

The Number and the Siren

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The Number and the Siren

A DECIPHERMENT OF MALLARMÉ'S *COUP DE DÉS*

Translated by

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sequence

To Gwenaëlle

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Introduction

Let us come straight to the point: This book proposes to bring to light a procedure of *encryption* housed within Stéphane Mallarmé's *Coup de dés*. This procedure, once deciphered, allows the precise determination of the 'unique Number' enigmatically evoked in the poem.

We thus claim:

- a) that Mallarmé's poem is coded;
- b) that the ability to read this code is a condition of the true comprehension of the *Coup de dés*, since it elucidates one of its essential components, namely the nature of the Number.

This declaration will doubtless arouse suspicion or irony in the informed reader. Let us pass over the apparently fanciful character of such an announcement: Readers must judge for themselves the seriousness (or otherwise) of our investigation. But there is a more profound reason for the reticence such a thesis might provoke, relating this time to the current state of Mallarmé criticism.

For connoisseurs of the oeuvre have in general internalized the idea that only a naïve reader would still associate the *Coup de dés* with the idea of a ‘secret code’. As Jacques Rancière writes, summarizing the opinion of most current commentators, ‘Mallarmé is not a *hermetic* author, he is a *difficult* author.’¹ By which he means that we must renounce any attempt to reduce Mallarméan poetry to a ‘key’ that would unveil its ultimate meaning, whether this key be biographical or borrowed from some pre-existing esoteric tradition. In fact, Charles Mauron’s psychoanalytical readings,² or those, at once erotic and hermeticizing, of Charles Chassé,³ important in their time, are now regarded by most critics as outdated – if not in one or another detail of their analyses, at least in their systematic claims. It is no longer fashionable to believe that behind Mallarmé’s most opaque poems there is a hidden secret that, once revealed, would ultimately and definitively clarify their deep meaning: neither a personal (or even obscene) ‘little secret’, nor a ‘great secret’ drawn from the wisdom of a religion from whose resources Mallarmé took his lead.

1 J. Rancière, *Mallarmé. La Politique de la sirène* (Paris: Hachette, 1996), 10 [tr. S. Corcoran as *Mallarmé: The Politics of the Siren* (London/New York: Continuum, 2011), xiv]. Emphasis ours.

2 C. Mauron, *Introduction à la psychanalyse de Mallarmé* (Neuchâtel: Baconnière, 1950) [tr. A. Henderson and W. McLendon as *Introduction to the Psychoanalysis of Mallarmé* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963)].

3 C. Chassé, *Les Clés de Mallarmé* (Paris: Aubier, 1954).

The only secret involved, we like to repeat, is that there is no secret.⁴

We can happily concede the disqualification of this type of psychoanalytic, biographical or esoteric decryption. Nevertheless, not all coding is necessarily of this type; and one need only attend to Mallarmé's writings to guess that they contain another. For there are indeed serious reasons to suppose the existence, in the case of the *Coup de dés*, of an *endogenous* code – decryptable solely by means of clues disseminated throughout the work itself – rather than an *exogenous* one, whose key would be located outside Mallarmé's writings, in the life of the poet or in some ancestral doctrine. Indeed, whence the temptation in the past (we shall come back to this) to discover a 'secret calculation' in the *Coup de dés*? Quite simply because Mallarmé himself had relentlessly pursued such calculations in his notes for the 'Book'. These notes (almost certainly composed between 1888 and 1895) are the only sketches he left us of what was to become his Great Work.⁵ Now, what remains of this dream of an

4 See Pierre Macherey's remarks in his article 'Le Mallarmé d'Alain Badiou', remarks that reiterate Rancière's almost to the letter: '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, since all the poem has to say is displayed [...] black on white in [...] the text'. P. Macherey, 'Le Mallarmé d'Alain Badiou', in C. Raymond (ed.), *Alain Badiou: Penser le multiple* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998), 400-1 [tr. M. Gaddis Rose and G. Riera as 'The Mallarmé of Alain Badiou', in *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and its Conditions* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 111].

5 A selection of notes translated by Richard Sieburth can be found in Mary Ann Caws (ed.), *Mallarmé in Prose* (New York: New Directions, 2001), 125-33.

absolute Literature consists essentially of elementary arithmetical operations concerning all possible aspects of the publication and the public reading of the Book. All these calculations manifestly have a symbolic rather than a utilitarian meaning: To take just one example, the twenty-four 'assistants' who were to be present at the public reading of the Book obviously symbolize the twenty-four syllables of a couplet of rhyming alexandrines. So the poet had seriously envisaged constructing a work in which would be inserted calculations whose meaning was to be deciphered: calculations some of which would be immediately decryptable, like the one mentioned above, but some more obscure, whose meaning would not always be clear. And these symbolic calculations would not have been immediately visible as such, but were to be hidden in apparently accidental aspects of the Book and its ceremonial – the length of the daily readings, the size of the published work, the number of volumes, etc.

The claim that Mallarmé could not possibly have indulged in a secret calculation of the 'unique Number' evoked in the *Coup de dés* is thus not in the least substantiated by what we know of his writings. This 'Poem', indeed, was published in its first version in 1897 – that is, only two years after the probable termination of the notes for the Book – before finding its definitive form in 1898. Knowing the insistent evocation, in the *Coup de dés*, of a Number whose identity remains mysterious, and which

alone seems to sum up, like a Meter yet to come, the destiny of a future poetry, it would hardly be surprising if this calculatory obsession had been propagated from one text to the other. It is true that Mitsou Ronat maintained, in 1980, the existence of a typographical calculation that was revealed to be inexact;⁶ but how can the falsity of his hypothesis be held up as a general proof of the nonexistence of any code? For instance, Michel Murat, in his (otherwise rigorous) study of the *Coup de dés*, hastens to deduce from Ronat's error, proved by the indications on Mallarmé's manuscript, the thesis that the 'approach of the poet' in the *Coup de dés* 'is not systematic and does not proceed via calculation'.⁷ His logical error (from the non-existence of a particular code he deduces the nonexistence of any code) betrays a position of principle whose supposed self-evidence stems solely from the broad consensus that the 'code' hypothesis is to be rejected.

Now this a priori refusal of the existence of a code seems to us, in truth, extremely suspect. Because on closer examination, it is not an antiquated form of criticism that is disqualified here, so much as the very enterprise of the Book, whose essential failure one thereby pronounces, implicitly or otherwise. To say that Mallarmé is not an hermetic author is in effect to condemn Mallarmé himself

6 We shall recall the reasons for this failure in the first part of the present work.

7 M. Murat, *Le Coup de dés de Mallarmé. Un recommencement de la poésie* (Paris: Belin, 2005), 93.

for 'going astray' by producing symbolic and secret calculations at the very point where his Work was to find its culmination. This done, why take the trouble to ask oneself what *poetic* meaning such calculations might have had in the mind of their author? The noncompletion of the Notes for the Book can simply be written off as the inevitable outcome of a debility inscribed from the very start in the aberrant nature of this enterprise.

Make no mistake: Contemporary criticism, overwhelmingly, says not that the *Coup de dés* is not coded. Of course, there is no proof of this, for it is difficult to prove the absence of a code. Rather, this criticism claims – reading between the lines, for it is not always explicitly acknowledged – that this poem *must not* be coded. And this for one simple reason: *The 'non-coding' of the Coup de dés guarantees Mallarmé's own repudiation of the Book.* For if it can be shown that the poet renounced all encryption in his most innovative poem, even though it continued his obsession with Number, we can be assured that Mallarmé recovered – from 1897 onward – from his strange and unaccountable passion, and that this charming folly did not propagate itself beyond the confines of his unpublished notes. The Number will be freed from Calculation, once again to become a pure poetic metaphor for the result of a hazardous throw of the dice – specifically, that throw undertaken by the writing of verse after the death of God. Thus the *Coup de dés* will be the very epitaph for the project of the Book, bogged down

as it was in the mad impasse of a symbolic and Byzantine numbering of all aspects of its writing and ceremonial reading. We would then be able, in Blanchot's wake, to make of Mallarmé the hero of an absolute Literature that knows itself bound to failure; or on the contrary, following Rancière, to maintain that Mallarmé succeeded in freeing himself from the aporias of the great unfinished texts – *Igitur* and the notes for the Book – in his actually published texts, at bottom the only ones that really count. In either case, we would be faithful to the last wishes of the poet, who, on his deathbed, asked his close relatives to burn the 'half-secular heap' of his unpublished notes – including, consequently, those for the Book. Failing the real auto da fe of the Work – which was refused, at least in part, by the poet's family – an 'intellectual auto da fe' of the secret calculations deployed therein becomes the duty of anyone who would approach sanely the arcana of his *Coup de dés*.

But then the other pole of the alternative becomes just as clear: *The discovery of a code in the Coup de dés would imply that Mallarmé never renounced* – in principle, anyway – *the calculative project of the Book*. To say that the *Coup de dés* is coded is to say that the unfinishedness of the Book should not be taken as the sign of a necessary failure, but as that of the research into symbolic calculations having suddenly taken another form. At the same time, it is to debar the image of a Mallarmé gripped by the impossible and sterile dreams of a Work doomed to

failure, in favor of that of a poet struck down by death (in 1898) just as he had discovered that which he had obstinately been seeking.

This is indeed the option we wish to defend. So that from this point on, our task is twofold. We must resolve, firstly, a question of fact: Does the code really exist – and if so, in what does it consist? How does it work, and why does its structure allow us to be convinced of its reality? And secondly, a question of principle: What could have been the *poetical* legitimacy, for Mallarmé, of such an encryption; and in what way could the poet have accorded it an essential role in his literary project as it stood in 1898, the very year of his death? Why was this poem – expressly testamentary, as we shall see – bound to bequeath us, along with its great beauty, a principle of encipherment?

It is this second problem – not the principle of the code, but its justification – that is the most difficult. For it is true that a code, in itself, is basically something rather puerile, whatever its complexity; something devoid of literary value, in any case. So that if the *Coup de dés* does indeed contain an enigma – which has to be decrypted, as one reveals a conjuror's 'trick' – its elucidation certainly will not clarify the poetical meaning of the text, seen thus in a new light. It will instead complicate it redoubtably, by forcing us to ask ourselves why Mallarmé was well and truly resolute in committing an act that, if one might say

so, does not seem worthy of the dignity of a great poet: introducing the childish trick of a decipherment into the splendor of his fractured verse. Amusing himself with a counting-up – we shall see of what – and even with a charade of the enigmatic Number, in the very place where modern poetry was to undergo an unparalleled revolution in writing, of unprecedented radicality and without equivalent since. To introduce such games into such a beautiful work, with such weighty stakes: How could Mallarmé have done this to us?

Thus, the discovery of the code will not offer us a response that will unknot all the difficulties of the poem, but will instead present us with a new question: *Why* encrypt the *Coup de dés*; or, more exactly, why encrypt it *in this way*? The code will not give us the ultimate key to the poem, but rather the form of its unsuspected lock: not the revelation of its true meaning, but the making explicit of a heretofore invisible difficulty. The text will not be completely illuminated once its cipher is elucidated, but will obscure itself otherwise, cloaking itself in unsuspected shadows. The elucidation of the encryption, rather than being the end of the mystery, will be the unveiling of a new problem, which can be posed only by the reader aware of the encryption: *How did a simple, elementary secret code acquire a fundamental poetical importance for Mallarmé?* Only the resolution of this ‘enigma within the enigma’ will allow us to penetrate the most intimate meaning of this strange poem.

PART ONE

Encrypting the Number

Some reminders to begin with: The complete title of Mallarmé's poem is *Un Coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard*. It first appeared in 1897 in the journal *Cosmopolis*, preceded by a 'Comment' by the author and an 'Editorial Note' (in fact penned by Mallarmé himself), and in a layout that did not conform to the poet's wishes, each double page being reduced to the format of a single page. The Poem would be republished in its final version after Mallarmé's death, in 1914, in the pages of the *Nouvelle Revue française*, thanks to the diligence of Edmond Bonniot. Bonniot was able to base this edition on the manuscript that the poet had prepared the day after the poem's publication in *Cosmopolis*, for an edition to be illustrated by Odilon Redon and published by Ambroise Vollard – an edition that never saw the light of day because of the author's death in 1898. There are thus two versions of the poem (1897 in *Cosmopolis*, and the manuscript of 1898), of which

only the second is faithful to the final intentions of the author. It is the latter that we shall now go on to study.¹

THE POEM

Once we turn the introductory page – which contains the genre of the text (Poem),² the title and the name of the author – the *Coup de dés* comprises eleven double pages: We shall number each double-page spread (not each page) with roman numerals, from I to XI, and consider each double page as a unique Page.³ Indeed, Mallarmé emphasizes in his 1897 ‘Comment’ that the unit of the Poem is the ‘Page’ in the sense of ‘double page’, since the text is read from top to bottom, with lines that traverse the entire width of the book from left to right margin. The word ‘Page’ with a capital ‘P’ will thus designate the double page, and the word ‘page’ with a small ‘p’ the single page (the left or right half of a Page). It is this unprecedented layout of the text that makes possible

1 We reproduce in Appendix 1 the *Coup de dés* in the typography of the Bonniot edition. We shall explain in the second part of the book why we prefer this edition to other more recent editions, which apparently conform more closely to Mallarmé’s instructions. Although the final version was last drafted in November 1897, we adopt the convention of dating it from 1898 – not only to distinguish it more easily from the (1897) Cosmopolis version, but because the editorial process did indeed run on into 1898, for the poem was to be illustrated by Redon’s lithographs.

2 The *Coup de dés* is the unique representative of what would have itself be an entirely new literary genre – which explains the custom of designating it not only as a ‘poem’ in the broad sense, but also as a ‘Poem’ – an unparalleled example of its ‘Idea’.

3 We borrow this principle of pagination from Murat, *Le Coup de dés de Mallarmé*.

the gripping visualization of the drama played out in the Poem.

The *Coup de dés* turns around the exposition, in barely suggested terms, of the scene of a shipwreck. A ship we cannot see, which we must suppose to have been already swallowed by the furious waters, and whose shadow seems to haunt the place of its disappearance (Page III), leaves above the water only a 'Master', of whom we know nothing. This hero's sole (paradoxical) action amounts to a hesitation over whether or not to throw the dice that he holds in one of his fists: a fist closed in a gesture of defiance against the sea that will shortly engulf him (Pages IV and V). The Pages that follow describe what takes place after the disappearance of the Master, whose cap (the 'toque'), along with its plume, alone remains on the surface of the ocean, carried to the brink of a menacing whirlpool. From the latter emerges, for a brief instant, a siren, who destroys with a beating of her tail the rock upon which the Master's vessel seems to have foundered (Pages VI to IX). We do not know whether the dice have been thrown, but the Poem closes, once the feather is engulfed in turn by the sea (Page IX), with the apparition – hypothetical (punctuated by 'PERHAPS') – of a stellar Constellation close to the Septentrion, or identical to it (both readings are possible). This Constellation seems to be set in motion as if by a celestial Throw supplementing that of the Master, with an outcome described as 'consecrated'

– the stars being identified with the points of a nocturnal Die (Pages X and XI).

As well as the controlled explosion of the lines of writing on the Page, the absence of punctuation and the typographical variety, the Poem is characterized by a syntactical construction based upon a complex of interpolations into two principal clauses:

(1) the title, repeated in the body of the poem and which runs through Pages I to IX: ‘A Throw of Dice /// will never abolish /// Chance [Un Coup de Dés /// jamais /// n’abolira /// le Hasard]’;⁴

(2) a statement, on Pages X and XI, that presents the appearance of the constellation: ‘Nothing / of the memorable crisis // will have taken place / but the place / except / perhaps // a constellation [Rien / de la mémorable crise // n’aura eu lieu / que le lieu // excepté / peut-être // une constellation]’.

Finally, breaking with the procedure of the principal clauses punctuated by interpolations, we find a simple phrase, clearly separated from the poem, which concludes it like some kind of ‘moral’: ‘Every thought emits a Throw of Dice [Toute pensée émet un Coup de Dés]’.

4 In our citations of *Coup de dés*, we adopt the following conventions: One slash represents a line break within the same page; two represent a separation by the central fold of the Page; three represent a separation of two Pages at least. We do not reproduce, except in rare cases, the typographical variations of the poem. So as not to overcrowd the cited phrase, neither do we insert ellipses to indicate that we pass ‘over’ interpolations.

So that consequently the poem begins and ends with the same words: 'a Throw of Dice [un Coup de Dés]'.

THE UNIQUE NUMBER

The 'Number' appears twice in the poem, on Pages IV and IX respectively. It designates, so it seems, the potential result of the throw of dice. The first mention of it describes the Master deep in thought, confronted by the unbridled ocean and still uncertain as to the gesture to be carried out:

THE MASTER / inferring / from this conflagration
// at his feet / of the unanimous horizon // that is
// prepared / shaken and blended / in the fist that
might grasp it // as one threatens // some destiny
and the winds // the unique Number that cannot
// be another // hesitates /// not to open his hand /
clenched / far beyond his useless head

LE MAÎTRE / inférant / de cette conflagration // à
ses pieds / de l'horizon unanime // que se prépare //
s'agite et mêle / au poing qui l'étreindrait // comme
on menace // un destin et les vents // l'unique Nom-
bre qui ne peut pas // être un autre // hésite /// à
n'ouvrir pas la main / crispée / par delà l'inutile tête.

The Master infers from the conflagration of waves – where, on the horizon, sea and sky blend together – that a ‘unique Number that cannot be another’ is being prepared. He hesitates to open his ‘clenched hand’ and to throw the dice it grips. The Number seems to be the anticipated result of throwing the dice, but also that of the storm and the shipwreck: for it is from the ‘conflagration’ that the Master ‘infers’ its advent. We have seen that the action of the entire Poem is condensed in the Hero’s hesitation to make his throw; we now discover that this hesitation is linked to the expectation of a unique Number, potentially contained in the situation of the shipwreck. He who understands the meaning of such a Number thus understands the meaning of the drama that plays out in the Poem. But that meaning, to this day, still escapes us.

In fact, what could it be: a number whose uniqueness owes to the fact that it ‘cannot be another’? From an arithmetical point of view, the idea is obviously meaningless: One might say, certainly, that *every* number is necessarily identical to itself and not to another – just as one could, moreover, say exactly the opposite – that *every* number can be augmented by a unit and become other by addition. The property seems either trivial, or false. But even if we allow it, it does not permit us to *single out* a *unique* number, which, *unlike every other number*, would affirm the perfect necessity of its being identical to itself. The impasse is the same if we reflect on the Number from

the point of view of throwing the dice: Every result of a dice-throw is necessary once it has happened, in the sense that the irreversibility of time prevents us from ever modifying it qua past event; and one could just as well say that every aleatory result is contingent in so far as it will have been able to have been other. But once again, and in both cases, whether we admit or reject the property of the Mallarméan number, we do not single out a unique result that, unlike all others, would manifest an absolute necessity.

It thus seems reasonable to suppose that we are confronted with Number in its *metrical* sense. Accordingly, Ronat and Jacques Roubaud have rightly emphasized that the 'memorable crisis' evoked in the second principal clause of the *Coup de dés* designates that 'exquisite and fundamental crisis'⁵ occasioned by the emergence of free verse, a crisis during the course of which would be called into question the necessity, in poetry, of fixed meter and regular rhyme. The Master's shipwreck would thus repeat that of Meter – and the poet's will to maintain regardless, against wind and tide, the existence of that poetic Number *par excellence* for French poetry that is the 12 of the alexandrine.⁶ There is still an incontestable aspect to

5 S. Mallarmé, 'Crise de vers' (in *OC* II, 208-9) [trans. as 'Crisis of Verse' by B. Johnson in *Divagations* (Camb., Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 201-11: 201].

6 See M. Ronat (ed.), *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (Paris: Change errant/d'atelier, 1980). Also see R. Greer Cohn's critique in *Critique* 416: January 1982, 92-3, and Ronat and Roubaud's responses in *Critique* 418: March 1982, 276-8.

this thesis, today – but equally there is another aspect that the facts speak against.

On one hand, we know that Mallarmé adopted a singular position in the course of the quarrel between advocates of free verse and partisans of official verse. The Parnassians, such as Leconte de Lisle and Heredia, denied that free verse was verse at all, seeing at bottom nothing but a typographical artifice – just a prose poem whose lines are arbitrarily interrupted. Inversely, the most radical of the advocates of free verse, such as Gustave Kahn (then the principal theorist of the new form) refused all legitimacy to traditional meter, seeing in it only a constraint, an essentially political one – the inherited legacy of royal centralism and absolutism, put to work in servile manner by Boileau and his successors. For Kahn, the essence of verse was not at all linked to the puerile counting of syllables or to the equally infantile matching of rhymes: It belonged to a unity at once rhythmic and semantic that must entirely replace that of the traditional canon.

Against these two extremes, Mallarmé's position consists in a dividing of roles: The alexandrine must be reserved for the 'solemnity' of 'grand occasions',⁷ whereas free verse is the place for individuation, the place where the poet forges his instrument, a voice that belongs to him alone. Far from entering into conflict, the two poetical

7 See S. Mallarmé, 'Music and Letters', tr. B. Johnson in *Divagations*, 173-98: 184.

forms complement and complete each other. Free verse avoids the exhaustion of the alexandrine, through its being overused to the point of becoming insupportable to the ear. From this point of view, the advocates of free verse continued the efforts of those, like Verlaine or Mallarmé himself, who, even while conserving official verse, had already loosened its too-rigid mechanism in favor of a heterodox play of cuts and *rejets*. But inversely, the maintenance of the alexandrine could allow poetry to conserve its power of unification, and even its religious role – its capacity to unify with its song a ‘throng’ that Mallarmé would wish to open to its own mystery, in a civic cult where the poem of a new art would replace the priest of an outmoded faith.⁸

This concern to maintain traditional verse without disavowing free verse doubtless explains the most surprising aspect of Mallarmé’s posthumous notes for the Book: that Great Work, of universal ambition, whose ever-deferred composition had remained his dream since the Tournon crisis of 1866, and of which only a few sketches remain. Now these notes for the Book were doubtless written during the period when the crisis of free verse preoccupied

8 On the positions of Mallarmé and the principal protagonists of the epoch with regard to free verse, see J. Huret’s 1891 collection of conversations *Enquête sur l’évolution littéraire* (Paris: José Corti, 1999), as well as G. Kahn, *Premiers poèmes. Avec un préface sur le vers libre. Les Palais nomades – Chansons d’amant – Domaine de fête*, 3rd edition (Paris: Mercure de France, 1897). On the crisis of verse and the sacerdotal role of poetry, see Mallarmé, ‘Crisis de vers’ and ‘Offices’, in *Divagations* (1897), in B. Marchal (ed.), *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. II (Paris: Gallimard, 1998/2003) [Tr. B. Johnson as ‘Crisis of Verse’ and ‘Displays’, in *Divagations*, 201-11 and 220-25]. (The two volumes of the French *Oeuvres complètes* will henceforth be denoted OC I and OC II).

him the most (between 1888 and 1895), and they appear to constitute a response to the development of the new form. In the drafts of this project that have come down to us, we discover, above all, a concern with organizing a ceremony of reading analogous to a secularized mass – a ceremony whose Bible would be a Book made of mobile pages, without the name of an author, and whose officiant is presented as an ‘operator’ joining two by two the loose-leaf pages according to a complex combinatorial that, so it seems, was intended to discover a multitude of meanings that would vary with the connections.

It is important for what follows to keep in mind this extraordinary ambition of Mallarmé’s – to refound a civic cult that would replace a deficient Christianity – so far away from the received image of the ‘poet of baubles’ and refined interiors. The author of the *Coup de dés* is situated, in truth, in the line of the first romantics – Lamartine, Vigny and above all Hugo – sharing with them the hubristic (furious, even, in the case of Lamartine and Hugo) desire to create a religion suited to modern, post-revolutionary consciousness. But Mallarmé distinguished himself in two essential points from his glorious elders. Firstly, he had ceased to believe in any form whatsoever of transcendence: The new religion would be that of the divine in man, not of a reconfigured Christian God. And then the poet went even further than his masters in the elaboration of this future piety. For the ‘romantic

images⁹ held to a more or less developed reinvention of a new theology – unencumbered, notably, by the eternal pains of Hell – without going so far as to specify the form of the cult that they wished to substitute for that of Catholicism, which was in their eyes outmoded. As for Mallarmé, according to that ‘practical spirit’ that Anatole France had recognized in him, he envisaged in the greatest of detail the organization of a new ceremony, entirely centered upon a Book, which was itself to be architected in its finest detail.

Now, what remains to us of the description of the ceremony of the Book is peppered with obsessive calculations in which 12 is very frequently involved, either explicitly or in the form of its divisors or its multiples. For example, as we have said, the audience of the reading must be composed of 24 ‘assistants’, divided sometimes into 8 groups of 3 chairs, sometimes into 12 double places; the rhythm of the readings is envisaged according to the tetralogical rhythm of the seasons – 4 per year; the prices envisaged for the Book and the profits expected from its sales obey the same logic (2 francs, 240 francs, 480 francs, etc.), as do the number of volumes published and the number of written pages per volume (for example, ‘960 vol[umes] of 96 p[ages]’). The very size of the Book was designed according to ratios that once again bring in the divisors

9 See P. Bénichou, *Romantisme français*, vol. II (Paris: Gallimard, 2004).

of 12 or the multiples of 6 (the 'cipher' of the hemistich): Thus, 3, 4, 12 and 18 determine the calculation of the height of the work or the number of lines in length and width.¹⁰ It is as if Mallarmé had tried to construct in 12 a retreat, a rear base: Toppled from its reign over the poetic text by free verse, the alexandrine seems to find refuge in the *setting* of the text – the material form of the Book and the organization of the reading ritual – enjoying a semblance of resecured sovereignty in this exile to the gilded margins. But only within these margins. For, in fact, 12 appears to play no role in the content, properly speaking, of the Book: the few sketches at our disposal, the 'tableaux' that it was to present – all of this contains no calculation attesting to the presence of 12 within the planned text itself.

According to Ronat, 12 nevertheless dominates the text of that other response to free verse that is the *Coup de dés*, because it presides over the secret logic of the poem's composition. In fact – and here are two incontestable remarks – (1) the very statement in which the Number appears is an alexandrine: 'l'unique Nombre qui ne peut pas être un autre [the unique Number that cannot be another]';¹¹ (2) the poem in its totality comprises a booklet of eleven

10 This type of calculation runs through all the notes, OC II, 549-622.

11 A nonclassical alexandrine, since the caesura falls on the relative pronoun 'qui', but representative by this token of the audacious gestures Mallarmé makes in his treatment of verse, whether in the *Scène d'Hérodiade* or in *L'Après-midi d'un faune*.

double pages, but to which we must add the recto of the first page – the title page, that is – and the verso of the last, which makes a total of 12 double pages, or equivalently two times 12 pages, as if a couplet of alexandrines took up the whole space of the Poem. Only Ronat adds – and this is the heart of his thesis – that 12 also determined all the dimensions involved in the composition of the Page: the point size of the typographical characters (12 or of a multiple of 12) and the number of lines on the Page (36 lines per page, 36 being a multiple of 12). Now, this last hypothesis does not survive the examination of the manuscript of the *Coup de dés* (to which Ronat did not have access), for the latter includes indications by both Mallarmé and the printer that belie any will to give preeminence to the number 12 in the physical publication of the poem.¹²

The thesis of a coding of the Poem by the number 12 has thus undergone a refutation by fact from which there is no question of returning. But it also contains a difficulty in principle, which we must discuss in order to clarify our own perspective.

12 On the material falsity of Ronat's interpretation, see N. D'Origny Lübecker, *Le Sacrifice de la sirène. «Un coup de dés» et la poétique de Stéphane Mallarmé*, in *Études romanes* 53 (University of Copenhagen, 2003), 24; and B. Marchal's note in his edition of the *Coup de dés* in *OCT*, 1322. Mallarmé writes in particular, on the manuscript of the Poem, the following indication: 'Each page / text and blank / is established on a cipher of / 40 lines'. Now 40 is neither a multiple of 12, nor even a multiple of 6; it would therefore have made no sense, according to Ronat's hypothesis, to have attributed to it so generic a role in the composition.

THE APORIA OF *IGITUR*

If Ronat's thesis had been correct, it would have placed the *Coup de dés* in strict continuity with *Igitur*, that unfinished tale composed in 1869 and published in 1925, well after the poet's death. In this fragmentary text, inspired by *Hamlet* and Vigny's 'L'Esprit pur [Pure Spirit]', a squire – Igitur – descends into the tomb of his ancestors, there to carry out, at midnight, a decisive act: a throw of dice whose intent is to see whether it will yield a 12. The number 12: at once that of midnight – the critical instant, the irreversible separator of Past and Future – and that of the perfect alexandrine. The question is whether this throw, which aims at the perfect verse, must still be perpetuated, and with it the line of his ancestors (romantic and parnassian poets) – given that, since God had ceased, for the young Mallarmé, to guarantee the status of literary symbols, nothingness and 'chance' alone reigned over Letters and over existence alike. The drama hangs entirely upon Igitur's hesitation to throw the dice – the very hesitation that we find again in the attitude of the Master faced with the storm of free verse.

It is thus indisputable that the *Coup de dés* is inspired by the 1869 tale, something also confirmed by the fact that, after the disappearance of the Master, all that remains on the surface is his 'midnight cap' (the Igiturian midnight),

to which is fixed for an instant a white plume – a feather that is at once the symbol of a poetical writing in perdition (the quill) and the privileged attribute of Hamlet, that 'latent lord', as Mallarmé wrote,¹³ overcome by supreme hesitancy.

But we must be more precise. All the givens of what we might call the '*Igitur* problem' are indeed present in the *Coup de dés*: midnight, the nonsense of Nothingness, hesitation, and a possible throw of dice. But if the *Coup de dés* had sought to make of 12 the 'Number that cannot be any other', it would have applied *Igitur*'s solution to its own problem. Now, this 'solution' was in truth a failure, which explains the unfinishedness of the tale. And this failure stemmed from what Mallarmé – then influenced by Hegel (or more likely, by some French review of the latter)¹⁴ conceived in 1869 as being the *infinity* of chance. Here is how he formulated the nature of this infinity at the time:

In short, in an act where chance is in play, it is always chance that accomplishes its proper Idea in affirming or denying itself. Before its existence, negation and affirmation are exhausted. It contains the Absurd –

¹³ S. Mallarmé, 'Hamlet', tr. B. Johnson in *Divagations*, 124-8: 125.

¹⁴ See L. J. Austin, 'Mallarmé et le rêve du «Livres»', in *Essais sur Mallarmé* (Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 66-91.

implies it, but in the latent state, preventing it from existing: which permits Infinity to be.¹⁵

Here 'Chance' is credited with a power of contradiction (it 'contains the Absurd') that allows it to be what it is, as well as what it is not – and thus to be 'infinite' in the dialectical (rather than mathematical) sense: to contain always already what is beyond its limit, and to absorb that which tends to oppose it. The proposition seems obscure at first, but the underlying idea is simple: When I throw dice, the result is generally erratic – 'lowly splashing', as the *Coup de dés* will say. In this case, chance as nonsense is visible in the very insignificance of its result. But the opposite can also apply, when an improbable and favorable coincidence takes place – such as when a 12 gives me the decisive upper hand in the game; for then the course of things can seem oriented by an intentional and higher purpose. In the same way, the makers of verse most often compose bland alexandrines that bear striking witness to the contingency of their labors; but sometimes, a stupefying sonnet of great beauty seems imbued with a destinal necessity, as if produced by a higher finality. However, for those who do not believe in Providence, this latter is equally an effect of chance: The victorious 12 is no less aleatory than the 5 or the 8 that cannot win the game;

¹⁵ OGI, 476.

and whether chance is lucidly attested to by the dismal everyday course of things, or denied in the apparent necessity of the resplendent work, it is always chance that governs and presides over the birth of geniuses and their productions. Contingency or coincidence, chance is thus indeed infinite in the precise sense that it contains by the same token that which displays it in all its dismal evidence and that which denies it in the luminous appearance of a Meaning. We see how Mallarmé transformed a banal idea – ‘all is chance’ – by giving it the aspect of a sort of inversion of Hegelian infinity: no longer the process of Spirit containing all in itself, including that which appears to deny it, but the process of Nothingness (understood as absence of Sense) including that which seems to be an exception to it.

How to struggle against infinite chance with a throw of dice if all results amount to the same – that is to say, to its infinity, to its equal absence of sense in perfect verse and in mediocre verse? In 1869, the young Mallarmé found no solution to this aporia. Indeed, he envisaged two denouements for *Igitur*: (a) *Igitur* ‘merely shakes the dice’ without throwing them, and then ‘lies down upon the ashes of his ancestors’ – a sort of abandonment of literature, or rather an exit from a literature no longer able to perpetuate itself except by evoking its own abandonment; (b) *Igitur* throws the dice, obtains a 12, and, faced with the sibilant fury of the wind, the voice of his ancestors,

bravely upholds his act – a sort of defiance (‘existentialist’ before its time) in which the project of writing is gripped by the acute consciousness of its absence of foundation. So that the hero does indeed perpetuate the activity of his forebears, but renders the latter furious, or mocking, by attaching to it a justification opposed to the ancestral beliefs: It is no longer God, but Nothingness that governs the poet’s vocation.¹⁶

It would thus hardly be forcing things to say that Mallarmé already touches here upon an alternative of which Blanchot and Sartre would become the two major twentieth-century representatives: Faced with meaninglessness recognized as ultimate, one endorses the literature of the exhaustion of literature, or the voluntarist literature of the absurd. But the fascinating point is precisely that the young Mallarmé – he was twenty-seven years old in 1869 – was manifestly unsatisfied by either of the two options that would come to dominate the following century; and this is indeed, doubtless, the deep reason for the unfinishedness of the tale. We can easily understand the motive for this dissatisfaction: that there could be two possible endings is enough to reveal the contingency of both of them and the fact that one might indifferently choose one or the other. If chance equalizes all options, then to write of the exhaustion of writing, or even to

16 *Igitur*, in *OCI*, 477-8 and 481-2.

abandon all writing, as Rimbaud would do, is no more or less valid than to affirm resolutely the rights of poetry in the era of nihilism. From this point on, it becomes vain to choose, and therefore vain to finish the tale.

Now if, in the *Coup de dés*, Mallarmé had identified the Number with 12, he would simply have returned to the aporia of *Igitur* by arbitrarily choosing one of the options he had earlier rejected. For to affirm resolutely the value of 12 is still to dream of the perfect alexandrine; but this alexandrine would be but the result of chance, and not its negation. The chance, firstly, of the French language, which, like every determined language, according to Mallarmé, is 'imperfect'¹⁷ – lacking any necessary link between its sounds and its significations. That French should be one language among others betrays its contingency, its babelian curse, and demonstrates that the privileged number of its poetry has no universal status, its alexandrine not always being transposable into foreign poems. And then the chance of genius, which can sometimes forge a sublime verse, but which is itself, as a posthumous satirical poem insists, but the fruit of a fortuitous sexual encounter, and thus no less vulgar:

Because a bit of roast was done to a turn,
because the paper reported a rape [...]

17 'Crise de vers', in *OC II*, 208 [tr. B. Johnson in *Divagations*, 205].

some simpleton plants his cold dry wife beneath
him [...]
and because those two creatures coupled in their sleep
one night with no storm and no bluster,
O Shakespeare, and ah Dante, a poet may be born!¹⁸

There would have been no reason for Mallarmé, at the end of his life, to accord to 12 the qualities – uniqueness, necessity – that he had lucidly rejected since his youth, especially given that his awareness of chance had retained, in his work, its full acuity. And what Ronat's hypothesis cannot explain either is that the title *Coup de dés* seems precisely to emphasize the still-upheld truth of infinite, Igiturian 'chance' – namely the necessary submission of every result of a throw (even if it be a perfect 12) – to eternal chance: A throw of dice will *never* abolish chance. No sublime verse will ever efface the mark of its contingency.

We touch here upon a very basic difficulty that appears to disqualify in principle *every* attempt – not just Ronat's – to code the Poem, that is to say, to extract from it a *determinate* number that might correspond to the Master's definition. If there is a continuity between the *Coup de dés* and *Igitur*, it does indeed lie in that infinite supremacy of chance, affirmed from the start in the 1898 poem, and which seems to condemn in advance the Master's

18 OC I, 65 [tr. E.H. and A.M. Blackmore in *Collected Poems and Other Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 189].

anticipation of a Number that would be unique and of higher necessity. This is why the failure of Ronat's decryption only reinforced the basic tendency of contemporary commentary: the tendency to read into the *Coup de dés* the assumption of a failure to produce a poetry, a verse, a meter, that would be really necessary – to produce anything whatever that would gainsay the implacable contingency of a world without God. This line of commentary – found notably in Gardner Davies and Murat – is today widely dominant. It implies a precise consequence: *The Master's inference* – his concluding, on the basis of the conflagration, the preparation of a Number that cannot be another – *is false*. The 'unique Number' is another name for the chimera that one might well live as Dream, Eden or Fiction, but whose realization, in any form whatsoever, is not to be hoped for.

This thesis appears to be confirmed by a statement that runs from Page VIII to Page IX, and where the Master himself seems to laugh at an illusion to which he had momentarily succumbed: 'anxious / expiatory and pubescent / mute // laugh / that / if /// it was / the Number // it would be / Chance [soucieux / expiatoire et pubère / muet // rire / que / si /// c'était / le Nombre // ce serait / le Hasard]'. One can indeed understand the Master here laughing silently ('mute laugh') at his error, a laugh at once expiatory and juvenile ('pubescent') before something that appears self-evident. In fact – according

This is the difficulty, not just of proposin
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that 12 is the number, but that any number ca^{be}

to *Igitur*'s severe teaching, which would thus be faithfully upheld here – even if the perfect Number was to be produced by the throw of dice ('even if it was the Number'), 'it would [still] be Chance'. That is to say: it would still be the effect of Chance. And, as if to make things yet clearer, the affirmation of the title that traverses the whole poem – 'A Throw of Dice Will Never Abolish Chance' – ends with the occurrence of the same word 'Chance' that closes the Master's 'auto-critique'. The two phrases thus converge in one and the same word, in order to say the same thing, to designate the inevitable failure of the mad poetical enterprise that believed itself on a mission to the Absolute. And this will have been a striking vow of defeat, in regard to the initial ambition to find an ultimate and necessary Meter: allowing those who adhere to this interpretation to distance themselves from any idea that a specific Number might be pursued, and above all engendered, by the poem.

However, this ironist, resigned reading is not without its own serious difficulties. For it is hard to understand what would have undone the Master and made him renounce his initial reasoning. After all, it was from the unbridled spectacle of the horizon, from the conflagration of verse – not from the illusory spectacle of some harmony or other – that the Master had inferred the coming of the unique Number. How could he then go on to conclude the opposite, if the circumstances from which he had

deduced the Number remained the same – that is to say, cataclysmic? There could be no plausible reason for such a sudden change of mind at this point. One might have understood the Master rapidly shedding his illusions if he had set out from the vision of a serene landscape and from a subsequent belief in God as guarantor of universal order and of the necessary beauty of his verse – only to have suffered a terrible disaster. But, as it happens, it is inversely, from the vision of the catastrophe, that he drew his conclusion: *It is the shipwreck – the very ruin of classical verse – that, for him, holds out the promise of the Number.* We cannot therefore say that it is this same shipwreck that opened his eyes to the illusory nature of his initial expectations. But equally, how can one deduce, from a radical disaster, a superior metrical necessity? The truth is that this inference of the Master's is a paradox whose logic we still do not understand, even today – not a naive hope, of which it would be easy to disabuse ourselves. And so long as we do not understand it, it will be impossible for us to decide whether or not the Master – and through him, the Poem – renounced it.

The insufficiency of these two interpretations (encryption and irony) brings out the core of the difficulty: *The title of the poem* (and, so it seems, the 'expiatory and pubescent' laugh) contradicts the Master's inference; but there is nothing to justify us in affirming that one or the other of them is false. Is there some way to unknot the aporia?



In truth, there remains only one way to go: it consists in asking ourselves on what condition both propositions could be true at the same time. After all, this is the solution that the poem itself indicates, since it never denies explicitly either of the two assertions. If we were to find a way to reconcile them, we should perhaps obtain a decisive clue to interpret the meaning of that Number the Master senses approaching. Now, we need only pose the question for the evidence to jump out at us – evidence we had not seen because we had not understood *literally* what Mallarmé wrote when he seemed to deny, with this laugh, the Master's initial hopes:

mute laugh if it was the number it would be chance

We have seen that the ironist interprets this statement as if it meant: 'Even if it were the number, it would be *an effect* of chance'. But this is not what is written, because – to the letter – quite the contrary is being said: if it was the number, then the number would be chance; that is to say, it would be chance itself, and not one of its effects. With this, things start to become clear. For let us place this statement, understood in its literal sense, after the title. Thereby we will obtain a syllogism whose inference is impeccable, and which uncovers for us the meaning of the Master's inference:

A throw of dice will never abolish Chance
 The Number (if it took place) would be Chance
(Therefore) A throw of dice will never abolish the Number

In other words, if we obtain the Number that can be identified with Chance, it would possess the unalterable eternity of contingency itself, indifferent to the individual aleas that proceed from it. Chance alone being necessary and infinite, a Number that succeeded in joining with it would be suffused with the same destiny. The Master thus senses, at the moment of the shipwreck, that the unique Number of Chance as such is being prepared. But how can a Number be Chance proper, rather than one of its products? And since the Number is itself the product of a dice-throw, how can a throw have as its result the very essence of Chance, rather than one of its contingent effects? As yet, we do not know. Let us nevertheless set out from this hypothesis and see where it leads us.

THE INCOMPARABLE METER

The failure of Ronat's hypothesis has doubtless been cause for secret relief on the part of many a Mallarmé scholar: so, the strange calculatory whim of the Book was not extended into the *Coup de dés*, which remains innocent of this type of mania. However, let us repeat:

If the poet had so insisted on introducing calculations of every order into the Book – his life's Work, according to his own admission to Paul Verlaine¹⁹ – it would be no surprise if there remained something of this in his most ambitious poem. And in fact, as we have seen, the number 12 continues to govern the material contours of the *Coup de dés* – that is to say, the number of its P/pages. But if we recall the absence of 12 from the sketched-out *contents* of the Book, we shall not be surprised if it were wholly absent from the content of the *Coup de dés* – aside from a few isolated segments, such as the announcement of the 'unique Number'. It could still be that *another* number governs the 'interior' of this last poem.

Let us suppose the existence of such a Number and ask ourselves, to start with, in what way it could be unique. By affirming that the Number was the alexandrine, Ronat began from a *generic* rather than an *individual* conception of uniqueness: for there are certainly very many individual alexandrines in French poetry, even if their common meter is unique. But can we now imagine a Meter that intervenes *only once in the whole history of poetry*: a Meter, in other words, that would be the Number of that poem, itself unique, without predecessor or successor, the *Coup de dés*?²⁰

19 Public letter to Verlaine, 16 November 1885, in OC I, 787-90.

20 Even if Mallarmé envisaged writing other poems in this form, and thus founding a new 'genre' – as we know from the 1897 'Comment' and through a comment reported by Kahn – the first of this series would still have boasted the uniqueness of an originary

We would then have a Number that was unique in the individual, not the generic, sense – produced from a count intrinsic to the 1898 poem alone. The Number would be the only representative of its order, both because it would belong to a singular poem and because the way in which it was calculated belonged to it alone. And thus we would be able to understand why the Master, seeing the conflagration of words on Page IV, could infer from them that the unique Number is being prepared: because it is the whole of the Poem that would be *on the way* to producing ‘a total count in the making’ whose sum would be complete only upon completion of its development – that is to say on Page XI – just as an alexandrine only adds up to its 12 syllables once we reach the end of it.

But, one may ask, why engender such a Number? Let us content ourselves for the moment with the following remark: if Mallarmé did code a unique Number, he would have produced a *poetic* reconciliation between regular verse and free verse – not just a theoretical reconciliation, as he had already done in his interview with Jules Huret and in his ‘Crisis of Verse’. Rather than proposing, qua critic, a division of roles between the two forms, he would have produced, qua poet, a Verse capable of bringing about their effective synthesis. For, on one hand, the entire Poem would be intended to be read as one single verse, or rather as

prototype. See G. Kahn, ‘Les origines du symbolisme’, in *Symbolistes et décadents* (1902) (Genève: Slatkine, 1977), 24.

one single couplet: a 'double alexandrine of pages' (2×12) whose interior would be coded by an original meter (other than 12). The Verse would thus be regular, the rule being in a certain sense more present than ever, since it would take up the whole space of the couplet, which itself would take up the whole space of the Poem and the whole space of the Book. But, in another sense, the Verse of the *Coup de dés* would have the individuality of free verse, since its Meter would belong to it alone. And in a certain way, the individuality of the Verse would be stronger than ever, since its rule would be absolutely unique, whereas all free verses have in common at least their equal lack of rule. Rather than opposing meter and singularity, a meter would be produced that singularizes better and further than the absence of meter.

This said, if there is a Meter intrinsic and specific to the *Coup de dés*, what does it number? And what exactly must we count to obtain it? Let us allow the text to guide us. If the Meter is completed at the end of the *Coup de dés*, then one might expect the end of the Poem to give us a clue as to its nature. And this is indeed the case, since the only word that refers to a number is the 'Septentrion' of the last Page, precisely that which appears to contain the seven stellar points of the celestial Throw. For the second principal clause of the *Coup de dés* argues as follows:

Nothing / of the memorable crisis / will have taken
place but the place // except / at the height / PER-
HAPS // apart from the interest / assigned to it /
of flames / toward / it must be / the Septentrion
also the North / A CONSTELLATION

Rien / de la mémorable crise / n'aura eu lieu que
le lieu // excepté / à l'altitude / PEUT-ÊTRE //
hors l'intérêt / quant à lui signalé / de feux / vers
/ ce doit être / le Septentrion aussi Nord / UNE
CONSTELLATION

Nothing will have proceeded from the crisis of free verse, except 'perhaps' a Constellation carrying within itself an unprecedented number – seven – destined to become the new North of modern poetry. The 'flaming verses [feux vers]' are obviously alexandrines, taken for dead by the ascendancy of free verse, but which must relay in the *Coup de dés* (without, for all that, suppressing them, given the 'interest' tirelessly 'assigned to' them by Mallarmé) the new constellatory Meter. Then we come to the grandiose finale:

THE NUMBER AND THE SIREN

A CONSTELLATION

cold with neglect and desuetude
not so much
that it fails to number
on some vacant and higher surface
the successive impact
starrily
of a total count in the making

keeping watch
doubting
rolling
shining and meditating
before finally halting
at some last point by which it is consecrated

Every Thought emits a Throw of Dice

Reading this apotheosis, we understand that the poem is quite simply *in the process of doing what it describes*. The *Coup de dés* has a 'performative' dimension in so far as it operates a summation, a 'total count in the making', of a unit of counting = x (still unknown) that is in the process of being summed before our eyes, 'rolling' on the surface of the Page 'before finally halting' at a 'last point by which it is consecrated'. And we now have reason to believe that the Number that is in the making, being produced by the deployment of the poem to its conclusion, has a close relationship to the number 7.

UNE CONSTELLATION

froide d'oubli et de désuétude
 pas tant
 qu'elle n'énumère
 sur quelque surface vacante et supérieure
 le heurt successif
 sidéralement
 d'un compte total en formation

veillant

doutant

roulant

brillant et méditant

avant de s'arrêter
 à quelque point dernier qui le sacre

Toute Pensée émet un Coup de Dés

Why give such an essential role to the number 7? The reason is not – or not principally – the sacred character of this cipher in various traditions. It is rather that for Mallarmé, 7 represents a medium term between the classical metric and pure chance. On one hand, 7 is the number of rhymes in a sonnet, undoubtedly the most perfect poetical form in Mallarmé's eyes, since the most continually practiced by him. The 'Sonnet in -x', that sonnet called 'null and reflecting itself in every way',²¹ thus makes appear at midnight (=12), in the mirror of an empty salon, the astral

21 'Nul et se réfléchissant de toutes les façons' – letter to Henri Cazalis, 18 July 1868, in *OC* I, 731.

Septuor: Its meter (the alexandrine) and the number of its rhymes are both symbolized in the interior of the poem.

But what is more, the 7 also designates the number of stars in the Little Bear, which contains the Pole Star, the North of all navigators. Now we know – notably by way of a confidence made to François Coppée²² – that the author of the *Coup de dés* held the stars in their pure dissemination to be a celestial symbol of Chance. To cut out, with the gaze, a constellation from this senseless splendor, is to carry out an act wholly analogous to the poetic act according to Mallarmé. For this poet seeks to make scintillate words forged and disseminated by the chance of language, through the usage of a disconcerting syntax in which each vocable seems isolated by a 'lacuna' from all the others, as if decontextualized: which allows it to shine with a light one has never before perceived in it.²³ The constellation of the Septentrion is thus the perfect symbol of the Beautiful, detached in all its resplendence on the ground of eternal Chance. It is also the reminder that the absence of God, his proven Nothingness, is the condition of the Beautiful, just as Night and the annihilation of solar light is the condition of stellar splendor – which is, from now on, our compass.²⁴

22 See H. Fabureau, *Stéphane Mallarmé, son oeuvre* (Paris: Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue critique, 1933), 25.

23 On this point, see our remarks on page 118.

24 There exists one last possible reason, more anecdotal, for the poet's predilection for the number 7. The mention of the 'Sept(entrion)' is perhaps a discreet way of signing

But what no one so far seems to have remarked, is that the Mallarméan obsession with 7 is also manifested in the notes for the Book. We have seen that a first series of numbers was produced by the divisors and multiples of 12, added to the multiples of 6, the cipher of the hemistich. There is however, in these Notes, a second series of numbers, no less important, which prove this time to be entirely constituted by *multiples of 5*. There are certainly 24 assistants in the audience, but including the operator, Mallarmé emphasizes, that makes 25 people per reading; each 'book' of the Book, that is to say each of its volumes, will have 5 different 'motifs'; the copies are generally published according to a number that is a multiple of 10, and thus of 5. And above all, the Book will be run through in its entirety according to a cycle of 5 years of readings – 5 years, a period that is designated by the term 'luster', as Mallarmé recalls,²⁵ the reason why another luster will light up the room where the séances are held.

The declination of numbers in the Book proceed from these two series – multiples and divisors of 12 and 6, multiples of 5 – and, to our knowledge, *uniquely* from these two series. Now, as much as the first series is symbolically

the poem (of appending his 'cipher' to it), since the four letters of 'sept' are identical to the four first letters of the poet's first name (*Stéphane*). The 7 would then have the status of a monogram and would be to Mallarmé what the chrism is to Christ.

25 OCI, 562.

obvious – the alexandrine, the hemistich – the second is without any obvious link to any number specific to poetry. For no element of a sonnet or an alexandrine seems to have a privileged relation to 5. Then why this fascination for a number that will even go so far as to determine the cycle of readings? The answer seems to us to be as follows: 12, as we have said, only dominates the *setting* of the text to be read. But what number, then, will govern the *content* of the Book? Mallarmé, in his Notes, responds indirectly to this question: *The Number internal to the Book will be the reciprocal of 5 to obtain 12*. In other words, one need only take the 5 from the 12 to give the result: $12 - 5 = 7$. The Septentrion is thus coded in the Notes without having ever appeared in them, precisely because the Notes determine the code of the ceremonial and, by difference alone, that of the Book. It is thus in accord with the numerological reflections of the Book that we can expect similarly punctilious calculations in the *Coup de dés*, this time in relation to 7 – the Poem of 1898 seemingly assuming responsibility for the intratextual code that the Notes were unable to develop.

With this, the conditions for the elucidation of the Number come into focus: We must consider whether there exists a unit of counting that would bring out 7 within the Poem. But, to do so, let us pay attention to the last phrase of the *Coup de dés*, the only part with no interpolations,

and whose simplicity breaks so clearly with the rest of the text: 'Every Thought emits a Throw of Dice'. We have said that it must be read as a *fabula docet*, as the 'moral' of the Poem: a statement that concisely brings out its meaning. Now there is a trivial but by the same token precise way to understand this phrase. Rather than saying that this statement affirms, in some vague and rather banal way, that every thought is a wager, we could interpret it as follows: Every thought, in so far as it is formulated in a language, produces a series of aleatory numbers linked to the linguistic components necessary for its formulation. For our concluding phrase contains, like every phrase, a certain number of letters, of syllables, of words, of substantives, etc. These numbers are 'engendered' by thought in so far as it finds itself formulated in them, but in themselves they have no meaning – and in particular, no meaning linked to the thought in question. At least this is ordinarily the case. Short of adopting a kabbalistic viewpoint, we cannot see any significant link between the declaration 'I love you' and the number 8, which is the number of letters necessary to formulate it. It is a chance connection between meaning and number – that is to say, a nonconnection. But the traditional poet – one who practices regular verse – is precisely one who submits language to a count, and more especially to the count of syllables so as to guarantee their meter. Why, then, should there not be in this final phrase an indication as

to the type of count to operate so as to find the Meter of the Poem? Let us therefore pose the following question: Does our final statement contain a 7, and, if so, according to what unit of counting? The answer is: Yes, it does contain one, and as simply as can be. *Our final statement is formulated in 7 words:*

<i>Toute</i>	<i>Pensée</i>	<i>émet</i>	<i>un</i>	<i>Coup</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>Dés</i>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

With this, we can take a step further and formulate our general hypothesis: *The Number of the Coup de dés will be the sum of the words of the poem, whose last term would be the word 'sacre [consecrated]' – precisely the word with which the stellar throw is completed.* The 'last point' which 'consecrates' will be no other than the word 'consecrated', and we will indeed rediscover the performative dimension of the Poem: the writing of 'sacre' has a sacred status. In other words, we suppose that the final phrase of the 7 words *is not* part of the Number: It is its 'cipher' or the 'key' to it, in both a cryptological and a musical sense. (The poem is written 'in 7', as a sonata is written in C minor or major.) In this way Mallarmé would have sought to bring out the number 7 *as such*, in separate fashion; since he could not write the poem in 7 words, he would have isolated a final statement unveiling the cipher from which the Number proceeds. But if our intuition is

correct, then *the Number* – that which sums the words of the poem from the first word up to the word ‘*sacre*’ – will contain 7 in a significant way.²⁶

THE VORTEX OF THE CODE

The tacit count of the *Coup de dés* would thus be composed, on one hand, of a number, 7, set into the final phrase, and, on the other, of a Number summing the remainder of the words and in which 7 would be contained in some remarkable way. What do we mean to say in speaking of the ‘significant’ presence of 7 in the Number? There are, as a first approximation, many hundreds of words in the *Coup de dés*. The Number will thus be written using three figures. If, for example, ‘*sacre*’ was the 777th word of the Poem, 7 would obviously be a significant component. Are there *a priori* other possibilities? The only other immediately significant number in Mallarmé’s poetics seems to be 0: associated with 7, it would be an obvious symbol of Nothingness or of the night upon whose ground the Septentrion appears. This gives us three other possibilities as to the position of the word ‘*sacre*’: 700th, 707th, or 770th.

²⁶ It will be noted that the last linear segment of the poem before the conclusive phrase contains 7 words also: ‘*à quelque point dernier qui le sacré*’. If our hypothesis is correct, the *Coup de dés* thus concludes with a metrical equality.

But even if we find one of these four numbers (777, 700, 707, 770), the symbolic relation of the sum to the poem would still be too tenuous to conclude that it was anything more than a coincidence. To prove that Mallarmé really counted his words, we should have to discover in the text of the *Coup de dés* an encrypted allusion to one of these four numbers: the equivalent of a 'charade' of the Number, hidden in a passage of the poem. In this way

AS IF

A sin

in sil

in some immi

ho

we would be able to bring to bear a *twofold* verification of the Number, and thus of the code: once through the count, and once through the text. If we were to succeed in doing so, the encryption would find itself confirmed by virtue of its heuristic value – its capacity to explain precisely certain passages of the poem.]

Such a passage does indeed exist. It is the *central* Page of the *Coup de dés*, Page VI:

inuation

led in irony

or

the mystery

hurled down

screamed

tex of hilarity and horror

the brink of the gulf

without sprinkling it

nor fleeing

and draws from it the virgin clue

AS IF

COMME SI

Une insinuation

au silence

dans quelque procl

voltige

This Page describes the whirlpool in which the Master is apparently drowned following the shipwreck. There remains however a 'virgin clue' to the 'mystery' (that of the Master's act – we do not know whether he threw the dice). We learn on the following Page – Page VII – that this virgin clue is a quill (a feather), an obvious symbol of the distraught writer, and one of the few traces of the Master (of his headgear) that has not yet been consumed by the waves. On this same Page VII, we are audience to an ephemeral and postmortem crowning – the quill for an instant 'brushes against' the cap, the 'toque' of he

nple

roulée avec ironie

ou

le mystère

précipité

hurlé

urbillon d'hilarité et d'horreur

tour du gouffre

sans le joncher

ni fuir

et en berce le vierge indice

COMME SI

who is no longer. A discreet triumph is suggested, but its meaning is unknown. To elucidate this meaning, we must understand what happened just before, as described on Page VI.

What plays out in this Page, in truth, is determined by the symbolic role of decapitation in Mallarmé. For the theme of beheading appears recurrently in his work, the separation between the head and the body symbolizing that between mind and nature. In an 1864 prose poem, 'Poor Pale Child'²⁷ (initially entitled 'The Head'),

27 'Pauvre enfant pâle', OCII, 88-9 [tr. B. Johnson in *Divagations*, 19].

Mallarmé imagines a poor child, whom he sees singing with all his might in the streets to obtain a few coins, becoming drawn into crime and ending up decapitated. In fact, the poem is a reverie on the expression 'to sing one's head off [chanter à tue-tête]', developed in its literal sense. Such is the Mallarméan rendition of the swan song: The poetic song demands an elevation of the spirit that tends toward an inaccessible sky, in the desire to obtain a purity that is at the same time a fatal separation from the terrestrial world (figured by the body). We find the theme of this guillotine purity once again in *Igitur*, where an 'arachnian ruff' is evoked, the symbol of Igitur's becoming-Spirit. But it is above all the ever-recommended labor of *Hérodiade* that manifests this obsession, and in particular the *Noces d'Hérodiade*, whose prelude sees the head of Saint John the Baptist intoning a victory song at the very instant that the executioner separates it from his body. Now, John the Baptist is, we might say, the only 'prophet' in the New Testament – the only properly Christian prophet: he who announces the imminent coming of the Savior, as opposed to the apostles and the martyrs who testify to his present or past existence. It is in this capacity that the decapitation of Saint John becomes, in Mallarmé, the symbol of the poetic act in its highest purity and its greatest power of hope: the symbol of a salvation, this time purely terrestrial; a symbol that

prepares and announces an equally extreme ascesis with regard to the work of writing.

It is precisely this spiritual process that the *Coup de dés* sets in motion here. Of the Master who has just inferred the coming advent of the unique Number and grasps the dice in his hand, it is written, on Page IV: 'Spirit / to cast it / into the storm / closing the division and passing proudly on'. The Master is thus on the point of transforming himself into 'pure Spirit', capable of the throw, capable of its summation (since the result is divided by the dice, of which we suppose there to be two, as in *Igitur*) and of bravely accepting death ('passing proudly on'). Now, this process begins with a *symbolic decapitation*. For the sea appears to have consumed the Master's body in its entirety, except for his head. The head, meanwhile, is flecked with foam: a wave 'invades the head / spilling down like a submissive beard' – a white beard that suggests the instantaneous aging of the Hero and metaphorizes his imminent death. And, on the following Page (Page V), the head is again said to be 'useless' because it appears to be detached from the body – which is beneath the waters, with only the 'clenched hand' that grips the dice still raised above the face. Soon the Master will disappear entirely. But the process of beheading will be extended, in a still-higher spiritual form, symbolized by the retention at the surface, for a moment, of the Hero's toque and its feather.

But let us come back to Page VI. This page, first of all, plays a role that is, to the letter, central for the Poem: It separates it, as we have seen, into two equal halves, the counting of whose pages – 12 on each side – incites us to read the whole of the Poem as if it were composed of a couplet of *rhymed* alexandrines brought together in a chiasmic structure. The first Verse runs between ‘A Throw of Dice [Un Coup de Dés]’ and the first ‘as if [comme si]’ of Page VI, the second Verse between the second ‘as if’ of Page VI and once again ‘a Throw of Dice’. Modern verse, particularly French verse, has indeed, to Mallarmé’s eyes, that superiority over antique verse of being twofold – stanza and couplet – because of the rhyme that constitutes it.²⁸ The regular metric thus insists (in this lies its modernity) that the Beautiful contains at its center a void, a blank: that very blank that separates the two verses while permitting them to resonate together. Now, in Page VI, the central fold of the book – occupied precisely by the text that describes the whirlpool of the shipwreck – plays this role of a gulf separating the two mirrored locutions: ‘as if [comme si]’ – ‘as if [comme si]’. A rhyme phonetically perfect but at the same time incorrect, since two identical words or expressions cannot, according to the normal rule, be joined at the end of a verse.

28 ‘Solennité’, in *OC* II, 200-1 [tr. B. Johnson as ‘Solemnity’, in *Divagations*, 167n].

This ironic defense of rhyme – faced with the scorn in which it was held by certain advocates of free verse – goes hand in hand with the defense of poetic meter. For this same Page contains the ‘charade’ of the sought-after unique Number, proof that the dice were indeed thrown before the drowning of the Master and that the spiritual process – the decapitation of the old man of whom only the symbolic ‘head’ (toque and plume) remain – has indeed reached its conclusion. To establish this thesis, and to elucidate the enigma, we must all the same make a brief detour via the Prelude to the *Noces d'Hérodiade*. Mallarmé was working again on this unfinished poem, begun in 1896, when death abruptly took him in 1898: It is thus contemporary with the final draft of the *Coup de dés*. Now, we find at the very beginning of this Prelude a phrase that is also enframed by the conjunction ‘if [si]’, in a diagonal similar to that of Page VI’s two ‘as if [comme si]’:

If..

Genuflection as if at the dazzling
 Halo down there so glorious rounding
 In the lack of the holy borne up by language
 [...]
 One knows not which bitter and fierce mask
 cleared
 Triumphantly and assertively if

Si..²⁹

Génuflexion comme à l'éblouissant

Nimbé là-bas très glorieux arrondissant

En le manque du saint à la langue roidie

[...]

On ne sait quel masque âpre et farouche éclairci

Triomphalement et péremptoirement si³⁰

The verse is presented as a long parenthesis interrupting a subordinate hypothetical (announced by the first 'Si..'), which is taken up again with the second 'si'. The ellipses that punctuate the first 'si' reinforce the analogy with the vortex Page, since there, both 'comme si' suggest this same punctuation of a phrase at once syntactically coherent and semantically incomplete ('as if...'). We have cut the passage that the 'si' enframes because it is not necessary to comment on it to grasp the crucial point here.

Let us begin by citing Bertrand Marchal's commentary on these verses:

This initial 'si', which places the *Noces d'Hérodiade* under the sign of fiction, remains suspended until verse 14, where it finally introduces a subordinate

²⁹ There are two ellipses, according to Mallarmé's express wish: 'The Master finds the three points rather suggestive. He always asks the typesetter to remove one.' Comment reported by Edmond Bonniot (31 January 1893), cited by G. Millan, *Les «Mardis» de Stéphane Mallarmé* (Paris: A.-G. Nizet, 2008), 82.

³⁰ OCI, 147

hypothetical whose principal verb appears in verse 25. [...] Between the two 'si', the first fourteen verses install the symbolic décor of the *Noces d'Hérodiade*. But the 'si' that gives the tonality of the text *also evokes the musical note, whose etymology we know: Sancte Ioannes, 'Saint John'*.³¹

We find ourselves at a decisive turning point in the investigation. For Marchal's remark allows us to put our finger on the triple signification of the word 'si': a hypothetical conjunction, but also a musical note, and the initials of Saint John the Baptist. We have seen that an allusion to the prophet was already contained in the symbolic process of decapitation of the Master, whose 'head' and crest alone were left floating above. We thus understand that 'comme si' is not simply a locution introducing an incomplete hypothetical proposition ('as if...') but also, and above all, a *complete comparative*: comme si = like *the* si (S.I.) of *Sancte Ioannes*. The poem's absence of punctuation allows this ambiguity: The reader introduces the ellipsis spontaneously, believing that it is a matter of a dreamy and vague insinuation. It is *as if* the locution merely signified 'as if...', whereas in fact it signifies above all that *the toque and the feather of the Master floating on the waters are compared to the decapitated head of Saint John*.

31 OC I, 1225-6. Emphasis ours.

The feather, in particular, is 'like' the severed head of the ascete – the sign of a sacrifice and of a purity that announces an unprecedented event. For just as Saint John announces Christ, so this symbolic decapitation announces the coming of a Number that is unique among all. In light of this fact, the meaning of the shipwreck is thus radically transformed: rather than being the sign of a radical failure, its submersion is revealed to be an 'atonement' through which the Master becomes a prophet announcing the advent of a higher form of salvation.

Before going further, it is worth taking the trouble to detail the three senses of the word 'si' that we have just indicated. The importance of 'si', for Mallarmé, can already be divined in the fact that it is at once the very first word of the last poem undertaken – *Les Noces d'Hérodiade* – and the central word of the *Coup de dés*. This term, in its equivocity, in fact sums up three essential aspects of Mallarméan poetics, and thus of the *Coup de dés*:

(1) The role of *fiction*: in the 'Comment' in the *Cosmopolis* edition, Mallarmé writes, concerning his Poem: 'Everything takes place in foreshortened, hypothetical form; any narrative is avoided.'³² The 'Si' of the central Page can therefore be read as the conjunction that introduces this hypothetical regime *par excellence*: as the symbol of the axiomatic, rather than narrative, presentation of the

³² OC I, 391 [tr. E.H. and A.M. Blackmore in *Collected Poems and Other Verse*, 263].

Coup de dés. And the 'supposing [soit que]' of Page III makes explicit, in the style of mathematical supposition, the 'eternal circumstances' (announced on the preceding Page) in which the throw of dice is to be effected – that is to say, the ideal, tempestuous sea in which the shipwreck came about: 'supposing the Abyss whitened glassy frenzied'. The 'comme si' is thus understood as an indeterminate insinuation: It is entirely as if the throw had taken place, or – equally – not taken place. In this case, we remain at the stage of uncertain hypotheses.

(2) However, the hypothetical 'si' is surpassed in favor of a second sense: that of the prophetic announcement of an unprecedented Meter. The 'si' must now be understood as the initials – the 'cipher' – of Saint John the Baptist. The 'comme si' refers to a beheading, a process of death and redemption prefiguring an exceptional event whose meaning remains still enigmatic to us. Now it is in turning toward the third sense of 'si' that we will begin to draw back the veil on this mystery.

(3) For we must now take a more deliberate look at the third signification of 'si': the *musical note*.

Let us emphasize first of all that this final sense also refers, indirectly, to an essential aspect of Mallarméan poetics, namely the rivalry between poetry and music. For we know that Mallarmé contested music's privilege with regard to *song*. The poet considered that the instrumental form of song was a deficient expression of the latter.

Of itself, instrumental music can only produce in the mind of the listener a vague meaning – a line of emotion whose exact signification is fugitive. When associated with lyrics, the uncertain effusions of music can therefore never succeed, according to the poet, in truly marrying the precision of words. Opera, in particular, fails because it merges speech and song: This art produces only a totality of juxtaposition, in which the parts do not engender each other reciprocally but are deployed according to the parallel and separate lines of libretto and score. It is this insufficiency that is so striking in Wagner, whose supposedly total art consists essentially, according to Mallarmé, of the external association of his music and an old stock of Nordic legend artificially resuscitated in the ‘Tetralogy’ of the Ring Cycle. Only poetry – because it engenders a song with the aid of speech alone – is in a position truly to be able to produce a profound unity between thought and music. It is thus a matter of reclaiming Music from ‘strings, brass and wood’ so as to restore it to Verse. There is not even any need for poetry to be read in declamatory fashion for its (entirely mental) melody to produce its full effects: poetry is ‘silence’s musician’.³³

33 ‘Sainte’, in *OC I*, 25 [tr. E.H. and A.M. Blackmore as ‘Saint’, in *Collected Poems and Other Verses*, 47-9]. On the rivalry between poetry and music, see ‘La Musique et les Lettres’ in *OC II*, 68 sq. [tr. B. Johnson as ‘Music and Letters’ in *Divagations*, 173-98] and ‘Richard Wagner. Rêverie d’un poète français’, in *OC II*, 153-9 [ibid., 107-13].

Now, the *Coup de dés* is explicitly compared, in 1897's 'Comment', to a 'score'.³⁴ The Poem must thus be considered in the context of that rivalry between the two arts. Can poetry take back its gift – song – from music, and in particular from Wagner, who has made of his art the foundation of a new religion? In the *Coup de dés*, it does indeed seem that these stakes are concentrated symbolically in the 'si' understood as musical note: Which art is the privileged depository of it? Is there a possibility of bringing back this note – the metaphor of essential Song – into the lap of poetry and of deploying it 'in silence', as it is written, making of it a mental and no longer an instrumental melody? The stakes are well and truly those of determining the legitimate source of a new cult: either opera become 'total art', or the poem reconfigured into a score of words. We draw near to an imminent event: the consecration of Poetry announced by our in-the-meantime decapitated Master.

But to establish that the *si* does indeed refer to the third – musical – sense, through the mediation of the comparison with Saint John, we must now educe the significance that the 'comme si' could have given such an hypothesis: What could be compared, in Page VI, to a musical note?

34 OCI, 391 [tr. E.H. Blackmore and A.M. Blackmore, *Collected Poems and Other Verses*, 263].

It seems that, this time, we have indeed fallen upon a formidable enigma. For in the central phrase, between the two 'comme si', Mallarmé insists upon the syllable *si*, and on the fact that the word should suggest to us something more mysterious. It is a question of 'une insinuation simple au silence enroulée [a simple insinuation in silence coiled]', of a 'mystère précipité [mystery hurled down]', or again of a 'vierge indice [virgin clue]'. All these expressions are calls to discover what the *si* could 'insinuate' beyond its 'silence' – the same *si* that is hurled toward the central gulf, and projected beyond it at the foot of the Page, like an always-intact 'mystery'. Would there not be, then, in this word, not only the index of a becoming-prophetic of the decapitated Master, but also the 'still virgin' (not yet deflowered) clue of that which this prophet must announce after him: the 'unique Number'?

Yes [Si], of course – it suffices, once more, to decrypt an infantile code (a 'simple' insinuation) – that of the 'sol-fa' scale:

do	re	mi	fa	so	la	<i>si</i>	do
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

Si is the seventh note of the elementary scale. 7 is thus the cipher that, in the arithmetical order, is 'like *si*' – 'comme [le] si' – it is like *si* in the order of the scale that everyone knows. The charade of the Number is thus constructed

around an insinuation that is indeed 'simple' – the insinuation of Seven by *Si*.

But then we understand that our Number must begin and end with 7, since it is coded by a sequence that begins and ends with that which is 'like' *si*: 'Comme si – Comme si' – '7 – 7'. It only remains for us to discover what 'codes' the text enframed by the two 'comme si', and we shall obtain the central cipher of the Number, and consequently the latter in its completeness. Now here the comparison is once more obvious: for what the central text speaks of is the whirlpool or 'vortex', the 'gulf' that carries away everything, situated as it is in the abyssal folding of the Poem at its center. And how best to figure a vortex, with its circular form, and an empty gulf around which is 'coiled' the insinuation (of 7 by *si*), if not with the cipher o? And with that, the charade of Number gives a perfectly determinate result: *The Number of the Coup de dés is none other than 707*.

Hypothesis; Prophecy; Number. *Si*, alone, has supported the whole process of this transfiguration.

*
* *

When we said above, regarding the final, 7-word statement, that the poem was written 'in seven' as a sonata is

written 'in *si* minor', the image was more exact than it appeared. The analogy of the *Coup de dés* with a musical score is sufficiently close that one might, from here on, speak not only of a 'decipherment' ['*déchiffrement*'] of it but also of a 'sight-reading' ['*déchiffrage*']: with this term that designates the activity by which a musician 'deciphers' a score, we thus reunite, for our poem, the idea of encryption with that of the *si* that is its key.

707

Before verifying whether the count of words confirms this first decryption (and confirms that our Number shone in the sky of the *Coup de dés* before having invaded the skies of the 1960s on the fuselage of the first long-haul Boeing flights), let us show how, in what follows in the Poem, the hypothesis of 707 as the determination of the Number is reinforced.

The first confirmation is given by the phrase, already noted, that runs along the top of Pages VIII and IX: 'anxious / expiatory and pubescent / mute laugh that IF /// IT WAS THE NUMBER // IT WOULD BE // CHANCE [*soucieux / expiatoire et pubère / muet rire que SI /// C'ÉTAIT LE NOMBRE // CE SERAIT // LE HASARD*]'.

At this point, we propose to the reader to try out an experiment: if she opens the Poem at Page

VIII, fixes her attention on the end of the phrase 'muet rire que Si', and then turns the Page swiftly and reads the top of Page IX, she will thereby discover, inscribed in its very heart, a phrase entirely different to the foregoing:

muet rire que Si: c'était le Nombre!

mute laugh that Si: it was the Number!

Thus, the laugh does not signify, as we have become accustomed to thinking, the bitter consciousness that every number would be an insignificant effect of chance and that the throw would have no reason to be effectuated rather than not. It signifies exactly the contrary: that the Number has just been produced, that Si was the Number (that is to say, the 7-7 from which the 707 is engendered) and that the poet – with a laugh that no one hears – is secretly delighted at the trick he has just played on the reader.³⁵

A second clue to the 707 is given to us on Page V, a Page that precedes the vortex and describes the final

35 Let us add that Mallarmé suggests with this same phrase that he takes back from music what it believes to be its own gift: for the section '*muet rire que si*' contains the three syllables of the word 'musique', the irony being that the word 'muet' contains the first. The *si* quits the kingdom of *musique* to accede to that of *poésie*, that *si* that is the syllable shared by the name of both arts and that thus symbolizes their common claim. Poetry thus deserves its title as 'musician of silence', of the *si* become 'mute' – that is to say mental rather than instrumental. Thus, the *Coup de dés*, through its being at once encrypted and silent, perfectly embodies the definition that Mallarmé, in 'Music and Letters', gives of poetry: 'Chiffrement mélodique tue' (OC II, 68) ['stilled melodic encipherment' – tr. B. Johnson in *Divagations*, 188].

hesitation of the Master when his hand and his head are still above water. Here intervenes an 'ulterior immemorial demon' – that is to say, the ancestral demon of poetry, ulterior to the catastrophe that has shipwrecked verse. This demon will guide the Master's decisive gesture, since the latter, decapitated, torn from his corporeal condition, is ready to follow his superior part – that which Mallarmé elsewhere names 'Divinity, which is ever but Oneself'.³⁶ We suppose that the old man, close to drowning, will make the right choice. Now what does this demon whisper to him? Here is the text: 'the ulterior immemorial demon / having / from null lands / led / the old man toward this supreme conjunction with probability [l'ultérieur démon immémorial / ayant / de contrées nulles / induit / le vieillard vers cette conjunction suprême avec la probabilité]'. These lines become very clear in light of our decryption: they signify that the demon has enjoined the Master, *on the basis of the central 0* of 707 ('from null lands') to elevate himself to the stellar 7 – which is in fact the most probable result when two dice are thrown, and thus deserves to be designated by the periphrasis, 'supreme conjunction with probability'.³⁷

36 'Catholicisme' in OC II, 238 [tr. B. Johnson in *Divagations*, 243-8].

37 It is true – this is an objection that may be made against us – that this interpretation supposes in Mallarmé a knowledge of probability more assured than that evident in *Ignitur*. For in the latter tale, the poet evaluates the probability that the throw of dice will give a 12 as 'one chance against 11' (OC I, 476), whereas the true probability is one in 36 (or one chance against 35). We can respond that, even so, between 1869

The same Page V also details the demon's 'shadow' in the following terms: 'his puerile shadow / caressed and polished [...] subtracted / from the hard bones lost amid the timbers / born³⁸ of a frolic / the sea attempting via the old man or the old man against the sea / an idle chance [son ombre puérile / caressée et polie [...] / soustraite / aux durs os perdus entre les ais / né / d'un ébat / la mer par l'aïeull tentant ou l'aïeul contre la mer / une chance oiseuse]'. We grasp that by 'son ombre [his shadow]' is intended, through an effect of consonant liaison, 'son nombre [his number]'. The Number of the demon – 707 – is thus in the process of being subtracted from the planks of the shipwreck (the timbers), but equally from the dice, made of bone, which the Master holds, and also from that old, mortal 'bag of bones' that is the old man himself: The Number is on the point of acceding to a state indifferent to the contingency of normal dice throwers, by being identified, according to an as-yet-unknown process, with the eternity of Chance itself. The passage confirms the Master's syllogism and its conclusion: 'A throw of dice will never abolish the Number'. This Number is indeed born, as is written, from the 'frolic' between the poet and the 'sea' as its waves break on words patiently added together by the Master. The latter, as is written on

and 1897-8, Mallarmé would have had nearly thirty years to perfect his mastery of elementary probabilistic calculations...

38 The demon, that is.

Page IV, ventured an 'idle chance' in playing 'like a hoary maniac the game', obsessed – as we now understand – by his fastidious count, to the point of mania.

*
'
* *

But the clearest confirmations of our hypothesis are found on Page IX, where the reader discovers the second and last mention of the Number, which is also the most detailed. The Number is presented gloriously, in capitals at the head of the Page, and defined as 'progeny of the stars'. Then a list of its characteristics is 'rolled out', as it were, toward the foot of the page, each property being announced by one or several verbs in the subjunctive, which attest to its hypothetical substance:

IT WAS
progeny of the stars

THE NUMBER

WERE IT TO EXIST

otherwise than as the sparse hallucination of agony

WERE IT TO BEGIN AND END

unheard but negated and enclosed when it appears

finally

through some profusion of dispersed rarity

WERE IT TO BE CIPHERED

evidence of the total sum in so far as there is one

WERE IT TO BE ILLUMINATED

All these characteristics become limpid once the Number is discovered to which they apply and the code that encrypts it. The expression 'progeny of the stars' signifies that the exploded constellations of words progressively engender the Number that is the same as their sum. The statement 'Were it to exist / otherwise than as the sparse hallucination of some agony' indicates that the first condition of understanding the Number is to grasp that it exists, quite simply: that it is a real Number, and not some phantasm produced by the hallucinatory and agonistic explosion of words on the Pages.

'Were it to begin and end': here begins the structural description of the Number, and the true relation that exists between 7 and 707. For 7 is the primordial Number (even if it is, in arithmetical terms, a 'cipher'), in the sense that

C'ÉTAIT

issu cellaire

LE NOMBRE

EXISTÂT-IL

autrement qu'hallucination éparse d'agonie

COMMENCÂT-IL ET CESSÂT-IL

sourdant que nié et clos quand apparut

cafin

par quelque profusion répandue en rareté

SE CHIFFRÂT-IL

évidence de la somme pour peu qu'une

ILLUMINÂT-IL

it determines the logic of the secondary Number: 707. Thus, 707 *begins* and *ends* with 7: the latter encircles the central abyss of 0. The cyclical character of the Number consequently reproduces the cycle of the Poem, which begins and ends with the same expression. The Number summarizes its general structure: 'A throw of dice' (a first throw, with the first 7 as its result), then the central abyss of the Poem = 0 (that is to say, the fold in the middle of the booklet, at Page VI, where we find the description of the oceanic gulf), and finally the last phrase, which ends once again with 'a throw of dice' (like a second throw, yielding a second 7). But 707 is also a reminder of the structure of the rhyme: It is the Meter by way of which 7 rhymes with itself across the gulf that separates it from itself. Not only is 707 the defense of meter in the strict sense – of the principle of the count introduced into verse; not only is it the summary of the cyclical structure of the Poem; it is also a defense of rhyme, in so far as it reminds us that the truth of the Beautiful belongs to its repetition alone – to its being put in resonance with itself within pairs of rhymed verses, with similar last syllables, and connected across the void that occupies their center.

Whence a 'dialectic' – not a Hegelian one, but a dialectic nonetheless – summed up by the following lines of the Poem: 'unheard though negated and closed when it appears / finally / through some profusion of dispersed rarity'. This is an exact description of what happens on Page VI:

7, coded by *Si*, had been *negated* by the vortex = 0 at the center of the Page, before having reemerged to bring the Number to closure and produce 707. The process is indeed dialectical in the sense that the negation of the negation of 7 does not lead back to 7 (as in classical logic, where the double negation of $A = A$), but produces a new result = 707. A result that contains within itself the riches of the becoming that engendered it. For the 707 summarizes *both* the negation of 7 by 0, *and* the negation of that negation = 0 once more by 7, in a totality that contains nothingness as an essential, but dominated, moment of the Septuor. The 0 is 'surrounded' by the 7; at once admitted and controlled. The void between two rhymes, that annihilation of the written by the blank, is similarly held in the margins – tamed like an animal that, however dangerous, is alone capable of bringing us to our destination safely. Nothingness is not rejected from poetic writing, nor does it become dominant to the point of destroying the possibility of that writing: It is 'inserted' into the verse, making a couplet of it, so as to prohibit the immediate self-identity, the unity closed back upon itself, of the unique verse. Unlike antique verse, which is separated according to the regime of the One, modern verse, because it is rhymed, is split within itself, creating a cavity between whose walls is engendered a system of reciprocal echoes. The cyclical Number is also a cyclopean

This is music, also.

Number whose central eye, but an empty socket, is the source of all beauty.

— This mastered assumption of the void in Number thus gestures toward the final Constellation and the type of splendor it displays: There is no stellar beauty without night being assumed (no constellation without the end of day) but mastered within certain limits (the black night, the 'hubristic' night, is to be avoided). The condition of the new poetry is thus identified as that of the absence of the old divine transcendence, but this absence lived no longer in the mode of an infinite mourning, but in the mode of a fecund, creative nothingness. The void, o, night, are mute centers around which gravitate a godless, vortical poetry. It is only with the term 'sourde [deaf, faint or unheard]' ('*sourdant* que nié et clos [unheard though negated and enclosed]') that allusion is made to the vortex where 7 is swallowed before emerging again, with the additional suggestion, through a wordplay, that the 'si' remains too 'faint' for us to hear (unless it is we who turn a deaf ear to its true meaning).

But the 'negation' of the Number signifies also its denial by the poet, that is to say, its concealment in the undeclared code of the Poem. And its 'closure' could also signify its secret completion through the adding up of that 'profusion of dispersed rarity', of rarefied words upon a Page where the blank space dominates. Consequently, our statement describes at once the structure of the Number

in its relation to the Poem (of which it is a 'scale model') and the way in which the Number is both engendered and buried by the code. The Number figures the drowning and the resurgence of 7; but is itself drowned in the deep waters of the code, in the expectation that a decryption will bring it back once again to the surface. Thus, the Number appears twice (with the second 7 that closes it during its writing, and then with its decryption by a future reader), but both times on condition of its prior annulation (by the 0 after the first 7, and then by the code after it is deciphered). ~~Nothingness follows Number like the shadow it casts, conferring upon it an originary gemellity.~~ A happy chance, or Mallarmé's premeditation? This dialecticization of Number via its self-negation can be heard in the very name of the Number: 'Sept *cent* Sept [Seven *hundred* and seven]' as 'Sept *sans* Sept [Seven *without* seven]'.

What follows is self-explanatory. 'Were it to be ciphered / evidence of the total sum in so far as there is one / were it to be illuminated': The Number will be ciphered (i.e. decoded and related to the cipher 7 which is its key), provided only that the reader has the simple idea of bringing about that 'sum' – so obvious – which is the addition of words.

Thus it is illuminated.

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Finally, a last obvious allusion to the structure of the Number is found at the foot of the same Page IX, which tells of the sinking of the feather before the emergence of the final Constellation:

Down falls
the plume
rhythmic suspension of disaster
buries itself
in the original foam
whence its delirium formerly leapt to a summit
blighted
by the identical neutrality of the gulf

Choit
la plume
rythmique suspens du sinistre
s'ensevelir
aux écumes originelles
naguères d'où sursauta son délire jusqu'à une cime
flétrie
par la neutralité identique du gouffre

The 'delirium' is that of the poet who began by projecting himself toward an Ideal that he now discovers to be stricken with Nothingness: a 'summit blighted by the identical neutrality of the gulf'. This Ideal is that 'principal part of Literature – that is, nothingness' evoked in 'Music and Letters':³⁹ the nullity at the center of the couplet; the symbol of a disappeared transcendence in

39 OC II, 67 [tr. B. Johnson in *Divagations*, 187].

which poetry must nevertheless find its foundation and its summit alike. This Nothingness, as we now know, is symbolized by neutrality in the form of the gulf of o – the latter is neutral in the sense that it is without effect in the summation of the words of the poem (o is neutral for addition), but above all in the etymological sense: neutral, *ne uter* – neither one nor the other, that is to say neither of the two 7-summits that flank it, and that are blighted by its central presence. The Septentrion that will henceforth guide the poet is a summit ‘blighted’ not only by the gulf of night, but above all by the fact that this night has doubled it, rhymed it, put it into correspondence with itself, so that its beauty proceeds only from the void that separates it from itself.

IN SUM

Everything thus concurs in suggesting that the identity of the Number is 707. It remains to validate this thesis through the actual counting of the words – taken, let us recall, from the first word of the poem (excluding the title) up to the word ‘sacre [consecrate]’. It is rare, and uniquely satisfying, for a general interpretation of a poem to be susceptible of being confirmed or refuted by a method so little subject to contestation as an elementary enumeration. We shall thus leave to the reader the counting of

the words placed at the end of the book (Appendix 2). She can then verify for herself that: '*sacre*' is indeed the 707th word of the *Coup de dés*.

It is no longer reasonable to suspect that this is a coincidence, given that there is a perfect convergence between the objective sum of the Number and the precise allusions encrypted in the Poem. For us, the fact is established: Mallarmé counted the words of his Poem to engender the Number. The word 'sacre' is indeed performative: It really does consecrate the Number through the sole fact of being written, delivering to it the last unit of the count necessary for its completion.

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Must we stop there, however, with regard to the procedure we have brought to light?

If Mallarmé did indeed conceive an original metric in the *Coup de dés*, it is tempting to ask oneself whether he had not already put it to work, 'tested' it, in the foregoing poems. But this verification can be carried out only for those poems whose themes are close to the *Coup de dés*, and which belong to a period where this type of calculation might have made sense – that is to say, between 1887 and the 'crisis' of free verse.

Now it seems that we find precisely *the same principle of counting* at work in the two octosyllabic sonnets usually associated with the *Coup de dés*, and which do belong to the period under consideration, namely 'Salut [Toast/Salvation]' and 'À la nue accablante tu... [Beneath the oppressive cloud...]'. Written between 1893 and 1894, these two poems developed the themes that would be found again in the *Coup de dés*: the shipwreck, the siren, the undecidable hypothesis. And as we shall see, they manifestly served as a 'laboratory' for the 1898 metric.

'Salut' opens the collection *Poésies*, which is Mallarmé's final and posthumous collection, published in 1899.⁴⁰ Comparing a poets' banquet to a setting sail on tremulous seas containing 'sirens, many in reverse', this sonnet is, of the two poems that interest us, the one most charged with hope. We find summarized here, in one verse, the entire process of the *Coup de dés*: 'Solitude, reef, star'. In the extreme concision of this progression, the poet's victory – the star – immediately overcomes the shipwreck caused by the reef. It should therefore come as no surprise whatsoever to find that this sonnet contains in the number of its words the constellation in the form of its plenitude: '*Salut*' contains 77 words.⁴¹

40 See the reproduction of the poem in Appendix 1, accompanied by an explanatory paraphrase.

41 Not counting the title, just as in the *Coup de dés*.

To this inaugural poem, aiming at the accomplished perfection of salvation, responds, in the penultimate position of the same collection *Poésies*, the untitled sonnet 'À la nue accablante tu...',⁴² which, on the contrary, is charged with extreme negativity: A thick cloud, black and stormy, covers a tempestuous sea where a ship seems to have sunk. But nothing is certain: Perhaps there was no shipwreck at all, and nothing took place but the place – nothing but the chimera of a 'siren' whose 'side' might have been a streak of foam. In other words: the epoch is so dark that one cannot even present the failure of the poetic absolute in the grandiose form of an unprecedented catastrophe, a disaster on the scale of the death of God. Even this 'negative sublime' seems forbidden to the postromantic generation, for so long the butt of the triumphant and limitlessly prosaic spirit of the industrial bourgeoisie. This shipwreck of the poetic voyage – which is also a shipwreck of the 'sublime' shipwreck – does, however, allow a discreet form of salvation. The latter comes in the shape of a siren, who manages to escape from the 'vain gaping chasm' of the epoch: for, not existing – an eminent quality of fiction when reality disappoints – she cannot drown in the contemporary sea of mediocrity.

Nevertheless, given the increase in negativity from one sonnet to the other, we shall not be surprised if

42 See also the poem and its explanation in Appendix 1.

'À la nue accablante tu...' is not, like 'Salut', dominated by 7 alone, but instead makes neighbors of Constellation and Nothingness, that is to say, 7 and 0: '*À la nue accablante tu...*' contains 70 words.

The progression of the 1899 collection is thus illustrated by the insertion of 0 in its almost final poem, in relation to an excessively optimistic outset. Salvation does not come, as was hoped in 'Salut', in the form of the plenitude of a pure Constellation. This was the inconsistent hope of 77, which dreamt in some way of a Septuor in the full light of day, of stars shining in the sole context of their own light, so to redeem the survivor-poet's odyssey. Instead, salvation will come from poetry's accepting its share of nothingness and of night – from its knowing how to endure the void of the epoch by turning it into subversive fiction. To set to work the nothingness around it, the void of the surrounding mediocrity, transforming it into an opaque ground for a scintillation whose fragility is a constitutive part of beauty: This is what 7 already symbolizes. But the completeness of this numerological progression will only be attained when the Meter goes beyond the mere fiction of the childlike siren and rediscovers, in a nonimmediate, nonnaïve form, the celestial glory of which 'Salut' sings: 77, 70, 707. Announcement of salvation (77); Shipwreck of the shipwreck (70); Advent of the Number (707). The structure of the rhyme is reached at the moment when the Meter closes itself. And the Number thus offers us the

steps of its constitution according to a trinary logic – of the type one would expect in any dialectic.

The dates of the first publication of the two sonnets are also significant: 'Salut' appeared on 15 February 1893, 'À la nue accablante tu...' on 15 May 1894 – that is to say, both of them, as noted above, during the probable period of the drafting of the notes for the Book. The same notes in which are manifest the counting mania with regard to the setting of the readings, and where 7 appears sketched out implicitly (by 12 and 5) as numerical rule of the poetic content. It is thus clear that Mallarmé, inspired by the research he had carried out in the drafts of the Book, began to test, from 1893 onward, the idea of a clandestine count integrated into the body of his poems: He systematized the procedure in 1898, after having put it to work, in a modest way, in the two sonnets related to *Coup de dés*.

According to our hypothesis, 'Salut' – published a year before 'À la nue accablante tu...' – would thus be the first time Mallarmé had imposed the arithmetical constraints that would go on to govern the *Coup de dés*. We thus understand the singular position he accorded it, placing it at the head of his final collection. And we also find, strikingly, that the poem was read for the first time, a week before its publication, on the occasion of the *seventh* banquet of *La Plume*, on 9 February 1893. As well as the siren and the star contained in the poem, the seven and the quill were thus also symbolically present,

in the setting of its public pronunciation, the very day when the poet publicly began, unknown to all, his strange numerological enterprise. And the title that was finally chosen – ‘Salut’, replacing ‘Toast’ – signified at once Mallarmé’s farewell to the poetical criteria of the epoch, and his hope one day to be ‘saved’, that is to say, to be recognized for what he had really done, and perhaps also pardoned for his ‘demented act’.⁴³

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An objection could, however, be made against us on the particular point of these last two enumerations. We have said that *Coup de dés* could not by mere coincidence comprise 707 words, because of the consonance of the count with the allusions that this same Number encrypts in the Poem. But as the two sonnets that we just commented on contain no allusion to 77 or to 70, one might imagine that in these cases it is a question of mere chance.

It is indeed a delicate matter to evaluate the ‘probability’ that an octosyllabic sonnet – and more precisely a Mallarméan sonnet – should be composed, simply by

43 ‘Don’t you find this a demented act?’: This is what Mallarmé says to Valéry when he hands him the corrected proofs of the *Cosmopolis* edition. Cf. Paul Valéry, ‘Le coup de dés’, in *Variété* II.

chance, of 70 or 77 words. If we limit our enquiry to the 1899 *Poésies*, we find among the nine other octosyllabic sonnets in the collection just one poem that comprises such a total, this time no doubt fortuitously.⁴⁴ But one cannot, within such a small sample, establish any semblance of a probability (of the type: 'there is one chance in nine that a Mallarméan sonnet has, merely by chance, 77 or 70 words').

But two considerations tell against the possibility that this is a matter of chance alone:

(a) Firstly, it must be said that the essential point is not a statistical one. If it is not plausible that the two sonnets associated with the *Coup de dés* contain simply by chance the numbers of words they do, this is not because in general there is a negligible probability that two octosyllabic sonnets should arrive at such totals. It is because of the now-acknowledged code of *Coup de dés*, a code that renders the conjunction of the three poems too coherent, both in their theme and in their count, to be merely coincidental. It is the poetic convergence, not the statistical one, that proves – so we argue – numerological premeditation.

44 'Tout orgueil fume-t-il du soir...', [tr. E.H. Blackmore and A.M. Blackmore as 'Does Every Pride in the Evening Smoke', in *Selected Poems and Other Verse*, 73-4], which comprises 77 words. Two reasons make us suspect in this case a simple coincidence: (a) the poem was published in 1887, at the very beginning of free verse, and thus before Mallarmé had had the time to become conscious of the gravity of the crisis thereby occasioned (see our remarks below on the 'Sonnet in -x'); (b) the poem contains none of the principal themes of the *Coup de dés*.

(b) If, what is more, we pay attention to the various different manuscripts of the two sonnets, as listed by Marchal, we discover that they contain few variants, and – a remarkable point – that none of these variants has a different word count. Thus, for the three recorded manuscripts, 'Salut' has only two variations, which in each case only consist in the substitution of one word for another.⁴⁵ 'À la nue accablante tu...' counts more differences in one of its manuscript versions, but they are differences that reciprocally cancel each other out, arriving finally at the same total number of words.⁴⁶ All of this reinforces the idea that the number of words constituted a secret constraint of the composition.

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45 The first variation affects the title, which in any case is not counted: 'Toast' (ms.1) preceded 'Salut', preferred in the proofs of *Podnès*. There is also, alongside the title, a mention of 'Pl', for *La Plume* (ms.2, ms. 3). The second variation, in verse 10, bears upon a definite article: 'sans craindre le tangage' (ms.2, ms.3) is replaced in the final version by a possessive, 'sans craindre son tangage'. We follow the indications of B. Marchal, in *OC I*, 1145-6: ms. 1, Doucet, MNR Ms. 1187; ms. 2 personal collection; ms. 3 collection of L. Clayeux.

46 We count three variations in manuscript 1 (ms.1): (a) whereas one finds in verse 5 of the final version: 'Quel sépulcral naufrage...', ms. 1 contains: 'Quel néant ô naufrage' – one word more; (b) verse 7 of the final version: 'Suprême une entre...'; same verse of ms. 1: 'La suprême entre...' – the same number of words – (c) final version (verse 11): 'Tout l'abîme vain éployé'; ms. 1: 'Le courroux vain éployé' – one word less than in ms. 1. One word more (a), three words replaced by three words (b), one word less (c): manuscript 1 does indeed add up to the same total as the definitive version. See B. Marchal, *OC I*, 1205-6 (ms. 1 Doucet Ms. 1207).

What can we say, now, of the 'Sonnet in -x'? This is a third sonnet customarily associated with *Coup de dés*, because of the 'perhaps' of the last strophe, and the final septuor that illuminates, at midnight, the empty salon of a 'Master' departed to 'draw tears from the Styx'.⁴⁷ The first version of the poem dates from 1868, well before the crisis of free verse. But Mallarmé prepared a second version of it – the only one to be published – in October 1887, for a photolithographed edition of *Poésies*. By that time, the poet had already discovered the first poems in free verse: Firstly in the journal *La Vogue*, some time during 1886; and then in Francis Vielé-Griffin's *Les Cygnes*, which he briefly praised in a letter of 23 February 1887; and above all in Kahn's *Les Palais nomades*, chronologically the first collection containing free verse, of which he took delivery on 7 or 8 June of the same year. It would thus have been possible, in principle, for the 'Sonnet in -x' also to have suggested to him a secret count of its words, in view of responding to the new poetic form: in which case it would have been this poem, and not 'Salut', that initiated the new metrical regime.

But in truth, this could not have been the case for two reasons. Firstly, Mallarmé seems to have become conscious of the gravity of the crisis occasioned by free verse only progressively. On 22 January 1888, he speaks

47 See Appendix 1, where the poem is reproduced and paraphrased.

of 'the farce of the moment' in regard to what still seemed to him nothing but a mere effect of fashion among the younger generation. The very expression 'Crisis in Verse' did not appear from his pen until 1889, in a letter of 4 May to André Fontainas. And the first public interventions where he demonstrates his cognizance of the importance of the event do not precede the year 1891: The interview with Huret appeared on 14 March 1891 in *L'Écho de Paris*, and 'Vers et Musique en France' in the *National Observer* on 26 March 1892.⁴⁸ It is thus hard to imagine the poet reacting so radically in 1887 by inventing a metric designed to counter the emergence of the new form.

The second reason is not historical but structural. For there was an obstacle, impassable by any means, to such a poem. The two preceding sonnets ('Salut', 'À la nue accablante tu...') were, as we have seen, composed of octosyllables. An octosyllabic sonnet comprises 14 verses of 8 syllables – that is, 112 syllables; whereas the 'Sonnet in -x' is written in alexandrines. It thus contains 168 syllables, 56 more than an octosyllabic sonnet. Over the length of a sonnet, the difference becomes considerable: with such an increase in syllables, it is all but impossible to obtain a total of words of the order of 70 or 77 – unless one were to artificially accumulate words of 3, 4 or 5 syllables. A sonnet of alexandrines always amounts to around

48 On this chronology of the crisis, see Murat, *Le Coup de dés de Mallarmé*, 13.

a hundred words: Its 'number' thus generally begins with a 9 (for 90-something) or a 1 (for one-hundred-and-something): ciphers that have no particular signification in the symbolism adopted by Mallarmé. And, in fact, the 1898 version contains 111 words. If the poet had wanted to forcibly 'insert' his poem into the new numbering system, he would have had to 'rig' his old sonnet absurdly to reduce it by around 30 words and thus artificially to make it respond to a metrical conception elaborated well after it was written. This is the reason why the poem, in its final 1887 version, cannot encrypt the number of its words, which in fact has no link to 7, since the total in this case is 104 words.

COSMOPOLIS

Now, how do things stand with the first version of *Coup de dés*: the 1897 *Cosmopolis* edition? We note just fewer than twenty-five variations, always slight, minimal even, between the 1897 Poem and that of 1898. The differences are limited to: the substitution or inversion of one or two words in a phrasal sequence; the correction of a mistake; the presence or absence of capitals in the same word; four parentheses and a dash in the 1897 text that disappear in the final version, which is stripped of all punctuation. But all the coded allusions to 707 that we have identified in the

1898 Poem (the charade of the vortex on Page VI, the list of characteristics on Page IX, etc.) are already present in the *Cosmopolis* edition. Mallarmé thus had his encrypting procedure in mind from 1897. However, as we shall see, there is a strong chance that he had not yet attained, in this first version, a full mastery of his counting technique.

We no longer have at our disposal the manuscript of the *Cosmopolis* edition, but only corrected proofs. Now, if we count the words in the uncorrected proofs and in the corrected proofs, we discover that the final text *lost* 12 words in relation to that of the proofs. What is more, we discover syntactical oddities that may have resulted from the constraint of counting that the poet imposed upon himself. In 1897, Mallarmé writes: 'naufage cela direct l'homme / sans nef [direct shipwreck man this / with no ark]',⁴⁹ in place of 1898's 'naufage cela / direct de l'homme / sans nef [direct shipwreck of man this / with no ark]'. And once again, in 1897, he writes, in what will become the vortex Page: 'Une simple insinuation / d'ironie / enroulée à tout le silence / ou / précipité / hurlé dans quelque proche tourbillon [A simple insinuation / in irony / entirely coiled in silence / or / hurled / screamed in some imminent vortex]'.⁵⁰ Since it lacks the word

49 OC I, 395.

50 OC I, 397. The text of the uncorrected proofs is very interesting here. Mallarmé had at first written the following phrase, before striking it out: 'Une simple insinuation / légère voulant rester / d'ironie enroulée à tant le silence / de ce que ne convient pas de dire / ou / précipité [A simple insinuation / light wishing to remain / coiled in irony so much silence / of that which is better unsaid / or / thrown]', OC I, 1321. Emphasis ours.

'mystère' of the final version ('ou *le mystère* / précipité / hurlé [or *the mystery* / hurled down / screamed]'), and since, in the *Cosmopolis* version, this subject is not replaced by another substantive, it is difficult to understand what these two masculine participles ('précipité' and 'hurlé') could accord with – unless with 'silence'. But, short of the whole construction becoming unsound ('silence' would have to be recalled in the following proposition by a demonstrative pronoun), it is difficult to grasp the meaning of a 'screamed silence [silence hurlé]'. Thus, everything does not seem settled in this first version: The exact count is not assured in the proofs, and the harmonization of the constraints of the count with the exigencies of syntax still seems fragile.

What, then, is the result of the count for the version printed in 1897? At first sight, the result ruins our hypothesis: *The Cosmopolis version contains only 703 words*. But an essential difference with the 1898 version is the fact that the 1897 Poem includes *four punctuation marks* before the word 'sacre'. Given all of this, it becomes difficult to decide definitively between two possibilities, both capable of explaining the number of words in the *Cosmopolis* edition. We shall nevertheless try to show why one of the two possible solutions seems to us more satisfactory than the other.

That the 'insinuation' and the 'silence' should be associated with that which 'is better unsaid' evokes clearly the idea of enigma, or of the secret – too clearly, even, which is doubtless the reason why Mallarmé suppressed this clue.

(a) We could firstly suppose that in 1897, Mallarmé had adopted a unit of counting other than that used for the two 1893 and 1894 sonnets; that the poet had chosen a rule that would include in the enumeration the few punctuation marks in the *Cosmopolis* edition; and that then, changing his mind, he removed all punctuation from the final 1898 version – notably so as to avoid any needless uncertainty as to the rule of summation – so as to count only words again. There would thus have been an episode of uncertainty in the rule: Between the octosyllabic sonnets of 1893-4 and the 1898 version of *Coup de dés* – which in all three cases add up only their words – Mallarmé would have tried out, in 1897, an enumeration of words *and* the four punctuation marks in the *Cosmopolis* version. We would then have to say that the poet, in his 1897 correction of the proofs, diminished the number of words to the correct quantity necessary to obtain the total that he judged exact according to the rule then being followed.⁵¹

51 The *Cosmopolis* edition contains, as we have said, a *fifth* punctuation mark, as well as the four parentheses. But this sign is situated *after* the word 'sacre'. For the 1897 Poem concludes as follows:

avant de s'arrêter
à quelque point dernier qui le sacre –

Toute Pensée émet un Coup de Dés

Between 'sacre' and the final proposition there is a dash whose function was manifestly, in Mallarmé's mind, to indicate that the count of the Number must end at 'sacre' and begin again from zero, starting with the following word. The count of 707 would thus be clearly separated from that of 7 – the count of the Number from that of the Cipher. But this dash had also disappeared in the 1898 version, once again doubtless out of concern to avoid all *superfluous* ambiguity in the resolution of the count. We shall understand in the second part the full importance of this excision.

The fragility of this solution stems however from the fact that we cannot see any clear reason that could have incited Mallarmé to change the rule between the sonnets of 1893-4 and the *Cosmopolis* version. The contrast with 'À la nue accablante tu...', in particular, becomes startling, for in that poem Mallarmé also excluded all punctuation, apart from two parentheses (and two periods within those parentheses): signs that did not need to be counted to obtain the correct total. For this reason, we prefer the second solution, apparently less elegant, but clearly more credible.

(b) In 1897 the poet had the same rule of counting as in 1898, but he simply committed a material error – not only in the proofs, but in the printed *Cosmopolis* text. In truth, it would not have been surprising if this had occurred, given the singular nature of the enterprise. Mallarmé had never carried out such a summation of words on such a vast scale; and he had to bring it to fruition whilst inventing procedures – themselves unprecedented – for the 'fractured' arrangement of the characters and their typographical variations (which he evokes for the first time in the summer of 1895 in 'Le Livre, instrument spirituel', but in wholly theoretical fashion). The 1897 version's syntactical oddities (which we encountered above), corrected in 1898, show that Mallarmé was still uncomfortable with the stack of new constraints he had imposed, all at once, and for the first time – at least on

such a grand scale, in the case of ciphering. He also had to keep to the strict schedule required for publication in a magazine. Given that the request for a text for *Cosmopolis* was made in October 1896 and that Mallarmé sent his Poem in March 1897, and given that we are not sure whether he had begun his Poem *before* his agreement with the magazine, the poet would have had perhaps only a few months to realize what we today regard as a *tour de force*. For there to have been a mistake in the count at this stage, a mistake corrected in the final version, would thus hardly be surprising. One need only try – as we ourselves have done – to add up, without using a computer, the words of the *Coup de dés*, to appreciate how easy it is to make a mistake in doing so.

We must, moreover, draw attention to one last remarkable fact which also pleads in favor of an error: It concerns the proofs of the final version of 1898. There are no less than *five* printed proofs of this last version of *Coup de dés* between July and November 1897. Now, across all of these successive printings, Mallarmé *made only two modifications to the text*, which seems very few for an author we know to be such a perfectionist.⁵² From July to October 1897, the text is as if ‘carved in stone’. It is not until the fourth proofs that the poet introduces, along with two capitals (Abîme, Fiançailles [Abyss, Nuptials]), two textual differences, of

52 See Marchal's remark (OC I, 1324). The two variants can be found in OC I, 1325-6.

which only one changes the number of words, and only by one unit: Mallarmé replaces the personal pronoun 'lui [he]' with 'l'aïeul [the old man]' in the segment 'l'aïeul contre la mer [the old man against the sea]' on Page V. It is thus only belatedly that the poet grasps that his count is out by *one* word, doubtless after having believed everything to be in order; whence the complete invariance of the text – and of the count – over the first three rounds of proofs. But if an error in the sum, however minimal, had slipped so late into the 1898 version, another, more important, could just as well have spoiled the *Cosmopolis* edition.

PROVISIONAL CONCLUSION

To conclude this first step of our 'sight-reading', we can sum up what we have learned from our analysis.

(a) The fact that there is a code, in the final version of the Poem, is founded on evidence that is hard to contest – textual as well as arithmetical evidence. The conjunction of the count and Page VI's charade, reinforced considerably by the description of the Number on Page IX, stand as manifest proof of an encryption of 707, identified as the Number anticipated by the Master's inference.

(b) This conclusion is confirmed by the count of the two octosyllabic sonnets related to the *Coup de dés*, which themselves also belong to the period of crisis opened up

by free verse: 'Salut' (77 words) and 'À la nue accablante tu...' (70 words). It follows that Mallarmé had had this procedure in mind since 1893 – that is, four years before the first published version of *Coup de dés*.

Such a weight of evidence cannot be overturned by the count of the *Cosmopolis* version (703 words), whose result can be attributed either to a hesitation over the principle of the count (words and parentheses then being enumerated), or, more plausibly, to an as-yet-insufficient mastery of the summation of words for a poem of this size.

*
* *

The fact of encryption having been established, it remains, however, to resolve a more taxing problem – one that takes us into the very essence of poetry according to Mallarmé: Why did the poet think to respond to the crisis of free verse with this encryption? And in what way could 707, to his eyes, have merited the status of 'unique Number that cannot be another'? As we shall see, this investigation will lead us to look again not only at the *Coup de dés*, but also at the results that we have just recapitulated as to its code.

PART TWO

Fixing the Infinite

I should prefer this note not to be read or, if skimmed, that it should even be forgotten. [...]

PREFARATORY 'COMMENT' TO *COUP DE DÉS*
(COSMOPOLIS EDITION)

If the code is now decrypted, the problem posed by the Number is far from being resolved. For, in truth, it is hard to see why 707 should be the only incomparable number that – as opposed to every other number – can be no other. Its symbolic nature is far from sufficient to establish its claim to uniqueness and to found its supposed eligibility to be identified with Chance as such. We cannot escape the suspicion that the Meter is just a derisory counting game – one that cannot even, like the ordinary metric, be justified by the alibi of rhythm: for, qua sum total, 707 does not govern the rhythmic construction of the verbal segments taken individually. Its function, decidedly, appears purely metaphorical: 7, symbol of the Constellation, of Chance and of Meter; 0, symbol of Nothingness, of the gulf and the vortex; double 7, symbol of rhyme launched over the Abyss. So what was Mallarmé trying to achieve with this unprecedented

counting procedure, and why did he seem so persuaded that he thereby acceded to an essential truth?

AN IDLE CHANCE?

First of all, we must note that the *Coup de dés* itself signals the apparently extravagant character of the undertaking. For the Master remains filled with doubt, and his hesitation takes on a much more concrete aspect once it is understood that this hesitation reflects that of the poet faced with the sum that he is about to produce. Mallarmé is describing his own misgivings *in writing* the poem: Will he get to the end of his meticulous enterprise of counting? Or will he abandon this demented project before it is completed and refuse to throw the dice by renouncing his pursuit of the premeditated sum of words?

These are the anxieties described on Page IV: The Master, 'risen beyond the old reckonings [*surgi hors d'anciens calculs*]' (those of syllables in the classical metric), 'hesitates / a corpse cut off by its arm // from the secret it withholds / rather / than playing / like a hoary maniac / the game / in the name of the waves [*hésite / cadavre par le bras // écarté du secret qu'il détient / plutôt / que de jouer / en maniaque chenu / la partie / au nom des flots*]' The arms of the hero freeze, like those of a cadaver, at the decisive moment of throwing; and this

hesitation also separates Mallarmé from the realization of his 'secret' – that is to say the implementation of the code. Indeed, this secret is apparently a mere riddle – a charade conjoined with an enumeration – and the risk is, if it is one day discovered, that it will make the poet a universal laughing stock for having given himself over to such pranks. This fear persists even when it is suggested (Page V) that the 'old man' has perhaps finally thrown the dice; for the 'chance' that he takes 'against the sea' is still denigrated as 'idle':

the sea attempting via the old man or the old man against the sea
an idle chance

Nuptials

whose

veil of illusion crashing back their obsession
along with the ghost of a gesture

will falter
will fall

madness

la mer par l'aïeul tentant ou l'aïeul contre la mer
une chance oiseuse

Fiançailles

dont

le voîle d'illusion rejailli leur hantise
ainsi que le fantôme d'un geste

chancellera
s'affêlera

folie

The destinies of the Master and his Poem are here interlaced. The old man tries his luck 'against' the sea, in the sense that he opposes to the furious wave of words exploding upon the foam of the Page the systematic reordering of a premeditated count. Inversely, the sea – that is to say, the Poem itself – tries its luck 'via' the old man: It is the initiative of the Master and his implicit coding upon which depends the destiny of the *Coup de dés*, its future recognition or nonrecognition. The posterity of the poet and of his Poem are henceforth intertwined, linked by the eternal 'Nuptials' that have sealed the 'wraith of a gesture': that gesture of counting that none yet know of, and that would be treated, no doubt, as 'madness' were it ever to be unveiled, is for the moment covered by this 'veil of illusion crashing back' that is the page, the space of all fictions – that turns so as to close the booklet. If this testamentary work does indeed constitute an 'idle chance', it is because there is no better way to qualify Mallarmé's improbable wager: that perhaps one day – but just as likely never – his 'bequest to someone ambiguous' (Page V) will finally be decoded, without it being possible to know whether this eventual discovery will arouse admiration or consternation.

And then comes the Page of 'Comme si': The dice have been thrown, it is impossible to go back, because there it is – the Number now appears in a 'charade'. Things are now irreversible; one must go all the way and make

correspond to the enigma thus produced the count that confirms it. But the vortex of the central o is again said to be 'of hilarity and horror' (Page VI): The poet seems to be frightened of what he has just done – he explodes with a laugh that is too strong, as if to cover his own fear.

And the doubts persist: The Master remains the 'bitter prince of the reef' (Page VII), as if he senses that the whole of his enterprise was going to falter because of the banality of the number thus produced. Mallarmé seems to go to the point of ridiculing himself via the figure of the Master, making of the latter a 'prince' who is a sort of braggart of limited rational capacity: 'heroically / irresistible / but fettered by his paltry virile reason / in a flash of lightning [héroïque / irrésistible / mais contenu par sa petite raison virile / en foudre]' (Page VII). Paltry reason, indeed, with its elementary arithmetic, its enumeration of words exploded as by lightning. Finally, the quill sinks in its turn, its project of writing qualified as 'delirium' (Page IX), its act described as a 'lie', a 'null result' (Page X).

The insistent description of these anxieties does not function solely to voice the worries of the poet in the face of his aesthetic audacity – which is indeed unprecedented in terms of the way in which the verses are exploded across the Page. It is also – and, we believe, above all – a notice to readers who may discover the code: We should not condemn the poet precipitately, for he has a manifestly

acute consciousness of the risk he is running, and of what may transpire should he be exposed in doing so. Mallarmé thus solicits us to elucidate the deeper reasons for his choice. Here we stand at the threshold of the true enigma of the *Coup de dés*: What did Mallarmé wish to produce with this new meter, and in what way could this procedure, to his eyes, revive modern poetry?

PRESENTATION, REPRESENTATION, DIFFUSION

We cannot understand the meaning of the Number unless we return to the motives that had succeeded in determining Mallarmé to abandon – if only provisionally – his notes for the Book. What is the real significance, for the poet, of the reading ceremony sketched out in these pages, and what essential thing could have been lacking therein for his most dearly held project to have been forsaken – in favor, notably, of the writing of the *Coup de dés*?

It all begins with a *political* consideration: Mallarmé's hostility, not to the French Republic, but to its secularism. For the poet, 'the State [...] needs a system'¹ because no society is possible without a strong symbolic bond, capable of founding a civic religion and engendering a profound adhesion of individuals to the ends of the

1 'De même', in OC II, 242 [tr. B. Johnson as 'The Same', in *Divagations*, 249].

community. A religion, he maintains, must be a public thing, not a private affair – Catholic rather than Protestant in spirit. However republican he might be, Mallarmé thus considers as impossible a strict neutrality of the public domain that would reserve all spiritual impulses for the personal sphere alone. There must be a common elevation. But what could henceforth be the principle of such an elevation, particularly in France? The two great collective symbolizations of the country have lapsed, and it is vain to hope to resuscitate them: Its ‘royalty surrounded with military prestige’² belongs to a political era that has been revolutionized, and ‘the ceremonial of our psychic exaltations’³ entrusted to the old clergy ‘has weakened’.⁴ Neither monarchy nor church are fit to respond to the challenge of a collective religion at once postrevolutionary and free of the old Christian belief in a beyond. The poet is thus convinced – a common idea in his epoch – that art must make up for the default of the old religions by offering a cult capable of satisfying the modern spirit. But more coherent than the pullulating mass of nineteenth-century artist-prophets, Mallarmé does not hesitate to draw the full consequences of this new claim – something that, according to him, no one else had done, not even Wagner.

2 Ibid.

3 Mallarmé, ‘Solemnité’ in *The National Observer* (7 May 1892), in *OC* II, 305.

4 Ibid.

The Bayreuth pilgrimage is certainly the most imposing nineteenth-century attempt to erect art into a new religion. But the weakness of Wagnerian 'total art' resides in its will to reconnect with the Greek articulation of theatre and politics. To figure upon a scene the relation of humans and their gods, to render visible to the masses the principle of their communion with the aid of a narrative embellished with song – in short, to *represent* to a people its own mystery: such is for Mallarmé the Greek heritage upon which art, including Wagnerian art, continues to feed. But, according to the poet, *it is precisely representation that art must break with* if it would claim to go beyond Christianity. To want to be Greek is an impossible desire: not because the Greeks are a lost origin, a perfect unity of art, science and politics impossible to rediscover; but, on the contrary, because we moderns know that they are not our real origin. Our true lost origin, that which we must bring to life again, albeit in a new form, is not Greek Antiquity, but the Latin Middle Ages – the 'incubatory' Middle Ages that the poet does not hesitate to call our 'Mother'.⁵

For our religion is irreducibly Roman. Moderns cannot be satisfied with the tragic scene around which the Athenian people communed at the time of the Great Dionysiacs. Why not? Because Christianity has handed

5 'Catholicisme' in *OC* II, 239 [tr. B. Johnson as 'Catholicism', in *Divagations*, 244].

down to us a ritual superior in power to those of paganism – namely the *real convocation of a real drama*. The drama is, of course, that of the Passion, taken as historical by Christians, and which the Mass, ‘prototype of ceremonials’,⁶ does not represent as would a piece of theatre, but of which it claims to produce the true, effective Presence, to the point where the host is absorbed by the faithful. Now here is what Bayreuth could not offer, since in view of forging a new political unity, it offered only the ‘Greek’ compound of (Nordic) legend and scenic devices. This is why the office of the Mass can never be replaced by the communions of total art: such a substitution would create a profound lack, owing to the loss of a collective communion around an Event effective and present to the point of being truly incorporated – absorbed like the Communion wafer. It is because Catholic ritual possesses this force of truth – redeploying the real presence of an historical Passion – that it, rather than tragic representation, was the spiritual vector of medieval Europe:

The enthusiasts that we are nowadays for something fundamental, we should no longer know how to be an audience, a passerby, to tragedy – even if it included an allegorical return to the Self; at the very least, we require a real fact – or at least a belief in this fact,

6 Ibid., 241 [246].

in view of the results. 'Real Presence': or, that God should be there, diffuse, total, mimed from afar by the effaced actor. [...]'⁷

In the Mass, the drama of 'Man' – Christ, in Mallarmé's lexicon – is not mediated by the décor and by actors in the limelight, but is invoked by an anonymous official, effaced before transcendence, and whose sole movement of retreating, back into the throng, attests to the presence of divinity. It is thus toward the mysteries of the office that art must turn if it claims spiritual teaching. Because if Catholicism refuses to die entirely, if the 'black agony of the [Christian] monster',⁸ as Mallarmé says, with unaccustomed aggression, is extended even into a parody of renaissance (the end of the nineteenth century saw a fashion for conversions among French writers), it is because a people on the way to emancipation had not hitherto known how 'to appropriate for themselves the treasure' hidden in the unexampled apparatus of the Eucharist: 'It was impossible for the race not to bury in religion, even if since abandoned, its intimate, unknown secret.'⁹ The masses desire today, albeit unconsciously, for art to finally take hold of that which fascinates them in

7 'Catholicisme', in *OC* II, 241 [tr. B. Johnson as 'Catholicism', in *Divagations*, 246-7, translation modified].

8 'Solennité', in *OC* II, 305.

9 'De Même', in *OC* II, 244 [tr. B. Johnson as 'The Same', in *Divagations*, 251].

such a ceremony, and which it takes for the God of the Passion, whereas it is only itself: that 'Divinity, which is never anything but Oneself',¹⁰ as Mallarmé writes. This 'occulted'¹¹ and superior self, whose elevation we feel without understanding its nature, must be reinstated according to a new ceremony – a ceremony become a stranger to all transcendence.

It is necessary, in order to understand more closely the nature of this 'Presence' that Mallarmé charges poetry with reinstating, to make a distinction between Eucharist and Parousia. Parousia is, properly speaking, the *presentation* of God: the absolute manifestation of Christ in glory at the end of Times. The Eucharist, on the other hand, even if it is a real Presence of the Son of Man in the course of the Mass, is not his full presentation: The latter remains hoped-for, expected, by the faithful. The Eucharist is thus a paradoxical mode of 'presence in absence': The divine is there, among the elect, in the very host – but is not yet returned. It gives itself according to a sufficiently withdrawn mode of reality to leave room for both remembrance (the Passion) and expectation (of Salvation). It is a presence that is not in the present, but in the past and

10 'Catholicisme', in *OC* II, 238 [tr. B. Johnson as 'Catholicism', in *Divagations*, 244].

11 'Il doit y avoir quelque chose d'occulte au fond de tous, je crois décidément à quelque chose d'abscons, signifiant caché et fermé, qui habite le commun. [...]' 'Le Mystère dans les lettres', in *OC* II, 229-30 ['There must be something occult deep inside everyone, decidedly I believe in something opaque, a signification sealed and hidden, that inhabits common man....' – 'The Mystery in Letters', tr. B. Johnson, in *Divagations*, 231].

in the future. To take up Mallarmé's vocabulary – and his evocation of 'God [...] there, diffuse' – we should speak, to signify the Eucharistic mode of presence, whether or not it is transcendent, of a *diffusion* of the divine, as opposed to its *representation* (the Greek scene), or its *presentation* (Christian Parousia). The ultimate singularity of Mallarmé's poetics – the idea that oriented his last writings – thus consisted in the quest for a 'diffusion of the absolute' emancipated from representation (even if, evidently, the latter is not annulled in the labor of the work) and dismissing all eschatological parousia. The Eucharistic mode of presence is no longer anticipative but becomes the supreme regime of divine being-there.

Thus the central stakes of Mallarméan poetry – at least from 1895, the year of the first publication of 'Catholicism'¹² – become those of its capacity or otherwise to produce a diffusion of the divine, by way of the convocation of a human Drama, at once real and of universal significance.

The fact remains that, posed in this way, the problem appears insoluble: How could poetry, rather than represented or signified fictions, produce the presence of a real event – one, moreover, suffused, like the Passion, with an infinite significance surpassing the particularity of all merely terrestrial existence? It seems that the acute

12 In *La Revue Blanche*, 1 April 1895, in *OC II*, 326-7.

consciousness of this difficulty (in 1895) was contemporary with the abandoning of the notes for the Book.

In fact, we may remark that the several sketches of the contents of the Book, or of the *mises en scène* that were to accompany its reading, never get beyond the stage of representation, whether textual or scenic. Thus we see file past, represented by actors upon the scene or in the text of the Book read by the operator (the difference not always being easy to establish on the basis of the notes): a troupe of women, the palace of a dead town, an animal-taming show, the double-act of an old priest and a child worker, bizarre and amusing stories of the invitation to a feast, of a glorious work transformed into a crime, of a woman whom one 'eats'...¹³ But the operator of the Book never seems to exhibit a *real* event, by way of a diffusion that would demonstrate its presence, *once again real*, among the 'assistants'.

It is this aporia of the Book – without doubt the most acute aporia of the dreamt-of Great Work – that the *Coup de dés*, in our view, was charged with overcoming. And it is the coding of the 'unique Number', precisely, that allowed the Poem to succeed where the Book had failed.

Let us see how.

13 See 'From *The Book*', tr. R. Sieburth, in Caws (ed.), *Mallarmé in Prose*, 132-3.

MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

If *Igitur* was inspired by 'L'Esprit pur', we know, at least since Thibaudet, that the *Coup de dés* began with another Vigny poem – the last to have appeared during his lifetime, in 1854: *La Bouteille à la mer* (Message in a Bottle), subtitled *Conseil à un jeune homme inconnu* (Advice to an Unknown Young Man). In it, the author of *Destinées* (Destinies) describes a shipwreck in the course of which a 'young Captain', before sinking beneath the waves, throws into the sea a bottle containing his 'solitary calculations', a map of the reef upon which his ship foundered, and a study of the constellations 'of the high latitudes', that will perhaps be received one day by an unknown voyager:

When a solemn sailor sees that the wind carries him
 And that the broken masts all hang on deck,
 That in his great duel the sea is the stronger
 And that the mind's calculations respond in vain;
 That he is rudderless, and, therefore, helpless,
 He folds his arms with a profound calm
 [...]
 In the evening hours, the young Captain
 Has done what he can for the salvation of his men
 [...]

His sacrifice is made; but the earth must
 Collect labor's pious monument.
 It is the learned journal, the solitary calculations,
 More rare than the pearl and the diamond;
 It is the map of the waves in the storm,
 The map of the reef that will crack open his head:
 A sublime testament to future travelers.
 He writes, 'Today, the current carries us,
 Forsaken, lost, onto Tierra del Fuego. [...]
 – Enclosed is my journal, including some studies
 Of the constellations of the high latitudes.
 May it reach you, if such is God's will!'

Quand un grave marin voit que le vent l'emporte
 Et que les mâts brisés pendent tous sur le pont,
 Que dans son grand duel la mer est la plus forte
 Et que par des calculs l'esprit en vain répond;
 Qu'il est sans gouvernail, et, partant, sans ressource,
 Il se croise les bras dans un calme profond.

[...]

Dans les heures du soir, le jeune Capitaine
 A fait ce qu'il a pu pour le salut des siens

[...]

Son sacrifice est fait; mais il faut que la terre
 Recueille du travail le pieux monument.
 C'est le journal savant, le calcul solitaire,
 Plus rare que la perle et que le diamant;

C'est la carte des flots faite dans la tempête,
 La carte de l'écueil qui va briser sa tête:
 Aux voyageurs futurs sublime testament.
 Il écrit: 'Aujourd'hui, le courant nous entraîne,
 Désemparés, perdus, sur la Terre-de-Feu [...]
 – Ci-joint est mon journal, portant quelques études
 Des constellations des hautes latitudes.
 Qu'il aborde, si c'est la volonté de Dieu!'

Mallarmé thus reprised from Vigny the idea of a testamentary text destined for an unknown reader – the 'bequest to someone ambiguous'. Like Vigny's captain, Mallarmé's Master, before sinking beneath the waves, has thrown the calculation, unknown to all, to its destination. But as for the author of the *Coup de dés*, he is not content to represent the idea or the theme of the message in a bottle: He *actually threw such a bottle*, through the writing and the publication of his Poem – a vessel containing his last wishes in the form of 'solitary' and constellatory 'calculations'. For the coding of the Number *transforms* the nature of the *Coup de dés*, making of it not just a text but an *act*. The Poem does not merely represent a drama that it relates: It acquires, as we have said, a performative dimension, in becoming the very act that it describes. And this act is of a very precise nature: It is a *wager*. The Number is thrown, beyond Mallarmé's death, into the chaotic seas of historical reception, and delivered to the fortunes of its possible decipherment.

Meanwhile, unlike Vigny's captain, the Master/Poet does not entrust to an all-powerful God the hope that his testament should one day be discovered; he entrusts it to his own divinity: infinite Chance.

Here it falls to us to explain with greater precision. Let it be well understood that Mallarmé had taken care to introduce into the encryption of the Number a quality of unforeseeability that implies that one can discover its existence only by chance. For no knowledge of the poet's work, no matter how thorough, would suffice to discover that the *Coup de dés* is organized around a count, and in particular the count of its words – rather, for example, than that of its letters, syllables, adjectives, etc. One could read all of Mallarmé that it is possible to read, task oneself with knowing it in detail and in depth: One would still not discover anywhere, in the texts, any indication to put one on the right track. Nowhere does the work lead us toward the decisive key. From the work to the Number, the only solution is a discontinuous one: No premise is given to the reader that might lead him to the Master's inference.

Thus, the discovery of the procedure can only occur accidentally. Certainly, at the limit, one might conceive of a certain relation between this discovery and the experience of reading made possible by Mallarméan poetry. But it is a matter of a relation so tenuous that it would have to be unveiled by some caprice, rather than through reasoned thinking. Imagine a reader captivated by the 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. This desire would not be entirely gratuitous, since it will have been aroused by the artistry with which Mallarmé decontextualizes each word of the poem, separating them one from another by what *Prose (pour des Esseintes)* (Prose for des Esseintes) calls a ‘clear outline’, or again a ‘lacuna’. The poet obtains this effect in particular thanks to an art, we might say, of ‘destructuring syntax’. At the turn of the 1870s, Mallarmé developed a writing technique that consisted in 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. The reading thus begins with a ‘dystaxic’ rather than a syntactical experience: One has the impression of words that are simply juxtaposed, but which, for this very reason, scintillate, as if they were appearing for the first time in their originary strangeness. Thus the tiny word ‘tu’ – not the personal pronoun [‘you’], as one first of all thinks, but the past participle of the verb ‘taire [‘to still, to silence]’ – in the first verse of our sonnet:

À la nue accablante tu
Basse de basalte et de laves

À même les échos esclaves
 Par une trompe sans vertu
 Quel sépulcral naufrage (tu
 Le sais, écume, mais y baves)
 Suprême une entre les épaves
 Abolit le mât dévêtu

Beneath the oppressive cloud stilled
 Basalt and lava lowering
 The very echoes subjugated
 By a trumpet of no virtue
 What sepulchral shipwreck (you know,
 Foam, but dribble there)
 Ultimate one among flotsam
 Abolishes the mast stripped bare

The reader discovers only in the eighth verse the principal verb of the phrase, which allows her to reconstruct its syntax: 'O what sepulchral wreck, stilled by a trumpet (a foghorn) of no virtue (with no force – it does not sound), abolishes the mast stripped bare?' Up until that point, we have read nothing but a series of words, written without punctuation, and which appear like so much delicate debris floating by chance upon the foam of the blank page. This impression will be reinforced by the weak number of words of the sonnet (70 rather than the 77 of 'Salut'), which emphasizes the sparseness, and by

the accumulation of monosyllabic terms in the first verse, which emphasizes their isolation on the page. Each word thus becomes a precious gem, and one could conceive, at the limit, that the desire to appropriate it as a treasure might express itself in the childish reflex of counting.

Our enumerating reader, first of all moved by the 'reverie', amused by the coincidence through which she had found a number containing precisely the 7 of the Septentrion and the o of the gulf, might then set about counting the words of the related poems. Firstly without believing in it, to put an end to a strange hypothesis that irritates a corner of her mind; and then systematically, to the extent that she uncovers a coherent structure, with certain heuristic virtues. But notwithstanding that the discovery could be 'rationalized' once it has been brought to light, the initial moment could only emerge from a mere chance, or at best an 'improbable' whim, like that described above. The fact is that, in order for the *Coup de dés* to accomplish *effectively* an *aleatory* throw, Chance alone had to govern the unveiling of the Number. It was imperative, consequently, that the latter should be inaccessible to any rational deduction born of assiduous frequentation of the poet's work.

In which case, we must revisit the reasoning which, in the first part, we used to lead the reader up to the decryption of 707. Our analyses may have made it seem as if we ourselves had begun with an attentive study of

many of Mallarmé's texts (*Igitur*, the notes for the Book) and of various passages of the *Coup de dés*, which then led us progressively toward the idea of a code governing the Poem. But our reasoning was in truth entirely *retrospective*, produced once the discovery had been made, and not *prospective*, preceding the deciphering and making it possible. Our knowledge of the poet was of no use whatsoever in decrypting the code: On the contrary, it is the knowledge of the code that has allowed us to explore, in the work, the logic of its genesis. Once we took the decisive step toward the solution, all the arguments fitted together; but there was no one argument that could have precipitated that step.

However, if we are to suppose that Mallarmé did indeed entrust to Chance the deciphering of his Poem, we might well wonder as to his motives for doing so: Why this Chance sewn upon the route that leads to the Number? Let us come back to the notion of 'diffusion'. We have seen that it is a question of determining a poetry capable of emancipating itself from the sole regime of representation, a poetry worthy to rival the Eucharist and the 'real presence' of the Passion in the host. Now we see that Mallarmé had indeed made sure that a *real* drama – namely *his own* – should be revealed one day through the *Coup de dés*. Because it is indeed a Passion that is at play here: a logic of 'sacrifice' aiming at the final 'consecration' of the Poem.

For let us reflect on what this means, exactly: A writer introduces secretly into one of his poems – perhaps his masterpiece – a key whose discovery, it is assured, can only result from chance. In doing so, Mallarmé took the risk that his ultimate poetical decision may never have been unveiled. And we understand why: A sacrifice had to be effectively accomplished at the heart of the Work in order for this poetry to acquire the profundity of a Passion. This sacrifice is not that of the individual *body* – as in Christ's Passion – but that of the work's *meaning*. A sacrifice of spiritual life, not of carnal life. Thus it is only once the Number is deciphered that we discover the following: Mallarmé accepted the possible destruction of the meaning of his labor upon the altar of a Chance that represented, for him, the equivalent of Destiny.

And we must even say that he took this risk twice. A first time in determining that the Number should *perhaps* never be deciphered. This is the code's first message to us: If you have discovered the Number, you have discovered retrospectively that I accepted the possibility that the meaning of my work might never appear. In this way, Mallarmé demonstrated that he was ready to sacrifice even his sacrifice itself – that is to say, to sacrifice the meaning of his work without anyone ever knowing that he had committed this sacrifice. A sacrifice 'squared', prepared to annul itself before posterity, to hide itself in the face of universal judgment, and one that allows the

poet to rival the absolute devotion of the old Christ. The Nazarene delivered his body up to crucifixion. But Mallarmé, in an act that implied an unprecedented solitude, both sacrificed the meaning of his work, and sacrificed that very sacrifice itself. And just as God alone can attest, in the Gospels, to the divinity of his Son, so it falls to infinite Chance, and not to finite man, to unveil the truth of the Mallarméan act. For this reason, it had to be the case that the decrypting of the Poem could not be deduced through any expert reading of the exoteric work, but had to be the result of a happy accident.

But the poet took a second risk, this time in the event of the code being discovered. For in that case, he accepted the possibility of being the object of disdain on the part of the discoverer of the code. The denunciation by future readers of a bogus mystery ('so it was only that...') was an intrinsic possibility of an encryption that, in itself, is indeed but a puerile thing.

With the act of the *Coup de dés*, the poet thus accepted that he would die carnally without knowing whether his work would one day be deciphered; but he also accepted the possibility of dying spiritually, by inserting into the heart of his Poem a coded Constellation, which, were it to remain undeciphered, would eternally bury the beauty of his gesture – and which, were it to be deciphered in malevolent or superficial manner, could forever discredit

his 'spiritual body' – the Mallarmé of posterity, he who would henceforth live in our memory.

In speaking of a 'bequest to someone ambiguous', the author of *Coup de dés* did not mean only that the future inheritor of the code must necessarily remain unknown to him, or even remain inexistent; he suggested also the necessarily ambivalent character – maybe hostile, maybe comprehending – of the possible decryptors. For (as we saw above in the expression of his doubts) it was not a question of the poet denying the slight nature of his 'secret': In reducing the latter to a word count conjoined with a simple charade, Mallarmé proposed (and was the first to do so) an ironic vision of his esoteric reputation. He knew that the reader would inevitably be alarmed by the procedure – and would only begin to change his opinion once he imputed to the author of the Poem an amused distance with regard to his own undertaking.¹⁴

A first way of legitimating the gesture would thus consist in considering that the 1898 Poem offers us a nihilist version of Christ's Passion. This Passion would have incorporated the modern moment of self-derision, but all the better to bring out the real suffering of the

¹⁴ In 'Crise de vers', in *OC* II, 208-9 [tr. B. Johnson as 'Crisis of Verse', in *Divagations* 201-11], Mallarmé maintained that the inventiveness of the writers of free verse could not go so far as to produce a new metric comparable with the old one: The latter, born in 'incubatory times', would constitute a 'prosodic heritage' [*Divagations*, 206] as inaccessible to individual recreation as an orthography might be. The 'bequest to someone ambiguous', as we can see, oversteps this prohibition. The Master thus also perishes as a result of his own crime, having given as his legacy a metric born wholly of himself.

poem – a suffering all the more pathetic in that it knows that it takes place in the name of a derisory prize. The *Coup de dés* would then reveal, with a calculated delay, the discreet drama of a man ready to sacrifice himself for the nullity that he knew was the foundation of his art. And the reader could be shaken by this proof of extreme love – a heartrending love – for a Literature whose central vanity would have been symbolized by the prosaic operations of a pointless code.

Staying provisionally with this interpretation, we can already understand in what way Mallarmé's 'hermeticism' is very distant from any traditional historical form of hermeticism: (a) The content of the secret would be not sublime but indigent, thus reminding the moderns that they will find in Literature no occult knowledge to replace the old beliefs. Mallarmé is not Sâr Péladan, and his gesture does not participate in that kitsch esotericism so widespread at the end of the nineteenth century. Quite on the contrary, since through the 'deflation' consequent upon the future revelation of his Poem, the author of the *Coup de dés* would relay the critique he had made elsewhere of those gimcrack spiritualities that had flooded the literature of his time.¹⁵ (b) Neither is the code hermetic, in the usual sense: Its transmission is not assured by a

¹⁵ See the article 'Magic' in the *National Observer* (28 July 1893), and its reprisal, abridged and revised, in *Divagations*, in *OC* II, 307-9 and 250-1 [tr. B. Johnson as 'Magic', in *Divagations*, 263-5].

continuous line of initiates, but instead implies a (potentially definitive) discontinuity between its author and his successors. The cryptor does not organize a tradition, hidden from the majority but which, through the choice of devoted disciples, would ensure the durable transmission of his message; on the contrary, the cryptor deploys a sea in which he assures himself of being able to lose forever what he had to say. The Master has no disciple and claims, by this very fact, to teach us something: his sacrificial devotion to the hazardous nothing from which fiction is fabricated.

But can we really be content with such an interpretation of the code? We do not believe so: for if Mallarmé had stuck with this desperate, even self-derisive, character of the wager made 'for nothing', he would have failed in his ambition to engender a modern form of the Passion. To overcome the Mass and Wagnerian total art with a new ceremonial requires far more than the sad irony of disabused modernity. It requires a divine dimension of suffering that would give it its universal purport. Now this higher dimension is not lacking in the Revelation that the *Coup de dés* offers us, for it is indeed Chance, and thus the Infinite – the God of the moderns – that Mallarmé's gesture has unveiled. But divinity is still lacking in the protagonist of the drama himself, that is to say Mallarmé: He has not proved that he is, himself, not only a man, but also a god, and thus Chance. If the poet intended to make

of his trial a trajectory at once christic and destructive of ancient transcendences, he would have to participate effectively in the only true eternity. In other words, and however strange this may appear, for his Passion to be effective and his wager successful, we should have to be able to say of the poet that which is said of the Number: if it was the Poet (of the Passion), it *would be* Chance – or rather: *he* would be Chance. For the wager to be won, Mallarmé would have to prove to us that he had finally succeeded, at the end of his life, in the exploit that, as a young man writing *Igitur*, he had failed to bring to completion: *to be* Chance, to make himself Infinite, to divinize his silent gesture.

TO BE CHANCE

So the double sacrifice we have described – the sacrifice of the meaning of the work, and that of this sacrifice itself – all of this is still not enough. For, described in this way, it is but the risk taken by a singular yet finite man. Now, if Mallarmé had wanted, with his act, to equal, or even surpass, the christic Drama, he would have had to confer a dimension of infinity upon the risk effectively taken. But the Infinite, for moderns, is no longer the God of monotheism, incarnated in Jesus: The Infinite is henceforth Chance – that which dominates eternally and

absolutely both manifestly insignificant realities and those that are apparently the most meaningful and perfect. To acquire an eternal dimension would thus mean Mallarmé himself becoming, through his sacrifice, Chance – that is to say, *participating* in the infinite structure that permits Chance to be at the same time all the possible options of a dice-throw, its failures and its successes alike. This is what we saw in *Igitur*: Igitur failed because he had to choose, *and thus finitize himself*. Whatever he did – not throw the dice, throw them and obtain a 12, *a fortiori* throw them and fail his throw – in any case, the meaninglessness of contingency would have been the winner. Igitur's gesture was just one option, just as vain as any other, since no more necessary than the alternatives. The only way to escape contingency would have been to have become just as eternal and infinite as the latter. But how? How to be, oneself, all the options of a throw? How to incorporate the dialectical structure of Chance, which, like the speculative Infinite, contains in itself the contradictory totality of alternative possibilities? How to be also that which one is not, thereby prohibiting oneself the possibility of change (since, already being other, one could not become other) and thus acceding to eternity?

A clue to the solution is given us by the first ending of *Igitur*:

In the Tomb

Igitur simply shakes the dice – a motion, before going to rejoin the ashes, the atoms of his ancestors: the movement which is in him is absolved. It is understood what his ambiguity means.

Salle du tombeau

Igitur secoue simplement les dés – mouvement, avant d'aller rejoindre les cendres, atomes de ses ancêtres: le mouvement qui est en lui est absous. On comprend ce que signifie son ambiguïté.¹⁶

Here Infinity seems to have been 'brushed up against' – before being lost again. Before lying down alongside his ancestors – thus finitizing his act by refusing to throw – Igitur had 'simply' shaken the dice in his hand. Thus he had produced a 'motion' charged with 'ambiguity', since it involves a 'throw' held back, as if still contained in the fist that remains closed. In other words, Igitur had indeed attempted an act that would be, after the example of Chance, all options at once: He had initiated a 'shaking', a 'quavering' of the dice, a motion whose ambiguity contained the contraries – both the throw and the non-throw – in at least virtual fashion. This is what is meant by the phrase 'the movement which is *in*

¹⁶ OC I, 477.

him is *absolved*: It is absolved, that is to say absolute – it is all things virtually. Something is indeed contained in *Igitur* that would have been able to resolve the aporia. But in the end, his ultimate decision to join the ‘ashes’ of his ancestors is too univocal – too clear a renunciation of taking his chance – to be satisfying. There has indeed been a finitization and a mortifying return to the outmoded ancestors, back to the literary tradition one had tried to escape.

From this we can understand Mallarmé’s fascination with *Hamlet* – the fact that there is, according to him, ‘no other subject’ than this ‘latent lord who cannot become’.¹⁷ For the prince of Elsinore is the hero of a drama of hesitation, hesitation being precisely the name of an ambiguity that is *on the verge of* infinitizing he who maintains it. To be this ‘latent’ hero, virtually capable of contrary actions – of believing and not believing the ghost’s speech, of avenging and not avenging the father – is indeed to accede, or nearly so, to that infinity of Chance that escapes, it and it alone, all ‘becoming’ – the only guarantee of eternity for the hero.

But Hamlet, like *Igitur*, fails to contain the contraries: He ends up choosing, kills the king’s murderer – and dies of being thus finitized. How could the *Coup de dés* escape this aporia and infinitize the Master’s gesture, making

17 ‘Hamlet’, in *OC* II, 167 [tr. B. Johnson in *Divagations*, 124–8].

this Hero the equal of originary Chance, as Jesus equals the Father in Divinity?

The dominant reading of the *Coup de dés* would seem to offer, at first glance, a solution to our impasse. Since the Poem does not indicate to us explicitly the Master's decision, commentators generally admit that his act – to throw or not to throw – remains undecidable. It is then tempting to maintain that Mallarmé avoided the aporia of *Igitur* in this way: rather than indicating, as in the latter tale, two possible, opposite endings, without being able to choose one of them, in the *Coup de dés* the poet constructed an ambiguous situation containing virtually both possibilities.

Might we say, following this interpretation, that then the Master 'would be' all the options at once – throw and nonthrow, successful throw and failed throw – and would in this way become equal to the infinity of Chance? Truthfully, no: for the Master would rather be *none* of the proposed options. His 'logical singularity' would be negative (he would have succeeded in giving the lie to the principle of the excluded middle by being *neither* thrower *nor* nonthrower) rather than positive (giving the lie to the principle of noncontradiction by being at once *both* thrower *and* nonthrower). Because for an entity – even a fictional one – to be at once both terms of an alternative, both terms must already have been *determined*. Now this is not the case in the usual interpretation of the Poem,

where we do not know *which* number the throw would have produced, nor what precise result a refusal to throw would have had. Everything remains therefore in the vague and the unsaid, and nothing infinite is truly generated. It is as if the Hero is 'crushed' by the fact that everything comes to the same, and is thus annulled rather than infinitized.

And in any case, even if we allow the contrary, even if we suppose that the Hero had succeeded, after all, in containing 'virtually' and for all eternity the ensemble of his decisions, we would not have eluded the difficulty. For this 'Master' who would be both thrower and non-thrower would be only a *representation* of the Master. He would be nothing more than a fiction engendered by the Poem – and it is precisely his fictional status that would permit him to be virtually all things, at the behest of the reader's imagination. Now, according to our hypothesis, at stake in the *Coup de dés* is the 'diffusion of the divine', and therefore the *real* presence of a *real* drama, a drama supporting an effective infinitization – not an empty fiction. Thus, it is indeed the gesture of *Mallarmé himself* – his throwing of the Number, his wager engendered by the performative purport of the encrypted Poem – that must be infinitized if we would extract the *Coup de dés* from the sole reign of representation.

But we have to be more precise if we wish to disentangle the difficulty. So let us look at things more closely: Mallarmé tried, throughout his work, to assimilate the

infinite structure of Chance to a hesitation become essential. And there is indeed an evident similarity between Chance and uncertainty: In both cases, we have to do with a contradiction – not actual, but *virtual* – that allows us to escape from becoming. In *Igitur*, ‘chance’ contains the Absurd, but ‘in the *latent* state’: It ‘prevents it from existing’ and thus permits ‘the Infinite to be’. It is the same term – ‘latent’ – that we find again in the description of Hamlet: He is the ‘*latent* lord’ who oscillates without resolution between contrary possibilities and consequently cannot ‘become’ – at least not until the final denouement.

Let us emphasize it again: neither Chance nor Hamlet produce *actual* contradictions. Chance does not engender throws of the dice that are at the same time nonthrows; Hamlet does not commit a murder of Claudius that at the same time is not a murder of Claudius. But in both cases we are confronted with a latent contradiction that impregnates with its absurdity all the possible options. If Chance does not produce throws that are at once successes and failures, its meaninglessness does nevertheless dominate successful and failed throws alike. Hamlet may not commit a murder that is also not a murder, but he does oscillate endlessly between these two possibilities, to the point of appearing mad to those around him – incapable of giving any direction to his action and giving rise to a true becoming. Each option refers to its opposite, because

it seems to him equivalent, having no more necessity than its alternative; everything comes back indefinitely to the same, and the infinite proceeds from this unlimited cycle where contraries meet each other in equal indifference.

However, hesitation – whether that of Hamlet or that of Igitur – always seems to fail to meld perfectly with the infinity of Chance. This infinity, as Mallarmé conceives it, is characterized by *three* properties: It is *real* (Chance rules effectively the finite and alternative events of our world), *determinate* (its opposed results are always this or that concrete result) and *eternal* (Chance remains equal to itself, always in act, whether its productions are insignificant or full of meaning). How could a hesitation combine these three properties and allow its bearer to meld with immutable Contingency?

√ We seem to have reached a dead end: Either hesitation is real – felt by an existing individual and not a fictional character, in which case it cannot be eternal – or hesitation is fictive, an object of literature, and can indeed arrive at the perennality of an ideal sense, but in doing so must part ways with reality.]

A real hesitation supports, virtually, determinate contraries. In indecision, an individual is generally torn between choices that themselves are precise, not between empty options. Determinacy and reality are thus indeed ‘captured’ by effective hesitation. But no real hesitation can claim eternity: We oscillate for a certain time, but we

cannot but end with a choice – even if it is that of not choosing. As Sartre quite rightly insists, to not choose is still to choose; and when we draw out our hesitation, we do so in order that it should become too late to take any positive action. Real hesitation thus seems bound to finish, to finitize itself, in one or another of its alternatives.

How about fictional hesitations? We have identified three cases:

(a) Hamlet undergoes a hesitation as determinate as in a real drama (to kill or not to kill the murderer of his father). There is also a part of eternity evident in his uncertainty, in so far as the prince of Elsinore perpetually relives the same torment from one production of the play to the next, to such a point that we end up identifying him with this dramatic oscillation. But it is precisely the ‘realism’ of the intrigue – a realism that permits Shakespeare’s play to render Hamlet’s doubt concrete and living – that constrains the dramaturge to endow him with the characteristic of every true ambivalence: Hamlet ends up choosing, and avenges his father. The determinacy of Chance (the fact that it is produced between determinate contraries) is captured well by Hamlet’s hesitation, but its eternity, however much it is approached through the perennial nature of fiction, is ultimately lost. The hero is certainly eternally bound to hesitate, but then he is bound just as eternally to decide.

(b) The *Coup de dés*, in the usual interpretation (not ours) discussed above, would propose the inverse option to that of *Hamlet*: beyond all realism, it is given to us to behold a Master eternally fixed in pure indecision, since the Poem (so this interpretation tells us) does not reveal what his choice might be. But if this time the eternity of Chance is captured by a perennial hesitation, it is its determinacy that now eludes the Poem: the Master is 'all things' virtually only because he is, in truth, none of them. His indecision is purely abstract, with neither context nor precision. Rather than infinite, it must be said of the Master thus understood that he is *indefinite* – that he is not positively anything.

Hamlet thus captures the determinacy of Chance, but not its eternity; the Master, in the 'undecidable' version of the *Coup de dés*, captures its eternity, but not its determinacy. And both one and the other remain confined to purely fictional personages, incapable of any purchase on the real world.

(c) *Igitur*, finally, proposes an interesting articulation of a fictional hesitation and a real hesitation. The fictional hesitation is that of *Igitur* throughout the whole tale. The real hesitation is that of the author of the tale, who has not succeeded in deciding between the two possible and equally determinate endings (*Igitur* shakes the dice and lays down amongst the ashes, or *Igitur* throws the dice and defies the furious spirits). But, once more, this does not

succeed in bringing together all the properties of Chance. On the side of fiction, the hero is simply inconsistent, made of two *actual* (and not virtual) options, incompatible with each other. And the real hesitation of the young Mallarmé, far from being eternal, in truth did have an end: the author *chose* not to finish the tale and to leave its protagonist 'torn' between two irreconcilable options.

The difficulty we face comes from the fact that only a hesitation capable of being *at the same time* real and fictional – combining the determinacy and the concreteness of a real choice with the ideal eternity of fictional characters – could contain in it all the properties of Chance. *Igitur*, in its unfinishedness, gave us an example of a possible articulation between the hesitation of the author and the hesitation of his character. But in the latter case, the two faces of hesitation do not fuse together, and each side remains limited to its own insufficiency: *Igitur* remains torn between two actually contradictory possibilities, and the young Mallarmé remains fixed in his inability to finish the tale. Our considerations on the Number will, however, allow us to surpass this aporia and to show that the *Coup de dés* did succeed in producing effectively an infinite hesitation, a perfect and unexampled hybrid between fiction and reality. For Mallarmé, who in 1869 had not been able to fuse his hesitation with that of *Igitur*, well and truly succeeded in incorporating himself into

the Master of *Coup de dés*, plunging along with the latter into an indecision at once precise and unlimited.

A QUAVERING NUMBER?

How to overcome this 'extravagant' impasse of an identification of (real/fictive) hesitation with the Infinite? And in particular, in what way did the coding of the Number allow Mallarmé to achieve his ends? It seems on the contrary that the existence of a Number encrypted in the *Coup de dés* proves that the poet did indeed *choose* to throw the dice and to sum their constellatory result, thus condemning himself, in turn, to the finitization of his act. We seem to be even further from a solution than if we had decreed that the Master's choice remained undecidable, and thus the eternal bearer of opposed virtualities.

And yet, there is indeed a solution; and the *Coup de dés* manifestly deployed it, since we ourselves are party to its formulation. This solution consists in *displacing the demand that the gesture* (of throwing or not throwing) *be infinite, onto the Number itself*. In other words, to throw the dice, to produce a Number – but a 'unique Number' *supporting in itself the virtually contradictory structure of Chance*. A Number that would thus be infinite, and could not be another, since it would be, itself alone, all the options, all alternatives. For this would be a Number that would

contain the possibility both of existing and not existing, that is to say of having and having not been coded, of having been premeditated by the poet and not at all – of having and having not been the result of a throw. It would thus indeed be a question of throwing the dice, of producing the code, but in such a way that the result – an infinite result – *would retrocede its own undecidable structure to the act that had engendered it*. This throw would produce a Number that presents the hesitation, the intimate ‘quavering’, proper to Igitur’s gesture as he shook the dice while keeping them in his hand. A Number that would be *at one and the same time* this Number premeditated by the count of the Poem – 707 – and *not this Number at all*, becoming in this way an insignificant number – 705, 706, 708, etc. – a noncoded total, ‘some lowly splashing or other’, negative proof that nothing had been premeditated with regard to the sum of words. A Number that would be like a ‘crystal of Chance’: at once immutable and quavering, both structured and fleeting, precisely determined and nondescript. In this way, we would indeed have a Number that would prove that there both had and had not been a throw; we would thus have to say that the forever-undecidable uncertainty affecting the Number had refluxed back onto the gesture of the poet, making of the latter a being virtually composed of contrary options. And Mallarmé would then have accomplished what was

announced in *Igitur* as his fundamental project: to act so as to be able to say that 'the infinite is at last *fixed*'.¹⁸

'Fixing the infinite' is indeed the fundamental programme of Mallarméan poetics, a programme that renders it a stranger to those notions, so valorized by modernity, of 'becoming' and 'dynamism'. For Mallarmé, a poem is a pure crystal that allows to transpire an evanescent flickering. Nothing really evolves in this poet's work, at least in his mature poems: Nothing takes the time to grow, nothing develops continuously. Nothing decays either, moreover; nothing truly perishes. The movement authorized in the structure is too rapid, too brief, too allusive to contain the thickness of transformative or corruptive duration. What is required is to capture a sudden modification, a transfiguration, a fulguration that abolishes in an instant the immobility of place, but also any possibility of change taking hold of things. A speed that interrupts the immutable, but also movement: a *passed movement*, annulled as soon as it is initiated. And thus a movement of which one could doubt whether it ever took place. An identity of contraries: a movement that is (perhaps) not a movement, an immobility that is (perhaps) not immobile. A dialectical infinite, then, that includes its other, but without invoking any dynamism – and in this sense a non-Hegelian dialectic, one without progress, without any

18 *Igitur*, in OC I, 477.

surpassing of one step by the next. A treading water that would not be an extinguishing, but the pulsation of the eternal – a hesitation of being. A flickering of the fan, an unknotting of hair, a whirlwind of muslin, white clothes on the edge of the water that seem fleetingly to be a bird on the wave. So many signs recalling to us, more or less adequately, the structure of Chance: to remain in itself alongside its contrary, to contain virtually the absurd, to be the two sides of its own limit.

But the signs or the metaphors of Chance, like those that we have mentioned, are not Chance itself. A flickering of the fan takes place or does not take place. It is rapid, but not infinite: In it, contraries succeed each other but do not coexist. A fleeting movement suggests the Infinite but does not join with it. Is there some way in which Number could be really, and not metaphorically, infinite? Could one conceive of a way of producing at once the throwing and the nonthrowing within the *Coup de dés* itself, and thus fixing, in the immutable lines of the poem, the eternal pulsation of Chance?

Yes, there certainly is a way, and it rests precisely upon the existence of an encryption in the Poem. The solution is simple: it would suffice that the code elucidated above should contain an indeterminacy. Let us suppose that our numerical 'crystal' has a crack, a fault – that is to say an uncertainty in its count, in its process of engenderment, which could cause it to come apart. But an uncertainty

marginal or minute enough that our initial conviction that a code does indeed exist would not be entirely put to rest. In this way we would have a Number in which would be incorporated Igitur's 'quavering': a Number that would be the trace both of the throw having taken place, and of the contrary. The code would have bolstered the evidence that there exists a coded Number sufficiently for us to be able to attribute to Mallarmé the decision to throw the dice – but no sooner would this be agreed than the code would plunge us into the inverse hypothesis: The principle of the count would 'slide' toward a number of words *a little* different from 707, suddenly placing the Poem back into the insignificance of a nondescript count. And this dialectic itself would convince us that the poet could just as well have produced *on purpose* such a 'quavering' count, such a marginally uncertain code, in order to engender an infinite Number that would contain in itself the option of both its existence and its nonexistence. Therefore, it is indeed the poet himself upon whom the reader of the *Coup de dés* must henceforth confer the 'eternal hesitation' that Igitur lacked – that infinite capacity to have held within oneself all options at once, throwing and not throwing, throwing victoriously and throwing and failing, the premeditation of an 'uncertain' throw and a mere chimera of our interpretation. The reader would be constrained to oscillate forever between these equally unstable possibilities, and the uncertainty of Number

would reflux into the act of the Master, which is also that of Mallarmé as he decides whether or not to code his testamentary text.

And thus the Number would indeed bring together all three properties of Chance: (a) it would contain two equally determinate opposites (707 and another number close to it, but without any relation to the code); (b) it would be eternal (the uncertainty is forever inscribed in the meaning of the Poem, since we can never determine the 'correct' solution); (c) it would be real (since it would refer to the act – *perhaps* effectuated, but undecidably so – of the man Mallarmé coding the *Coup de dés*).

However, even in admitting this possibility, it will be objected that the real Mallarmé must indeed have chosen, in the depths of his heart, one of these actions, and thus finitized himself – and that this 'infinity' that we attribute to him owes only to our own ignorance of what was truly decided.

We shall respond in two stages to this objection.

(a) We can firstly recall that every author is composed of a body of flesh and a 'body of glory', a mortal body and a 'spiritual body'. In other words: of a real individual (Stéphane Mallarmé, that English teacher living in the rue de Rome under the Third Republic) and of an ideal posterity ('Stéphane Mallarmé', signatory of the *Coup de dés*, forever living in the mind of his readers) – just as Christ, eternal in the Trinity, perennial in the ever-recommended

ceremony of the Mass, knew a corporeal, finite existence as Jesus, born in Bethlehem under Augustus. Now, if Mallarmé had made a choice as to the coding or non-coding of his Poem, this choice would have been the doing only of the 'carnal' part of the poet, and not of his 'immaterial' part. For the Mallarmé who survives the fleshly body – his posterity as it inhabits our memories – is none other than that which the Number delivers to us: his only trace resides in the count of the words. And as the count quavers, so the memorial Mallarmé will remain forever in the same state of uncertainty.

With this, we discover the possibility of the *real Presence* of an *infinite Mallarmé* within a ceremony that, far from the complex apparatuses of the Book, is reduced to the simple act of reading the *Coup de dés*. For if the code does have a fault, then it is indeed this spiritual part of Mallarmé – that which survives in the 'tomb of the Book' – that each reader will absorb as his 'mental nourishment'.¹⁹ The act of deciphering the Poem will become the analogue of a Eucharist through which the real passion of the poet, of the finite man, his solitary and hazardous wager, will be combined with the infinite becoming of his posthumous double, created by the community (and the communion) of his readers. We would be touched by the risk taken, by the startling disinterest of the historical individual,

19 'Étalages', in OC II, 219 [tr. B. Johnson as 'Displays', in *Divagations*, 220-5]

and would simultaneously admire the part of him that he bequeathed to history – the bequest he made of his memory, that of the immutable and quavering Mallarmé, eternally uncertain as to his ultimate decision, and who will ever haunt our speculations.

A finite, and thus historical Mallarmé, as he existed, and an infinite Mallarmé, the author of the *Coup de dés* as he appears to us: as a poet having at once coded and not coded his poem. And there would indeed be a *diffusion* of this infinite Mallarmé every time we read his ambiguous work. For this 'ideal poet' would be neither presented to the reader (for this, the historical Mallarmé would have to be resuscitated), nor represented (the author is not a mere fictional character), but given according to a Eucharistic mode of 'presence in absence': an absence of the historical Mallarmé and the effective presence of the memorial-undecidable Mallarmé – the Mallarmé who does not exist, and will exist once more only in the ever-recommended act of reading.

(b) But a more radical response can and will be advanced to our objection. For if the code was indeed jammed in some way, then this infinite indeterminacy has every chance of having been inhabited by the poet himself, and not his mere image such as we create it for ourselves. Let us take up this hypothesis in more detail. If the encrypting contains an element of uncertainty, then it presents *objectively* all the options: All the choices become founded

upon equally plausible reasons. So that we are convinced alternately, each time for motives that are circumstantial, that this or that precise, determined choice was made. We oscillate between contradictory but 'dense' possibilities; that is to say, we do not inhabit an empty and abstract alternative between throwing and nonthrowing in general (as the ordinary reading of the Poem would have it), but an undecidable alternative between two choices and two numbers, or between two types of number (coded, noncoded) produced by two equally precise techniques of counting. The discovery of the code would thus not be entirely annulled by its uncertainty, but only weakened, troubled by the adverse hypothesis. It would not have been entirely pointless to have found the code: for a 'hesitant' code is not the pure and simple absence of a code, but a hesitation between two options that are now equally likely.

This determinacy of each term of the alternative – a count that yields 707, another that gives a little more or a little less than 707 – means that it makes sense to ask oneself whether a real individual (the author) did or did not choose to encrypt his text. But the undecidability of the alternative itself – the fact that neither of the two counts has any sure way to prevail over the other – implies that one cannot any longer be sure whether Mallarmé himself *really did choose one of the options* that torment us. If he had wanted to code the poem, why this miniscule

grain of sand with which he deviates from a correct count? And, if he did not want to code it, why all these allusions to 707, and why a count almost adequate to this sum?

But it will be objected, no doubt, that if we found such a slight deviation in the code, this would be the proof that Mallarmé had *chosen* an ambiguous technique of counting, permitting exactly this uncertain flickering of contrary hypotheses: He would thus indeed have decided something – the uncertain code rather than the certain or absent code – and with this choice would have finitized himself. However, this last option – voluntary ambiguity – would be just as fragile as the others. If the count is *only just* ambiguous, we cannot be certain that Mallarmé, in his heart of hearts, *frankly* chose ambiguity. We might very well think that he did want to code the poem, but that he *let pass* a few negligences in the final details – both *wanting and not wanting* to see his undertaking through to the end. That is to say that there is a strong possibility that Mallarmé basically knew no more than we do about his poem, and even that did not wish to know more; and this because the Poem is in itself, in fact, a ‘machine’ for hypotheses – a machine that functions without him, indifferently to his innermost conviction. And, if so, why bother to have an innermost conviction? The poet may very well have been so deeply melded with his ideal double – the Master of the undecidable gesture – so carried away by the vortex of contrary alternatives, that he lost all certainty

as to his 'true' intentions. And, consequently, his very sacrifice would have become more uncertain, attenuated, gently *ironized* without falling into irony – and, stranger still, it would remain poignant. Sacrifice? Retreat before sacrifice? We do not know, we no longer know – and perhaps he, also, no longer knew in the end.

Certainly, as we have said, a real hesitation can only be finite: One chooses, even when one chooses not to choose. We do not argue, consequently, that the individual Mallarmé succeeded in the exploit of becoming *fully* infinite. But we maintain that he succeeded in becoming a *bifid being*, a double individual, made of reality and of ideality, of history and of fiction, without it being possible (perhaps even for himself) to determine a precise limit between his two identities – the biographical individual and the author of the Poem. And we therefore think that this singular poet did indeed *participate* in the infinite through the fusion within him, fluctuating and unstable, of the carnal-historic determined being and the signatory-being of the *Coup de dés*.

If the hypothesis of a 'jammed code' can be verified, then we would discover only mirages reflecting each other, so that the very frontier between the supposedly determinate choice of the finite man and the infinite uncertainty of his ideal double would become in turn uncertain – for him as for us. Nothing authorizes us to say that Mallarmé consciously made a precise choice, or

just as clearly refused to choose, or changed his mind one or more times. Neither does anything permit us to exclude the possibility that everything was premeditated. But, precisely, this cloud of alternative possibilities forms a part of the infinity of the Poet, blended in our memories with the furious Chance encrypted in his testament.

*
* *

Let us recapitulate. We have seen that Mallarmé, from 1895 onward, was seeking a poetry capable of engendering a real Presence, alone capable of extracting from the Catholic Mass the secret of its perennial power. This literary diffusion of the divine was to take the place of the Passion and of its Eucharistic mode of presence, and doubtless was destined to be situated at the center of the ceremony of the Book, up until then governed by a regime of representation inherited from the Greeks (the operator presiding over a scene punctuated by various 'tableaux vivants'). The poet thus launched his 'proper name' in the *Coup de dés*, so as to create beyond his death an infinite entity carrying his patronymic.

We have supposed that the code could be uncertain, and that if this were the case, Mallarmé the individual would not necessarily be any more of an 'expert' than we

as to the true nature of the encrypting or absence thereof. Now this last hypothesis has a precise consequence with regard to the 'diffusion' of the Mallarméan Passion among the readers of the *Coup de dés*. On one hand, we are not sure whether the 'real Mallarmé' knew any more than us concerning the code or its possible absence; but, on the other hand, we *are* sure, inversely, that we know something about the 'ideal Mallarmé' that the real Mallarmé did not. What? Well, that he *succeeded* in his wager. For the code *was* discovered, and, if we succeed at demonstrating that it is affected by a slight uncertainty, we will have established that Mallarmé's Number and his gesture have indeed been infinitized in the eyes of his readers. Now this – this success of the wager – the historical Mallarmé knew nothing of. Consequently, we find ourselves in the Presence of an ideal Mallarmé of which Mallarmé could never have known: the Presence of a Poet whose image has been transmitted to us with the aid of an *autorevelation* of Chance – a revelation, by chance, of the code and of its uncertainty, which has produced *for us* the fusion of a man and Chance. The Presence of the infinite hypothetical act that we absorb like an intelligible host, and in which we participate in remembering the Name engendered by the Work. And here we are closer to 'Mallarmé', the dreamt-of signatory of the Poem, than Mallarmé himself ever was: We know that his infinity *will have been* effective,

and we know it better, through his divine part, than he knew it during the term of his humanity.

CLUES

We have developed abstractly the hypothesis that appeared to us to correspond, in the *Coup de dés*, to Mallarmé's project since 1895 – that of a diffusion, rather than a representation, of the divine through the Work. We must now show the reader that we have not applied this exigency and its operatory mode artificially to the Poem – we must prove that the code is uncertain, that the Number resulting from it is infinite; and that there are indeed signs to this effect within the text itself.

But before pointing them out, we should emphasize that, in order to be considered as conclusive evidence, these clues must signal not just any type of uncertainty. As we have said, the ordinary reading of the Poem would have it that the undecidability of the *Coup de dés* relates to our ignorance as to the Master's decision: to throw or not to throw the dice. Now, the clues that matter to us must bear upon another type of undecidability. We must find the traces of a throw *that does take place*, but one whose *result* consists in a Number that is indeterminate (infinite). Thus, for example, the 'Perhaps' that qualifies the final emergence of the Constellation does not count, of itself,

as a sign that our thesis is correct, because it could signify (as is usually thought) an uncertainty as to whether the dice have been thrown and the Septentrion produced. But what we seek is to establish that a throw has indeed taken place, that a Septentrion is indeed come – but one affected by an intrinsic indetermination that makes it quaver.

It will perhaps be said that the distinction between these two options is rather tenuous – specious even – since the consequence of the infinite Number is also to produce in return the undecidability of throwing. But the difference is nevertheless clear. In the first case we are dealing with the ironical and representationalist thesis: It is affirmed that the Poem represents a Master whose gesture remains unknown to us, but that this is of no importance, since to throw and not to throw lead equally to failure. In the second case, we are dealing with a victorious and ‘diffusive’ thesis: It is maintained that the throw did indeed happen, and that it engendered a Number capable of transfiguring the poet and his gesture into a new, hypothetical, entity, diffused into the reader like a mental Eucharist. Everything in the Poem associates uncertainty not with a bittersweet irony, but with the announcement of a possible victory – of a quasi-divine transfiguration – thus pointing in the direction of the proposed thesis. And detailed analysis will confirm that our hypothesis is indeed more

fitting than its ironist counterpart to the explanation of the decisive moments of the Poem.

(a) *Effacement of the site*

The first clue is found on Page III, which we suppose to describe the shipwreck that has just taken place. Mallarmé began (Pages I and II) by expositing the general thesis of the poem: 'A throw of dice /// never /// even when launched in eternal / circumstances / from the depths of a shipwreck... [Un coup de dés /// jamais /// quand bien même lancé dans des circonstances / éternelles / du fond d'un naufrage...]'. Before the proposition is taken up again and completed, on Pages V and IV ('...will never abolish /// Chance [...n'abolira /// le Hasard]'), Mallarmé inserts a string of interpolations the first of which (the one that interests us here) seeks to explicate what the 'eternal circumstances' in question might be. Indeed, the poet undertakes a proof: He affirms that in any case – even the most favorable – a throw of dice cannot abolish Chance. It thus falls to him to elaborate in what such favorable circumstances might consist, so as to prove the truth of his thesis. If, even in the conditions that I will describe – the most advantageous one could conceive of – the throw fails to abolish Chance, then no throw could ever do so. This is why Page III begins with a mathematical-style expression: 'supposing [soit que]', which suggests that

a series of postulates are being formulated upon whose basis rigorous deductions will be drawn.

One long phrase then describes, to the reader's surprise, not the expected shipwreck, but a combination of raging elements that seem alone to evoke the disappeared vessel: 'Supposing / the Abyss / whitened / glassy / furious / beneath a declivity / compacted desperately / on a wing / its own / in / advance fallen back from a failure to take flight / and stifling the torrents / cutting short the swell / deep within recapitulates / the shadow buried in the deep with this alternative sail [Soit / que / l'Abîme / blanchi / étale / furieux / sous une inclinaison / plane désespérément / d'aile / le sienne / par // avance retombée d'un mal à dresser le vol / et couvrant les jaillissements / coupant au ras les bonds / très à l'intérieur résume / l'ombre enfouie dans la profondeur par cette voile alternative]'.
 The Abyss represents the sea whitened by foam and overhung by a low sky, by a cloud (described as a 'declivity') that cannot lift itself, like a wing condemned to fall back immediately. This cloud presses down upon the projections of the sea (the 'torrents' and the 'swell'), a sea that we understand to be traversed by high and fierce waves. Now these two forms – the undulating sea and the cloud – suffice in themselves alone to 'recapitulate' the 'shadow' of the disappeared vessel. For – as it is written, again on Page III – the 'gaping trough' of the sea – evoking the hollows of the waves – resembles 'the hull of a

ship / listing this way or that [la coque d'un bâtiment / penché de l'un ou l'autre bord]', whereas the white clouds are like an 'alternative sail [voile alternative]'. The ship is absent, and all that remains is the obsessive, haunting memory adumbrated by the sites of its perdition.

What is signified by this exposition of the site where the drama will play out? In truth, the aim of the description is to make us doubt whether there has been a shipwreck at all: Perhaps, in fact, there never was a sunken vessel. The storm, as in the sonnet 'À la nue accablante tu...', itself produced the illusion of a shipwreck, so that we are not audience to a disappearance (the disappearance of a 'ship'), but to the disappearance of a disappearance (the disappearance of a conflagration).

¶We might then ask how such a description of the 'depths of a shipwreck' could come to be hailed as 'eternal circumstances' capable of favoring – however unsuccessfully, ultimately – the abolition of Chance. In the framework of the ordinary (ironist) interpretation of the Poem, we are unable to respond satisfactorily to this question. If we accept that all throws of the dice amount to the same – to failure – it is hard to see how putting the shipwreck itself in doubt would permit the description of a situation exceptionally favorable to the possible success of a throw. But it is entirely otherwise if we hold to the hypothesis we have defended above – that of an infinite Number produced by the poem. For if the Number is

indeed engendered by the throw, and infinitized by an uncertainty in the code, then it must have 'retro-acted', as we have seen, *upon its own initial conditions*. Now, this retro-action must consist in an undecidability as to the throwing of the dice – in the impossibility of knowing whether or not a throw has taken place. It follows that if the Infinite is effectively produced on this basis, it is the Master himself, and consequently also his ship (the absent and vain 'ark' evoked on Page IV), whose existence must become uncertain. For, in case of a 'jamming' of the code, we cannot know whether or not there was some sort of wager (a count of words), nor whether or not there was a poet staking his life on such a wager. If the Number turns out to be infinite, then Mallarmé is disrupted not in his historical existence qua author, but in his memorial existence qua gambler. And this quavering will then propagate itself back up to whatever catastrophe may have initiated such an undertaking: We must doubt whether there ever existed a literary disaster (a shipwreck of regular verse) profound enough to justify such 'madness' on Mallarmé's part, for the sake of saving Meter and rhyme in spite of the emergence of free verse.

Page III thus describes the site of the throw in the most favorable circumstances: those of a throw of the dice having *succeeded* in producing 'the unique Number that cannot be another', a throw that has 'infected' in return its own conditions of arrival by rendering them 'eternal',

that is to say infinite – virtually existent and nonexistent at once. In other words, the circumstances are described according to a consequence that has *already* modified them, as if the throw had preceded and conditioned its own conditions. The throw has taken place – it has produced the infinite Number – and in return the throw is become uncertain, and with it the site in which the drama took place. This is doubtless what explains the circular structure of the Poem, which begins and ends with the words ‘a throw of dice’ so as to suggest a game that has always already begun, and in which it is impossible to distinguish chronologically the starting point from its ramifications.

Dilla's Donuts

However, even in this case – that of the effective production of an infinite Number responding to the Master's expectations – the throw of dice *will not* annul Chance, since it will draw its eternity from an *identification* with the latter, and not from an impossible destruction of Contingency. Thus, even in the most favorable case – that of the complete success of the wager – a throw of dice will not abolish Chance: which is to say that it will never abolish it. QED.

(b) *The Body in the Conditional*

The first mention of the Number, on Page IV, confirms this line of reading. The Master, as we have seen, infers

from the 'conflagration' of words that 'is prepared / shaken and blended / in the fist that might grasp it // as one threatens / some destiny and the winds // the Unique Number that cannot be // another [se prépare / s'agite et mêle / au poing qui l'éteindrait // comme on menace / un destin et les vents // l'unique Nombre qui ne peut pas // être un autre]'.²⁰ We see that the Hero of the *Coup de dés* acts like Igitur in one of the endings to the tale: He *shakes* the dice in his fist without letting them go. But something then happens that allows the surpassing of the aporia of 1869: *The fist itself passes into the conditional* – it no longer grasps, it 'might grasp'. The Number is prepared; but, if the code fails, its preparation, its future summation, is also the preparation of its undecidability; and the latter, as we have said, will infuse the act of throwing, but also the thrower himself, his own uncertainty. In other words, the undecidability of the Number is in the process of passing into the flesh of the Poet. The Number impregnates with its hypotheticity the very person of the Master, 'mixes' it with him and begins to drown him in its own uncertainty: 'one [wave] // invades the head / spills down like a submissive beard // direct shipwreck // of man this with no ark [un <flot> // envahit le chef / coule en barbe soumise // naufrage cela // direct de l'homme sans nef]'. Here Mallarmé indicates, with these waves of writing that

20 Emphasis ours.

have turned him gray, that his imminent physical death will transfigure him into an author whose being will have become conditional. For, in combining his existence as an author with a Poem that is revealed to be an act, and inserting into this act the virus of 'perhaps', the Poet will himself, during his posthumous existence, become a 'quavering name'.

(c) *Intrinsic Subjunctives*

Let us pass on to the second exposition of the Number, on Page IX.

If the code was entirely unambiguous, the imperfect subjunctives through which the Number is characterized ('were it to exist', 'were it to be ciphered', 'were it to be illuminated', etc.) would cease to be pertinent once the code was decrypted. One would then be able to speak of the Number in the indicative, affirming that it does, indeed, cipher and illuminate. But the insistence on the subjunctive (the capital letters, the insistent repetition) suggests that the properties of the Number must be eternally hypothetical and exclude forever the indicative; that even once it is ciphered, a conditional clause must be appended to it – *were it indeed* to be *truly* ciphered, existent, illuminated, etc., rather than nondescript, noncoded, insignificant. If the two options (encrypted/nonencrypted) are undecidable, the subjunctive does

indeed become an intrinsic and perennial property of the Number, not an external, provisional property relating solely to our ignorance. The subjunctive is an objective property of the Number, not a subjective attribute of the reader. The undecidability is thus not (as the ironist would have it) anterior to the throw and the enemy of its success, but posterior to it and a sign of its efficacy.

(d) Return to the Unique Number

We can, what is more, demonstrate that the hypothesis of an uncertain code allows us to elaborate on the twofold determination that the Hero applies to the Number – that it ‘cannot be another’ and remains ‘unique’.

α) If the Number that is being prepared ‘cannot be another’, it is because this Number is on the way to being infinitized. The sum of words, because of a hesitation in the code, is on the way to being split into two possibilities that will crystallize when the word ‘consecrated’ – the final term of the count – is reached: Either the Number ciphered by the vortex (707) will emerge, a sign that the dice have been thrown; or another number will come about, or even a series of other numbers, all nondescript, indicating that nothing will have taken place but the place of the Poem and its insignificant quantity of vocables. But therein lies precisely the authentic consecration of the Constellation: the true Number which illuminates the

nocturnal sky of the *Coup de dés* is not 707, but 707 *fringed* by its alternative numbers. When it is said of this Constellation that 'it must be the Septentrion also the North', the 'it must' signifies on one hand that *it must be* the Number containing the symbol of 7 charged with nothingness and night (=0), but also, on the other hand, that this stellar configuration is espied in somewhat uncertain fashion (it must 'no doubt' be it – but there is, precisely, a doubt), hemmed by a cloud of other possibilities, in a turmoil that is its halo: the crown of infinity. The programme that Mallarmé sets himself in 'Le Mystère dans les lettres', that of a 'chance conquered word by word',²¹ will in this way be realized to the letter: Word by word, Chance will have been enumerated, then enumerated *once again* and thus joined with.

This stellar Number will be identified with Chance, and will be just as eternal as Chance, because it will be wedded to the dialectical structure of the latter (to be itself and its other). But this identification will not have been fully achieved until the day when the code is deciphered – deciphered by chance, and thus *for* Chance. A process of the unveiling of Chance by Chance: such is the meaning of the Constellation. This is the way in which the *Coup de dés* accedes to the *anonymity* of the Book:²²

21 OC II, 234 [tr. B. Johnson as 'The Mystery in Letters', in *Divagations*, 231-6: 236].

22 Recall that the Book has no authorial attribution, and that the operator who conducts the reading of it is not expected to have composed it. On this anonymity of the dreamt-of

because the meaning of the Poem is held at the center of a relation that none will have written, except for Chance. For on one hand, we have a poet who died without knowing whether his text would be deciphered; on the other, readers who, by accident, have discovered the cipher of the text, but will never know the choice of the poet, nor even whether he made a clear choice. Neither all-powerful author nor omniscient reader: The Poem escapes mastery of its composition just as it escapes knowledge of its decipherment. The meaning of the *Coup de dés* is constructed in the back-and-forth between these two halves – author, reader – that never come together. This double system of echoes reciprocally lacking each other, this discordant, quavering vibration between ourselves and the Master, is that of the infinite itself, symbolized by the constellatory *blur* of the ‘it must be...’

ß) We thus understand more precisely what the *uniqueness* of the Number is going to signify. The Number is unique, we have said, because it is the Meter of a Poem that is itself unique. In fact, the code, in itself, has nothing singular about it: to count the words of his poem and to insert a charade that summarizes the ciphers – anyone could do as much. The uniqueness of the Number must thus proceed from the Poem itself, not from the

book, see also ‘Le Livre, instrument spirituel’, in *OC* II, 224 [tr. B. Johnson as ‘The Book as Spiritual Instrument’, in *Divagations*, 226-30].

encryption, which, for its part, is easily reproducible. But in what, precisely, lies the uniqueness of the *Coup de dés*?

The Poem apparently radicalizes the undertaking of free verse: One could say of it also – even more so, in fact – that it ‘tampered with’²³ verse by redistributing it over the entire space of the page. However, unlike free verse, this new form represents not only a defense of a new genre, but also the indirect defense of traditional meter and rhyme: In it the idea of a count intrinsic to the structure, and of a duality dividing the whole of the poem, is maintained (a throw of dice – as if / as if – a throw of dice). But it is not this formal radicality that assures the *Coup de dés* of its uniqueness – for other poems of the same ‘genre’ could and must follow. As we have said, only in being the first of the genre, the prototype, is it truly singular. But we must now add that this characterization is still too external: It must be shown in what sense this implies a difference in nature, not just a chronological priority.

What is it that, in the *Coup de dés*, can never be repeated, even by a poem of the same form? Just one thing: its *wager*. For the latter does not make sense unless it is unique – christic, even. The shipwreck sends out only one message before sinking – Christ knew only one crucifixion and one resurrection. Imagine the Son of God returning to Earth and undergoing once more the agony of the cross:

23 ‘La Musique et les Lettres’, in *OCI*, 64 [tr. B. Johnson in *Divagations*, 173-98: 183].

This would no longer be a Passion, but a comedy of repetition. In the same way, we cannot today – now that Mallarmé's procedure is known – repeat the *Coup de dés*'s enterprise of encryption, unless as a parody, or as an immediately stale 'trick'. But the same goes for Mallarmé himself: If he had left us a series of poems adopting not only the form of the *Coup de dés*, but also its encryption, the wager would collapse into farce. For we would have a Poet who tried to multiply his chances of being decrypted by producing his messages in a bottle on a regular basis.²⁴ The beauty of the gesture consists in its unparalleled nature. And the infinity of Number engendered by the quavering of the code, the infinity of the Poet who participates in the undecidability of Chance, confirm that this adventure, like that of the Passion, has no meaning unless it takes place once and once only. There must be no occurrence of the Meter beyond the first one: Its uniqueness is evental, not arithmetical.

Hence the title of the Poem, which is also its key phrase, now appears in a different light: 'A throw of

²⁴ The two sonnets ('Salut' and 'À la nue accablante tu...') are not poems comparable with the *Coup de dés*: The latter contains in principle not only a count, but a confirmation of the code through the presentation of the Number in a charade. On the other hand, the octosyllabic sonnets offer no proof in themselves that their number of words is more than a chance occurrence, since neither 70 nor 77 are encrypted a second time in the text in which they appear. If the *Coup de dés* had not been written, we would not have been able to demonstrate that these latter two numbers had doubtless been premeditated, whereas the inverse is not true: The evidence of the encrypting of the *Coup de dés* would have remained very strong even if the two sonnets had not been written (or similarly counted). This Poem is thus indeed unique within the oeuvre, and from it alone radiates the gesture of the thrower.

dice will never abolish Chance'. We have explained how the production of an infinite Number does not represent an abolition of Chance, since owing to its undecidable structure, the former is identified with the latter. And then a dialectic ensues between the two: As it fuses with Chance, the Number (and it alone) escapes from the effects of Chance. It ceases to be hazardous and becomes necessary. Thus, in one sense, the *Coup de dés* does not abolish Chance, but, in another, it does – for it abolishes Chance's capacity to produce nothing *but* contingent realities, through the exception of the unique Number. This is why we must adjoin to the immediate meaning of the title – a throw of dice will never abolish Chance – a contrary sense: A throw of dice has indeed abolished Chance. Chance is destroyed at the same time as it is conserved, according to an ambiguity that reproduces in its own way the twofold sense of Hegelian *Aufhebung* (surpassing/conservation).

It will perhaps be said that, in maintaining that there has indeed, in a certain sense, been an abolition of Chance, we do violence to the very declaration of the statement-title. But this is not the case, for we pay attention to the *literal* sense of this declaration, that is to say, to the fact that it is *in the future tense*. If Mallarmé wished to formulate a universal law, why did he write not 'A throw of dice *can never* abolish Chance', but 'A throw of dice *will never* abolish Chance'? It will perhaps be said – and this is true,

of course – that the second statement, with its destinal twist, is more beautiful than the first. But is there not also a more fundamental reason presiding over this choice? Is the choice of words but a matter of style for Mallarmé? Let us ask ourselves in what way the use of the future tense here implies a meaning that *is not* identical to that of the phrase in the present tense. Then things become clear: the title does not affirm that a throw of dice cannot abolish Chance, *but that it can never abolish it again*. In other words, that the only and unique dice-throw capable of abolishing Chance has already been played by the Poem we are in the process of reading. For, as we have said, it is impossible to reiterate Mallarmé's act without degenerating into parody. Everything is necessarily contingent, except contingency itself *and* the unique act of the Poet who incorporates himself into it – once, once only, and forever. Never again. *Nevermore*.

The *Coup de dés* does indeed intend to break in two the history of the world: like an zero-event on the basis of which every calendar must be calculated – like a chistic birth – it is the absolute rupture of a before and an after, of a unique, nonreproducible wager, without precursor or successor, of which Mallarmé is the 'unique Name'.

THE VEILED LETTER

But this whole web of suppositions is built on sand so long as we have not established that the count of 707 does indeed possess some ambiguity that can infinitize it. We must therefore verify our second hypothesis: the existence of a slight uncertainty affecting the summation of the Number. Now, the establishment of such an uncertainty places us before the same exigency as did the establishment of the reality of the Number: We must indicate not only where the indeterminacy of the count is situated, but in what way the meaning of the Poem (or of one of its episodes) might indicate this indetermination. Just as the Number is coded twice – through a counting procedure and through allusions in the text (by the number of words and by the charade of the vortex) – so must its ‘quavering’ be. However, it is no longer a matter of discovering, as before, general clues as to the infinity of the Number; this time we must find the analogue, for the ‘quavering’ of the enumeration, of what the Page of the vortex was for 707. In other words, we need to find the precise spot where the Poem exhibits that its process of *counting* is troubled, and, for this very reason, *victorious*. Let us begin by seeking out this Page, before tackling once more the protocol of the summing of words.

Now, for this purpose we have at our disposal one precious clue: a letter from Mallarmé to Camille Mauclair, of 9 October 1897,²⁵ in which the poet speaks of the eminent importance that he accords to the silent *e*, in particular for the defense of regular verse:

I have always thought that the silent *e* was a fundamental device for verse, and I even drew this conclusion in favor of regular verse – the fact that this syllable that can be omitted or heard at will, made possible the appearance of a fixed number, which, struck uniformly, would be appropriate only on grand occasions.²⁶

To understand the meaning of this declaration, it must be recalled that, at the end of the nineteenth century, the ‘quarrel’ of the silent *e*²⁷ was still very much alive. The controversy, of which one finds traces from the eighteenth century onward,²⁸ bears upon the question of whether it is legitimate to pronounce silent *es* in the body of regular

25 That is, while he was correcting the proofs of the final version of *Coup de dés*.

26 *OCI*, 818.

27 Rather than the ‘silente’, the metricians now prefer to speak of the ‘obsolete’ or ‘unstable *e*’, since the so-called silent *e* is not always silent. We will nevertheless conserve this name, which was that of Mallarmé and his contemporaries.

28 For a history of the quarrel, see J. Gros de Gasquet, *En disant l’alexandrin. L’acteur tragique et son art, xviii^e - xxe siècles* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2006), 332-8. See also, for the situation in the nineteenth century, M. Murat, *Le Vers Libre* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008), 96-7.

verse according to current diction rather than according to metrical rules. In particular, ought one to strive to make heard the 6-6 caesura of classical verse, pronouncing to this end the silent *es* one would discard in normal speech but which are necessitated by meter? Or should one favor, as do actors in the theatre, the natural and the phrased,²⁹ abandoning the monotonous litany of the alexandrine chanted by the hemistich and at the end of verse, and conform to common usage, which tends toward the elision of the silent *e*?

Take Racine's couplet:

Qu'il ne se borne pas à des peines légères:

Le crime de la soeur passe celui des frères.³⁰

The final feminine endings of 'borne', 'peines', 'crime' and 'passe' must be pronounced if one does not want the verse to limp. For classical metrics requires us to count the silent *e* at the end of a word as a syllable when it is placed between two consonants ('crime passionnel') and

29 A phrased reading consists in taking one's cue for the scansion from the syntax rather than from the meter. Rather than producing, as declamation does, pauses – or accents – at the hemistich and at the end of the verse, one tries to introduce patterns of breath that efface the metrical frontiers of the verse (in particular its external frontiers), emphasizing its syntactical divisions alone. The phrased usage participates in a dynamic similar to that of the nonmetrical elision of the silent *e*, in so far as both have the effect of replacing (at least partially) the hearing of verse with the hearing of a phrase. On the phrased in the course of the nineteenth century, see Gasquet, *En disant l'alexandrin*, 175-86.

30 'No light punishment should be the sister's / Her crime exceeds that of all her brothers'. – *Phaedra*, Act IV Scene VI.

to elide it only when it is followed by a vowel ('foll[e] inquiétude'). If, in our couplet, we elide the *e*, then we lose not only the length of the verse, but also its internal structure – that is to say, its splitting by the caesura, whose position ceases to be identical from verse to verse. Now, the caesura is the essential medium for the listener to recognize the mutual equality of the alexandrines that follow each other. As Benoît de Cornulier has shown, it is in fact impossible to recognize spontaneously the metrical quality or inequality of two verses when they are made up of more than eight syllables.³¹

'Short' verses – up to the octosyllable – thus have no need, in principle, to possess an internal structure to aid in their recognition. On the other hand, in order for 'long' verses – for example, a decasyllable or an alexandrine – to be recognized, they must contain a 'fixed caesura' that divides them into parts of fewer than eight syllables each: For the verses mentioned above, the classical division is respectively 4-6 and 6-6, but romanticism, as we know, has an affection for the 4-4-4 as an alternative division of the

31 Benoît de Cornulier, *Théorie du vers. Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarmé* (Paris: Seuil, 1982). The 'psycho-metric law of eight syllables', more precisely, states as follows: (a) that one cannot identify a metrical equality for verses *more than eight syllables* (for some people can identify this equality only for shorter verses); (b) that this spontaneous identification bears upon a syllabic equality between neighboring verses (heard or read one after the other), not a perception of the syllabic number proper to each verse. According to the law of eight syllables, I can identify a series of verses of the same meter without knowing what meter it is. The spontaneous recognition of isometry is a psychological fact; the spontaneous recognition of a determinate meter (for example of an alexandrine), on the other hand, is a fact of culture (through experience, one develops 'an ear' for verse) that may be combined with the latter, but is of a different nature.

alexandrine. It is only on this condition that the listener or reader would be able to perceive the recurrence: In the case of the classical alexandrine, it is not by means of the 12 syllables of the verse, but by means of the six syllables of the hemistich, that we identify the regular return. For this caesura to be audible, it must obey strict constraints, maintained without exception by the classical poets, and still widely dominant in the romantics.³²

It should thus be understood that what is at stake in the pronunciation of the silent *e* is the comprehension of meter *as such* by the listener: Our capacity to hear the recurrence of length in verses depends upon a respect

32 The classical caesura, as well as its privileged place in verse according to meter, must obey four rules, two syntactical and two phonetic. Syntactical rules: The caesura cannot fall inside a word nor separate a proclitic or a monosyllabic preposition of the word that follows (the proclitic is a monosyllable that is a part of the word that follows it, and only makes sense together with it – for example an article, a subjective pronoun or a demonstrative determinative). Phonetic rules: These concern, precisely, the silent *e*, which must not fall either on the sixth or the seventh syllable of a verse.

There is nothing arbitrary about these rules: to transgress them systematically amounts to writing a series of phrases of twelve syllables in which can no longer be heard an equality of length. Thus, this phrase in Racine's prose: 'C'est à vous de voir com//ment vous vous défendrez', in which the caesura falls within a word, cannot be treated as a twelve-syllable in reading or in hearing. One must 'count on one's fingers' to assure oneself of its syllabic number. The same is true of this other phrase of Racine's: 'Tunc fus point coup//ble de ce sacrifice', where the seventh syllable falls on a silent *e*. Rewritten respecting the rules of the caesura, the two statements on the contrary exhibit spontaneously their common meter, because we now perceive the equality of their hemistiches:

Et vous verrez comment // vous pourrez vous défendre

Tu n'as point eu de part // à cet assassinat

This constraint of the fixed caesura proves that meter does not govern verse as an external and artificial convention (as if it were a matter of writing beautiful phrases in prose, whose 'rule' demanded 'in addition' that they should have the same number of syllables and should rhyme), but that it determines intimately its structure.

On the examples above, see Gasquet, *En disant l'alexandrin*, 32-5.

for the silent *e*. Thus, it is not the *e* in itself – its phonic matter, its possible degrees of realization, the fine detail of its modulation – that matters here or that is of principal import. The problem lies not in determining the sonorous tenor of *e* (barely pronounced, clearly audible, hammered home), but in deciding whether or not it should be counted, in the hearing, as a syllable. For what is at stake is knowing whether metrical verses – submitted to a fixed measure of syllables – need be understood as metrical. In other words, the question is: Is metricity a quality that is poetical in itself, and that deserves to be heard as such? Or is it a matter of a ‘coordinate’ of verse that is no longer of any importance, since it represents an outmoded convention that can be detached from verse and from its lifeblood, as a snake sheds its skin? It is this last option that the partisans of the elision of the silent *e* will favor. For them, the pronunciation of the silent letter gives rise to a diction that has become rather artificial, even ridiculous, to modern ears. To pronounce this letter systematically would bring about a kind of death of classical (notable Racinian) verse, by rendering it inaudible to contemporary ears and subordinating it to rules whose provenance is long forgotten – rules that do not relate to that which constitutes its dramatic and intemporal beauty. To take up our example again, the same couplet of Racine’s would thus be submitted to the elision of mute *es*, and one would pronounce, in the

place of alexandrines, not two verses, but two phrases: two ten-syllables, that would not, furthermore, be classical decasyllables, because of an identifiable caesura in the fourth position, which comes close to 'rhymed prose' – even if the rhythm in 5-5 maintains, in the present case, the impression of isometry:

Qu'il ne se born' pas // à des pein' légères
 Le crim' de la soeur // pass'³³ celui des frères

Considered in this light, the question of the silent *e* could be determined by serious arguments in one direction, or the other, in each case with a clear awareness of the stakes of the dispute. But we must now add that it this is a *contemporary* presentation of the quarrel, and does not permit us to understand the precise context in which Mallarmé made his own proposition as to the vocalization of the *e*. For in the nineteenth century the conception of things was much more complicated, for a set of reasons that we must now discuss.

At the time when Mallarmé penned his letter to Maucclair, the pronunciation of the silent *e* was being undermined not only by the diction of actors, who neglected it more and more, but also by the 'accentual theory' that had dominated French metrics since the 1840s. This theory,

33 Here a discreet pause might replace the pronunciation of the *e*, to avoid a disagreeable accumulation of 's'.

initiated by Scoppa at the beginning of the nineteenth century, was intended to bring French verse together with antique and European (in particular, Italian) verse, by freeing it from the syllabic orientation that is singular to the French metric. Its argument was that regular verse is not characterized in the first instance by the counting of syllables, but (as in ancient verse) by prosodic constants, that is to say by the rhythm of its accentuation – for example, in the case of the alexandrine, as Quicherat would have it, by accents placed in the middle and at the end of the verse, together with two mobile accents in each hemistich (the alexandrine called the ‘tetrameter’).³⁴ For this theory, it is thus the scansion of the verse, and not its syllabic formation – the number of accentual groups, and not the number of syllables – that primordially determines meter. It is the regularity of accentuation, and not the return of *n*-syllables (of the verse or of its division into hemistiches) that ensures the perception of a measure common to the verse. The appearance of free verse, at the end of the century, will appear to be a striking confirmation of accentualism, since this new poetical form shows that the syllabic count is not an essential characteristic of verse and that consequently we must seek the principle of a unified metric in terms of rhythm instead.

34 For example, to take up again the preceding verse of *Phaedra*: ‘Qu’il ne se borne pas à des peines légères’.

We know today – in particular since the work of Cornulier – that the accentual theory fails to take account of the structure of regular verse, and that it is impossible to do without including syllabic count in the examination of fixed meter.³⁵ But its domination at the end of the nineteenth century aggravated the confusion of the quarrel over the silent *e*, by supplying fallacious arguments to adversaries of its systematic pronunciation. For the debate to have been, if not resolved, at least clearly set out, would have required the alternative to have been formulated in the terms proposed above: Either one must decide to make the meter of regular verse heard (a meter determined by the syllable-count), or one must renounce it. Up to each, then, to advance his motives: fidelity to the metrical intention of the author (that is to say, his concern to make heard the return of a constant syllabic meter) or a desire to maintain the bond between verse and the living practice of language. Once one is conscious that meter is defined in syllabic terms, one understands immediately

35 On the story of the accentual theory and its contemporary critics, see J.-M. Gouvard, *Critique du vers* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000), 'Introduction' and 'First Part', I. The principal weakness of the accentual theory was that it was based on an accentuation that, in French, has no certain rules: we discover considerations not only syntactic (tonic accent on the last nonsilent syllable of a word or of a grammatical group), but also stylistic (oratory accent on the first syllable), and we are thrown into undecidable controversies (is there a counter-tonic accent on the prepenultimate syllable of long words, for example: 'échelonnement'?). The subjectivity of the metrician must thus necessarily be brought to bear to rule on controversial cases, which makes it impossible to establish any criteria acceptable to all. What is more, the rules that determine the position of the caesurae are not accentual, as we have seen, but syntactical and phonetic. Thus the internal structure of verse cannot be studied with precision and objectivity on the basis of rhythmic considerations.

that the elision of the silent *e* amounts to rendering the meter inaudible. But, because of the preeminence of the accentual theory at the end of the nineteenth century, the adversaries of the silent *e* – and even its defenders – do not seem to have understood that what was at stake in the quarrel bore, above all, upon meter, and not upon the phonic quality of the letter itself. For the silent *e* had *never been accented* – so its conservation or elision could not modify the number of accents in a verse. Phoneticists such as Paul Passy could thus extol the systematic suppression of the silent *e* in the name of the sovereignty of oral language, while maintaining that this does not affect meter, which is defined solely by the count of accents (alexandrine ‘trimeter’, ‘tetrameter’, etc.).³⁶

Now – a sign that this debate is misdirected – the partisans of the silent *e* responded on the same terrain as their adversaries: phonetics and not metrics. Rather than asserting the rights of syllabic constancy of verse so as to defend the pronunciation of the silent letter, they emphasized various degrees of pronunciation of the silent *e* and affirmed that one heard it even when one did

³⁶ See R. de Souza, ‘Le rôle de l’*e* muet dans la poésie française’, *Mercur de France*, January 1895, 7. Passy, cited by Souza, even goes so far as to annul masculine *es*, including those that are within a word (syncope) if they are not accented. Which gives, applied to the verse of Lamartine’s *L’Immortalité*, a self-evidently ridiculous result (*ibid.*, 5):

Pour moi, quand j’verrai dans les célestes plain’
 Les astres s’écartent de leur rout’ certain’
 [...]
 Seul, je s’rai d’bout; seul, malgré mon effroi...

not detach it as a distinct syllable: 'Aimée', they said, is not pronounced like 'aimé'; in 'gêne' the first syllable is prolonged by the presence of the silent *e* even when the latter is elided, and so on.³⁷ In other words, they defended a pronunciation that changed nothing in the counting of syllables (whether the *ê* of 'gêne' is long or short does not modify its syllabic formation; 'aimée' counts for the same amount of syllables as 'aimé'). They discussed the phonic realization of *e*, without understanding that the problem bears upon the audibility not of the letter, but of the syllabic meter.

The confusion is further aggravated by the appearance, again at the end of the nineteenth century, of free verse. For one of the characteristics of this poetic form is to introduce a principle of uncertainty into the pronunciation of the silent *e*, since there no longer exists any fixed syllabic meter to govern pronunciation. There will be equivocal cases, where the reader will hesitate between a 'poetical' diction – pronouncing the *e* in virtue of a resonance between the verse read and a known regular

37 Ibid., 12-13. The argument from the difference 'aimée/aimé' comes from Voltaire, who emphasizes the importance of this 'e' in a famous letter (to M. Deodatti de Tovazzi, 24 January 1761, cited in Gasquet, *En disant l'alexandrine*, 334). This difference would again be argued by Maurras in his preface to *La Musique intérieure* (Paris: Grasset, 1925), vi. The latter, a doctrinaire defender of traditional pronunciation, takes up all possible arms to defend his cause. He does not hesitate, half-jokingly, to call to his aid verses written by Landru [an infamous Parisian serial killer of the 1910s – trans.], to prove that the partisans of the elision of the silent *e* number among them an ally who discredits them. For this killer of women was also a killer of feminine *es*, his verse manifestly not counting them – and his undue 'slashing' of the vowel is enough, to the eyes of the head of *Action française*, to condemn him to the guillotine.

verse – and current diction, where he will tend toward elision. Let us take the example of Kahn's (mediocre) verse, from *Les Palais nomades*:

Cycle et volute
En trilles de flûte
Vers des paradis pleins de nus inconnus
Forme vestale
En ton ombre s'étale
Le tapis d'Orient des Édens continus³⁸

In the second verse, ought one to pronounce the *e* of 'trilles' to compose a pentasyllable? Or should one follow current diction, eliding the *e* and composing a tetrasyllable homogeneous with the preceding verse, which also has four syllables? The question of diaeresis or synaeresis poses a similar problem – linked still to the count of syllables. Should one read the last verse as an alexandrine, opting for diaeresis in 'Orient' ('O-ri-ent'), or adopt the usual diction ('O-rient') but thereby arrive at a less orthodox verse of eleven syllables?

As we can see in this example, free verse is not content with allowing the length of each verse to vary freely. By the same token, it also introduces the possibility of metrical

38 'Cycle and volute / In trills of the flute / Toward paradises full of unknown nudes / Vestal form / In your shadow spread out / The Oriental rugs of continuous Edens' – Kahn, *Premiers poèmes*, 77.

indeterminacy *within* each verse. Because the verses, taken one after another, cease to be of equal or regular length, they are also, taken individually, no longer always of an exactly determinable length. Certainly, Kahn himself maintains a univocal and resolutely anticlassical principle of reading: He recommends that one always follows current diction, setting aside the ambiguities of the silent letter. But this is just an external rule, advocated in his preface on free verse,³⁹ and which does not at all follow from the new form in itself. And, in fact, Kahn seems to be the only one, among the writers of free verse of the symbolist period, to have imposed any rule regarding the silent *e*. His principal contemporaries (Jules LaForgue, Emile Verhaeren, Vielé-Griffin, Henri de Régnier) understand that the spirit of 'free' verse actually invites this slight uncertainty that permits the reader to operate her own counts and to choose her own rhymes.

We thus understand that the quarrel over the silent *e* may have prepared the public for that modification of hearing brought about by free verse, by introducing into regular verse, already, the possibility of a free choice of pronunciation. Stuck between opposed arguments equally incapable of achieving a decisive victory, actor and reader alike were obliged to choose for themselves their pronunciation of classical verse. This freedom of choice, which

39 Ibid., 31.

for traditional meter was possible *de facto*, could not but confirm the *de jure* freedom of free verse. And, in return, free verse seemed to deliver a decisive argument to the accentual analysis, by liberating verse from syllablism; it also backed up the point of view of phoneticists who pleaded in favor of current elocution, since the latter had now become licit, even recommended, for the new poetry. Thus, one way or another, a reciprocal reinforcement took place between the new diction of the old verse, and the equivocity sanctioned by the new verse.⁴⁰

But this 'contamination' of the arguments demonstrated that no one had a clear vision of the situation, for the question of the silent *e* could not, as would later be realized, be treated in the same way for metrical (syllabic) verse as for nonmetrical (free) verse. In the first case, it is a question of the measure of a verse; in the second, one of euphony alone. Instead of which, at this time – the end of the nineteenth century – the 'modernists' considered that syllablism and rhyme had been mere social conventions to which the geniuses of the past had submitted through

40 It does not seem, however, that the advocates of free verse utilized the accentual theory to argue their case. Indeed, Kahn – their principal theorist, as we have said – recuses the maintenance of a tonic accent in verse (a marked accent on the last nonsilent syllable of each grammatical group), an element that is the very basis of the accentual theory. He replaces it with what he calls an 'accent d'impulsion', difficult to conceive precisely, which depends upon considerations of style rather than of grammar. See his 'Préface sur le vers libre', in *Premiers poèmes*, 29-30, as well as the analysis of it proposed by R. Biétry in *Les Théories poétiques à l'époque symboliste (1883-1896)* (Bern: Peter Lang SA, 1989), 182-90. It is nevertheless true that the accentual theory left the field open for writers of free verse, far more so than had strict syllabic theory; and perhaps this was the principal contribution – an aesthetic one – of an otherwise unsound theory.

timidity. For the adversaries of traditional diction, therefore, it was a matter of rediscovering what they believed to have been the intimate 'music' of the classical poets and dramaturges, beyond the rules that had corseted them – rules that in themselves, so it was thought, had no literary value.

In this context, free verse would appear, naturally, as the ultimate liberation of poetry, continuous with the freeing-up of romantic and symbolist meter in relation to the 'rigidities' of the seventeenth century. What its partisans did not seem to understand, or to admit, was that this free verse was a rupture different *in nature* to the audacities that preceded it, since it was not a question of making meter more or less supple, but of abandoning it pure and simple. It thus appeared entirely legitimate to read regular verse with the same freedom (with regard to the silent *e*, to synaeresis and diaeresis) as the new verse, allowing ancient poetry to profit from the musical flexibility of the new diction – a way of emancipating postmortem the authentic geniuses of the past (Racine, Molière, La Fontaine) from the 'yoke' of Malherbe and Boileau, who had, it was believed, squeezed the life out of them.

We needed to take this detour to understand precisely what position Mallarmé occupied in the space of this dispute. According to his letter to Mauclair, there is, from

his point of view, an essential freedom of pronunciation of silent *es* in the alexandrine, so as not to produce the threnody of verse, always declaimed in the same rhythm. One must thus 'loosen up' verse, not only in its writing – as Mallarmé had done with the multiplication of enjambments and *rejets* (notable in *L'Après-midi d'un faune*) – but also in diction. So the poet confirms the existence of an uncertainty in regular verse that suggests its affinity with free verse: In either case, freedom is left to each reader to imprint on verse the rhythm that seems the most just.

Why adopt thus the point of view of the 'moderns'? Because Mallarmé tried thereby to invert, in favor of fixed meter, the argument of those who were hostile to the maintenance of the rule. For if it became possible, even desirable, to introduce flexibility into the reading of regular verse, *it would then no longer be possible to reproach it for its rigidity* – it would no longer be possible to make of meter a particular and arbitrary case of free verse. For Kahn, regularity and rhyme remain possibilities of free verse, which contain them as one of its many variants: The new form is thus, according to him, in a position of universality vis-à-vis metrical verse, which is but a particular and sedimented expression of it.⁴¹ Mallarmé suggests, on the contrary, that it is fixed meter that, once affected with the uncertainty of the silent *e*, finds itself

41 Kahn, *Premiers poèmes*, 16.

in the position of a general form containing its opposite as one of its possibilities. It is false that free verse contains metrical verse, since one should not confuse the potential for regularity in free verse (for reasons of meaning or rhythm) with the strict rule that the poet has no freedom to modify. The essence of meter and rhyme is to be constraining and to always be followed – not to be chosen as one, among others, of the expressive media at one's disposal. If Mallarmé sees in meter the condition of a ceremonial and public poetry, it is because the latter gives itself as an obligation anterior to individual choice, and capable by this token of supporting a Song destined for the Mass. However, once this rule is imposed – once the alexandrine is accepted as a fixed form – it is possible for each to introduce a principle of uncertainty into the *reading* of the verse, and thus to conjoin with the public usage of verse an individual usage that permits each to play the common instrument in his own way. Writing is rule-governed, but oralization is free. And so it is fixed meter that succeeds in combining *both* the rule of tradition *and* the freedom of the moderns.

We can well see the dream that Mallarmé is fostering here: the dream of a cast-iron rule that would nevertheless contain some 'play', allowing verse – and in the first instance the alexandrine – to vibrate freely from one rhythm to another, from dodecasyllabic scansion to the fluidity of current pronunciation; but a rule that would

also manage to contain that principle of uncertainty within the narrow and marginal space of a simple letter, pronounced or elided at leisure. It is as if the poet desired to *infinite* the alexandrine – to make of its 12 a fixed number that, at the same time, would not be a fixed number. To make of it a meter that, like Chance, contains virtually its contrary option, free verse, without a strict rule as to the pronunciation of the silent *e*.

But this desire, in fact, runs up against an obstacle. For, as has been said, the alexandrine *is* a fixed meter, and its rule, notwithstanding one's allowing some degree of license in diction, admits of no play in the writing: The twelve syllables must be *readable* in the verse. And the same goes for rhyme. An alexandrine, isolated, does not exist: Even when its division is regular (as in Apollinaire's *Chantre*, with the one unique verse), it is no more than a dodecasyllabic verse, the alexandrine being by definition a rhymed pair, stanza or couplet. By means of the silent *e*, one can thus play with the (oral) *practice* of the rule but one cannot deny or place in doubt its existence. The alexandrine does not contain within itself – despite any liberties one might take with it – the possibility of its pure and simple non-being; it is thus not infinitizable according to the model of Chance.

But now suppose that the Meter of the *Coup de dés* contains in its rule an uncertainty analogous to that of the silent *e* for regular verse (at least in the version that

Mallarmé proposes to Maclair). No manual of metrics has taught of the existence of such a Meter. The singularity of the Number comes from the fact that we have learned of its existence uniquely *from* the poem that it governs, and with the help of clues that are 'open sesames' to it. Everything thus rests upon an hypothesis, and not upon a rule explicitly posited by the tradition; and because of this fact, it cannot be denied. Thus, if we discover an indeterminacy in the code that is at the origin of the unique Meter, then, this time, it is the very existence of the Number and of its rule that would be placed into doubt. And the Meter does indeed contain a principle of radical indeterminacy: It will both exist *and* not exist. And this for reasons equally serious in both cases, at least if we can show not only the equivocity of the count of words, but also the passages that, in the poem, effectively speak of this equivocity. Mallarmé would thus have succeeded in producing a Verse (of the amplitude of *Coup de dés*) that contains in it both the 'play' of free verse, and the strict count of regular verse – which contains both the rule and the nonrule, according to an oscillation that, bringing together the two factions of modern poetry, will alone succeed in exhibiting its infinite essence.

It is time, then, to begin the quest for this precious fault.

THE SIREN

In Part One, we found a double confirmation of the existence of a Number, and thus of the effectuation of a throw: an encryption of 707 *in* the text (the charade of the vortex) and an encryption of 707 *by* the text (the count of words). If we wish to establish with the same coherence the existence of an infinite quavering of the code, we must exhibit once more this type of double confirmation. Firstly, we must find in the text a passage of the Poem that treats in roundabout fashion the idea of a 'quavering' affecting the Number; and then we must extract, through the text, an effective grasp of the principle of the count.

Meanwhile, this decryption will lead (if it succeeds) to a paradox: we would have to be uncertain of its reality at the very moment that it reveals itself to be solidly attested. For the two aspects of decoding will play out in opposite directions:

1) If the *count* of words is indeed revealed to be marginally defective, this could be, no doubt, because Mallarmé made it so; but it could also be because such a premeditated count only ever existed in our imaginations. This first aspect of decryption *through* the text will thus potentially *disqualify* the very idea of a code. The decryption will, in this aspect, undermine itself, throwing suspicion upon our whole undertaking. Derailing the sum of words,

we will slide toward the hypothesis that there never was a code, and that therefore *neither was there a decryption* – that all was but smoke and mirrors.

2) But, inversely, if we find *within* the text an episode that evokes precisely this derailing of the count and this sliding toward the possibility that nothing, in truth, has happened, then we will be confirmed in the idea that Mallarmé premeditated things and that everything was composed according to a design made down to the last detail.

This double decoding will thus produce a combination of uncertainty and reinforced belief, and thus a 'flickering' between contrary convictions. The more clearly this second code appears, the more we shall hesitate to take its side completely. Now, this oscillation of our conviction will itself be intensified by the fact that, as we shall see, the episode of the siren enacts exactly this paradox: that of a discovery so unstable, so fragile in its truth, that we no longer know whether it really took place. A dazzling instability that prepares, of course, for the scintillating 'Perhaps' of the ultimate alternative: Nothing will have taken place but the place, except *perhaps* a Constellation

Let us begin by determining whether we can find, in the text, any evocation of a flaw in the count.

Such a passage, speaking not of the Meter, but of its infinite quavering, does indeed propose itself to us. As has already been suggested, it is on Page VIII, where we read of the *episode of the siren*:

THE NUMBER AND THE SIREN

anxious

expiatory and pubescent

mute

*The lucid and lordly crest
on the invisible brow
glitters*

*then overshadows
sombre a dainty figure
in her siren sinuosity*

with terminal scales impatient and

laugh
that

IF

of vertigo

upstanding

long enough
to slap
forked

a rock

false memory
immediately
evaporated into mist

that will impose
a limit on the infinite

THE NUMBER AND THE SIREN

soucieux

expiatoire et pubère

muet

*La lucide et seigneuriale aigrette
au front invisible
scintille
puis ombrage
une stature mignonne ténébreuse
en sa torsion de sirène*

par d'impatientes squames ultimes

rire

que

SI

de vertige

debout

*le temps
de souffleter
bifurquées*

un roc

*faux memoir
tout de suite
éva poré en brumes*

*qui imposa
une borne à l'infini*

Just as the vortex Page (Page VI) was the 'Page of Meter and Rhyme', so Page VIII might be called the 'Page of the Silent *e*'. Firstly because of the large number of names and adjectives with a feminine ending, sometimes occupying the whole of a segment ('*lucide et seigneuriale aigrette de vertige*'), or even three words in succession ('*stature mignonne ténébreuse*', '*impatientes squames ultimes*') or almost so ('*vertige / scintille / puis ombrage*'). But this appellation is above all justified by the segment that runs from the top of the Page, a decidedly inexhaustible passage where we read the very name of the shifting vowel:

pubère

muet

rire

The irony, of course, is that one hears the *name* of the letter ('*e muet*') on strict condition that the letter – the *e* of 'pubère' – is not left silent but is pronounced. So the indication is clear: The episode of the siren, placed under the aegis of the 'veiled' letter, suggests that it is the question of the strict rule and of its relaxation that is going to be broached.

What does this scene describe, then? The Master seems to have been drowned: He has been swallowed by the vortex of Page VI, and nothing remains of him but a quill brushing up against the cap that was certainly his (Page VII).

Henceforth, the crest will adorn nothing but a brow become invisible: It glitters, as if overcome with vertigo at the edge of the whirlpool, in the light of the stars. But then suddenly there emerges from the waters a siren, at the precise place where the plume floated – as if this ocean creature were to be crowned with the latter in place of the disappeared Hero. The quill, which offers one face to the light, ‘over-shadows’ [‘ombrage’ – also ‘umbrage’, therefore ‘angers’] with the other the siren that it adorns – and, through a play of words, seems to render it ‘sombre’ [‘ténébreuse’ – also ‘shadowy’], a blackened mood the ‘dainty’ creature then takes out on ‘a rock’, which it shatters with a brief beating of its tail. The cap is the night part of the Master, the inferior moment of his ‘fettered’ and maniacal ‘reason’ (his ‘toqué [cracked, loopy]’ aspect), whereas the plume is his stellar (‘lucide [lucid]’) part. In other words, by becoming the successor of the undone Master, a dauphin crowned in his wake, the siren succeeds also in separating the finite moment of the strict and univocal count (the black night, the cap, the abolished rock) that results in 707, from the infinite moment that is the instant of fleeting uncertainty imposed by the summation of the Number (the sparkling cap that now adorns her). This leap of the siren, brief and decisive, thus destroys the ‘rock’ of a Meter up until then ‘fettered’ in its arithmetical truth – that is to say, the Meter whose excessive and limited precision ‘imposed a limit on the infinite’ (that of 707).

Let us emphasize that there is no need here to bring the 'fantastic' into the poem – that is to say, to consider that a 'real' siren emerges. Indeed, the *Coup de dés* seems to constrain itself to relating events that are perhaps strange, but nevertheless possible according to the ordinary laws of nature, and from whose symbolization the whole poetic charge flows. Thus, the celestial throw, at the end of the poem, does not signify that the constellations are set miraculously into motion, but that the poet asks us to observe the night from the point of view of a shipwrecked sailor upon the surface of the water – on a sea that one supposes still to be rough and that 'pays no mind [verse l'absence]' to its 'lowly splashing'. A 'realist' restitution of the episode of the siren is thus necessary – and even desirable, for in it one discovers the entire beauty of the episode. The captain once submerged, we must imagine that the debris of the ship comes back for an instant to the surface, spat out by the whirlpool that will suck it back down again in a moment, and that amongst this debris is the *pro*w of the ship, which, as is often the case, takes the form of the *figure* ('stature') of a siren. It is this statue that, through a sublime chance, emerges at the exact point where the disappeared Master's feather is floating, appearing for an instant, with this brief coronation, to take up once more the glory of his 'mission', before sinking in turn. It is as if the Master himself, rather than perishing, had emerged once more from the waters, transfigured

into the form of the fantastic creature. We are faced with one of those visions, at once hallucinatory and rationally explicable, that one encounters in the stories of Edgar Allan Poe – Mallarmé's acknowledged master.

What does this transformation mean? The 'si-ren' in her 'tor-si-on' is the Number just coded by the note 'Si', become the 'queen' of the Poem. This Si is enthroned in glory on top of the same Page VIII ('muet rire que SI'), as she soars up from the depths of Page VI's vortex toward the Sky (the laugh is 'sou-cieux [anxious]', placed under ['sous'] the sign of the skies ['cieux']). The 'ultimate forked scales' of the 'dainty form' figure the form of an S, with its double hook, as well as that of a French 7, with its transversal bar giving it a 'bifurcated' aspect. The Number, emerging from the vortex that has just been encrypted, thus destroys the finitist obstacle that has up until this point tormented the Master: The Meter is freed from the code that, after having engendered it, became a fetter on it; and it will be diffused, from the following Page onward, with all the (from now on hypothetical and eternal) force of its being-in-the-subjunctive ('IT WAS // THE NUMBER // WERE IT TO EXIST', etc.). It will finally be born to itself, buffeted by a chimera that cares nothing for neatly closed counts.

But in the process, the transfiguration of the Master will itself be completed. Remember that the 'fist' that shook the dice initiated the transformation of the Hero by

'haloing' itself in an embrace described in the *conditional*, not in the indicative. Now it is the *Poet* – that is to say the Author of *Coup de dés* himself – who *has become one of his Fictions*. It is indeed Mallarmé who comes back from the dead to be reborn in the Siren. Having been infinitized owing to an uncertainty (still unknown) introduced into the count, the Number ends up retroceding its infinity to the thrower of the dice. But this thrower is Mallarmé himself, the writer of the Poem-Number. Mallarmé thus described his carnal death and his resurrection (in the strict sense: the siren is standing *upright*) in the form of one of his works. His body has disappeared, but his spirit – his posterity, the memorial Mallarmé – returns to us in the form of an Hypothesis that contains within it all the options of Chance: He threw and he did not throw, he succeeded and he failed – all at the same time and according to the same logic. This new entity that is the 'posthumous author' is engendered by the Poem as one of its artifacts, as inconsistent and thus as limitless as its purest chimera. Mallarmé thus stands alone in having passed *entirely* into his own work, in having slid into the very interior of his Pages, between the ink and the paper. He is the one and only cantor to have become, to the letter, 'the son of his works', to have re-engendered himself – no longer in a birth brought about by a chance sexual encounter, but in a rebirth brought about by the strict necessity of Chance.

The christic process is thus faithfully reinstated, at the same time as it is transposed. The Master, firstly, is his own prophet: He is Saint John the Baptist decapitated by the waters, cap and plume announcing the coming of the messianic Number. Then he becomes his own Son, brought back from the dead in the form of the Siren ~~bifid~~ being, tenant of literary fiction and of the reality of a true gesture. Finally, he becomes a *dubitable* divinity, however brief and paradoxical his passage upon this Earth (or this Sea) may be. The Siren is no sooner perceived than she plunges once more into the ocean: Did this infinitization take place, or only its phantasm? Everything happened too fast, and in too improbable a fashion, for anything to be certain. If the Number is destroyed, the Number that is born of the ship's destruction, the 'conflagration of the unanimous horizon' – and if the cause of the disaster (the rock) is itself destroyed, are we not within our rights to doubt whether there has been any drama at all, and not just a dream brought on by the mingling of wind and waves? This hardly perceptible apparition of the Siren indicates to us its paradoxical being: Since it disagrees with the count, *it tends to abolish it, and with it its own action of disagreement*. It saws off the branch upon which it will never have had occasion to sit – to such a point that we no longer know, as spectator of this fulgurant elegance, whether something happened within it or not. And thus – in a last reprise of the 'destiny of Christianity' – modern

skepticism as to the authentic divinity of Christ is transposed into doubt as to the paradoxical existence of the Poet-Siren: Did something take place, or not?

As we have indicated, the derailing of the count implies that of the very idea that there is a code, and therefore decryption. At the same time, the text's description of this equivocal process reinforces the idea of a possible premeditation of the 'jamming' of the code, referred back to its infinite and concerted essence.

AT A STROKE

But we have anticipated enough. We must finally show where the uncertainty could lie, in a count that seems at first sight free of all equivocation: For what could be simpler than counting words? The last question to resolve is thus as follows: What, for a count of words, could play a rôle analogous to the quavering of the silent *e* for a count of syllables?

The solution presented itself, as one might expect, in accidental fashion. During the first months of our investigation, we regularly re-counted 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. In its place, we found a number hardly more or less than 707:

708, 706, 705... We did eventually identify our error and find the required Number again. But this episode also unveiled for us the most profound dimension of the Poem.

Where did the error come from? It came from the presence, in the Poem, of *three compound words*. We had counted each of these compounds now as *two words*, now as *one only* – whence the marginal variation in the count. It will be said that this error was purely subjective and that nothing allows us to see in it a principle of objective uncertainty; for a *compound word*, it will be argued, is always *one* compound word, and not two words. There is no indeterminacy there, no mark of a failing rule.

But it is not so simple. For it will be observed (and this was the source of our error) that *two* of the three compound words of the Poem *have no hyphen*. They are, on Page V, the preposition ‘par delà’ and, on Page XI, the substantive preposition ‘au delà’.⁴² Before examining the consequences of this notation, let us observe that the two terms have a celestial consonance, which underlines their importance in the poem. The first, recall, designates the

42 Marchal’s otherwise admirable Pleiade edition is at fault here, for it modernizes the orthography of these two words by adding hyphens to them. As to the Bonniot edition, it certainly commits the error of modifying the typographical character of the 1898 proofs, whereas Marchal reestablishes the Didot typography that Mallarmé initially wanted; but, on the decisive (for us) point of the absence of a hyphen in ‘au delà’ and ‘par delà’, Bonniot respects the notation of the 1898 manuscript as found in the Françoise Morel edition – *Un coup de Dés jamais n’abolira le Hasard. Manuscrit et épreuves* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 2007). Strangely, Morel proposes, in this same work, an edition of the Poem faithful in its typography, but containing in its turn the hyphens which every reader can see, only a few pages beforehand, do not exist in the original manuscript.

closed fist '*par delà* l'inutile tête [*beyond* his useless head]', thus indicating the beginning of the stellar transfiguration of the Master via the intermediary of his final gesture, which seems to point toward the sky. The role of the second compound word is more essential still: It intervenes at the very end of the Poem, in an interpolation into the second principal clause, to 'situate' the final Constellation. Running the punctuations together for convenience, the phrase is as follows: 'Rien n'aura eu lieu que le lieu, excepté, à l'altitude, *aussi loin qu'un endroit fusionne avec au delà*, une Constellation [*Nothing will have taken place but the place, except, at the height, as far away as a place merged with beyond*, a Constellation]'.⁴³ The expression is strange: 'Au delà' is used as a substantive, and not as a preposition, but without an article; the Constellation inhabits a place that 'fuses with beyond' and not 'with *the* beyond' or '*a* beyond'. No doubt Mallarmé thus avoids the Christian connotation of the term, but he seems also to suggest that the Constellation occupies the space of the *word* itself, as if the latter were to fuse with the term 'au delà', and with its ambiguity with regard to the count.⁴⁴

43 Emphasis ours.

44 It seems that in his prose texts Mallarmé writes 'au-delà' when it is employed as a substantive and 'au delà' when it is employed as a locution. This difference, which disappears in the Marchal edition (where the hyphen is systematically used), is faithfully reinstated by Yves Bonnefoy in *Œuvres complètes/Un coup de dés* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), for example on pages 135, 295 and 356 (see the *notice d'établissement* of the text, where the poet and editor explicitly assume their choice, 432).

But ambiguity, ultimately, for what reason? Firstly because we touch here on an arbitrary manifestation of the French language. It sometimes happens that French compound words tack together their two components – for example, ‘contresens [misinterpretation]’. In this case, the ‘count-for-one’ of the word seems obvious: ‘Contre’ and ‘sens’ have *visibly* fused into one single word. The ‘welding’ of two terms can also be achieved with a hyphen, as in the word ‘non-sens [nonsense]’. Here again, the count of the word seems logically to be one. But it can also happen that the two components, as above, remain separated by a space. Thus, the word ‘faux sens [mistranslation]’ is also known as a compound word (to be understood like ‘non-sens’, with a sort of ‘mental hyphen’).⁴⁵ This last case, however, can give rise to ambiguities. If someone opposes two interpretative traditions for the same text – the first carrying according to him a ‘true sense’ and the second a ‘false sense’ – he uses ‘faux sens’ in a way that makes of it, so it seems, a group of two words rather than one single compound word. For the speaker could just as well have spoken of a ‘sens faux’ (and a ‘sens vrai’) – that is to say, he could have inverted the terms, which is not possible in the case of a compound word (‘non-sens’ cannot be inverted into ‘sens-non’). In the same way, ‘chaise longue’ is a compound word (without hyphen) if one designates

45 On these examples, see M. Riegel, J.-C. Pellat and R. Rioul, *Grammaire méthodique du français* (Paris: PUF, 1994), 80.

with it 'a soft armchair designed for repose in a lying position'. However, in an oral phrase such as: 'Prenez cette chaise, la petite – non, pardon, plutôt la chaise longue – enfin, oui, la moins petite des deux... [Bring that chair, the small one – no, sorry, the long chair – yes, the less small of the two...]', we can see very well that 'chaise longue' is, in this case, a group of two words.

Thus, the context can modify the meaning – and thus the count – of these 'duplicitous' words when they have no hyphen: They can go from being a single compound word to being a group of two words. We see moreover that there is, as we have said, a strong arbitrariness in the French language as to the use of hyphens or compounds: *Contresens*, *non-sens*, *faux sens* are three compound words that belong to the same family of meaning, but are nevertheless spelled in three distinct ways; we write 'contrepoison [antidote]' like 'contresens', attaching the two words contiguously, but we write 'contre-exemple [counterexample]' with a hyphen. There is no grammatical reason for such differences.

How did things stand in Mallarmé's time? We know that a ministerial edict of 1901 – three years after the *Coup de dés*, that is – officially sanctioned the writing of compound names without a hyphen.⁴⁶ That the state should feel obliged to intervene in this question, albeit

⁴⁶ Ibid., 80.

to authorize freedom on the issue, leads one to think that things were up until then far from being clear and uniform. In short, all of this suggests that, if our code were to admit of some 'play', it would indeed be in the counting of compound words.

It seems that, in his Poem, Mallarmé follows the common usage of the time. Consulting the *Littré* dictionary – which, it is thought, was used by the poet⁴⁷ – in its original edition, one will find that 'au delà', listed as an adverbial locution, was written at the time without a hyphen.⁴⁸ On the other hand, if one seeks 'par delà' in the same edition, one will not find it: This term is not indexed as a compound word, but as the combination of two prepositions, 'par' and 'delà', each of which have an independent entry. 'Par delà' having no specific entry, it is found only as a possible use of 'delà', under the entry dedicated to the latter term. The presence in the *Littré*, as an independent entry, of the first locution and not the second, appears all the more arbitrary in that the entry for the word 'au delà' includes a citation from Voltaire in which alongside this latter word figures... the preposition 'par delà'⁴⁹ – proof that their equally-valid usage is attested to in an example of language used as a point of reference.

47 See Chassé, *Les Clés de Mallarmé*, chapter III.

48 É. Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (Paris: Hachette, 1878).

49 'Ma maison qui a le lac en miroir au bout du jardin, et la Savoie par delà ce lac et les Alpes au delà de cette Savoie [My house where the lake presents a vast mirror at the end of the gardens, with the countryside of Savoy beyond the lake, crowned by the Alps beyond it].' Voltaire, *Lettre d'Argental*, 8 January 1758, *ibid.*, vol. I.

So, how to count these two prepositions? Should we, following the usage established by the dictionary, count 'au delà' as one word and 'par delà' as two? In that case we would have to adopt the following rule: We count as one word every single entry – including every compound word (even if it has no hyphen) – listed in the *Littré* and as such inscribed in the general alphabetical order. On the other hand, we count as two words those compound words that have no hyphen and are not listed as a word, but as locutions with no specific entry. In which case, in the count of the words of the *Coup de dés*, 'au delà' will count as 1 and 'par delà' as 2. However, things are not so simple: for Mallarmé, as we have seen, made sure to use 'au delà' in a grammatically aberrant way. He who ordinarily respected syntax scrupulously, as the only guarantee of what he calls the 'stratum of intelligibility', employed this word in such a way that it could not be clearly identifiable, either with a locution (the construction excludes this), or with a substantive (the article is lacking). Is this not a discreet way of suggesting to the reader of the *Littré* that 'au delà', in the context of *Coup de dés*, is no more a recognized word than 'par delà'? In this case, must we not count it also as 2? We can see that the ambiguity is not surmountable by such an approach.

And then, more generally: Why would the *Littré* be the authority for the *Coup de dés*? Wouldn't it conform more to the spirit of the Poem to extract an *internal* rule of the

count – that is to say, one that proceeds solely from the endogenous logic of the text – and thus to count for 1 every vocable *separated by a space*? For the *Coup de dés* does indeed invite us to a reinvention of the separative power of blank space, and it would thus seem more satisfying to place our confidence solely in the visual lacunae between the words to assure our count.

In this case, ‘au’, ‘delà’, ‘par’ and ‘delà’ would count as 4 words – these terms’ autonomous existence, moreover, being solidly attested in the dictionary: for each boasts an independent entry in the *Litttré*, and there is thus no grammatical absurdity involved in isolating them from the locutions to which they belong. On the other hand, every compound word that carries a hyphen between its components crosses out the caesura of the white space, bridges the separation of the two halves, and would thus be counted for 1. And it is indeed by (spontaneously) following this rule that we obtained the sum of 707 words.

Let us understand the situation well: We have arrived at the idea that there should exist some way of counting compound words more reasonable than any other, given the nature of the *Coup de dés*. Since the architecture of the Poem relies upon the typographical force of the blank space, its poetic capacity to break the line of prose, as in regular verse, we shall consider the spontaneous reading, which isolates words between two spaces, to be also the most faithful to the spirit of the text. For we thereby pay

homage to the capacity of the blank space to separate, even within the word – at least when the latter consists of two halves, each possessing an autonomy of meaning. We also pay homage, in addition, to the ‘force of the line’ – to that symbol of the line of writing, struggling, with its coherence, against the storm of the void, that line which alone can succeed in reestablishing the unity of disjoint vocables: the hyphen that allows us to count the compound word for 1. And it is indeed thus that we have obtained, as the result of the addition of the three compound words (two of which have no hyphen), the sum (= 5) necessary to obtain the number 707.

The outcome, as we see, is that it is a matter here of a *decision* – a reasoned decision, certainly, but not an imperative: The ‘play’ introduced into the rule is enough for it to be possible to defend, and indeed to adopt, another choice without absurdity. And here is the essential point: the count of words thereby ceases to appear to be a ‘neutral’ and rigorously objective procedure. Mallarmé acted so as to slip into his Poem a linguistic uncertainty which, like the sounding of the silent *e*, became transformed into an uncertainty of metrical calculation. Free verse left us the choice to decide on the vocalization of the *e*, of diaereses and synaereses, while indicating to us, most often, a choice more euphonic than the others. In the same way, the Meter of the *Coup de dés* is given to us according to a method of summation perhaps more justified than

its alternatives, but nevertheless justified according to a necessity too slight to entirely prohibit a different count.

We are thus indeed in the presence of that detail that jams the overall mechanism of the unique Number and, in so doing, succeeds in abolishing it – and thus in infinitizing it.

But we can still take one last step. For the crux of the affair – which is also, as we believe, that of the Poem – bears upon the *third* compound word. The latter belongs to a third case in the *Littré*: It is no longer an unlisted word ('par delà') or one listed without a hyphen ('au delà'), but a word listed *with* a hyphen. We can thus call it the more 'solid' compound word of the three, and this because we have always counted it for 1, unlike the other two. But we now understand that it is also this third term that forbids us any univocal rule in the count of compound words. For, if all *three* terms had been written alike *with* or *without* a hyphen, we would have been able to apply the *same* rule of counting for each of them: to count them as 2 if they were separated by a space, as 1 if they were all linked together by a line. But this is now impossible: The rule engendering 707 is revealed to be heterogeneous – to be composed of two decisions – and thus to lay bare in strikingly evident fashion its 'axiomatic' character (that is to say, its decided, posited, rather than neutral, character). In other words, if 'au delà' and 'par delà' play in the text the role of the exception that makes the

rule fail (rather than proving it, for once), then our third compound word – the one, the only one, *with* a hyphen – reveals itself to be an exception to the exception. It is this ‘minority within the minority’ that exacerbates the dysfunction of the total by exposing the tinkering that is necessary to obtain the ‘correct total’. It thus becomes a focus for the entire stakes of the Poem – the hypothesis, the infinite, the consecration.

And this compound word – this unique word that succeeds in unsettling our count, from its margins, by exhibiting the undecidable nature of its procedure – the reader will doubtless have guessed, is none other than:

PEUT-ÊTRE

Rien n'aura eu lieu que le lieu excepté PEUT-ÊTRE
une CONSTELLATION

Rien n'aura eu lieu que le lieu excepté *par le*
PEUT-ÊTRE une CONSTELLATION

PERHAPS

Nothing will have taken place except PERHAPS a
CONSTELLATION

Nothing will have taken place except, *through the*
PERHAPS, a CONSTELLATION

It is the densest word of the *Coup de dés*, since in it and through it all the lines of the Poem converge, so that its writing alone suffices to produce the Poem's truth. Through Mallarmé's *inscribing* this adverb in the *Coup de dés*, the count of the constellatory Number acquired the uncertain vibration necessary for the infinitization of its Meter. An 'auto-performative' word, a word that engenders itself, in the image of the Poet become his own Fiction, the siren of the transfigured Master. PEUT-ÊTRE, creator of its own truth by the sole fact of its being written upon the constellatory night, by the poet drowning in white space.

FINAL REMARKS

We now understand the proliferation of other 'lines' in the poem, namely the *connecting* lines between postposed verbs and pronouns that relate precisely to the Number: 'existât-il', 'se chiffât-il', 'commençât-il et cessât-il', 'illuminât-il'. From a strict grammatical point of view, they are *also* 'hyphens'. Introducing no ambiguity into the count of words (since they do not at all fuse together the terms that they link), they are doubtless an ironic resonance – together with the glorious employment of subjunctives – of the absolute hypotheticity of the new

Infinite and of the graphism of the 'Peut-être' that ultimately engenders it.

The reader will recall, what is more, the presence of another line, this time in the 1897 *Cosmopolis* version – the *dash* that separated the word 'sacre' from the final phrase:⁵⁰

un compte total en formation

veillant
 doutant
 roulant
 brillant et méditant

avant de s'arrêter
à quelque point dernier qui le sacre –

Toute Pensée émet un Coup de Dés

a total count in the making

keeping watch
 doubting
 rolling
 shining and meditating

before finally halting
at some last point by which it is consecrated –

Every Thought Emits a Throw of Dice

Dashes are always punctuation marks: They can introduce a reply in a dialogue or play the role of a weakened parenthesis in the body of a phrase. Hyphens never, on

50 See above, page 93 note 51.

the other hand, play any role in punctuation: They have a lexical role (the constitution of compound words), a syntactical one (*crois-tu*, *existât-il*) or a typographical one (indicating of the breaking off of a word at the end of a line). When Mallarmé excluded all punctuation from the 1898 version of *Coup de dés*, he thus logically abandoned – at the same time as the four parentheses of the *Cosmopolis* version – the final dash, but conserved the hyphens, which are lexical as well as syntactic. But we now understand better his hesitation as to the dash: The dash of 1897 indicated that one must take up the count of words again at 0 and count separately the 7 words of the final phrase, rather than adding them to the 707 preceding terms. In Part One, we stipulated that this 1897 dash, separating the Poem from its conclusion, was doubtless not meant to be counted: certainly not if Mallarmé had enumerated, to obtain 707, the four parentheses of the text (for to add the dash would have then brought him to 708); and surely not in the case that he made a mistake in his numbering, for then (according to our hypothesis) his summation would have taken account only of words, and not of punctuation signs (parentheses or dashes). In other words, we are sure that this dash was in every way *outside the count*. Or, more exactly, the dash was conceived in such a way that to number it would mean losing 707. This punctuation sign thus refers, through scriptural allusion, to that other stroke, the hyphen of

'Peut-Être' – because both of them would introduce, each in its own way, a potential variation of the count capable of falsifying the Number.

We have said that the hyphen and the dash must not be conflated – the latter alone being a punctuation mark. But the 1897 dash, coming immediately after the word 'sacre', manifestly serves as a *visual citation* of the hyphen that is decisive for the Poem: It celebrates this stroke internal to *Peut-être*, and its infinite value, by plucking it out of the body of the text and adjoining it to the moral of the *Coup de dés*, itself also placed outside of the total count. In this way, the 'moral' of the Poem – 'Every Thought Emits a Throw of Dice' – would play its role as a 'scale model' of the whole: through its meaning (the wager and its result engendered by the encrypted count of words), and through its numbering (the 7 as 'cipher' of 707); and then also through the stroke that announces it, introducing into it once more a principle of uncertainty factored by infinity (should one count the dash placed after the word 'sacre' in the concluding phrase, which would give 8 and not 7?).

But in this case, why did Mallarmé abandon the dash in the final version of 1898? Doubtless because in this way the sign introduced one indeterminacy *too many* into the Poem, placing it in a rivalry with that what was to be the *Coup de dés* unique line of indecision, internal to its word-emblem. Just as the conservation of the four parentheses

created, in 1897, a pointless uncertainty in the summation, so the dash made for an excessive garbling, which risked rendering impossible any future decryption. The stroke was thus struck out.



It may be that the reader, having resisted the idea that the *Coup de dés* could be coded, now resists the idea that the code could be *seriously* put into doubt by such trifles.

The objection could take two distinct forms:

(a) The first objection would consist in admitting that the Number is identified with 707 according to the principle of the count of words, but in refusing to believe that Mallarmé would have gone so far as to introduce a principle of uncertainty relying upon a finely regulated usage of the hyphen. The results of Part One (the code) would be accepted, but not those of Part Two (the infinitization of the code).

We have already sufficiently responded to this above. Three convergent reasons give a high degree of plausibility to this option: Firstly, the essential role of undecidability in Mallarméan poetics (again emphasized in the *Coup de dés* by a 'Peut-être' in stellar capitals), which makes the idea of a univocal decipherment of the Number scarcely

credible; secondly, the coding in the text (the Page of the siren, which is also that of the silent *e*) – and not only in the text – of a principle of disorder; thirdly, the fact that one of the three compound words that ‘jam’ the count should be precisely the final ‘Peut-être’ of the Constellation.

This third argument in favor of our hypothesis permits us, what is more (and this reinforces its purport), to understand why Mallarmé chose to count the words of his Poem rather than its syllables or some other unit of language. We said, in Part One, that this choice seemed purely arbitrary, but that was merely the effect, as we now understand, of a still-incomplete perspective on the *Coup de dés*. The unit of count of the unique Meter, rather than being, as we thought, the mark of pure arbitrariness, instead becomes in its turn *retrospectively* comprehensible – even if, as we maintain, it can be discovered at first only by chance. For to count the words is to play with the indeterminacy of compound words, and thus to be able to make of one of them – the one whose meaning summarizes the entire project – the cause of that ultimate reversal of the code into its uncertainty. And perhaps this was the secret ambition of the *Coup de dés*: to write the most beautiful *peut-être* in the French language, the cause of itself in its letters of fire.

(b) But this response to the first objection only lends weight to a second one. The latter consists in admitting

both the results of Part One (the 707) and those of Part Two (the 'jamming' of the 707), but arguing that on their basis it is impossible to seriously doubt that this *twofold* device could have existed. This time it is a matter of recusing not our interpretation, but Mallarmé's project itself: The poet failed to produce in the mind of the reader the balance between belief and incredulity as regards the existence of the code (and thus as regards the throw). Before the exposition of the code, the reader was convinced (in general) that there was no encryption – and now he cannot but be persuaded, inversely, that there is a code, even if it is one that incorporates its own effacement. For the mechanism by which the 707 is rendered uncertain is too manifestly premeditated to be the work of chance. This is what we ourselves just argued: So we cannot now say that nothing has taken place – that the Poem is not coded – just because the count of words does not necessarily give the required result. We must indeed rather be convinced by the effect of our own argumentation, beyond all doubt, that Mallarmé purposely confused things in this way. Rather than conferring upon the Number its status of undecidable hypothesis, the siren's blow has founded the certitude that the poet planned everything meticulously.

And yet there are indeed reasons to doubt the solidity of our edifice. The latter, in truth, is built on bases whose equilibrium is fragile and that the least crack could bring

down entirely. After all, it seems common sense to count the three compound words as three separate whole words (and not as five words, breaking two of them up for purely typographical reasons) – which would make ‘sacre’ the 705th word of the Poem. And even if we accept the counting procedure, we must not forget that the Poem in its totality counts not 707 words, but (including its final phrase) 714 words. And then the first version of the *Coup de dés*, in 1897, only contained, as you will remember, 703... And it is supposed to be this, this cloud of insignificant numbers – 705, 714, 703 – that would found our unalterable conviction? Can we not see the set of *decisions* that have allowed us to ‘fall’ as necessary upon the ‘exact’ number, and thus to distance ourselves from other possibilities, recalcitrant to this beautiful architecture?

Numerological convictions, as we see, can rapidly crumble once a simple fissure appears in our delicate arrangement. But should the reader, if the doubt proves too pressing, begin reading again from the beginning, she will doubtless see her suspicions evaporate once more, fissured in their turn by the conjunction of contrary reasons.

This code is thus a thing at once fragile and coherent, authorizing a perennial balance between two polarities. The reader can henceforth, with its movement, impregnate herself with the infinitude of the Master; with his ardent hesitation to rethrow the dice of modern poetry; with his

FIXING THE INFINITE

possible existence, eclipsed and luminous – diffused in the intelligible and opaque essence of the Number. The unique Number whipped, in the white fury, by a siren absent from the world – convulsed by the star.

Conclusion

Thus, modernity triumphed and we did not know it. The passionate energy expended, throughout the nineteenth century, upon extracting messianism from its Christian matrix, reinventing a civic religion delivered from dogma, an emancipatory politics beyond the old Salvation; this unprecedented effort, on the part of poets (Lamartine, Vigny, Hugo, Nerval), historians (Michelet, Quinet), philosophers (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Saint-Simon, Comte), novelists (Hugo again, Zola) and he who we have never known how to classify, Karl Marx, once more to *vectorize* the subject with a meaning, with a direction freed from ancient eschatology; all that our masters have instructed us to regard as outmoded *par excellence* – those dead Grand Narratives, at best obsolete when fermented by solitary researchers, at worst criminal when clothed in the statist finery of Progress or Revolution; all this would nevertheless have succeeded in making *one* breakthrough up to our times, one only, and at a precise point – a unique

Poem that would traverse the twentieth century like a hidden gem, finally to reveal itself, in the following century, as the strangely successful defense of an epoch we had buried under our disenchantments.

Mallarmé would have taught us that modernity had *indeed* produced a prophet, but an effaced one; a messiah, but a hypothetical one; a Christ, but a constellatory one. He would have architected a fabulous crystal of inconsistency containing, at its heart, visible across its transparency, the gesture of the siren, impossible and vivid, who had engendered it, and engenders it always. In this way the poet would have diffused the 'consecration' of his own Fiction among all the readers who agree to nourish themselves on the mental host of his fragmented Pages. And all according to an exacting atheism, for which the divine is nothing more than the Self, articulated with Chance itself.

The *Coup de dés* as christic crystallization of Chance.
As Christal of Nothingness.

As that which makes no longer *being*, but the *perhaps*,
the first task – the task to come – of thinkers and poets.

And the focus of this intimate revolution of the subject, through which ardent centuries *communicate* once more with us, he would have resumed precisely in this sign – in this *hyphen* borrowed by French from Hebrew, around the 1540s. The very same sign that, in a famous declaration of Mallarmé's, appears to be 'cited' by another dash, and to

CONCLUSION

announce, in 1894, through an amusing equivocation of meaning, the future function of its simple stroke:

À quoi sert cela –
À un jeu

What is this good for –
For a game¹

Yes, what is this for – this stroke *that I show you*, not the dash that you take for a punctuation mark? Of what use is it, if not to introduce some play into our works?

1 ['Music and Letters', tr. B. Johnson in *Divagations*, 173-98: 187 – trans.]

APPENDIX 1

The Poems

POÈME

UN COUP DE DÉS JAMAIS N'ABOLIRA LE HASARD

par

STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ

UN COUP DE DÉS

JAMAIS

QUAND BIEN MÊME LANCÉ DANS DES CIRCONSTANCES
ÉTERNELLES

DU FOND D'UN NAUFRAGE

[II]

SOIT

que

l'Abîme

blanchi

étale

furieux

sous une inclinaison

plane désespérément

d'aile

la sienne

par

avance retombée d'un mal à dresser le vol
et couvrant les jaillissements
coupant au ras les bords

très à l'intérieur résume

l'ombre enfouie dans la profondeur par cette voile alternative

jusqu'adapter
à l'envergure

sa béante profondeur en tant que la coque

d'un bâtiment

penché de l'un ou l'autre bord

LE MAÎTRE

surgi
inférant

de cette conflagration

que se

comme on menace

l'unique Nombre qui ne peut pas

hésite
cadavre par le bras

plutôt
que de jouer
en maniaque chenu
la partie
au nom des flots

un

nauffrage cela

hors d'anciens calculs
où la manoeuvre avec l'âge oubliée

jadis il empoignait la barre
à ses pieds
de l'horizon unanime

prépare
s'agite et mêle
au poing qui l'étreindrait
un destin et les vents

être un autre

Esprit
pour le jeter
dans la tempête
en reployer la division et passer fier

écarté du secret qu'il détient

envahit le chef
coule en barbe soumise

direct de l'homme

sans nef
n'importe
où vaine

N'ABOLIRA

[V]

COMME SI

Une insinuation

au silence

dans quelque proche

voltige

simple

enroulée avec ironie

ou

le mystère

précipité

hurlé

tourbillon d'hilarité et d'horreur

autour du gouffre

sans le joncher

ni fuir

et en berce le vierge indice

COMME SI

[VI]

plume solitaire éperdue

sauf

*que la rencontre ou l'effleure une toque de minuit
et immobilise
au velours chiffonné par un esclaffement sombre*

cette blancheur rigide

dérisoire

*en opposition au ciel
trop
pour ne pas marquer
exigüment
quiconque*

prince amer de l'écueil

*s'en coiffe comme de l'héroïque
irrésistible mais contenu
par sa petite raison virile*

en foudre

soucieux

expiatoire et pubère

muet

*La lucide et seigneuriale aigrette
au front invisible
scintille
puis ombrage
une stature mignonne ténébreuse
en sa torsion de sirène*

par d'impatientes squames ultimes

rire

que

SI

de vertige

debout

le temps

de souffleter

bifurquées

un roc

faux memoir

tout de suite

éaporé en brumes

qui imposa

une borne à l'infini

C'ÉTAIT
isru stellaire

CE SERAIT
pire

non

davantage ni moins

indifféremment mais autant

LE NOMBRE

EXISTÂT-IL

autrement qu'hallucination éparse d'agonie

COMMENCÂT-IL ET CESSÂT-IL

sourdant que nié et clos quand apparut

enfin

par quelque profusion répandue en rareté

SE CHIFFRÂT-IL

évidence de la somme pour peu qu'une

ILLUMINÂT-IL

LE HASARD

Choit

la plume

rythmique suspens du sinistre

s'ensevelir

aux écumes originelles

naguères d'où sursauta son délire jusqu'à une cime

flétrie

par la neutralité identique du gouffre

RIEN

**de la mémorable crise
ou se fût
l'évènement**

accompli en vue de tout résultat nul
humain

N'AURA EU LIEU
une élévation ordinaire verse l'absence

QUE LE LIEU
inférieur clapotis quelconque comme pour disperser l'acte vide
abruptement qui sinon
par son mensonge
eût fondé
la perte

dans ces parages
du vague
en quoi toute réalité se dissout

EXCEPTÉ

à l'altitude

PEUT-ÊTRE

aussi loin qu'un endroit

fusionne avec au delà

hors l'intérêt
quant à lui signalé
en général
selon telle obliquité par telle déclivité
de feux

vers
ce doit être
le Septentrion aussi Nord

UNE CONSTELLATION

froide d'oubli et de désuétude
pas tant
qu'elle n'énumère
sur quelque surface vacante et supérieure
le heurt successif
sidéralement
d'un compte total en formation

veillant

doutant

roulant
brillant et méditant

avant de s'arrêter
à quelque point dernier qui le sacre

Toute Pensée émet un Coup de Dés

POEM

A THROW OF DICE WILL NEVER ABOLISH CHANCE

by

STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ

A THROW OF DICE

NEVER

EVEN WHEN LAUNCHED IN
ETERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES

FROM THE DEPTHS OF A SHIPWRECK

[II]

SUPPOSING

the Abyss

whitened

glassy

furious

beneath a declivity

compacted desperately

on a wing

its own

in

advance fallen back from a failure to take flight
and stifling the torrents
cutting short the swell

deep within recapitulates

the shadow buried in the deep with this alternative sail

to the point of matching
the span

with its gaping trough like the hull

of a ship

listing this way or that

THE MASTER

risen
inferring

from this conflagration

that is

as one threatens

the unique Number that cannot

hesitates
a corpse cut off by the arm
rather
than playing
like a hoary maniac
the game
in the name of the waves
one

direct shipwreck

beyond the old reckonings
where maneuvers forgotten with age

he used to take the helm
at his feet
of the unanimous horizon

prepared
shaken and blended
in the fist that might grasp it
some destiny and the winds

be another

Spirit
to throw it
into the storm
closing the division and passing proudly on

from the secret it holds

invades the head
spills down like a submissive beard

of man this

with no ark
no matter
where vain

ancestrally not to open his hand
clenched
far beyond his useless head

a bequest in disappearance

to someone **ambiguous**

the ulterior immemorial demon

having
from null lands
led
the old man toward this supreme conjunction with probability

he
 his puerile shadow
 caressed and polished and restored and washed
 softened by the waves and subtracted
 from the hard bones lost amid the timbers

born
of a frolic
the sea attempting via the old man or the old man against the sea
an idle chance

Nuptials

whose
veil of illusion crashing back their obsession
along with the ghost of a gesture

will falter
will fall

madness

WILL NEVER ABOLISH
[V]

AS IF

A simple

in silence

in some imminent

hovers

insinuation

coiled in irony

or

the mystery

hurled down

screamed

vortex of hilarity and horror

on the brink of the gulf

without sprinkling it

nor fleeing

and draws from it the virgin clue

AS IF

a plume solitary and lost

except

*for the encounter where a midnight cap brushes against it
and is fixed
on the velvet crumpled by a dark burst of laughter*

this rigid whiteness

derisory

*in opposition to the sky
too much
not to mark*

scantly

whosoever

bitter prince of the reef

*caps himself with it heroically
irresistible but fettered
by his paltry virile reason*

in a flash of lightning

anxious

expiatory and pubescent

mute

*The lucid and lordly crest
on the invisible brow
glitters*

*then overshadows
sombre a dainty figure
in her siren sinuosity*

with terminal scales impatient and

laugh
that

IF

of vertigo

upstanding

long enough
to slap
forked

a rock

false memory
immediately
evaporated into mist

that will impose
a limit on the infinite

IT WAS
prophecy of the stars

IT WOULD BE

worse

not

more nor less

indifferently but just as much

THE NUMBER

WERE IT TO EXIST

otherwise than as the sparse hallucination of agony

WERE IT TO BEGIN AND END

unheard but negated and closed when it appears

finally

through some profusion of dispersed rarity

WERE IT TO BE CIPHERED

evidence of the total sum in so far as there is one

WERE IT TO BE ILLUMINATED

CHANCE

Down falls

the plume

rhythmic suspension of disaster

buries itself

in the original foam

whence its delirium formerly leapt to a summit

blighted

by the identical neutrality of the gulf

NOTHING

**of the memorable crisis
in which
the event**

may have happened in view of every null result

human

WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE

an ordinary elevation tips away the absence

BUT THE PLACE

some lowly splashing or other as if to disperse the void act

abruptly that otherwise

with its lie

would have founded

the loss

in these indefinite regions

of the wave

wherein all reality is dissolved

[X]

EXCEPT

at the height

PERHAPS

as far away as a place

merged with beyond

apart from the interest
assigned to it
in general
by a certain obliquity in a certain declivity
of flames

toward
it must be
the Septentrion also the North

A CONSTELLATION

cold with neglect and desuetude
not so much
that it fails to number
on some vacant and higher surface
the successive impact
starrily
of a total count in the making

keeping watch
doubting
rolling
shining and meditating
before finally halting
at some last point by which it is consecrated

Every Thought Emits a Throw of Dice

SALUT¹

Rien, cette écume, vierge vers
 À ne désigner que la coupe;
 Telle loin se noie une troupe
 De sirènes mainte à l'envers

Nous naviguons, ô mes divers
 Amis, moi déjà sur la poupe
 Vous l'avant fastueux qui coupe
 Le flot de foudres et d'hivers;

Une ivresse belle m'engage
 Sans craindre même son tangage
 De porter debout ce salut

Solitude, récif, étoile
 À n'importe ce qui valut
 Le blanc souci de notre toile

(77 words)

1 *Poésies* (Deman edition of 1899), in *OC* I, 4.

TOAST/SALVATION

Nothing, this foam; virgin verse
 that designates only this glass;
 Far within which plunge a shoal
 Of sirens, many in reverse

We navigate, O my various
 Friends, myself already on the poop-deck
 And you at the bold prow that cuts through
 Tides of lightning and winters;

A sweet inebriation urges me on
 Without even fearing its pitching
 To offer upright this toast

Solitude, reef, star
 To anything that's worthy of
 The white unease of our sail

Before a group of his peers, the poet raises his glass of champagne, whose foam makes him dream of a troupe of sirens plunging into the ocean. His glass [verre] is also the verse [vers] that he reads before the shared table, whose tablecloth is like the sail around which the poets ready themselves for a voyage full of dangers and victories that will be celebrated from this day on.

'À LA NUE ACCABLANTE TU...'¹

À la nue accablante tu
Basse de basalte et de laves
À même les échos esclaves
Par une trompe sans vertu

Quel sépucral naufrage (tu
Le sais écume mais y baves)
Suprême une entre les épaves
Abolit le mât dévêtu

Ou cela que furibond faute
De quelque perdition haute
Tout l'abîme vain éployé

Dans le si blanc cheveu qui traîne
Avarement aura noyé
Le flanc enfant d'une sirène

(70 words)

What sepulchral shipwreck thus abolishes, remaining uppermost of the other debris, the mast stripped bare of its sails? The conflagration is produced in silence: it has been stilled [tu] by a powerless

1 *Poésies*, in OCI, 44.

'BENEATH THE OPPRESSIVE CLOUD STILLED...'

Beneath the oppressive cloud stilled
 Basalt and lava lowering
 The very echoes subjugated
 By a trumpet of no virtue

What sepulchral shipwreck (you know,
 Foam, but just dribble there)
 Uppermost among flotsam
 Abolishes the mast stripped bare

Or that which furious in the absence
 Of some great catastrophe
 The entire abyss deployed in vain

In the so white hair that trails
 Greedily will have drowned
 The flank of a child-siren

foghorn, in a lowering and stormy cloud, black as basalt and red as lava. Only the foam could answer the question, but it simply dribbles its whiteness on the site of the possible disaster. Unless nothing took place, and the furious abyss, deployed in vain, engulfed in its foaming wake only the fiction of a child-siren.

SONNET EN -X¹

Ses purs ongles très haut dédiant leur onyx,
 L'Angoisse ce minuit, soutient, lampadophore,
 Maint rêve vespéral brûlé par le Phénix
 Que ne recueille pas de cinéraire amphore

Sur les crédences au salon vide: nul ptyx,
 Aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore,
 (Car le Maître est allé puiser des pleurs au Styx
 Avec ce seul objet dont le Néant s'honore.)

Mais proche la croisée au nord vacante, un or
 Agonise selon peut-être le décor
 Des licornes ruant du feu contre une nixe,

Elle, défunte nue en le miroir, encore
 Que, dans l'oubli fermé par le cadre, se fixe
 De scintillations sitôt le septuor.

(104 words)

An anguished night, whose starry nails light up, as in an offering, maintains the poet's dreams, which are reborn every evening, without finding any final resting-place in the now-empty salon. No word, even one void of meaning (like 'ptyx'), shall any longer serve as the urn

1 'Plusieurs sonnets', in *Poésies*, in OC I, 37-8.

SONNET IN -X

Her pure nails on high dedicating their onyx,
 Anguish this midnight, uphold, lampadophore,
 So many vespertine dreams seared by the Phoenix
 That no funerary urn shall collect

On the credenza of the empty salon: no ptyx,
 Abolished bauble of sonorous inanity,
 (For the Master has gone to draw tears from the Styx
 With that sole object that Nothingness honors.)

But near the window of the vacant north, a gold
 Dying, in accordance perhaps with its gilded
 Unicorns that hurl fire at a water-nixie,

She, deceased naked in the mirror, even
 Though, in the oblivion enclosed by the frame, are fixed
 Scintillations soon the Septuor.

for a deceased dream: for the Master has left to draw tears from the underworld, with this last vestige of Nothingness. Meanwhile, near the salon's window, open to the north, a mirror's golden frame seems to conserve a relic of light, in which can be perceived the ornamentation of unicorns throwing flames over a nymph. This light fails in its turn, but is not completely extinguished: for on the surface of the mirror suddenly scintillates the Septentrion.

APPENDIX 2

The Count

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 résumé
7 bien	33 la	59 l'
8 même	34 sienne	60 ombre
9 lancé	35 par	61 enfouie
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

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

APPENDIX 2 THE COUNT

172 écarté	203 l'	234 démon
173 du	204 homme	235 immémorial
174 secret	205 sans	236 ayant
175 qu'	206 nef	237 de
176 il	207 n'	238 contrées
177 détient	208 importe	239 nulles
178 plutôt	209 où	240 induit
179 que	210 vaine	241 le
180 de	211 ancestralement	242 vieillard
181 jouer	212 à	243 vers
182 en	213 n'	244 cette
183 maniaque	214 ouvrir	245 conjonction
184 chenu	215 pas	246 suprême
185 la	216 la	247 avec
186 partie	217 main	248 la
187 au	218 crispée	249 probabilité
188 nom	219 par	250 celui
189 des	220 delà	251 son
190 flots	221 l'	252 ombre
191 un	222 inutile	253 puérile
192 envahit	223 tête	254 caressée
193 le	224 legs	255 et
194 chef	225 en	256 polie
195 coule	226 la	257 et
196 en	227 disparition	258 rendue
197 barbe	228 à	259 et
198 soumise	229 quelque'	260 lavée
199 naufrage	230 un	261 assouplie
200 cela	231 ambigu	262 par
201 direct	232 l'	263 la
202 de	233 ultérieur	264 vague

265 et	296 voile	327 mystère
266 soustraite	297 d'	328 précipité
267 aux	298 illusion	329 hurlé
268 durs	299 rejailli	330 dans
269 os	300 leur	331 quelque
270 perdus	301 hantise	332 proche
271 entre	302 ainsi	333 tourbillon
272 les	303 que	334 d'
273 ais	304 le	335 hilarité
274 né	305 fantôme	336 et
275 d'	306 d'	337 d'
276 un	307 un	338 horreur
277 ébat	308 geste	339 voltige
278 la	309 chancellera	340 autour
279 mer	310 s'	341 du
280 par	311 affalera	342 gouffre
281 l'	312 folie	343 sans
282 aïeul	313 n'	344 le
283 tentant	314 abolira	345 joncher
284 ou	315 comme	346 ni
285 l'	316 si	347 fuir
286 aïeul	317 Une	348 et
287 contre	318 insinuation	349 en
288 la	319 simple	350 berce
289 mer	320 au	351 le
290 une	321 silence	352 vierge
291 chance	322 enroulée	353 indice
292 oiseuse	323 avec	354 comme
293 Fiançailles	324 ironie	355 si
294 dont	325 ou	356 plume
295 le	326 le	357 solitaire

APPENDIX 2 THE COUNT

358 éperdue	389 ne	420 muet
359 sauf	390 pas	421 rire
360 que	391 marquer	422 que
361 la	392 exigüment	423 si
362 rencontre	393 quiconque	424 La
363 ou	394 prince	425 lucide
364 l'	395 amer	426 et
365 effleure	396 de	427 seigneuriale
366 une	397 l'	428 aigrette
367 toque	398 écueil	429 de
368 de	399 s'	430 vertige
369 minuit	400 en	431 au
370 et	401 coiffe	432 front
371 immobilise	402 comme	433 invisible
372 au	403 de	434 scintille
373 velours	404 l'	435 puis
374 chiffonné	405 héroïque	436 ombrage
375 par	406 irrésistible	437 une
376 un	407 mais	438 stature
377 esclaffement	408 contenu	439 mignonne
378 sombre	409 par	440 ténébreuse
379 cette	410 sa	441 debout
380 blancheur	411 petite	442 en
381 rigide	412 raison	443 sa
382 dérisoire	413 virile	444 torsion
383 en	414 en	445 de
384 opposition	415 foudre	446 sirène
385 au	416 soucieux	447 le
386 ciel	417 expiatoire	448 temps
387 trop	418 et	449 de
388 pour	419 pubère	450 souffleter

451 par	482 autrement	513 somme
452 d'	483 qu'	514 pour
453 impatientes	484 hallucination	515 peu
454 squames	485 éparse	516 qu'
455 ultimes	486 d'	517 une
456 bifurquées	487 agonie	518 illuminât-
457 un	488 commençât-	519 il
458 roc	489 il	520 ce
459 faux	490 et	521 serait
460 manoir	491 cessât-	522 pire
461 tout	492 il	523 non
462 de	493 sourdant	524 davantage
463 suite	494 que	525 ni
464 évaporé	495 nié	526 moins
465 en	496 et	527 indifféremment
466 brumes	497 clos	528 mais
467 qui	498 quand	529 autant
468 imposa	499 apparu	530 le
469 une	500 enfin	531 hasard
470 borne	501 par	532 Choit
471 à	502 quelque	533 la
472 l'	503 profusion	534 plume
473 infini	504 répandue	535 rythmique
474 c'	505 en	536 suspens
475 était	506 rareté	537 du
476 issu	507 se	538 sinistre
477 stellaire	508 chiffât-	539 s'
478 LE	509 il	540 ensevelir
479 NOMBRE	510 évidence	541 aux
480 existât-	511 de	542 écumes
481 il	512 la	543 originelles

APPENDIX 2 THE COUNT

544	naguères	575	tout	606	mensonge
545	d'	576	résultat	607	eût
546	où	577	nul	608	fondé
547	sursauta	578	humain	609	la
548	son	579	n'	610	perdition
549	délire	580	aura	611	dans
550	jusqu'	581	eu	612	ces
551	à	582	lieu	613	parages
552	une	583	une	614	du
553	cime	584	élévation	615	vague
554	flétrie	585	ordinaire	616	en
555	par	586	verse	617	quoi
556	la	587	l'	618	toute
557	neutralité	588	absence	619	réalité
558	identique	589	que	620	se
559	du	590	le	621	dissout
560	gouffre	591	lieu	622	excepté
561	rien	592	inférieur	623	à
562	de	593	clapotis	624	l'
563	la	594	quelconque	625	altitude
564	mémorable	595	comme	626	PEUT-ÊTRE
565	crise	596	pour	627	aussi
566	ou	597	disperser	628	loin
567	se	598	l'	629	qu'
568	fût	599	acte	630	un
569	l'	600	vide	631	endroit
570	événement	601	abruptement	632	fusionne
571	accompli	602	qui	633	avec
572	en	603	sinon	634	au
573	vue	604	par	635	delà
574	de	605	son	636	hors

THE NUMBER AND THE SIREN

637 l'	668 désuétude	699 s'
638 intérêt	669 pas	700 arrêter
639 quant	670 tant	701 à
640 à	671 qu'	702 quelque
641 lui	672 elle	703 point
642 signalé	673 n'	704 dernier
643 en	674 énumère	705 qui
644 général	675 sur	706 le
645 selon	676 quelque	707 sacre
646 telle	677 surface	
647 obliquité	678 vacante	1 Toute
648 par	679 et	2 Pensée
649 telle	680 supérieure	3 émet
650 déclivité	681 le	4 un
651 de	682 heurt	5 Coup
652 feux	683 successif	6 de
653 vers	684 sidéralement	7 Dés
654 ce	685 d'	
655 doit	686 un	
656 être	687 compte	
657 le	688 total	
658 Septentrion	689 en	
659 aussi	690 formation	
660 Nord	691 veillant	
661 une	692 doutant	
662 constellation	693 roulant	
663 froide	694 brillant	
664 d'	695 et	
665 oubli	696 méditant	
666 et	697 avant	
667 de	698 de	

APPENDIX 2 THE COUNT

NB. To obtain 707, we must count 'quelqu'un' as two words and not as one in the section 'legs à quelqu'un ambigu'. Thus, facetiously, Mallarmé seems to dream of a bequest made to 'some one' – but a 'one' that is 'ambiguous' precisely in so far as it is duplicitous, double: For this 'some one' counts for two, when it seems to count for one... The imperative of the count produces a last elucidation of the poem's meaning.

Translator's Note

I have over the past few years enjoyed the privilege of translating a number of Quentin Meillassoux's philosophical writings. The principal challenge in doing so was invariably to render his prose as precise and direct in English as it is in the original French. The present book, in which this scrupulous lucidity transports the reader to the brink of delirium, posed some specific problems of its own. Given an argument that bears upon often very fine points of the French language, and a startlingly original interpretation of what is widely regarded as the most obscure of modern literary works, it is inevitable that one should meet with semantic complexes that prove stubbornly untranslatable. And there is no avoiding the fact that the delights of literary wordplay can be stifled by their laborious explanation.

To the extent that these problems cannot be circumvented, Anglophone readers will simply be obliged to exercise some patience with the fact that certain crucial

plot devices pertain to peculiarities of a language that is not their own. This patience will be repaid many times over by the exhilarating conceptual trajectory of Meillassoux's argument, fueled by the rich resources of Mallarmé's poetics. My policy as translator has been – here as elsewhere – to avoid as far as possible interrupting this momentum. It seemed especially important not to overburden with scholarly apparatus a book that belies its substantial critical and philosophical weight by reading like an expertly crafted detective story or thriller (a *Da Vinci Code* for the *Being and Event* generation?). This respect for the integrity and spirit of the book, of course, had to be weighed up against the risk of occasional awkwardness. I hope that I have made the right choices as to when to intervene and when to allow readers to piece together the clues themselves.

A few points can be remarked upon from the safety of this endnote, for the benefit of those who wish to miss nothing:

Déchiffrement/Déchiffrage: Meillassoux's argument, in so far as it brings together a musical motif with that of coding and decoding, plays on these two related words. 'Déchiffrement' is simply deciphering; 'Déchiffrage' refers specifically to a musician's 'deciphering' of a written musical score. This is even reflected in the original subtitle, which reads 'A *déchiffrage* [not *déchiffrement*] of Mallarmé's *Coup de dés*'. Unfortunately, although English does share

with French one of the etymological convergences that Meillassoux exploits – that of musical keys and keys that unlock – there is no English equivalent for 'déchiffrage', the equivalent term being 'sight-reading', which I have used once or twice to mark the double register.

Charade: Meillassoux speaks of the 'charade of the Number', referring to the figurative clues within the poem that 'spell out' the Number. In French the word 'charade' retains as its principal sense a riddle of the form: 'My first [letter] is in cat but not in dog...' – one, then, that spells out the letters of a word [or in this case, the digits of a number] through a series of clues. Although the English were once also keen on this word game, it has been overshadowed by the popular game of 'charades' in which players physically mime the title of a book, song or movie.

Tremblé: This becomes a key word at the point when Meillassoux unveils a 'precious fault' in the code he has discovered. He intends the word ('tremulous', 'shaky') to comprise (at least) three meanings: (1) the shaking of dice in the Master's (or Igitur's) closed fist; (2) a vacillation between possible actions, leading to a 'blurring' in which it is impossible to know which choice has been made; (3) a vibration, as of a guitar string, that produces a certain 'tonality'. Equivalent English words (shaking, trembling, and so on) tend to be firmly anchored in the physical, and what is more have a frankly comical tone

when applied to a number (a 'shaking number' sounds like the work of a rock'n'roll tribute band). Others that describe indecision generally lack the requisite physical and musical connotations. The most satisfactory solution proved to be 'quavering', which combines a musical trill alternating between two notes, with the more general connotation of a trembling motion – and the nervousness that may accompany chronic indecision.

La lettre voilée: The title of the section beginning on page 166, 'The Veiled Letter', is a pun on the famous story (much beloved by Lacanians) 'The Purloined Letter' (in French, 'La Lettre volée') – and thus also a discreet homage to Mallarmé's acknowledged master, and patron saint of the detective story, Edgar Allen Poe.

During the process of translation it became, if not necessary, then certainly irresistible, to undertake in turn a new translation of the *Coup de dés* itself. Although I have drawn on many of the existing English translations of the poem, Meillassoux's reading afforded me an advantage that their authors did not have: Its complete and inexorable logic gives the translator a criterion by which he may arrive at a decision on almost every word of the *Coup de dés*. Far from welcoming the poem's enigmatic mystery as an interpretative opportunity, it makes of this mystery a crystal-clear structure around which every element of the poem demands to be reconstructed. Previous translators had

to negotiate a difficult path between applying ultimately capricious figurative interpretations so as to resolve the poem into comprehensible images and narratives, or strictly translating word for word and thereby erecting an inscrutable edifice of steely, impervious arcana. Thanks to Quentin, my job was far easier. Over the course of a few delightful hours spent together in a Paris café poring over the *Coup de dés*, he brought every detail of what was formerly a hazy, oneiric scene into sharp, sparkling focus. From there, it was a great pleasure to plunge, his book in hand, ever more deeply into this astonishing creation, to the point where it began to invade my dreams. I hope that, twinned with *The Number and the Siren*, my translation affords readers the same intimacy with Mallarmé's masterpiece. But by the same token it should be admitted, unabashedly, that it is a tendentious reading of the poem – and thus to be regarded as of a piece with my translation of Meillassoux's book. (Needless to say, I have not tried to reproduce in the English text any of the numerical properties of the 'coded' original – to have done so would have been to run the risk of the translation expanding into a numerological enterprise to rival Mallarmé's own 'demented act'.)

As well as retaining Meillassoux's references to the *Oeuvres complètes*, I have referred the reader to widely available English translations of Mallarmé's works. Of particular note, since it has been an invaluable companion

throughout the process, is the tremendous volume of Mallarmé's *Divagations* and other prose works translated by Barbara Johnson, to which I refer throughout. Johnson's ability to make Mallarmé's knotty, meticulous locutions speak with what one imagines to be their original urgency, poise and humor, have been a source of inspiration, and I would have liked very much to have been able to hand her a copy of this book.

I would like to thank Miguel Abreu and Katherine Pickard of Sequence Press for their ongoing commitment to our joint enterprise; Quentin Meillassoux for his patient assistance in progressing the translation; Ben Carver for his invaluable comments on an earlier draft; Daniel Berchenko for his meticulous copyediting; and Louise for the love that makes it possible to embark upon such lengthy and hazardous voyages across the 'foam of the page'.

Robin Mackay

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