

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

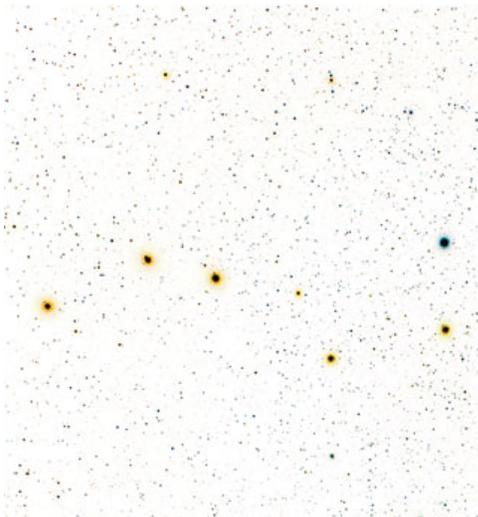
## The Most Beautiful Perhaps

by [Barry Schwabsky](#) on October 7, 2012

QUENTIN MEILLASSOUX

### The Number and the Siren

A DECIPHERMENT OF MALLARMÉ'S *COUP DE DÉS*



I wrote, a few months ago, of [Stéphane Mallarmé as a difficult poet](#) — difficult to understand, and difficult to translate, perhaps especially into English. What I should have also said then is that part of the difficulty lies in the fact that his poems in verse, as Peter Manson titled them in his estimable recent translation, that is, his *Poésies*, constitute only one facet of his work. There's also what Mallarmé called *vers de circonstance*, occasional verse of which he turned a considerable quantity, and which might or might not be, as it appears, as insubstantial as it is sparkling — that is, it might or might not be in reality what the poet sometimes pretended all his verse was, “*Rien, cette écume, vierge vers*”: nothing but foam. These pieces are well and truly untranslatable in their wispy evanescence. Then there's a mass of prose, ranging from literary criticism to a strange sort of fashion journalism to the scattered notes toward his unfinished, indeed unbegun yet long contemplated project known simply as the Book, *Le Livre*. Prose poetry is something else, and there's that too. And finally there's that famous, prophetic and (despite a century of commentary) barely comprehended work that Mallarmé himself designated, on its title page, a *Poème* — not a *Poésie* — though it's neither in verse nor exactly in prose but in a writing of some other kind that as yet still lacks a name: I'm referring, of course, to *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira pas la hazard*, *A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*. Only certain dimensions of Mallarmé's sense of poetry can be gleaned from the poems in verse; to comprehend it more deeply demands an acquaintance with the rest of his writing, and perhaps above all the notes toward the Book and *Un coup de dés*.

*Un coup de dés* has been translated a number of times, and the translations on the whole seem adequate, yet while certain arguably superficial aspects of the work have been enormously influential — its typographical experimentation, the theme of chance — one has always had the sense that the work is fundamentally misunderstood. In a different way than the verse, certainly, but to the same degree, it is a difficult text. What does this mean? That can be argued, but as Quentin Meillassoux points out in his recently translated study *The Number and the Siren*, what most commentators broadly agree on is that it is difficult is not because there is something hidden in it. In the words Meillassoux quotes from Jacques Rancière, “Mallarmé is not a *hermetic* author, he is a *difficult* author.” Pierre Macherey is of precisely the same opinion, and explains more fully what he means: “Mallarmé is not hermetic, in the sense of a well-hidden secret that ought to be found out; he is only difficult.... The secret is, finally, that there is no secret.” And as Meillassoux admits, albeit with some irony, this is precisely as we would

hope it to be, for to encode a hidden meaning in this way “is basically something rather puerile, whatever its complexity; something devoid of literary value, in any case.” The situation is similar, one might say, to what makes mystery stories a subliterate genre: As Edmund Wilson asked, “Who cares who killed Roger Ackroyd?” Not to say that this encoding would necessarily deprive the work of value — but that value would still have to be situated somewhere beyond the code, just as, for instance, the mere fact that a work is constructed according to rhyme and meter would not give it literary value — the poetry subsists somewhere on the far side of that. But nonetheless, Meillassoux insists, *Un coup de dès* does conceal a secret, and he can tell us what it is. Meillassoux can hardly deny that Mallarmé is a difficult poet, one who, as he says, for instance, “at the turn of the 1870s...developed a writing technique that consisted of losing readers from the outset with an opening line whose construction initially escapes them entirely, it being possible to reconstitute the first phrase only by means of verses sometimes located far into the poem. One has the impression of words that are simply juxtaposed, not which, for this very reason, scintillate, as if they were appearing for the first time in their originary strangeness.” But nonetheless he insists that Mallarmé is *also*, at least in *Un coup de dès* and a few others of his last lyrics, a hermetic poet.

But who is this Meillassoux who claims to have found what a century of readers have failed to find, and who is willing to point out a dimension of this foundational modern text that would be so contrary to modern aesthetics — more like a Baroque allegory, perhaps, than any work of modernity ought to be? He is a philosopher teaching at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, a former student of Alain Badiou, and the author of several books, of which one has previously been translated into English, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (Continuum, 2008). He is a leading light of a philosophical trend called speculative realism, whose adherents are mainly active in England. However, and while it’s not insignificant that Mallarmé has attracted the attention of an unusual number of philosophers — Rancière, Badiou, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Paul Sartre are only the first to come to mind — *The Number and the Siren* is not a book of philosophy but a very close empirical examination of Mallarmé’s poem.

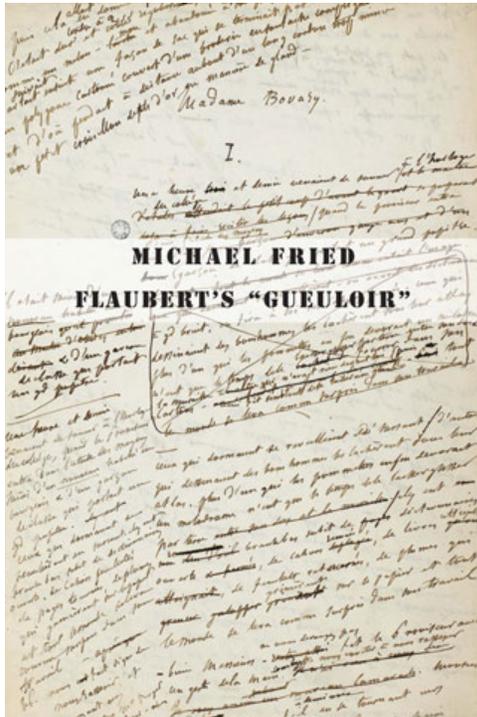
I’ve never before written a review of a book on poetry in which I’ve had to watch out for spoilers, but in this case I think it really would be better if I tell you you’d better go read the book if you want to know the secret Meillassoux claims to have uncovered—and that despite the fact that he reveals it pretty early on in the book. The suspense isn’t so much about what the secret will be but about how he will convince you, if not to believe him, at least to suspend your disbelief. One Mallarmé authority I spoke to said the book seemed suspiciously like the old Douglas Adams novel in which the answer to the great question of life, the universe and everything turned out to be the number forty-two. One reason is that in his decipherment of *Un coup de dès* Meillassoux never entirely loses himself in its details; in fact, whether or not one accepts Meillassoux’s central contention, *The Number and the Siren* makes for the best overview of Mallarmé’s poetics that I know.

In particular, Meillassoux makes clear the poem’s relation to Mallarmé’s reflections on politics. This is all the more crucial as the poet is sometimes made to seem nothing more than a fabricator of crystalline literary baubles. Mallarmé was convinced that the civil state had need of a civil religion, what might be called a post-theistic secular Church. “Mallarmé thus considers as impossible a strict neutrality of the public domain that would reserve all spiritual impulses for the personal sphere alone,” Meillassoux points out. “There must be a common elevation.” Though Meillassoux doesn’t mention them, one thinks of the civic festivals promoted by the Jacobins in the wake of the French Revolution — for instance in Strasbourg, 30 Brumaire, Year II of the Revolution, when the cathedral was proclaimed a Temple of Reason and a choir of 10,000 voices sang hymns to this new deity under the sign, light after darkness. The Book of which Mallarmé dreamed—and which he presumably could not write because by nature it would have had to have been anonymous — was to be likewise the instrument of a new godless religion. Poetry, in this dream, was to be “a *diffusion* of the divine,” writes Meillassoux, “as opposed to its *representation* (the Greek scene), or its *presentation* (the Christian Parousia).” What might be surprising is that Mallarmé’s political thinking is directly tied to his position on the “crisis in verse” of his time, the break between classical versification, above all the alexandrine, and free verse, and the attendant ambivalence as to how classical verse should be pronounced on stage. Accordingly, although “Mallarmé sees in meter the condition of a ceremonial and public poetry,” each individual, explains Meillassoux, may “introduce a principle of uncertainty into the *reading* of the verse.”

Meillassoux traces Mallarmé’s poetics from its broadest socio-theological implications to the most minute details of prosody. Yet his strategy, strange as it may seem to say, depends precisely on maintaining the reader’s skepticism even as he inveigles you into entertaining the possibility that his thesis is correct. For him, the poem is “the most beautiful *peut-être* in the French language,” and the beauty is all in the conditionality of this “perhaps.” And to see this, as Meillassoux points out, is to understand that our notions of authorial intention may have to be revised. “There is a strong possibility,” as he says, “that Mallarmé basically knew no more than we do about his poem, and even that he did not wish to know more; and this is because the Poem is in itself, in fact, a ‘machine’ for hypotheses — a machine that functions without him, indifferent to his innermost conviction.” It really is a throw of the dice in this sense, that its result is beyond the thrower’s control.

From Lucretius onward at least, to accept the idea of materialism is to accept the primacy of randomness, the *clinamen* — and therefore to accept meaninglessness, or what amounts to the same thing, the arbitrariness of meaning. The fundamental question for Mallarmé — in this I am entirely in agreement with Meillassoux — is, always, how can an act, poetic or otherwise, have meaning in a wholly secular, wholly material world, that is, a world ruled by chance. “The condition of the new poetry is thus identified as that of the absence of the old divine transcendence,” writes Meillassoux, “but this

absence lived no longer in the mode of an infinite mourning, but in the mode of a creative, fecund nothingness.”



It's interesting to compare Meillassoux's plunge into the aporia of authorial intention with another recent analysis of one of the glories of nineteenth-century French writing, Michael Fried's new book *Flaubert's "Gueuloir,"* two-thirds of which is given over to an essay on "Style and Habit in *Madame Bovary.*" Again, as with *The Number and the Siren*, this is a book whose originality may have something to do with the fact that it comes at literature from a disciplinary tangent, Fried being an art historian rather than a literary critic. Flaubert, like Mallarmé after him, is renowned for the almost obsessive degree of control he exercised over every detail of his text. *Gueuloir*, as Fried points out, is "Flaubert's term for his regular practice of reading his sentences in a loud voice, as a means of becoming aware of defects in his writing (assonances, consonances, repetitions of all kinds) that he would then seek to eliminate in pursuit of a new and extremely demanding ideal of stylistic perfection." Combing through the text of *Madame Bovary*, Fried points out any number of highly patterned instances of such repetitions—patterns that seem impossible to ascribe with certainty either to Flaubert's intention or to some lapse; they cannot clearly be seen as willed nor can they be written off as automatisms either.

By contrast, in a second essay, on *Salammô* — a text that unlike *Bovary* or *Un coup de dès* has had remarkably little evident impact on subsequent modernist writing — Fried endeavors to show the entirely *willed* nature of the work's construction, from its overall design to its every detail. In doing so he does not make this rebarbative text any more attractive; copious citations of the reservations expressed by contemporaries like the Goncourts and Sainte-Beuve seem pretty much on the mark. Moreover, it is never clear what justifies Fried's decision to use "will" as his master category here; one would have thought others, most obviously, "artifice," might have served as well or better. In showing Flaubert's effort to evoke an entirely strange and unfamiliar corner of history, Fried inadvertently demonstrates that *Salammô* is not a historical novel in the usual sense, but closer in spirit to those science fiction epics that attempt to construct fully realized alternative worlds.

In his analysis of *Bovary*, Fried propounds a problem for scholars to ponder — and there you have a clause that the *gueuloir* should have eliminated — while Meillassoux proposes a solution that readers must take or leave, or manage to take and leave at the same time. To one of the world's strangest and most enigmatic poetic texts he adds a most astounding exegesis. Meillassoux makes us see Mallarmé as a different kind of author than we might have imagined he was—shows us a madness in that we might not have expected. Suddenly he seems more a precursor of Raymond Roussel than of Paul Valéry on the one hand or Pierre Reverdy on the other, though in each of them in his own way, no doubt, we can see in "his ardent hesitation" another attempt "to rethrow the dice of modern poetry." Likewise, true as it is that, as Maurice Blanchot once wrote, "*Flaubert n'est pas encore Mallarmé,*" Fried's Flaubert is not so much a precursor of James or Proust as, he is again, of Roussel — and of books like *Dune* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*. The genealogy of literature, too, is subject to further throws of the dice.

Quentin Meillassoux's [The Number and the Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé's Coup de dès](#), translated by Robin Mackay (Urbanomic/Sequence Press), and Michael Fried's [Flaubert's "Gueuloir"](#) (Yale University Press) are available

