This book is for Frédéric, Thomas and Christophe Lalaurie

CONTENTS

6 Preface
8 Introduction

21 Chapter One
POÉSIES DE STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ 1930–1932

61 Chapter Two
DESSINS, THÈMES ET VARIATIONS 1941–1943

103 Chapter Three
FLORILÈGE DES AMOURS DE RONSARD 1941–1948

143 Chapter Four
POÈMES DE CHARLES D’ORLÉANS 1942–1950

173 Chapter Five
PASIPHAÉ, CHANT DE MINOS 1943–1944

201 Chapter Six
LES FLEURS DU MAL 1939–1947

233 Chapter Seven
LETTRES PORTUGAISES 1945–1946

259 Chapter Eight
JAZZ 1941–1947

302 Conclusion
306 Notes
310 Bibliography
311 List of Illustrations
314 Acknowledgments
316 Index
Interest is growing in Matisse's books. They have been featured in major exhibitions and important biographical, bibliophilic and critical/theoretical works by Hilary Spurling, John Bidwell, Kathryn Brown and Alastair Sooke. *Matisse: The Books* contributes an interpretative reading of Matisse's eight major *livres d'artiste*, together with the bulk of their illustrations – never gathered before in a single volume – and a substantial sampling of their original texts. The chapters take one book at a time, beginning with the cover or wrapper, title spread and/or one or more choice images. Each includes a number of illustrations in their original sequence, followed by reproductions of a comprehensive selection of pages (also in sequence, but distinct from the chapter text). The aim is to convey a sense of the handling and enjoyment of Matisse's books as books – an experience hitherto reserved for private collectors or visitors to the rare-book rooms of a few heritage libraries.

The catalogue of Matisse's *œuvres illustrées*, produced in 1988 by his grandson Claude-Durhuait, lists all the published graphic work, from individual frontispieces to review illustrations and book-length engagements with literary texts (texts included). Of the last of these, *Matisse: The Books* presents the *livres d'artiste* published during the artist's lifetime, in which Matisse responds to pre-existing texts or creates pictorial and literary narratives of his own, and where his authorial involvement extends to every aspect of the books' making and printing as art objects. I have not included Matisse's illustrations for James Joyce's *Ulysses*, commissioned by the Limited Editions Club of New York in 1934, as Duthuit observes, 'Matisse never considered or spoke of Ulysses as one of "his" books, perhaps because his role was reduced to that of illustrator.' Paul Revery's *Visages* (1946) is also excluded, being the poet's response to pre-existing drawings by Matisse.

With the exception of *Poesies de Stéphane Mallarmé* (1932), Matisse's major books were created during the dark years of the Second World War. Often, their printing and distribution were impacted, with the result that their publication dates do not always reflect their creative chronology. At the height of the war, in February 1943, Matisse's letter describes work on four books at once. As a translator from French, specializing in art, I hoped to consolidate my literary credentials with a part-time thesis. Was there a text I might translate? I chose Ronsard's *Amours*, and explored how Matisse’s pictorial setting had shaped my choices. My research led me to more of Matisse's books. Canonical French poets (*Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé*) and contemporaries, including the maverick playwright Henry de Montherlant, were illustrated with an extraordinary corpus of lithograph drawings, linocuts, etchings…. I discovered, too, how little this work was known and read. Post-thesis, in 2013, the outline for *Matisse: The Books* took shape.

This study begins with Mallarmé and highlights the later books’ intimate connection to ‘Matisse’s war’ by presenting them, as far as possible, in the order of their creative genesis and making. The date spans indicated in each chapter title run from their emergence in the sources to publication.
Lausanne: Albert Skira & Cie. Éditeurs, 1932

Etchings on cream vélin d’Arches. Each page 33 × 25.1 cm (13 × 9 7⁄8 in.)

‘Printing completed on 25 October 1932 in Paris, at Léon Pichon for the typography, and R. Lacourrière for the engravings, limited to 145 numbered copies, signed by the artist. At thirty copies on Imperial Japan: five copies numbered 1 to 5, containing a suite... with remarques in black and an original drawing by the artist, and twenty-five copies numbered 6 to 30, containing a suite... with remarques in black; 95 copies numbered 31 to 125, on mould-made wove paper specially produced by the Arches factory; 20 non-commercial copies... for the artist and collaborators. The copper plates used for printing the illustrations were scored through by the artist in the presence of the publishers.’
Ses purs ongles très haut dédiant leur onyx,
L’Angoisse, ce minuit, rougissant, lampadophore,
Maint rêve vespéral brûlé par le Phénix
Que ne recueille pas de cinéraire amphore

Sur les créences, au salon vide : nuil pyx,
Aboli bibelot d’inanité sonore
(Car le Maître eût allé puiser des pleurs au Styx
Avec ce seul objet dont le Néant s’émoura).

Mais proche la croisée au nord vacante, un or
Agonise selon peut-être le décor
Des licornes ruant du feu contre une nixie,

Elle, défunte une en le miroir, encor
Qui, dans l’oubli fermé par le cadre, se fixe
De scintillations soit le septième.
A book in a box. Thick sheets of cream Arches paper, folded loose inside cream paper wrappers, enclosed within a folder of plain boards and all presented in a slipcase. A collection of over fifty poems, interspersed with twenty-four full-page illustrations and a further six head- and tailpieces placed above or below the text, occupying roughly half the printed page. Lines of poetry in large, decorative, mostly italic type with simple, seemingly hand-drawn quotation marks and contrastingly elaborate, calligraphic ampersands in place of the French word et throughout – already, we are instructed to read a decorative sign as a word. The illustrations are reproduced as etchings, their impossibly thin black lines like a spider’s web, an even spread of rhythmic curves that leaves abundant white space, perfectly balancing the airy pages of type. The poems are by the French Symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898), and the illustrations are by Henri Matisse. Mallarmé’s verse comprises allusive, cumulative ‘word-clouds’, sustained by almost hypnotically regular metre and rhyme schemes within which meanings cohere – an effect replicated precisely in Matisse’s illustrations, whose regular, pulsing lines gradually resolve to depict luxuriant vegetation, ocean swell, cloud forms or the rippling hair and full-bodied curves of female figures.

Matisse had published volumes of his own drawings in 1920 and 1925, and contributed illustrations to other publications – a 1914 book on Cézanne, and an anthology of writings about Paris in 1927. But in his 1946 article ‘Comment j’ai fait mes livres’ (How I made my books), he described the Poésies de Stéphane Mallarmé as ‘my first book’ – an authorial foray into the creation of a new, composite literary and visual text. Matisse did not select or re-order Mallarmé’s poems to the extent that he would later with Ronsard, Baudelaire or Charles d’Orléans, but his illustrations work with and in counterpoint to the text, to shape a parallel narrative of their own.

The book was commissioned in 1930 by the ambitious young publisher Albert Skira (1904–1973), as the follow-up and pendant to his first (exceedingly costly) venture, Ovid’s Metamorphoses, illustrated by Pablo Picasso. In April 1930, Skira drew up a contract during Matisse’s extended trip across the US to Tahiti. The artist would illustrate a retelling of classical myth, Jean de La Fontaine’s Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon (1669). A revised contract shortly afterwards stipulates virtually identical terms, but a different text: the collected poems of Stéphane Mallarmé. The change of heart was Matisse’s. He may have sought

Matisse is a difficult author. Not for nothing did he illustrate Mallarmé.
Louis Aragon, ‘Matisse-en-France’, 1943

On p. 20: Poésies de Stéphane Mallarmé, front cover
Previous spread: ‘La Chevelure’, pp. 126–9
Opposite: ‘Salut’, p. 4

On p. 25: Poésies de Stéphane Mallarmé
to disarm comparison with Picasso's interpretation of Ovid by illustrating a resolutely modernist poet — albeit through classic allusions abound, notably in ‘Héroïade’ and ‘L'après-midi d'un faune’ (The afternoon of a faun). He may also have been attracted by the legacy of modern art inspired by the latter poem: Mallarmé's 'Faune' had engendered Édouard Manet's decorated edition (1876), a woodcarving by Gauguin (1889), an orchestral work by Debussy (1892–4) and a ballet premiered by Diaghilev in May 1912, starring Nijinsky and designed by Léon Bakst. Matisse himself had depicted the poem's central figures more than twenty years before in a decorative wall ceramic (1907–8) and a controversial oil painting, Nymph and Satyr (1908, p. 11). By illustrating Mallarmé, Matisse would invite comparison with his own past work. The poet's prominent engagement with the book arts doubtless also appealed. Mallarmé's French translation of Edgar Allan Poe's poem The Raven had appeared with atmospheric illustrations by Manet (1875), and the preface to his experimental, typographically deconstructed poem Un coup de dès (‘A throw of the dice will never abolish chance’, 1897) expresses a fascination with the relationship between empty space and marks on the printed page in terms that had clearly inspired Matisse (see Introduction). The poem is absent from Matisse's Poésies, but the effect of its scattered lines cascading through white space underpins the illustrations throughout. Unlike Picasso, Matisse was determined to avoid any hint of a frame, even using copper plates larger than the page size in the final book, so that no indented plate mark would be left on the paper during printing.2

A letter to André Rouveyre [1941] reveals Matisse's sensitivity to Mallarmé's poetry, in his account of an over-egged recitation of the poem 'L'Azur' at a rowdy literary dinner held in 1912: 'It ended with [the actor] hollering... l'Azur, l'AZUR! l'AZUR, l'AZUR! l'AZUR! Matisse and his neighbour, Guillaume Apollinaire, disapproved: the piece had been written ‘with words carefully weighed’, so that ‘a plain, measured, almost impersonal delivery would have been more desirable’ 3 Matisse's friend and chronicler Louis Aragon identified synesthetic parallels between painter and poet in his essay ‘Matisse-en-France’ (the preface to Dessins, Thèmes et Variations, 1943): Matisse tells Aragon that he has long been ‘bothered’ by Mallarmé's poem 'Quelle soie aux baumes de temps' (What silk steeped in the balms of time),4 which he illustrated in the Poésies. The opening lines describe an antique silk robe decorated with a writhing mythical chimera, whose curves in no way match a lover’s naked torso, reflected in a mirror. ‘Suddenly,’ says Aragon, ‘I was struck by an obvious truth. The qua-train is a Matisse.’5 Mallarmé and Matisse use precisely similar ‘syntax’: the poem, like Matisse's odalisques of the 1920s and later, guides the eye first to the texture and pattern of fabric, and then to the woman's body, or its reflection. Matisse's linear etchings, devoid of tints and shadow, prompt further parallels. Walter Strachan, a leading scholar and collector of livres d'artiste, commented that every line ‘is pondered and placed with the same care as every word in Mallarmé's poetry. His lines and use of surrounding space match the inspired meticulousness of the poet.6

Matisse was conscious of the need to engage with the livre d’artiste on the heels of his friends Aristide Maillol, Pierre Bonnard, Georges Rouault and André Derain, not to mention Picasso.7 Skira's commission came at a time of disillusionment with painting for Matisse: his new focus on printmaking and line drew enthusiastic praise from his daughter, Marguerite, who wrote that her father worked with his etching point and copper plate as easily as with a pencil and paper.8

The book opens with ‘Salut’, a poem in the form of a drunken toast like those doubtless proposed back in 1912 at Matisse's literary banquet. The poet tips a cup decorated with mermaids, so that they drown in the bubbles of his drink. He pictures himself alone on the fearlessly through winter storms, while his companions stand in the prow. The image is widely perceived as a band of creative souls, steering the vessel of the avant-garde through rough seas and high weather, deliciously intoxicated, pinning their hopes and fears to ‘le blanc souci de notre toile’ (the ‘anxious white of our canvas’). These closing words evoke a ship's sail, a painter's stretcher or a blank page. For Matisse – a trailblazing, often bitterly controversial artist launching into a new adventure in books, behind some of his closest associates – the poem had particular resonance. Turning the page, his first picture breaks like a crashing wave. Rippling lines and generous curves describe a statuesque, naked woman, running with her arms flung high and wide. Long strands of hair stream behind her on the wind. She would be the picture of freedom and strength, but for the context of the book: the woman moves from right to left, against the ‘direction of travel’ through the pages ahead, and twists to glance back over her shoulder. Perhaps she is running away? The picture captures the mix of jeopardy and majesty in ‘Salut’.

Over the page, Matisse’s poem ‘Le Guignon’ (The Scourge) and its accompanying headpiece pack a literal punch. In a dramatic change of scale, a life-sized fist, huge on the page, clutches a thick shaft – spear, pen or brush?9 – while the vertical lines of the wrist frame the title. The dread inspiration of the white canvas is no more: here, the ‘dazed herd of humanity’ marches beneath a banner of ‘Black wind’, their only deliverance a ‘mighty angel’ of Death towering on the horizon, sword in hand. The titular ‘Scourge’ is a tyrant monarch, his downtrodden people scorned by more enlightened souls. The herd's attempts at insurrection are risible acts of self-harm: ‘ridiculously lynched, themselves, from the lantern’s arm’. The immense raised fist is the poem's only visual accompaniment – an image with overt political overtones in early 1930s Europe and subsequently, referencing the brutality of the Ancien Régime, the rise of Fascism and the moves afoot to conduct both. In Germany, the fist had been adopted as the symbol of the Roter Frontkämpferbund, a Communist, antifascist paramilitary organization established in 1924; it would soon become internationally known as the salute of the...
Communist resistance to General Franco in the Spanish Civil War.

Matisse was just back from his sea voyage to America and Tahiti – deliberately with no work to show, but conscious that his impressions would inform everything he did thereafter. The thickset, muscular female figure at the beginning of the Poésies establishes a type for the rest of the book, inspired by the women of Tahiti and associated in Matisse’s mind with release from the trappings of ‘civilization’. He wrote to his wife, Amélie, that they reminded him of sculptures by Aristide Maillol, noting wryly that were he (Matisse) to draw them, their forms would be construed as clumsy and inartistic.10 Together, the poems and pictures in the book’s opening pages crystallize imagery that resonated with Matisse’s experience of Depression-era America, his voyage to the South Seas, and the politics of his day. The people of Tahiti seemed free and strong, far removed from the banner-waving paramilitary factions at home in Europe or the ‘huddled masses’ (kinsfolk to Mallarmé’s ‘dazed herd’) inscribed on the towering Statue of Liberty, past which Matisse sailed on the evening of 4 March 1930. Yet the Tahitians lived under their own Scourge: French colonial domination.

Mallarmé’s next poem is the picturesque nocturne ‘Apparition’, a memory of a moonlit walk on cobbled streets lined with weeping flowers, and the sudden apparition (real or imagined?) of his love, laughing with sunbeams in her hair and a hat on her head. Matisse’s full-page illustration conjures memories of his own: his model Antoinette Arnaud wearing a broad-brimmed, ostrich-plumed hat (1919). Thick ringlets frame the girl’s face and her long, columnar neck. She is the precise opposite of the earlier, running figure: static, fully clothed, slimmer, and with facial features set in a sweet, winning smile, although her eyes are unnervingly blank. The simple, unifying arc of her nose and eyebrow suggests a minimalist African mask from Matisse’s collection, accessorized with a Western wig and hat – a confrontation with which the artist had experimented, sensationally, almost twenty years before, in his 1913 Portrait of Madame Matisse.11 The girl is as superficially pretty as her textual counterpart, but her empty eyes conjure the skeletal Scourge in ‘Le Guignon’, who just happens to wear a feathered felt hat – ‘coiffé d’un feutre à plume’. Acclimatized, now, to reading Matisse’s pictures with the poems they follow, face or precede, we also readily connect her imma-

Above: ‘Le Guignon’, p. 9
head at her fleshy belly, pendulous breasts and hairy armpits – another detail that conjures the corpse-like Scourge, who has ‘wrigling worms’ for underarm hair. Our angle of vision emphasizes the hair on her head, neither long, straight and free-flowing, nor elaborately ringleted, but short and kinky, in tight, regular rows that echo the frill on the princess’s bodice – a detail that identifies her as Black. Sprawling with her thighs raised, we wonder if she has been pushed to the ground, punished like the clown in the title of Mallarmé’s adjacent poem, ‘Le pitre châtié’.

Picture and poem alike contrast strikingly with the genteel, tea-time scene in ‘Placet futile’. The narrator – a carnival clown weary of precisely the artifice and histrionics enacted there – finds a ‘window in the canvas wall’ of his circus tent and bounds away into the real world (inevitably, we picture Matisse’s running woman), where his mother-of-pearl mask melts in the heat of a passionate, carnal encounter. The images – an opening cut into canvas, the dissolution of artifice – have an obvious resonance for Matisse, painter of windows and relentless seeker after hard-won authenticity in art. Like the princess in the hat, the etching of the naked Black model connects both forward and back. The picture is calculated to shock, but Mallarmé’s next poem, ‘Une nègresse’, is more shocking still. In the grip of demonic possession, a woman seeks to introduce an unhappy child to ‘new and criminal fruits’. Rolling on her back like a ‘crayed elephant’ with her ‘victim’ between her legs, she presents her vulva, described (disturbingly beautifully) as ‘the palate of a strange mouth, pale and pink like an ocean shell’. The poem was as problematic in Mallarmé’s day as it is to modern readers, omitted from both the 1899 and 1913 edition of his collected poems. Its inclusion here is a deliberate choice on Matisse’s part.

Taken in sequence, we may read ‘Placet futile’ and ‘Une nègresse’ as pendant, equally ludicrous extremes of ‘civilization’ and ‘savagery’, either side of the pivotal sonnet ‘Le pitre châtié’, which effects a transition from the artifice and correctness of the one to the raw physicality and transgression of the other. A connective tissue of motifs (the feathered felt hat, the underarm hair) links Mallarmé’s princess and ‘negress’ to the Scourge in ‘Le Guignon’ – and hence to the scourge of colonialism. Matisse had already explored the West’s problematic embrace of tribal and indigenous art, and, as his 1913 painting of Amélie demonstrates so remarkably, the question was further connected to his exploration of authenticity. Indigenous art offered inspiring, expressive, abstract forms, but was also the object of significant cultural appropriation by Western artists. Matisse’s remarkable sequence of words and pictures tests these issues to their limits. Just as problematic in Mallarmé’s day as it is to modern readers, omitted from both the 1899 and 1913 edition of his collected poems. Its inclusion here is a deliberate choice on Matisse’s part.
pictures as illustrations in the conventional sense. But the effect was arrived at accidentally. In ‘Matisse-en-France’, Aragon tells how Matisse had made preparatory studies of a lily (named in the poem), but had unintentionally produced a bouquet of clematis when executing the final version, ‘the same number, in the same arrangement...a resurgent memory...of a hedge of white clematis...which had seemed inimitable to him at the time. And there in the print, they blossomed suddenly, quite perfect.’15 Aragon links the memory to a process described in Mallarmé’s ‘Las de l’amer repos’ (Weary of bitter idleness), the next poem illustrated by Matisse, a few pages along. In the book’s second reference to a painted seascape, the poet declares that he will imitate a Chinese porcelain painter whose ‘pale, azure line’ captures the scent of a flower, imprinted upon his soul as a child. He conjures a lake beneath a sky of untouched porcelain, framed by reeds drawn as three tall brush strokes. Matisse's etching achieves precisely that minimalist, calligraphic quality: the tailpiece features another life-sized hand, mirroring the reader's own as we turn the page (p. 43): not a clenched fist, but the porcelain painter's fingers and thumb holding a delicate brush while drawing on a cup. In Aragon's words, ‘The meaning of Mallarmé's passage becomes luminously clear in the light of Matisse.’ The poem invokes drawing from nature and memory – the quasi-automatic transcription of intensely personal impressions – as the antithesis of the ‘voracious’ art of ‘cruel’ nations, which devours and regurgitates its own history, or the art of other cultures.

The lament of a solitary bell-ringer, labouring to produce a sound that barely reaches distant, indifferent ears, is heard in ‘Le sonneur’. One day, he will kick away the stone he uses to reach the pull and hang himself. Matisse's etching acknowledges and transfigures the poem's yearning for oblivion: a figure very like the earlier, running woman sits with her head resting on her hand, fast asleep (p. 45). Her lively curves roll and tumble diagonally down the page. This ‘lutteuse endormie’ (sleeping combatant) is addressed in the opening line of the next poem, ‘Tristesse d’été’ (Summer sadness). Mallarmé laments his combative lover's sense of the impossibility of eternal union. He is hurt, and longs for oblivion. He might drown in the ‘warm river’ of her hair; he wishes his heart were unfeeling like the azure sky – and so comes ‘L’Azur’, the poem Matisse remembered from the boisterous literary banquet. Like the bell-ringer, the poet experiences ‘a sterile desert of pain’ beneath the sky's appalling indifference. He prays for a shroud of grey fog to close over him like a ‘great, silent ceiling’, and revisits the ‘human herd’ of ‘Le Guignon’, not downtrodden here, but complacent. He will give up the fight and wait for death with his fellow men, yawning like cattle in the straw. The poem’s ‘turn’ occurs as we turn the page and discover Matisse’s next picture. The call of the ‘azure’ – a vocation, the blue sky of inspiration? – rings out like a peal of bells, and the poet resolves to answer. Matisse's etching harks back to the imagery of ‘Salut’, although the weather is kinder by far. A rigged steamer like the Papeete rises on the swell, its prow breaking the thin line of the horizon. A lone figure has advanced from the poop deck to the prow, standing confidently with arms outstretched on the rail. The distance travelled is plain to see: Matisse has found his sea legs, in and through the making of his book. Over the page, Mallarmé’s ‘Brise marine’ (Ocean breeze) celebrates renewal and the pursuit of fresh inspiration: ‘Je partiral! Steamer balançant ta mature, / Lève l’ancre pour exotique nature! [I shall go! Steamer, with your swaying masts, Weigh anchor for the exotic wild!]. There may be shipwreck and storms ahead, but the poem ends on a note of heady excitement: ‘ô mon cœur entend le chant des matelots!’ (O my heart, listen to the sailors’ song!).

The central section of the Poésies includes Mallarmé's dramatic poem ‘Héroïdade’ and the narrative ‘L’après-midi d’un faune’. Matisse's etchings develop established motifs, beginning with the full-bodied, long-haired nude, now lying on her stomach and gazing at her reflection in a pond or river. Thinly etched grass and reeds allude to the porcelain painter's artistry, while the woman's body dives across the page, echoing the flow of her earlier, seated pose, and the cascading typography of Mallarmé's poem Un coup de dès n'abolira jamais le hazard. A lock of hair falls forward over her left ear. Mallarmé began ‘Héroïdade’ in 1864, at just twenty-two years old, and revisited the poem throughout his life. The biblical Herodias, mother of Salomé, has been raised from the grave, Matisse's setting begins with her nurse's cry of
recognition: ‘Tu vis! Ou vois-je ici l’ombre d’une princesse?’ (You live! Or do I see the shadow of a princess?). Like the doubting apostle Thomas, she seeks proof, but like the resurrected Christ, Herodias is not ready to be touched or even gazed upon directly. Throughout, the language enacts a kind of metamorphosis: Herodias is associated with glittering gems, stars, ice and snow. She rejects the life of the flesh and the trappings of seduction – perfume or styled hair. Dismissing her servant, she asks her to light torches and close the shutters: ‘the seraphic azure smiles in the deep panes, and me, I hate the beautiful azure!’ The passage stands in striking proximity to Matisse’s visualization of ‘L’Azur’, an image full of natural light and fresh air. Herodias’s self-centred retreat is a Coleridgean ‘nightmare Life-in-Death’. The poem addresses important moral and spiritual themes revisited by Matisse in his later books, most notably his own text for *Jazz*. His etchings capture Herodias’s serene self-absorption and her rejection of worldly artifice: the Arcadian opening picture echoes the myth of Narcissus, and the poem’s headpiece shows a jumble of cast-off pearls, ribbons, a tiara and what look like a belt and hand mirror. Further into the poem, the naked figures of Herodias and her nurse form a beautiful, circular composition (p. 46). Herodias sits squarely on the ground, staring past the viewer with empty eyes like the princess in ‘Placet futile’ while her nurse rises from a kneeling position, reaching to fix her mistress’s tumbling hair. The women’s arms describe a broad circle, framing their perfectly round breasts and the spheres of Herodias’s beads – her one concession to vanity.

In the poem’s opaque closing lines, Herodias says *adieu* to her nurse and waits, alone, for ‘some unknown thing’. She reflects on the lies issuing from the ‘naked flower’ of her lips, and the pain of childhood reveries, like ‘cold gems’. Matisse’s magnificent tailpiece shows the oval of her face and her neatly parted hair drawn in a single, looping line. A few delicate marks define her features. As elsewhere, her eyes are unnervingly blank, although a couple of tiny lines on the lower lids confuse us – perhaps they are closed? Is she staring expectantly or shutting herself in? She is the picture of serene but ice-cold resolve.

The close identification of Matisse-the-artist with Mallarmé-the-poet is plain as we turn the title page of *Espaces-midi d’un faune*, set in classicizing type with the letter V replacing the ‘u’ in ‘faune’ (p. 47). Matisse’s etching and headpiece revisit the ‘twin’ female nudes of *Hérodiade*, reclining languidly among the clouds in the poem’s frontispiece and leaning companionably, almost conspiratorially, close in the headpiece, above the faun’s opening words: ‘These nymphs, I will perpetuate them. So bright, of flesh so light it turns and tumbles in the air.’ The women’s poses recall figures from *The Dance II* (1932), created at the same time as the *Poésies*, or the earlier Divisionist painter *Luxe, calme et volupté* (1904). Matisse had perpetuated nymphs like these for almost three decades. Other figures float like a memory of paintings past, conjured in the swirling notes of the faun’s double pipes (p. 49). Above him, a figure with
outstretched arms grasps the waist of a woman huddled on her side, in direct reference to Matisse’s *Nymph and Satyr* (1908, p. 11), although the couple here are both women, and the ‘lunge’ has none of the satyr’s menace. Matisse’s miniature retrospective precedes the faun’s exhortation to the nymphs to ‘flesh out our various MEMORIES’ (the word is capitalized in all editions of the poem). The adjacent etching shows the faun toppling a nymph as he straddles her thigh and thrusts his left hand between her legs (p. 50). Unlike the wholly human satyr in the painting of 1908, this creature has a pert, erect tail and goat’s haunches, echoing the faun in Matisse’s very first depiction of the scene, the wall ceramic of 1907–8. Delicate strokes of hair lick at the faun’s contours like tongues of flame, in a vivid evocation of sexual arousal. The impassive nymph and self-engrossed faun prompt reflection on the artist–model relationship, a transaction that Matisse himself would later posit as a kind of rape. In a hand-written comment on an article by Aragon about the impact of the journey to Tahiti, the artist noted that the presence of a model was essential ‘to maintain a level of emotion, a fluctuation that would culminate in an act of violation. Of who? Of myself, of that softening of my sensibility when I consider a pleasing subject.’ In the poem’s final etching, the faun stalks away on his hircine hindquarters, dangling a bunch of grapes in his upraised right hand (p. 51). The picture condenses two images from the poem: the faun’s description of translucent grape skins, sucked of their flesh and held against the light, and his parting words, ‘Couple, farewell, I shall go, to see the shadow you have become.’ Both suggest a meditation on art as the leavings of lived experience, beautiful to behold but emptied of its essence; a shadow.

Mallarmé locates ‘l’après-midi d’un faune’ at the heart of his collected poems, to be read as a hazy reverie – a slumber from which we wake and return to civilization. The next poem and etching point the way back, and develop the theme of past experience revisited in art (p. 52). A couple approach arm-in-arm along an Edenic path, through trees very like those framing the Ship Portrait in the etching for ‘Les fenêtres’. Mallarmé’s poem – paradoxically titled ‘Prose’ and subtitled ‘pour Des Esseintes’ (the aesthete anti-hero of Joris-Karl Huysmans’s cult novel *À rebours*, 1884) – recalls a lovers’ stroll. Together, poem and picture address the unreliability of memories and their creative expression in art: ‘Nous sommes deux, je le maintiens’ ([There were just two, I’m quite certain], insists the narrator. His recollection of their united face as they stepped out on their walk (‘Nous promenons notre visage’) is both confirmed and undermined by Matisse’s faceless couple, whose silhouettes blend into one.

Two poems describing ladies’ fans complete our return to civilization. One belongs to Madame Mallarmé, the other to the poet’s daughter. The first is paired with an extraordinary, minimalist etching, in barely twenty lines, of an elegant young woman with bobbed hair under a cloche hat, holding a simple fan (p. 53, top). The unearthly quality of her empty eyes is accentuated by her missing hands and etiolated arms, oddly reminiscent of the faun’s spindly shanks. The collar of her dress resembles a pair of wings, a recurrent image in the poem. Poetry soars on the wings of inspiration, says Mallarmé, but the verse brings us firmly down to earth as he describes Madame Mallarmé’s ever-busy hands, flouting her fan or dusting some speck of ‘invisible ash’. In Matisse’s etching, the fan and hand are one, reinforcing our sense of a fashionable, modern woman teetering on the brink of metamorphosis. In the second poem, a fan addresses the poet’s daughter, Geneviève, begging to be clasped forever in her hand (p. 53, bottom). Matisse’s tailpiece recants the tale of gems and accessories at the beginning of ‘Hérodiade’: a fan lies open like a fluttering wing, with a pair of discarded lady’s evening gloves. As in the poem, their owner has set them aside and moved on to other entertainments. Mallarmé describes a brocaded, but we do not see it here – Geneviève is wearing it on her wrist, evoked with tactile force in the folds of the limp gloves; a memory of flesh, like the faun’s translucent grape skins.

We remain in Mademoiselle’s presence as we turn to the page a new section of poems accompanied by two full-page portraits. The first shows a young woman’s face and neck tumbling hair and the folds of a knotted scarf. Her smile extends to her warm, fully drawn eyes. She is the ‘Mademoiselle’ addressed overhead in Mallarmé’s ‘Feuillet d’album’. The poet tries to capture her beauty in the notes of his ‘several flutes [like the faun, earlier] but admits defeat when he gazes on her face and hears her ‘nataure, clear and childlike laughter’. Mallarmé engages with the trope of art’s failure to capture the living model’s charms, although his beautiful portrait does a very fine job. In the second portrait, a young woman (the same?) with noticeably more tousled hair seems to lie half-awake in bed (p. 55). The poet hopes she is ready for his embrace. As in the tailpiece portrait for ‘Hérodiade’, the woman’s eyes are blank, a graphic invitation to read them as open or closed.

The final section of the *Poésies* opens with a suite of four sonsnets, and one of the best-known of all Matisse’s graphic works. The stupendous image of a swan, bearing and spreading its powerful wings, resonates back and forth, like all the book’s full-page etchings (p. 56). We think of the frequent references to wings and feathers, and the thick stem of a gladiolus, like a swan’s neck, in ‘Les fleurs’. Two pages ahead, ‘Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui’ (The virginal, living and lovely day) is perhaps Mallarmé’s best-known sonnet. Like the swan in the poem, struggling to free itself from a layer of ice, Matisse’s exquisitely minimalistic bird is immediately recognizable as both a Platonic form [Mallarmé’s ‘Cygne’ with a capital ‘C’) and a symbol of jealousy, ‘threshing the whole length of its neck’. It is also, of course, a metaphor for the artist striving to break his bonds ‘here below’ and soar on the wings of inspiration. Matisse’s etching is a powerful visualization of his own and Mallarmé’s sensitivity to the white space of the page. The radiating lines of the bird’s wing and tail feathers stab at the edges and corners, while the great neck coils to fit the available space. Mallarmé’s poem magnifies the ‘blanc souci’ of the canvas sail-cum-blank page in ‘Salut’, to invite the reader to read them as open or closed.

As in the tailpiece portrait for ‘Hérodiade’, the woman’s eyes are blank, a graphic invitation to read them as open or closed.
freedom or flight, so here the physical confines of the page both emphasize and restrict the bird’s exceptional power.

The swan is a hard act to follow, but Matisse progresses confidently to a stupendous trio of portraits, each gazing directly at the reader. The smiling Mademoiselle of a few pages back is turned quite literally on her head for Mallarmé’s poem ‘La chevelure’, inserted here by Matisse as the culmination of a sequence of ‘album leaves’ and sonnets (p. 23). The Poésies draw to a close with Mallarmé’s ‘Tombeaux’, eulogies to the presiding genius of Edgar Allan Poe and Baudelaire. Matisse zooms closer each time, in a crescendo of intensity. The young insouciante’s features are lost in the coils and waves of her tumbling mane, but Poe’s hair is mostly off the page, focusing attention on his sad eyes and barely perceptible smile (p. 57). Baudelaire’s hypnotic, ferocious glance – a personification of the unblinking Azur throughout? – looms large as life, its play of vertical and horizontal lines emphasizing the tight space of the page. For Mallarmé, Baudelaire’s poetry was the bedrock of his inspiration, while Matisse could not avoid the gaze of the champion of authenticity and modernity in painting, whose Salon reviews defined the future of independent art in France.

The penultimate illustrated sonnet is ‘Quelle soie aux baumes de temps’, the poem hailed by Aragon as ‘a Matisse’. A naked model sits in a favourite Matissean pose, arms folded behind her head, one knee raised and her other ankle tucked beneath (p. 59). Her hairstyle, physique and placing on the page echo ‘Madame Mallarmé’ flitting her fan: the near, oval face is framed by the same bobbed hair, while the frill at her hip hints that her flounced dress has been cast off. As in the earlier picture, the undulating line suggests cloud contours, from which the model’s torso rises. Matisse told Aragon that the picture was inspired by a huge cumulus cloud he had photographed in Tahiti. In Mallarmé’s poem, a lover slips out of her silken robe, its undulating print surpassed by her naked torso. Outside on ‘their avenue’, tattered or bullet-pocked flags stand for turbulent times. This poem was written, revised and published over a period that included the 1870 Siege of Paris and the Commune of 1871, yet it celebrates peacetime domesticity. We might picture Monet’s famous image of Paris’s rue Montorgeuil ablaze with flags on 30 June 1878, for a national celebration of ‘peace and work’.

‘The etching captures Mallarmé’s focus on his lover’s body to the exclusion of the world outside, and visualizes his wordplay (torse – a ‘twisting torso’); but it also connects with Matisse’s pictorial narrative through the pages of the book. The model’s unnaturally thin shanks (like Madame Mallarmé’s arms) recall those of the faun, a visual echo aided by her invisible feet and the curl of her cast-off garment, which might also suggest a tail.

Matisse’s final etching contrasts with the model’s sparsely drawn curves in ‘Quelle soie…’. A huge, fluted Ionic column thrusts skywards through billowing foliage and branches. Tall and straight, although plainly a ruin, the column visualizes Mallarmé’s references to historical conquest and downfall; but its realism and architectural detail are an alien presence in the book. Like the accompanying poem, ‘A la nue accablante…’, Matisse’s drawing subverts the column as an image of victory. The capital is drawn in accurate perspective, but the entablature is not. The image is an illusion, and the capital’s disproportionately vast size in relation to the surrounding trees brings it crashing down. The thin, trailing clouds behind the ancient stone echo the ‘white hairs’ of salt foam described in Mallarmé’s poem, lapping at a beached wreck. The closing reference to a drowned mermaid is a poignant echo of the same image in ‘Salut’, at the beginning of the book. Matisse’s image heralds the ‘ruine, par mille écumes bénie’ (a ruin, anointed by a thousand foaming waves) in the book’s last sonnet. The poet closes one of his books – dismissed colloquially as bouquins – with a reference to the Greek island of Paphos, famed for its temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of wisdom. On a cold night, in a silent house, he stands with one foot on his carved chimneypiece, meditating on the glorious past and poking the embers of a fire (‘our love’). The scene may well have impressed Matisse as he processed his impressions of Tahiti.
The fireside rumination brings the book to its literal close. Night falls at the end of a long, bright day.

The shimmering light of Matisse’s etchings on the printed page posed an immense technical challenge for their printer, Roger Lacourière. Matisse sent his daughter, Marguerite, to oversee the printing, but felt the results were ‘drained of their lifeblood’. His desired fine lines looked ‘furry’ on the early proofs. The printer’s lengthy reply conveys his exasperation, and the difficulties involved:

‘I did the best I could…so would be grateful if you could detail the precise complaints…. For me, it was a matter of bringing out a fine line…on paper that is tantamount to blotting paper when damp, and which on the one hand has a tendency…to catch tiny fibres on the bars left on the plate, so that if you aim for a very bright, sharp effect, you risk having a dry [insufficiently inked] plate with empty grooves; if you leave more ink, you can get a decent line but reveal all the imperfections in the copper, and with a tinted ground. So a middle way had to be found, for each of 5,600 proofs, in a very short time.’

Lacourière said he had shown the book to several bibliophiles, who found it ‘very beautiful, fine and strong’ nonetheless. Matisse remained apprehensive. He was approaching his sixty-third birthday when the *Poésies* went into production, with an international reputation to defend – his photograph had appeared on the cover of *Time* shortly after his trip to the US and Tahiti. The book, and his decorative mural *The Dance II*, were significant new departures. He wrote to Lacourière that if the Mallarmé was poorly received, he would be vindicated by his maquette (a compilation of preparatory layouts, drawings and rejected compositions), which he hoped might be acquired by France’s Bibliothèque Nationale. The comment suggests that his concerns were not merely technical, but related to possible criticism of his interpretation or stylistic choices. The presentation maquette was in fact bought by the American collector Etta Cone, who, as Matisse had hoped, arranged immediately for it to be exhibited in New York, where the carefully assembled chronicle of the making of the *Poésies* attracted much attention. Prior to publication, Matisse’s anxiety glimmers in pre-emptive comments to Tériade, for an article published in 1931. Good poetry, he says, has no need of skilled declamation, nor the response of a fine composer or painter – ‘but it is agreeable to see a good poet inspire the imagination of another artist, so that the latter might create an equivalent.’ The artist should not ‘follow the text word for word’ but work ‘with his own sensibility enriched by his contact with the poet…. I would love to be able to say simply, after illustrating the poems of Mallarmé: “This is what I have done after having read Mallarmé with pleasure.”’

A decade later, André Rouveyre began to plan an article about Matisse’s images of swans. The artist wrote to advise him to show ‘the two versions [of the swan] that precede the finished etching, and the finished etching itself’. Again, Matisse is concerned to ‘show his working’. Rouveyre’s esteem for the book as a whole is warmly expressed in his letters: ‘The swan is of unparalleled beauty in its human realism, and shimmering all over, too, with a divine energy.’

Writing in 1951, not quite twenty years after publication, Alfred H. Barr Jr described Matisse’s *Poésies de Stéphane Mallarmé* as ‘one of his happiest works in any medium, and one of the most beautiful illustrated books ever printed’. 
Transparence, la fleur qu’il a sentie, enfant,
Au filigrane bleu de l’âme se griffant.
Et, la mort telle avec le seul rêve du sage,
Serein, je vais choisir un jeune paysage
Que je peindrais encore sur les taies, distraint.
Une ligne d’or ge mince & pâle serait
Un lac, parmi le ciel de porcelaine nue,
Un clair croissant perdu par une blanche nue
Trempe sa corne calme en la glace des eaux,
Non loin de trois grands cils d’émeraude, rouges.
LE SONNEUR

Cependant que la cloche éveille sa voix claire
À l’air pur & limpide & profond du matin
Et passe sur l’enfant qui jette pour lui plaire
Un angelus parmi la lavande & le thym,

Le sonneur effleuré par l’oiseau qu’il éclaire,
Chevauchant tristement en geignant du latin
Sur la pierre qui tend la corde séculaire,
N’entend descendre à lui qu’un tintement lointain.

Je suis cet homme. Hélas ! de la nuit désireuse,
J’ai beau tirer le câble à sonner l’Idéal,
De froids pêchés s’ébat un plumage fiole,

Et la voix ne me vient que par bribes & creuse !
Mais, un jour, fatigué d’avoir enfin tiré,
O Satan, j’éterai la pierre & me pendrai.

‘Le sonneur’ / ‘Tristesse d’été’, pp. 36–7
LE FAVNE

Ces nymphe, je les veux perpétuer.

Si clair,
Leur incarnat léger, qu’il voltige dans l’air
Assoupit de sommeils taillis.

Aimai-je un rêve?

Opposite: ‘Héroïade’, p. 63
Above: ‘Caprice mol d’un loisir’, p. 75
Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé

Chapter One

'L'après-midi d'un faune', pp. 76–7

Mon doute, amas de nuit ancienne, s'achève
En maint rameau subtil, qui, demeuré les vrais
Bois mêmes, prouve, bèlas! que bien seul je m'offrais
Pour triompher la faute idéale de rose....

Réfléchisons...
ou ni les femmes dont tu glores
Figuèrent un sommaire de tes sens fabuleux!
Saumâtre, l'illusion s'échappe des yeux bleus
Et froides, comme une source en pleurs, de la plus chaîne:
Mais, s'entre tout sommeurs, dis-tu qu'elle contrafie
Comme brise du jour chaude dans ta loison!
Que non! par l'immobile & lasse pâmoison
Suffoquant de chaleurs le matin frais s'il lutte,
Ne murmure point d'eau que ne vire ma fâche
Au bosquet arrosé d'accords; & le seul vent
Hors du deux tuyaux prompt à s'exalter avant
Qu'il disperse le son dans une plus aride,
C'est, à l'horizon pas renué d'une ride,
Le visible & serin souffle artificiel
De l'inspiration qui regage le ciel.

O bords siciliens d'un calme marnage
Qu'à l'envi des soleils ma vanité scançage,

76
Chapter One

Opposite: 'Prose, pour Dos Esseintes', unpaginated
Top: 'Éventail', pp. 96–7
Above: 'Autre Éventail', pp. 99, 100

ÉVENTAIL
DE STEPHANE MALLARME

Au cœur pour languir
Rien qu’un baume en ces ais
La fleur vers le dégagé
Du lieu qui précède.

Ah, ma douce j’ai creur l’intérieur,
Et le droit, et l’ordre du cœur,
Te peuples même à lui
Longue vie à ti restant.

Lentement (l’un va redansant
Maintenant que tu m’aimes
Un peu d’amour contrepent
J’aurai une autre vie plus)

Temps de l’algébrisme
Bertie te maitze cise pesant.

AUTRE ÉVENTAIL
DE STEPHANE MALLARME

O mousse, pour que je plongé
As par dûaux sais chenêves,
Toi qui par ces belles immobles,
Quand nos âmes dans la main.

Une flèche de reflets
Le ciel à ta figure première
Dans la cime peinture resté
S’affiche silencieuse.

L’ange* est ici qui pleure
L’ange comme un grand lacet
Qui, de sa mère par personne,
Ne fait jalous et l’enkrate.
RONDELS

I

Rien au réveil que vous n'ayez,
Envisagé de quelque moue
Pire si le rire secoue
Votre aile sur les oreillers,

Indifféremment sommeillez
Sans crainte qu'une baleine avance
Rien au réveil que vous n'ayez
Envisagé de quelque moue

Tous les rêves émerveillés
Quand cette beauté les déjoue
Ne produisent fleur sur la joue,
Dans l'œil diamants impayés,
Rien au réveil que vous n'ayez.
LE TOMBEAU D’ÉDgar POë

Te voici. Loin d’elle, elle s’est dissipée.
Le PCIe errait avec un fantôme au
Son, éclairant de ses yeux son père comte
Qui se sera réveillé dans cette voix étrange.

Eux, comme au soleil, d’Edgar qu’ils jalousent l’ange
Demeure avec nos frères par une rue de la ruelle
Pénètre dans le vent dans son entrelacs noir l’entrelacs.

Et en de de la voix brillante, il s’est
Et en de de sa voix ou est le hurlement
Dans la nuit de la belle femme s’éteint

L’autre fois en bas dans des détails ombreux
Qui se gonflent de brumes contre à jamais la haine
Aux eaux sèches du Bosphore après dans la nuit.

Opposé: ‘Le Cygne’, p. 123
Quelle voie aux baumes de temps
Où la Chimère s’est éteinte
Vaut la torse et native nue
Que, bors de ton miroir, tu tends!

Les traits de drapéaux méditants
S’excitent dans noire avenue :
Moi, j’ai ta chevelure nue
Pour enfouir mon yeux contents.

Non! La bouche ne sera sûre
De rien goûter à sa morsure,
S’il ne fait, ton prunier amant,

Dans la considérable touffe
Expire, comme un diamant,
Le cri des Gloires qu’il étouffe.