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THE FRENCH AESTHETICS OF CONTINGENCY

Abstract

*This essay considers three important French literary authors who have made contingency (chance, fortune, randomness) a significant and explicit subject of their writings. Charles Baudelaire has become well known as a major poet of chance encounters within the large, crowded modern city of the second half of the nineteenth century. For him, chance—and the paradoxically related concept of artifice—offers a break with the ennui of nature and routine. His thought on these matters echoes (while also reversing the valorisation of many ideas) that of the seventeenth-century mathematician and Christian apologist Blaise Pascal, who also denounced nature, as human beings perceive it, as a “second nature,” one that conceals the first and that is dominated by chance. This “second” nature, alienated by original sin from divine reason, is permeated by randomness. However, within this random world, human beings cultivate certain forms of artificial chance (e.g., games of chance) as a way of escaping ennui. The last writer considered here is Stéphane Mallarmé, whose great modernist poem *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* (A throw of the dice will never abolish chance) raises chance from the level of everyday encounters to a heroic gesture associated with many of the pre-modern symbols of chance.*

French literary modernity has, since the Renaissance of the 16th century been increasingly concerned with the experience of contingency, with the circumstantial, fleeting, and unpredictable incidents of human life. Three writers stand out for the central and explicit place they accord to chance: Blaise Pascal, Charles Baudelaire, and Stéphane Mallarmé. Each of them wrote about the subjective experience of everyday life as pleasant or unpleasant, beautiful or ugly, and in that sense they can be said to be concerned with aesthetics. They were not philosophers (at least by professional formation or even by self-definition) but reflected quite seriously on the interrelated issues of perception, time, beauty, boredom, dress, and painting. They are concerned not only with issues of fine arts and poetics but also with chance in everyday life, with what has been called “aesthetics from below.”¹ Although two of them wrote in the 19th century and one in the 17th, their works are interrelated, as will be apparent.

Let us begin with Baudelaire, whose “poetics of contingency” has been widely recognized, especially in the wake of the writings of Walter Benjamin². The poem *À une*

¹ G.TH. FECHNER, *Vorschule der Aesthetik* (1876), G. Olms, Hildesheim-New York 1978, pp. 1–7.

² S. SINGH, *Baudelaire without Benjamin: Contingency, History, Modernity*, in “Comparative Literature”, 64 (4/2012), pp. 407–428.

passante (*To a woman passing by*) encapsulates Baudelaire's positive valuation of chance as forming the basis for aesthetic experience.

À une passante

La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait.
Longue, mince, en grand deuil, douleur majestueuse,
Une femme passa, d'une main fastueuse
Soulevant, balançant le feston et l'ourlet;

Agile et noble, avec sa jambe de statue.
Moi, je buvais, crispé comme un extravagant,
Dans son oeil, ciel livide où germe l'ouragan,
La douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue.

Un éclair... puis la nuit! — Fugitive beauté
Dont le regard m'a fait soudainement renaître,
Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l'éternité?

Ailleurs, bien loin d'ici! trop tard! *jamais* peut-être!
Car j'ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais,
Ô toi que j'eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais!³

This poem can be seen as an echo of the most classical author of European love lyric, Petrarch, whose (non-verse) description of his encounter with Laura seems to furnish the narrative kernel of the 19th-century lyric: "Laura, illustrious through her own virtues, and long famed through my verses, first appeared to my eyes in my youth, in the year of

³ *To a woman passing by*

The deafening street howled around me.
Tall, thin, in deep mourning, majestic sadness,
A woman passed, with an ostentatious hand
Raising, weighing the hem of her skirt.

Agile and noble, with the leg of a statue.
Me, I drank, frozen like a crazy man,
In her eye, pale sky where the hurricane brews,
Fascinating sweetness and fatal pleasure.

A flash...then night!—Fleeting beauty
Whose glance gave me a sudden rebirth,
Will I never see you again except in eternity?

Elsewhere, far away from here! too late! *never* perhaps!
For I do not know where you flee, you do not know where I am going,
Oh you whom I would have loved, oh you who knew it.

(CH. BAUDELAIRE, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Y.-G Le Dantec and Claude Pichois, Gallimard, Paris 1961, pp. 88–89. All subsequent quotations from Baudelaire will come from this edition and will be marked OC, followed by the page number. All translations, unless otherwise noted, will be mine).

our Lord 1327, on the sixth day of April, in the church of St. Clare in Avignon, at matins...”⁴

Baudelaire, much more than Petrarch in his brief and private note, takes care to stress the purely random nature of the encounter, noting and even perhaps exaggerating its brevity and setting the encounter within the context of the kind of disproportion that is a *topos* of writings on chance. On one hand there is a huge mass of people, all of whom are rejected into the background as unimportant, and on the other hand there is the passing woman whose one glance is of overwhelming, crucial significance to the persona of the writer. We are all familiar with the modern way of expressing the disproportion that we perceive in chance events and that we evoke in such expressions as “it is a thousand to one chance”—thus contrasting those things that we consider to be entirely certain and not attributable to chance (though we use the term “chance” to negate it, as in “There is a one hundred per cent chance of rain tomorrow”) with those things that are exceptionally unexpected and remarkable intrusions of chance into actuality.

Suddenness and disproportion as criteria of chance events are manifested together in Baudelaire’s poem in the image of the flash of lightning, which is proverbially sudden (e.g. *Blitz* as signifying “lightning” now being a prefix in many languages simply for extreme speed) and which has long served as an example of a very unlikely personal experience. Two centuries before Baudelaire, the authors of the *Port-Royal Logic* (*La Logique, ou l’Art de penser*, 1662) used the fear of being struck by lightning as an example of a random event so infrequent that it should not be worried about: “there are...many people who are excessively frightened when they hear thunder. If the thunder makes them think about God and about death, so much the better: we can never think enough about those. But if it is only the fear of dying from a lightning bolt that gives them this extraordinary fear, we can easily show them that it is not reasonable. For within a population of two million people, it would be unusual if even one of them died in this manner...”⁵

Baudelaire, as his readers know, attached great importance to the kind of chance encounter represented here, encounters that occur to the passive *flâneur* in the great metropolis that Paris had become by the mid-nineteenth century. Rosemary Lloyd writes that Baudelaire’s strategy “cantered on surprising and astonishing” (a taste that he shared with Edgar Allen Poe). In his correspondence he writes that “the irregular, by which I mean the unexpected, the surprising, the astonishing are an essential part of the characteristics of beauty.”⁶

Key to his appreciation of the city and its crowds was his search for a remedy to boredom, *ennui*⁷. The city seems a favourable milieu both for the onset of *ennui* and for its provisional cure or respite. So we read in one of the *Spleen* poems of *Les Fleurs du mal*:

⁴ F. PETRARCA, *Petrarch’s Lyric Poems: The Rime Sparse and Other Lyrics*, trans. Robert M. Durling, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1976, p. 5.

⁵ A. ARNAULD-P. NICOLE, *La logique; ou, L’art de penser; contenant, outre les règles communes, plusieurs observations nouvelles, propres à former le jugement* (1662), Flammarion, Paris 1970, p. 429.

⁶ R. LLOYD, *Baudelaire’s World*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY 2002, p. 17.

⁷ “Boredom” is, of course, an inadequate way to describe or translate *ennui*. For a fuller treatment see R.C. KUHN, *The Demon of Noontide: Ennui in Western Literature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ 1976, especially, for definitions, pp- 5-6.

Rien n'égale en longueur les boiteuses journées,
 Quand sous les lourds flocons des neigeuses années
 L'ennui, fruit de la morne incuriosité,
 Prend les proportions de l'immortalité. (OC 69-70)⁸

Here the accumulated weight of time—"the weight of temporality" as Cheryl Krueger writes—produces *ennui*, which is negatively linked to the sense of immortality⁹. The latter is, in most modern Western writing, given a positive valuation, but in this instance, Baudelaire attaches to it the notion that nothing will ever change, that there will never be any stimulation. In contrast, the encounter that gives the poetic character pleasure in *À une passante* is in multiple ways associated with death. He finds in this woman's stormy eye, "the pleasure that kills" and also rebirth, "the glance that gave me sudden rebirth" (*Dont le regard m'a fait soudainement renaître*). The woman herself is dressed in black, described by Baudelaire as the costume of mourning, and she is a *passante*. This term can mean, and apparently here must necessarily mean, a woman who is simply walking by or riding by. But in French, as in many languages, "to pass" can also mean "to die." The woman could be in mourning for someone who has died, or she could be death incarnate, who both kills the onlooker and then gives him rebirth in another life, in eternity, where the poet may see her again (*Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l'éternité?*). Death does not seem here scary, but rather erotic, exciting, and fascinating, an object of *curiosity* in several meanings of that term, whereas continued life (on earth, in the city) as presented in the *Spleen* poems is unbearable and, pointedly, lacking in curiosity and in anything that might awaken that sensation¹⁰. Most important, perhaps, for the concept of chance, is that something sudden and interesting (in *À une passante*) is opposed to the lengthy, lasting, slow, and uninteresting existence evoked in so many other poems. Claire Lyu contrasts the "poetic encounter with cosmic forces and death" in this energetic poem with other texts for which the term "narcotic" is more appropriate¹¹. Of *À une passante*, Erich Köhler has written, "The *flâneur*, this 'self hungry for non-self,' 'man of the crowds,' is seeking those fortuitous phenomena which are a component of Baudelaire's aesthetic, the aesthetic of 'modernity': 'surprise,' 'astonishment,' 'the unexpected,' 'the transitory,' 'the fleeting,' 'the contingent,' 'the strange,' 'the bizarre.' Walter Benjamin very rightly drew attention to a poem where the fundamental correlation between the process of poetic creation and the chance encounter in a big city crystallised into a poetic image."¹²

⁸ "Nothing equals in length the limping days,
 When under the heavy flakes of the snowy years
 Ennui, fruit of dull incuriosity,
 Assumes the proportions of immortality."

⁹ Ch.L. KRUEGER, *The Art of Procrastination: Baudelaire's Poetry in Prose*, University of Delaware Press, Newark DE 2007, p. 13.

¹⁰ "Curiosity" can also have erotic connotations. See N. Kenny, *Curiosity in Early Modern Europe: Word Histories*, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1998.

¹¹ C. CHI-AH LYU, *A Sun within a Sun: The Power and Elegance of Poetry*, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh PA 2006, p. 93.

¹² E. KÖHLER, *Le Hasard en littérature, le possible et la nécessité*, Klincksieck, Paris 1986, p. 46.

It is worth emphasizing that for Baudelaire chance appears in what happens, in an incident, but—this is crucial—the thing that happens is pointedly non-heroic (in a traditional sense) and would seem almost trivial to someone who was not personally involved in this experience. This is another aspect of the disproportion that is so often manifested in what we call chance. Whether it be an incident that is simply by itself and from every point of view unimportant or whether it be an incident that is in itself very tiny but subsequently has immense and disproportionate consequence (as we will see below in Pascal’s writing, for example in his comment “La puissance des mouches: elles gagnent des batailles” [“The power of flies: they win battles”])¹³, chance in modernity usually distinguishes itself from the more grandiose claims of Fate and Fortuna¹⁴. It is for this reason that subsequent to the seventeenth century French writers are more likely to use the term *hasard* (which we can translated as “chance” or “randomness”) than *fortune*.

The great city that is Paris generates random encounters, and Baudelaire presents these encounters as the source of his poetry itself¹⁵. *Le Cygne (The Swan)* is a well-known example of an encounter that produces a domino-like set of poetic insight. In this text, the poetic persona is strolling through Paris during the period of the city’s major transformation under Haussmann, when old streets and buildings, some dating from the Middle Ages, were replaced by broad, straight boulevards and avenues¹⁶. In this context Baudelaire renews one of the most ancient examples of chance: the unexpected urban encounter. Aristotle presented such an incident in his *Physics*, book IV, chapters 4-6 (195a 31-198a 13), to clarify what he meant by *tyche* (chance, fortune). In Aristotle’s example, a man who wishes to collect money from another man walks into the

¹³ B. PASCAL, *Pensées*, in ID., *Les Provinciales Pensées: et opuscules divers*, ed. P. Sellier and G. Ferreyrolles, Librairie générale française, Paris 2004, pp. 754–1374, fragment 56. Other references to the *Pensées* will be to this edition and will be given, as is conventional, with “S” (for the Sellier numbering scheme) followed by the number of the fragment.

¹⁴ J.D. LYONS, *Entre Fortune et hasard*, in “Méthode!”, 18 (2012), pp. 65-70.

¹⁵ The Surrealists were clearly inspired by a similar impulse.

¹⁶ The “Haussmannization” of Paris is itself a dialectic of chance (which guided the formation of the winding roads of the old city) and human control (in the careful, forward-looking design of the Second Empire engineering). The renovation of Paris seems to actualize the Cartesian analogy of random construction versus method from the *Discours de la méthode*, when he writes in the second part of “ces anciennes citez, qui n’ayant esté au commencement que des bourgades, sont deuenues, par succession de tems, de grandes villes, sont ordinairement si mal compassées, au pris de ces places regulieres qu’un Ingenieur trace a sa fantaisie dans une plaine, qu’encores que, considerant leurs edifices chascun a part, on y trouue souuent autant ou plus d’art qu’en ceux des autres, toutefois, a voir comme ils sont arrangez, icy un grand, la un petit, & comme ils rendent les rues courbées & inégales, on diroit que c’est plutost la *fortune*, que la volonté de quelques hommes vsans de *raison*, qui les a ainsi disposez” [these ancient cities which, having at their origin been only hamlets, and having become, with the passage of time, great cities, are usually so poorly formed, compared to those regular places that an engineer designs as he pleases on a plain, so, even though in each of the individual buildings there may be as much or even more artistic merit than in those {designed cities}, still, when you see how the buildings are laid out, here a big one and there a little one, and how the streets are curved and of disparate width, one would say that it is *chance*, rather than the will of men guided by *reason*, that made them what they are.] (R. DESCARTES, *Discours de La Méthode*, in ID., *Œuvres de Descartes*, ed. Ch. Adam and P. Tannery, 11 vols., J. Vrin, Paris 1996, vol. 6, pp. 1–78; here pp. 11-12, emphasis added).

marketplace where he *unexpectedly* meets the man from whom he eventually hoped to collect the sum. What is essential here for the concept of *tyche* is that something happened contrary to expectation that nonetheless conforms to a desire on the part of the money-collector. Here we have a third characteristic or symptom of chance—to add to suddenness and disproportion: surprise. What happens is recognizable (it fits a pattern of incident that exists in the mind of the man who enters the marketplace) and significant, but it happened surprisingly, unexpectedly.

Le Cygne begins by the poet's address to the mythical Greek princess Andromache, wife of Hector of Troy: "Andromaque, je pense à vous!"¹⁷ However, the image of Andromache mourning Hector years after the Greek victory and her subsequent enslavement, was not the result of a conscious plan on the poet's part to recollect that literary *topos*, nor was it even his cogitation of the category of heroic victims. Instead—and here suddenness, disproportion, and surprise combine in a single experience—Andromache's image came to his mind when he saw a swan that had escaped from a menagerie and was scratching around in the dust, looking for water: "Ce Simois menteur qui par vos pleurs grandit,/A fécondé soudain ma mémoire fertile."¹⁸ The image of the exiled bird stimulates the memory of the poet, unleashing a set of associations: Andromache, an African woman looking tubercular and homesick, and many others. A chance encounter thus breaks through the prosaic monotony of the urban landscape¹⁹.

Baudelaire is explicit about the poetry-generating randomness of the city, particularly of the more modest quarters that escape the bourgeois narratives of success and respectability. In *Le Soleil*, he describes the revealing effect of sunlight on the shanties and on fields (the edges of Paris were still agricultural), where he went "Flairant dans tous les coins les hasards de la rime/Trébuchant sur les mots comme sur les pavés" (*OC* 79)²⁰. A common accident—one that a few decades later gave Henri Bergson the key example of what produces laughter, stumbling on an uneven paving stone—unites everyday city life with the process of poetic creation²¹. One *stumbles* upon the words as upon the paving-stones; poetry depends on chance for its existence.

Baudelaire's emphasis on chance is not limited to poetic inspiration in the narrow sense of production of carefully-crafted texts; instead chance appears in his accounts of aesthetic experience more broadly, what we perceive as beautiful, ugly, pleasant, unpleasant, fascinating, boring. As we know, for Baudelaire these categories have an unusual reversibility insofar as the ugly is not necessarily less appreciated than the beautiful, the unpleasant is not necessarily less welcome than the pleasant, the major point being to create excitement and to defeat the monotony of *ennui*. Chance, as source

¹⁷ "Andromaque, I think of you!"

¹⁸ "That false Simois, that swells with your tears/Suddenly seeded my fertile memory."

¹⁹ It is possible that this Baudelairean image underlay the slogan from the May 1968 student uprising in Paris: "Sous les pavés, la plage."

²⁰ "Scenting in all the angles the contingencies of rhyme/Stumbling on the words as on the paving stones."

²¹ H. BERGSON, *Le rire, essai sur la signification du comique* (1900), Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1964, p. 7: "Un homme, qui courait dans la rue, trébuche et tombe: les passants rient" ("A man, running in the street, stumbles and falls: the passers-by laugh.")

of intense surprise, is therefore a major ingredient in Baudelaire's aesthetics. In *Hymne à la beauté*, he evokes the apparently oxymoronic qualities that he associates with "beauty":

Viens-tu du ciel profond ou sors-tu de l'abîme,
O Beauté? ton regard, infernal et divin,
Verse confusément le bienfait et le crime,
Et l'on peut pour cela te comparer au vin. (OC 23)²²

This personified concept contains a set of antitheses that exclude the middle, no doubt because the middle is the domain of the reasonable, compromised virtues of the proper industrious bourgeoisie against which Baudelaire so energetically positions himself. Most significant is the way Baudelaire represents beauty as the modern incarnation of chance: "Tu sèmes au hasard la joie et les désastres,/Et tu gouvernes tout et ne réponds de rien."²³ It is tempting to see here a reprise of the medieval Wheel of Fortune but with a major difference. Baudelaire's all-governing random force is not moralizing but aesthetic. Immediately after these verses in which the poetic states beauty's random action, comes this quatrain:

Tu marches sur des morts, Beauté, dont tu te moques;
De tes bijoux l'Horreur n'est pas le moins charmant,
Et le meurtre, parmi tes plus chères breloques,
Sur ton ventre orgueilleux danse amoureuxment.²⁴

Baudelaire's random aesthetic scrambles or explodes moral categories, leaving an amoral or even anti-moral panoply.

In his art criticism, Baudelaire also advanced the idea that beauty in painting was tied closely to chance. This is particularly evident in his well-known essay *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, in which comments about the work of Constantin Guys serve as starting point for a much broader meditation on beauty in the modern world²⁵. This essay begins with a distinction between "general beauty," which is timeless and independent of circumstance, and "particular beauty," the kind of beauty that depends on circumstance, time, and customs²⁶. As soon as "circumstance" becomes a positive aesthetic quality,

²² "Do you come from deep heaven or from the abyss,
Oh Beauty? your gaze, infernal and divine,
Pours out mingled benefits and crime,
And we can thus compare you to wine."

²³ "You sow randomly joy and catastrophe,/And you dominate everything and take responsibility for nothing."

²⁴ "You walk on the dead, Beauty, mockingly indifferent;
Among your jewels, Horror is not the least charming;
And murder, one of your dearest trinkets,
Dances lovingly on your belly."

²⁵ OC, pp. 1152–1192.

²⁶ This distinction is reminiscent of Aristotle's remarks in chapter 9 of the *Poetics* on the difference between poetry and history, though Aristotle's preference goes in a direction opposite to Baudelaire's insofar as the philosopher praises poetry for its representation of the universal and its freedom from the particular, time-dependent details that the historian is obliged to report. ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, in ID.,

chance is validated as a component of beauty, because circumstances are unintentional, changeable, unpredictable, and non-rational. Rosemary Lloyd writes, “The modern is also to be found in apparently trivial objects or episodes that reflect the transitory and contingent.”²⁷ Accident, or chance, is a matter of time and timing. In Aristotle’s example in the *Physics* of the man who met the one from whom he wished to collect money, the encounter was entirely dependent on the unforeseen coincidence that they both happened to be in the same limited space at the very same moment. And in the *Poetics*, Aristotle gives another classic example of *tyche*, when he writes of the statue of Mityls that falls on the man who had murdered Mityls²⁸. Aristotle sees the fall of the statue as unintentional and yet weirdly appropriate, but this incident occurs simply because Mityls’s murderer happened to pass below the statue at the exact moment when some defect in the stone allowed it to drop down. Had the man passed through this spot a few seconds earlier or a few seconds later, nothing significant would have happened. Thus, from the earliest mentions of chance, *tyche*, in antiquity, this phenomenon or concept is tied strongly to time.

For Baudelaire, in *The Painter of Modern Life*—and here he anticipates the Proust of *Le Temps retrouvé*—time becomes an essential ingredient of “particular” beauty, the dominant form of beauty in modernity. In contemplating engravings and paintings of the past, just as in enjoying what he sees around him in everyday life, Baudelaire locates a powerful source of pleasure in the quality of *presentness*: “Le plaisir que nous retirons de la représentation du présent tient non-seulement à la beauté dont il peut être revêtu, mais aussi à sa qualité essentielle de présent” (OC 1153)²⁹. Perhaps we should not engage overmuch in a game of philosophical vocabulary in this instance, but we see that Baudelaire, by making the present (and circumstance) an “essential” quality, has reversed the traditional terms (of Aristotelian and Scholastic philosophy) according to which circumstance would be described as “accidental” (in the sense of something that can only exist as part of another thing), that is, secondary³⁰. But in doing so Baudelaire has also incorporated chance into pleasure and the perception of beauty, since chance consists of those things which unintentionally co-occur in time *if we notice them*. Baudelaire’s way of appreciating the art of the past is not classicizing—that is, it does not stress those qualities that the creations of the past have in common with the interests of his own day and that can therefore be considered shared or “universal”—but rather particularizing, a form of (in a positive sense) aesthetic alienation or *Verfremdungseffekt*. He views images from the past in order to savour details that were unintentional, perhaps unconscious, and certainly inessential to the original makers and viewers of the images: “Ces costumes...sont très-souvent beaux et spirituellement dessinés; mais ce qui m’importe au moins autant, et ce que je suis heureux de retrouver dans tous ou presque

The complete works of Aristotle: the revised Oxford translation, ed. J. Barnes, trans. I. Bywater, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ 1984, vol. 2, p. 2323, 1451a 1-b 1.

²⁷ R. LLOYD, *Baudelaire’s World*, p. 196.

²⁸ ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, p. 2323, 1452a 1.

²⁹ “The pleasure that we receive from the representation of the present is due not only to its beauty, but also to its essential presentness.”

³⁰ See R. HAMILTON, *Accident: A Philosophical and Literary History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago IL 2007.

tous, c'est la morale et l'esthétique du temps" (OC 1153)³¹. Those things that were virtually invisible to the people in the past, the aspects of costume, gesture, social ritual, habitat, and so forth, are on the contrary striking to the later viewer.

Baudelaire describes his aesthetic as a double one, a union of the universal and the particular (in other words, of the timeless and the time-specific), but it is also a double aesthetic in terms of accident, for it implicates both the notion of what is essential and what is contingent (non-necessary, random) through the juxtaposition of moments. In another passage of *The Painter of Modern Life*, Baudelaire warns the would-be artist against the temptation of the timeless—that is, the imitation of the past: "Pour s'y trop plonger, il perd la mémoire du présent; il abdique la valeur et les privilèges fournis par la circonstance; car presque toute notre originalité vient de l'estampille que le *temps* imprime à nos sensations" (OC 1165; the emphasis is Baudelaire's)³².

Among Baudelaire's poems there are, we know, texts in which time seems to stand still; indeed, there are texts which seem to stand outside of time in any real, historical sense. These are poems like *L'Invitation au voyage* (both in prose and verse versions), *Le Léthé*, *Lesbos*, *Les Litanies de Satan*, *Harmonie du soir*, and so forth. In them, if there is time at all, it is a time that has no end, that simply lasts. And yet these poems evoke situations that escape the *ennui* of the *Spleen* poems. And it may also have no beginning, since the action or state imagined is outside of real life. *L'Invitation au voyage* is particularly significant in this regard because it is saturated with intention, evoking a world where "Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté,/Luxe, calme et volupté" (OC 51)³³. Such a world of perfect order and calm is—it should be obvious—a world without chance, without surprise, without sudden and unforeseen change, and with no beginning and no end. It is a peaceful, enchanted world diametrically opposed to the chaos, noise, and unforeseeable encounters of poems like *À une passante* or *Le Cygne*. Such texts of an ordered, but non-existent world in which things happen because, and only because, we wish them to, allows us to conceive a spectrum, for Baudelaire's work, that goes from the complete absence of surprise and chance on one extreme to the frenetic and unpredictable world of random encounters that appears in evocations of Paris crowds, *les foules*, which generate aesthetic pleasure insofar as they actualize the unforeseen. This spectrum, at the pole of surprise and chance, is also one that is articulated into ever shorter periods of time, so that it culminates in the intensity of the *moment* of encounter, the lightning-flash, the *éclair*, of *À une passante*.

In the middle of such a spectrum, going from the timeless dream-world of the *Invitation* on one hand to the briefest of urban encounters on the other, is the bogged-down duration of the *Spleen* poems, in which (as for the *Invitation*) time doesn't pass but where there is no pleasure, perhaps because somehow there is no sense of presence. It is as if the poetic persona were trapped in his own past ("Je suis un vieux boudoir plein de

³¹ "These costumes...are very often beautiful and wittily designed; but what is at least as important to me, and what I am happy to find in all of them or almost all, is the ethic and aesthetic of the time."

³² "If one immerses himself too much there, he loses the consciousness of the present; he abdicates the value and the privileges offered by the circumstances; for almost all our originality comes from the imprint that *time* gives to our perceptions." On circumstance as chance, see D.F. BELL, *Circumstances: Chance in the Literary Text*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln NE 1993.

³³ "There, all is order and beauty/Luxury, calm, and pleasure."

roses fanées,/Où gît tout un fouillis de modes surannées,” OC 69)³⁴. What is missing is the possibility of surprise, that wonderful experience brought by chance and that generates the opposite of the oppressive oldness of spleen: the new, *le nouveau*. Death itself—and we recall that the most perfect representation of chance in Baudelaire’s poetry, *À une passante*, is shot-through with connotations of death—brings with it the possibility of something new. At the end of *La Mort*, Baudelaire calls upon death to carry him away, “Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu’importe?/Au fond de l’Inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau!*” (OC 127; emphasis in the original).³⁵

While the dream-like texts in which comfort, order, and security exclude the kind of excitement that the random encounters of the Paris crowd provide in other poems that depict the intense rush of unexpected new experience, there is an intermediate scenario that could be called artificial or cultivated chance. In these cases the human agent does not determine the outcome but, as the common expression has it, tempts fate, allowing material circumstance to determine the outcome. There is an example of such risk-taking in *Le Mauvais vitrier*, where the poet tells about risky actions by his friends: “Un ... allumera un cigare à côté d’un tonneau de poudre, *pour voir, pour savoir, pour tenter la destinée*, pour se contraindre lui-même à faire preuve d’énergie, pour faire le joueur, pour connaître les plaisirs de l’anxiété, pour rien, par caprice, par désœuvrement.” (OC 238)³⁶ The poet describes the outcome of one such experiment: “Un de mes amis, le plus inoffensif rêveur qui ait existé, a mis une fois le feu à une forêt pour voir, disait-il, si le feu prenait avec autant de facilité qu’on l’affirme généralement. Dix fois de suite, l’expérience manqua, mais, à la onzième, elle réussit beaucoup trop bien” (OC 238)³⁷.

Such “cultivated chance” is, of course, a form of game, part of the long tradition of games of chance from which the usual modern French word for chance or randomness derives: *hasard*. This word appeared in French about the time of the Crusades, apparently brought into the vocabulary by veterans who had sufficient contact with Arabic to begin to use a form of *hasard*³⁸. The relationship between “games of chance” and chance or randomness in a broader sense is complex and deserves to be considered at length. Here, let it suffice to point out a paradox that verges on contradiction. Games in general appear as the antithesis of chance³⁹. They are bound by rules, often very elaborate ones, so that—in contrast to the openness of chance events in the world, where the

³⁴ “I am an old boudoir full of faded roses,/The burial place of a jumble of yesterday’s fashions.”

³⁵ “To plunge to the depths, Hell or Heaven, who cares?/Into the deep Unknown to find something *new!*”

³⁶ “One...will light a cigar next to a barrel of gunpowder, *to see, to know, to tempt fate*, to force himself to show some energy, to play the risk-taker, to experience the pleasures of anxiety, for nothing, by whimsy, because he has nothing else to do.”

³⁷ “One of my friends, the most harmless dreamer who ever existed, once started a forest fire to see, as he said, if the forest can catch fire as easily as people say. Ten times in a row, the experiment failed, but, the eleventh time, it succeeded much too well.”

³⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*: “The origin of the French word is uncertain, but its source was probably Arabic. According to William of Tyre, the game took its name from a castle called *Hasart* or *Asart* in Palestine, during the siege of which it was invented: see Littré s.v. The true Arab name of this castle appears to have been *’Ain Zarba* (Prof. Margoliouth). Mahn proposes vulgar Arabic *az-zābr* or *az-zār* ‘die’ (Bocthor); but early evidence for this sense is wanting.”

³⁹ R. GARDNER-E. OSTROM, *Rules and Games*, in “Public Choice”, 70 (2/1991), pp. 121–49.

unforeseen and sometimes even seemingly impossible happens—every combination of outcomes is foreseen. In their elaborate rules, games are at the extreme of artifice, if we imagine human behaviour on a spectrum ranging from the spontaneous and open to the closed and ritualistic. Moreover participants willingly engage in games of chance and often plan to do so at specific times, also in distinction to the unplanned and unintended occurrence of what we usually call a chance event or fortuitous event.

Games of chance are not the only case in which artifice and chance are allied. Baudelaire's work offers valuable opportunities for insight into this relation between artifice and chance. The image of a spectrum going from closed (artificial) to open (spontaneous) happenings can be usefully complemented by the image of a triangle, in which the three points are artifice, chance, and nature. In different ways, artifice and chance both oppose nature. Clément Rosset has argued in his *L'Anti-nature: éléments pour une philosophie tragique*, that Greek philosophy establishes three great reigns of existence: artifice, nature, and chance. Nature is what exists independently of human activity and that functions according to an internal set of laws; artifice what comes from man; chance is the result of matter, “un mode d'existence non seulement indépendant des productions humaines, mais aussi indifférent à tout principe et à tout loi.”⁴⁰ Rosset, beginning with a reading of Plato's *Laws* (book 10) and Aristotle's *Physics* (book 2), advances the view that nature is what is neither the product of art nor the result of chance. In nature, things happen because they must happen. Natural things have within them a principle of motion which determines what they do. As Rosset develops at length his ideas of this triad, it appears that mankind finds comfort in both the idea of nature and the idea of artifice insofar as both offer the assurance of predictable outcomes. Natural things happen in ways that are observed so many times in the same sequences that people speak of the “laws of nature” and rely on the continuation of the same sequences. Humans find artifice comforting because, although it makes things work in ways that would not happen if nature were left to itself, successful artifice—itsself based on an understanding of natural regularity-- also leads to a predictable outcome. Chance, on the other hand, appears to violate the predictability of nature and also to escape human control. Chance is an idea deeply rooted in human culture, and this idea is highly resistant to the objections of scientists and philosophers, who repeatedly explain that “freak” or “chance” occurrences are not necessarily exceptions to natural functioning but rather simply blindspots in human knowledge⁴¹. However, people living an everyday life (as opposed to a scientific investigation) perceive surprising, inexplicable incidents as “chance.”

Baudelaire's aesthetic favours artifice as well as chance. In *Éloge du maquillage* (a section of *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*), he denounces 18th century ideas of beauty, and most of all the error of considering that beauty is created by nature:

⁴⁰ “[A] mode of existence independent not only of human productions, but also indifferent to any principle and any law.” (C. ROSSET, *L'anti-Nature; Éléments Pour Une Philosophie Tragique*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris 1973, p. 11).

⁴¹ L. DASTON, *Fortuna and the Passions*, in *Chance, Culture, and the Literary Text*, ed. Thomas M. Kavanagh, Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor MI 1994, p. 26.

La plupart des erreurs relatives au beau naissent de la fausse conception du XVIII^e siècle relative à la morale. La nature fut prise dans ce temps-là comme base, source et type de tout bien et de tout beau possibles. La négation du péché originel ne fut pas pour peu de chose dans l’aveuglement général de cette époque [...] la nature n’enseigne rien, ou presque rien, c’est-à-dire qu’elle *contraint* l’homme à dormir, à boire, à manger [...] le bien est toujours le produit d’un art. (OC 1182-83)⁴²

Beauty is thus created by acting against nature⁴³. Mankind’s correction of—or violation of—the natural order creates beauty⁴⁴. The artifices employed to this end obey no rules and no necessity except the rule of random, time-articulated variation as achieved in everyday fashion (*la mode*):

La mode doit donc être considérée comme un symptôme du goût de l’idéal surnageant dans le cerveau humain au-dessus de tout ce que la vie naturelle y accumule de grossier, de terrestre et d’immonde, comme une déformation sublime de la nature, ou plutôt comme un essai permanent et successif de réformation de la nature [...] toutes les modes sont charmantes, c’est-à-dire relativement charmantes, chacune étant un effort nouveau, plus ou moins heureux, vers le beau. (OC 1184)⁴⁵

The stress here on newness is typical of Baudelaire’s positive valuation of all that breaks with routine and regularity; or in other words, what is new and surprising is a cure for *ennui*, just as, logically, continued sameness, predictability, and routine lead to *ennui* or

⁴² “Most errors about beauty derive from the false 18th-century conception about morality. At that time nature was taken as the basis, source, and type of all possible good and of all possible beauty. The denial of original sin was not a minor part of the general blindness of that epoch [...] nature teaches nothing, or almost nothing, that is to say that it *forces* man to sleep, to drink, to eat [...] good is always the product of an art.” Jean Dubray, in his very illuminating *Pascal et Baudelaire* (Classiques Garnier, Paris 2011), has described the two authors’ conceptions of original sin (pp. 65–89).

⁴³ For a substantial discussion of this theme, see F.W. LEAKEY, *The Repudiation of Nature*, in ID., *Baudelaire and Nature*, Manchester University Press-Barnes and Noble, Manchester 1969, pp. 103–172.

⁴⁴ Dubray, notes divergent views of the two writers with regard to beauty (*Pascal et Baudelaire*, 28–34), but in the midst of that discussion makes an extremely penetrating remark about the way Baudelaire’s praise of cosmetics seems to be a trace of the yearning for the pre-lapsarian ideal that Pascal posited in mankind: “un fil ténu mais tenace semble les relier, car il appartient à une tradition ininterrompue: celle du péché originel, qui engendre la nostalgie du paradis perdu...” (p. 32).

⁴⁵ “Fashion should therefore be considered as a symptom of the taste of the ideal that rises to the top layer of the human brain above all that natural life deposits that is crude, earthy, and filthy, and ideal that is like a sublime deformation of nature, or rather like a constant and repeated attempt to reform nature [...] all fashions are charming, that is, relatively charming, each of them being a new attempt, more or less successful, to achieve beauty.” The concept of an ideal that manages to “float above” the gross natural life is an echo of Pascal’s concept of the trace left by mankind’s first nature in the fallen second nature, implanting in mankind the ability to recognize, for instance, that society is unjust. Whence comes this notion of the “just” and therefore also the “unjust”? Michael Moriarty, notes that in the *Pensées*, “the notion of a Fall seems to offer a key; that we look for what we cannot find suggests we must *know* or *have known* what we are looking for” (M. MORIARTY, *Fallen Nature, Fallen Selves: Early Modern French Thought II*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, p. 129). Moriarty writes elsewhere that “Three hundred years before the Barthes of *Mythologies*, Pascal has observed that ‘nature’, then is a social construction. We identify the imaginary with the natural because imagination has installed a second nature in man....the very existence of this second rival nature shows that ‘nature’ itself is not nature....” (M. MORIARTY, *Early Modern French Thought: The Age of Suspicion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003, p. 112).

spleen—and the *Spleen* poems of *Les Fleurs du mal* give no hint of anything new but only speak of oldness, deadness, and of a failure of invention⁴⁶. At the court of the bored king, “jeune et pourtant très-vieux,” makeup and fashion do not succeed in reaching the successful level of artifice that would draw the desired reaction (the reaction of desire): “les dames d’atour, pour qui tout prince est beau,/Ne savent plus trouver d’impudique toilette/Pour tirer un souris de ce jeune squelette” (OC 70)⁴⁷.

In the triad nature-artifice-chance, the Baudelaire of *The Painter of Modern Life* and of many texts in *Les Fleurs du mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris* (the prose poems), celebrates artifice and chance as they work independently or together to overcome the predictability of nature and of social convention. At this point in our argument it is logical to object that “social convention” is a form of artifice rather than of nature and to propose the correction that Baudelaire simply likes one form of artifice rather than another. We could say that he likes “new” forms of artifice rather than older, established ones. To shed light on this conceptual puzzle, it is helpful to turn to the work of the seventeenth-century scientific and religious writer, Blaise Pascal, who also pondered *ennui*, artifice, and nature.

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) was a mathematician and speculative physicist who discussed games of chance with gambling friends and created what he called a “geometry of chance” (*géométrie du hasard*), considered a major basis of the modern theory of probability⁴⁸. Pascal is also well known for what is called the “Wager” argument for behaving as if the Christian God existed. These two connections to chance, and particularly to games of chance, though often discussed by philosophers, are probably not in fact the best basis on which to bring forward Pascal as a major representative of the French aesthetics of contingency. However, we should review them briefly before considering the third, more extensive and important category of chance in Pascal’s thought, chance in everyday life. This third representation of chance in the author’s work is most often remembered in connection with the example of “Cleopatra’s nose” and its effect on world history.

First, the “geometry of chance” was Pascal’s mathematical response to the theoretical problem of the interrupted game, in which the gambling participants had all contributed to the stakes that the winner will claim at the end of the game. If the game is played to the end, there is no problem because whatever rules apply to the particular game being played will clearly specify the distribution of the sums wagered. However, if the game is interrupted, the rules will not be adequate to resolve the problem of distribution. This very circumscribed problem appealed to the mathematical interests of Pascal’s contemporaries as well as friends interested in gambling⁴⁹. However, this approach

⁴⁶ J. DUBRAY, *Pascal et Baudelaire*, pp. 294–299.

⁴⁷ The king is “young and yet very old” and “the ladies of the court, for whom any prince is handsome/Can find no shameless outfit /To make this young skeleton smile.”

⁴⁸ I. HACKING, *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction and Statistical Inference*, Cambridge University Press, London 1975, pp. 57-62. See also B. PASCAL, *Lettre de Pascal à Fermat [sur la règle des partis]*, in ID., *Œuvres complètes*, ed. L. Lafuma, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1963, pp. 43–49.

⁴⁹ TH.M. KAVANAGH, *Dice, Cards, Wheels: A Different History of French Culture*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia PA 2005.

seems to avoid the much larger issues of contingency. It only considers the situation *after* some chance event has taken place and does not describe the event that interrupted the game nor does it provide any tools for calculating the likelihood of the interruption itself⁵⁰.

Second, the “Wager” argument for acting as if the Christian God existed is probably, for the discipline of philosophy, the most frequently examined of Pascal’s texts. This argument appears only once in Pascal’s manuscript notes that were published after his death in the text we know as the *Pensées* (the original edition, of only a small number of the fragments appeared in 1670 as *Pensées sur la religion et quelques autres sujets*). This is not the place to examine the argument, its merits, nor its place in what we can surmise of Pascal’s intentions for his work-in-progress. With regard to chance, to the French *hasard*, it should be enough here to note that Pascal never suggests in any way that the existence of God is the result of chance. Instead, the text in which the wager appears (as a fragmentary dialogue between the author and a non-believer) concerns making a decision about action in the absence of reliable information.

Thus we come to the much more general description of chance in human life in the *Pensées*, where Pascal comments frequently on the way individual human lives and vast historical situations are transformed by disproportionately small and unexpected causes. The example of “Cleopatra’s nose,” is the best known passage on this subject:

Qui voudra connaître à plein la vanité de l’homme n’a qu’à considérer les causes et les effets de l’amour. La cause en est un *Je ne sais quoi*. Corneille. Et les effets en sont effroyables. Ce *Je ne sais quoi*, si peu de chose qu’on ne peut le reconnaître, remue toute la terre, les princes, les armées, le monde entier.

Le nez de Cléopâtre s’il eût été plus court toute la face de la terre aurait changé.⁵¹

This is an example of what in ordinary language we would call chance. That is, this is not a method for dealing with the situation that comes *after* a chance event (as in the “geometry of chance”) nor is it a proposal for decision-making with insufficient data (as in the Wager argument). Instead, the example of the Roman general Anthony falling in love with the Queen of Egypt offers an example of an incident that Pascal evokes as possessing a purely random quality of everyday life⁵². What is at issue is not Cleopatra’s

⁵⁰ In this respect the “geometry of chance” resembles Aristotle’s poetics of the tragic plot. The *Poetics* proscribes plots that end with chance events and *deus ex machina* supernatural interventions but does not prohibit chance events that occur at the beginning or early in the chain of plot elements. Aristotle gives the example of Sophocles’s *Oedipus Tyrannos*, and although he does not dwell on the incident of the protagonist’s chance encounter with his (unrecognized) father Laios on the road, clearly such an unintended and unexpected encounter fits squarely into the types of incidents that Aristotle elsewhere (in the *Physics* for example) classifies at chance. Thus, like Pascal’s “geometry of chance,” Aristotle’s poetics of tragedy permits an inaugural chance incident while subsequently seeking to banish chance from what follows.

⁵¹ “Whoever wants to take the full measure of human vanity need only consider the causes and effects of love. The cause is a *I know not what*. Corneille. And the effects are frightful. This *I know not what*, such a small thing that it cannot even be recognized, moves the whole earth, the princes, the armies, the whole world.

Cleopatra’s nose, if it had been shorter the whole face of the earth would have changed.” (S 32).

⁵² Though Pascal offers this example to show the inscrutable unpredictability of the course of human actions (with the goal of countering human vanity and the sense of control that people have concerning

deliberate attempt to charm Anthony but rather the importance of a physical variable beyond human control and even beyond the awareness (at least the foresight) of the people involved. In addition to her gifts, then, Cleopatra was just plain lucky.

The *Pensées* abound in examples of everyday chance, at all levels of the social scale. Cromwell would have achieved lasting military and political control of England, writes Pascal, except for “un petit grain de sable qui se mit dans son uretère” (*S* 622)⁵³. This kidney stone, by chance, killed the tyrant. It is significant that Pascal does not add to his mention of this historical accident any claim that the Christian God acted thus in a providential way. At the lower end of the social scale, there is the case of the young man who chooses to become a shoemaker simply because he has heard a shoe admired (*S* 162). In another colourful hypothetical example of everyday chance a grave magistrate solemnly arrives in church to listen piously to a sermon. However, it turns out that, by chance, the preacher has an odd face and is also *barbouillé*—poorly shaven or washed. As a result, the magistrate will, Pascal predicts, lose his dignified bearing and start laughing (*S* 78).

Why is Pascal interested in emphasizing the role of chance in everyday life and even in the formation of social institutions, which are so illogical that they seem to have been put together haphazardly? Baudelaire is the one who can answer that question for us. In a passage of his *Éloge du maquillage* quoted above, the poet attributes the naturalistic prejudice to a denial of original sin (*OC* 1182). Nature, in Baudelaire’s account, is full of vice and violence. Virtue, on the other hand, results from artifice. If we consider the age-old experience of humanity, we see, he writes, it is nature

qui pousse l’homme à tuer son semblable, à le manger, à le séquestrer, à le torturer; car sitôt que nous sortons de l’ordre des nécessités et des besoins pour entrer dans celui du luxe et des plaisirs, nous voyons que la nature ne peut conseiller que le crime. C’est cette infaillible nature qui a créé le parricide et l’anthropophagie, et mille autres abominations que la pudeur et la délicatesse nous empêchent de nommer. (*OC* 1183)⁵⁴

This description could have come directly from Pascal’s pen, and this view of nature is, in Pascal and Baudelaire, directly connected to the Christian concept of original sin. In describing the disorder of human laws and institutions, Pascal affirms that the “témérité du hasard” has created all the laws that mankind considers natural:

Sur quoi la fondera-t-il, l’économie du monde qu’il veut gouverner? Sera-ce sur le caprice de chaque particulier, quelle confusion! Sera-ce sur la justice, il l’ignore. [...] Le larcin, l’inceste, le meurtre des

their achievements), if Baudelaire were treating the relationship between Anthony and Cleopatra he might give a different emphasis. Would this be for Baudelaire an incident similar to the one he mentions in *À une passante* or rather similar to his praise of artifice in *Éloge du maquillage*?

⁵³ “a little grain of sand that lodged itself in his urethra.”

⁵⁴ “that incites man to kill his fellow man, to eat him, to imprison him, to torture him; because as soon as we leave behind the order of necessities and needs and enter the order of luxury and pleasures, we see that nature can only encourage crime. This infallible nature created parricide and cannibalism, and a thousand other abominations that modesty and delicacy prevent me from naming.”

enfants et des pères, tout a eu sa place entre les actions vertueuses. Se peut-il rien de plus plaisant qu'un homme ait droit de me tuer parce qu'il demeure au-delà de l'eau [...]? (§ 94)⁵⁵

The particular qualification that Pascal makes in the *Pensées* is that human nature as we know it is a “second nature,” one that covers over and conceals the “first nature” within which only the first two human beings, Adam and Eve, dwelt. Pascal would have been entirely in agreement with Baudelaire’s distinction between the “order of necessities and needs” and the order now prevalent in human affairs. We should emphasize this term, *necessity* because it is what distinguishes nature (in the Aristotelian sense) from chance. Or, in terms of the Christian world-view adopted by Pascal and Baudelaire, necessity is what is absent from nature *as we know it*, in other words, from the fallen nature that follows from original sin.

The fallen world of Pascal and Baudelaire, being the world of non-necessity, is the world of chance, the world in which an ignorant child becomes king and thus gives orders to strong, mature, knowledgeable men; the world in which incest is a virtue in one place and a crime in another; the world in which people are expected to love someone simply because he is powerful enough to have them killed.

Another characteristic of the world that is important both to Pascal and to Baudelaire is *ennui*. Both of these authors emphasize repeatedly the almost unbearable oppression of *ennui*. In addition to the apparently random pattern of laws and power in human society, the other major characteristic of human life in Pascal’s account is the craving for activity that kills time and prevents *ennui*: “un roi sans divertissement est un homme plein de misères” (§ 169)⁵⁶. The most extreme case of boredom would be that of a man sitting alone day after day in a room: “j’ai dit souvent que tout le malheur des hommes vient d’une seule chose, qui est de ne savoir pas demeurer en repos dans une chambre” (§ 168)⁵⁷. In such a situation nothing would happen, the past and the future would blend together and there would be nothing new or unexpected. In other words, in the case of the room-bound man there would be no chance. Indeed, unless the building were hit by lightning or shaken by an earthquake, the man’s situation would be unbearably uniform. By juxtaposing Baudelaire with Pascal we can see a solution to such an awful situation: leaving the room to walk around where there are other people, to be a *flâneur* in Baudelaire’s terms and to take a “bain de foule”—a crowd bath—multiplies almost infinitely the occasions—we recall that *Occasio* was one of the manifestations of chance in Roman culture—for incidents that would occupy the thinker and prevent boredom.

The cultivation of chance through such exposure to the external world appears in many examples in the *Pensées*. Artifices for maximizing unpredictability and sudden events include hunting. Pascal stresses that the goal of hunting in 17th-century

⁵⁵ “What will he base it upon, the order of the world that he wishes to govern? Will it be on the whimsy of each individual—what confusion! Will it be on justice—he doesn’t know what it is. [...] Theft, incest, infanticide and the murder of parents—everything has had its place among virtuous actions. Could there be anything more amusing than that a man has the right to kill because he lives on the other side of the water?”

⁵⁶ “a king without diversion is a man full of miseries.”

⁵⁷ “I have often said that all mankind’s unhappiness comes from one single thing, which is not knowing how to remain quietly in a room.” On this topic see J.D. LYONS, *Espace physique, espace conceptuel dans les Pensées*, in “XVIIe Siècle”, 261 (2013), pp. 621-635.

aristocratic society is not to obtain something to eat. The effort and cost of hunting a boar or a hare far surpasses the expenditure necessary to purchase equivalent food. But hunting rivets human attention and makes time pass painlessly by incorporating into the activity a huge range of variations in process and outcome. Another major pass-time in Pascal's milieu was gambling. Games of chance are the purest form of artificially cultivated contingency in the *Pensées*. When we consider Pascal's examples of gambling as a way of killing time and when we also keep in mind his "geometry of chance" with its concentration on the situation *after* a hypothetical chance interruption of the game, we perceive games of chance as having a two-fold purpose with regard to contingency. On one hand, such games, like almost all other human activities, are diversions, *divertissements*, which allow us to forget about death. Thus they serve the function that Krueger has described in Baudelaire as procrastination. But games of chance offer a particularly pure form of *divertissement* from the thought of death in that they exploit chance twice to the same end. Since death is very likely to arrive in the form of an accident—a fall from a horse, an apoplectic attack, a falling roof-tile—death is the ultimate chance event. But by concentrating on the artificially-restricted, highly refined and stylized form of chance that is the essence of gambling, players can forget the other, much more fearsome manifestations of chance that exist outside of the game. So just as Pascal's "geometry of chance" excludes any consideration of the event *outside the game* that caused the game to stop unexpectedly, so gambling grants the players the momentary illusion that chance exists in the relatively benign form of hands of cards and throws of the dice. In other words, games of chance are like vaccinations or like homeopathic doses of randomness that are not life-threatening and that distract the mind from the *ennui* that afflicts an unoccupied mind and prevent that mind from turning its attention to death and to the ultimate purpose of existence.

Could we throw the dice to make chance itself disappear? Could gaming be raised from the refuge of bored artists and aristocrats with too much time to kill and instead become a heroic gesture? Such a question seems to underlie Mallarmé's striking—and also hermetic and baffling—text on the theme of chance, *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (*A throw of the dice will never abolish chance*)⁵⁸. This poem—critics disagree whether it should be called a prose poem or simply a poem—is one of the most important works of literary modernity⁵⁹. Even if one disregards the question of its semantic content, as some scholars have done, it is undeniable that *Un coup de dés* served subsequent generations of poets as an incitement to break with prosodic, typographic, and visual traditions that had endured for centuries or even millennia⁶⁰. The poem consists of its

⁵⁸ S. MALLARMÉ, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. H. Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry, Gallimard, Paris 1945, pp. 457–77.

⁵⁹ The pioneering attempt to provide a thorough interpretation of this poem is R.G. COHN, *Mallarmé's Un Coup de Dés: An Exegesis*, AMS Press, New York NY 1980. Cohn's overview is that each page corresponds "to a level of the hierarchy of sciences": metaphysics pp. 1-2 ; physical sciences 3; biological sci 4 ; social sci 5 ; early art and ritual 6 ; "drama (public art)" 7 ; "poetry (private art)" 8 ; "synthesis of all the arts" 9; return to empty ocean 10; lonely space 11.

⁶⁰ Michel Murat, for instance, has written an important book on this poem solely on its prosodic and typographical characteristics, dismissing interpretation of its semantic content (M. MURAT, *Le Coup de dés de mallarmé: un recommencement de la poésie*, Belin, Paris 2005). Murat dismisses exegetical studies of the

title (or what we conventionally describe as its title), which is a sentence distributed in large all-capital type over the space of twenty-one pages, and of many other words in smaller type that might be considered a commentary upon the central sentence. The words are separated as UN COUP DE DÉS/JAMAIS/N'ABOLIRA/LE HASARD—without commas, periods, or exclamation or question marks. Many books and many more articles have been written about this seminal work, and in the present article we will make only one or two comments strictly on the issue of chance, *le hasard*.⁶¹

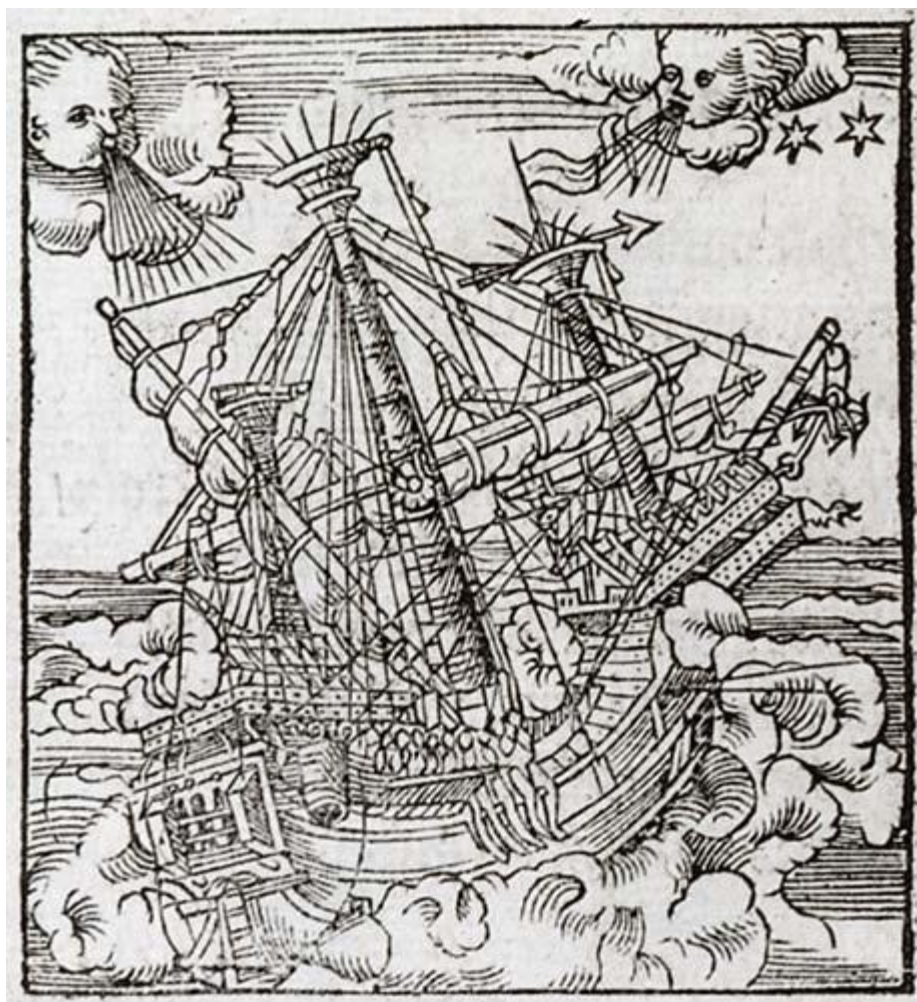
Before considering the semantic or conceptual content of Mallarmé's propositions, we should note that there is an aspect of the typography that is related to contingency. At first glance, the words of "Un coup de dés" seem to be distributed randomly across the pages. Once we realize, however, that Mallarmé himself intended that the type be set so that the words would appear in precisely this way, the poem seems visually to convey the opposite of chance: total authorial control that eliminates or at least minimizes chance. The visual aspect of the text is thus not random but instead arbitrary. In everyday usage "arbitrary" is frequently used as a quasi-synonym for random (*Oxford English Dictionary*: "Derived from mere opinion or preference; not based on the nature of things; hence, capricious, uncertain, varying"), but instead, with regard to the etymology of the term, we can understand that an arbitrary decision is simply one that is made by someone with the authority to impose a decision without giving an explanation or justification for it (*Oxford English Dictionary*: "Relating to, or dependent on, the discretion of an arbiter, arbitrator, or other legally-recognized authority"). In comparison to Mallarmé's assertion of writerly authority, most authors of prose poems submit themselves to the randomness of typographical practice. The beginnings of lines on the left, the end of lines on the right, and page breaks occur in most cases in a purely random way. But because readers, and presumably writers, are accustomed to this random distribution, it becomes seemingly "natural"—an example of the congealed randomness that Pascal designates as the "second nature." Hence, the visual aspect of Mallarmé's text already, even at first contact, constitutes a significant dialect of chance and convention.

When we turn to the semantic content of "Un coup de dés," it becomes clear that Mallarmé has made use of many elements from the Western cultural tradition of chance. First of all, he connects the toss or throw of the dice with the word *hasard*, and thus suggests a return to the etymological origins of the word in the 12th century interaction

poem, referring to hermeneutic critics as "les 'maniaques', dont Robert Greer Cohn est le parangon illustre, qui ont voué leur vie à le [ce poème] refaire à leur idée" (p. 169).

⁶¹ Cohn (*Mallarmé's Un Coup de Dés*, p. 90) empties the word *hasard* of its usual semantic content (*tyche*, chance, randomness) and says "LE HASARD: Pure Paradoxe (with all the impact of defeat it carries in relation to the attempted Throws, but only in relation---). The closest the written or uttered Word can get to expressing nothingness, end of life." Bernard Delville (in his brief note, *Le Hasard selon Mallarmé*, in "Magazine Littéraire", 312 (1993), pp. 54–55) remarks the inadequacy of Cohn's treatment of chance, and cites with approval Émilie Noulet: "C'est contre le hasard que se défend notre instinct de conservation quand il l'appelle providence, fatalité, coïncidence, prémonition, quand il l'affuble de toutes les superstitions qu'il peut imaginer. Il faut étouffer cette clamante preuve de la vanité universelle. Il faut supprimer le hasard. C'est le sujet du *Coup de dés*" (É NOULET, *L'Œuvre Poétique de Stéphane Mallarmé*, Droz, Paris 1940, p. 50). In other words, we must destroy the very *idea* that chance exists, returning then, in a sense, to Stoic wisdom.

of Christian Europe and the Muslim Arabic world⁶². Second, the elliptical narrative that is laid out in the smaller-type propositions that accompany the central sentence incorporates one of the key attributes of the chance *topos*—the *topos* of *tyche* and Fortuna—that existed in Greco-Roman antiquity and in the Renaissance: the storm-tossed sailing ship that is on the verge of sinking forever into the watery abyss.⁶³



To this he has added a number of modern terms associated with contingency: “calculs,” “Nombre,” “destin,” “conjonction,” “probabilité,” “chance” (with a further echo in the verb “chancellor”: to stumble—thus tying the randomness of chance with the mortal danger of the shipwreck), “rencontre,” “foudre,” “tout de suite,” “SE CHIFFRÂ-IL” (again the idea of number and calculation), “suspens,” “événement,” “abruptement,” and “heurt.” Suddenness, encounter and collision, thunder (or lightning), human attempts at calculation—all these chance-related terms are woven into the suggestion of

⁶² Mallarmé had a lively interest in etymology. Among the many scholarly comments on this aspect of his work, see P.A. MILLER, *Black and White Myths: Etymology and Dialectics in Mallarmé’s ‘Sonnet En Yx,’* in “Texas Studies in Literature and Language”, 36 (2/1994), pp. 184–211.

⁶³ A. ALCIATI, *Spes proxima*, in *Liuret des emblemes de maistre Andre Alciat*, Chrestien Wechel, Paris 1536. On the motif of the storm-tossed ship and the distinction between “fortune” and “chance” (*hasard*) see J.D. LYONS, *From Fortune to Randomness in Seventeenth-Century Literature*, in “French Studies”, 65 (2/2011), pp. 156–173.

a wind-whipped sea tossing a doomed boat under the stars (and the stars are not only essential to spatial navigation but also associated with human attempts to divine the future and thus to overcome chance).

Mallarmé makes of the gesture of throwing the dice part of a heroic scenario, a contest of life and death in which the storm and the likelihood of destruction and death is not trivial but rather epic, a game played “DANS DES CIRCONSTANCES ÉTERNELLES.” The many references to ancestors and to ancient traditions and precedents seem to ennoble the struggle that is carried on generation after generation. Much closer to Baudelaire than to Pascal in this respect—at least to the Baudelaire of such texts as *À une passante* and *Le Mauvais vitrier*—Mallarmé holds forth the encounter with chance as an exciting and vivifying experience, even if it will always ultimately be fatal for the player. There seems to be nothing routine or boring about what is happening in *Un coup de dés*. For Mallarmé, as for Baudelaire, chance takes us on a voyage far from the everyday.

On the basis of the three authors we have considered, we can conclude with some remarks about an evolution in the role of chance in French culture over several centuries. In the Middle Ages, chance—in the figure of *Fortune*—was a concept fraught with moralizing, admonitory power. After the Renaissance, however, chance appeared in French culture less as a totalizing abstraction or personification—suitable for graphing a human life its unitary rise and fall—than as the marker of everyday experience. Chance continued to serve as a concept in moral discourse but increasingly within an inventory of minute occurrences that manifest the incoherence and fragility of human life and society. The observation of human interactions with the material world became intertwined with meditations on chance. In life, it was noted, people experience pleasure and pain, loss and gain, desire and disappointment, excitement and boredom—all at the whim of chance. Thus we can say that chance became a topic for aesthetic reflection⁶⁴. The clearest example of the aestheticization of chance in the visual arts is the genre of paintings known as “vanity.”⁶⁵ However, in the writings of the French *moralistes* (moralist in the sense of observer of mores rather than as prescriber of conduct) such as Pascal much attention is given to people’s perceptions, pleasures, and pains⁶⁶. What do they find beautiful? What do they find funny? What do they find exciting and interesting? What do they find unbearable? These perceptions seem to Pascal to come about for reasons that can be broadly attributed to chance.

The aestheticization of chance that appears in Pascal as a flight from boredom continues in Baudelaire but with a radical and ironic turn. Vice, horror, sin, and boredom still appear frequently as categories in Baudelaire but no longer as part of an

⁶⁴ Although the term “aesthetics” did not exist in the 17th century, categories of perception later studied under that concept certainly did. Here, aesthetics is used more in the sense of empirical observation of what pleases than in terms of a theory of beautiful. See G.Th. FECHNER, *Vorschule der Aesthetik*, p. iv.

⁶⁵ K. LANINI, *Dire la vanité à l'Âge classique: paradoxes d'un discours*, H. Champion, Paris 2006.

⁶⁶ Jean Lafond’s anthology gives a thorough view of this literature, with texts of Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, and La Bruyère: *Moralistes du XVIIe siècle*, ed. J. Lafond, R. Laffont, Paris 1992. For a penetrating view of Pascal as observer of human life, precursor of what we call “anthropology,” see H. BJØRNSTAD, *Créature sans Créateur: Pour Une Anthropologie Baroque Dans Les Pensées de Pascal*, Presses de l’Université Laval, Québec 2010.

apologetic discourse aimed at providing the reader with a better conception of religion and salvation. Instead, moral values serve aesthetic ends. In this shift of emphasis the French authors are not alone but rather find kindred impulses in such authors as Poe and E.T.A. Hoffmann. Chance, even the chance of horror and death, appears as exciting, serving to make the present moment come alive in the experience of the *new*. As one critic writes, comparing Baudelaire with Hoffmann, “Psychologically, the aesthetic value of horror and evil is due partly to the shock that these categories produce in the reader’s consciousness.”⁶⁷

Mallarmé continues Baudelaire’s aestheticization of chance in even more emphatic form. Fashion (*la mode*), which had appeared to 17th century moralists such as Pascal and La Bruyère as one of the clearest examples of the human fall into irrational, time-bound randomness (and away from divine or even natural law) was for Mallarmé, as for Baudelaire, an object of pleasurable fascination⁶⁸. In juxtaposing Mallarmé with Pascal and Baudelaire, we can see that the author of *Un coup de dés* closes a circle, or executes one turn of a spiral, in that he picks up Pascal’s interest in games of chance but makes the throw of the dice an epic gesture. Endowed with trappings of human encounters with storms, seas, and stars, Mallarmé’s poetic character seems to find pleasure in playing not against a human opponent, not to win money, and not even to kill time, but instead, heroically, to kill chance itself. But chance will never be abolished.

⁶⁷ I. KÖHLER, *Baudelaire et Hoffmann*, Almqvist & Wiksell, Uppsala 1979, p. 196.

⁶⁸ Mallarmé edited a women’s fashion magazine, “La Dernière Mode” (S. MALLARMÉ, *La Dernière Mode*, in ID., *Œuvres complètes*, pp. 705–847). For a study of La Bruyère’s views of chance and fashion see J.D. LYONS, *An Accidental World*, in ID., *The Phantom of Chance*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2012, pp. 174-195.