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JOINED AT THE HIP:  
 SIMONE WEIL, QUENTIN MEILLASSOUX

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“We have to believe in a God who is like the true God in everything, except that he does not exist, for we have not reached the point where God exists.”

Simone Weil, *Notebooks*<sup>1</sup>

“To solve the dilemma requires the thesis of *the divine inexistence*, the very title of Meillassoux’s still withheld major book. In a useful play on words, he notes that this phrase has two meanings. It refers to the inexistence of the divine, but also to the divine character of this inexistence....”

Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux, Philosophy in the Making*<sup>2</sup>

Two severely clear stylists, in passionate pursuit of the real, unflinching, tough-minded, scrupulous;

both respectful of science as a chain of complex descriptions (not reasons) that attests to the world’s current and temporary order, but not sharing the truly privileged relation that mathematics has to reality;

both having written serious critical works about poems that confront catastrophe:

Simone Weil’s homage, “*The Iliad*, or The Poem of Force,” interrogating not force, but a feeling for *μεταξύ*/metaxu, bridges to a good beyond force, saying in her *Notebooks*: “*The Iliad*: this draws a picture of God’s absence”;<sup>3</sup>

Quentin Meillassoux's decipherment, *The Number and the Siren*, interrogating Mallarmé's quest to determine a poetry "capable of emancipating itself from the sole regime of representation, a poetry worthy to rival the Eucharist and the 'real presence' of the Passion in the host";<sup>4</sup> worthy as well to extend the heritage of poetry as counted, in *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hazard* through a strategy involving number and a wager on number, a strategy that has clearly informed Meillassoux's own work;

my contention in bringing these two into a Collision is that they are joined at the hip.

According to the editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, a Collision is "[a] new genre of speculative writing...that introduces philosophical questions...not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument...an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing [which] may propel later inquiries into being."

How inaccessible Weil and Meillassoux are! The effort to recover and edit her texts, 100 years past Weil's birth, is still not concluded. The part of her work dealing with mathematics is ignored; 21 pages of calculations are excised from *First and Last Notebooks*. Meillassoux is self-censoring. His presumed masterwork-to-be, *The Inexistent Divine*, appears only as a condensation (about 20 percent) of an early version, translated by a generous rival. For both, one must cite notebooks, interviews, transcribed lectures; the published oeuvre is often self-revising; the writers do not shy from creating their own vocabulary.

But both are devoted to reason: they prize it above all else until forced, *by reason*, to a limit-concept, in her case Mystery and in his Contingency. Both uphold the principle of non-contradiction. Both are driven in the end to Cantor. In both, a kind of reversal or affirmation of paradox prevails.

Weil claims that "God's absence is the divine form of presence which corresponds to evil—an absence that is felt. (Anyone who has not felt God's presence in him is incapable of feeling His absence.)... It depends on Man that God should be able to traverse Creation from end to end and pass to the farthest extremity, which is the extremity of evil,"<sup>5</sup> an account that needs unpacking in her stories and her concept of decreation.

She says, "Affliction...deprives...victims...of their personality and turns them into things.... They will never again believe that they are anyone.

Affliction would not have this power without the element of chance...<sup>6</sup> “Suffering has no significance. There lies the very essence of its reality. We must love it in its reality, which is the absence of significance. Otherwise we do not love God.”<sup>7</sup>

Meillassoux’s Contingency is neither chance nor the improbable—those concepts rely on an idea that Cantor’s thought rules out. Nothing can bound Contingency, nor contain its anarchic possibilities which include every form of order. Contingency prescribes Hyperchaos, a non-physical time accommodating every state of reality. Contingency requires the existence of concrete, empirical things, “since it is because things are like this or that (red, round and with an individual redness or roundness) that they *could* be other, or could not be.”<sup>8</sup> The primary consequence of Contingency is that *nothing* (no state, no being, no law) is necessary, a supreme un-grounding of being. Contingency is all-powerful, but for this: it cannot produce a necessary entity. It, alone, is necessary.

For most, this state of affairs seems disturbing, but Meillassoux hails it: “For no reason” is a genuine answer. The absence of a why-for is not “a limit that thought encounters in its search for the ultimate...” but rather “*is... the ultimate...*”<sup>9</sup> welcomed reversal: “everything and every world *is* without reason, and is thereby *capable of actually becoming otherwise without reason.*”<sup>10</sup> Weil’s take on the absence of a why: “Affliction constrains a man to ask continually ‘why?’ the question to which there is essentially no reply. So by means of it we hear the non-reply.”<sup>11</sup>

Contingency as sole eternal ruler of the world is close to Weil’s Necessity, a morally indifferent chain upon Creation. Crucial here is her view that Creation is itself a crucifixion, a Passion. “Because he is the Creator, God is not all-powerful. Creation is abdication,”<sup>12</sup> or more precisely, abandonment. The abdication is voluntary, but not rescindable. Like a giant constrained by oath in folktales, or the hero who has hidden his heart elsewhere in some ill-fitting casket or wooden chest, God’s abandonment has created us. If he did not abandon us, we would not exist, “for if we were exposed to [his] direct radiance...we should be evaporated like water in the sun.”<sup>13</sup>

Meillassoux envisions things crashing in and out of existence more readily than Weil does, but she is clear that there is no reason for things to be as they are other than that they are; she speaks of “the indifference of all things...even Christ’s crucifixion is no more charged with significance than is a pine-needle which falls to the ground; God wants all things that are to

an equal degree.”<sup>14</sup>

Both feel acutely the misery or affliction of mankind—and both feel a need to produce or seek an honest fervor to combat demoralization. Meillassoux wants to “escape being paralyzed by an impossible mourning for the atrocities of the twentieth century, and...to avoid the totalitarian temptation of collective action” while “confronting the despair that results from the indifference of the world to my moral ends.”<sup>15</sup> He mentions specific “specters,” the unmourned victims of genocide, famine, and epidemic. Weil’s purview is wider: “[V]iolence obliterates anybody who feels its touch. It comes to seem just as external to its employer as to its victim. And from this springs the idea of a destiny before which executioner and victim stand equally innocent, before which conquered and conqueror are brothers in the same distress.”<sup>16</sup>

For Meillassoux, unlike most of the object-oriented ontologists he is linked to, humans are uniquely valuable. The singular nature of the human is to understand and want justice, though no experience of this world supports such an expectation. All humans, as individuals, possess an identical value. For Simone Weil, this value is founded on the equalizing cry, *why is this happening to me?* For her, all possess from birth the expectation that good will be done to them, a feeling of unjustness if it is not. Meillassoux extends this by saying, “Hence those who exercise their humanity...can only hope for the recommencement of our lives in such a way that justice would surpass the factual death that has struck down our fellow humans.”<sup>17</sup>

Both insist that all, living or dead, must have an equal chance at resurrection/redemption. Meillassoux, under the influence of Badiou, Mallarmé, and Poe, seeks eventual uniqueness. Speaking of *Coup de dés*, he says: “The shipwreck sends out only one message before sinking—Christ knew only one crucifixion and one resurrection. Imagine the Son of God...undergoing once more the agony of the cross: This would no longer be a Passion, but a comedy of repetition.... The beauty of the gesture consists in its unparalleled nature.... Its uniqueness is eventual, not arithmetical.”<sup>18</sup> On a point in which she disagrees with Meillassoux, Weil claims that all do, and did, have an equal chance: “...Christianity did not begin with Christ.”<sup>19</sup> “[T]he redemption is continued in the person of all those who, either before or after his birth, have imitated the Christ.”<sup>20</sup>

Meillassoux imagines a “fourth” World of Justice—no, he does not *imagine* it. He has understood Contingency as the *rationale* for hope of a new world that transgresses every limit of the present. The only limits that concern

him, however, are those that affect the nature of human consciousness. The ordering is based on advents newly arising, not contained in embryo in prior arrangements, though requiring the presence of all prior “Worlds.” Thus, Matter leverages the fluctuations of the Void; Life brings sensation, perception, affection, and inter-being resonance to Matter; Thought attains for Life—through being able to think its own death—concepts of the infinite, the eternal, truth, the transfinite, and mathematics.

What is an equivalent rupture with regard to Thought? Not perfection of mind (in Meillassoux’s view mind achieves its limit when it understands Contingency); no, the relevant novelty is Justice for all requiring resurrection of the dead. The Fourth World must be doubly conditioned, in almost exactly the same sense that God is awaited in Simone Weil’s narrations. One is powerless to *cause* justice to arrive, or to *make* oneself experience God. Weil believes if two people have no experience of God, the one who denies him is closer to him. We cannot look for God if we have had no experience of him. All we can do is refuse the name of God to whatever is not God (God-good as an emerald is green) and wait for him to find us. These value-laden events cannot occur if they are not attentively awaited—by Meillassoux, with hope newly made rational and real in Contingency; by Weil, with a turning-toward, a patient close attentive waiting, a willingness to abandon self in a loving act reciprocal to the abandonment that Creation involved. These two stories enjoin a similar behavior on the living.

For Meillassoux religious (as opposed to philosophical) waiting means to desire the inhuman, the perfection and power of elsewhere; but for Weil, religious *and* philosophical waiting end in unexpected personal encounter, “the smile on a beloved face.”<sup>21</sup> Both writers put forward elaborate scenarios, both clear that Creation cannot become divine without human participation, and both telling what I will call Symbol Stories.

Symbols serve as a method of future recognition; originally a broken token, part of a hospitality tablet which, fitted together, in the future serves as introduction. Meillassoux views the symbol as a link between being and value. For him, the major symbols of the Western world are the Greek Heavenly Spheres, replaced by a Rousseauian trust in organic Life and Nature, in turn replaced by the near-divinization of History in Hegel and Marx. For Weil, “Christianity tried to discover a harmony in history. This is the germ in Hegel, and consequently Marx. The notion of history as being a directed continuity is Christian. It seems to me there are few more completely false ideas than this.”<sup>22</sup> For Meillassoux, this “ruse of history...as autonomous

entity...whose own becoming depends on no individual thought or action but which leads us towards emancipation none the less..."<sup>23</sup> is absurd. Any movement of History said to be *bound to* arrive at justice contravenes his basic assertion of necessary contingency, as well as falsely posing a "principle of process...as the actual accomplishment" of its goal.<sup>24</sup> For both Weil and Meillassoux singular humans are not monadic individuals subject to statistical treatment, but afflicted lives charged with memories of past injustice.

Meillassoux wants a new symbolization, value inserted into a reality identified with lawless change. Weil is more inclusive. She thinks that "by reading...symbolism the soul ceases to be overwhelmed by continually reading force in matter."<sup>25</sup> She agrees with Meillassoux that ethics ruled by symbol is not the deepest ethics, but she finds symbols, analogons, stories, metaxu of every sort, pedagogically productive and would like to see them enshrined in ritual (as would Mallarmé). She says, "A method is necessary for the understanding of images, symbols, etc. One should not try to interpret them, but contemplate them until their significance declares itself.... It is preferable to take the risk of taking them too literally than insufficiently so."<sup>26</sup>

Though each of them honors individuals, as the centers of all value, they are also engaged in teaching a long process of decentering and decreation. For Meillassoux, humans after becoming central through the Void-to Matter-to Life-to Thought advents, embark upon a long process of de-centering, thinking their death, their non-necessity, thinking existence beyond them in every direction, at every time-scale, thinking themselves out of central position in the non-All of universes/multiverses that cannot be counted. Weil's note: "[Folklore—a princess who becomes a servant; the only way of convincing people that a servant is a human being.] Impulse analogous to that of incarnation; emptying oneself of one's false divinity."<sup>27</sup>

Both writers believe they can reach the absolute via mathematical methods: for her mediation, for him operationalism.

For Meillassoux, in math thought thinks its own absence, because math is a proliferation of meaningless signs. "Whereas the meaningful sign is forgotten in favor of its meaning and its reference, the meaningless sign, given ultimately for itself, as pure sign, makes me accede to its pure gratuitousness, to its pure absence of necessity; to the fact that anything whatsoever could fulfill its task just as well as it does. So that it is indeed the non-foundation of all beings, and not of the sign alone, that discreetly reveals itself in this in-significance."<sup>28</sup>

For Weil, “Mathematics [is] the ability to reason in a vigorous fashion concerning the non-representable,”<sup>29</sup> an “action in which there is nothing to manipulate except *signs*.”<sup>30</sup> It is the realm of rigorous demonstration as invented by Greeks who wanted more than serviceable accounting and surveying; they wanted truth, eternal, real, cosmic, divine. What this task required was extreme attention and, in her view, “the only form of extreme attention is a religious one.”<sup>31</sup> “That part of mathematics which concerns diverse orders of infinities (theory of wholes, topology) contains a treasury of infinitely precious images which can be applied to supernatural truths.”<sup>32</sup>

Weil notes that “In ‘Cantor’s Paradise’ the mind has got to be very much clearer, more exact and intuitive than anywhere else.... The distinction to be made between levels is something of the utmost importance.... The relation between the whole and the part... The different forms of demonstration.... The *method of proof* in mathematics.... Analogical utilization of the notion of transfinitude.”<sup>33</sup> The meaning of transfinitude, here, is Cantor’s demonstration that a Totality-holding-All cannot exist. Any purported Whole-that-holds-All can be shattered and exceeded by a larger One made from the combined subsets of the original Whole. And there is no end to this process.

Both focus on the meaning of relationship. Weil says, “A point is infinitely small, is nothing at all, in comparison with a volume. And yet it is a point which, if sustained [center of gravity], abolishes the entire weight of the volume; and it does that simply as a result of its position. The reason is that this point contains a relationship. A relationship between places is not one of spatial extent; it cannot occupy a place, but only a point.”<sup>34</sup> Boxed and set out on her Notebook page: “With regard to any order whatever, a higher order—therefore something infinitely above it—can only be represented in that order by something infinitely small.”<sup>35</sup>

She notes, “Ratio conceived without the aid of the senses, and as certain as number.”<sup>36</sup> On one side of a drawn column, she writes “God mediator between,” and in the adjoining column “God and God, God and man, Man and man, God and things, One thing and another thing, Myself and myself” and completes this thought with the sentence “God is mediation and, in itself, everything is divine mediation. Analogically, for human thought, everything is ratio.”<sup>37</sup> She understands the “privileged role of the intelligence...comes from the fact that the nature of intelligence consists in this, that it is something which becomes obliterated from the very fact that it

is exercised. I can make an effort to make my way toward truths, but when they are there before me, they *are*, and I have nothing to do in the matter.”<sup>38</sup>

For Meillassoux, “What is specific to a formal axiomatic [is that] one does not begin with any initial definition...one posits relations between terms that themselves are not defined.... These terms are named as sets: but to *name* them...is not to *define* them.” “These axioms are not ‘definitions in disguise’...it is an entirely other matter, a matter of the substitution of a *relation* for a definition.”<sup>39</sup> “Mathematics is thus not reality itself, but the language which—by virtue of its set-theoretical structure articulating non-totalities and of its syntax of signs devoid of meaning—can meaningfully refer to the in-itself of hyper-chaotic reality.”<sup>40</sup> “In fact mathematics...are the strange possibility to speak about a world...without thinking or life. Mathematics are the possibility of coming back...from death’s realm.”<sup>41</sup>

Interestingly posed against mathematics, the language of access to the dead and indifferent truth of lawless Contingency, is Weil’s view of “certain words” which “...refer to an absolute perfection which we cannot conceive. Since the proper use of these words involves not trying to make them fit any conception, it is in the words themselves, as words, that the power to enlighten...resides. *That* they express [alternatively, *What* they express] is beyond our conception. *God* and *truth* are such words; also *justice*, *love*, and *good*. It is dangerous to use words of this kind. They are like an ordeal.”<sup>42</sup>

Meillassoux and Weil, inaccessible thinkers, are joined at the hip through the ordeal of these phrases and thoughts:

absence as the divine form of presence  
 affirmation of paradox  
 Contingency  
 decentering  
 decreation  
 “fourth” World of Justice  
 individual  
 misery / affliction  
 Necessity  
 poems that confront catastrophe  
 reality which is the absence of significance  
 reason  
 relation of mathematics to reality  
 reversal  
 Symbol Stories.

We are left to parse them in light of the strenuous commitment of both thinkers to a justice that wants to come to every past, present, and future event.

*New York, New York*

## NOTES

1. Weil, *Notebooks*, 151.
2. Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux*, 87.
3. Weil, *Notebooks*, 405.
4. Meillassoux, *The Number*, 121.
5. Weil, *Notebooks*, 343-4.
6. Weil, *On Science*, 175.
7. Weil, *Notebooks*, 484.
8. Meillassoux, *Iteration, Reiteration*, 35.
9. Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 53.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Weil, *First and*, 82-3.
12. *Ibid.*, 120.
13. Weil, *Notebooks*, 401-2.
14. *Ibid.*, 400.
15. Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux*, 163, 195.
16. Weil, *The Iliad*, 179.
17. Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux*, 191-2.
18. Meillassoux, *The Number*, 163-4.
19. Weil, *First and*, 79.
20. Weil, *Notebooks*, 383.
21. Weil, *Waiting for*, 69.
22. Weil, *Notebooks*, 616.
23. Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux* 202.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Weil, *First and*, 337.
26. Weil, *Notebooks*, 334.
27. *Ibid.*, 285.
28. Meillassoux, *Iteration, Reiteration*, 37.
29. Weil, *Notebooks*, 275
30. Weil, *First and*, 6.
31. Weil, *Notebooks*, 441.
32. Weil, *First and*, 292.
33. Weil, *Notebooks*, 362.
34. *Ibid.*, 464.
35. *Ibid.*
36. Weil, *First and*, 81.
37. *Ibid.*, 89.

38. Weil, *Notebooks*, 364.
39. Meillassoux, *Iteration, Reiteration*, 21, 22.
40. Gironi, "Meillassoux's Speculative," 38.
41. Meillassoux, "Interview with," UF13-1/7.
42. Weil, *Selected Essays*, 33.

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