

Stéphane Mallarmé: Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui

The poem, which opens with one of the most famous lines in French literature, has also the reputation of being very difficult. First, the original text:

Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui
Va-t-il nous déchirer avec un coup d'aile ivre
Ce lac dur oublié que hante sous le givre
Le transparent glacier des vols qui n'ont pas fui!
Un cygne d'autrefois se souvient que c'est lui
Magnifique mais qui sans espoir se délivre
Pour n'avoir pas chanté la région ou vivre
Quand du stérile hiver a resplendi l'ennui.
Tout son col secouera cette blanche agonie
Par l'espace infligée a l'oiseau qui le nie,
Mais non l'horreur du sol où le plumage est pris.
Fantôme qu'à ce lieu son pur éclat assigne,
Il s'immobilise au songe froid de mépris
Que vêt parmi l'exil inutile le Cygne.

Literal Translation

The literal translation is clear in outline, though there are difficulties in detail:

The virgin, vivid and beautiful today
Will it tear for us with a blow of its drunken wing
This hard, forgotten lake that haunts beneath the frost
The transparent glacier of flights that have not fled!
A swan of other times remembers that it is he
Magnificent but without hope of freeing himself
For not having sung the region where to live
When of the sterile winter glistened the tediousness.
His whole neck will shake off this white agony
By space inflicted on the bird which denies it
But not the horror of the soil in which his plumage is caught.
Phantom that to this place his pure brightness assigns,
It immobilizes itself in the cold dream of scorn
That clothes during the useless exile of the Swan.