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HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics



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HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

VOL. X, NO. 1 (WINTER 2017) — ON MALLARMÉ: PART 2

Curated by Guest Editor KARI HUKKILA

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The *Coup de dés*, Encoded Crypt

Quentin Meillassoux

Trans. Robert Boncardo & Christian R. Gelder

Any attempt to elucidate the *Coup de dés*, even partially, can only with difficulty do without a fact that we believe orients its interpretation: namely, that the poem is probably encoded. That the poem is *probably* encoded — and not *certainly* encoded — is, as we shall see, an essential effect of its procedure of encryption. But that it *is*, in all probability, encoded, is something we have elsewhere attempted to establish through an investigation whose principal elements we will now recall, without prohibiting ourselves from adding certain other elements that converge towards the same conclusion.¹

As we know, banally speaking, an encryption is a code whose key is withheld from the reader. For its part, the code of the *Coup de dés* is doubly encrypted: for not only is its key withheld from the reader, but above all the *Coup de dés* does not even present itself as encoded. If there is a “secret” (the word designating, as we know, what the Master of the poem holds in his clenched fist), then the “secret” is that there is a “secret code” in the first place. In other words, the code is secret insofar as the principal secret of the poem is the very existence of a code. To decrypt the code of the poem, then, is first of all to discover that the poem was encrypted. As for the content of the code — the “message” that the code reveals to us once it is known — it is, as we shall see, almost nothing. In other words, the *Coup de dés* is based on an encryption

¹ Quentin Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren*, tr. Robin Mackay (Falmouth/New York: Urbanomic/Sequence, 2012).

that, so to speak, encrypts nothing and whose principal esoteric characteristic is its very existence. It is here that we find the nodal point of its intimate dynamic: what the procedure of encryption keeps most secret is that it is itself a procedure of encryption. The essence of both the poem's meaning and its importance result from this.

Why impute such a protocol to Mallarmé? The reason is that this technique, when properly employed, allowed him to solve in a single gesture the two major problems that insistently imposed themselves upon him in his writings during the last fifteen years of his life, from around 1885 to 1898. That is: firstly, the problem of a regular poetry at the time of the free verse revolution; and secondly, the problem of a poetic religion, in the face of the Wagnerian challenge of "total art." After a long period during which Mallarmé experienced both progress and stagnation, these two "problematics" will find a dazzling and unified response in the *Coup de dés* — a response that, in order to be rigorous, had to presuppose a code.

* * *

Let us begin by following the basic "thread" of the poem, or its equivalent. This thread is the exposition, which is barely hinted at (Page III), of a scene of shipwreck: a ship seems to have sunk in a storm, and the master (who we suppose to be a ship's captain) is the only thing afloat after the disaster — a master about whom we know nothing, save that he will doubtless be drowned in turn. The only "action" performed by the hero in all of the poem consists in him holding several dice in his fists — no doubt two of them — that he hesitates to throw into the furious waves (Pages IV–V). The following pages describe what happens after the hypothetical drowning of the Master, about whom we do not know whether he threw the dice before being swallowed up. A whirlpool appears — still suggested rather than described — on Page IV, around which the Master's cap turns, as well as the feather that was in it. Page VIII then describes an enigmatic figure, "in its Siren twist," slap-

ping a “rock [...] which imposed a limit on the infinite.”² Cap and feather subsequently sink into the whirlpool, leaving only “some splashing below,” which justifies the declaration on Page X: “NOTHING WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE BUT THE PLACE.” It seems as though nothing has happened; that all the actors of the drama have been abolished without trace by a sea returned to its vain monotony.

But suddenly the nocturnal, stellar sky appears to come alive, as if the stars had been set in motion like an astral throw of dice. As a compensation for the Master’s throw, about which we do not know if it has taken place, the sky now throws the dice and the result is illuminated, triumphantly, in the form of a Septentrion whose concluding brilliance is compared to a sanctification [sacre] (Page XI).

The poem, which is not punctuated, is written across the space of a double page (or “Page”) and unfolds through a multiplicity of differently sized typographies. It is constituted by three principal propositions, the remainder being a cloud of interpolated clauses that complicate the first two phrases to an extraordinary degree. There is, first of all, the statement that repeats the title and opens the poem: “A THROW OF DICE / WILL NEVER / ABOLISH CHANCE,” written in large capital letters and running from Page I to IX. The second proposition occurs on Pages X and XI: “NOTHING / of the memorable crisis / WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE / BUT THE PLACE / EXCEPT / PERHAPS / A CONSTELLATION.”

The third proposition is very different from the two that precede it, since it is separated — even at the visual level — from the rest of the text, and contains no interpolated clauses. We are referring to the final statement, which concludes the drama in the manner of a moral: “All Thought emits a Throw of Dice.”

Furthermore — and this is the central point of our investigation — the poem evokes an enigmatic number. This “Number,”

² All translations of the “Coup de dés” are taken from Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems: A Bilingual Edition*, tr. and with a commentary by Henry Weinfield (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996) 124–145.

written with a capital letter, appears on two occasions in the poem. It denotes the possible total of the Master's throw of dice. The result of this throw of dice seems to carry a superior form of necessity. The Number is first introduced in the following way: "THE MASTER" — suddenly arisen from the scene of the shipwreck — infers from "this conflagration at his feet / from the unanimous horizon / that there is readied [...] the unique Number which cannot be another" (Page IV). In other words, the Master, surfacing out of the disaster, infers from the conjunction of the storm and his imminent throw of dice the advent of a "unique Number," whose necessity is without equal. It is this number in gestation that is explicitly identified with a "secret" — a secret that the hero holds in his fist, while his hesitation immobilizes him like a "corpse."

What, then, can the following statement signify: "the unique Number which cannot be another"? And why does the Master make this strange inference? Finally, if the production of the Number seems essential to him, why does he nevertheless hesitate "not to open up the hand"?

Let us begin by clarifying the meaning of the "unique Number that cannot be another." We now know that it must be understood in the context of what Mallarmé calls the "exquisite crisis":³ in other words, the crisis of free verse. This crisis began in 1887 with the appearance of the first collection of poetry containing free verse: Gustave Kahn's *Les Palais nomades*. From this date onwards, we witness a proliferation of other free verse collections written by a number of poets from the younger generation. We are therefore dealing with a new current of poetic writing, & not with a fantasy without future of some isolated author being followed by a few mavericks — something that Mallarmé, who did not take it

³ Stéphane Mallarmé, "Crisis of Verse" in Mallarmé, *Divagations*, tr. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007) 199–211. The expression had been used previously in the article from the *National Observer* (March 26, 1892), "Vers et musique en France," *Œuvres complètes* II, Édition présentée, établie et annotée par Bertrand Marchal, 299.

seriously before 1888–1889, initially believed to be the case.⁴

Such a novelty — by which the young generation abandons, whether partially or completely, the rule — obviously provokes a polemic. This polemic takes place essentially between the vers-libristes & the Parnassians. The quarrel is fundamental insofar as it concerns the very definition of verse and poetry: it is a matter of knowing if free verse is, quite simply, verse, and therefore if it is poetic in nature, or whether it is only prose in disguise. For the Parnassians (principally Heredia and Leconte de Lisle) it is not poetry, for a verse ceases to be verse if it is not submitted to the rules of meter, rhyme, & fixed form: we are dealing with poetic prose (a genre that had been identified since Aloysius Bertrand, then Baudelaire), that is, with lines that have arbitrary endings, which artificially creates the appearance of verse for the gaze. By contrast, the most radical vers-libristes, such as Gustave Kahn, say that regular verse — or, more precisely, the rule in verse — has nothing intrinsically poetic about it. For Kahn, the meter of a verse is, in fact, a political invention. According to him, it was Boileau, following Malherbe, who, in the 17th C, had established a classical meter whose vocation was to regiment poetry, just as the absolute monarchy then regimented France via a centralized power. The rule is the non-poetic sediment of traditional verse, & it is despite it — rather than thanks to it — that in its time the genius of verse was able to unfold itself within it: Kahn therefore denounces the rule as an arbitrary obstacle to the musical flourishing of the stanza.⁵

⁴ The letter thanking Gustave Kahn for sending his collection (from the 7th or 8th of June 1887) is, under the appearance of praise, obviously tainted with irony (*Œuvres complètes* I, édition présentée, établie et annotée par Bertrand Marchal, 794-5). Six months later, Mallarmé thus expresses his annoyance to Verhaeren regarding “this sometimes vain torment suffered by an eternal art” (letter from the January 22, 1888). He does not seem to use the expression “crisis of verse” to characterize the configuration opened by free verse before his letter to André Fontainas from the May 4, 1889 (*Correspondance*, ed. de Lloyd James Austin et Henri Mondor, Gallimard, 1965–1985, t. III, 311–312).

⁵ These positions are developed in the ‘Préface sur le vers libre.’ *Les Palais Nomades — Chansons d’Amant — Domaine de Fée*, troisième édition (Paris: Mercure de France, 1897).

Mallarmé refuses these two extremes: he maintains that free and regular verse are both true forms of poetry. Even if Mallarmé became ever more audacious with respect to the classical rules of verse, just like Verlaine, he never entirely broke with them, as these constraints remained, for him, essential to poetry's destination. The rule is, in fact, the universal modality of verse, which makes it possible to grant poetry a role of communion — of the gathering-together of the "crowd": this role alone makes it possible to maintain the hope of a poetry capable, in the future, of compensating for a Christian religion, a religion that Mallarmé — a non-believer since at least 1866 — judged to be incapable of responding to the immanent aspiration of the modern community.

For Mallarmé, in fact, a verse had to be regular if it were to become, one day, a rallying-point, and thus a possible site of worship. This is an inheritance from the first period of Romanticism — that of Lamartine and Hugo — normally judged to have been abandoned by the generation of 1830 — that of Gautier and Baudelaire. But Mallarmé cannot be understood if we fail to see that he takes up in his own way this desire of the "romantic mages."⁶ In truth, this brings him closer in his mature period to Hugo than to Baudelaire. This certainly hybrid project is therefore a religion of poetry that succeeds the Catholic religion and confers the principle of its communion upon society. Art must constitute a space of celebration for the community, such that each person is capable of finding in poetic song — and in a literally unprecedented form — the nave in which the assembled elect celebrate the Eucharist. Now, for Mallarmé, free verse cannot fulfill such a destiny because — and it is eminently modern in this respect — it is the invention of an entirely singular verse, a verse where each poet can make the instrument of his subjectivity heard. However, this does not mean that this new form — or this refusal of form — must be condemned. For, according to the poet, there exists, as he explains in

⁶ See the eponymous work of Paul Bénichou, reprinted in *Romantismes français* (Gallimard, 2004), tome II.

his interview with Jules Huret,⁷ a happy division of labor between the two forms of verse, which makes each one of them legitimate in their own domain: free verse is concerned with singularity, which it intensifies in a fortuitous manner, while regular verse is concerned with universality, which it maintains with an intermittent magnitude. Better still, to the degree that its success grows, free verse has another merit, namely, that it rarefies the alexandrine, which had been heard too often. This itself will render regular verse unto its destiny, namely, to be ceremonial, exceptional in its use, and not to be perpetually disseminated.

Mallarmé therefore adopts an original position: he seeks to reconcile these two forms rather than condemning one in the name of the other. But, in the context of the quarrel his is also, perhaps, the most difficult position since it amounts to arguing that a verse can be both metrical and free. How, in this case, is it possible to define the unity of what makes up verse? What can the essence of verse be if it is capable of articulating these two opposites within itself? Leconte de Lisle or Kahn erected positions that at least had the advantage of clarity. For the first, verse obeyed rules that had been codified with precision. For the second, as we discover in his manifesto-like texts, verse possessed a nature that could be said to be “rhythmo-semantic” and was tied to a unity of meaning and rhythmic accentuation: the established rule has nothing to do with its poeticity, which is linked to the quality of the union between meaning and song. But, in Mallarmé’s case, how can the unity of a verse be defined if this unity is present just as much in the case of the rule as it is in the case where the rule is substituted for some other principle of unity? More brutally: how can the notion of verse remain coherent if the rule and the non-rule characterize it in equal measure?

We will see that the *Coup de dés* constitutes a response in act to this new question. And it is such a determination of the essence of verse, reinterpreted in light of the crisis of free verse, that will have to pass by way of the procedure of encryption. The *Coup de*

⁷ “On Literary Evolution,” *L’Écho de Paris*, March 14, 1891, *Ceuvres complètes* II, 697.

dés is a poem that aims to define — at the same time as it produces — a verse whose essence can indifferently accept both regular verse and free verse; an essential verse that is therefore in itself neither regular nor free, since it is anterior to these possible determinations, as the genus is to its species.

A shipwrecked Master, a throw of dice in the storm: all of this becomes clear when we know the context of the crisis of free verse. For the ship's "Master" [le Maître] is, of course, poetic Meter [le Mètre] in the process of being drowned by the tumultuous waves, which are nothing other than the textual segments dispersed across the Page of the *Coup de dés*. These segments take on the characteristics of free verse by exacerbating its refusal of established form. It is free verse become furious which submerges poetic Meter. In this way, the terrible tension between the two forms is restituted dramatically — a tension that Mallarmé will attempt to resolve from a poetic, and not only critical, point of view; by writing a poem rather than by theoretical interventions, as he had done in the preceding years.

Let us follow the thread of the poem again, now with this key for reading, which we are merely reprising after Ronat and Roubaud.⁸ The Master holds two dice in his hand. As we know, this theme was already present in a text from Mallarmé's youth: *Igitur*, an unfinished tale from 1869 that was contemporary with a deep crisis concerning the destiny of poetry. This crisis refers to the "discovery of Nothingness" and its poetic consequences, which Mallarmé documents in his letters from 1866–1867:⁹ the discovery that no God exists who is capable of guaranteeing the absolute value of the poetic symbol, as the first Romantics had hoped. He therefore writes this fable, in which he imagines a young poet-prince, *Igitur*, descending into the vault of his ancestors in order to ask if he must perpetuate their destiny. His hesitation is summed

⁸ Mitsou Ronat (ed.), *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (Paris: Change errant/d'atelier, 1980). See also M. Ronat and Jacques Roubaud, "À propos du *Coup de dés*," *Critique*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 418 (1982).

⁹ In particular, see, in *Œuvres complètes I*, the following letters to Henri Cazalis: April 28, 1866, July 13, 1866 and May 14 or 17, 1867.

up entirely in either throwing or not throwing the two dice that he holds in his hand in an attempt to cast a double six. These ancestors represent the lineage of poets whose inheritor Mallarmé claims to be, and it is a matter of knowing whether it is worth attempting to produce the twelve of the perfect alexandrine, even though it is known that this alexandrine will no longer be the result of a divine inspiration but of a chance without signification.

Mallarmé then hesitates between two possible endings that could be given to this tale, without deciding in favor of one or the other. Either Igitur throws the dice and provokes the furious hissing of his ancestors, for the poet continues the gesture of his forebears, albeit for different motives (chance has become the only God of the moderns); or — another ending — Igitur shakes the dice in his hand without throwing them, and goes to lie down on the tomb of his ancestors. Either Mallarmé heroically assumes the absurdity of the world while still aiming, despite everything, at a formally perfect verse, or he writes the very exhaustion of writing — writing unfolding itself in the experience of its own impossibility.

Because of the hesitation that characterizes the poem — a hesitation that impacts upon Mallarmé himself, incapable as he is of choosing between the two endings — Igitur must of course be compared to Hamlet. In fact, in the tale the twelve is also represented by the midnight of the decision, a midnight evoked by the presence of a clock in the hero's bedroom. A midnight decision that must separate a before and an absolute after and which seems to block any resolution due to its own radicality.

These themes are clearly reprised in the *Coup de dés*, at almost thirty years' distance. The Master hesitates to throw the dice, and he is crowned with a "Midnight cap," as well as a feather — a feather which, citing Banville and pointed out by Mallarmé in a text from *Divagations*, also crowns the prince of Elsinore.¹⁰ In 1897, then, Mallarmé reprises the thematics of *Igitur* because, in the *Coup de dés*, he understands that the theme of the death of a poetry guaranteed by the divine must be transposed to the context of the

¹⁰ Stéphane Mallarmé, "Hamlet", in *Divagations*, op. cit, 124–128.

crisis of free verse. The Master must throw the dice in order to know if he will produce, once again, a metrical verse with universal pretensions, or if everything will instead fall back into the chance of non-metrical verse, the representative of the subjective diversity in the temperaments of each poet. The same crisis of nothingness is being played out at many decades' distance, yet with a greater degree of radicality since the annihilation at stake henceforth concerns the meter internal to verse and no longer God, the exterior guardian of its absoluteness.

For Ronat and Roubaud, the desired meter that resists Chance is the same in the *Coup de dés* as it is in *Igitur*: the alexandrine. According to them, the *Coup de dés*, as unmetrical as it might appear, is, paradoxically, a defense of the "unique Number," a clear symbol of the poetic rule. The final proposition of the *Coup de dés*, "NOTHING / of the memorable crisis / WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE / BUT THE PLACE / EXCEPT / PERHAPS / A CONSTELLATION," can now be easily understood: the "memorable crisis" is the crisis of free verse, from which nothing will emerge if meter does not succeed in surviving it.

The danger, then, is that one of the two forms of verse will drown the other. Instead, what is needed is for the two forms to co-exist in an original manner. Now, in reading the *Coup de dés*, we initially see nothing other than the exacerbated explosion of free verse. Is there a way for a meter to insert itself into a poem that by all appearances ruptures with established rules? Ronat proposed an ingenious solution to this question by demonstrating that the *Coup de dés* is an encrypted eulogy for the alexandrine; but before dealing with her solution, we must make a detour past another well-known text by Mallarmé: a mere accumulation of notes, without a title, incomplete like *Igitur* yet contemporary to the "crisis": the *Notes en vue du 'Livre'*.¹¹

Most notably through his public letter to Verlaine, we know that for a long time Mallarmé was haunted by the writing of a

¹¹ See Stéphane Mallarmé, *Le "Livre" de Mallarmé*, ed. Jacques Scherer (Paris: Gallimard, 1957) — TN.

“Grand Œuvre,” a book in which all poetry would be condensed in its purity, and which he identified with “the orphic explanation of the Earth.”¹² Now, Mallarmé persistently returns to this desire — acquired in his youth as a response to the discovery of Nothingness — precisely at the moment of the crisis of free verse, as the composition of the *Notes en vu de ‘Livre’* likely run from 1888 to 1895. This insistent desire for the Book must obviously be understood in the context of the project of a religion of art. In his *Notes*, Mallarmé thus describes — in a very concrete, very “practical” fashion — a ceremony of reading that is clearly envisaged as a communion capable of substituting itself for the traditional mass. He describes a room in which “assistants” sit facing a stage on which there are two cabinets filled with unbound pages that an “operator” — anonymous like a priest — sets about adjoining one to the other according to a complex combinatorial. The reading of the Book was expected to last for five years & a double session required each day.

The non-specialist reader of the *Notes* is struck first of all by the numerological insistence that is on display throughout. A large part of the manuscript is composed of calculations regarding the material and financial aspects of the Book, which concern the ceremonial context of its reading. An important part of these Numbers possesses an obvious link to the alexandrine: there are 24 assistants in the reading room, while the size or the price of the book are also tied either to multiples or divisors of 12. Struck by the possible “expiration” of the rule — and therefore of meter — caused by free verse, Mallarmé seems to seek out substitute meters capable of saving the principle of the poetic count via its metamorphosis. Since free verse demonstrates that the 12 is contingent for poetry, the author of the *Notes* attempts to restore a necessity to this number — the symbol of all fixed meters — by disseminating it throughout the material surroundings/milieu of the text: that is, in the context of the reading, rather than in the content itself. Indeed, there is little discussion of the content of the Book in these *Notes*,

¹² Stéphane Mallarmé, *Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé*, ed. & tr. Rosemary Lloyd (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988) 143.