

BADIOU AND MALLARMÉ: THE EVENT AND THE PERHAPS

Quentin Meillassoux, translated by Alyosha Edlebi

From the January 5, 1976 seminar of *Theory of the Subject* to *Five Lessons on Wagner*, which appeared in 2010, Mallarmé is mobilized on numerous occasions in the philosophical work of Alain Badiou. There is a continuous presence of a never-renounced master, but also a strategic presence, convoked at the decisive point of the event as such, in Meditation 19 of *Being and Event* (BE). Nevertheless, Alain Badiou's fidelity to Mallarmé, during his publications over thirty years, is not without a recurrent taking-of-distance, at times discreet, at others more pronounced. I want to try to show here that this taking-of-distance is in some sense reciprocal: certain reservations of Badiou towards Mallarmé can be inverted into discrete resistances of Mallarméan poetics vis-à-vis Badiou's philosophy. I would like in particular to sketch out the following thesis: the Mallarméan *perhaps*, as we discover it in *Coup de dés*, is not identical to the Badiouian event. This can be seen from two points of view: from the viewpoint of the Badiouian event, affirming an identity of the Mallarméan perhaps and the event leads to making the first an unsatisfactory approximation of the second; but, on the other hand, I will attempt to show that, from the Mallarméan viewpoint, the perhaps is not so much a Badiouian event as an alternative mode of thinking the undecidable. I want thus to work out a difference of nature, at once tenuous and, I believe, consistent, between the two notions. A difference which, through the ensuing contrast, will illuminate the discrete divergence of the poet and the thinker.

Lastly, I will suggest that this redefinition of the Mallarméan "perhaps", outside the orbit of the event, encounters nevertheless a major question posed by Badiou in his lessons on Wagner: in what must the modern ceremony consist? In sum, I will attempt to construct a Mallarmé other than that of Badiou, but capable in this sense precisely of responding, at least to some extent, to the most recent interrogations of the philosopher.

I. THE EVENTAL DEVALORIZATION OF THE PERHAPS

In order to explain these various points, and launch the examination of what fundamentally separates our two

BADIOU AND MALLARMÉ

authors, it is best to begin with an example of Badiou's explicit "taking-of-distance" with regard to Mallarmé, which seems to me particularly well-defined and significant. It is found in the Preface to *Logics of Worlds (LW)*. It is interesting in that it conjugates a distancing of the poet and a declaration of fidelity maintained towards him—Badiou installing himself within this narrow space that separates divergence from renunciation.

The mention of Mallarmé, and more specifically of *Coup de dés*, intervenes at the moment when the axiom of "democratic materialism" is dialecticized: "there are only bodies and languages", with the exception of truth. Here is the passage:

There are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths. One will recognize here the style of my teacher Mallarmé: nothing has taken place but the place, except, on high, perhaps, a Constellation. I cross out, nevertheless, "on high" and "perhaps". The "there are truths", which serves as an objection to the dualist axiomatic of democratic materialism (the law protects all bodies, arranged under all the compatible languages), is for me the initial empirical evidence. There is no doubt whatsoever concerning the existence of truths, which are not bodies, languages, or combinations of the two. And this evidence is materialist, since it does not require any splitting of worlds, any intelligible place, any "height".²

We see that the statement of *Coup de dés* intervenes at a decisive moment: that of the formulation of the axiom of "dialectical materialism". In a first sense, there is a renewed fidelity to Mallarmé, situated explicitly in the position of "master". But at the same time, the concluding statement of *Coup de dés* is corrected as soon as it is convoked. Two terms of the Mallarméan sentence (already separated from the multiplicity of its interpolated phrases) are crossed out by Badiou: "on high" and "perhaps". Mallarmé's statement becomes in *LW*: "Nothing will have taken place except a Constellation." At first blush, the crossing-out of the "perhaps" is striking, since *Coup de dés* was precisely convoked twenty years earlier, in *BE*, in order to support the analysis of the event, and in particular the analysis of its undecidability. The "perhaps" which affects the final Constellation might thus seem to be at the heart of the Badiouian interest for this Poem of Chance. Just as the event is undecidable from the point of the situation, the toss of the dice remains undecidable on account of the Master's hesitation to open his fist in the face of the raging waves. And we know that the celestial "sublation" of the inadequate toss, sublation of the Master by the ultimate Septentrion, is affected in its turn by a "perhaps"—the "perhaps" that precisely interest us—confirming the impossible determination of the event through the knowledge of the situation. How can we explain such a contrast in the approach to the poem between *BE* and *LW*? How can what may seem emblematic of the 1988 approach be crossed out in the 2006 citation? Has Badiou distanced himself—and even considerably distanced himself—in the meantime from his master Mallarmé?

Such is not the case. The explanation for the correction in *LW* stems from the fact that it is this time a question, not of the event in itself as in *BE*, but of *truths*. In order to grasp this difference of viewpoint, we must recall the definition Badiou gives of *forcing* in Meditation 35 of *BE* (entitled "Theory of the Subject"): "A term [of the situation] forces the statement to be veridical in the new situation (the situation supplemented by an indiscernible truth)."³ Let's make explicit the meaning of this complex statement by drawing our inspiration from an example that Badiou himself calls "caricatural", but which has the merit of being directly accessible: that of the discovery of Neptune by Le Verrier in 1846. The initial situation is that of Newtonian astronomy.

In this situation, the event corresponds to the irregularities of Uranus' trajectory. It is always possible to say that these irregularities in no way constitute a decisive disruption for astronomy, on the grounds that they result, for example, from the faultiness of our measurement apparatuses. We could, on the contrary, miss the scope of this event for astronomy—and it alone—by aiming "too widely", by affirming that this fact goes so far as to refute the theory of universal gravitation, and requires the re-founding of physics in its entirety. In effect, Uranus' irregularities can be interpreted in countless ways, without us being able to grasp the exact situation it is called upon to transform. Le Verrier's originality was to wager on the eventual nature of this irregularity for the astronomy of his time, by formulating a hypothesis in what Badiou calls the subject-language (a language that

surpasses the factual terms of the situation) and which can be summed up thus: “There exists a supplementary planet.” The inquiry for this supplementary term proceeds through a computational production of an unheard-of precision, which enables Le Verrier to connect in the future anterior the statement of the subject-language and a term of the situation now accessible to the knowledge of the situation (that is, to observation by telescope); if such a planet with such an orbital trajectory, still unknown, is observed, then it will have rendered true the statement “There exists a supplementary planet.” The observation of the new planet by Johann Galle, on the very day when Le Verrier communicated his calculations to him, forces thus the “veridicity of the statement of the subject-language” by supplementing the astronomical situation of the epoch of such a statement, henceforth included within a new configuration of knowledge. This veridicity of the statement attests retrospectively to the eventual, and not simply factual or insignificant, nature of Uranus’ irregularities. We see then that the initial capture of the event proceeds from a wager anterior to every knowledge, since it is this wager, precisely, that engenders knowledge: it is because Le Verrier recognized in the irregularities of Uranus the possible presence of an astronomical event (the discovery of a new planet) that he undertook calculations aimed at sparking off new telescopic observations: proof that this wager is not itself the result of a calculation or an observation, but their very source.

Thus, there is indeed—initially—a *decision* of the subject: a wager that is authorized only by itself, at the point of undecidability of the event. Another proof that this wager is not supported by any knowledge is that it could have very much turned out to be false. This is in effect what happened to Le Verrier himself—something mentioned less often—when he analyzed in the same fashion the irregularities of Mercury’s trajectory: he supposed once again the presence of an unknown planet, which he named Vulcan and which was never discovered, since it does not in fact exist. It was necessary to wait for Einstein to extract the veritable eventual nature of this irregularity: not the existence of an unknown planet within the framework of Newtonian astronomy, but the local verification of a new physics—General Relativity—substituted, on the macroscopic scale, for that of Newton.

But if the event is undecidable, truth for its part—which is to say, the new situation produced by the forcing of the statement of the subject-language—proceeds indeed from a knowledge. Here is what Badiou writes on this subject: “Forcing is a relation *verifiable by knowledge*, since it bears on a term of the situation (which is thus presented and named in the language of the situation) and a statement of the subject-language (whose names are ‘cobbled-together’ from multiples of the situation).”⁴ There is no sense in doubting past truths, since all of them proceed from a forcing, and this is why Badiou can say, in the cited passage from *LW*, that the existence of truths proceeds for him from “empirical” evidence.

Let’s return, then, to Mallarmé. We understand now that if *Coup de dés* is examined from the point of the event’s undecidability, the “perhaps” of its final statement is legitimate: if on the other hand, we take up its formulation for truths, the perhaps is no longer suitable and must be crossed out. But are things in reality so simple? Does Mallarmé inscribe himself so clearly in the eventual and veridical construction deployed by Badiou?

In order to examine the question more closely, let’s take up the example of forcing that Badiou, always in Meditation 35 of *BE*, gives this time, no longer from Le Verrier, but from Mallarmé himself. Now the event produces itself in the situation of French poetry after the death of Hugo: it is, parallel to the decline of Parnasse, the crisis opened by free verse. The statement of the subject-language is borrowed from “Crisis of Verse”: “The poetic act consists in suddenly seeing that an idea becomes fractionated in a certain number of motifs with equal value and in grouping them.”⁵ The words “cobbled together” from the situation—“motif” and “idea”—could only have a referent within a new poetic situation, supplemented by the forcing of the Mallarméan statement—they are the equivalent of Le Verrier’s unknown planet. The forcing represents what a knowledge can discern from the relation between the statement of “Crisis of Verse” and such-and-such an effectively existing, singular poem or collection. It is thus that the new poetry, posterior to the crisis of verse, will finally be presented and no longer announced. This poem will play the role of the effective observation of a new planet. But what is then in Mallarmé the name of this poem capable of forcing the veridicity of its statement? There

BADIOU AND MALLARMÉ

is, at this point, a certain hesitation on Badiou's part, but a hesitation that is in some sense due to the thing itself. In effect, Badiou first convokes the *Book*—but the latter having remained incomplete continues to be a project, which does not enable one to attest to, but only suspend the veridicity of our statement; Badiou then falls back on *Coup de dés* which, according to him, “forces to be veridical the statement that what is at stake in a modern poem is the motif of an idea (ultimately, the very idea of the event). The relation between forcing is here detained within the analysis of the text.”⁶

Let's understand how these things are articulated: for Badiou, *Coup de dés* makes the event as such a motif. The Idea set in the poem—the idea made motif—is that of the event taken for itself in its pure undecidability. This is why the Hero of the poem, avoiding passive submission to the devastated place just as its opacifying mastery by knowledge, persists in the sole paradoxical action permitted by his fidelity to the indiscernible of the situation: he hesitates—he hesitates to toss the dice, thus he holds firm in his fist the eternally hazardous nature of the event. We said it, that the event took place or not, this cannot be initially the fact of a knowledge, but the fact of a wager: the hesitation to toss the dice is thus the exact symbol of eternal fidelity to this initial uncertainty of non-knowledge. And the final sublation of the Master by the constellatory toss maintains this fidelity to the hazardous toss, by submitting it to a “Perhaps” that attests to its intrinsic hypotheticity.

But, as we have seen, for Badiou, the undecidability of an event is undoubtedly its essence—but certainly not its vocation: the event's end is rather to prolong itself in a finite number of inquiries, those having as their goal a relation of forcing, which this time is of the order of knowledge: forcing between the statement of the subject-language that determined the series of inquiries and a term discernible within the situation. The event can only be apprehended from the point of a statement that thus reverses it originally in the series of inquiries and of the truth to which it initiates us. If I am not already engaged in inquiries by means of a statement of the subject-language, oriented by the series to come and driven to make investigations, I cannot even conceive that an event perhaps took place. This is why Badiou subordinates, in Mallarmé, the motif of the in-itself undecidable event to the motif of forcing—that of knowledge—which enables us to access the truth of the statement of “Crisis of Verse”. And he does it twice over: a first time by subordinating the event thematized by *Coup de dés* to the project of the Book, a second time, more insistently, more intrinsically, by subordinating in the midst of *Coup de dés* the motif of the event to the forcing produced by the production of the poem *Un Coup de dés*, a production which demonstrates in action the possibility that is simply announced in “Crisis of verse”: namely, the coming of a poetry constituted as the “motification” of an Idea—that, in this instance, of the event as such.

Nevertheless, this way of articulating Mallarmé's theses with the logic of forcing can only lead, in my view, to devaluing or at least relativizing the interest of his poetry—and this from the very standpoint of a philosophy of the event, that is, from Badiou's own viewpoint.

In the case of *Coup de dés*, what resists the idea that there will have been an articulation of eventality and forcing? Simply the emphatic maintenance of *PERHAPS* in the final sentence: this word, inscribed in capital letters, is in no way posited as provisional, and as awaiting a truth that would come to complete it at the same time as abolish it, replacing its hypotheticity with an effective certitude. In the poem, this adverb is instead pronounced as the attribute of the beyond itself, in other words: the *eternal* attribute of the ultimate constellation. In Meditation 19 of *BE*, Badiou makes this *PERHAPS* the expression of a “promise”: nothing will have taken place except perhaps—in the future—a constellation. A promise whose realization will be the writing of the Poem itself. But nothing of this kind, once again, is expressly indicated in the Poem: the *PERHAPS* is neither realized nor invalidated—it is on the contrary hypostasized, celebrated for itself, erupting in the Heavens as an intrinsic property of the constellation—and that is why it is in capital letters, and in an identical body of characters. There is no hierarchy between the *PERHAPS* and the constellation: as though the latter were the realization of the promise contained in the former. In this sense, the Mallarméan *Perhaps* silently resists its eventalization à la Badiou: because it is not so much a promise as a pure actuality, a *Perhaps* that does not seem destined to disappear and to make place for another thing, because it is itself the sought-after fulfillment. And this holds as well if we identify the constellation with the Poem itself, according to its

splintered typography: the Poem, far from abolishing the *Perhaps* in the certitude of its own reality, exhibits it as an eternal and unsurpassable element of its own effectivity.

Will we thereby say that Mallarmé forced the statement-subject of the poem as motif of the Idea—in this instance of the Idea of event? But this success is then only partial, and deemed insufficient. For this logic of a celebration of the *Perhaps* for itself would come back, in Badiouian logic, to a hypothesis of the event, considered as a conclusion, at the expense of the patient and laborious work—in the noble sense of the term—of inquiries. We would thus have reasons to suspect in it a mysticism of the event, very obscure and devoid of consistency. And above all, we would have reasons to think that, by aiming for the event for itself, for its pure undecidability, Mallarmé lacked in fact its essence, failed to give its rigorous motif, since the veritable essence of the event is to be a promise of something other than itself alone, and not the will to maintain itself in its peculiar and vain autarkic resplendence.

If we move now to the *Book*, as another possibility of forcing of the Mallarméan statement, we have other Badiouian reasons to be dissatisfied with Mallarmé. In the first place, no doubt, because the *Book* is not an existing poem but a simple project, largely incomplete. And a project cannot suffice to produce the forcing of a statement of the subject-language. But also—and perhaps especially—in that the *Book* is a sufficiently precise project for its essential insufficiency with regard to the canons of the events to be expressed within it.

This critique of the project of the *Book* is, in effect, explicitly conducted by Badiou in his *Handbook of Inaesthetics*. It is produced in the context of a comparison between the apparatus of heteronymy in Pessoa, and the project of the *Book* correlated to the anonymity of its author. And the least we can say is that the comparison does not favor Mallarmé:

Rather than being the author of an oeuvre, Pessoa has laid out an entire literature, a literary configuration wherein all the oppositions and intellectual problems of the century come to inscribe themselves. In this respect, he has greatly surpassed the Mallarméan project of the Book. The weakness of Mallarmé's project lay in retaining the sovereignty of the One, of the author—even if this author made himself absent from the Book to the point of becoming anonymous. Mallarméan anonymity remains prisoner of the author. The heteronyms (Caeiro, Campos, Reis, “Pessoa-in-Person”, Soares) are opposed to the anonymous inasmuch as they do not stake a claim upon the One or the All, but instead originally establish the contingency of the multiple.⁷

(I said that Badiou never renounced his fidelity to Mallarmé, but we have the impression here that we are witnessing a scene between philosophy and poetry, where the philosopher finally admits to his old mistress that his heart beats henceforth for a new passion, which is not necessarily recent).

We understand, in reading this passage, that there is in truth a profound reason, from Badiou's point of view, for crossing out in *LW* the words “perhaps” and “on high” of the final statement of *Coup de dés*. A reason that is not reduced to the fact that we cease to aim, in this statement, for the question of the (undecidable) event in order to envisage only that of truths (attested by forcing). These words, in effect, can be crossed out twice over, in two different but convergent senses—if we suppose that Mallarmé's poetry discovers its fulfillment either in *Coup de dés* or in the *Book*. For *Coup de dés*, to begin with: the crossing-out arises from the fact that the emphasis given to the *perhaps*, its constellatory quasi-hypostasis, risks constituting it on high, in an uncertain beyond, diffuse, intrinsically indeterminate and yet desired for itself. There is a risk of engendering a vague reverie, full of bad effusion and sterile musing: of fascination for a “perhaps, perhaps...” whose indefinite points of suspension leave us powerless—in contrast to the sober and painstaking labor of the inquiry required by the event. As for the *Book*: it is its own idealism, that is, its Hegelian will to totalization, which makes it a beyond doomed in its turn to an eternal *perhaps*: in other words, to a basically predetermined failure, turning the statement of the subject-language into a statement destined to be eternally suspended. To which Badiou can oppose the empirical evidence *that there have been* truths (including poetic truths) and that this is the decisive

point: more than the undecidability of the event, the evidence of truths in the four procedures that produce them, truths attesting retrospectively to the value of inquiries, and which thereby produce effective, real, evident constellations; not events that remain pure and virginal in the soft veil of their intact eventuality, but events “forced” by the meticulous investigation of the subject, from which the indubitable stars of procedural truths have been born.

II. RECONSTRUCTION OF A NON-EVENTAL PERHAPS

I would like now to propose another way of grasping of the Mallarméan perhaps, other than that of the event. I will attempt, in other words, to take up again the givens of the problem that Badiou posed (the statement of “Crisis of Verse” on one hand, *Coup de dés* and the *Book* on the other) but by articulating them according to a logic distinct from that of the event, of the subject-language and of forcing. This will enable me to put forward a plea for maintaining as is, *without crossing-out*, the “perhaps” and “on high” in the final statement of *Coup de dés*.

Let’s set out again from the statement of “Crisis of Verse” cited by Badiou. He only mentions the middle of the sentence, which I want to quote in its entirety: “Similitude between verses, and old proportions, a regularity will endure because the poetic act consists in suddenly seeing that an idea becomes fractionated in a certain number of motifs with equal value and in grouping them; they rhyme; as external seal, the final words are proof of their common measure.”⁸

This declaration—the beginning of the sentence indicates it clearly—is in effect the affirmation of a fidelity to the fixed meter of regular verse, in the face of the crisis opened by free verse. We know that in the conflict between the vers-libristes and the Parnassians, Mallarmé adopted a singular position that recognized the viewpoints of both parties. For the most radical adepts of free verse, such as Gustave Kahn, traditional meter—that is, metric rules in the strict sense (syllabication, caesura, syllabic division) and rules of rhyme—was merely an obsolete tool, with a conventional, even political origin (heir to monarchic centralism), but devoid of any poetic value. For the adepts of regular verse—such as Leconte de Lisle or Heredia—free verse, in contrast, was in no way poetry, but a prose poem embellished with arbitrary line breaks. Mallarmé, for his part, objects to these two extreme positions: his solution consists in a division of tasks between the two poetics. Against “Parnasse’s rusty sign”, he maintains that free verse is a novel poetic instrument, enabling each poet to forge for himself an individual instrument apt to express his own personality. But against the radical vers-libristes, he reaffirms the importance of regular verse, affirming that it—and in particular the alexandrine—is alone adequate to “ample occasions”, that is, alone capable of producing the song through which the Crowd accesses its own mystery. Mallarmé did not cease to aim, throughout his work, for a sublation of Christian religion and cult through poetry: he sought, and this is the material of the notes he left us in the *Book*, to constitute a ceremony through which the community, delivered from every belief in a transcendence, could contemplate the immanence of its own divinity. Poetry must thus be understood according to a double polarity: metric verse, ceremonial and collective; free verse, individual and personalized. But this polarity, understandably, is hierarchized in favor of metric verse: for it alone manages to constitute the new religion that is ardently sought after by the century, and in particular, it alone exhibits with clarity the source of every poetry. This is precisely what our statement affirms.

The sentence cited by Badiou is, in reality, addressed primarily to the vers-libristes: it affirms that a “regularity will endure”, in other words, that regular verse will never disappear for the benefit of free verse alone, because the Idea consists in a fractionation of equal motifs: in this way Mallarmé, as he indicates afterwards, affirms very concretely a defense of rhyme. For rhyme consists precisely in a separation of two consonant words, initially adjoined in the mind of the poet, which are then separated in order to be distributed in two distinct verses whose rhymed conclusion they constitute. Put differently, our text affirms that the poet is driven by the simple intuition of an Idea that initially consists in two words brought together by their sound and meaning, which the poet fractionates thereafter in order to construct verses that are themselves equal by their syllabic

numbers. The “motifs with equal value” are at once the rhymed words and the isometric verses (of same length), and the poem remains essentially an art of composing these equalities.

It is a point that we do not always have sufficiently in mind: Mallarmé’s singularity lies in being a poet who simultaneously participates in the most audacious modernity and maintains in a strict fashion the essential character of regular meter. The complete or quasi-complete victory of free verse in the 20th century would have meant for him, if he had bore witness to it, a ruinous amputation of poetry. Rhyme, in particular, far from being an obsolete artifice, attested to the superiority of French verse over ancient verse because it compelled verse to be dual. A rhymed verse is two verses (stanza or distich) separated by a white space, a nothingness whose space contains the vibration in which the song is deployed: a truth which the Greeks and the Romans did not attain, their verse being defined individually, by an internal rhythmic structure and not by an external relation to another verse. Rhyme is thus the exhibition of nothingness as constitutive element of poetic beauty; it is essential to the marking of modernity in relation to ancient poetry where verses are unitary totalities and not relational dualities.

A conversation from October 10, 1891 with Valéry, relayed by the latter in stenographic style, enables us to understand whence stems Mallarmé’s interest in rhyme, and why he could have perceived in it a solution to the crisis of free verse: “On free verse. Its predicament. Difficulty of creating verses without partitions. [...] Rhyme – Banville’s brilliant solution.”⁹

Banville is one of Mallarmé’s great admirations, never renounced. In particular, he was a fervent reader of his *Small Treatise of French Poetry* (1872) and did not hesitate to correct certain of his sonnets in order to make them conform to the prescriptions of this treatise. The third chapter of this work developed a singular thesis on rhyme: “RHYM... is the unique harmony of verses and it is the whole verse.”¹⁰ In fact, Banville continues, the “great secret of poetry lies in this end around which and with a view to which the whole verse is constructed.” Banville was very proud of this thesis, which he presents accordingly as the revelation of a secret that poets had never revealed to the layman: namely, that the poem is entirely constructed starting from its rhymes. The true poet, in effect, begins with the intuition of rhymed words—herein resides the source of his genius—and only afterward constructs the verses, which have no other function than to showcase their consonant ends.

Why was Mallarmé fascinated by the Banvillian thesis, to the point of declaring it “brilliant” and rendering it a possible solution to the crisis of free verse? Because this thesis enabled him to point out the danger of a regression of free verse in the direction of ancient verse: for if the verse ceased to be metrical, it would cease to be rhymed, thus dual, encumbered with nothingness, and it would then risk falling back into the totalizing plenitude of individual verse. Meter—and in particular rhyme—becomes the guarantee of a relational nothingness set under the principle of verse, and therefore emerges as a form of modernity, and not of archaism. From this point of view, free verse is potentially reactionary, and alone the preservation on its side of regular meter will enable the poem to conserve the gains of a structurally relational poetics.

Let’s admit then that the Mallarméan statement of the “subject-language”, in Badiou’s lexicon, bears on rhyme: what is thus its relation with the *Book* and *Coup de dés*? Can we conserve Badiou’s intuition according to which these two texts constitute, if not a forcing in the strict sense, at least a putting to the test of the Idea understood as fractionation of equal motifs? And what relation with the Mallarméan “perhaps” in its difference from the event?

Let’s begin with some reminders. The incomplete Notes for the *Book* were probably composed between 1888 and 1895, thus precisely during the years when Mallarmé is caught in the crisis of free verse, and does not cease to seek a path in order to respond to it. If the notes are interrupted in 1895, it is particularly because these pursuits lead him towards *Coup de dés* whose first section—the only known one during his lifetime—appeared in 1897. It is thus probable that *Coup de dés* was conceived as a response to the difficulties encountered in the composition of the Notes for the *Book*, or as a complement to what could be missing from it. My hypothesis is

BADIOU AND MALLARMÉ

that the *PERHAPS* of *Coup de dés* constitutes one of these responses to the insufficiencies of the *Book*. Let's try to demonstrate this.

In the first place, what do the fragments of the *Book* consist of? What is at stake is the description of a ceremony of reading, before an audience of 24 people, by a reader called "the operator". The *Book* is not bound: it is composed of mobile pages, stowed away in two cabinets made up of pigeonholes. The operator then adjoins the pages in multiple ways, producing the "proof" that their junction is each time legitimate. The number of these combinations must be, in Mallarmé's mind, very important, since one needs no less than five years to achieve a complete reading of the *Book*, according to the rules of the ceremonial.

Badiou is right: there is indeed a totalizing design in the *Book*. Although dismembered and never bound together, although enabling a reading with much broader scope than ordinary books, the Mallarméan *Book* functions as a closed totality, eternally recommenced according to a period of five years, that is, as the notes recall, a "lustrum" (whence the ironic presence of the luminary on the ceiling of the reading room). But we also see that the *Book* is conceived as a *non-metric fashion* of "defending" metric number and rhyme. In effect, 12—number of the alexandrine—is omnipresent in the ceremony: the number of assistants (24, the number of syllables of a couplet of alexandrines), but also the price or size of the book should be a multiple of 12 or 6 (number of the hemistich). As to rhyme, it is precisely celebrated by what one could call a "dance of visual rhyme": the dance of the operator who, on the scene, adjoins, under the gaze of everyone, the mobile pages—revealing the fractionation and continual recombination not only of two verses, but of two pages.

Yet, what must now be emphasized is that Mallarmé did not in fact remain at this totalizing project of the *Book*: he was oriented, after *Coup de dés*, towards an *eternally hypothetical realization of this ceremony*. I will try to explain myself on this point. Badiou admits that the subject must necessarily wager on the event on account of its initial undecidability; but this undecidability is provisional or is meant to be so. On the other hand, truths, once obtained through the articulation of inquiries and of forcing, are guaranteed, always locally, always in a situation, by a specific knowledge. There is no sense in doubting that there have been truths; *a fortiori* there is no sense in doubting that there is what Badiou calls "truth procedures": science, art, politics and love in the case of human subjects. Well, Mallarmé nevertheless established the eternal undecidability not only of an event, but of a truth procedure: *that of poetry*. This is to say that he bore to ideality the possibility that poetry does not exist.

How can we maintain such a thesis, and attribute it to Mallarmé? How can we doubt the existence of poetry, and especially that of Mallarmé? In fact, such is indeed, we believe, the meaning of *Coup de dés* and of its evocation of a "Number that cannot be another". This Number is in effect that of the result of the dice tossed perhaps by the Boatswain at the moment of his ship's sinking. It is unclear whether this Master—who is also indeed the poetic Meter at the moment of regular verse's shipwreck—tossed the dice or not: but the result which appears in the Heavens under the forms of a Septentrion is simultaneously posited as celestial—divine—and hypothetical, marked with an indelible *PERHAPS*. Mallarmé thus clearly affirms that the advent of a metrical Number infused with a superior necessity ("which cannot be another"), a Number capable of resisting the "memorable crisis" of free verse, must be purely hypothetical if it aspires to be eternal. The Master does not produce a necessary Meter except on condition of making it the Rule of a Poetry become uncertain in its own existence. But once again, how can poetry doubt itself, its own effectivity; and how could this doubt become the paradoxical bearer of its future salvation?

That poetry can doubt its own existence: it is evident that this hypothesis is absurd if we give to poetry a "positive" definition; that there is a practice of versified and metric language, this is uncontested. The doubt at issue has meaning only from the standpoint of the poetry that, in the heritage of Romanticism, claims to be an absolute and the source of a new religion.

As we have seen, the vocation of Metric verse, according to Mallarmé, is precisely the re-foundation of the community after the collapse of Christianity. If this verse does not survive free verse, poetry will become exclusively an art of individuality, and will have thus failed to become a “great art”, a configurative art: it will have, in sum, failed to rival music which, for its part, and under the form of total Wagnerian art, knew how to set itself up as a new cult.

Nevertheless, Mallarmé considers that it indeed falls to poetry, and not to instrumental music, to constitute a new scene wherein the Crowd is convoked. But he simultaneously affirms the eternally doubtful existence of a poetry thus conceived as “religion to come”. In effect, if poetry is *at once* metric verse and free verse, it will only exist on the condition that its two sides realize their respective destinations: common (regular) poetry addressed to the Crowd for the culture of its own mystery, singular (free) poetry addressed to individualities disseminated by their idiosyncrasies. But if it is impossible to doubt the reality of free verse, since it has known how to express in an ever-new fashion the individuality of poets, it is possible today—quite possible—to consider that the metric side of verse has fallen into nothingness, at the same time as the ceremony of the *Book*. Nevertheless, the inversion of this anxiety consists, in *Coup de dés*, in affirming that the eternity of metric Number consists precisely in its eternal undecidability.

Here is the crux: Mallarmé’s singularity resides, we believe, in his attempt to produce not only an immanent religion (without beyond nor transcendent God), but also one that makes doubt in its own regard the object of its very cult. What is, in effect, a modern? A human whose irony renders him rebellious to every excessive belief, to every univocal ceremonial—the modern balks at the splendor, always pompous for his taste. This is why all the attempts of new religions in the 19th century—from Comte to Wagner by way of Lamartine and Hugo—fell in his eye, that is, in ours, more or less into ridicule. We cannot revive the dimension of cult, be it immanent, without secretly considering that there is here—*perhaps*—something irremediably derisory. No return of the ceremony that is, for the moderns, marked by an intense discomfort experienced in doing something that smacks of the artificial and the vain. I believe that Mallarmé’s originality comes from having realized very early on that his project of the *Book*—what he called his Great Work in 1866—should incorporate this dimension of doubt, of uncertainty, and make it precisely the object of a paradoxical religion.

To make this point crystal-clear, and show in what way it is tied up with Mallarméan pursuits, I will briefly rely on two texts: *Igitur* and *The Afternoon of a Faun*.

Igitur, let’s recall, is depicted descending into the vault of his ancestors, in the process of hesitating, during the crucial instant of Midnight, to toss the dice he holds in his hand. The tossing of the two dice symbolizes the act of producing a verse: imperfect, shaky, when the result is inferior to 12; perfect, when it is equal to the number of the alexandrine. This hesitation to toss the dice, that is, to continue to write poetry like his romantic ancestors once the belief in God disappears, stems more profoundly from the infinite structure of Chance. This structure, no doubt due to the influence of Hegel, possesses a manifestly dialectical structure—albeit of a heterodox dialectic. Chance is infinite in that it always fulfills “its own Idea by affirming or denying itself.” In this way it “enables the Infinite to be.”¹¹ In truth, when chance affirms itself, it lets itself be seen in an evident way in the insignificance of its result, and these are the bad verses, the results other than 12 for the toss of the dice, which symbolize this affirmation of Chance. But it happens nevertheless that a verse comes to light—like a miraculous 12 during a game—a verse with such perfection that it seems to enjoy a destined necessity, negating through its beauty the Chance which nevertheless gives birth to it. For Chance, in truth, is always fulfilled when it is negated in the appearance of the most ordered results: in the fortunate coincidences that seem illusorily the sign of an intentional will, or in the sublime verses that appear to be produced by a divine inspiration, when they are merely the fragile work of a poet that might not have been born. The 12 that concludes the victorious game is made up of the same aleatory “foam” as any ineffective result whatever. Chance is thus (dialectically) infinite: it is *equally* present in the mediocrity that lets it erupt clearly and in the fulgurating beauty that apparently negates it.

But in this case, once Chance is posited as the new Infinite that takes the place of the old God, how can the poetic act hope to *equal* this Infinite—and thus become absolute, fulfill the Romantic wish for a poetry in symbiosis with the Eternal? *Igitur* initiates the solution that will be deployed by *Coup de dés*: the infinitization of verse must be produced by a *hesitation to toss the dice, a hesitation that is then incorporated into the verse*. In one of the endings of the (incomplete) story, *Igitur* simply shakes the dice in his hand, before joining the ashes of his ancestors: he tosses the dice without tossing them, confining himself to this ambiguous gesture as symbol of the poetic act to come. In the Poem of 1898, this ambiguity is posited in a more radical and clearer fashion: it is thus forever uncertain whether the toss of the Master have taken place, and whether the final constellation has indeed appeared: the perhaps of the poetic gesture is eternalized to ensure that the (metric) Number is infinitized—at once existing and not existing, fulfilling its Idea through the simultaneous affirmation and negation of the toss. In this way is symbolized a splendor that is infinite because it is hesitant. It is equally suggested that the ceremony of the moderns will be a ceremony of hesitation, the sole act capable of comprising in itself the infinite opposites: hesitation to smile with irony, or to believe with sincerity in the possible rebirth of a poetic and political communion.

My second example will be drawn from *The Afternoon of a Faun*. Badiou produces a very beautiful commentary on it in *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, by identifying the relation of the Faun to the vanished nymphs with that of the subject in the face of the vanishing event. We know in fact that the argument of the poem consists in the ruminations of a Faun wondering if it dreamed its erotic encounter, some time before, with a couple of nymphs. For Badiou, this uncertainty of the Faun—which is not dispelled in the final version of the poem (1876)—illustrates the undecidable character (for a knowledge) of the authentic event. I believe that there exists, nevertheless, another possible reading than the eventual reading, and which accounts for the remarkable fact that the nymphs are *two*. In effect, we possess many convergent indices (which I cannot mobilize here) that suggest that Mallarmé is thinking, through this erotic duality, of the encounter of the poet with his rhyme (with a duality of verses). The two nymphs are originally entwined together, according to a sapphic duo to which the phallic duo of the Faun's antlers responds. This double couple—the nymphs, the antlers—is reproduced by the usage, in the poem, of rhyming couplets: there is an apposition of two feminine rhymes, which are enlaced with the apposition of two masculine rhymes.

But the passage that unequivocally demonstrates that the nymphs are the rhyme is the following:

Then, instrument of flights, Syrinx malign
At lakes [*lacs*] where you attend me, bloom once more!
Long shall my discourse from the echoing shore
Depict those goddesses: by masquerades,
I'll strip the veils that sanctify their shades;¹²

The important word is “lakes” [*lacs*]. We imagine in the first place that it designates the set of water pools where the encounter with the naiads is perhaps situated. But in the evocation of the Faun, it was a question of a marsh, not a lake, and there was only one and not many. If such is the meaning of the term, we must admit here a certain arbitrariness on Mallarmé's part, in that we do not see what calls for the word to be in the plural. It is thus more probable that the veritable sense, as Gardner Davies saw, is “*le lacs*”—pronounced <la> and not <lak>—a word which can signify, according to Le Littré:¹³

1. Snare used to catch birds, hares and other game.
2. Love knot, cords folded on themselves in order to form a horizontal 8.

Since the Faun aspires to project itself “as high as love modulates itself”, Davies thinks it is “this trap, knot or love knot that the Faun asks the syrinx to reconstitute musically.”¹⁴ Certainly the term, if it is a question of a “lacs”, must support this sense; but it also contains a more precise signification not noted by Davies. This “lacs” designates, first and foremost, the two nymphs that the Faun will manage to capture, and we will discover that

they were entwined at the moment of their seizure, which was perhaps equally that of their rapture:

*I seize them without untangling them*¹⁵

The “lacs” is thus the synecdoche for the duo of nymphs. In *La Musique et les Lettres*, which appears twenty years after the *Faun*, here is what Mallarmé wrote apropos the couple that two verses in a poem make:

The turn of a certain phrase or *the weave* [lacs] *of a diptych*, copied upon our confirmations, aids the hatching, inside us, of observations and correspondences...¹⁶

We therefore grasp that the interrogations of the Faun who wakes up, wondering if the memory of this encounter is real or merely a dream, concern the very heart of poetry: rhyme, already posited as synecdoche of verse in the first version of the *Faun* (1865)—which is anterior, let’s note, to Banville’s *Small Treatise*. But if the (incomplete) version of 1865 maintains the real existence of the naiads, the two ulterior versions (1875, 1876) render the uncertainty perpetual. If Mallarmé appeared preoccupied with the relationship to rhyme before reading Banville’s *Treatise* (1872), it is only after having read it that he theorizes the idea that the poet is destined to be always unaware of the value of his act: did he have the vision of a divine entwinement, an absolute distich—or was all of this merely a dream?

The Faun’s question is thus the following: is rhyme a phantasm, a simple pleasant assonance, a hackneyed rule even, or is it truly the Idea divided into equal motifs? This is what remains unresolved in the final version, just like the toss of *Coup de dés*. And the Faun seems to resign itself to the necessity of this destiny, which makes its dream a phantasm, by concluding its monologue with this declaration: “Couple, farewell; I’ll see the shade that now you are.”¹⁷ Doctrine of rhyme which enables us to understand that the adjoined pages of the *Book*, perceived as visual and danced rhymes, would have no doubt shown, in Mallarmé’s mind, their eternally doubtful and yet admirable character: the Faun’s philosophy, present implicitly in the Notes for the *Book*, and splendidly fulfilled in *Coup de dés*.

CONCLUSION

What should we conclude from this? I have sought to show that there exists in Mallarmé a “perhaps” that does not function according to the register of the event, because it aims for itself, and not as undecidable starting point for a truth process made up of inquiries and forcing. But having said that, I will add that Mallarmé attempts a response in his own way to the question that guides Badiou’s analyses on Wagner, and which make the latter turn once again towards the ceremony of the Book, this time in a kind treatment.

Badiou, in effect, concludes his *Lessons on Wager* with the enigma of *Parisfal* (1882), an enigma formulable in the following question: what is the subject of *Parisfal*? His response is ultimately as follows: the subject of *Parisfal* is identical to the “great question” of the 19th century, that of the possibility of a new ceremony, of a ceremony posterior to Christianity. The opera is punctuated by two ceremonies—in the second scene of Act I, then of Act III: the first is celebrated by Amfortas, the second by Parisfal. These two, Badiou insists, are formally identical (showing the Grail to the knights), the only notable alteration consisting, with the introduction of a woman in the second ceremony, in the change of the officiant. The subject of *Parisfal*, Badiou concludes, thus seems to be the undecidable character of the share of restoration and innovation in the future ceremony. The performed ceremony contains, in effect, a sort of empty repetition, which makes it uncertain to what extent it differs from the old one (novelty) and to what extent it is merely its replica (restoration).

But the ceremony of *Parisfal* contains a second repetition, which once again introduces an uncertainty. Badiou recalls that Wagner wanted *Parisfal* to be performed only in Bayreuth and did not wish the public to applaud at the end. Put differently, the *performance* of the double ceremony—the two quasi-identical ceremonies which take place successively on the stage—is *in its turn* a ceremony: that of Bayreuth; by the absence of applause, by

BADIOU AND MALLARMÉ

the sacralization of the place, Wagner intended to demonstrate that it was not a simple spectacle. There will thus have been a (real) ceremony of the (performed) ceremony. A double splitting in two of the ceremony. And yet, it is not certain (Badiou thinks otherwise) that there will have been here a new ceremony or even a ceremony *tout court*. The performance itself attracts dolled-up bourgeois from the whole world, which, Badiou says, is so pathetic when we think about it. And the fictive ceremonies, for their part, fail at bottom to produce a genuinely novel difference between the old and the new. Well, I believe that this is what could have reconciled—be it partially—Mallarmé with Wagner: this whole uncertainty, oscillating between the ridiculous and the sublime, the new and the repetitive, the real and the fictive—all of this would have represented fairly well I believe, not a failure, not a waiting for another thing, but quite precisely the modern ceremony, according to its intrinsic and, in a certain way, unsurpassable “perhaps”. The ceremony as eternal hesitation between the derisory and the solemn, the constellation and its night.

QUENTIN MEILLASSOUX teaches philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure. He is the author of *After Finitud* (Continuum, 2008) and the recent *The Number and the Siren* (Urbanomic, 2012).

NOTES

1. *Translator's note*—We would like to thank Éditions Germina for granting the permission for this translation. The French text appeared originally in the collection *Autour d'Alain Badiou*, 2011, copyright of Les Éditions Germina.
2. Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event*, 2. Trans. Alberto Toscano. London: Continuum, 2009, 4.
3. Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*. Trans. Oliver Feltham. London: Continuum, 2005, 403 (translation modified).
4. Badiou, *Being and Event* 403.
5. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations: The 1897 Arrangement by the Author; Together with "Music and Letters"*. Trans. Barbara Johnson. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007, 206 (translation modified).
6. Badiou, *Being and Event*, 405.
7. Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*. Trans. Alberto Toscano. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005, 44.
8. Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 206 (translation modified).
9. Paul Valéry, *Oeuvres*, Gallimard, Bibl. De la Pléiade, t. 1, 1957, p. 1723; cited by Michel Murat, *Le Coup de dés de Mallarmé. Un recommencement de la poésie*. Belin, 2005, 24.
10. *Ressouvenances*, 1998 (facsimile of G. Charpentier's edition, 1883), 47.
11. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. B. Marchal, Bibl. de la Pléiade, Gallimard, t. I, 1998, 476.
12. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems: A Bilingual Edition*. Trans. Henry Weinfield. University of California Press, 1994, 39.
13. *Translator's note*—*Le Littré* is a French dictionary published by Hachette.
14. Gardner Davies, *Mallarmé et la "couche suffisante d'intelligibilité"*. Paris, José Corti, 1988, 84. One can also consider Vigny's verses (*La colère de Samson, Les Destinées*):

He will go to the city and there the foolish virgins
Will catch him in their snares [*lacs*] at the first words.

15. Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, 40 (translation modified).
16. Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 186. My emphasis. Mallarmé spells "lac" and not "lacs", but there is no doubt that he understands the term in the sense of a weaved network [*lacs*] and not a pool of water—for otherwise the comparison with the distich would have no meaning.
17. Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, 41.