Scholars regard Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) as one of France’s pre-eminent poets and I was excited to come across two of his rarest publications here in the State Library of New South Wales collections.

One of these is the groundbreaking 1897 poem, *Un coup de de?fs jamais n’abolira de hasard* or *A throw of the dice will never abolish chance*. This ambitious work is full of esoteric symbolism and disjointed syntax written in free verse. It also disregards typographical conventions such as left alignment and uniform type. As you can see from the image the text cascades across the pages with some words and phrases emphasized through a larger font size while others switch between roman and italic type.

A version was published in 1897 in the literary review *Cosmopolis* but it was not until 1914, 16 years after his death, that it was printed in a book form which reflected Mallarmé’s exacting vision for the typographical layout and format of the poem. Before his death Mallarme? had worked on a deluxe edition, illustrated with lithographs by Odilon Redon [2], with the firm of Lahure. This deluxe edition was abandoned after his death. The proof sheets and prints were sold by the publisher.

Upon seeing proofs for the poem, the French poet, essayist, and philosopher, Paul Valéry [3] wrote,

> It seemed to me that I was looking at the form and pattern of a thought, placed for the first time in finite space. Here space itself truly spoke, dreamed, and gave birth to temporal forms. Expectancy, doubt, consternation, all were visible things. . . . There amid murmurs, insinuations, visual thunder, a whole spiritual tempest carried page by page to the extremes of thought, to a point of ineffable rupture - there the marvel took place; there on the very paper some indescribable scintillation of final stars trembled infinitely pure in an inter-conscious void; and there on the same void with them, like some new form of matter
arranged in systems or masses or trailing lines, coexisted the Word! I was struck dumb by this unprecedented arrangement. It was as if a new asterism had proffered itself in the heavens; as if a constellation had at last assumed a meaning. Was I not witnessing an event of universal importance, and was it not, in some measure, an ideal enactment of the Creation of Language that was being presented to me on this table at this last minute, by this individual, this rash explorer, this mild and simple man who was so unaffectedly noble and charming by nature?


The first edition of 1000 copies was printed at L'Imprimerie Sainte Catherine in Bruges on July 10, 1914. Of these, 10 copies were printed on Montval paper [6] and a further 90 copies were printed on Vélin d'Arches [7] paper; both were bound in Japanese parchment paper wrappers.

The remaining 900 copies were printed and bound using ordinary paper.
There are two copies of this book in the library (RHQ/1003 and TQ056711). The copy pictured on the left was donated to the library as a part of the Randolph Hughes Collection of French and Pre-Raphaelite Literature [8]. Loose inside the front cover, and alongside the Hughes' bookplate, is an interesting set of documents. These include an early twentieth-century vintage print of an unidentified man, a published exegesis on Mallarme and a newspaper clipping of Mallarme's obituary written by Henri Mondor.

The second rare publication is Pages, a collection of Mallarme poems published in 1891. The main feature in the printing of this book is the copper etching of a young woman in the frontispiece, drawn by the impressionist, Auguste Renoir (1841-1919). Renoir was a great friend of Mallarmé who was a supporter of modern painting and published his thoughts on the subject in numerous articles. To thank Mallarme for this support, Manet and Renoir illustrated some of his poems and painted portraits of him. This publication had a very limited print run. The Library's copy is listed as being "No 73 of 275"

References:

Author