

# Stéphane Mallarmé: Aesthetic Thought

Paula Gilbert Lewis The Aesthetics of Stéphane Mallarmé in Relation to His Public

Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson, 1976

~~Wallace Fawcett~~ Mallarmé

## I. Mallarmé's attitude towards social injustice, economic classes, religion.

A. "Ambivalent" (Lewis): on one hand, social reality and all causes are doomed to failure; political disputes are vain. Our task must simply be to escape from the sordid realities and injustices of everyday life (= M's attitude, esp. before 1871). Yet he felt guilty about this, and embraced the proletariat, but not in its present reality, but in its ideal future, when artist and society will be reunited. One writes, therefore, almost religiously, for the ideal world that will emerge. (M's attitude after 1871)

- 1) Bourgeois, those now in power, are despised, objects of scorn -- they "possessed political power... and were, therefore, responsible for the sad state of public affairs and for modern warfare; it was the bourgeoisie who headed the organized church... [and] who disdained the intellectual elite" (Lewis) -- we need to attack superficial, but influential, bourgeois.
- 2) Touch of anarchism in M's political views -- he was sympathetic with Fr. anarchists (i.e., during anarchist bombings of 1894), but believed ultimately that their methods were <sup>(Lewis 19)</sup> futile. He "opposed all forms of direct confrontation" (Lewis, 19). [Camille Mauclair make SM into the anarchist-artist hero of 1898 novel Le soleil des morts, where artist is named Calixte Armel <sup>(Lewis 18)</sup>]
- 3) But also -- lingering traces of the aristocrat in SM's behavior (though common-born) [Lewis 31]
  - a) Modern democracy [et commerce] is confusing, abolishes all distinctions + undermines taste + judgment. Scholar John Payne (1886) thought SM "a refined, conservative aristocrat who hated the foul ambiguity of liberalism" [Lewis 21] opposed to democracy: <sup>no true equality possible here</sup>
  - b) Thus: if poet is misunderstood, & he must be, he writes for a specific audience in the present. The audience of SM's friends consisted of: ① a literary elite of friends ② an "aesthetic elite based upon family wealth" ③ upper bourgeoisie elite based upon education ④ French as opposed to German but not as opposed to English ⑤ if French, Parisian, or at least cosmopolitan [Lewis 29-30]

## B. Esp. characteristic of SM's early thought:

- 1) Social injustices are grievous and readily apparent, but unsolvable in existing society.
- 2) Lives are thus difficult + unhappy, & thus the state [which causes the ills] has a duty to provide its citizens with some means of escape, most conveniently and successfully in the form of theater, as a compensation for social ills, but governments have failed in this responsibility" [Lewis 20] "M. recognized the essential need of some form of artistic escape in order to withstand everyday misery" [Lewis 46] -- Expressed in his "Nuits de la poésie" (1887) "le désir ou le moderne" (1886-7)

NB

a) Poetry as opium, as protection from outside world (almost a parental nurturing of a three infant -- Lewis 46 -- in M's "Lure" -- Music accomplishes this the best & poetry should try to rival it. ... Music: "the Sunday washing away of banality" [Plaisir sacré] ... [See also Music in subsequent outlines →]

b) Goal → "A work of art can offer any man the possibilities of evasion, often with a dual purpose: art can hide the image of daily reality, and an escape into this art form can provide relief from the menacing world of absolute intellectualism, encountered as in M's experiences, during one's own processes of artistic creation" [Lewis 46]

3) 1890s M's concern about social injustices becomes more and more evident. (Panama land scandal of 1893, etc. ... looked forward to a future ideal society -- Lewis 20-1.

### C. Religion (organized) also a problem

1) vulgar, mediocre, + overly complex. All concepts of God are probably false, but it is mankind's most wonderful dream. ... Moderns should cherish the dream in its best forms. But modern religion is "a monstrous rather than glorious chimera, whose stagnation, represented by medieval cathedrals, hinders man's natural sentiments and desires for elementary magic" (Lewis 20) (SM raised a Catholic but early, abandoned belief) ... dislike of dogma, church power, Cath. theology ... ~~Catholic~~ "Catholicisme" "De Même"

2) But admired the power of rituals and ceremonies (as elementary mysteries)

↓ His contemp. Fr. culture he conceived as a kind of interim period of chaos and disorder before the onset of a future ideal society, in which "social classes will no longer be meaningful" [Lewis 22]

1) Thus, now a separation exists between artists and society -- but it will be healed  
SM, Correspondance #, p. 303 "Basically I consider the contemporary period as an interregnum for the poet, who never ~~has~~ has to involve himself in it: this period is in such great disuse and preparatory turmoil that there is nothing else to do but work mysteriously with the future, or never, in sight, and, from time to time, to send one's visiting card to those who are still living"  
[quoted Lewis p. 24]

2) SM had faith in the masses (as mystical, oppressed entity) that would contribute to his "ideal future crowd" (Lewis 39) -- They contain mysterious attributes, even now -- He sees the crowd as a closed circle with a mediocre exterior [the bourgeoisie]. Within this circle lies the mysterious element of collective grandeur, something occult ... [Lewis 40] People sleep at present, but they have active dreams [Lewis 40, n. 77]

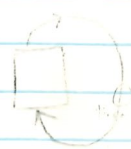
3) Thus: Ambivalent towards crowds, people, present reality -- There is a hidden core within us that must be cherished, reawakened to permit the future ideal society, even though current society is foul, repulsive ... ∴ Artist can embrace some of contemporary reality, but the goal is to reawaken the elemental mystery inside us for the future ideal society. Art forms thus have an obligation to evoke the contemporary as well as the past. [Lewis 48]

4) Thus contemporary mankind will have an apotheosis in the future

it should try also to evoke the "modern crowd" in all its pluralism -- something new being born [Lewis 48]

See my diagram, fol. 2<sup>v</sup>

... [Lewis 61]



## II. Art: Functions (Roles)

A. Escape (cf. I, B above): characteristic esp. of early Mallarmé (1860s)

- 1) "Given the contemporary situation of many men in society, M often recognized the essential need for some sort of artistic escape in order to withstand everyday misery" [Lewis 46]
- 2) Ad art can be (legitimately) a simple diversion or mere amusement -- an "emotionally soothing escape"
- 3) Esp. music, e.g., of Wagner: "a hospitality against one's insufficiencies and the mediocrity of countries... like isolation, a rest for the spirit... as much as a shelter from the all too lucid haunting of this menacing summit of the absolute" [from "Richard Wagner: révére d'un poète français" (1885) transl. Lewis 47]

B. As presenting a deeper, truer reality; a substitute for a less "realistic" present reality.

- 1) Linked with concept of the ideal future society (Utopia) [see I, D]
- 2) M. thus implicitly distinguished between a present being and an ideal being that is more "real" and true.
- 3) At first (1860s) ideal world only found within himself (narcissistic reflection of Hérodote); later ('70s, '80s, '90s) believed that mere self-discovery not enough -- the public world have to be encountered and involved (Lewis 49)
- 4) Thus poet creates an "absolute poetic world" -- [In 1860s (self-centred, personal phase) SM underwent a crisis (Hérodote 1866 reflects this) "mental death" → [nothingness] → Eternity + Purity

Similarly, "Igitur" or male hero, must die into nothingness before attaining pure lucidity + purity but in doing this himself, the poet will make this process essential with every man" [Lewis 54]

- 5) Artist and artistic subject attain one kind of immortality. (permanence of the work)
- 6) Important: to cause a reaction or movement in the audience (public): "When an individual comes in contact with an art work, certain emotional + intellectual faculties should be aroused. The work reminds the person of something <sup>that</sup> he has forgotten or something of which he was not consciously aware. In all reactions to this artistic stimulus, the individual will experience... lucid comprehension of the world or of oneself... toward the total awareness of eternal truths. [Lewis 56]
- 7) This poet is quasi-Divine, has innate divine qualities, even though "God" is a fiction, man's most beautiful fiction (see I C above)

C. Thus art's real functions are religious, social, intellectual, and emotional, and these are not easily distinguished. "Art is a kind of initiation into a secret and mystical cult" (Lewis 59) (see <sup>Rich. Wagner:</sup> *Révére d'un poète p.* p. 54/ O.C.)

At first only the elite are initiates, but soon all will become members... Ceremony is the function (orig. function) of French letters

D. Belief: social flaws separate us from our true nature -- our natural posture as men is not permitted to shine through. Art can EDUCATE humanity [Lewis 58]. "Even if certain eternal + innate truths exist within the individual or in nature, they may be so hidden, or the person so blinded by the contemporary state, that he may have to be taught to understand himself + the world correctly" [Lewis 58]

III Art: how it works

A. It should educate by bringing "the individual back to his ideal origins, presumably before the advent of corrupting societies." (Lewis 60)

1) R. Wagner did bring us back to legend, but it was culture-specific, part of a [German] national heritage. SM wants to bring us back further, to a more universal impulse

2) [I.e., back to elemental ideas -- The Fable, the pure product of the Sensibility + the Imagination]

3) "The purpose of making man aware of his primitive origins and innate qualities is to erase the negative + superficial characteristics of his contemporary state" [Lewis 60] → to rediscover prim. man before contemp. corruption.

4) ∴ "If the crowd can see its image in an ideal art form, it will see its true being reflected" [Lewis 60]

B. Relates to death + rebirth -- cyclical deaths + regenerations "Now, through art" <sup>the ultimate</sup> ~~action~~ <sup>action can be undertaken</sup> man can be reborn after his final death, each man can be reborn ideally as he was originally. (Lewis 61)

1) CYCLES + CIRCLES IMP. to SM. -- bringing one back to elementary images + experiences (earlier in the cycle), even if they (literally) have never been experienced before. [Like the Jungian archetype idea, I suppose - gatt] "Art serves as a catalyst to bring unconscious or subconscious knowledge to a conscious level" [Lewis 44]

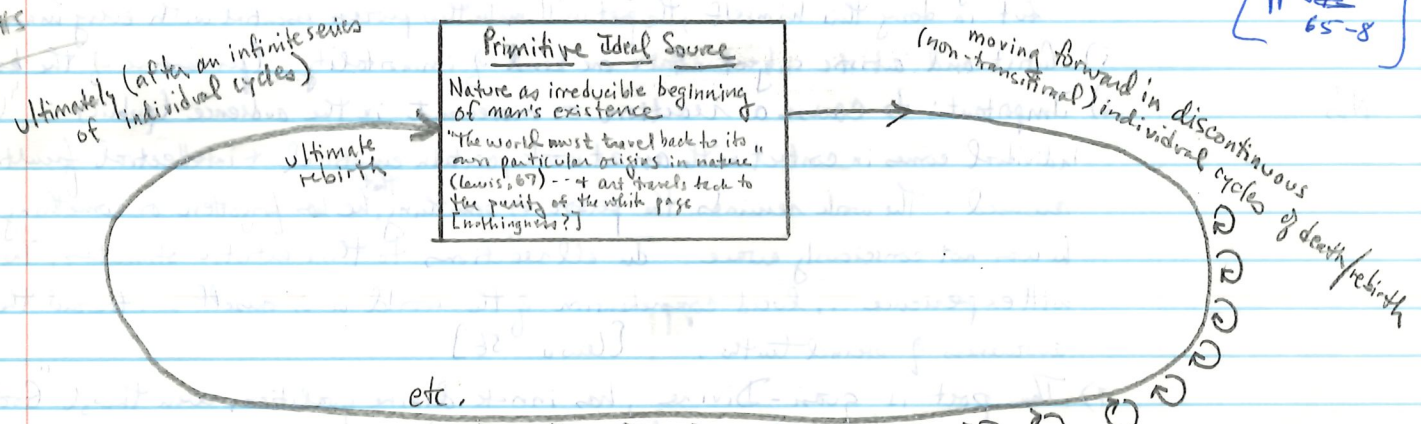
2) Art tells us of something occult, mysterious, primitive, within us. Art thus tells us something important that we (think we) do not know. Thus it is self-knowledge, the self-~~created~~ <sup>created</sup> self.

Cf. Wagner on Music + Drama, p. 89 from Opera + Drama → goal of art = self-knowledge -- artist tells us how we truly feel if freed from the constraints of life). Close link betw. ART + MAGIC (Lewis 107)

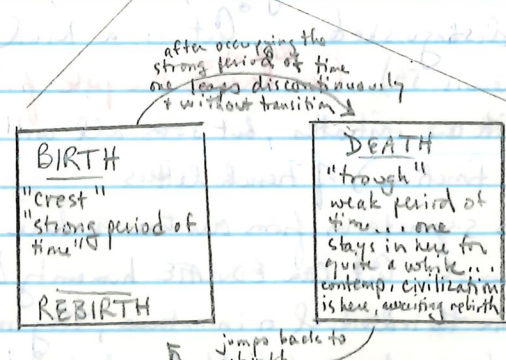
C. CYCLICAL VIEW OF TIME (1870s, 80s, '90s) AND HISTORY. [Lewis pp. 65-8]

cf. Deb, topics  
to men + elemental  
origin ... etc

CYCLICAL  
SERIES OF DEATHS  
+ REBIRTHS



an individual cycle, magnified → one jumps between death + rebirth, or perhaps the mind simply perceives one aspect of the cycle at a time.



Death phase -- contains seeds and signs of the future

Rebirth = "almost another" --

thus, a minuscule change away from total identity, and into another cycle...

## IV Art and Time (Cyclical, see preceding page)

A. Nature as basis of universe. Hence 4 SEASONS become prototypes of cyclical change

B. Ideal Art-Form should reflect circularity and the seasons

1) Number 4 becomes important -- Cycles of 4 (or  $[4+4+4+4]$ , etc.) become important to S.M.

2) Four seasons  $\rightarrow$  each differs from each other, but each set of four individual cycles is mirrored by the next four (next year), etc. ... Thus individual cycles (unlike last page) become sets of 4, not sets of two -- [a further elaboration of the theory to fit the seasons]

C. Thus Time is really eternity -- an equality of time, where past, present, + future are identical -- all time unified

D. Concept: the ETERNAL PRESENT (from Igitur) -- the ideal moment: midnight, the death of one day + the birth of another -- all aspects of time in one instant

"The ideal minute was the god of all men" [Lewis 69]

E. Thus, Poet wants to DENY historical time, the external surface of the world, in which Chance + Fate reside. "Exterior duration" should be "annulled" in search of "absolute inner time" [Lewis 69] which exists within every individual who understands the true reality beyond the external surface.

1) "A description of absolute reality is a major function of art, for this eternal reality must replace the contemporary impostor" (Lewis 70). S.M. said in his Correspondence II, p. 301, that art [to him, the Poet] is "the orphic explanation of the World, which is the only duty of the poet and the supreme literary game" [quoted Lewis 70]

2) Thus the IDEAL absolute reality. "Mallarmé himself consistently referred to the poetic re-creation of the cosmos as ideal, superior, and beyond, always detached from the historical contemporary world" [Lewis 70]. Some have called him a Platonist, some an idealist, some an escapist.

## V Art as Religion for Mallarmé

A. The above all suggests M.'s "hope for a return to the simplicity of paradise" -- He believed, despite his rejection of religion, that nothing is "exclusively secular" [see "De Môme" O.c., p. 397]

B. Art mirrors a pre-fall ideal paradise, related to the 4 seasons as a pagan ritual deifying Nature, while also representing the Easter Passion of Christ or man. "In such an interpretation, the poet becomes the creator, or re-creator, of Genesis" [Lewis 72]. The poet rivals God

C. Hence "the art form must be a bible or a religion" [Lewis 72] in a sense S.M. is trying to compete against Wagner, who had already posited the religion of music

D. S.M. going to a Lamoureux Concert, told his wife + daughter, "I am going to Vespers" (quoted in Lewis 72) -- these concerts were, for him, the modern form of religion

1) S.M. said in his "Rêverie" that Wagner's music is "almost a cult" for "ultimate salvation" -- it "exerts fervent men" in "the finished voyage of humanity towards an Ideal" -- all takes place "in your sacred Temple, half-way up the sacred mountain" [quotes from O.c., 541, 546]

2) Music offers mankind "a needed baptism and resurrection from daily life" [Lewis 73]

E. Thus all art forms are religious! Art will become the true religious will + displace all others

see "Catholicism" O.C. 11.397

F. Art should take on the ceremonial trappings of religion, cults (esp. Catholic mass) --  
art as festival [Lewis 73]

G. Art's SOCIAL FUNCTION → to offer mankind "a social replacement for contemporary reality" [Lewis 74] -- a substitute for the faults of the "realistic" world. --

1) And still, art shows man he is divine -- and literature will become the new law in the ideal future society.

2) Art mirrors the ideal cosmos, and gradually society will come to reflect this art from (Lewis 75)

3) Thus art is the MEANS to a social utopia -- for the time being, social classes (aristocracy) should remain, to counteract the effects of liberalism + democracy. -- one becomes a member of the elite by remaining open to the ideal art form.

4) "M saw art as the initial stimulus toward an ideal mankind and society, but, in some miraculous way, his art form would simultaneously reflect an innately equal humanity in an eternally just world" (Lewis 77)  
Lewis finds this (of course) naïve and confused -- but for S.M., art was the only form of action in the world [Lewis 77] This action should be restrained or limited  
["L'Action restreinte," article]

H. Literary action could replace political action, military action, and anarchistic methods.

S.M.'s response to anarchist bombings: "I know of no other bomb but a book" -- S.M.

often refers to books as explosives, bombs, fireworks (Lewis 78-9) Lit. action or fire.

VI Lewis asks: is all of this escapism?

A. S.M.'s 3 general functions of art.

1) total escape from daily life -- fantasy -- distraction... M. loved this, but realized that it treated people as children... not as worthy as other forms

2) Personal self-discovery -- knowledge or re-awakening of ideal mankind, religion... absolute world of perfection. -- <sup>in some sense</sup> Not really escape, because related to a metaphysical conception of life -- yet we are offered a viable alternative to daily life, and some might call this an evasion of reality.

3) <sup>Initial</sup> Catalyst for social change, moving towards an ideal future society. -- Function is action

a) First occurs within individual mind (internal reality)

b) But as internal reality becomes more external, social changes may be effected.

c) Clearly, this is not (in theory) escapism -- but S.M. still wants to escape the realistic world by destroying it and substituting another ("a naïve evasion" - Lewis 82)  
(The idea of literature's ultimate domination seems naïve)

VII In S.M.'s last 15 years or so (+ 1898) he was occupied in producing the Great (Secret) Art Work, the true embodiment of all his ideals - - studied extensively Art + Religion in preparing what he thought would be his masterpiece.

A. Critical controversy rages as to whether Un Coup de dés or Le "Livre" represents (a fragment) of this ideal art work.

B. Thus - - 1880s + 90s, fervently involved in artistic/religious thought, revising earlier works, etc. as he is planning his own magnum opus... very philosophical/aesthetic period.

VIII Mallarmé's rivalry with Richard Wagner - - rivalry + desire to surpass haunted S.M. from 1885 until his (1898) death. [Lewis 92]

A. RW's music he recognized as being both an escape from daily life and a religion - - and →

B. S.M. was jealous (as early as 1862) of the religious awe + emotion evoked by music.

1) "L'Art pour l'art" (1862) o.c. 257: "Every sacred thing that wishes to remain sacred envelops itself in mystery, [Religions become entrenched protected from secrets unveiled to the predestined individual: art has its own.]

Music offers us an example. Let's lightly open [to a page] of Mozart, Beethoven, or Wagner, cast an indifferent eye over the first part of their work: we are seized by a religious astonishment at the sight of these macabre processions of severe, ~~and~~ chaste, unknown signs. And we close back up again the missal, untainted by any profane thought.

I've often asked why this necessary character was refused to one single art, to the greatest [i.e., poetry...]. Oh gold clasps of old missals! oh, inviolate hieroglyphics of papyrus scrolls!

Whence this absence of mystery? [The problem = poetry available to all + degraded by the multitude] [Lewis 108]

2) Thus music is a kind of occultism - - and offered its listeners a kind of easy ecstasy, which seems religious in nature!

a) "La Cour" (1895) → "The initiative seems to me to be at the front of the new religion, music, which groups it [abstract concepts, suggests Lewis 106] because of its occultism that lends itself easily to inscrutable ecstasies." [religion?, initiative?]

3) Music, like the Word, was oral communication, elemental, and returning mankind to its origins. Spoken words are superior to written ones (S.M. interested in combining the arts, like Wagner)... Oral poetry = oral music / Written = silent music

4) [S.M. wanted to make possible for poetry what Wagner had done for music, and to outshine him if possible]

5) Thus when S.M. told Debussy that he had already put the Faun to music, he meant this elemental oral poetry. (Written poetry is like a silent concert) Empty spaces on the page are like RESTS in music.

6) Music's communication is pure: it abolishes the text in favor of either an abstract, mentally visual image or mental poetry that in turn becomes silent music. It does not have to depend upon the mediocrity of ordinary spoken language. [Lewis 100]

→ Purity of silence + the white page... discovery of le néant

IMP. ESSAY of MANIFESTO

8) Lengthy discussion about how "Un Coup de Dés" is a musical work, contrapuntal, polyphonic, mobile, etc. Mobile architecture in le "livre" →

**IX** NB - In "Le Livre" he extended the mobile architecture "to include the use of loose pages, able to be read in any order, but fixed by the poet for his public. The interchangeable pages would form a book read in one order; they would then be reversed to form an album. The overall structure of twenty volumes would be determined in advance, but its musical rhythm would also be preserved." [Lewis 106] Thus → intellectual order AND mobility...

Monument allowed among the five volumes of each larger work ... form of page = unbound.

**X** Music is particularly enviable, because it can have its intellectual ordering, available only to the trained musician, but to the layman it seems pure emotion ... This is close to an ideal situation, and poetry should try to rival it + better it! Emotion is needed to stimulate the innate intelligence of others, to lead them back to an intuition of their original state of being. "Vague inner emotions, also evident in the poetic work, are first activated, leading, hopefully, to an intellectual understanding of multiple meanings" [Lewis 106-7]

**XI** Art = "an INITIATION into a secret artistic cult for a certain chosen few, ideally for artists alone" (esp. characteristic of young Mallarmé in 1860s) [Lewis 109]

"L'Art pour l'Art" (1862) → basic document "Man can be a democrat; the artist subdivides himself [breaks off?] and must remain an aristocrat [O.C. p. 259] ... Think about Corneille, Molière, Racine -- were they popular + glorious? No, they were not popular -- their name maybe, but their verse? it's false! The crowd read them once, I confess, without understanding them. But who re-reads them? Only artists. ... [The masses "deflower" the poems of Hugo] <sup>LAST LINE</sup> O poets, you have always been proud; be more, become scornful [devenez dédaigneux] O.C. p. 260

Later, more + more of the public will be admitted into the mystery...

A. Essential to art = MYSTERY (see also VII, B, 1 above)

- 1) Obscure, impossible-to-understand surface, but underneath a clarity worth any effort to discover ... to discover this is to discover the awareness of "ideal-primitive man and reality" [Lewis 109]
- 2) Art = magical, mysterious -- Mallarmé calls it a return to alchemy → ordinary matter into gold. -- Beneath external mystery are beautiful truths, like alchemist's gold -- S.M. jealous of music's notation, its hieroglyphics, its emotion but get its mathematical foundation, its intellectual order

3) Goal of obscurity on surface → to make the word create AND EQUAL an ideal reality that he intuits -- to make the word into the pure essence of an underlying idea

Quote from S.M. →

"Sur l'évolution littéraire" [1891] "To name an object is to suppress  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the enjoyment of the poem which is composed, to be divined little by little; to suggest, then, is the dream. It is the perfect use of this mystery which constitutes the symbol; to evoke an object slowly in order to show a state of mind, or, conversely, to choose an object and, through a series of decipherings, to detach it from a state of mind" [O.C., p. 869]

transl. Lewis (113)

basic document + manifesto  
see notes of this folio for more.

see p. 113



XII

If Wagnerian myths were too culture-specific, what subjects <sup>+ forms</sup> would be better?

- A. Impersonal generality of content, <sup>accessible</sup> ~~available~~ to all men as individuals.
- B. Fr. mind, acc. to S.M., is abstract, imaginative, poetic - - - doesn't like art in form of "anecdotal legends" . . . . Best <sup>artistic myth</sup> subjects: "a Fable, Poem, or Ode independent of any particular time, place, nationality, & race" It is the myth of the universe as it is inscribed in Heaven [Rêverie d'un poète français: "celle inscrit sur la page des Cieux" <sup>D.C. 544-5</sup>] - - Fable "mirrors the multiple personality of mankind because it is of a general nature, reflecting original man in paradise." [Lewis, 115, obv. for "Reverie"]
- C. Eternal myths - - modernized - - applicable to our age.

NB

XIII

"As an alternative to Wagnerian assimilation in art, the poet advocated a concept of the purity of a genre. . . . one must be careful not to force their union, à la Wagner. One may seek a "communication" between the arts, one may ally them, but each art should maintain its purity. A composite art-work is indeed a goal, but the elements should be juxtaposed & kept separate [?] Somewhat unclear in Mallarmé."

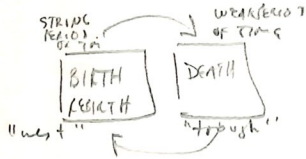
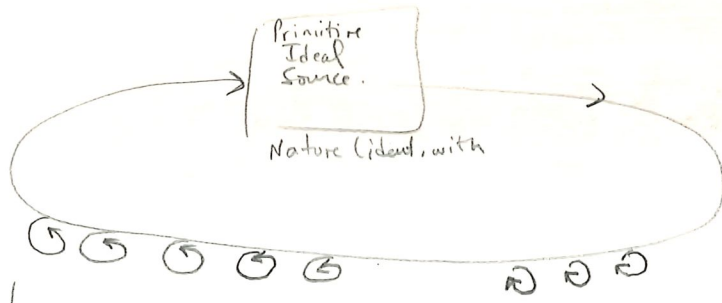
XIV

Contemporary theater similar to a religious rite or mass

- A. Audience doesn't always understand every word or why it is responding.
- B. Same of public concerts [Plaisir sacré]
  - i) "The written form of music in "L'Art pour tous" was for the intellectual mind, but, in its aural presentation, accessible to a vast public, its aesthetic value becomes religious. According to Richard Wagner, music can immediately display the essence of a world, whereas in all other arts this essence must pass through the public's intellect before being exhibited. The listener to music, through his most receptive organs, the senses, can fall into a dreamlike state 'essentially akin to that of hypnotic clairvoyance'" [Lewis <sup>195-6</sup> 1956]

Rich. Wagner on Music & Drama pp. 183-4, 186, 188-91

S.M. "Plaisir sacré"



### individual cycle

- - discontinuous, non-transitional movement between the two states...
- or perhaps the mind moves through the confronts separating the two aspects of each cycle before passing ~