

Mute

ARTICLES

# *EX NIHILO*

By Michael Reid , 1 August 2012

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Image: Jeu de Marseille, surrealist playing card, 1940-41

**Quentin Meillassoux's new book revisits a rather well-worn modernist artefact, Stéphane Mallarmé's epic poem *A Throw of Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*. Whilst the continental philosopher proposes to unveil the poem's secret code for the first time, Michael Reid discovers the real surprise at the heart of the book to be much more incongruous and bizarre**

Quentin Meillassoux is a strange figure. His work is unworldly, abstract, painstakingly argued, intensely philosophical, teeming with fantastic notions and yet written with sober clarity. It finds few echoes. Within the French intellectual milieu that he emerged from (increasingly, in its public form at least, resembling more a contest of egos

than a source of perennial ideas) he is a solitary figure. *Après la finitude*, his first book, was greeted largely with indifference in France on its publication in 2006. Surprisingly, this was not the case in the Anglo-American world when it was translated as *After Finitude* in 2008, despite the dominance of critical theory, which would hardly seem to have much use for it. His ascendancy in these circles has been rapid. Almost all his work has been promptly translated and published, particularly in the *Collapse* journal, which, along with the internet presence surrounding the so-called Speculative Realism movement (or 'brand', as Graham Harman has aptly termed it) is largely responsible for bringing his ideas to a public. *The Number and the Siren*, appearing in English only a few months after its French publication, arrives at a time when the sheer scale, audacity and untimeliness of his work is becoming more evident. The philosophy of contingency introduced in *After Finitude* was only a small part of a much larger project. We wonder how this new book will fare, deepening as it does that project's aura of strangeness.

So what is the book? It is a reading or, as the subtitle indicates, a decipherment, of Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, or *A Throw of Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*. The publishers describe it as 'a detective story à la Edgar Allen Poe'. There is something in this, insofar as it is a work with a unique narrative structure, hinging on suspense and surprise. But it is very much a philosophical narrative. However extraordinary the book, the only fictions within it are the ones woven into Mallarmé's poem, in which Meillassoux locates a desire to go beyond the fictional and realise an authentically real act. But we get ahead of ourselves. How to proceed? We only want to introduce the thinker and the book to you, to give some small idea of the force of both, so will attempt a series of compact summaries – of Meillassoux's project, of the poem, and of the book, with the understanding that such summaries will of necessity be diminishments. For the book in question we will try to avoid revealing key moments in too much detail (even philosophy books, it seems, are susceptible to spoilers), giving just enough information to allow us to understand at the end of this review how it fits into the wider project and what this might mean for us.



Image: Ace, Jeu de Marseille, surrealist playing card, 1940-41

There are two main aspects to Meillassoux's philosophy, insofar as we are able to grasp it from the material currently available: one ontological, one ethical, the latter derived from the former. His ontology, outlined in *After Finitude*, maintains the necessity of contingency. Essentially, for Meillassoux, all beings are contingent, there is no such thing

as a necessary being, the only thing necessary being contingency itself. Consequently, there is no possibility of an eternal God as creator and provider. Everything that occurs (including the physical laws that would normally govern occurrences) is susceptible to becoming other for no reason whatsoever. In place of an ordered universe we have what he has recently been calling a 'superchaos'. Nonetheless, he is a rationalist and believes that such a universe is conceivable and describable in rationalistic terms and will even support certain logical norms. For example, he shows that even within this chaos, indeed *because* of it, the principle of non-contradiction still holds. A contradictory being (one capable of being both itself and other than itself) would be a necessary being (because its being already contains the non-being that would depose it) and therefore impossible. Furthermore, such a universe allows the rational conceivability of certain possibilities, not described within *After Finitude* but suggested in some essays currently available and apparently outlined more fully in the forthcoming *L'Inexistence Divine*. The most surprising of these, given his irreligious ontology, and, we expect, the most galling to his current readership, is the idea of 'a God to come'. Superchaos enables the emergence *ex nihilo* of absolutely unpredictable occurrences. He has isolated three successive historical eruptions of this type – matter, life and thought. Meillassoux speculates on a fourth, *justice*, essentially the bestowal of near-immortality (only *near* since no being can be eternal) on every thinking being, living or dead. His ethics consists in the never assured hope for this event, which takes the form of a peculiar messianism – the subject awaits a being of such unconstrained power that its appearance drags the human race into a new state. The waiting is not intended as passive, however. The subject who experiences this hope is invigorated by it, released from the weight of the terrible injustices of history and of the last century in particular, from eternal grief and inaction, and is given renewed political impetus to anticipate this new world in her actions and thought.

Paul Valéry once said of *A throw of dice* that it 'proclaims a God as loudly as it denies one'. We can see from this conception why Meillassoux was drawn to it, as a thinker with an ontology that is radically atheist but which at the same time enables the proclamation of a world that can only be realised by a God. The poem is probably the most famous of Mallarmé's experiments. It appears as an appendix to *The Number and the Siren* laid out in the form originally intended by the poet, with verse printed in various typefaces, separated by blocks of blank space and running over panels across two facing pages. The narrative, insofar as it can be abstracted, concerns a figure called the Master, floating on a furious sea at the scene of a shipwreck that may or may not have happened. The Master hesitates over whether or not to throw some dice he holds clenched in his hand, before the sea overcomes him, leaving only a hat and a plume floating into a whirlpool. Out of the whirlpool comes a siren who destroys a rock that may have been the cause of the shipwreck. The final image is of a constellation, possibly the Septentrion (known more commonly to us as the Big Dipper), which seems to assess or respond to 'a total count in the making', something occurring in the events of the poem, perhaps the roll of the dice, perhaps some other enumeration. In the midst of these events sky and sea associate and combine in various elusive dramas, accompanied by abstract ruminations on chance and on 'the unique Number that cannot be another'.



Image: Ace, Jeu de Marseille, surrealist playing card, 1940-41

The poem, as should be clear from our fumbling description, is of a rare mystery and complexity. It is, to say the least, a fiendish puzzle. Perhaps this is why it has elicited so many philosophical responses, from figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière, to name only a few. And Meillassoux now. What is it that he brings to bear on a subject visited so many times?

Meillassoux's Mallarmé is attempting to revive a destiny for a poetry faltering in the face of the collapse of religious authority, struggling to retain its ritual significance in a world where significance itself is revealed as merely a gloss over absurdity. The God that Mallarmé proclaims is thus no deity at all but only Chance, understood as that which rules over all events, including poetry. Meillassoux is not alone in picturing the poet thus. What distinguishes his approach from most other contemporary takes on the poem (including Rancière's, for example), is his unfashionable belief that Mallarmé's poem is not merely difficult to understand, but actually hermetic, properly incomprehensible unless the reader has access to a certain number that illuminates it. In other words, in this book, Mallarmé revives a destiny for poetry by means of a *secret code*.

The first half of the book consists of Meillassoux establishing the existence of the code and showing its significance. He finds evidence for it in the poetic context Mallarmé found himself, in that the number connects to the crisis that free verse provoked in the authority of meter, a crisis intimately linked to that of religion, which left the poet wanting to preserve something of the majesty of the French alexandrine whilst inhabiting the individuality of lines unconstrained by traditional measurement. He finds evidence in Mallarmé's other works, notably in 'Igitur' – also a meditation on chance in which a metrical number is key – and in the plans for *The Book* – Mallarmé's never realised project to establish by means of poetry and ritual 'the true cult of the modern era', which featured various numerological calculations. He uncovers evidence for the code within the poem itself, particularly in a panel structured in an abstractly metrical fashion around an image of an abyss, evoking the nothingness at the heart of all fictions. Finally, he finds evidence in a shockingly simple fact about the poem as a whole, where the number itself is

produced (we shall let the reader encounter this for themselves).

The code here appears as both arbitrary and essential, not designating some higher numerological order but still fundamental to the structure and meaning of the poem. Nonetheless, having established the plausibility of the code, Meillassoux muses on the fact that no matter how original the use of the number might be and how symbolically rich it is, it hardly thereby becomes 'a unique number that is no other'. Furthermore, whilst such a gesture confronts the crisis in poetry, it doesn't give it a new religious vocation. Mallarmé wanted an experiment that would reveal 'Divinity, which is never anything but Oneself'. The poem is the experiment, the ritual; the subject, the poet himself. But if the code is to function to infuse the poet with the power of Chance, seen as the true, eternal and therefore divine power, it has to be more than a ruse or a fiction. The second half of the book thus establishes that by means of the code Mallarmé makes the poem into an action, linked to the throw of the dice.

As soon as the dice are thrown, Chance, seen as pure possibility, is exhausted. The result is a finite term. Like Meillassoux's contingency, Chance is not capable of producing an actual contradictory event but it does hold within itself virtual possibilities that contradict each other. Insofar as these possibilities can be simultaneously grasped, it is as if becoming, choosing, finitude, all can be averted. Hence Mallarmé's fascination with the hesitation of Hamlet, whose ambivalence is on the verge of infinity. But Hamlet eventually chooses, in keeping with realistic conventions of plot, and by choosing becomes finite. The dominant interpretation of *A throw of dice* is that Mallarmé avoids this by means of ambiguity – he constructs a situation where the Master may or may not have thrown. For Meillassoux, this isn't sufficient. The mystery of whether the Master threw the dice is here indefinite, rather than infinite – it lacks the definite, contradictory terms that make the hesitation of Hamlet into something approaching the infinite. Furthermore, although it represents Chance, such a scenario doesn't raise the poet to the level of Chance itself. Meillassoux thus has to show how Mallarmé creates a hesitation that is eternal (not constrained by a reality that compels decision), determinate (holding in itself a virtual contradiction) and real (capable of transforming the poet).

He does this by making the infinite thing the code itself – for Meillassoux, Mallarmé's action is to produce a 'quavering number', a 'unique Number', a hesitating number that by means of its undecidability renders the throw of dice that produced it and the thrower himself infinite. He does this by imbuing that aspect of the poem that produces the number with a flaw. In other words, the success of the code is dependent on it not quite succeeding. It has to succeed enough so that it is determinate, so that we maintain the poem has a code, but be uncertain enough so that we can also maintain its opposite, without being able to settle. Meillassoux thus proceeds by disrupting his own thesis, trying to reveal a Mallarmé who did not quite settle on a code, without thereby choosing not to choose, thus in a real act transmitting an ideal version of himself (the eternal Mallarmé known through the poem) into contradictory determinations. The poet would thus be 'diffused' by the poem, just as Christ is diffused by the Host in transubstantiation. He becomes the divine presence proclaiming the truth of Chance in a bizarre messianic gesture.

Such a thesis may seem incredible and, indeed, we found our credulity wavering when reading the book. In its final pages, in a moment that is somehow quite moving, Meillassoux addresses concerns of this type after charting some possible objections:

Numerological convictions, as we see can rapidly crumble once a simple fissure appears in our delicate arrangement. But should the reader, if the doubt proves too pressing, begin reading again from the beginning, she will doubtless see her suspicions evaporate once more, fissured in their turn by the conjunction of contrary reasons.

Having now read at least certain parts of the text several times, we can confirm that our ideas in response are indeed constantly 'fissured', caught in an enjoyable, tantalising quavering like that of Mallarmé's act, perhaps like that of any experience of a literature still living.

We are not best placed to assess properly the success of the book as a reading of the poem. Our task is more to convey the force of some of its ideas. Part of their force, for us, comes from the interest of Meillassoux's wider meditation on similar issues. We have here a book that presents a world ruled by Chance, just as *After Finitude* discovered a world of absolute contingency. And we have a messianic gesture that somehow emerges from nothingness, just as one will be envisaged emerging from a superchaos by the forthcoming *L'Inexistence Divine*. However, though the parallels are obvious, Meillassoux does not seem to find in Mallarmé a meaning that corresponds precisely to that of his solitary philosophy. We shall outline two examples, though more could be found.

1. *Chance is not the same as contingency*, despite Meillassoux occasionally using the words interchangeably in *The Number and the Siren* and also drawing on a similar semantic field to that deployed when he discusses his own conception. In fact, he distinguishes rather carefully in the essay 'Potentiality and Virtuality' between chance and contingency. Chance has the ability to actualise potentials, which are determinate possibilities already indexed in the situation (the poem has a code or the poem doesn't have a code). Contingency has the ability to actualise virtuals, which are in no way given already prior to the event of their emergence (nothing sentient exists in the world, then sentience appears as something entirely new).

2. *A very different messianic presence emerges for each thinker*. While discussing Mallarmé's religious ambitions, Meillassoux distinguishes between Eucharist and *Parousia* as different forms of divine presence. In the former is that diffusion of the divine we have already mentioned, transubstantiation, a 'presence in absence' that in Mallarmé's atheist poetics invokes the power of Chance and raises the poet to its infinity. *Parousia*, however, is the full presence of the divine, which would normally occur in the resurrection of Christ. Meillassoux's messiah appears in this eschatological fashion, except not repeating an original presence, as Mallarmé's Eucharist doesn't envisage a future one. Meillassoux's messiah is not a repetition of Mallarmé's, nor is Mallarmé's an anticipation of Meillassoux's.

So, if Mallarmé's drama differs fundamentally from Meillassoux's and if, furthermore, this difference itself does not seem to be the impetus of the book, how does *The Number and the Siren* fit into Meillassoux's project?

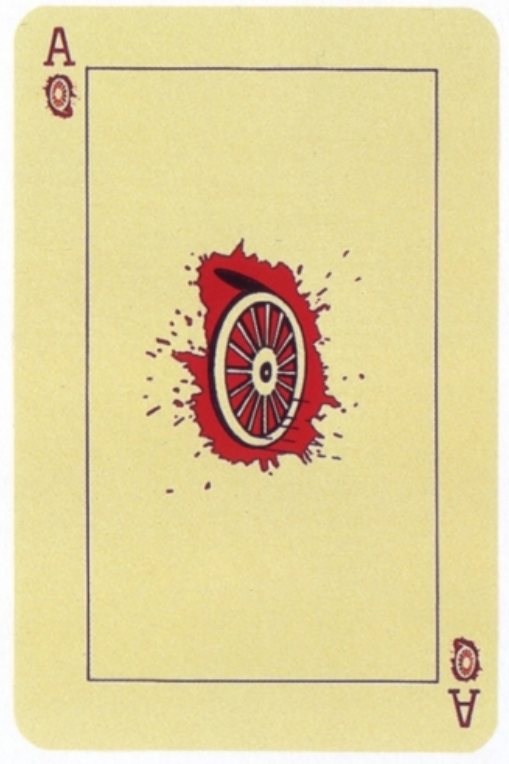


Image: Ace, Jeu de Marseille, surrealist playing card, 1940-41

Perhaps it doesn't or, at least, not straightforwardly, as an incorporation of Mallarmé's ideas into the continuity of a thought developing, or as a way of clarifying that thought by differentiation. In an interview with Graham Harman in 2010, Meillassoux spoke of the existence of 'hidden works', including one on Mallarmé, very possibly *The Number and the Siren*. He spoke of an 'incongruity' between his open and hidden works, his two identities as a thinker, though without explaining what this difference consists in.

Although, to the best of our knowledge, this is not stated anywhere by Meillassoux, we do seem to have an example of another work of this type in the form of 'Subtraction and Contraction', Meillassoux's moving essay on Gilles Deleuze. Like *The Number and the Siren*, 'Subtraction and Contraction' builds an unusual rapport with its subject, constructing a philosophical narrative that resonates with Meillassoux's concerns but is never at any point circumscribed by those concerns. In other words, Meillassoux performs in both works the remarkably generous act of bracketing his philosophy to try and speak in chorus with another's. But perhaps he is able to do this because, after all, although their concepts are not the same, there is something of a shared spirit there, an echo, a feeling for the rejuvenating course that might arise out of thought's monstrous sense of possibility. *A perhaps.*

This *perhaps* is key to *The Number and the Siren*. For Meillassoux, Mallarmé's poem 'makes no longer *being*, but the *perhaps*, the first task – the task to come – of thinkers and poets'. *Perhaps* is also a word that is, as anyone who completes the book will see, at the centre of the code's 'quavering' and thus Mallarmé's diffusion. But for those of us for whom atheism is an unfinished project, the Eucharistic perhaps of Mallarmé and the eschatological perhaps of Meillassoux may seem dismaying. Is there not another way? Must we say, with Heidegger, that 'only a God can save us'? Or believe, since, unlike in Heidegger, the thought of the divine in Mallarmé and Meillassoux invigorates our capacity for action, that our acts require a quasi-religious dimension in order that they don't give way before futility, towards cynicism and despair? We would like to think not. It is true that we live in spectacularly nihilistic times. And that this question of religion, with the notions of eternity and immortality that accompany it, is far from resolved.



Meillassoux's rationalist vision of subjective possibility is a brilliantly stirring intervention into the malaise of attempts to think through such problems. We're not sure there is any other philosopher working today capable of producing such a strong subjective affect and not least in this study of a poet who attempted to found, through a unique literary act, a messianic meaning from within the meaninglessness that we moderns have come to recognise as the horizon of our world.

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