



REVIEW ESSAY/ESSAI CRITIQUE

By the Numbers: Meillassoux as a Reader of Mallarmé

Quentin Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé's Coup de Dés*. Trans. Robin MacKay. Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012; 298 pages. ISBN: 978-0983216926.

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If philosophy is the art of inventing concepts, Quentin Meillassoux's first slim volume may already justify his future enrolment in the philosophical pantheon. In *After Finitude*, Meillassoux introduces the term "correlationism" for the idea that one can only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, never to either term in isolation.¹ That is to say, there can be no thoughts without objects, but equally no access to objects outside of thought. By identifying this shared and fundamental premise of the main currents of post-Kantian philosophy, Meillassoux's term is helping to focus efforts to think beyond it. His concept of "the correlation" increasingly informs new materialisms and other speculative projects that embark on the philosophical wager of encountering the absolute, the object "in itself."

Meillassoux's attempt to think beyond the correlation in *After Finitude* follows Alain Badiou in taking mathematics to be the privileged discourse of ontology. Mathematics is understood to offer us the "great outdoors" as it exists independently of our conceptions of it, which are necessarily bound up with history, language, culture, subjectivity, and so on. What needs to be demonstrated, Meillassoux states, is that "what is mathematizable cannot be reduced to a correlate of thought."² And, again like Badiou, this turn to mathematics appears motivated in part by hostility to the linguistic turn, seen as a postmodern forcing-house for sophistry, pseudo-religiosity, and poetic irrationality. Badiou has often seemed content to assert that mathematics is fundamental ontology as an article of dogma, and in

¹ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, (tr.) R. Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008).

² Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 117.



consequence has invited criticism that his choice of mathematical system is unsupported and ultimately arbitrary.³ Meillassoux has been more cautious: in a seminar paper of 2008 he describes the proof that mathematics allows us to know reality as it is in itself as something “that I don’t resolve in *After Finitude*, but which I hope to resolve in future.”⁴

Meillassoux’s latest book can be read as a first attempt to cash that promissory note. But it takes an oblique and unexpected approach to this problem, via a monographic “decipherment” of Mallarmé’s poem *A Throw of Dice (Un Coup de Dés)*. As with the millenarian atheism of his unpublished *L’inexistence divine*, in *The Number and the Siren* Meillassoux discovers messianic truth in the mathematics of contingency—here, specifically, in an untotalizable totality, an infinitized yet specific number. The number in question is 707, which is both the number of words in the poem and a numeric code encrypted within the text. Seven is the Septentrion, the constellation that appears on the poem’s final page; it is *si*, the seventh note of the sol-fa scale, and Saint John, after whom this note is named, who is heralded as the prophet of our modernist Saviour; and it is *si*, or “if,” which announces the subjunctive mood of the poem, its hypothetical embrace of chance. Zero, the cipher, is null and void. Zero is the empty fold separating the two instances of *COMME SI*, “AS IF,” that frame the verso and recto of the poem’s central double-page. So 707 corresponds to the chiasmic form of *Un Coup de Dés*, which begins and ends with the same phrase—“a throw of dice”—and encloses an abyssal shipwreck of the poetic tradition at its heart. Indeed, Meillassoux interprets the poem as a single, enormously extended, rhyming couplet:

Not only is 707 the defense of meter in the strict sense—of the principle of the count introduced into verse; not only is it the summary of the cyclical structure of the Poem; it is also a defense of rhyme, in so far as it reminds us that the truth of the Beautiful belongs to its repetition alone—to its being put in resonance with itself within pairs of rhymed verses, with similar last syllables, and connected across the void that occupies their center. (74)

³ Ricardo L. Nirenberg and David Nirenberg, “Badiou’s Number: A Critique of Mathematics as Ontology,” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, no. 4 (2011), 583–614.

⁴ Quentin Meillassoux, “Time without Becoming,” 2008 [http://speculativeheresy.files.wordpress.com/2008/07/3729-time_without_becoming.pdf].

Meillassoux is well aware that numerology is an intellectual wasteland of cranks, symbologists, and Douglas Adams jokes. But in a very characteristic logical twist, Meillassoux seizes on this apparent weakness and converts it into a central premise of his argument. Rather than being evidence of an interpretive leap too far, the quixotic fragility of his decipherment is instead reclaimed as an element of the poem's own coding. The poem's literary throw of the dice—its incorporation of a ludicrous code—wobbles on the edge of undecidability, almost too absurd to be credible. It is at this point, and again, quite characteristically, that Meillassoux's elegant Cartesian reasoning takes a mystico-rational turn.

What makes the symbolic resonance of the number seven philosophically interesting for Meillassoux is its bearing on the nature of metre. For metre names the disjunctive intersection of meaning and formal numerical constraints. For Meillassoux,

Every thought, in so far as it is formulated in a language, produces a series of aleatory numbers linked to the linguistic components necessary for its formulation.... These numbers are "engendered" by thought in so far as it finds itself formulated in them, but in themselves they have no meaning—and in particular no meaning linked to the thought in question. (49)

The fact this sentence contains nine words is meaningless. But verse can make this lack of meaning meaningful. It uses the absence of any connection between language and its numbers as a medium for connecting the two. Writing verse is then a poetic wager on chance, an attempt to demonstrate "the necessity of contingency."

Amidst the historical crisis of verse at the end of the 19th century, Mallarmé doubles down on contingency. In Meillassoux's account, he publishes a metrically unique poem for a future anonymous reader who will likely fail to discover the poem's codified number, or who, perceiving it (and this could happen only by chance), may well dismiss it as childish, even derisory. The *logos* prophetically heralded by seven, *si*, does seem more than a little ridiculous. For Meillassoux, however, this is how Mallarmé out-Christ's Christ. Mallarmé not only sacrifices his poem's meaning to "a word count conjoined to a simple charade" (124), but he also "sacrificed that very sacrifice itself." (123) Mallarmé, Meillassoux argues, even destabilizes the reader's perception of the code, and thus her recognition of the poem's metrical claims, the very stake of the poem's gamble on chance. The precise count of 707 depends on a strategic—perhaps chance—deployment of ambiguously compound words, and on a series of interpretative decisions, including whether to include the poem's title and final

phrase. Even the existence of the code comes to appear radically uncertain.

By such means, we are told, Mallarmé “infinitezes” his unique number, creating a metre that both exists and does not exist. On the one hand, the poem’s meaning relates to a fixed number. On the other hand, both fixity and number are put in question, so that the poem’s relation to its number operates by means of their possible non-connection. Through such paradoxes, the poem’s total count of 707 is detotalized. And this, Meillassoux states, allows the figure of the poet to diffuse into the infinity of chance folded in on itself. His ideal presence is “transmitted to us via the aid of an *autorevelation* of Chance.” (150) Meillassoux locates Mallarmé’s grandeur in this undecidable moment of an aleatory quantification of absolute contingency, and in his identification with this void of chance.

And so the chiasmus of the poem’s form is revealed to be the Cross of a new secularized religion of Modernity. After the death of God, the great intellectual projects of the 19th century sought to reconstitute the social solidarity and subjective intensity once offered by religion. For Meillassoux, *Un Coup de Dés* succeeds—uniquely, unrepeatably—in accomplishing “this intimate revolution of the subject, through which ardent centuries *communicate* once more with us.” (222) The literary century that intervenes between Mallarmé and Meillassoux, however, is cast as an irredeemably fallen time, one unilluminated by the mathematics of contingency. For both the “voluntarist literature of the absurd” (Sartre) and the “literature of the exhaustion of literature” (Blanchot), contingency represented an insurmountable impasse to absolute meaning. (32) For Meillassoux, to the contrary, it offers nothing less than an ideal resurrection of the dead.

For all his astounding exegetical acrobatics, Meillassoux claims to follow a simple interpretative principle: the poem does what it says, and says what it does. Whatever looks representational in the poem is in fact an abstract operator of poetic self-reference. The poem is understood as a self-enclosed system, a vibrating crystalline structure in which constative and performative dimensions work in perfect synchrony. Reading the poem in these terms is strictly deductive, a matter of syllogistic logic. The poem is held to operate by axiom, not narrative: approached as a theorem of undecidability, it allows for mathematical standards of confirmation. The unmistakable aesthetic in play is one of rarefied abstraction and hyperformalization, i.e. an “in-aesthetic.” And the poem’s claims to transhistorical communication—its address across time to an unknown reader—are justified in terms of this mathematical eternity.

20th-century theories of interpretation, by contrast, tended to suggest that a text undoes what it says and unsays what it does. By unworking itself in these ways, literary language was thought to give rise to what Merleau-Ponty once called a “haze of signification,” a space for critical discussion and argument.⁵ But the haze Meillassoux identifies is one of numbers, not of meaning: it is the “cloud of insignificant numbers—705, 714, 703” that surround 707. (216) And a cloud of numbers leaves less room for disagreement. Indeed, even if you totally reject Meillassoux’s reading, you do not thereby escape its force, for your rejection is already factored in as a crucial premise of his argument. Whether she dissents or not, Meillassoux’s reader affirms his interpretation.

As an anti-representational poet, suspicious of content, Mallarmé is very amenable to this type of mathematical formalization. Pierre Macherey has recently argued that these formal qualities explain why “Mallarmé is everywhere in Alain Badiou’s work,” his appeal lying in his “knowing how to rescue poetry from the trap of the referent in all its forms.”⁶ Once liberated from referentiality, poetry is left free to function as a pure medium of self-reflection, closed in upon nothingness. It is as if Mallarmé’s language were already on the way to mathematics, aspiring to the a-signifying nature of the mathematical symbol—which is self-identical and rigorously unequivocal across all its iterations precisely because it is referentially void. So in taking Mallarmé as his poetic test-case, Meillassoux may be rolling some philosophically loaded dice.

For Meillassoux, pure quantity is what eternalizes Mallarmé:

The Mallarmé who survives the fleshly body—his posterity as it inhabits our memories—is none other than that which the Number delivers to us: his only trace resides in the count of the words.
(144)

The paradox described here—of a material author who is inextricably imbedded in his or her spatio-temporal matrix, and yet who also exists as an authorial communication liberated from the constraints of time and place—is the foundational paradox of literary history. It was famously posed by Marx, for instance: why does the *Iliad* still speak to us today? The only trace of posthumous literary survival

⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, (tr.) J. O’Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 90.

⁶ Pierre Macherey, “The Mallarmé of Alain Badiou,” in *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and its Conditions*, (ed.) G. Riera (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 109, 114.

that Meillassoux allows for “resides in the count of the words.” But if language allows for other kinds of traces and non-numeric survivals, then it may also enable other literary modes of transhistorical communication. And if we understand metre to be a literary technology or practice of the trace, we might question whether it is always reducible to a purely mathematical formalization. What would happen if philosophy opened onto a wider literary canon, and took up other texts pursuing other lines of linguistic flight?

As a poetic medium, metre is internally various. The synecdoche “numbers” names one possible medial dimension of poetic metre, but only one. Others are more bodily: the circulatory pulse of the blood, the regulation of breath, or the motor mimicry suggested by metrical “feet.” Then there is visual patterning on the page, the collective rhythms of social life, the second nature of poetic convention, and the dialectic of poetic tradition and revolution. Poetic metre, as Simon Jarvis has argued, is at once a technique of the body and a mode of thinking—what he calls “thinking in verse.”⁷ But it is a mode of thinking, Jarvis also suggests, that is not entirely paraphrasable or articulable in terms of abstract ideas. Thinking in verse, that is, never fully yields to conceptual analysis, instead retaining contact with a world beyond the grasp of the concept. In poetic metre, the biorhythms of pulse and respiration can be entangled together with the tempo of history, and sometimes, as Meillassoux suggests, with the timelessness of mathematics. The wager of writing in verse would then involve communicating this complex temporal conjuncture across time itself. But reading by numbers will only ever discover more numbers. These other medial dimensions of time—and whatever political promise they may hold for our day—will be left out of account.

One literary dice-game notably reworked by Mallarmé—by profession, an English teacher—takes place in Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. It is a game played between Death and Life-in-Death, and won by the latter:

The naked hulk alongside came,
And the twain were casting dice;
“The game is done! I’ve won, I’ve won!”
Quoth she, and whistles thrice.

⁷ Simon Jarvis, “Thinking in Verse,” in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romantic Poetry*, (ed.) J. Chandler and M. N. McLane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 98–116.

The Sun's rim dips; the stars rush out:
At one stride comes the dark;
With far-heard whisper, o'er the sea,
Off shot the spectre-bark.⁸

At stake in this game is the survival of the ancient mariner himself; by extension, it is the very existence of the text which records the game's outcome, for the mariner lives on to rime the text we read. In his recent ecological interpretation of this poem, Timothy Morton suggests that "Life-in-Death is a pretty good description of a virus...the disturbingly non-thin, nonrigid boundary between life and nonlife."⁹ More precisely, perhaps, Life-in-Death might serve as a good description of the viral nature of literary textuality. To be claimed by Life-in-Death, won by a dice-throw, is to be condemned to a life of literature, to enter the suspended animation of narration.

Most of the words in this poem are the mariner's. But Coleridge tends to leave out the quotation marks, blurring the distinction between narrative discourse and the mariner's speech. The sudden intrusion of the present tense, for example, when "The Sun's rim dips" and the dark comes at a stride, could plausibly refer to the scene outside the bridegroom's door, where the mariner is telling his tale, as well as to the moment in his tale when the maritime world lurches back into uncanny life. *The Rime* stages a scene of its own telling, but the boundaries between the levels of text and metatext, text and context, text and interpretation, remain uncertain and indefinite. And because the limits of poetic life-in-death appear blurred and porous, literature's realm comes to seem ambiguously coextensive with life itself, and also, as Morton suggests, with nonlife. The text spills out across this nonrigid boundary into inorganic matter, crossing over to the other side of meaning and asserting contact with what lies beyond thought.

Perhaps the point becomes clearer if we think of the correlation as something like a medium. Knowing reality as it is outside of thought, beyond finitude, would then represent unmediated knowledge. Poetry certainly cannot give us this. But poetry can suggest access to what lies outside thought by employing the absence of mediation as itself a medium, or by negating or cancelling out the mediations through which it communicates. Poetic metre

⁸ S.T. Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" in *Poetical Works*, 3 vols. (London: 1828), 2:14-15.

⁹ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 47.

weaves together multiple medial dimensions, interrelating a multiplicity of correlations: bodily, linguistic, historical, social, cultural, and so on, each with its own constitutive temporal rhythm. Between these medial dimensions lie gulfs of unknowing, dark shadows that fall between the various ways in which we apprehend the world. Perhaps, in its metrical play with these gaps, poetry can offer a negative apprehension of an uncorrelated real. That, at least, has been the counterclaim poetry has traditionally asserted against philosophy: poetry can communicate the “in itself” precisely because it operates in part via nonconceptuality, by thinking in verse.

One place this negative access to the absolute is figured in Coleridge’s *Rime* is in the absence of the letter *h*: the poem is a rime, not a rhyme. The *h* in “rhyme” is a silent, unvoiced sound, seen but not heard. Rime is also a name for the aperture between the vocal chords (the *rima glottidis*). To utter the *h* sound involves the absolute minimal narrowing of the rime. You say *h*, the zero-degree of voice, by reducing the space of an absence by almost nothing. Reducing rhyme to rime involves something similar: the erasure or elision of a silence. *The Rime* is a poem in which silence is abstracted into textual airlessness. Air, the medium of voice, undergoes a phase-change to become rime—frost, or frozen mist, the matter of language grown opaque and recalcitrant to meaning. The paradoxical “far-heard whisper,” at once proximate and distant, coincides with this poetic reduction or narrowing of nothingness. It is a whisper that accompanies the passage of the “spectre-bark”—a phrase that might well serve to describe a deconstructive notion of a text. The only posthumous survival promised here is that of textual life-in-death, communicable via a silencing of silence. Perhaps this is a more humble promise than that presented by Meillassoux’s mathematical eternity. But it is one, at least, that allows for reasoned dissent—indeed, that survives only through instances of interpretative disagreement and scenes of contested reception like that staged in Coleridge’s poem. Every poetic metre codes for a potential politics of time. Set against timelessness, the code of Coleridge’s life-in-death may seem truncated, ambiguous, deficient, even unambitious; the appeal of its literary politics, however, resides precisely in those shortcomings.

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