apollonisch*) rather than ‘Apollonian’ to denote the god in the flawed and destructive mode of which Spengler treats.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber Paperbacks, 1961), 444

<sup>10</sup> Steven F. Walker, ‘Mallarmé’s Symbolist Eclogue: The Faune as Pastoral’, *PMLA*, Vol. 93, No. 1 (Jan, 1978): 113

<sup>11</sup> A.R. Chisholm, *L’Après-Midi d’un Faune: exégèse et étude critique* (Brussels: Editions Jacques Antoine, 1974), 18

<sup>12</sup> Henry Weinfield, *Stephane Mallarmé Collected Poems* (University of California Press, 1996), 183

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 122

<sup>14</sup> 29

<sup>15</sup> *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1169

<sup>16</sup> Graves, *ibid*, 182

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 171

<sup>18</sup> 20

<sup>19</sup> E.J. Ellis and W.B. Yeats, *The Works of William Blake, Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1893), 248

<sup>20</sup> *Hymnen an die Nacht* 5

<sup>21</sup> 20

<sup>22</sup> *Le Lexis, Le Dictionnaire Érudit de la Langue Française* (Larousse, 2009)

<sup>23</sup> *The Prose of Christopher Brennan*, 108

<sup>24</sup> 130

<sup>25</sup> 115

<sup>26</sup> A.N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Simon & Schuster, The Free Press, 1967)

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<sup>27</sup> 15-16

<sup>28</sup> Axel Clark, *Christopher Brennan: A Critical Biography* (Melbourne University Press, 1980), 53

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, I.415

<sup>30</sup> Richard Anderson, 'Hindu Myths in Mallarmé: Un Coup de Dés', *Comparative Literature*, 19:1 (Winter, 1967): 28-35

<sup>31</sup> 20

<sup>32</sup> Thomas A. Williams, *Mallarmé and the Language of Mysticism* (University of Georgia Press, 1970), 68

<sup>33</sup> *Correspondance*, I.243

<sup>34</sup> *The Prose of Christopher Brennan*, 108

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 117-8