

This book is for Frédéric, Thomas and Christophe Lalaurie

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PREFACE

This book reaches back three and a half decades to my final year at university, and a visit to Primavera Gallery on King's Parade, Cambridge. Flipping through a box of art postcards, I found a set of four showing poems in Old French decorated with line drawings: couples embracing, a woman's breasts, Cupid shooting an arrow. The cards were brand new, but the captions and copyright credited the sixteenth-century poet Pierre de Ronsard and confirmed the unmistakable author of the deft, supple illustrations: Henri Matisse. The enchanting drawings matched Ronsard's imagery, captured the poems' erotic, romantic appeal, even conveyed a sense of their rhythm. Two sonnets were signed off on the reverse with charming 'tailpieces': silhouettes of an ivy leaf and songbird, each drawn with a single line. I was intrigued. Had Matisse illustrated poetry? The cards showed pages from an anthology of Ronsard's *Amours*. Perhaps they had been printed for Valentine's Day. I bought all four and stuck them on my wall (they bear the Blu-Tack marks to this day). As a student at Cambridge's Faculty of Architecture and History of Art, I discovered colour theory with the great John Gage, and another book by Matisse: *Jazz*, with vivid paper collages illustrating the artist's own, handwritten words. Seven years later, in New York with my French husband and baby son, I bought a pocket-sized facsimile in the bookshop at MoMA and read it from start to finish, for the first time. I puzzled over an introductory essay that failed to see what, for me, had jumped off the page: Matisse's words and pictures formed a dazzling, fascinating sequence. The facsimile included a translation of the artist's French text, separate from the rest. Perhaps the author of the essay had read this, and not the original. Fast-forward thirteen years, to an interview at the University of London Institute in Paris. 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.



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 *ouvrages illustrés*, produced in 1988 by his grandson Claude Duthuit, lists all the published graphic work, from individual frontispieces to review illustrations and book-length engagements with literary texts (*Jazz* 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.'¹ Paul Reverdy's *Visages* (1946) is also excluded, being the poet's response to pre-existing drawings by Matisse.

With the exception of *Poésies 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 letters describe work on four books at once. A note to his old art-school friend and literary adviser André Rouveyre discusses both the *Florilège des Amours de Ronsard* (published in 1948) and *Poèmes de Charles d'Orléans* (1950). Responding to Henry de Montherlant's query about illustrations for his play *Pasiphaé* (1944), Matisse asks 'But when? 1) I have to finish Ronsard... 2) finish another illustration in progress, 3) do one for the Baudelaire....'²

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.

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STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ

POÉSIES

POÉSIES DE STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ

1930–1932

Lausanne: Albert Skira & Cie. Éditeurs, 1932

*Etchings on cream vélin d'Arches. Each page 33 × 25.1 cm
(13 × 9⁷/₈ in.)*

'Printing completed on 25 October 1932 in Paris, at Léon Pichon for the typography, and R. Lacourière for the engravings, limited to 145 numbered copies, signed by the artist.... Thirty copies on Imperial Japon: 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.'

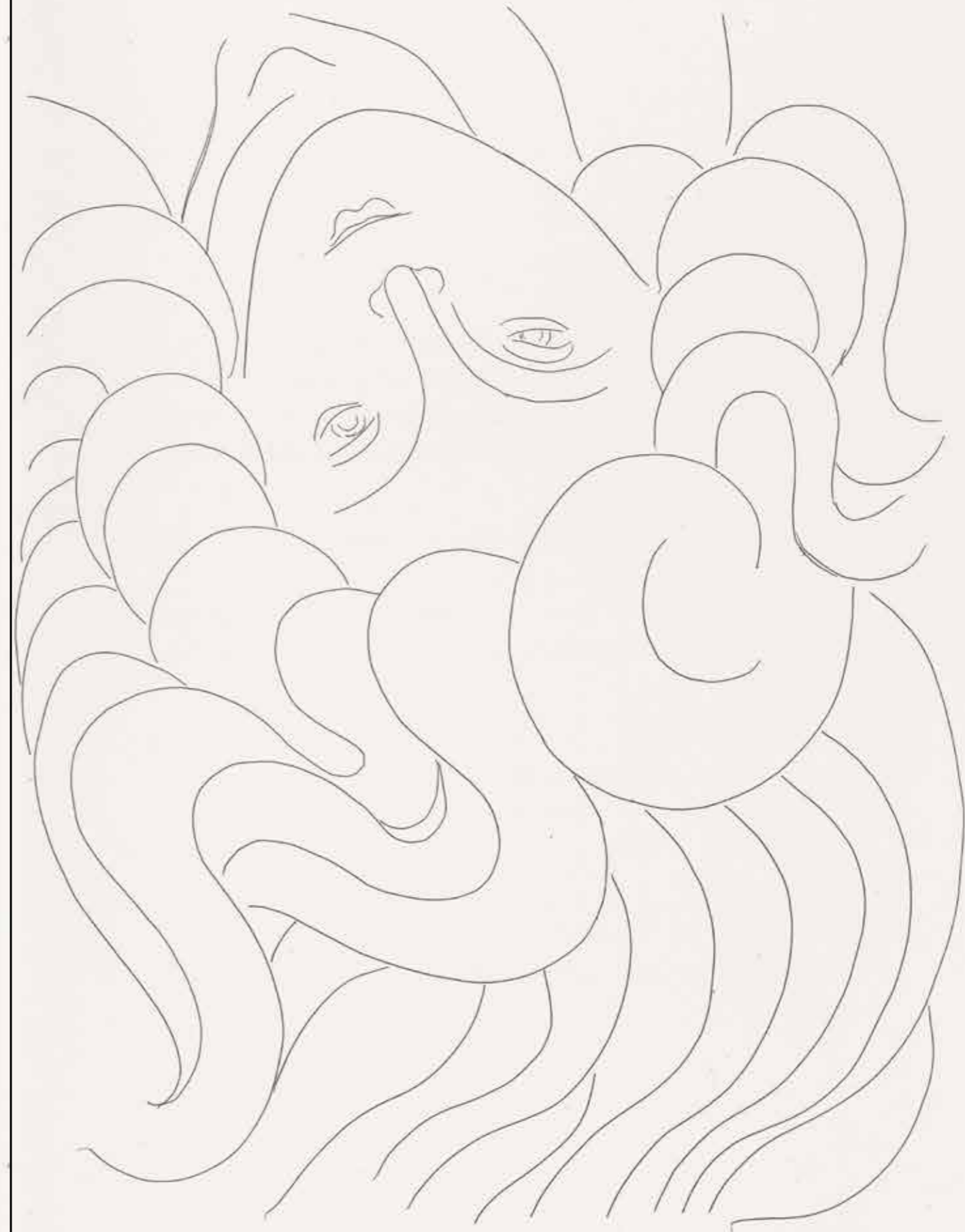
*Ses purs ongles très haut dédiant leur onyx,
L'Angoisse, ce minuit, soutient, lampadophore,
Maint rêve vespéral brûlé par le Phénix
Que ne recueille pas de cinéraire amphore*

*Sur les crédences, au salon vide : nul ptyx,
Aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore
(Car le Maître est allé puiser des pleurs au Styx
Avec ce seul objet dont le Néant s'honore).*

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

*Elle, défunte nue en le miroir, encor
Que, dans l'oubli fermé par le cadre, se fixe
De scintillations sitôt le septuor.*

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On p. 20: *Poesies de Stéphane Mallarmé*, front cover
 Previous spread: 'La Chevelure', pp. 128–9
 Opposite: 'Salut', p. 8

*Matisse is a difficult author.
 Not for nothing did he illustrate Mallarmé.*

Louis Aragon, 'Matisse-en-France', 1943

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 *Poesies 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.¹ The change of heart was Matisse's. He may have sought

to disarm comparison with Picasso's interpretation of Ovid by illustrating a resolutely modernist poet – although classical allusions abound, notably in 'Hérodiade' 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 (1893), 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 n'abolira jamais le hazard* ('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, I' A Z U R!*' 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 quatrains 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

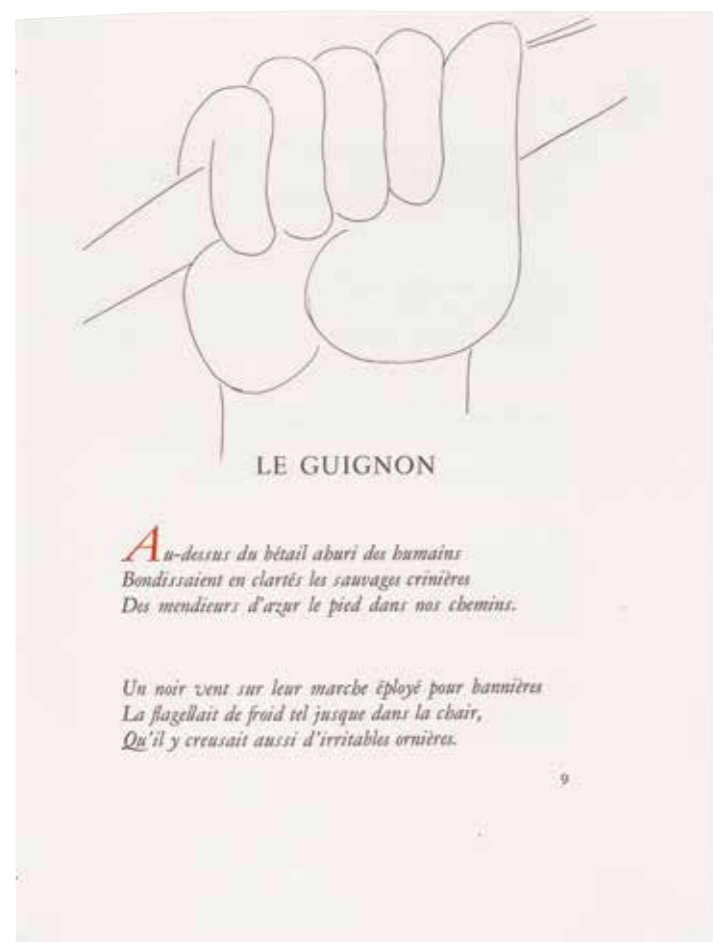
Mallarmé's poetry. His lines and use of surrounding space match the inspired meticulousness of the poet.'⁶

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 poop deck of a ship, pitching 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 heady abandon and jeopardy in 'Salut'.

Over the page, Mallarmé'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 combat 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



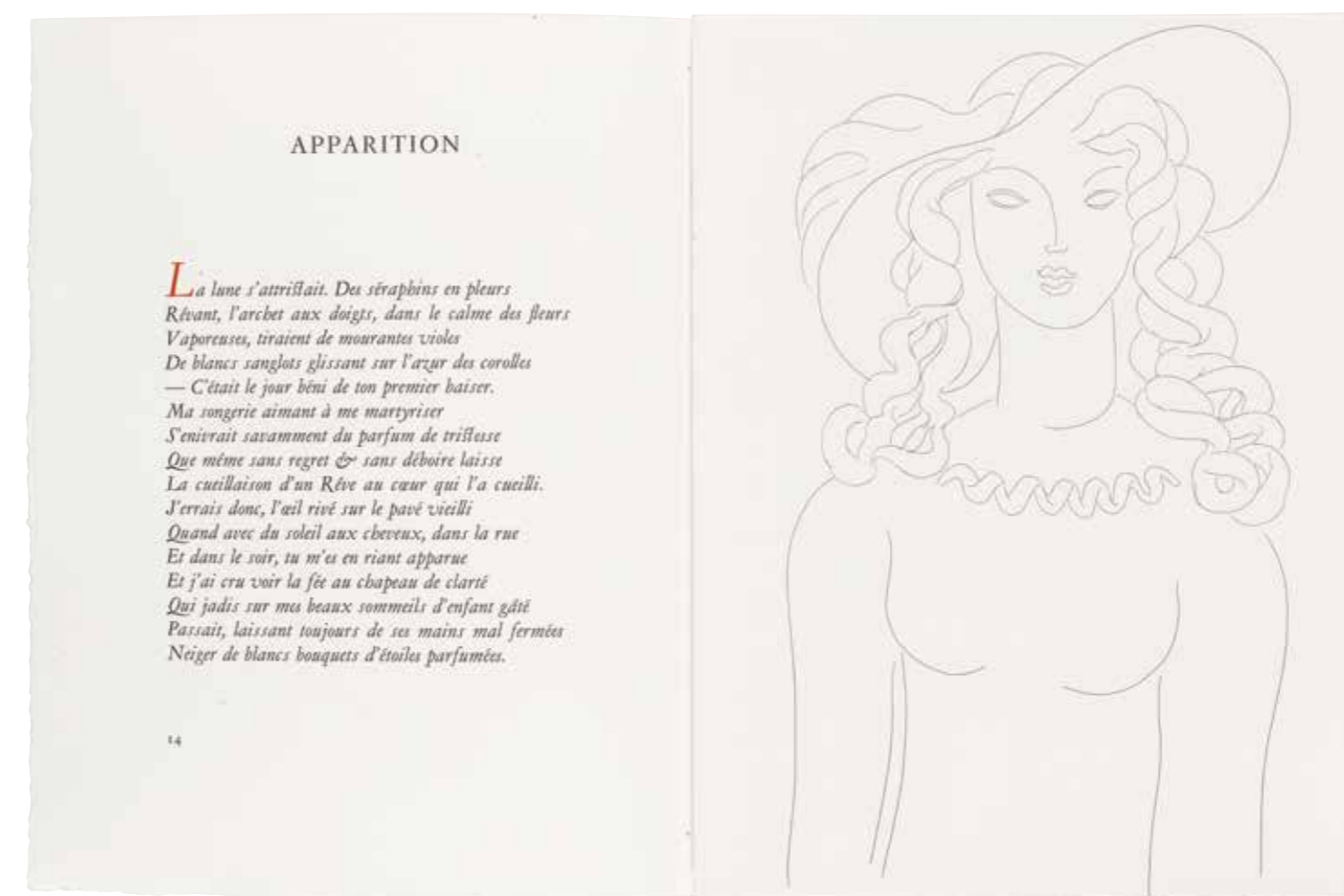
Communist resistance to General Franco in the Spanish Civil War.

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

Above: 'Le Guignon', p. 9
Opposite: 'Apparition', pp. 14–15

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'. Accustomed, now, to reading Matisse's pictures with the poems they follow, face or precede, we also readily connect her immaculately groomed appearance with the 'Princess' apostrophized overleaf in 'Placet futile' (Futile petition). Mallarmé described the poem as a 'Louis XV sonnet' in a letter to a friend, a parody of the eulogizing 'favours' penned by royal courtiers.¹² The poet declares that he can no more aspire to the touch of the princess's lips than if he were a painted figure on her porcelain teacup, or her fan, where Cupid is seen fingering his flute to lull a flock of sheep at dusk: the parodic veneer of civilization contrasts hilariously with the poem's double entendres. The impact of the shift of register overleaf is all the greater. Matisse's third full-page figure is as different from the first two as they are from one another: this woman lies naked on her back, powerfully foreshortened so that we look down across the top of her

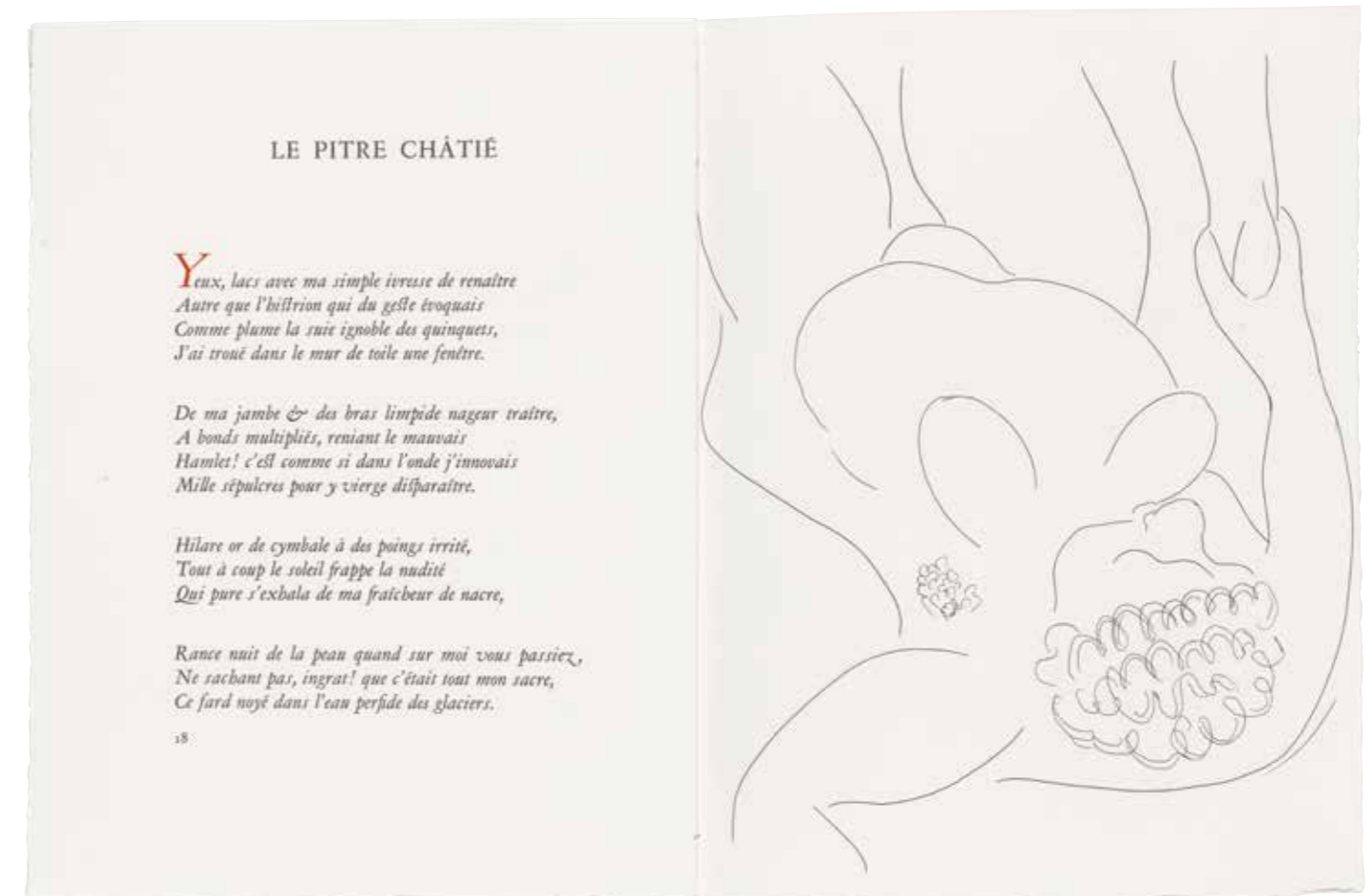


head at her fleshy belly, pendulous breasts and hairy armpits – another detail that conjures the corpse-like Scourge, who has ‘wriggling worms’ for underarm hair. Our angle of vision emphasizes the hair on her head, neither long, straight and free-flowing, nor elaborately ringleted, but short and kinky, 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 négresse’, 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 ‘crazed 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 négresse’ 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 correctitude 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 months before, in New York, he had attended a play that tackled the question in reverse: ‘a serious Black piece, the story of the Old Testament seen through a Black man’s eyes’ (Matisse uses the language of his day: *négre*). The play was likely *The Green Pastures*, adapted by the White American playwright Marc Connelly from short stories by another White American writer, Roark Bradford.¹³

The voyage to Tahiti is explicit in Matisse’s next etching, accompanying a brief, autumnal interlude – Mallarmé’s exquisite ten-line poem ‘Soupir’ (A sigh).



The ship *Papeete*, named for the Tahitian capital, is glimpsed through tropical foliage, from an upstairs window framed by a stone balustrade and a lace curtain (p. 42). The scalloped edge of the curtain connects and blends with cloud forms and clumps of foliage. As in Mallarmé’s poem ‘Quelle soie aux baumes de temps’, the scene may even be a reflection in a mirror – Matisse has chosen not to reverse the ship’s name on his plate, something he is careful to do elsewhere. The picture anticipates ‘Les fenêtres’ (The windows), a poem that contains much of relevance to the trip that Matisse had hoped would secure release from his bout of ‘painter’s block’. The artist travelled to Tahiti alone; Amélie’s recurrent ill health had culminated in a severe mental and physical breakdown that left her confined to the couple’s waterfront apartment in Nice.¹⁴ The windows in Mallarmé’s poem are first those of a sickroom from which an elderly invalid gazes out through ‘dull, white curtains’, dreaming feverishly of past loves, even kissing the sunlit pane; and second, ‘every window frame’ that offers a glimpse, for the narrator, of an alternative to the tedium of family life. The poet cleaves to the glass pane of art, through which he may be reborn. Back in the ‘here below’, he wonders if he might shatter the glass and fly away (like the *pitre* diving through the window in the tent wall). But he fears his ‘featherless wings’ will see him falling for all eternity.

‘Les fleurs’ (Flowers) remembers a lover gathering a bouquet: gladioli, laurels, hyacinth, myrtle, roses (the cruel ‘Herodias of flowers’) and the ‘sobbing whiteness’ of lilies. Matisse shows none of these. Instead, one flower – the clematis – is depicted in a cluster of seven radiant blooms, an explicit reminder not to read his

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 teacup, 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.

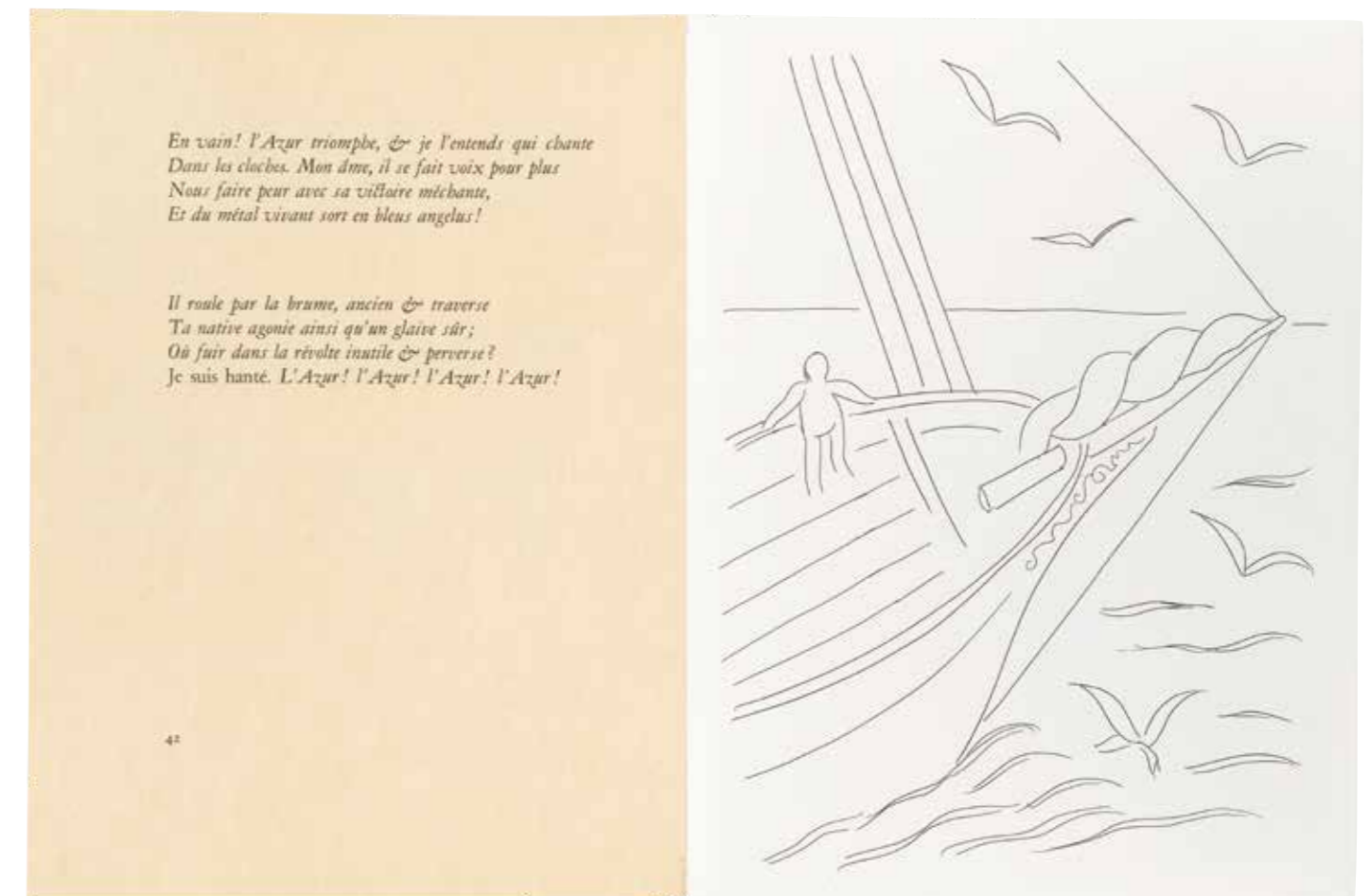
The lament of a solitary bell-ringer, labouring to produce a sound that barely reaches distant, indifferent ears, is heard in 'Le sonneur'. One day, he will kick away the stone he uses to reach the pull and hang himself. Matisse's etching acknowledges and transfigures the poem's yearning for oblivion: 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 partirai! 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 coeur entend le chant des matelots!' (O my heart, listen to the sailors' song!).

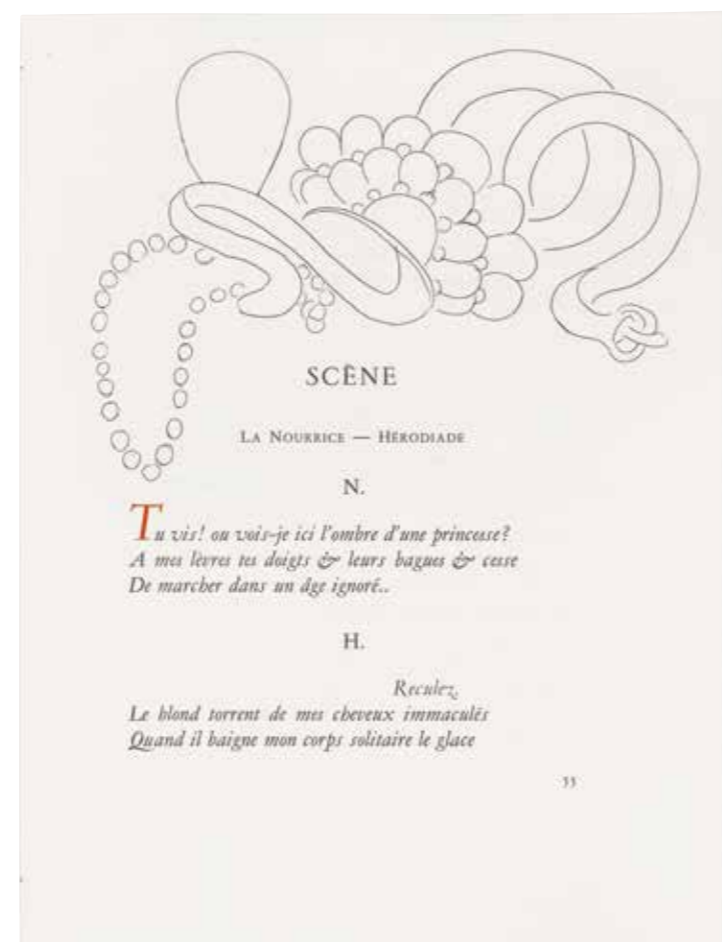


The central section of the *Poésies* includes Mallarmé's dramatic poem 'Hérodiade' and the narrative 'L'après-midi d'un faune'. Matisse's etchings develop established motifs, beginning with the full-bodied, long-haired nude, now lying on her stomach and gazing at her reflection in a pond or river. Thinly 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 hasard*. A lock of hair falls forward over her left ear.

Mallarmé began 'Hérodiade' 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



'L'Azur' / 'Brise marine', pp. 42–3

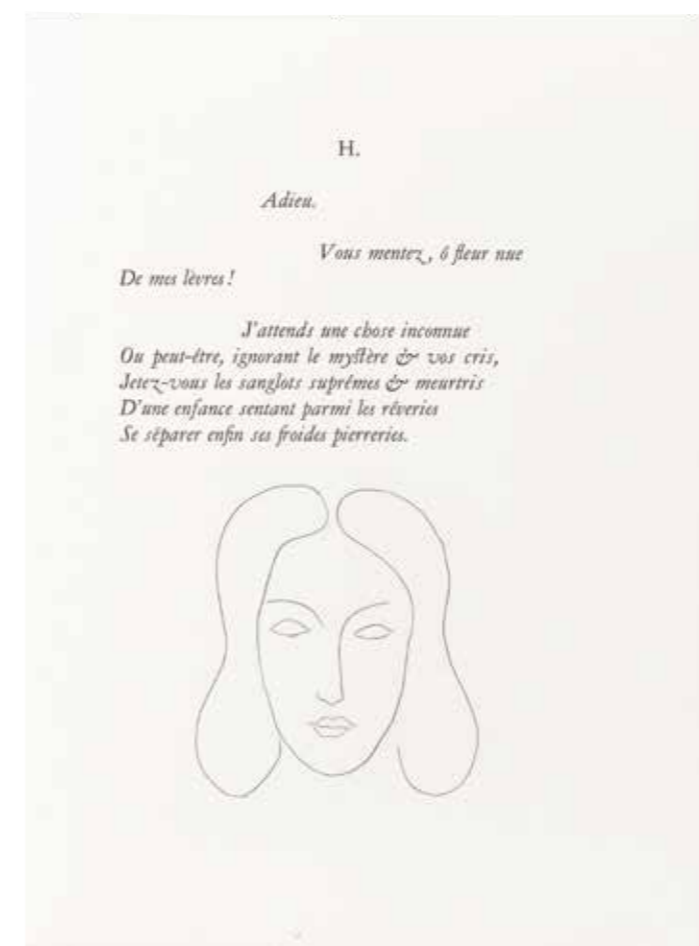


recognition: 'Tu vis! Ou vois-je ici l'ombre d'une princesse?' (You live! Or do I see the shadow of a princess?). Like the doubting apostle Thomas, she seeks proof, but like the resurrected Christ, Herodias is not ready to be touched or even gazed upon directly. Throughout, the language enacts a kind 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'.¹⁶ 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.

Above left: 'Hérodiade', p. 54
 Above right: 'Hérodiade', p. 55
 Opposite, left: 'Hérodiade', p. 67
 Opposite, right: 'L'après-midi d'un faune', p. 73

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 'L'après-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 painting *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 handwritten 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 flirtation that would culminate in an act of violation. Of who? Of myself, of that softening of my sensibility when I consider a pleasing subject.'¹⁷ 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.

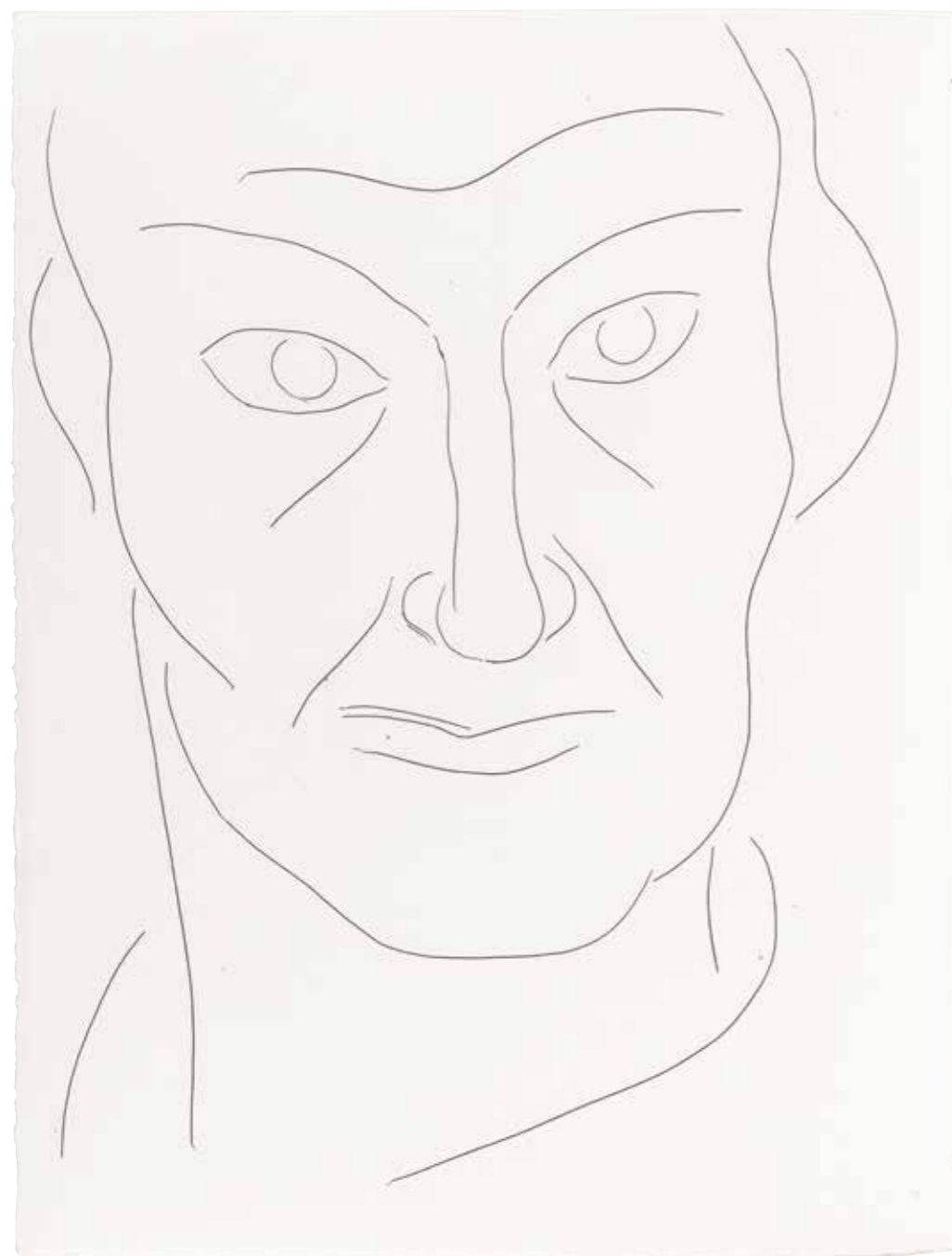
Mallarmé locates 'L'après-midi d'un faune' at the heart of his collected poems, to be read as a hazy reverie – a slumber from which we wake and return to civilized society. The next poem and etching point the way back, and develop the theme of past experience revisited in art (p. 52). A couple approach arm-in-arm along an Edenic path, through trees very like those framing the ship *Papeete* 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 (un)reliability of memories and their creative expression in art. 'Nous fûmes deux, je le maintiens' (There were just us two, I'm quite certain), insists the narrator. His recollection of their united face as they stepped out on their walk ('Nous promenions 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, fluttering 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 recalls the tangle 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 bracelet, 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 the page to a new section of poems accompanied by two full-page portraits. The first shows a young woman's face and neck framed by thick scrolls of tumbling hair and the folds of a knotted scarf. Her smile extends to her warm, fully drawn eyes. She is the 'Mademoiselle' addressed overleaf 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 'natural, clear and childlike laughter'. Matisse 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 sonnets, and one of the best-known of all Matisse's graphic works. The stupendous image of a swan, heaving 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, live 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 minimalist bird is immediately recognizable as both a Platonic form (Mallarmé's 'Cygne' with a capital 'C') and a symbol of jeopardy, 'thrashing 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 become 'cette blanche agonie par l'espace infligée à l'oiseau qui le nie' (this white agony inflicted by space upon the bird that denies it). Just as the fabric of the book inflects Matisse's running woman at the beginning of the *Poésies* as an image of



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 *insouciant*'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 glare – a personification of the unblinking *Azur* throughout? – looms large as life, its play of vertical

'Le tombeau de Charles Baudelaire', p. 136

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 Matisseian 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' fluttering her fan: the neat, 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.¹⁸ 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 Montorgueil 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.

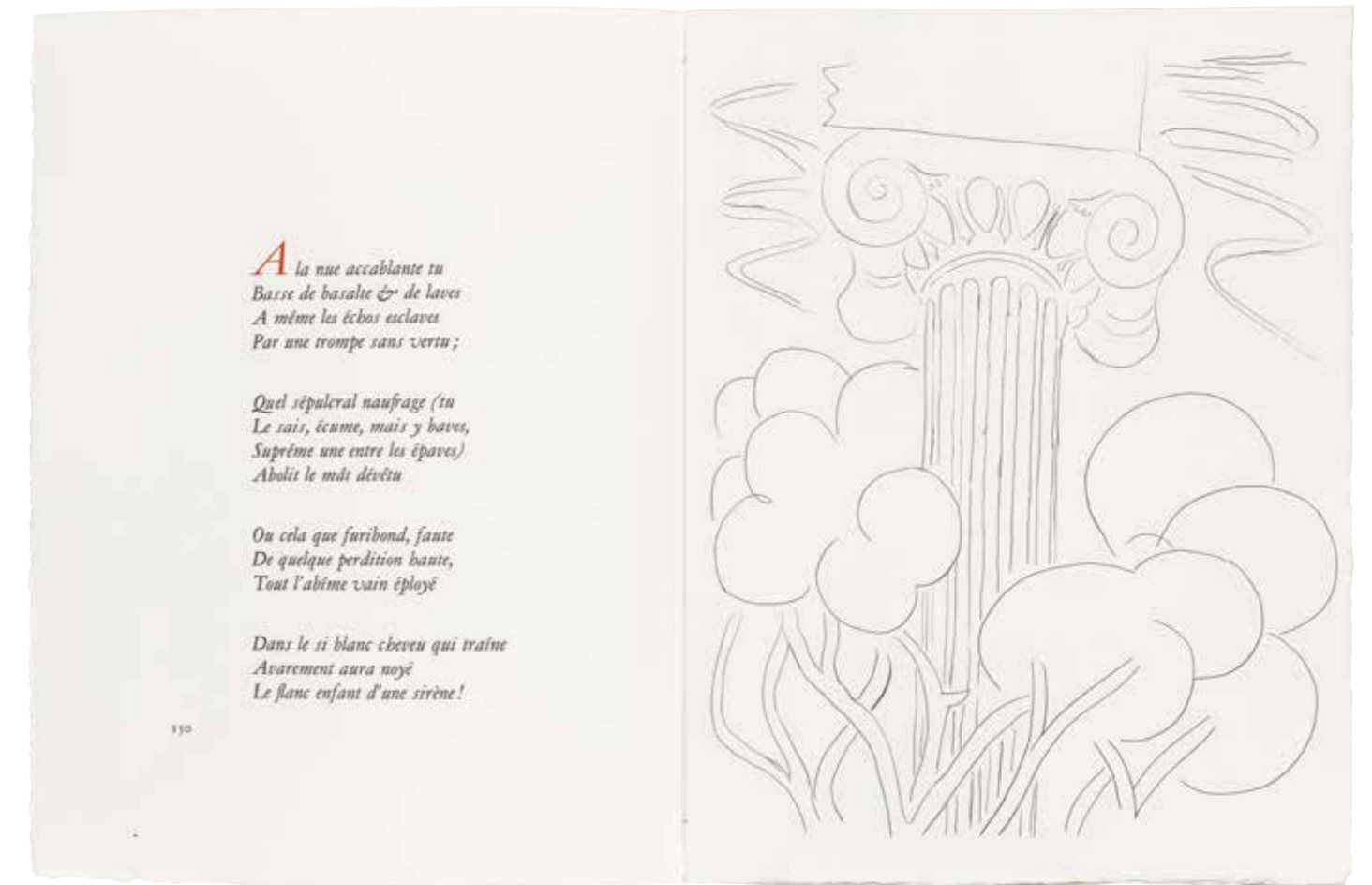


The shimmering light of Matisse's etchings on the printed page posed an immense technical challenge for their printer, Roger Lacourière. Matisse sent his daughter, Marguerite, to oversee the printing, but felt the results were 'drained of their lifeblood'. His desired fine lines looked 'furry' on the 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 barbs 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.¹⁹

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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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."²²

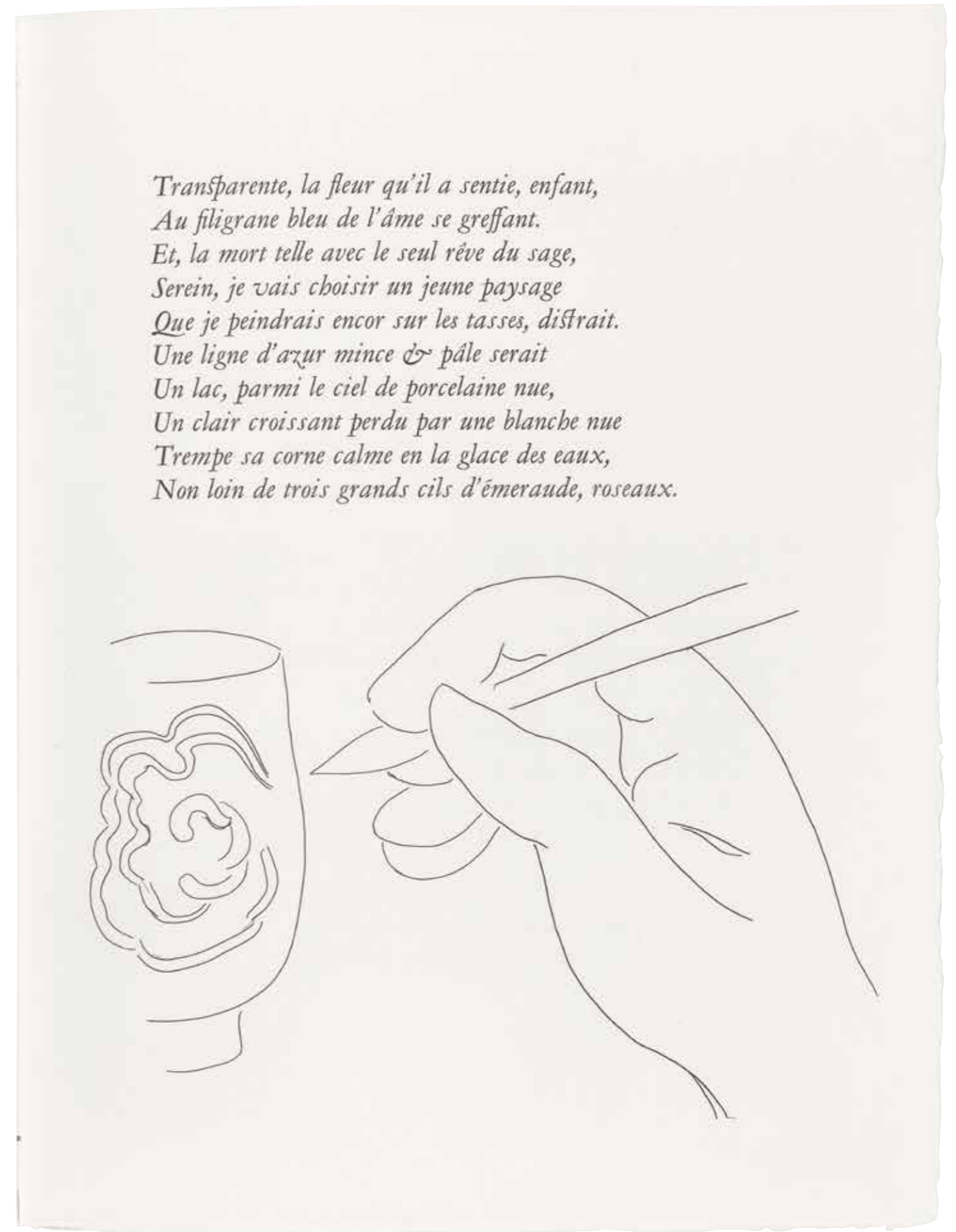
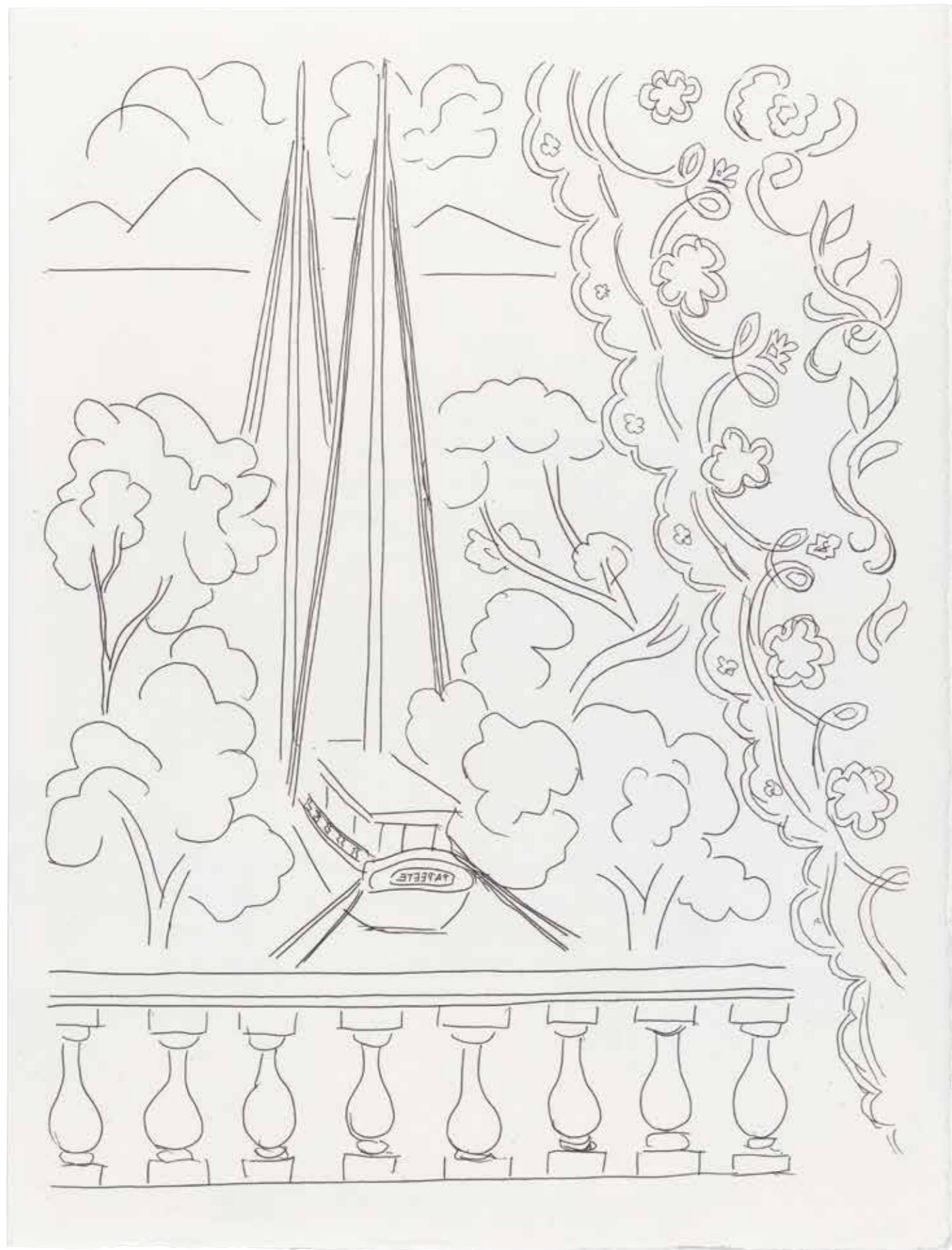
A decade later, André Rouveyre began to plan an article about Matisse's images of swans. The artist wrote to advise him to show 'the two versions [of the



swan] that precede the finished etching, and the finished etching itself'.²³ 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.'²⁴

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'.²⁵

Opposite: 'A la nue accablante...', pp. 150–51



Above: 'Soupir', p. 23
Opposite: 'Las de l'amer repos', p. 35

LE SONNEUR

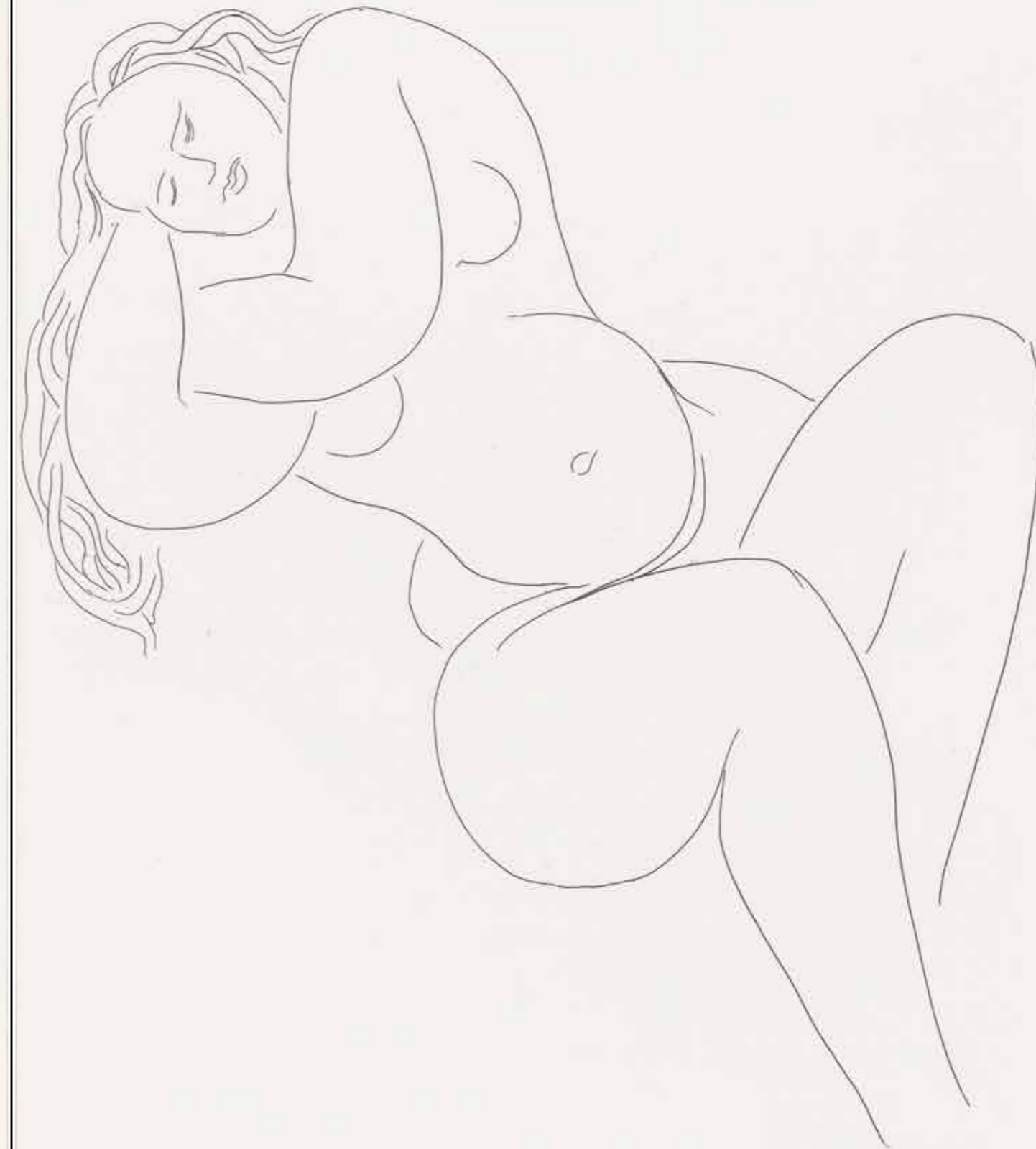
Cependant que la cloche éveille sa voix claire
A l'air pur & limpide & profond du matin
Et passe sur l'enfant qui jette pour lui plaire
Un angelus parmi la lavande & le thym,

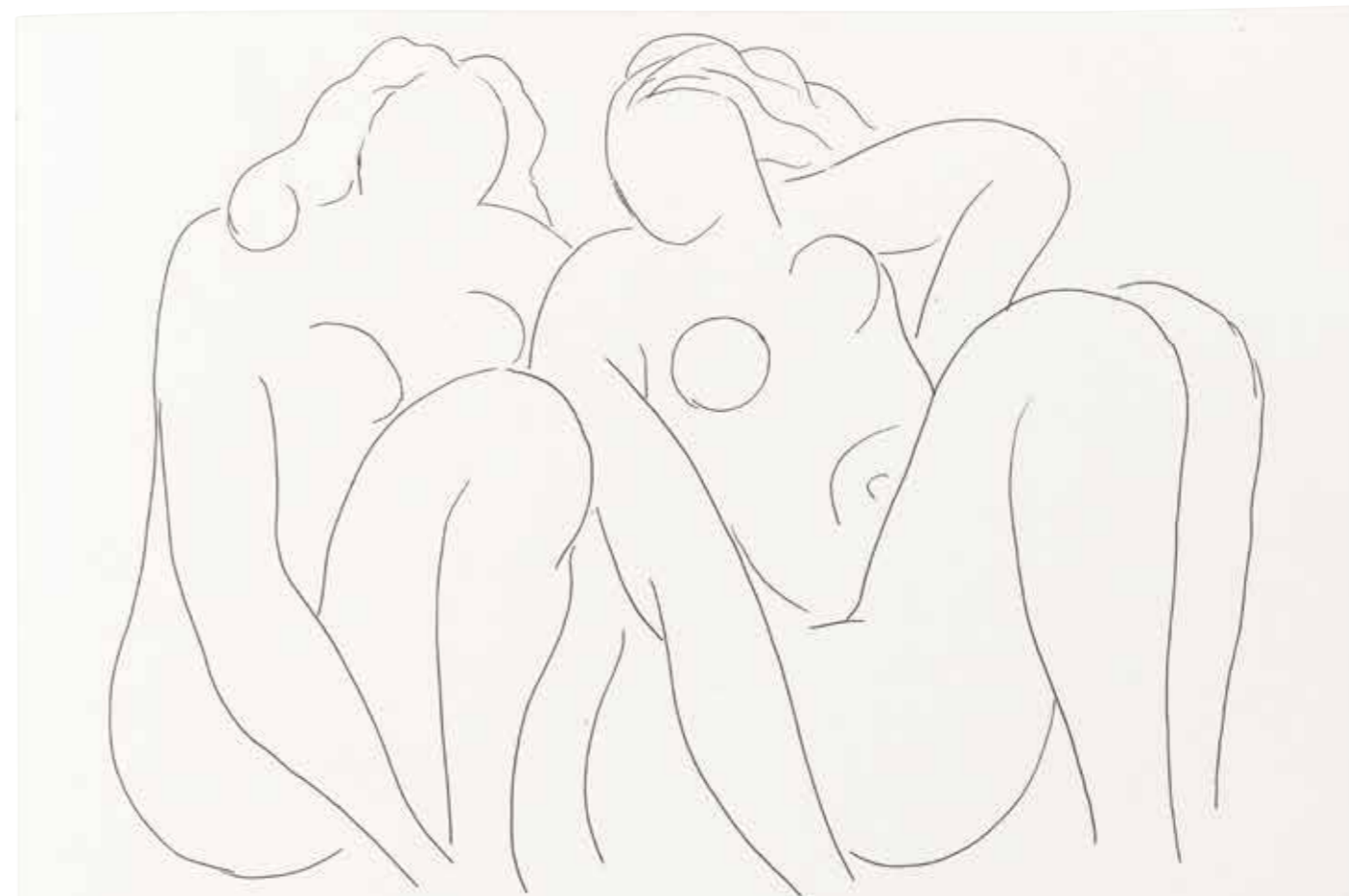
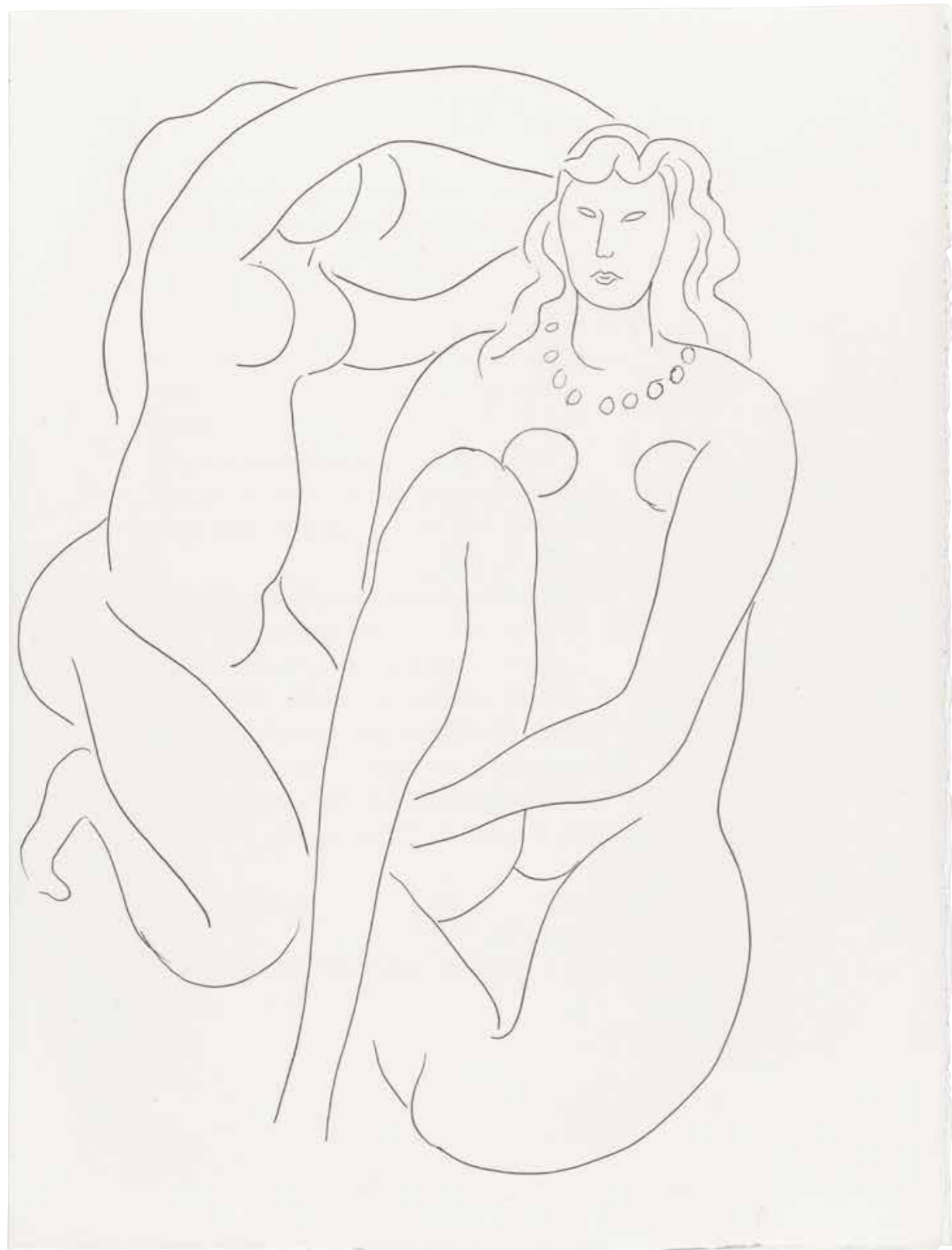
Le sonneur effleuré par l'oiseau qu'il éclaire,
Chevauchant tristement en geignant du latin
Sur la pierre qui tend la corde séculaire,
N'entend descendre à lui qu'un tintement lointain.

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

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

36





LE FAVNE

Ces nymphes, je les veux perpétuer.

*Si clair,
Leur incarnat léger, qu'il voltige dans l'air
Assoupi de sommeils touffus.*

Aimai-je un rêve ?

75

Opposite: 'Hérodiade', p. 63
Above: 'L'après-midi d'un faune', p. 75

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

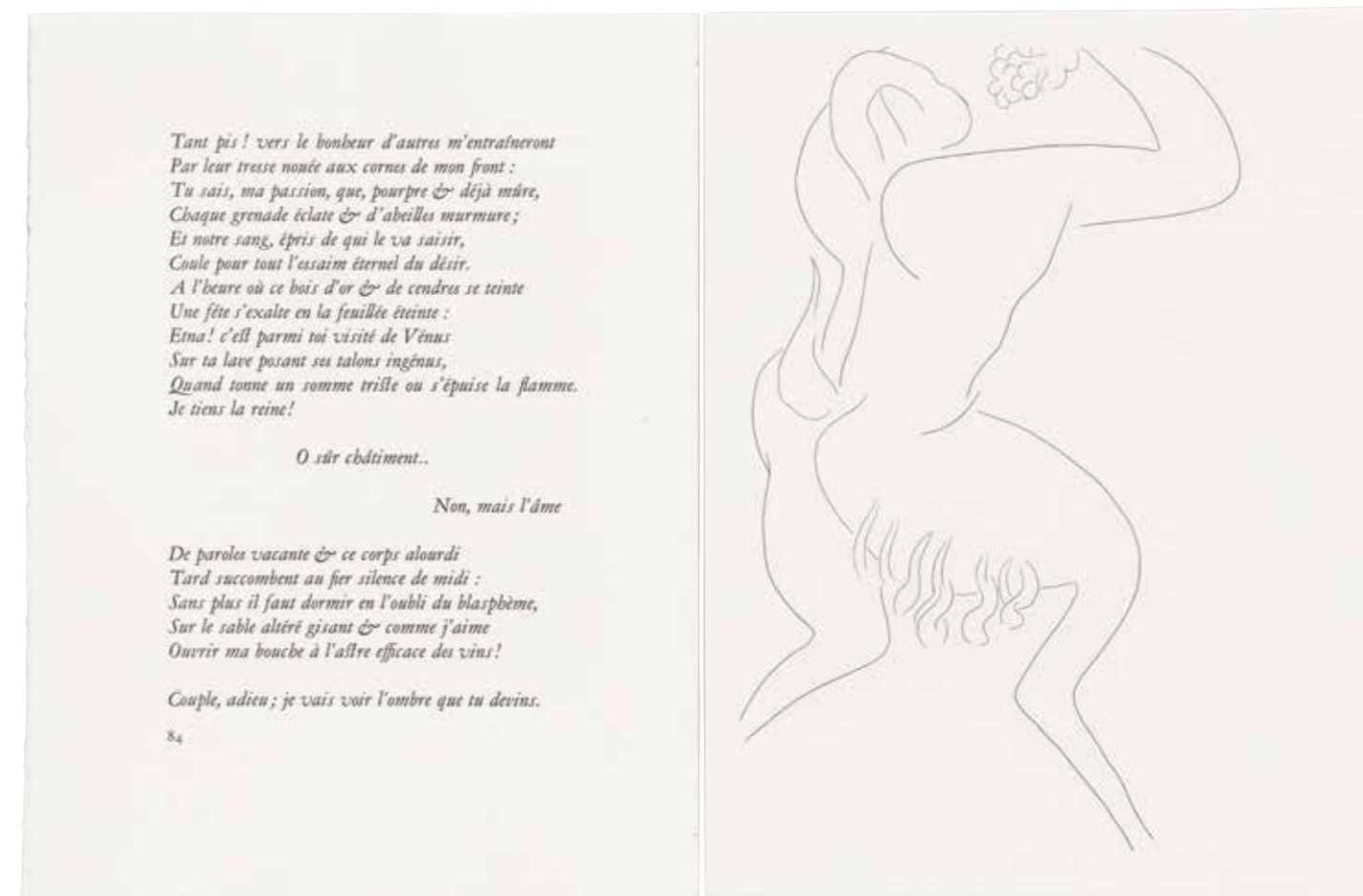
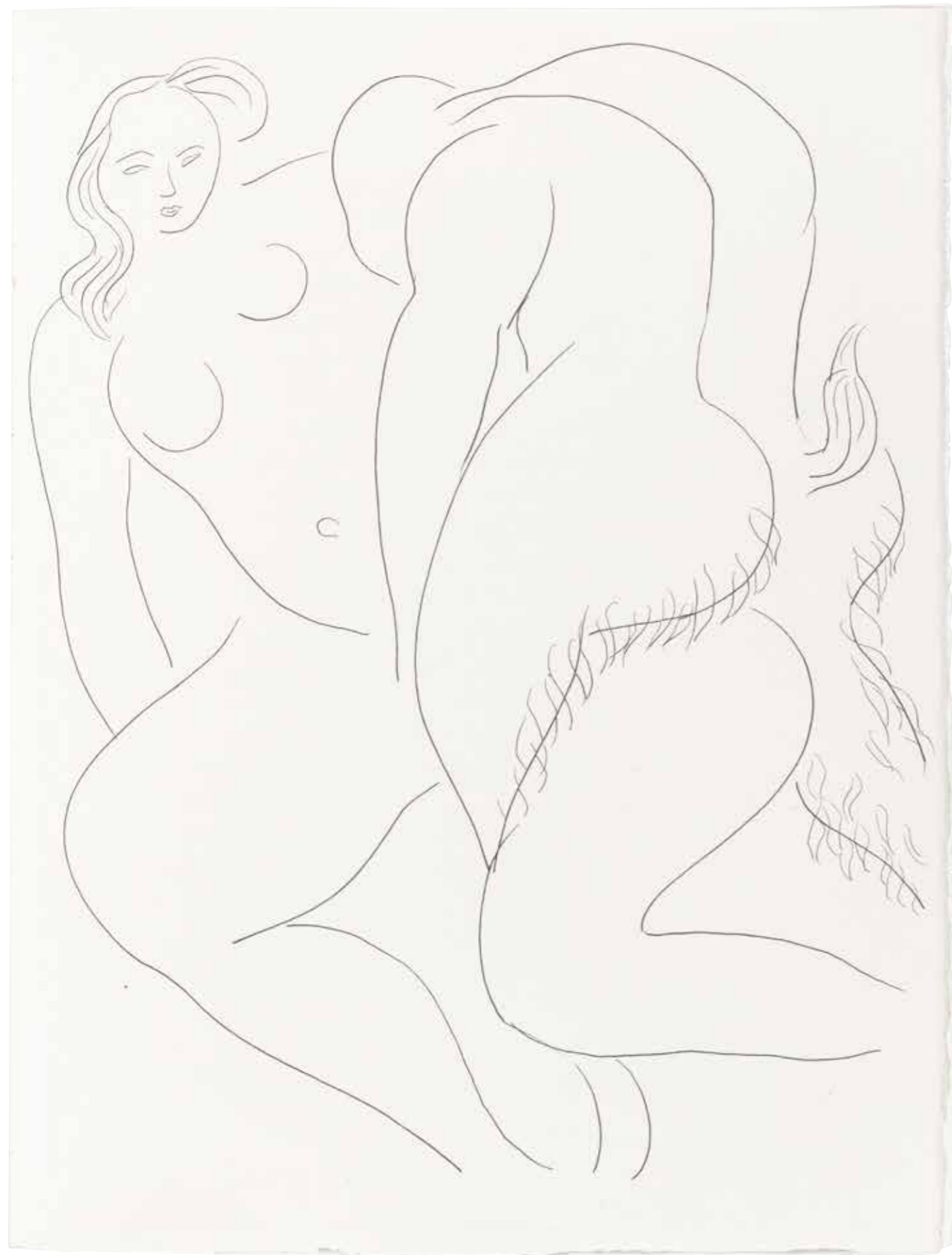
Réfléchissons..

*ou si les femmes dont tu gloses
Figurent un souhait de tes sens fabuleux!
Faune, l'illusion s'échappe des yeux bleus
Et froids, comme une source en pleurs, de la plus chaste :
Mais, l'autre tout soupirs, dis-tu qu'elle contraste
Comme brise du jour chaude dans ta toison!
Que non! par l'immobile & lasse pâmoison
Suffoquant de chaleurs le matin frais s'il lutte,
Ne murmure point d'eau que ne verse ma flûte
Au bosquet arrosé d'accords; & le seul vent
Hors des deux tuyaux prompt à s'exhaler avant
Qu'il disperse le son dans une pluie aride,
C'est, à l'horizon pas remué d'une ride,
Le visible & serein souffle artificiel
De l'inspiration qui regagne le ciel.*

*O bords siciliens d'un calme marécage
Qu'à l'envi des soleils ma vanité saccage,*

76





Tant pis ! vers le bonheur d'autres m'entraîneront
 Par leur tresse nouée aux cornes de mon front :
 Tu sais, ma passion, que, pourpre & déjà mère,
 Chaque grenade éclate & d'abeilles murmure ;
 Et notre sang, épris de qui le va saisir,
 Coule pour tout l'essaim éternel du désir.
 A l'heure où ce bois d'or & de cendres se teinte
 Une fête s'escalte en la feuillée éteinte :
 Ena ! c'est parmi toi vicié de Vénus
 Sur ta lave posant ses talons ingénus,
 Quand tonne un somme triste ou s'épuise la flamme.
 Je tiens la reine !

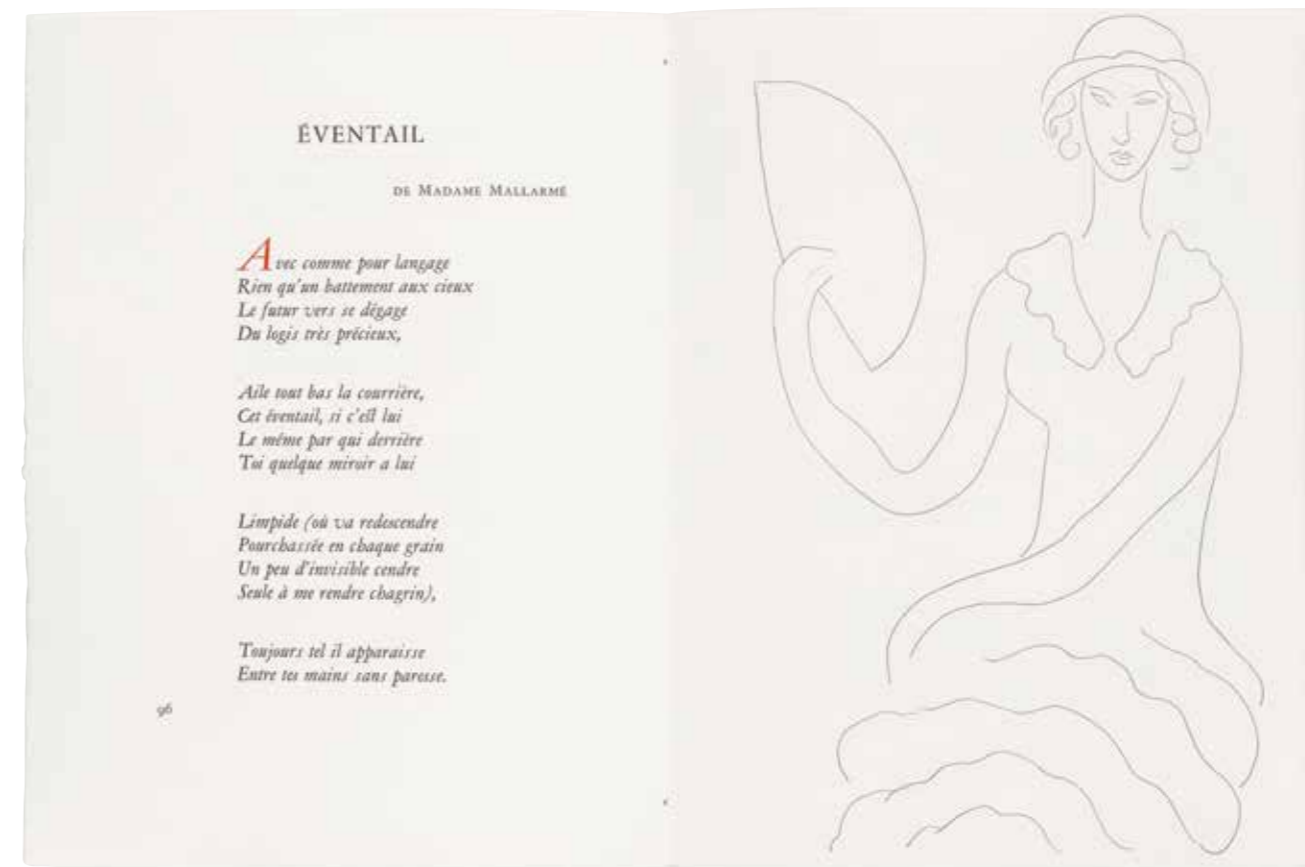
O sûr édificent..

Non, mais l'âme

De paroles vacante & ce corps alourdi
 Tard succombent au fier silence de midi :
 Sans plus il faut dormir en l'oubli du blasphème,
 Sur le sable altéré gisant & comme s'aime
 Ouvrir ma bouche à l'autre efficace des vins !

Couple, adieu ; je vais voir l'ombre que tu devins.

84



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

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 avoue
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,

114





LE TOMBEAU
D'EDGAR POE

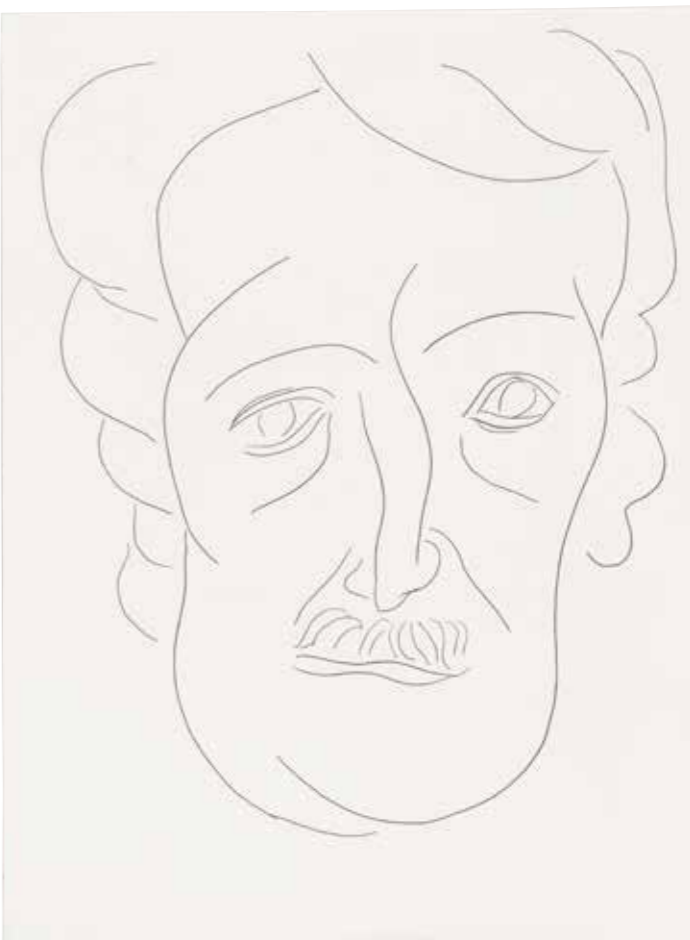
Tel qu'en Lui-même enfin l'éternité le change,
Le Poète suscite avec un glaive nu
Son siècle épouvanté de n'avoir pas connu
Que la mort triomphait dans cette voix étrange!

Eux, comme un vil sursaut d'hydre ayant jadis l'ange
Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu,
Proclameront très haut le sortilège bu
Dans le flot sans bonheur de quelque noir mélange.

Du sol & de la nue hostiles, ô grief!
Si notre idée avec ne sculpte un bas-relief
Dont la tombe de Poe éblouissante s'orne

Calme bloc ici-bas chu d'un désastre obscur,
Que ce granit du moins montre à jamais sa borne
Aux noirs vols du Blasphème éparé dans le futur.

133



Opposite: 'Le Cygne', p. 123

Above: 'Le tombeau d'Edgar Poe', pp. 132-3

*Quelle soie aux baumes de temps
Où la Chimère s'exténue
Vaut la torse & native nue
Que, hors de ton miroir, tu tends!*

*Les trous de drapeaux méditants
S'exaltent dans notre avenue :
Moi, j'ai ta chevelure nue
Pour enfouir mes yeux contents.*

*Non! La bouche ne sera sûre
De rien goûter à sa morsure,
S'il ne fait, ton princier amant,*

*Dans la considérable touffe
Expirer, comme un diamant,
Le cri des Gloires qu'il étouffe.*

146

