



“Nothing will have taken place...”:

Meillassoux and the Repetition of Failure

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“RIEN N’AURA EU LIEU QUE LE LIEU EXCEPTÉ PEUT-ÊTRE UNE
CONSTELLATION/NOTHING WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE BUT THE PLACE EXCEPT PERHAPS
A CONSTELLATION” – Stéphane Mallarmé

Quentin Meillassoux’s *The Number and the Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé’s Coup de dés* is a complex work of literary criticism undertaken by a philosopher that often verges on the fantastic. In this review, which I am circumventing the grinding processes of an academic journal and posting to the blogs in the spirit of supporting the work of Urbanomic/Sequence Press, I want to reflect mainly on the the experience of strangeness reading the book and what potentially this project of philosophically-attuned literary criticism may have to offer to continuing discussions in philosophy of religion and political theology. Now, many readers will already be familiar with [Adam’s review](#) of the book and so I will do my best not to replicate what he has already written, but find that my own consideration of the text somewhat differ from Adam’s tongue-in-cheek theory that Meillassoux’s project constitutes an ‘independent discovery of Christianity’. Setting this relatively minor disagreement until later, as it is a disagreement in part regarding the value of this project (if one can really call it a disagreement as such), I will only say now that in addition to an independent discovery of Christianity Meillassoux’s reading of Mallarmé also independently discovers the post-Christian secularism of civil religion and the twin failures of both Christianity and Western secularism. But out of this failure, this shipwreck, perhaps Meillassoux and others may perhaps find points, perhaps forming a constellation, about what sort of things philosophy, poetry, and humanity may build after the death of God.

First, though, I would like to reflect on the strangeness of the book. Adam and others have already remarked that the trajectory of Meillassoux's work has been anything but predictable. Perhaps this should be less surprising than it is, since the thesis concerning absolute contingency put forward in *After Finitude* was taken very seriously by Meillassoux. There is no sufficient reason for anything and so why should we have expected his nihilism to play out as every other nihilism has? Indeed, this term, though seemingly embraced in *The Number and the Siren*, may not really be apt for a description of Meillassoux's work. While there is a certain void lying at the center of his philosophy and while the privileging of primary qualities in *After Finitude* seemed to suggest a kind of scienticism, already we could see there a certain humanism at work. Limiting the law-like powers of Nature (with the capital-N intended) in order to make room for human salvation.

Still, even taking that into account alongside his theory of "Divine Inexistence" and the the possible resurrection of the dead after the coming of a God, *The Number and the Siren* still seems strange. Adam has deftly dealt with the specifics of the book, and so his spoiler alert in effect already, I will only say that I began the book a bit incredulous about the importance of this number 707 that Meillassoux argues is central to an understanding of Mallarmé's *Coup de dés*. I'm always suspicious of those who think math or the number will bring the gods, but in this case it seemed like the case of a philosopher potentially losing his damn mind. A secret code? In the work of French poet who, while very important to a number of French thinkers, is seemingly little commented on in the rest of the world? And this is supposed to be the way, as Meillassoux says, "modernity triumphed and we did not know it (p. 221)"? But, surprisingly, by the end of the book I was buying it. Meillassoux takes great pains to make his case, which again is that the "count" of the poem (meaning when you count all the words up) equals 707, even at one point digging into the dictionary that Mallarmé would have used to argue for counting certain compound words as separate words. In other words, though the task is seemingly a little nuts, this isn't the work of a lunatic losing himself in numerology. When I finished the book the whole looked to me incredibly well-crafted. Meillassoux's prose is always clear, direct, and teeming with confidence. All of this is captured by Robin Mackay's excellent translation, a translation that, while aided by Meillassoux's clarity in the French, was surely a challenge since the argument of the text depends on particular nuances of the French language (and here it bears mentioning, though unrelated ultimately to the content, Urbanomic/Sequence has produced a beautiful physical product as well showing a care that is sorely lacking amongst the larger presses these days). But, despite that, I was left with a certain feeling of emptiness at the end of reading the book. What was this all for? What took place here?

Now I should be clear, I don't expect every work of philosophy to be pathbreaking or life altering. Yet, there was something about the grandiose nature of the claims of this text that drew me in. There really is a certain drama at work here. After all, I started off with a certain amount of incredulity towards the main thesis. And I found myself turning towards acceptance, resisting such a turn, and finally giving in. Yet, at the end of it, what really was presented? Is it simply, as it may be, just an interesting reading of Mallarmé? Or is Meillassoux attempting to be a faithful subject to a proper event (in the sense we find in Badiou's philosophy)? The first would be difficult

to reconcile with Meillassoux's wider philosophical project of thinking the absolute and overturning agnosticism in thought. The second then presents the reader with a choice, at least in Badiouian terms: be faithful to the event or reject it. If I am left wondering what took place at the end of this text then am I simply a reactionary subject? Rejecting the event as such? Or, to continue playing on a theme, is the claimed event here perhaps only a constellation of points of failure in the West?

Meillassoux tells us that Mallarmé's aim was to create a civil religion after the failure of Christianity. The failure, though, is perceived in somewhat banal terms by Mallarmé and so also by Meillassoux after him. Quite simply, Christianity is "out-dated". Its form and practice no longer satisfy the "modern spirit". At this point in the text Meillassoux deploys an interesting historiography concerning the move from the Greek marriage of theatre and politics to the drama of the Latin Middle Ages to the need for some modern civil religion capable of holding together a society through some 'strong symbolic bond'. This historiography is captured, for Mallarmé, in the Christian dialectic of presence and expectation, despite Christianity's seeming lack of fit with the modern spirit. What is needed is some kind of post-Christian symbolic bond that neither presents nor represents the Divine, but rather a diffusion (distinct from "Christian" presentation and "Greek" representation). And though this appears to be an interesting concept, not greatly borne out in the text, it does raise a question concerning how much a post-Christian civil religion would truly resist the same Christianity that has failed the modern spirit as such.

Meillassoux describes this civil religion as needing to be public rather than private, and so "Catholic rather than Protestant in spirit". This struck me since the Roman Catholic Church hasn't been a state church in any real sense since the Middle Ages. And now when folks speak of civil religion it is generally Protestant in character, meaning a set of beliefs diffused not through some central authority but rather internalized as mini-panopticons. Here the question to ask of Mallarmé's project, which Meillassoux does not, would be in what way does his civil religion centred around the Poem match and yet still overcome such a Catholic spirit. Is it simply in the dramatic acting out of the Mass as taken up in the dramatic acting out of the reading of the projected project called "the Book" before *Coup de Dés*? And is this all to simply support a society? To cement the social bonds?

It's admittedly a strange project, but without asking these questions I think the reader will simply stop at its strangeness rather than considering the ways in which the project is actually indicative of wider attempts in secular philosophy to overcome religious traditions. It is indicative both in terms of its power (I have already remarked on the passion of the text, a passion that sweeps up its readers) but also in terms of its shortcomings. The implicit theory of religion at work is that religion is about social bonds. Which, as far as theories of religion go, is reasonable, but this can go in many different ways, many nefarious. But does the society deserve to continue? Is the new civil religion anything more than an argument for the society? All of this largely repeats, as Adam has already pointed out, the form of Christianity. Without a rigorous critique of that form the philosophy is bound to repeat the same mistakes, perpetuating a kind of "orthodoxy with atheist

characteristics". We have a name for this, it is Western secularism. Without addressing the issue more head on of the relationship between the secular and religious traditions generally the point of the book ultimately remains somewhat obscure to me beyond simply finding that there is some code in the poem that plays an important part in interpreting it. Addressing these issues that, rather than being secondary, seem to be raised precisely by the text itself, seems necessary, since the decipherment of that poem is predicated on the wide social claims of the power of the Poem. Perhaps if he goes through with his planned text on Nietzsche he will turn to these social and political concerns. For now, though, I can only wonder what has taken place.