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**Le Nombre et la sirène: Un déchiffrement du Coup de dés de Mallarmé
by Quentin Meillassoux, and: The Number and the Siren: A Decipherment
of Mallarmé's Coup de dés by Quentin Meillassoux (review)**

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introduction. By addressing this phrase in the concluding chapter of his work, Pérez's research thus comes full circle.

Pérez work closes with an epilogue entitled "De l'imagination en régime post-industriel." Like his previous chapters, the epilogue includes a wide-ranging number of examples and references. While an emphasis is placed on Pierre Klossowski, Olivier Cadiot and Pascal Quignard, other figures, for example Freud, Nietzsche, Adorno, and Lyotard are also mentioned. Drawing on numerous examples, Pérez claims that stereotypes are the products of post-industrial society, a society in which discourse has been standardized and mass-produced. The main questions asked by Pérez in this epilogue are therefore: how can one or how should one respond to industrial society's systematized discourse? Moreover, is singular invention even possible in such a society?

According to Pérez, both Pierre Klossowski and Pascal Quignard offer potential responses to these important questions. Pierre Klossowski, for example, believes that the soul is capable of multiple becoming and metamorphoses and accordingly, the soul can move in a non-human direction: "en direction du non-humain, des plantes, des astres ou des bêtes, dans un mouvement qui est celui de la métamorphose et des *devenirs*" (308). Much like Klossowski, Quignard contends that *écrits* should partake in an "élan inhumain" (312). Considering the implications of both Quignard and Klossowski's ideas in the final remarks of his epilogue, Pérez asks if they are the result of a certain melancholy: a nostalgia for the cosmic in a modern, a-cosmic world in which the imaginary is now a "techno-imaginary" and images are now digital and pixelated. Pérez concludes his epilogue by including eight lines of Beckett's poem *Mirlitonrades*; the last line of verse declares "On n'imagine pas."

The merit of this work is both its wide-ranging subject matter and its meticulous attention to detail. Indeed, its thorough consideration of numerous terms and authors make it, unequivocally, a noteworthy research contribution. What makes this work even more significant, however, is that it has at its heart not only interesting, but also truly relevant questions. What is more, Pérez asks these questions with striking clarity and elegance.

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JENA WHITAKER

Quentin Meillassoux. *Le Nombre et la sirène: Un déchiffrement du Coup de dés de Mallarmé.* Paris: Fayard 2011. 256 pages.

———. *The Number and the Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé's Coup de dés.* Tr. Robin Mackay. NY: Sequence & Falmouth / Urbanomic, 2012. 306 pages.

Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard consists of one verse with a heretofore hidden meter of 707 words. Or, Mallarmé encoded *Un coup de dés* with the

unprecedented meter of 707 words and intentionally hid the code. Or, Mallarmé designed *Un coup de dés* to present the possibility of a hidden code that could only be discovered by chance, one verse composed of 707 words, and intentionally left that possibility compelling yet ultimately uncertain. Or perhaps mere fancy has hallucinated the code, but why . . . Through this logical mise en abyme Quentin Meillassoux unveils a beautiful interpretation of Mallarmé's poem. Against prevailing twentieth century readings of the work as an ironic testament to literature's failure since the death of God, Meillassoux shows how *Un coup de dés* (1897/1914) realizes the nineteenth-century Romantic aspiration to an Ultimate founded on the immanent human conditions of uncertainty and chance. Out of the somber fin-de-siècle springs a kind of gospel for what Bertrand Marchal calls *La Religion de Mallarmé* (Corti 1988). "Religion" may appear an oxymoron for a non-theist absolute; here divinity does not reside in a higher celestial dimension, but in the mind's mysterious ability to create such a fiction and to gain awareness of that creative power. Meillassoux's possible code draws a constellation in a similar manner.

The introduction initiates a liberal method of persuasion, openly acknowledging the hypothetical character of Meillassoux's own reading. He stands against the consensus of critics including Rancière and Murat who express hostility to the idea of a hidden code. They still belong to the existentialist tradition of Blanchot and Sartre, who do not abide any supposed certainty except perhaps death. With a pessimistic attitude to chance, they see *Un coup's* fragmentation perform an Icarian failure to realize the impossibly grand Livre, at best touching a negative absolute of nothingness. Meillassoux proposes that the poem copes with absolute indeterminacy through more optimistic means: possibility and chance.

Part one deciphers *l'unique Nombre* of 707 from both internal and external evidence. Meillassoux begins with a lucid articulation of the poem's shipwreck tale. At the instant before his head submerges, the captain contemplates throwing the dice he clutches as a symbolic and paradoxical act. Without clarifying the outcome of his hesitation, the maelstrom swallows all except for a siren's brief appearance and the stars above. The study then turns to the "Notes en vue du livre" that had convinced Mitsou Ronat (1980) that the alexandrine's number twelve surreptitiously coded the poem, down to the sizes of its typography (additional manuscripts later disproved this detail). Meillassoux presses upon a second number obsessed over in the poet's notes—5—and its significant difference from 12—7. In the poem's own text only one number appears, in the name of the little dipper constellation—*le Septentrion*. Composed of seven stars, the significance of its pivotal North Star for navigation needs no belaboring. The whirlpool at the poem's center delivers a caesural zero, bracketed by a repeated *COMME SI* (performing an absurd rhyme). *SI* signifies the seventh note in the Western musical scale (Do Re Mi . . .); *SI* also denotes the Latin initials of Saint John the Baptist, whose decapitation and spiritual deliverance will mirror the drowning captain-poet's fate.

The unique meter presents an ingenious solution to the free verse controversy. Its determinate and symmetrical number, *cæsura*, and coupled phrases qualify the single verse as regular, while its unprecedented yet unstable sum emancipate the reader from all previous convention. Meillassoux also recognizes prototypes in the 77- and 70-word sonnets “Salut” and “À la nue accablante . . .” They all share themes with the unfinished 1869 tale *Igitur*, yet the later works adopt possible codes in response to verse’s crisis.

Part two argues how the code’s unstable possibility embodies the infinite, as a siren’s song swivels between pure beauty and wreckage. Where the rituals of Greek theater and the Catholic Mass represent and present the divine in a manner unconvincing to moderns, even in Wagner’s total art, Mallarmé’s possible code *diffuses* actual chance infinitely. The poet must have risked that his message in a bottle would never be recovered, nor would his sacrificial act of risk be acknowledged. The poem thus propagates randomness in a way beyond *Hamlet*’s hesitation. Furthermore, the meter contains an indeterminacy equivalent to the silent *e* of syllabic French verse. (Mallarmé alludes to that other fin-de-siècle poetics debate in the siren scene on page VIII.) Three compound words instill a possible defect that would crash the perfect 707 count: *par delà*, *au delà*, and (most significantly) *PEUT-ÊTRE*.

Meillassoux concludes that the poem realizes the Romantic dream of a new civic religion based on an immanent divine ritualized through art. He compares other figures who sought modern equivalents to organic medieval life, from Hugo and Schelling to Michelet and Marx. Number and siren, code and instability, together offer a hypothetical poet-messiah and an atheist political emancipation that can vector the subject with meaning. The latent persona of Quentin Meillassoux rises behind Mallarmé’s grand work like an evangelist, and one wonders how exactly the bygone poet’s civic religion relates to the contemporary philosopher’s project of an irreligious divine.

He might have forged additional, concrete support for his argument with the poem’s print medium characteristics. His brief analysis of its punctuation opens an axis toward the book’s diffusion through various and accidental publics, with all the contingencies of reception—the terrain mapped recently by Arnar and by Thierry Roger. Meillassoux’s companion article to this book, collected in *Autour d’Alain Badiou* (Paris: Germina, 2011), argues that the poem’s visual rhymes realize a quintessentially uncertain modern ceremony where the theatrical *Livre* reverted to a totalizing order. Taken to the extreme, Mallarmé’s work implies that the existence of poetry itself is an undecidable hypothesis. Here is another opportunity to clarify how word count can serve as meter, and to respond to recent work on Mallarmé’s verse theory by Michel Murat (typographical unity with antanaclasis) and Roger Pensom (anisosyllabic rhythmic schemas).

The equivalence of chance, the infinite and absolute are almost taken for granted in the monograph. His *Autour* article echoes Alain Badiou (1997), who contrasted the Mallarméan principle that infinity derives from chance to

a Deleuze-Nietzsche vitalism where chance is secondary. Meillassoux begins to explain how chance manifests a dialectical structure. In poetry, both mediocre verses in their arbitrariness, and perfect ones in their uncanny necessity, affirm chance eternally. Mallarmé's *peut-être* copes with undecideability in a different mode than Badiou's event, which prefers the sober inquiry and empirical evidence of past truths. Meillassoux surely develops these philosophical ideas in his eminent monograph *After Finitude: an Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (2006/tr. 2008). From my perspective, his thinking has sympathies with Charles Peirce's tychism, abduction, logical realism and futurity. Mallarmé shared with Peirce and Bergson the post-Darwinian drive to integrate the reality of randomness at a fundamental level.

The undeniable critical value of Meillassoux's book stems from his exploration of the political and philosophical contexts beneath the poem's reflexive play with meter. Such formal intricacies might otherwise appear trivial. His understanding of the poem's symbolic operation achieves a comprehensive-ness unrivaled since Robert Greer Cohn's exegesis of nature cycle motifs (1949/51). Yet Meillassoux claims only to discover the shape of the lock, and not a final key to interpretation; he refrains from scrutinizing what does not pertain to the code. His synthetic reading of the poem's drama provides a welcome alternative to predominantly distant theoretical musings. Detractors will likely probe here with alternative stories and meta-stories, because Meillassoux's analytical development is otherwise sound. He argues with the precision of a detective testing a hunch against a labyrinth of clues, and with the dedication of a Schoolman who tinkers with syllogisms to prove ten thousand angels could dance on the head of a pin. His narrative suspense can motivate a second reading by those of us who want to believe. Great criticism brings readers deeper into the text, and this original interpretation should not fail to rejuvenate a typically under-read, over-theorized modernist work.

Robin Mackay's translation boasts a suaver design and cover than the original, and intriguing company among its arts-philosophy-literature catalog. He includes new parallel translations of the back matter: *Un coup de dés* (1914 ed.) and the three sonnets at issue. Mackay aims to replicate Meillassoux's engaging style and risks too-literal equivalents on occasion—but I prefer the Nabokovian injection of strangeness into English, without a surplus of cumbersome notes. Both editions lack index and bibliography, but the useful footnotes survive, as well as an appendix charting the word count for your own verification or numerological obsessions. The niche press recognized a quality not purely academic in this book: Meillassoux's erudition speaks to the Mallarmé scholar, but his cunning composition and clarity could entice any literary person or new student into the poem's riddling elegance.