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Syllable as Syntax: Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés*

“To his lot fell the heavy duty of thinking out afresh the whole poetic problem, of envisaging the poet’s task in its rarest form, of refining the poet’s medium till it should be adequate to that task. His was the exceptional destiny to conceive the perfect work, to labour at it for more than twenty years in the interval of ungrateful drudgery and to die, exhausted by the tension of those years, when freedom at last had come.” – Christopher Brennan¹

Un Coup de dés is one of the masterworks of modern literature, and a kind of *summa* of Stéphane Mallarmé’s lifework. It could not have been better served by writers and thinkers: on the one hand, it immediately transformed the field for working poets as different as Paul Valéry and Christopher Brennan, as for so many more thereafter; on the other, a strong lineage of European philosophy registered the poem as an event for thought, encompassing Maurice Blanchot, J.-P. Sartre, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, J.-C. Milner, Quentin Meillassoux, and many others.² Confronted by this sequence of commentaries by great poets and philosophers, a contemporary reader could be forgiven for experiencing the torment of a methodological and intellectual impasse. How could one add to this sequence of readings except as a supernumerary number that could always be another? Yet how could one also not feel that the sequence itself demands another numbering or enu-

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¹ C. Brennan, *Christopher Brennan*, ed. T. Sturm, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia 1984, pp. 206-7.

² See, inter alia, J.-P. Sartre, *Mallarmé, or the Poet of Nothingness*, University Park, Penn State University, University Park 1988; M. Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, trans. C. Mandell, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1995; J. Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. D. Attridge, Routledge, New York 1992; J. Rancière, *Mallarmé: The Politics of the Siren*, trans. S. Corcoran, Continuum, London 2011; A. Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. O. Feltham, Continuum, London 2005; Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, Second Edition, intro. W. Godzich, Methuen, London 1983; J.-C. Milner, *Constats*, Gallimard, Paris 2002; Q. Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren*, trans. R. Mackay, Urbanomic, Falmouth 2012.

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meration of the operations of the poem? Even more tormentingly, does not this double address itself mimic the structure of the limit as delivered by Mallarmé himself: the spontaneous eruption of the crowd of history, to which one cannot add except by subtracting oneself, as per the disappearance of the author, the purification of the verse, the becoming-abyssal of content? With these orienting reservations in mind, this article will accordingly take the route of a speculative reconstruction of a (one) sequence of thought that *may* have taken place for *Un Coup de dés* to become what it is, along the lines of the now-familiar, even banal paradox that a *dispositif* can only find its own conditions of possibility following the act that retrospectively creates those very conditions.

As all its inheritors testify, the poem poses the question *what is a poem?* in and as a poem itself, according to the most strenuous conceptual criteria. As Martin Heidegger announces regarding his own adherence to certain poems of Friedrich Hölderlin: “I did not choose Hölderlin because his work, as one among many, realizes the universal essence of poetry, but rather because Hölderlin’s poetry is sustained by his whole poetic mission: to make poems solely about the essence of poetry. Hölderlin is for us in a preeminent sense *the poet’s poet*. And for that reason he forces a decision upon us.”³ If Heidegger himself did not and could not himself say the same of Mallarmé, there is no question that this remark can also serve as an orientation to the French aesthete: a poet’s poet who forces a decision upon us.

Yet the question concerning the “meaning of Mallarmé” cannot simply, *pace* Heidegger, be posed according to the (Romantic) problematic of language, nation and people à la Hölderlin. Whereas Heidegger was consumed – especially in the 1930s-40s, for all the well-known reasons – with trying to think-through the problem of the truth of historicity of the German people according to the dictates of the work of art – Mallarmé’s moment is precisely not a nationalist one. Approximately a decade ago, Slavoj Žižek, launching a new *Lacan Dictionary* in Melbourne, remarked that Australia was precisely the right distance from Paris to be able to get Lacan right. The same goes, *a fortiori*, for Mallarmé. In a first moment, then, I wish to mark the importance of Australia as a poetic site for the interpretation of Mallarmé – at once poetic, critical and parodic – from

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³ M. Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*, trans. K. Hoeller, Humanity, New York 2000, p. 52.

Christopher Brennan, through Gardner Davies and A.D. Hope, to Chris Edwards and Rosemary Lloyd, David Brooks, John Hawke, and now Christian Gelder and Robert Boncardo.⁴ I don't make this point for merely nationalist reasons, not least given that I have already doubted the putative "nationalism" of Mallarmé; on the contrary, as I will try to show, it rather is for odd poetic reasons. Part of the point will be that Mallarmé ushers in a new modality of possibility for a poetry no longer tied to its empirical or linguistic site; in doing so, however, his work has recourse to a kind of sibyllic syllabary that at once mimes and reverses the linguistic labours of European colonisation.

This aspect of Mallarméan poetics can be confirmed by a number of indicators, not only along the chains of interpretation and influence I have already noted, but in the symptoms constituted by the points-of-antagonism between the express statements of the most significant critics themselves. We can see this in Rancière speaking of Mallarmé's "types" as correlated with the deracinated industrial design of Peter Behrens; in Friedrich Kittler, noting that Mallarmé's "instant insight," under new media pressure, that literature was nothing but the deployment of letters; or J.-C. Milner's analyses that show how modern science renders all human experience patently imaginary.⁵ But it is also to be found in Badiou's *Theory of the Subject*, regarding Mallarmé's development of the relations between "the crowd" and poetic negation, or in Meillassoux's doctrines regarding the situated problem for Mallarmé of the failure of Greek, Catholic and Wagnerian liturgy.⁶ To extend Robert Boncardo's analyses here, it was not only great 20th century French philosophers who found Mallarmé exemplary of

⁴ See, inter alia, C. Brennan, *Prose-Verse-Poster-Algebraic-Symbolico-Riddle Musicopomatographoscope & Pocket Musicopomatographoscope*, ed. A. Clark, Hale and Iremonger, Erskineville 1981; G. Davies, *Mallarmé and le drame solaire* J. Corti, Paris 1959; R. Lloyd, *Mallarmé: The Poet and his Circle*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1999; C. Edwards, *A Fluke*, Monogene and Jacket, Sydney 2005; D. Brooks, *The Sons of Clovis: Ern Malley, Adore Floupette, and a secret history of Australian Poetry*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane 2011; J. Hawke, *Australian Literature and the Symbolist Movement*, University of Wollongong Press, Wollongong 2009; C. Gelder and R. Boncardo (eds.), *Mallarmé: Rancière, Milner, Badiou*, Rowman and Littlefield, London 2017.

⁵ See J. Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. G. Elliott, Verso, London 2007; F. Kittler, *Optical Media*, trans. A. Enns, Polity, Cambridge 2010; J.-C. Milner, *L'Oeuvre claire: Lacan, la science, la philosophie*, Seuil, Paris 1995.

⁶ See A. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. B. Bosteels, Continuum, London 2009; Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren*, *passim*.

the bond between literature and politics, caught between the admirable intransigence of his high art and its apparent concomitant rejection of poetry as the voice of the people.⁷

Indeed, integral to this interpretative history is the constant sequence of philosophical inversions of the sense of Mallarmé. For Sartre, Mallarmé exemplifies a kind of complicit hermeticism; for Pierre Macherey, Octavio Paz and Rancière, Mallarmé is not at all hermetic, but a vital public artist; for Meillassoux, again, Mallarmé is entirely hermetic but not according to any political compromise.⁸ Or, to take a different track through the tangled thickets: Derrida shows Mallarmé's excesses vis-à-vis metaphysics; whereas Pierre Campion sees Mallarmé attempting to make philosophy from literature, to discern a Sense in Mallarmé; and André Stanguennec sees the unleashing of a new ethics of poetry.⁹

I will add to this sequence in turn, by pointing to a certain peculiarity regarding Mallarmé's mission to purify verse, along the lines of writing a-poem-that-simultaneously-embodies-and-exposes-the-essence-of-poetry.¹⁰ To accomplish such a poem would be to produce pure poetry, that is, nothing but poetry itself, *poetry itself as a (one) poem*. But "to not to be anything else" means that such a poem must bear the mark of its own singularity within itself. Such a poem by definition cannot work like anything else. Such a poem cannot pose the question of its essence *philosophically*, for instance, that is, *propositionally* or *hypothetically*. Such a poem would have resolve the question it poses *as itself* – *actually*. But, actually, what can *actually* then mean? At the very least, it must mean that the

⁷ See R. Boncardo, *Appropriations politiques de l'oeuvre de Stéphane Mallarmé*, unpublished PhD thesis, Université d'Aix Marseille and University of Sydney, 2014.

⁸ In addition to those texts already cited, see P. Macherey, "The Mallarmé of Alain Badiou" in: G. Riera (ed.), *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and its Conditions*, SUNY, Albany 2005, pp. 109-115; O. Paz, *Marcel Duchamp: Appearance Stripped Bare*, Arcade Books, New York 1990.

⁹ See P. Campion, *Mallarmé: Poésie et philosophie*, PUF, Paris 1994; A. Stanguennec, *Mallarmé et l'éthique de la poésie*, Vrin, Paris 1992.

¹⁰ This is my own rephrasing of what Bertrand Marchal famously calls *La Religion de Mallarmé*, José Corti, Paris 1988, or what other commentators have parsed as, for example, "The hymn of spiritual hearts," Rancière, *Mallarmé*, pp. 24-42 or Meillassoux, pp. 106-113, where he remarks: "Thus the central stakes of Mallarméan poetry – at least from 1895, the year of the first publication of "Catholicism" – 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," p. 112.

discourse of poetry – or the poem – on its own being, on being, cannot be separated from its own existence. Perhaps this doesn't mean that being and existence would have to be one and the same for such a poem, but it does raise the question as to whether there can be any ontic-ontological difference for such a poem. For such a poem would be such a poem only insofar as its existence be too its being.

Yet this immediately raises questions about such a poem's identity and unity, its apparition-value. For how can being = existence = identity = unity = recognizable-as? Under such a description, if a poem is recognizable *as* a poem, then it isn't a poem; it would merely have the *form* of a poem. But a poem cannot be reducible to its form. Not only because poetry has historically shown that it can harbour all forms, including the anti- or zero-degree form of the prose poem, itself a crucial interest of Mallarmé's – therefore rendering any *particular* form a compromise of the pure poem – but because a poem cannot in principle be reducible to its form. No formal, technical, prosodic device, be it meter, rhythm, sense, or enjambment can serve such an existential role. Nor, of course, can a pure poem be reduced to its content; again, poetry self-evidently has no particular content, even if we wanted to say its proper content is nothing. Neither form nor content, then. Not in general, nor in particular. Any pure poem would be historically situated by its particular form, thereby immediately compromising its purity. No poem can be recognizable as a poem if it is to be a pure poem. We may now also consider the preposterous converse of this proposition: not everything that is not recognizable as a poem is potentially a poem.

To be a poem not recognizable as a poem but nevertheless a poem, in fact, the/a pure poem, such a poem would still have to detain something to distinguish it from all those other things not recognizable as poems. It would have to inscribe internally and integrally a peculiar mark – perhaps itself unrecognisable – of its own pure poetryness. Or, in another vocabulary, it couldn't have any of the predicates of a poem, nor could it simply share the absence of such predicates. One possible solution would be that what gives a poem its identity as a pure poem would be that it present itself as positively not-having the predicates that would make it a poem, in a form of Kantian infinite judgement. This would be a paradoxical form of self-nomination as neither non-nomination nor non-non-nomination, a mark of the suspension of the poem above the abyss of itself. The pure poem would name itself by not-naming and not-not-naming itself with a single stroke. This seems like a difficult trick to pull off. Yet can it be done?

Throughout his work, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has regularly foregrounded the decisive agency of *deixis* in and for philosophy. In *Language and Death*, Agamben writes that “*the problem of being – the supreme metaphysical problem – emerges from the very beginning as inseparable from the problem of the significance of the demonstrative pronoun, and for this reason it is always already connected with the field of indication.*”¹¹ The demonstrative pronoun is today part of the grammatical study of *deixis*.¹² Deictics are fundamental to all natural languages. Agamben: “every language has at its disposal a series of signs (which linguistics call [sic.] ‘shifters’ or indicators of enunciation, among which, for example, there are the pronouns ‘I,’ ‘you,’ ‘this,’ and the adverbs ‘here,’ ‘now,’ etc.) destined to allow the individual to appropriate language in order to use it.”¹³ Shifters have a number of peculiar properties: although they are integral to the *use* of every language, they have *no meaning* in themselves; they take on their meaning through a contextual reflexivity of performance. As Emile Benveniste writes, “I signifies ‘the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing I.’ This instance is unique by definition and has validity only in its uniqueness. If I perceive two successive instances of discourse containing I, uttered in the same voice, nothing guarantees to me that one of them is not a reported discourse, a quotation in which I could be imputed to another.”¹⁴ Note Benveniste’s emphasis upon uniqueness here: uniqueness that establishes person, place, and time.

¹¹ G. Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. K.E. Pinkus with M. Hardt, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1991, pp. 16-17.

¹² For a useful introduction to the study of *deixis*, see L. Edmunds, “Deixis in Ancient Greek and Latin Literature: Historical Introduction and State of the Question,” *Philologia Antiqua*, 1 (2008), pp. 67-98.

¹³ G. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen, Zone, New York 1999, p. 115.

¹⁴ E. Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. M.E. Meek, University of Miami Press, Florida 1971, p. 218. Benveniste continues: “This constant and necessary reference to the instance of discourse constitutes the feature that unites to I/you a series of ‘indicators’ which, from their form and systematic capacity, belong to different classes, some being pronouns, others adverbs, and still others, adverbial locutions,” p. 218. In yet another essay he adds: “The personal pronouns provide the first step in this bringing out of subjectivity in language. Other classes of pronouns that share the same status depend in their turn upon these pronouns. These other classes are the indicators of *deixis*, the demonstratives, adverbs, and adjectives, which organize the spatial and temporal relationships around the ‘subject’ taken as referent: ‘this, here, now,’ and their numerous cor-relatives, ‘that, yesterday, last year, tomorrow,’ etc. They have in common the feature of

Perhaps the most famous philosophical meditation on the problems posed by deixis can be found in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In the section "A. Consciousness," under "I. Sense-Certainty: or the 'This' and 'Meaning,'" Hegel writes, that the first, immediate knowledge of the object means that "the singular consciousness knows a pure 'This,' or the single item."¹⁵ Yet, as Hegel at once adds, "the 'This' splits into a 'Here' and a 'Now,' and, in the inscription of this Now and this Here, it becomes indifferent to its own truth. 'This' is therefore 'the universal This'; or, 'it is,' i.e., *Being in general*."¹⁶ By deixis, we assert a singular truth that immediately contradicts its own singularity, introducing the temporality of auto-negation through the attribution of indexicality: the Here, for instance, becomes in itself "a 'simple togetherness of many Heres.'"¹⁷ A shifter therefore simultaneously: anchors an utterance to its speaker; refers to the context of its own taking place; indicates a singularity that, in being so indicated, exposes its own multiplicity; is implied in every utterance; must always be repeated; self-differs in its very utterance; opens the road to universality by a minimal form of negation.

A shifter is therefore the enaction of the "point" at which language interrupts itself by exposing the conditions of its own taking-place. In saying "I," then, individuals become subjects at the same moment that they become other than they are (i.e., they are simultaneously de-subjectivised). In doing so, at least in Agamben's interpretation, a shifter also exposes the Thing – the other of language that can emerge only within language. A shifter may seem to effect the transition from world to language, but in fact it effects an intra-linguistic shift ("from langue to parole" or "from code to message" or "from semantic to semiotic"). It is this problem of deixis that Agamben considers as the place of the Voice of language, the radically negative foundation of Western metaphysics. In this sense, the problematic of reference is at once foregrounded and complicated by the irreducibility of the event of deixis.

being defined only with respect to the instances of discourse in which they occur, that is, in dependence upon the *I* which is proclaimed in the discourse," p. 226.

¹⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller with analysis and foreword J.N. Findlay, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1977, p. 59.

¹⁶ Hegel, op. cit., p. 60.

¹⁷ Hegel, op. cit., p. 66.

If “ordinary language” then, or even what we might call in a Benjaminian mode “language as such,” cannot forego such an event of reference, this is not necessarily the case for mathematical formalization. On the contrary. Formalization, as opposed to form, requires the indifference of all or any particular set of letters to what they can be deployed to demonstrate. Yet it is precisely for this reason that the *principles of their deployment must be explicitly and essentially manifested in and by their deployment itself*. Moreover, this must be done *immanently* to the demonstration: at every point of a mathematical demonstration the linkages between steps of a proof and the principles of such linkages must be practically shown as inseparable. Indeed, formalization can be considered the immanent rendering-consistent of the indifference of its own contingent materials. In mathematical and logical systems, this rendering-consistent – at least in classical and intuitionist logics – is equivalent to the impossibility of producing any contradiction within that system. So consistency is what mathematics and logic inseparably do *and* what they think *in and by* this doing. To put this yet another way, the difference between appearing and doing or between showing and proving is itself indifferent in mathematical practice – and *only in this* practice. This is equivalent to what Brian Rotman, from an essentially Peircean perspective, derisively refers to in mathematical formalization as being “completely without *indexical* expressions.”¹⁸ Mathematical formalization’s indifference to empirical criteria – more precisely, any external referent – is ensured precisely through the effective suppression of any markers of the taking-place of the “utterance,” which is therefore not an *utterance* in any existing semiotic sense. The suppression of deixis simultaneously suppresses the moment of reference to the speaker, the context, and to any particular empirical thing. As such, this peculiarity of mathematical formalization – its elaboration of a pure syntax through suppression of all deictic markers – can also seem to give it, as

¹⁸ B. Rotman, *Ad infinitum: The Ghost in Turing’s Machine: Taking God Out of Mathematics and Putting the Body Back In*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1993, p. 7. Rotman’s very interesting book nonetheless suffers from a number of serious problems, evident in the current context. Above all, his understanding of what constitutes “Platonism” is quite naïve, and certainly unable to account for Badiou’s peculiar interpretation. Another problem is that, despite Rotman’s emphasis on the materiality of mathematical signification, he doesn’t quite separate – as the French thinkers in Lacan’s wake have – the “signifier” and the “letter,” such a distinction enabling a more detailed, materialist and persuasive account of the issues. For a longer account of what I argue here, see J. Clemens, “Can Mathematics Think Genre? Alain Badiou and Forcing,” in: V. Duché et al. (eds.), *Genre, Text and Language: Mélanges Anne Freadman*, Garnier, Paris 2015, pp. 203-223.

philosophy has historically recurrently believed from Plato to Badiou, a peculiar *ontological* destiny.

But is this suppression of ordinary-language deixis through the asemantic intrication of letters not moreover one of the most notorious aspects of Mallarméan poetics? And is it not self-confessedly at stake according to the rigours of number? As Derrida himself phrases the Mallarméan wager, in a brief encyclopaedia entry: “A text is made to do without references; either to the thing itself.... or to the author who consigns to it nothing except its disappearance.”¹⁹ Or, as Derrida puts it elsewhere, speaking of Mallarmé’s *Mimique*: the text engages a kind of “reference without referent.”²⁰ What I wish to argue that Mallarmé shares with mathematical reasoning is therefore a kind of *suppression of deixis*, the “elocutionary disappearance” of author to the benefit of a “flower absent from all bouquet.” Yet pure poetry is not for all that mathematics; it does not engage in theorems and proofs in the same way. Mallarmé is certainly not reducing mathematics to poetry. Rather, he is confronting ordinary language with mathematics in order to produce a third thing. That third thing is the poem, purified. So what are the details and the sense of the operations by which Mallarmé essays to suppress ordinary language by mathematical means to the benefit of poetry? How, exactly, does this cash out in *Un Coup de dés*? My answer is relatively simple: Mallarmé accomplishes this through a *syllabarization* of writing, that is, by decomposing and reconstructing the minimal bond that binds letters in order that they make words and, in this reconstruction, extends this operation of binding across the surface of the page itself. Hence Mallarmé’s famous declaration that: “We need a guarantee – Syntax –.” Instead, however, of syntax being delivered by deduction in the service of consistency, Mallarmé establishes the claims of syntax through compositional disposition across the site of writing itself.

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When Aristotle starts to worry about the identity of objects in the *Metaphysics*, he comes up against a fundamental paradox. For an object to be an object, it must be more than the sum of its parts; but this individuating element cannot be another relation, since that would lead to an infinite regress. Contradiction is in tension with the abyss in the thought of identity. A philosopher, it seems,

¹⁹ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, p. 113.

²⁰ See J. Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1981, passim.

cannot be happy with either pole (contradiction and dissemination must be foreclosed), but any attempt to explain a thing's principle – that by which that thing is that thing – broaches this aporia. At this point, Aristotle has recourse to an extraordinary double comparison:

Now since that which is composed of something in such a way that the whole is a unity; not as an aggregate is a unity, but as a syllable is – the syllable is not the letters, nor is BA the same as B and A; nor is flesh fire and earth; because after dissolution the compounds, e.g. flesh or the syllable, no longer exist; but the letters exist, and so do fire and earth. Therefore the syllable is some particular thing; not merely the letters, vowel and consonant, but something else besides. And flesh is not merely fire and earth, or hot and cold, but something else besides. Since then this something else must be either an element or composed of elements, [20] (a) if it is an element, the same argument applies again; for flesh will be composed of **this** and fire and earth, and again of another element, so that there will be an infinite regression. And (b) if it is composed of elements, clearly it is composed not of one (otherwise it will itself be that element) but of several; so that we shall use the same argument in this case as about the flesh or the syllable. It would seem, however, that this “something else” is something that is not an element, but is the cause that **this** matter is flesh and **that** matter a syllable, and similarly in other cases. And this is the substance of each thing, for it is the primary cause of its existence. And since, although some things are not substances, all substances are constituted in accordance with and by nature, substance would seem to be this “nature,” which is not an element but a principle. An element is that which is present as matter in a thing, and into which the thing is divided; e.g., A and B are the elements of the syllable.²¹

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Flesh and syllable – what a doublet! – it is as if Aristotle, whether consciously or not, is alluding to his own strictures in the *Politics* regarding man as the only animal which has language and politics, here renders that man and that language down to their basic components in which the very connection of elements becomes obscure, *to their flesh and to their syllables*. For Aristotle, the form of

²¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 7, 1041beta, 10-30. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0051%3Abook%3D7%3Asection%3D1041b> Accessed 13 October 2016. Note the (symptomatic?) introduction of the bolded shifters by the translator(s) here in an attempt to clarify Aristotle's propositions.

the object provides its unity, as well as its identity in concert with its materials (form + matter = individual, as the Scholastics will later specify).

But this solution is unacceptable for Mallarmé, for whom form cannot (or can no longer) be a criterion of identity for the poem, at least under any received description of form, type, or idea. Is it then matter that matters? As we have already noted, every Mallarméan image disappears itself; it is, in fact, is an ensemble of disappearances.²² So let us take one counter-Aristotelian determination seriously, to suggest that it is precisely the unavowed or suppressed *political* relation of flesh and syllable to humanity that remains at stake in *Un Coup de dés*. When commentators invoke Aristotle in the context of Mallarmé – which is occasionally the case – their authoritative texts tend to be the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*, not the *Metaphysics*. It is the questions of *mimesis*, *theatre*, and *writing* that preponderantly seem to occupy the critics. Yet this does not quite enable us to explain Mallarmé's doctrine regarding “– Syntax – .” For what sort of guarantee is syntax anyway?

For Aristotle, invention is precisely a *topology*: it is the placement or *disposition* (*taxis*, the second part of rhetoric) that is at stake in the *exposition* (*hypokrisis*, *actio*) of syllables, in and from which the trace (*memoria*) is confounded with its *elocution* (style). So let us here revisit some of the syllabic hijinks familiar to Mallarméans. In his already-cited entry to the *Tableau of French Literature* (1974), Derrida characteristically offers a characterization of Mallarmé as deploying syntax as undecidable: “The syntax of the short word *or* is sometimes calculated to prevent us from deciding whether it is the noun ‘gold,’ the logical conjunction ‘or,’ or the adverb of time, ‘now.’”²³ As Derrida continues: “Mallarmé has also, by disintegration, liberated its energy. The word, for him, is no longer the primary element of the language... Mallarmé knew that his ‘operation’ on the word was also the dissection of a corpse; of a decomposable body each part of which could be of use elsewhere.”²⁴ Derrida provides a familiar list: *l’or*, *des lors* (from

²² Here, see Badiou's extraordinary analyses of the three versions of negation operative in Mallarmé, e.g., in *Conditions*, trans. S. Corcoran, Continuum, London 2008; Milner on the problematic of the constellation in “Les Constellations Révélatrices,” *Elucidation*, 8-9 (2003), pp. 3-7; Rancière on the work of types in Mallarmé in *The Future of the Image*, etc.

²³ Derrida, “Mallarmé,” p. 114.

²⁴ “Related to the whole of nature and in this way coming closer to the organism that possesses life, the Word presents itself, in its vowels and its diphthongs, like a piece of flesh,

then on), *dorure* (gilding), *dehors* (outside), *fantasmagoriques* (phantasmagorical), *tresor* (treasure), *horizon* (horizon), *majore* (increase), *hors* (outside), etc. To which could at once be added: *sonore*, *encore*, *alors*...and many more. The point here is that a syllable is precisely a non-decomposable composite body. If a letter is, in Aristotle's own terms, a *stoikeion*, an element, and words (sense) are aggregates that are precisely decomposable into their elements (letters), a syllable is composed of elements yet is not decomposable back into those elements without losing the principle of its unity: it is an *atomic compound*, much like the chemical elements of the periodic table, itself one of the great scientific inventions of the later nineteenth century.²⁵

If this "operation" is a well-known aspect of Mallarmé's method, its import has not always been treated very perspicuously or persuasively. One of the notable lapses in the tradition is that nobody (to my knowledge, anyway) has linked this dependence on *or* to a key element of Poe's extraordinarily important essay on "The Philosophy of Composition," an essay that had its most decisive impact upon the great French poets of the late nineteenth century, Mallarmé included.²⁶ Why is this essay relevant here? Because it is Poe's account of the (literally) *literal mechanics* of the construction and functioning of *The Raven*. And what is the refrain of this famous poem? The word *Nevermore!* Yet this word qua refrain is really a doubled refrain: if the word *nevermore* can repeat, it is because it is itself comprised of an absolutely fundamental syllable, that itself repeats in a variety of words throughout: *or*. For Poe, the repetitive variations upon the "or" sound itself become nothing more than a mechanism for generating affect. Mallarmé is not above polylingual punnings (homonymic scramblings) along this line: *Ce lever de lune or* resonates with Lenore, Lunar, Lore, Law, Laura, etc. But what is determining here is that it enables us to see that it is the *exigencies of generalized syllabic disposition* – neither simply literal nor verbal – that is one crucial

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and, in its consonants, like a skeletal structure difficult to dissect. Etc. etc. etc. If life nourishes itself from its own past, or from a continual death, Science will trace this fact in language...." Mallarmé, *Les mots anglais*.

²⁵ Dmitri Mendeleev published what is widely considered the first version of the Periodic Table in 1869.

²⁶ E.A. Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," *Graham's Magazine*, XXVIII (4 April 1846), pp. 163-167. See Marie Blaise, "Mallarmé et Poe: 'la personne analogue,'" in *Mallarmé herméneute, Acts de colloques et journées d'étude*, 10 (2014), <http://ceredi.labos.univ-rouen.fr/public/?Mallarmé-et-poe-la-personne.html>, accessed 6 July 2015.

moment of the Mallarméan intervention. Mallarmé is an anti-philosophical poet neither of the word nor the letter – but of the syllable. The syllable is the primordial apparition of syntax as such: it is simultaneously speech and writing; it is one and multiple at the same time; it cannot be permuted without becoming other than it is. A syllable is the *pure* element of *language*, insofar as it binds letters to letters, letters to sounds, language to its topos.²⁷

We can verify these properties by recourse to a perhaps-unexpected source. This source is none other than late nineteenth-century Imperial linguistic anthropology. In the 29 April 1887 issue of *Science*, an anonymous author reports on “A System of Orthography for Native Names of Place”: “The Royal geographical society of London, and the Société de géographie of Paris, have each adopted a system of geographical orthography which is intended to put an end to the existing confusion in the mode of spelling in maps and books.”²⁸ What is absolutely crucial to note about this attempt by the respective Societies to promote such a standardization of nomination is that it is not only intended to ensure scientific and commercial security along epistemological and pragmatic lines. Rather, the very attempt – however uncertain or insufficient – is also directed at ensuring a regular capture of non-Western oral languages by Roman script. If the article’s author then proceeds to complain that “the individuality and nationality of the author give the sound a peculiar character which not at all corresponds to the word as pronounced by the natives,” we see that “the rules adopted by the societies named can only help the explorer who is not at all acquainted with linguistics – which every explorer ought to be – to write down the names in an intelligible form.” What, in other words, underpins such colonial programs of

²⁷ Meillassoux’s striking interpretation suffers from various weaknesses, including that he never fully or seriously questions that the basic unit of language is the word. Indeed, he busies himself to assert that the unit of Mallarmé’s count cannot be “syllables or some other unit of language”: “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,” *The Number and the Siren*, p. 214. In the context, such an assertion can only seem an exemplary instance of logical question-begging.

²⁸ Anon., “A System of Orthography for Native Names of Place,” *Science*, 29 April (1887), p. 421.

uniform orthography, is a commitment to a theory of universal composition dependent on a form of translinguistic syllabarization.²⁹

Whether or not Mallarmé himself knew of and considered the implications of such “scientific” attempts, I have as yet been unable to ascertain.³⁰ Yet it is clear that, between Poe’s “poetic” deployment of the syllable in his philosophy of composition, and the attempts of colonial anthropologists to generate a uniform orthography capable of capturing and inscribing the never-before-heard words of utterly unrelated “native” tongues, the question of the foundational powers of the syllable as the minimal syntactic unit of language was indisputably “in the air.” Mallarmé himself proposes several notorious investigations into the problematic of the translation and transcription of languages, including his “pedagogical” grammar *Thèmes anglais pour toutes les grammaires*, and his “scientific” study *Les mots anglais: petite philologie à l’usage des classes et du monde*.³¹ In the latter in particular, we find, for example, Mallarmé’s famously aberrant discussions of supposed laws of reduplication and permutation which presuppose, despite the lack of any supreme language, operators of translinguistic syntax.

This situation is perhaps most express and fraught in French letters in the nineteenth century, due to at least two related factors. First, the alexandrine seems to have dominated French poetry in a more imperious way than had comparable formal measures in other languages. The iambic pentameter in English

²⁹ For a brief, accessible account of some of the basic elements of such orthographic programs, see David Moore, “A uniform orthography and early linguistic research in Australia,” <https://hiphilangsci.net/2013/10/16/a-uniform-orthography-and-early-linguistic-research-in-australia/> accessed 13 October 2016. I coin the barbarous neologism “syllabarization” because, precisely, it chimes with *barbarization*, as well as with *sybaritic*.

³⁰ For a different account, see A. Stanguennec, “Fiction poétique et vérité morale chez Mallarmé,” *Littérature*, 111 (3/1998), pp. 11-27, which notes that the poet was a contemporary with the rise of Comtean positivism. Regarding Mallarmé’s colonial or anti-colonial *piste*, there seems to be relatively little written on the subject. Vladimir Klima cites J.I. Gleason linking Mallarmé to *négritude*: “*Négritude* as a poetic objectifying process, therefore, is a re-creation of the absent and as such is closely linked to the methodology of the symbolist poet, Mallarmé...this is *négritude*’s romantic, passive side. The active aspect is an attack on colonialism,” in: V. Klima et al. (eds), *Black Africa: Literature and Language*, D. Reidel, Hingham 1977, pp. 66-7.

³¹ S. Mallarmé, *Thèmes anglais pour toutes les grammaires*, Gallimard, Paris 1937; *Les mots anglais: petite philologie à l’usage des classes et du monde*, Leroy frères, Paris 1877.

versification, for example, had never been quite as central as the alexandrine in French. Second, the alexandrine is a function of a pure count, 12 vowels (or syllables) usually considered to be broken by the caesura into two groups of 6/6, rather than, as in syllabic accentual metres, a combination of count and stress. Yet, as I have been arguing, the relation between the alexandrine and free verse has put the count into question for Mallarmé. As Rancière phrases it: "In Mallarmé's epoch, one had 'forgotten the manoeuvre,' lost with the ancient bar of the alexandrine which had been sabotaged by the adept of uneven verse and then that of free verse, before being carried to its tomb by the Hugolian ogre."³² In French, then, there had been the necessity of a *count* at the very base of poetry, a count that had recently been ruined by poets themselves. A simple count of the syllables of a line could therefore no longer function to guarantee the presence of poetry. Moreover, if one wishes to create a pure poem under such circumstances, it certainly cannot be mistaken for prose, nor for any particular form (for which the alexandrine had been the paradigm in French): such a poem must now somehow, impossibly, mark simultaneously the *necessity of form* and the *necessity of a negation-of-form*. As the syllable is the very basis of both prosody and prose (so to speak), by way of the fact that while the syllable is not-yet-language, there is no language without the syllable, it will be the radical implementation of an operation upon this primary pre-semantic binding condition of both sense and nonsense that Mallarmé effects.

Yet it will not be the syllable "itself" (or any particular syllable) as a simple ground, but the *principle* that enables a syllable to be a syllable. That is, syllables function in *Un Coup de dés* as the element of the count that makes-poetry-poetry-when-no-particular-inherited-number-can-hold-any-longer. A syllable can do this because it is the most basic moment of *articulation* of any language, whether ordinary, mathematical, or poetic. As I have already elaborated above, a syllable binds letters (which require some kind of syntax to organize their deployment) before they are words (which presume a syntax that they show but don't say), etc. Of course, a syllable cannot alone define the essence of poetry, no more than the word or Word. On the contrary, if the syllable is a condition of all language and all languages, Mallarmé makes it what-is-not-itself-one-but-is-the-unit-of-the-count-which-itself-makes-the-unique-number-that-cannot-be-another.

³² Rancière, op. cit., p. 54.

Because classical French prosody required the pronunciation and elision of certain syllables that would otherwise go un/enounced, then the recitation of French verse inevitably comes to produce weird foam-chimera-syllables that appear and vanish at once. This particular mode of reading is usually dependent on the recognition of a verse *as* a verse: here, given the disappearance or rather dislocation of the standard line, any putative reading must encounter undecidables of enunciation, let alone undecidables of direction and sense. The concomitant absorption of the “musicality” of the verse (or even musical notation) as syllables means here that we are forced to know that we cannot know if we ought to sound out what is notated, even as the popping bubbles of ocean foam or champagne fizz are tickling the hairs of our ears and noses. Likewise, all the numbers that are regularly cited as expressly Mallarméan – 0, 1, 5, 6, 7, 12, and so on – are certainly present here in their operatory spectrality, as emanatory actualities of the poem in its purity, but none of them can function as the secret of a cipher.

It is precisely here that a close reading of *Un Coup de dés* needs to be done (if there is unfortunately not the space here to do so) in order to verify the sequence of hypotheses I have elaborated: 1) Mallarmé seeks to write a “pure” poem; 2) such a poem must indifferentiate the ontic and ontological, that is, it must negate the ontological difference and, thereby, cannot be identified with or by any particular form, nor with any lack-of-form; 3) to this end, Mallarmé recognizes the possibilities offered by mathematical writing, whose deductive syntax is achieved through the suppression of deixis; 4) if it is letters that provide the basis for mathematical formalization, it is the syllable that provides the basis for Mallarméan formalization, as the fundamental atomic compound of language; 5) but because the syllable cannot function in a pure poem by being given an inherited number or function (e.g., the 12-count of an alexandrine), nor simply an indifferent number (e.g., the arbitrariness of a syllabic count in free verse or prose), it must be now otherwise deployed; 6) this deployment compels a construction of the poem as a total, topological distribution of syllables in space; 7) the “numbers” with which the poem is undoubtedly playing cannot be reduced to a particular “count,” whether of syllables, words, or pages: if anything, the poem is itself the “One” which sutures event to being.

So if the poem thus names itself as the apparition of itself – not the flower absent from all bouquets, as Mallarmé says, but poetry absently present in and as the/a poem whose elements uncannily appear and disappear because their being can-

not be separated from their appearance³³ – is there another way to specify its particular modality of inconsistency? One could invoke logic to ask: is the pure poem contradictory or paraconsistent? Indeed, there is now a well-developed discourse on poetry that renders it eminently contradictory, inconsistent in the classical sense. In their very different ways, one could see critics such as Derrida, Badiou and Meillassoux all sharing such a doctrine. But one can also construct a paraconsistent structure by rendering an object intransitive. As Graham Priest puts it, regarding such a situation (which he himself calls “dialethics”): “the transitivity of identity will fail. We have $a = \xi$ and $\xi = c$, but we will not have $a = c$.”³⁴ However, Priest’s object – his name is “gluon” – is not poetry or poetic in the particular sense I am describing here. Between the commentators who end by rendering poetry a paradoxical nomination of the event of which it is a part, *qua* without-being, trans-being (*event*) or can-being (*peut-être*), and those who are concerned with identity-in-general (*being*), we will say that Mallarmé’s ultimate poetics is neither eventual nor paraconsistent, but puritan. Between inconsistency and paraconsistency, there is poetry. *Pure* poetry.

Drawing on the mathematical triplet that establishes equivalence relations in the construction of objects – reflexivity, transitivity, symmetry – we are able to parse Mallarmé’s reference-without-referent more precisely. Given a relation P (for “Poetry”) on U (for “*Un Coup de dés*”), P is reflexive on U if every element u of U, that is, its syllabic disposition, satisfies the relation with itself, that is, (u, u) P. *Un Coup de dés* is a *model* of such a reflexive set; it is itself a universe. What’s interesting in this context about reflexivity – in distinction from transitivity and symmetry – is that, meta-mathematically speaking, it requires *specified* pairs to be in a relation, rather than given *in general*. For Mallarmé, one could hazard that a poem is only reflexive, that is, it models only the elements related to itself, “the unique number that cannot be another”; though it must also be intransitive as “the unique number that cannot be another”; and its symmetry could only be the automorphism of its reflexivity, insofar as this can be the only mapping of the object onto itself that preserves its identity.

³³ “I say: a flower! and beyond the oblivion to which my voice relegates any shape, insofar as it is something other than the calyx, there arises musically, as the suave idea itself, the one absent from every bouquet,” *Crise de vers*.

³⁴ G. Priest, *One: Being an Investigation into the Unity of Reality and of its Parts, including the Singular Object which is Nothingness*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, p. 17. Priest uses here the Chinese symbol for “centre,” “zhong.”

For the reasons I have already enunciated above, it is with the poem, and only the pure poem, that appearing and being can be one and the same. Such a poem would therefore be entirely composed of what Badiou calls in *Logics of Worlds* “real atoms.” In Badiou’s words: “A real atom is a phenomenal component, that is a kind of sub-apparent of the referential apparent which, on one hand, is an atomic component (it is simple, or non-decomposable), and on the other, is strictly determined by an underlying element, which is its ontological substructure. At the point of a real atom, being and appearing conjoin under the sign of the One.”³⁵ This, in other words, is the meaning of Mallarmé’s symbolism: topological establishment of a real poem on the principle of syllabic binding of *Un Coup de dés*. A syllable cannot be further decomposed, as it would then be a letter: it both appears as such in its deployment, as in its further assemblage. This is why *Un Coup de dés* must be considered univocal. Not because it is not susceptible to irreducible interpretations, but because no syllable can be altered without transforming its identity. If a mathematical proof can use any symbols one likes, just so long as they are used consistently, but is rendered entirely false if any one of its letters fails to hold up, *Un Coup de dés* is rendered entirely false if the disposition of its syllables fails to maintain its peculiar lack-of-reference. If mathematics is axiomatic, declarative, invariant, poetry is anaxiomatic, in-suspense, yet invariant. It is the presentation of the bond between appearing and being, in which every intensity of appearing is also an ontological element: in fact, *Un Coup de dés* is the “l’événemètre” or “l’êtrévenement” par excellence.

That Mallarmé only achieves this at the very end of his life is no accident. His lifelong efforts regarding the rewriting of poems are famous, as are his constant experiments at the very limits of form. If we track this development according to the above argument, we can see at every point how his complex development concludes in the identification of the syllable – the syllable as minimal disposition in an open field – as the basis of all poetry, and therefore the “allegorical content” of the pure poem itself. If the prose poem obliterates the line-count and enjambment retained by traditional verse – the Scylla and Charybdis of the late nineteenth century crisis of verse – *Un Coup de dés* retains a variability of

³⁵ A. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, trans. A. Toscano, Continuum, London 2009, p. 250. Technically, the definition is as follows: ‘If a given atom, defined by the function $a(x)$, is identical to a single atom of the type $a(x)$ —in other words, if there exists a single $a \in A$ such that for every $x \in A$ we have $\alpha(x) = a(x) = \mathbf{Id}(a, x)$ —we will say that the atom $\alpha(x)$ is real.’ p. 250.

count in the line by referring the syllable and enjambment to the disposition of each page, and thence to the totality of the pages of the poem, without simply obliterating the principle of the count itself. The poem is the constellation and the wreck whose apparitions it stages, the master and the die, the mast and the foam, thus becoming at once the real of writing, the turbulence of its own vanishing, and a crystalline absolute.