

## REVIEWS

Quentin Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren*. Translated by Robin Mackay. Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic; New York: Sequence Press, 2012. 298pp. \$25.95

In his first book, *After Finitude*, Quentin Meillassoux showed contemporary philosophy some numbers. The biggest was 13.5 billion, the age of the universe, and the smallest was 2 million, the age of humankind as a species. In between came the dates for the formation of the earth and the origin of life. “The codicil of modernity,” he observed, is that “event Y occurred x number of years before the emergence of humans—for humans.” The “correlationism” of post-Kantian thought, that is, cannot accept the (“naïve”) realism of statements about the prehuman without the qualification of their human provenance. Wickedly, Meillassoux suggests that, faced with such “ancestral” facts, intellectually respectable skepticism “is exposed as an extreme idealism,” comparable to the creationism that explains the fossil record away as a test of faith. The implication for philosophy, he argues, is that it needs to admit at least “a modicum of absoluteness”—a respect, that is, for the “absolutely possible” nature of mathematical observations—into its intersubjective creed.

In *The Number and the Siren*, his second monograph, Meillassoux rather more sinuously raises the same challenge for literary criticism. What if it were discovered that Mallarmé’s great folio spread of free verse, *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* (A throw of dice will never abolish chance), were governed by an exact numerology? The idea has, he concedes, already been proposed and discredited, and now runs contrary to the antihermetic orthodoxy of modern Mallarmé criticism, which regards the poet’s last major work as a renunciation of his obsessive private calculations for the aesthetic ritual of “the Book.” *Coup de dés*’s depiction of a shipwrecked “Master” in crisis at the prospect of producing a “unique Number” thus becomes a self-portrait of the poet as “the hero of an absolute Literature that knows itself bound to failure.”

Meillassoux contends that the poem is numerically coded nonetheless. Not, as previously proposed, by a symmetrical cipher of twelve (a frequent number in the Book, and the length of the alexandrine line) but a “Number // that cannot be another,” the singularity of which encrypts the poem’s prosodic and philosophical modernity. The prime number with which Mallarmé was working, he believes, is seven, and the unique number 707—a hypothesis corroborated by several pieces of ingenious cryptogrammic reasoning, including

the homonymic identity of the key word “*si*” (in the repeated phrase “*comme si*”) with the seventh note in the sol-fa scale, and the discovery that two thematically related sonnets from the oeuvre contain, respectively, 70 and 77 words, while a third (“Sonnet en  $-X$ ”) points, like the end of *Coup de dés*, to the Septentrion constellation, named for its seven stars.

All this may, admittedly, begin to make Meillassoux sound like a latter-day Stephen Dedalus, setting out to prosecute his personal theory of Shakespeare with a perverse scholasticism (“he proves by algebra that Hamlet’s grandson is Shakespeare’s grandfather”). Mallarmé’s imagining of the empirical randomness of modernity makes him the intellectual grandfather of the author of *After Finitude*, who expounds on the aleatory (from Latin *alea*, die) as an illustration of the limited contingency allowed by “unalterable physical laws”:

This is precisely what the example of the dice-throw shows: an aleatory sequence can only be generated on condition that the dice preserve their structure from one throw to the next.... If from one throw to the next the dice imploded, or became flat or spherical, or if gravity ceased to operate and they flew off into the air...then there would be no aleatory sequence.

This passage establishes the rule of Meillassoux’s so-called “speculative realism,” which asserts that “any cause may actually produce any effect whatsoever, providing the latter is not contradictory.” It may also be read as a gloss on the final line of Mallarmé’s poem: “*Toute Pensée émet un Coup de Dés*” (“Every Thought Emits a Throw of Dice”). For the poet-philosopher of an aleatory universe, even the highest illuminations are haphazardly inspired. A line of verse unrolls by chance of sound. A thought may “emit” a throw of dice, but it has itself already been emitted by one.

The most probable result of two dice thrown together is seven. *Coup de dés* turns out to have 714 words, of which the 707th is “*sacre*,” followed by the final, seven-word line. Mallarmé was a poet who believed that “an order innate to the book of verse exists inherently or everywhere, eliminating chance.” A compositional numerology not only silently ironizes his one experiment in free verse—it reveals a master-poet casting the sacred ritual of form itself to chance discovery (“*THE NUMBER / ... / WERE IT TO BE CIPHERED / ... / WERE IT TO BE ILLUMINATED*” teases the passage immediately above the lone word “CHANCE”). Meillassoux’s demonstration of all this is elegant and unevasive. Disarmingly, on the first page, he acknowledges his own contingent condition as the author of an esoteric thesis: “Readers must judge for themselves the seriousness (or otherwise) of

our investigation.” As in Kent Johnson’s recent provocations on the question of authorship and the New York School, the critic turns the implications of his unproven argument back on us. We are free to doubt the interpretation he puts upon the facts, but is this only because we instinctively mistrust all absolute hermeneutics?

Were this a much shorter book, it might be tempting to think of it as an amusement on the model of Poe’s “The Philosophy of Composition,” in which the poet claims to have begun “The Raven”—which Mallarmé translated—by first deciding the “ideal length” for a poem. Poe’s poker-face reversal of the usual “vacillating crudities” of inspiration is a satire on inductive critical reasoning. But an undigressive, closely argued work of two hundred pages—here lucidly translated and beautifully typeset—is itself a tacit argument for seriousness of method. This is not an avant-garde *Da Vinci Code*, even if Meillassoux’s hypothesizing indulges in a certain amount of narrative suspense, leading to the twist in his speculations that paradoxically confirms them:

During the first months of our investigation, we regularly recounted the words of the Poem to assure ourselves that we had not been mistaken about the code. Now, to our perplexity, it happened that we did so one day and failed to arrive at the “correct” count.

This is the moment where the second, subtler hypothesis of the book enters: logically, there must be an inherent uncertainty to Mallarmé’s “total sum in so far as there is one,” which will conceptually “infinite it”—that is, leave it eternally open to doubt. Meillassoux then embarks on a (genuinely) gripping final “quest for this precious fault,” which considers the contested status of the silent *e* in nineteenth-century arguments about French meter, and culminates in the celestial revelation of “the most beautiful *peut-être* in the French language”: “creator of its own truth by the sole fact of its being written upon the constellatory night, by the poet drowning in white space.... The cause of itself in its letters of fire.”

The evident sympathy that the speculative realist feels with the creative logic of the Symbolist poet is what makes Meillassoux’s Mallarmé so plausibly our contemporary. Both are concerned with the printed page as a precise reality (its uprising “siren” is the figurehead of the wrecked ship, returning to the surface) and atomized illusion. As such, *The Number and the Siren* is the ideal companion essay to Peter Manson’s recent exacting translations of the *Poésies*. Its analysis of the potential significance of number in the sphere of experimental form also reflects a cold, century-old light on more recent instances of this kind of magical thinking. Mallarmé’s reckoning with the

Number that cannot be another—which must also be the zero figuring the void around which his sevens roll—goes beyond both neomedievalism and algorithmic conceptualism in its implicit signing of the poem into the physical universe.

Two footnotes on ambiguous types of seven seem an appropriate conclusion. Meillassoux writes that the “Septentrion” of *Coup de dés* is the Little Bear, which contains seven stars, including the Pole. But more commonly, and etymologically, it is the seven stars of the Plough (*septem-triones*, seven plough oxen) in the Great Bear, which point to the Pole. So there is a knowing doubleness to “*le Septentrion aussi Nord*” revealed by Mallarmé’s final page. There is also the fact, not mentioned by Meillassoux, that every throw of a die results in seven, if you add the upper and lower faces together. The “sacred” figure of 707 may therefore also symbolize that “modicum of absoluteness” no combination of pips can abolish.

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Jeremy Braddock, *Collecting as Modernist Practice*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. 319pp. \$39.95

*Burning City: Poems of Metropolitan Modernity*. Edited by Jed Rasula and Tim Conley. South Bend, IN: Action Books, 2012. 574pp. \$25

In the past several years, as the historical avant-garde hit parade celebrates centennial after centennial, many works have bounced through copyright Plinko into the public domain, and others will soon follow. But this hardly makes the “retrieval” of the avant-garde archive a *fait accompli*. Large swaths of the cultural field never entered effectively into literary marketplaces, and even cultishly celebrated works seem to fall perpetually out of print. As Jed Rasula writes in his introduction to *Burning City: Poems of Metropolitan Modernity*, “The lack of ready (and readily comparative) access to many texts has left a conspicuous gap in awareness of early twentieth-century avant-garde poetry as a shared encounter with the phenomena of metropolitan modernity.” Like Pound’s Mauberley, many a poet is forever risking a “final / exclusion from the world of letters.” Or to put it another way: at every revival for some Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, a forlorn Alfred Richard Meyer or Farfa nurses a forgotten ode to the “Newyorkcocktail” in the corner.

The idea of a “final / exclusion” from this phantom canon largely conforms to print culture’s restrictive scales of production and protocols of