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Vers: Une Architecture¹

This essay explores the architectural trope in concrete poetry by concentrating in one of its major sources of inspiration—the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé. Departing from a small number of texts by Mallarmé on the condition of poetry (*vers*) during his life time, I attempt to demarcate his concept of verse; one that brings together both architectural as well as musical concerns. A considerable part of the essay consists of applying this concept to an analysis of Mallarmé’s masterwork *Un coup de dés*.

*Le futur vers se dégage
Du logis très précieux
Stéphane Mallarmé*

*A arquitetura como construir portas,
de abrir; ou como construir o aberto;
construir, não comoilhar e prender,
nem construir como fechar secretos;
construir portas abertas, em portas;
casas exclusivamente portas e tecto.
O arquiteto: o que abre para o homem
(tudo se sanearia desde casas abertas)
portas por-onde, jamais portas-contra;
por onde, livres: ar luz razão certa.
João Cabral de Melo Neto*

*As one can’t get architecture or even mural stuff DONE one retreats to printed page.
Ezra Pound²*

The concrete poetry movement attributes its radical experimentalism in language to the influence of Mallarmé’s work, and although this influence has been perennially heralded, intriguing aspects of it have thus far been left unexamined. Chief among these is the pre-

¹ The title of this essay refers to Le Corbusier’s seminal text *Vers une architecture* (*Towards a new architecture*). By inserting a colon in Le Corbusier’s title I intend to isolate the word *vers* and make its ambiguities resonate — in French, *vers* takes on several meanings according to the context in which it is presented: toward, verse and worm. Although the equation worm/verse is full of implications to the kind of writing I am interested in exploring — the “night worm” in Blake’s *The Rose* comes to mind — I will use *vers* mainly in regard to its other two meanings.

² In 1929, when inquiring whether Wyndham Lewis might be willing to design decorative initials for his Aquila edition of Cavalcanti, Pound observed, “As one can’t get architecture or even mural stuff DONE one retreats to printed page.” *Pound/Lewis: The Letters of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis*, ed. by Timothy Materer (NY: New Directions, 1985), p. 168. I thank Richard Sieburth for bringing Pound’s quote to my attention.

dominantly architectural bent of Brazilian concretism, which seems to taint the more nuanced elements that might have manifested from Mallarmé's influence. The concept of concretism elaborated by the Noigandres Group in their manifesto *Plano Piloto para Poesia Concreta* has given rise to an eminently architectural perception of concrete poetry, as opposed to the more musically oriented model proposed by Öyvind Fahlström in his *Manifesto for Concrete Poetry*; in Mallarmé's work, as we shall see, architecture and music co-exist and are inextricably woven into the *vers* ("ou ligne parfait").³

For Mallarmé, the *vers* has the same fluid, protean meaning that the word carries in its definition — it means both "verse" and "toward." It is through (*à travers*) the *vers* that Mallarmé bridges the depths of the white page, moves over the gutter between pages, and ultimately structures the edifice of his oeuvre. The "toward" of the *vers* also points to the *futur vers*, the poetry to come, the *vers* being his connection to the past (for Mallarmé intends to "laisser intact l'antique vers") and to the future.⁴ Like Nietzsche's, Mallarmé's work was preparing the ground for what was to come, bridging the gap between the poet of the past and the poet of the future. This future might not be a utopia, as he made clear in *Le Phénomène Future*, but, as Henry Weinfield points out, "the poets have not disappeared; at the end of the piece, they 'make their way toward their lamps, their brains momentarily drunk with an obscure glory, haunted by a Rhythm and forgetting that they exist in an age that has outlived beauty'."⁵

There are few examples of finished works by Mallarmé, the greater part of his oeuvre falls into the category of *vers de circonstance* — tributes to dead friends or colleagues, gifts, *envois divers*, and so forth. Even a poem such as *Un coup de dés* has to be considered in the context of the specific circumstances of a commissioned work. All this leads to the conclusion that Mallarmé was interested in the concept (of poetry) rather than in poetry itself and the *vers* is where this concept is formulated.

The microscopic lens Mallarmé applies to the *vers* can be glimpsed in an excerpt from a letter to Swinburne, dated 1876, in which he suggests minor changes to a poem Swinburne wrote in homage to Theophile Gautier:

A peine si je préférerais lire au second vers "Pour y cueillir qu'un souffle d'amour" au lieu de "Pour recueillir rien qu'un souffle d'amour" à cause de l'équilibre assez heureux dans le vers des deux monosyllabes *y* et *rien* et du moins grand nombre de fois qu'apparaîtra de suite la lettre *r* appuyée notamment sur une voyelle muette *e* dans *re* après avoir servi de finale à *pour*.⁶

The same method is, of course, applied to Mallarmé's own poetry, in which similar examples are abundant. The first line of *Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui*, for instance, has three *v*'s in its first half, counterbalanced by three *u*'s in its second half. The visual sharpness of the initial *v*'s is suddenly smoothed by the curvaceous *u*'s in the line's last words. This is a poem to be both read and seen: the eyes hear its music.

³ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvre Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 455.

⁴ Mallarmé, p. 456.

⁵ Henry Weinfield, *Collected Poems: Stéphane Mallarmé* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 242.

⁶ Bertrand Marchal, *Mallarmé: Correspondance: Lettres sur la poésie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), pp. 546-7.

In “On the Way to Language,” Heidegger writes that a poet might “come to the point where he is compelled to put into language the experience he undergoes with language.”⁷ Mallarmé’s fascination with words and letters of the alphabet, and their endless combinatory possibilities, is at the core of a poetic venture that can only be called an “experience with language.” This notion of an experience with language, through which “language brings itself to language,” has often been used to describe Mallarmé’s unique rapport with poetry. Whether through the linguistic explorations in “Les Mots Anglais,” the intricate meditations on poetry and art in his innumerable essays, his poems, or his Tuesday-night gatherings, the image one holds of Mallarmé is of a demiurge pouring out an all-encompassing system of discourse grounded in the nineteenth century, but reaching to both the past and the future.

The *vers* is the way (*la voi*, or *un envoi*), the path through which Mallarmé travels back and forth in space and time. This path, this ground, is also where he buries things, such as names. He frequently inserted his own name (*Stéphane*: “*Reste là sur ces fleurs dont nulle ne se fane*”) or friends’ names (such as *Verlaine*: “*Je te lance mon pied vers l’aine*”) in the verses of his poetry.⁸ A typical Mallarméan text resembles a field with a variety of traps — ambush, trick, stratagem, maneuver, artifice. The relationship, in a *vers*, between names, space, and time is exemplified by *Les loisirs de la poste*, which also establishes the rapport between his *vers* and architecture.

In its entirety, *Les loisirs de la poste* works as a poetic mapping of Paris in space and time, with the names of recipients and streets mixed up with contemporary events, anecdotes, and miscellaneous elements. Rhyme is the main focus in each quatrain, thus conferring on the general plan an intrinsic musicality. This musicality is attained by the juxtaposition of urban elements — urban planning as music, music as planned urbanity. It is worth noting that at the time Mallarmé was conducting his alleged “assault on language,” the city of Paris had just gone through major transformations under the direction of Baron Georges Eugène Haussmann. The opening up of rationally planned avenues and boulevards in the organic maze of the old city is an apt metaphor for the task Mallarmé set himself with regard to the French language.

The parallels between language and architecture are particularly evident in the study of Mallarmé’s progress as a writer. The evolution of his prose texts, as methodically examined by Norman Paxton, exposes the kind of rational decisions Mallarmé adopted in order to achieve a high level of structural complexity in writing:

This complexity forces the reader to go slowly and therefore to be more aware of the careful balance of the sentence, comprehending it only at the end, when he can look back and see the whole nebulous confection in suspension. The artistic construction of a sentence is almost an end in itself. In the *Préface à Vathek* there is a considerable step forward towards a sentence structure which shall give aesthetic satisfaction by the original beauty of its involved construction and also communicate a thought modified by the unexpected juxtaposition of its elements.⁹

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. by David Farrell Krell. (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 59.

⁸ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvre Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), pp. 55; 82.

⁹ Norman Paxton, *The Development of Mallarmé’s Prose Style*, (Geneva: Droz, 1968), p. 52.

Terms such as “construction” and “structure” per se already insinuate the architectural motif, and the image of the reader going “slowly” down the sentence further enhances the suggestion of the sentence as a *via* — the *vers* as a path, although at times the path leads the reader to nowhere or to an abyss. In innumerable reworkings of the same texts, Mallarmé often omitted entire sentences, thus abandoning the reader to his own musings. In *L’action restreinte*, for instance,

After “*Écrire —*” Mallarmé had originally written “*A personne, sans savoir quoi; du fait de ne te adresser, un objet, tu le traites.*” This sentence was simply omitted in the revision, with the result that “*Écrire —*” is launched into the void much more than before; but even originally Mallarmé had implied the relative unimportance of communication — only we need the original to see just what is that he was saying.¹⁰

It is this sense of structure that captivated the Noigandres poets. After the extremism of the Miesian *beinahe nichts* in modernistic architecture, the concrete poets embraced “structure” as a means to reach “essence.” The importance of the structure in concretism supplanted that of the *vers*, and gradually blended into the notion of design. The *vers* was blown up to a point at which it gradually disappeared, leaving behind only a word or even just a fraction of it. Such is the case in Decio Pignatari’s 1960 poem *Organismo*:

O ORGANISMO QUER PERDURAR
O ORGANISMO QUER REPT
O ORGANISMO QUER RE
O ORGANISMO QUER
O ORGANISMO
ORGASM
OO
O

Thus the versatility of the Mallarméan *vers* is reduced by concretism to the point of extinction. What triumphs instead is a notion of structure that seems foreign to any reader of Mallarmé’s work. The minimalism hinted at by some of Mallarmé’s mature work was one of high intellectual concentration and skill. There is nothing mechanical or repetitive in his poetics, nothing that would justify mistaking it for a method or a process. Any attempt to emulate his achievements — visual display in *Un coup de dés*, for example — will forever fail, because he did not propose rules for the poetry to come, but only prepared the ground for it. Nevertheless, the Noigandres group found in Mallarmé a confirmation for their own architectural tendency; and emphasized this aspect to the detriment of the more subtle aspects of the *vers*. In *Poesia, Estrutura*, written in 1955, Augusto de Campos wrote:

Mallarmé is the inventor of a process of poetic organization whose significance for the art of letters seems to us aesthetically comparable to the musical value of “serialism” created by the musical universes of a Boulez or a Stockhausen. This process can best be expressed by the word *structure*. We should add that the particular use, that we here make of the word *structure* has in mind an entity medularly defined by a gestaltian principle

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 79.

that the whole is more than the sole addition of the parts, or that the whole is something qualitatively diverse of each component, thus ever being misunderstood as an additive phenomenon.¹¹

Although there is in this passage a reference to music, it is not intrinsically connected to structure, but only compared to it. It is important to emphasize that the structure in Mallarmé is both musical and mobile, like a fan (“*Rien qu’un battement aux cieux*”), pliable, adapting to various circumstances and ends.¹² Virginia La Charité writes that the fan is “a segment of a circle which is constructed with thin rods which move on a pivot; made out of silk, feathers or paper, it opens and closes, mystifies and reveals.”¹³ This deceptively simple structure in fact will be used to great profit in Mallarmé’s hands, for the movement of constriction and expansion, the act of folding and unfolding, will on the one hand generate a bountiful source of verbal joy (“*de la cendre/descendre*,” “*un frisson/unisson*,” “*la flamme/l’âme*,” “*le plumage est pris/mépris*,” “*le vide nénie/dénie*,” “*vole-t-il/vil*,” “*las/les lilas*,” “*glacier/l’acier*,” “*lune/l’une*,” “*de visions/dévisions*,” “*se para/sépara*,” “*désir Idées/iridées*,” “*devoir/de voir*”), and, on the other, provide the final shape of poems such as *Soupir*, where a dash in the fifth line provides the sole visual mark where the poem will fold into two opposed movements, ascending and descending as one’s chest might when emitting a sigh.¹⁴ That’s how subtle, Mallarmé seems to tell us, the sound can be, like the flapping of a wing. Nevertheless, music is embedded into structure to the same degree as letters: “*Je pose, à mes risques esthétiquement, cette conclusion: que la Musique et les Lettres sont la face alternative ici élargie vers l’obscur; scintillante là, avec certitude, d’un phénomène, le seul, je l’appelai, l’Idée.*”¹⁵

The “Idea” manifests itself through letters and music, but Mallarmé’s music will never reach the operatic dimensions of Wagner’s, for he is more interested in the “music of the spheres,” which is highly abstract, or in the music produced by everyday objects — the chiming of bells, the ruffling of skirts, the flapping of fans, the rocking of a cradle.

When in motion, the fan emits sound waves — delicately, imperceptibly. Its sound replicates a pulsation, or a palpitation. It speeds up or slows down according to the physical and/or emotional condition of the one who manipulates it. For Mallarmé, a poem offers this kind of flexibility — it is ultimately left to the discretion of the reader how to manipulate or unfold the poem, which thus becomes extremely objectified. In the particular case of the *éventails*, some of which Mallarmé actually wrote on fans, the object itself becomes the poem. “The conception thus involves the mysterious transformation of the animate to the inanimate, the concrete to the abstract, the material to the spiritual.”¹⁶ It has been noticed that from the final letters of *éventail* an “*aile* springs poetically” standing for the traditional symbol of poetic inspiration.¹⁷ This circularity, a poem about a fan that stands for a poem, is

¹¹ Augusto de Campos, “Poema, Ideograma,” in *Mallarmé* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1974), p. 177.

¹² Mallarmé, *Oeuvre*, p. 57.

¹³ Virginia La Charité, *The Dynamics of Space: Mallarmé’s Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard*, French Forum Monographs, 67 (Lexington: French Forum, 1987), p. 16.

¹⁴ La Charité, p. 17.

¹⁵ Mallarmé, *Oeuvres*, p. 649.

¹⁶ Weinfield, *Collected*, p. 196.

¹⁷ Weinfield, p. 196.

the essence of Mallarmé's poetic meditation — a poem writes itself about itself, a thought thinks itself about a thought, "*un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard.*"

Un coup de dés is the work in which all the aspects addressed above regarding architecture, music, poetry, and idea are so finely tuned as to provide us with an ideal model for discussion. "*Vers* is the primary direction in the text," writes La Charité, underlining the main motif in the poem — the alexandrine verse. *Hasard* derives from Arabic for "the die," thus "a throw of the dice will never abolish the di[c]e," a tautological statement that reiterates that the poem is *not* about something other than itself. "*Un coup de dés*, as 'POÈME' is an authentic object which is at the same time its own subject."¹⁸ There is no message to be found at the bottom of this shipwreck, but only the POÈME as it is written on the title page. "The poem is and confirms itself through the informative and descriptive declaration of the titular phrase."¹⁹ We go down the *vers* (*à tavers*), between wonderment and stasis, only to be thrown back to the beginning of the poem. And we come up with nothing — no major revelation, everything still kept secret. The poetic experience is confined to its duration, not the acquisition of truth. The poet is a performer who sets the conditions for such experience. The poet titles the experience, and the title is the experience. *Un coup de dés* is the unfolding of its title, of its gesture, of its performance.

Un coup de dés is the most extreme of the fan-poems and also the first modernist architectural construction. Its extremely calculated use of space opens up a series of questions regarding the brokering of the printed page as a territory for action. This calculation is the inverse of ratiocination, for Mallarmé's intention is to restore the primacy of language (language that speaks itself) through the poem. Poetry will unveil, in space, the "*subdivisions prismatiques de l'Idée.*"²⁰ Heidegger contends that poetry is in the neighborhood of thought, "but because we are caught in the prejudice nurtured through centuries that thinking is a matter of ratiocination, that is, of calculation in the widest sense, the mere talk of a neighborhood of thinking to poetry is suspect."²¹ With *Un coup de dés*, Mallarmé inaugurates the page as a field of action — the poet ruling over the constraints of space. La Charité brings our attention to the material and utilitarian aspect of the printed page, and its inherent set of laws:

The unit of the printed page is a utilitarian form which makes the word visible through a given assembly of words into lines and lines into stanzas or paragraphs. Rules dictate how parts (words, lines, paragraphs) fit together and deny authorial freedom. Certain two-dimensional limits are imposed on the text by the medium of its communication. The formal order of the medium directs the reader: sequential pagination, a certain balance of type and space. To reassert the original freedom of the language as an initiating experience, Mallarmé turns his attention to an art of space and the role of the reader.²²

Utility, rules, limits, formal order constrict language in its movement to speak itself. "Only because in everyday speaking language does not bring itself to language but holds back, are

¹⁸ La Charité, *Dynamics*, p. 102.

¹⁹ La Charité, p. 59.

²⁰ Mallarmé, *Oeuvres*, p. 455.

²¹ Heidegger, *Writings*, p. 330.

²² La Charité, *Dynamics*, p. 15.

we able simply to go ahead and speak a language, and so to deal with something and negotiate something by speaking.”²³ In *Un coup de dés*, Mallarmé inveighs against this conformism and undermines the rules of the game. Reportedly, the printer for the first edition of *Un coup de dés* reacted strongly to Mallarmé’s use of space, and this contretemps between writer and printer raises a series of questions that are essential to understanding the significance of the leap that *Un coup de dés* represents.

A page is printed in signature sheets, the most common one being in multiples of four; signatures are then folded to page size, the largest signature being a folio. Pages appear as verso and recto. Hence, a page is a fixed framework which delimits the amount of words and lines which it can support. A page may be said to represent a unity of space, the place for the confrontation of printed elements, but the writer does not own at any time a whole page because of the dictum of printer space. Printer space is space owned by the printer, not the writer, to wit the first verso after a title is generally unprinted and each page is surrounded by dead, unusable space or printer’s margin. The margin frames or encloses the printed elements. Center margin or gutters further compromise the integrity of the page and create a columnar effect; as a result, the vertical always dominates the horizontal although the horizontal does not actually oppose the vertical, but is harmonious in its subordination to it. The restraints of a page impose spatial ordering. Every page in a given printed work begins and ends with a predetermined line length, a length further dictated by type selection and margin space, which is a function of line length.²⁴

The promise of “*un livre qui soit un livre, architectural et prémédité, et non un recueil des inspirations de hasard, fussent-elles merveilleuses [...]. Le jeu littéraire par excellence: car le rythme même du livre, alors impersonnel et vivant, jusque dans sa pagination, se juxtapose aux équations de ce rêve, ou Ode*” is partly fulfilled in *Un coup de dés*, for the relationship of book to poem in this work is so closely knit as to render it impossible to unravel.²⁵ *Un coup de dés* is a poem-book-object, hence the futility of trying to quote it: any attempt to quote *Un coup de dés* will invariably be transformed into an illustration.²⁶ All its parts are connected to such a degree that to select any cluster of words is utterly useless. Furthermore, there are no *bons mots* in this work that justify their isolation from the whole. The experience of reading it is one of movement in space and time. The reader scrutinizes the page, downward, from left to right, making bridges through the white space, the eyes squinting or widening to adapt to the changes in type size.

The type visually expands the emission of the thought into the concrete object of dice, space is crossed and filled, presence replaces absence, contact is established, and the reading activity is the experience of creation,

²³ Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 59.

²⁴ La Charité, *Dynamics*, pp. 41-42.

²⁵ Marchal, *Mallarmé*, p. 585.

²⁶ Paradoxically, the worst printing of *Un coup de dés* is to be found in the Pléiade edition of Mallarmé’s *Oeuvre complète*. This edition does not observe Mallarmé’s specifications regarding page size, font, type, or alignment. The general effect is thus of a miniaturized illustration of the ‘real thing,’ which as a matter of fact was never really materialized.

in which the text emerges as both object and subject: a perpetual coming into being. The text is the event and place of the communication.²⁷

“Thinking is not a means to gain knowledge. Thinking cuts furrows into the soil of Being.”²⁸ Likewise, there’s no knowledge to be extracted from *Un coup de dés*, just a thinking act. In reading, seeing, and listening to it, the basic requirements of any *Gesamtkunstwerk*, we perform the act of thinking, and grasp the “*subdivisions prismatiques de l’Idée*.” A *poème* does not refer to anything outside itself. “*Rien n’aura eu lieu que le lieu*.” This is the site, here in these pages. “In thinking there is neither method nor theme, but rather the region, so called because it gives its realm and free reign to what thinking is given to think.”²⁹

It was necessary to construct this book, so carefully planned, in order to distinguish the *poème* from any other written text, thus revealing the *poème* as a “power book.” *Un coup de dés* is the prototype of hypertext, in which highly sensitive words carry the power to remit the reader to other texts. And the units of this construction are the page and the printing process.

Basically, print is static, inert, concrete, impersonal, and utilitarian. Print is what the reader reads; it bestows order in its linearity, sets points of convergence and divergence, establishes sequence and stratification (subordination), fixes the fiction by controlling groupings of words which in turn offer precision and concision in the determination of the restraints which bring about meaning and the communication of that meaning through the assembly of the words into lines. Print is a psychological framework for the reader, who goes forward, word by word, line by line, page by page, identifying figures and their relations, or he goes backward in order to reconstruct the events of the forward-motion of the narrative.³⁰

Mallarmé subverts this order and, in so doing, exposes the invisible structure that upholds literature — linearity, convergence, sequence, stratification, *in summa*, all the “restraints that bring about meaning.”³¹ Through his exploration of typography and topology, Mallarmé emphasized the idea of language as an artifice, a construction — not a natural trait, but a technique to express ideas, or the idea. The problem with assertions such as this lies in the likelihood that it will always be taken for an absolute (“language as a construct”), after all the nuances have been brushed aside. Hence the emphasis, by the majority of concretists, on the architectural aspect of Mallarmé’s enterprise.

But Mallarmé’s architecture is diaphanous, or at least mobile. In the letter to Verlaine known as “Autobiographie,” when he refers to “un livre architectural et prémédité,” he writes that the pagination of this book “se juxtapose aux équations de ce rêve, ou Ode.” Writing about Maeterlinck, for instance, he notes that “une symétrie, comme elle règne en tout édifice, le plus vapoureux, de vision et de songes.” And referring to Hugo, he writes, “Monument en ce désert, avec le silence loïn; dans une crypte la divinité ainsi d’une majes-

²⁷ La Charité, *Dynamics*, p. 124.

²⁸ Heidegger, *On the Way*, p. 20.

²⁹ Heidegger, p. 74.

³⁰ La Charité, *Dynamics*, pp. 84-85.

³¹ La Charité, pp. 84-5.

tueuse idée inconsciente, à savoir que la forme appelée vers est simplement elle-même la littérature.” At the end of “Igitur,” after nothingness has been conquered, “reste le château de la pureté.” “Dream” and “vision” are terms often invoked by Mallarmé, alongside “symmetry,” “edifice,” “monument,” and “tomb”; but above all, this impalpable architecture is always called upon to provide an image, a stage set:

Exterieurement, comme le cri de l’étendue, le voyageur perçoit la détresse du sifflet. “Sans doute,” il se convainc “on traverse un tunnel — l’époque — celui, long le dernier, rampant sous la cité avant la gare toute-puissante du virginal palais central, qui couronne.” Le souterrain durera, ô impatient, ton recueillement à préparer l’édifice de haut verre essuyé d’un vol de la Justice.³²

Mallarmé’s architecture often has the ghostly quality of the tower William Beckford had built after his own design — an architecture that is already a ruin, a monument, a tomb. Or perhaps an architecture such as is seen onstage: suggestive, evocative, and easily dissipated. The “architecture” of *Un coup de dés* is mobile, like the screens in a Japanese home. The reader is never able to contemplate the entire “edifice,” but each space opens onto the next, revealing chambers, niches, and staircases, never differentiating between inside and outside.

And while there has been excessive stress on the term “structure” with regard to Mallarmé’s poetics, there is a general tendency to ignore his penchant for ornamental motifs.

Il y a à Versailles des boiseries à rinceaux, jolis à faire pleurer; des coquilles, des enroulements, des courbes, des reprises de motifs. Telle m’apparaît d’abord la phrase que je jette sur le papier, en un dessin sommaire, que je revois ensuite, que j’épure, que je réduis, que je synthétise. Si l’on obéit à l’invitation de ce grand espace blanc laissé à dessein au haut de la page comme pour séparer de tout, le déjà lu ailleurs, si l’on arrive avec une âme vierge, neuve, on s’aperçoit alors que je suis profondément et scrupuleusement syntaxier, que mon écriture est dépourvue d’obscurité, que ma phrase est ce qu’elle doit être et être pour toujours.³³

The relationship between syntax and architecture is one that concrete poets also pursue, but they equate syntax with structure, never with ornament. One might find the justification for such misreading in early texts on modernistic architecture, such as the condemnation of ornament by Adolf Loos titled “Ornament and Crime.” Modernistic architecture repudiated ornament and advocated the supremacy of structure over surface beauty. The architecture of concrete poetry is not the same as Mallarmé’s: the tendency toward ornament in Mallarmé is not merely a figure of speech, but an important feature of his whole enterprise, ranging from the curlicues in his signature to the subtle variation of font styles and sizes in *Un coup de dés*. Above all, this tendency manifests itself in effects that are sometimes nearly imperceptible, such as this particular topological display in *Un coup de dés*:

There is considerable verticality attained by the ascending kerns, especially d, l, b. The unit begins with “de la mémorable,” and the ascending kerns point upward. Moreover, the layout demands that this group be placed so that the b of “mémorable” be over the f of “fût” and that the f be over the l of “l’évènement.” The vertical

³² Mallarmé, *Oeuvres*, pp. 371-372.

³³ Paxton, *Development*, p. 54.

kerns and the capital letters stabilize the space of 10v [page 10 verso]; contrary to the lexical meaning of the unit “RIEN” which dominates by size, it has identity.³⁴

Several of the *tombeaux* already hinted at the confluence of architecture and writing, even though visually they do not resemble tombs. The fan is an architectural construct par excellence: awnings are based on the fan’s principle of pliability. But the fan poems do not evince an architectural shape. So where is the architecture in Mallarmé to be *seen*? It is in the *vers* (“l’exact ligne”) that one will find this architecture. “*Dans le genre appelé prose, il y a des vers, quelquefois admirables, de tous rythmes. Mais, en vérité, il n’y a pas de prose: il y a l’alphabet et puis des vers plus ou moins serrés: plus ou moins diffus. Toutes les fois qu’il y a effort au style, il y a versification.*”³⁵ The *vers* is the bridge through which Mallarmé will transcend the non-materiality of the page. Before the *vers* there is nothing, only the white page. The *vers* creates a site where the eye and the mind can find shelter. In *Building Dwelling Thinking*, Heidegger discusses the nature of a construction and the creation of a site:

The bridge swings over the stream with ease and power. It does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge designedly causes them to lie across from each other. One side is set off against the other by the bridge. Nor do the banks stretch along the stream as indifferent border strips of the dry land. With the banks, the bridge brings to the stream the one and other expanse of the landscape lying behind them. It brings stream and bank and land into each other’s neighborhood. The bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream.³⁶

Heidegger is interested in the relationship of thinking to construction (*edificare, cultivare*), and therefore the proximity of architecture and language. Although its conciliatory and contrite tone (owing to the circumstances that informed the delivery of this lecture) is in sharp contrast with Mallarmé’s style, Heidegger’s exploration of the bridge image is an apt metaphor for some aspects of the concept of *Vers*.

To be sure, the bridge is a thing of its own kind; for it gathers the fourfold in such a way that it allows a site for it. But only something that is itself a location can make space for a site. The location is not already there before the bridge is. Before the bridge stands, there are of course many spots along the stream that can be occupied by something. One of them proves to be a location, and does so because of the bridge. Thus the bridge does not first come to a location to stand in it; rather a location comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge.³⁷

The *vers* is the organizing principle. It brings (metric) order and symmetry to the chaos of unelaborated ideas: it is through the *vers* that the “Idea” actually flows. The *vers* has the power to name things, rescuing them from the depths of memory. “*Je dis: une fleur! et, hors de l’oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose d’autre que*

³⁴ La Charité, *Dynamics*, p. 78.

³⁵ Mallarmé, *Oeuvres*, p. 867.

³⁶ Heidegger, *Basic*, p. 330.

³⁷ Heidegger, p. 332.

*les calices sus, musicalement se lève, idée même et suave, l'absente de tous bouquets.*³⁸ (“Language is the flower of the mouth,” as Heidegger paraphrases Hölderlin).³⁹ The *vers* inaugurates a space, opens up a possibility for this space, and baptizes it. “What appears on the page is real; it exists; it is both trustworthy and credible because it is so deliberately set, displayed, and constructed.”⁴⁰ The *vers* is a landmark, a point of orientation, an organizing principle, it casts a new light on space and objects.

Le vers qui de plusieurs vocables refait un mot total, neuf, étranger à la langue et comme incantatoire, achève cet isolement de la parole: niant, d'un trait souverain, le hasard demeuré aux termes malgré l'artifice de leur retrempe alternée en les sens et la sonorité, et vous cause cette surprise de n'avoir ouï jamais tel fragment ordinaire d'élocution, en même temps que la réminiscence de l'objet nommé baigne dans une neuve atmosphère.⁴¹

The *vers* creates out of the book a site. “For Mallarmé, the poet has the power to create with words, to go beyond the object by making an absolute out of language. The very act of writing on the page ordains the credibility of the text,” writes La Charité. The conversion of the page into a site attests to Mallarmé’s belief in the transcendent power of language and the tools and skills involved in its pursuit:

Écrire —

L'encrier, cristal comme une conscience, avec sa goutte, au fond, de ténèbres relative à ce que quelque chose soit: puis, écarte la lampe.

Tu remarques, on n'écrit pas, lumineusement, sur champ obscur, l'alphabet des astres, seul, ainsi s'indique ébauché ou interrompu; l'homme poursuit noir sur blanc.

Ce pli de sombre dentelle, qui retient l'infini, tissé par mille, chacun selon le fil ou prolongement ignoré son secret, assemble des entrelacs distants où dort un luxe à inventorier, tryge, noeud, feuillages et présenter.⁴²

There is a hopeful attitude in Mallarmé toward (*vers*) the progress of the *vers* — writing poetry as a philosophical practice, a practical manner of *thinking*, a science not confined to the restraints of the page and the printing process. The progress of the *vers* corresponds to the progress of the “Idea.” Through (*à travers*) writing — and, among its various modes, poetry in particular — thinking takes form, expands, takes place. The author is a reader, a scribe, meticulously following the many unfoldings of the “Idea” and setting down on paper its every move. The *vers* is the unit of construction in this process — the micro that mirrors the macro, the encoding of a thought. The *Crise de Vers* is thus a constant crisis insofar as thought is constantly revolving, evolving, unfolding. *Crise de Vers* is the ever-present state of poetry, for the *vers* is always toward the poetry to come.

³⁸ Mallarmé, *Oeuvres*, p. 368.

³⁹ Heidegger, *On the Way*, p. 99.

⁴⁰ La Charité, *Dynamics*, p. 43.

⁴¹ Mallarmé, *Oeuvres*, p. 368.

⁴² Mallarmé, p. 370.