



REVIEWS

Review of *The Number and the Siren*
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Tedious Methods

JEFF NAGY ON QUENTIN MEILLASSOUX'S
THE NUMBER AND THE SIREN

The Number and the Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé's "Coup de dés," by Quentin Meillassoux. Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic/Sequence Press, 2012. 298 pages.

IN MAY OF THIS YEAR, the latest contribution to the philosophico-literary genre known as "speculative realism" appeared: an English-language translation of *The Number and the Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé's "Coup de dés."* In this rip-roaringly paranoid, critical fantasia by way of *The Da Vinci Code*, we follow not Robert Langdon but one Quentin Meillassoux—a youngish and meteorically successful student of Alain Badiou's and professor at L'École Normale Supérieure in Paris—as he pursues the book's subeponymous English professor and symbologist at the close of the nineteenth century, tracking the poet Stéphane Mallarmé

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through his famous 1897 ode to chance and the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance). Across the book's some three hundred pages, we discover, along with Meillassoux, an event no less momentous than the Incarnation—or more so: one that the philosopher posits as having broken the history of the world in two, "like a zero-event . . . like a christic birth . . . the absolute rupture of a before and an after." A scission accomplished in such a way that a wager on

its own possible nonreception—on whether or not a hiker passes within earshot of the falling tree—is an intrinsic part of its functioning. Via Mallarmé's own identification with the protagonist of *Un Coup de dés*, and his sacrificial drowning in an unmeasured sea (the scene of a shipwreck being Mallarmé's ostensible subject), coupled with the second-order potential sacrifice of the reception of that sacrifice, "modernity triumphed and we did not know it"—not, that is, until now.

How does Meillassoux arrive at this miraculous conclusion? How is his own wager, if not Mallarmé's, to be won? The means to this end will be familiar to anyone who's ever used Microsoft Office: Meillassoux does a word count, finding that the poem's revolutionary experiments in typography conceal (spoiler alert!) a Boeingsque 707. This quantification of *Un Coup de dés's* unique metric serves as the key to its thematic "decipherment," as Meillassoux terms it, with all the aforementioned consequences. Our intrepid avatar imagines a Mallarmé "obsessed . . . by his fastidious count, to the point of mania." But as the younger M. tries to match the elder's maniacal fastidiousness, it turns out that all is not right in the land of mathemagic. Repeating his pencil-and-paper tally, Meillassoux arrives each time at slightly different results: now 705, 706, 708. The total depends, so we discover, on the proper accounting of compound words—a variable that Meillassoux isolates to suggest that Mallarmé's code and the enciphering it enables must themselves be contingent. Not unlike the pairing of system and chance in the aleatoric compositions of John Cage, Ellsworth Kelly's grids of randomly arranged color, or



the necessarily error-riddled or unfinished permutations of Sol LeWitt's incomplete open cubes, the logic of *Un Coup de dés* is, Meillassoux insists, paradoxically predicated on some originary indeterminacy.

Untold counts and recounts take place in *The Number*, with the poem's complete text and Meillassoux's authoritative tally included as an appendix for those who would like to play along. "One need only try—as we ourselves have done." Life is short, friends. Seldom has reading and rereading Mallarmé's tour de force been so boring. In the face of this colossal numerical tedium, a review on the WordPress blog *Speculative Heresy* remarked optimistically that "this isn't the work of a lunatic losing himself in numerology." Correct—it resembles more that of a maniacal CPA poring over the double-entry books he suspects of being cooked, pouring small change, over and over, out of the till: Is that a nickel or a slug? In this light, a nickel, in that . . . We know the conclusive golden rule of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: Whereof one cannot say nice things, thereof one must be silent. But Meillassoux is, shall we say, asking for it. In *The Number*'s prequel, *After Finitude*, he invites, even demands, that "the examination of the determinate conditions for absolute unreason should strive to multiply objections, the better to reinforce the binding texture of its argumentative fabric."

If this tastes like vanilla dialectics, it is actually closer to the output of a pseudo-Dionysius operating a terminal in the Cloud of Unknowing Computing: an atomizing dialectics, whose hysterical hairsplitting ends in an apophatic experience of stuff qua stuff. And the branding of this posttheological martyrdom of the mind as a "materialism" is speculative realism's siren song to artists: a "real" and "realist," possibly political because "materialist," "relational" but not "correlational" way out of or twist on, say, relational aesthetics, to name one art-historical labyrinth. Others might find speculative-realist thought's reckoning with sheer digits promising grounds for a critique of market practices. Whatever its appeal for artists, speculative realism has

Quentin Meillassoux presenting *The Number and the Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé's "Coup de dés,"* Sequence Press, New York, May 6, 2012.



been rapidly absorbed by the art world over the course of the past half decade, serving as the subject of lectures and exhibitions in New York and in London.

But what relation does *The Number*, in its indeterminate postfinitude, have to its speculative mother-ship? In short, speculative realism proposes an escape hatch from a post-Kantian hall of mirrors to which Meillassoux and colleagues such as Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, and Alberto Toscano give the name correlationism—the notion that an external reality is inaccessible beyond its presentation as given to an observing subject. Speculative realism claims instead the reality of things even in the absence of human (or other) sensors—or, in Meillassoux's own words, "thought's capacity to think what there is whether thought exists or not." Apparently, only this threaded needle, backstitched through first-order realism, will allow us to account philosophically for the kinds of facts that form the object and product of scientific inquiry, and for the particular subclass thereof that Meillassoux (with a nod to Derrida) calls "arche-fossils," material substrates that indicate the existence of a reality anterior to any possible observer or to any thought.

But this thought that thinks about what thought could think where thought is not can't formulate itself in any old way. As characterized by Meillassoux, the process is confined to "those aspects of the object that can give rise to a mathematical thought (to a formula or to digitalization) rather than to a perception or sensation." And, we are told, thought's access to this quantified reality comes at a price: the paradoxical acceptance of a broader radical uncertainty, extending to the operations of any and all natural laws, and whose aesthetic translation in *The Number* is that "no sublime verse will ever efface the mark of its contingency."

Readers already familiar with Meillassoux's earlier volume will be able to see in the above thumbnail of *The Number* various murky themes common to both books: mathesis, retroaction, contingency, etc. But beyond these echoes, the connection between the two remains deeply ambiguous: Is *The Number* a case study, a demonstration of speculative realism in action, of philosophy as literature? The program for a speculative-realist aesthetics or criticism? The archaeology of a literary arche-fossil, evincing the capacity of speculatively realist thought to speculate what might be regardless of whether speculative realism itself existed or not? A sort of speculative-realist automythologizing or prophecy? And what, reversing the polarity, can *The Number* deliver in regard to its precursor and to speculative realism as a whole?

In order to answer this last question, we must first crack the procedural code, this time not Mallarmé's but Meillassoux's. How, after all, could this idea of endless recounts have speculatively arisen, if not by Chance? Now we are on to something. As Meillassoux confesses, the urge to begin counting *Un Coup de dés*

(in order to begin accounting for it) arose just so. “Imagine a reader captivated by [Mallarmé’s] sonnet ‘À la nue accablante tu . . .’ and suddenly feeling the desire, so as to complete his pleasure, to count the words that appear so brilliant and joyous to him—just as a child counts and recounts his marbles, a coquette her jewelry or a bibliophile his first editions.” How do I love thee? Let me count the words.

Perhaps this retrospective, happenstance count and recount in the interests of a strangely acquisitive and totalized “complete pleasure” arises from a drive toward the kind of mathesis that speculative realism, as the wonted but unwanted handmaiden of the hard sciences, aims to valorize. But the reading is not so much mathematical as merely arithmetical, not so much a mathematization as an accounting. This is never clearer than at the moment where M. Meillassoux, coquettish bibliophile, reveals the nonpun that connects the “speculative” in *speculative realism* to financial “speculation.” What parades as a mathematization, with its rigorous grip on a reality indebted to no subject, then, is not grounded in any sort of absolute, but on grasping the proper count, the winning number. To get at the reality of the poem beyond any possible reader, one must turn it into digits and acquire it thus—and this “realist meaning,” if we take *Un Coup de dés* to be loosely “ancestral” to speculative realism, is its ultimate meaning, its speculative value where speculation (in both senses) is presumed not yet to operate. One must materially and contingently price the work, all the while presenting this price as a rational evaluation derived from the work’s formulated code. Time troubles, circular logic: We’ve seen this kind of speculation before.

But who cares what Meillassoux thinks about Mallarmé, and about thinking about what must be there where thought is not, and what the value of such thinking might speculatively be? Apparently, quite a few people, given the capacity crowd at a book launch hosted by Miguel Abreu Gallery for the French philosopher at Sequence Press during New York’s Frieze week last spring. Our young Master gave what we poets know (and dread) as a “reading,” anemically reprising his written argument at some length, accompanied by the visual hum of projected pdfs. We lay down here our own reading in his, in a performance of a book far more banal than the highly orchestrated secular rituals of *Le Livre* (The Book) envisioned (though never actualized) by Mallarmé. But if Simon Critchley, gatekeeper of the philosophical mainstream, is right in suggesting that one of speculative realism’s potential strengths lies in its parasitic capacity to be ambitiously unambitious with respect to its scientific hosts, then perhaps we must consider Meillassoux’s tedious, contingent channeling of his own audit of Mallarmé’s masterpiece a sure bet, and an infinite success. □

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Count of the words of *Coup de dés* (1898 version)

1 Un	27 une	53 bonds
2 Coup	28 inclinaison	54 très
3 de	29 plane	55 à
4 Dés	30 désespérément	56 l'
5 jamais	31 d'	57 intérieur
6 quand	32 aile	58 résume
7 bien	33 la	59 l'
8 même	34 sienne	60 ombre
9 lancé	35 par	61 enfoiue
10 dans	36 avance	62 dans
11 des	37 retombée	63 la
12 circonstances	38 d'	64 profondeur
13 éternelles	39 un	65 par
14 du	40 mal	66 cette
15 fond	41 à	67 voile
16 d'	42 dresser	68 alternative
17 un	43 le	69 jusqu'
18 naufrage	44 vol	70 adapter
19 soit	45 et	71 à
20 que	46 couvrant	72 l'
21 l'	47 les	73 envergure
22 Abîme	48 jaillissements	74 sa
23 blanchi	49 coupant	75 béante
24 étale	50 au	76 profondeur
25 furieux	51 ras	77 en
26 sous	52 les	78 tant

THE NUMBER AND THE SIREN

79 que	110 la	141 les
80 la	111 barre	142 vents
81 coque	112 inférant	143 l'
82 d'	113 de	144 unique
83 un	114 cette	145 Nombre
84 bâtiment	115 conflagration	146 qui
85 penché	116 à	147 ne
86 de	117 ses	148 peut
87 l'	118 pieds	149 pas
88 un	119 de	150 être
89 ou	120 l'	151 un
90 l'	121 horizon	152 autre
91 autre	122 unanime	153 Esprit
92 bord	123 que	154 pour
93 LE	124 se	155 le
94 MAÎTRE	125 prépare	156 jeter
95 hors	126 s'	157 dans
96 d'	127 agite	158 la
97 anciens	128 et	159 tempête
98 calculs	129 mêle	160 en
99 où	130 au	161 reployer
100 la	131 poing	162 la
101 manoeuvre	132 qui	163 division
102 avec	133 l'	164 et
103 l'	134 étreindrait	165 passer
104 âge	135 comme	166 fier
105 oubliée	136 on	167 hésite
106 surgi	137 menace	168 cadavre
107 jadis	138 un	169 par
108 il	139 destin	170 le
109 empoignait	140 et	171 bras

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Quentin Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé's "Coup de dés"* (Urbanomic/Sequence Press, 2012). Pages 283–84.