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## **By any language necessary: Quentin Meillassoux and the Question Concerning Signification in Philosophy**

### **Référence électronique**

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“It is possible, possible, possible. It must  
Be possible. It must be that in time  
The real will from its crude compoundings come,

Seeming, at first, a beast disgorged, unlike,  
Warmed by a desperate milk. To find the real,  
To be stripped of every fiction except one,

The fiction of an Absolute.”

-- Wallace Stevens, *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*

### ***More Mathematico and More Hermetico***

Formulating a theory of signification doesn't seem to be one of philosophy's current preoccupations. Whether suffering from a malaise after the so-called linguistic turn, or placing its hopes on the algorithms of the future to figure out language's "emergent properties," the thinking of the sign seems to have lost most of its vigor. Nevertheless, a theory of signification remains indispensable for contemporary efforts that depend on a certain proof of a philosophical absolute, the great outdoors of speculation. One could say that a consistent theory of signification is the *sine qua non* for any access to such an absolute, simply because it would always already be at the same time an absolute limit to language. We may refer to such a theory as a *speculative theory of signification*,<sup>1</sup> whose core, I would argue, would consist in a clear distinction between the mathematical and the non-mathematical (philosophical, linguistic, poetic) sign.

To contextualize this issue of demarcation and its historical antecedents, we may turn to the quarrel between astronomer Johannes Kepler and mysticist Donald Fludd, between signification *more mathematico* and signification *more hermetico*.<sup>2</sup> Kepler claimed that Fludd, together with other alchemists and hermeticists, constantly relied on analogies between macrocosm and microcosm, interpreting diagrams and formulas metaphorically, whereas true mathematicians like Kepler himself stayed away from such interpretative exuberance. This rigorous refusal of analogy and metaphor on one side and the delirium of interpretation on the other played out in other fields as well, specifically the field of language. We may place, for example, on the side of *more mathematico* the Leibnizian dream of a *mathesis universalis*, in which each philosophical proposition would be inaugurated with a *calculemus*. This line of thought extends right to modern times, with Frege's idea for a "formula language for pure thought,"<sup>3</sup> the Turing machine, and Montague grammar. Language here becomes ethereal, fully replaceable by abstract, empty signs and functions. On the other, "hermetic" side we may situate all attempts at finding the original, "arch-metaphorical," symbolically charged language, for example in the Dutch work of Johannes Goropius Becanus, and more recently in Nicolay Marr's "Japhetic Theory" of language, Kemal Atatürk's "Sun-Language" system, or Petro Zheji's

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Quentin Meillassoux, "Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign," lecture at the Freie Universität, Berlin, April 20, 2012, Robin Mackay (tr.): "I call 'speculative' every philosophy that claims [...] to attain [...] an absolute." Available at <http://oursecretblog.com/txt/QMpaperApr12.pdf> (accessed July 19, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 265.

<sup>3</sup> Gottlob Frege, "*Begriffsschrift*: A Formula Language, Modeled upon that of Arithmetic, for Pure Thought," in Jean van Heijenoort (ed.), *From Frege to Gödel: A Source Book of Mathematical Logic, 1879-1931*, Lincoln, iUniverse, 1999, p. 6.

albanological work. All rely on an obsessive attention to the metaphorical meaning of individual letters and sounds.

Now, the position of philosophy in this debate remains ambiguous, with adherents of both sides making their contributions. Philosophy's theories of signification, whether developed through the work of Aristotle, Leibniz, Saussure, Lacan, or Chomsky show the continuous marks of an, as for now, unresolvable argument between, once taken to their extremes, particularly close positions: a *mos mathematicus* aiming for a universal, abstract symbolic system that proceeds along purely mathematical lines, and a *mos hermeticus* working toward an arch-metaphorical, "original" language (which is therefore, paradoxically, also a universal, abstract symbolic system). There would therefore exist something like signification *more philosophico* -- a very unstable mode of signification indeed. Nevertheless, it is this mode, and no other, in which philosophical "proofs" are articulated. This is mode of signification which therefore constantly confronts the tension between under- and overinterpretation.

Returning to our initial question of the necessity of theory of signification for a certain set of proofs concerning the absolute and everything that would follow from such proofs -- a certain access to things-in-themselves, the destruction of "correlationism," philosophical realisms -- I suggest that we start by reviewing the position of such a theory in the work of Alain Badiou. This is instructive to the extent that Badiou somehow manages a balance between the *mos mathematicus* and *mos hermeticus* by explicitly introducing the *mos philosophicus* as a properly citational mode. At the same time, Badiou's work has provided the fundamentals for the only extant contemporary proof of an absolute, as we will encounter in the work of Quentin Meillassoux.

As John Van Houdt and I have argued elsewhere, the citationality characteristic of Badiou's philosophical discourse is anchored in his idea of philosophy's "circulation" and its dependence on "truth procedures" such as mathematics and poetry to formulate philosophical propositions.<sup>4</sup> The consequence, however, of this dependency on truth procedures external to philosophy itself is that philosophy always only *cites* and therefore potentially *misquotes* mathematics, and can never aspire to argue *purely more mathematico*, which would imply a disastrous *suture* between mathematics and philosophy. For Badiou, philosophy is an unstable, decentered circulation around a void, gravitating between the three poles of the poetry of the subject, the mathematics of ontology, and the history of philosophical discourse. By accepting the metaphorical quality of all philosophical discourse, as already analyzed in depth in Derrida's essay "White Mythology," Badiou therefore also excludes realism as a viable philosophical position.

The absence of a philosophy *more mathematico* -- not its impossibility *tout court*<sup>5</sup> -- is both advantageous and disadvantageous for philosophy, depending one's inclination. On the one hand, the impossibility of a pure philosophy *more mathematico* -- or, for example, as Spinoza desired, *ordine geometrico demonstrata* -- implies that it can never be refuted by mathematics on the basis of some misappropriation or category mistake<sup>6</sup>; because philosophy *always* only cites mathematics it necessarily misappropriates it to a certain extent. On the other hand this seems to imply that certain philosophical statements will remain unprovable, such as the existence of an absolute outside any theological or metaphysical predetermination. For in order to arrive at such

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei and John Van Houdt, "Circulating Philosophy: A Note on Two Apparent Misquotations in Alain Badiou's *Logics of Worlds*," *Theory and Event* 14.2, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> It would be my claim that the only moment we will arrive at a pure philosophy *more mathematico*, a Leibnizian *mathesis universalis*, is the moment of the appearance of artificial intelligence, whose definition practically coincides with such philosophy: namely a bijective mapping of mathematics onto language. In this sense, AI is nothing but a different avatar of the death of philosophy, or, in Badiouan terms, a suture of mathematics to philosophy.

<sup>6</sup> I refer here specifically to philosophies that depend to a smaller or larger extent on arguments imported from mathematics. Naturally there are many philosophical positions which are inherently impervious to mathematical or mathematicalizing arguments.

proof one has to face precisely the glaring absence of a coherent speculative theory of signification, which in its weak version would claim an unequivocal demarcation between the philosophical and the mathematical, and in its strong version a subservience of the former to the latter.

### **Absolute Proof**

Before discussing Meillassoux's aporetic treatment of the sign and some of its consequences, let us first inspect the proof of the existence of the absolute given in his book *After Finitude*, which indeed may be said to ground an entire philosophical movement which implicitly assumes access to such an absolute. That Meillassoux is both the only philosopher in this movement who has attempted an actual proof *and* indicated the unresolved issues related to this proof in the field of signification is our motive for singling out this particular philosopher for commentary. Other so-called (speculative) realist philosophers are nevertheless vulnerable to the same arguments that Meillassoux's oeuvre allows us so clearly to articulate, in the sense that they all, openly or implicitly, must assume his proof if calling themselves realists.<sup>7</sup> This is all the more reason to take his work seriously.

Whereas *After Finitude* specifically aims to name and define a philosophical absolute, namely the principle of factuality and resulting necessity of contingency, I am interested not so much in this particular proof because it is argued from out of philosophy's own history.<sup>8</sup> What I would rather focus on is the status of mathematics (and the mathematized sciences) in the line of argument Meillassoux employs after positing the principle of factuality, and the aporia at which he arrives. I do not intend to offer a critique of his philosophical project based on the affirmation "that the sole point of absolute exteriority that thought encounters is that of the radical contingency of our own world,"<sup>9</sup> but rather of the possible modes through which certain "figures," non-trivial and necessary properties of this necessary contingency, may be thought by means of what he baptizes "dianoetic intuition."<sup>10</sup>

For what is at stake is not an absolute *tout court*. What is at stake, first in *After Finitude* and then in Meillassoux's later lectures, is a *philosophical* absolute that somehow would allow for a *discourse* that is outside the hold of language or consciousness on the human subject to which he gives the name correlationism, namely a position "disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another."<sup>11</sup> Correlationism naturally rejects a philosophical absolute, in the precise sense that nothing can be said to exist outside human consciousness or language.<sup>12</sup> However, it also implicitly rejects a

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<sup>7</sup> Meillassoux explicitly makes this point in an interview with Graham Harman: "I am [...] opposed to every form of realism that claims to challenge correlationism without striking at the root of the difficulty. [...] In this case I try to show why the path I have taken seems necessary to me, despite its difficulty: every other path seems defective in each case, incapable of a true refutation of correlationism" (Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2011, p. 166).

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted, however, that this argument proceeds using the principle of non-contradiction, which in Meillassoux's work is deduced as "figure" of the necessity of contingency -- a deduction that necessarily rests on a *mathematical* definition of contradiction. We therefore believe that even the principle of factuality is not impervious to the line of argument below.

<sup>9</sup> Meillassoux, "Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition," p. 11. Henceforth, IRR.

<sup>10</sup> In *After Finitude*, this is still called "intellectual intuition." Cf. Ray Brassier et al., "Speculative Realism," in R. Mackay (ed.), *Collapse III*, Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2007, p. 432.

<sup>11</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, Ray Brassier (tr.), London, Continuum, 2008, p. 5. Henceforth, AF.

<sup>12</sup> See also the contributions of Alberto Toscano, Peter Hallward, Nathan Brown, and Adrian Johnston in the volume Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (eds), *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, Melbourne: re.press, 2011. For an overview of the current state of the (speculative) realist movement, refer to Michael Austin et al. (eds.), *Speculations IV*, Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2013.

*discourse* of the absolute. And it is on this point that Meillassoux's problem of demarcation appears most clearly.

After the deduction of the principle of factuality, Meillassoux's argument proceeds with the proof of the absolute necessity of contingency, implying that physical laws "could actually *change at any moment for no reason whatsoever*" (AF 83). This seems initially to be a counterintuitive result, because we observe on a daily basis that the laws of nature seem quite stable, at least since beginning of scientific recording on this planet. Meillassoux's counterargument to this objection departs from a reformulation of Hume's problem, namely how to prove the necessity of causal connections, or, in other words, the necessity of the stability of physical laws. Meillassoux reverses this problem by asking "*how we are to explain the manifest stability of physical laws given that we take these to be contingent*" (AF 92). The core of his argument is a distinction he draws up between randomness or aleatory distribution (which always implies a certain totalization of all possibilities in the universe) and contingency as such. The contingency of physical laws does not imply constant disorder and chaos in the universe, because such reasoning "*extend[s] the probabilistic reasoning which the gambler applied to an event that is internal to our universe (the throw of the dice and its result), to the universe as such*" (AF 97). Meillassoux differentiates his concept of contingency from this type of aleatory reasoning by positing "*a precise condition for the manifest stability of chaos*" (AF 101). He indeed locates such a condition, namely under the Cantorian concept of the transfinite.

It is here mathematics is called upon to support Meillassoux's argument for the absolute necessity of contingency *philosophically*, in a move that Peter Hallward calls the "Cantorian trump card."<sup>13</sup> As Hallward indicates, the cornerstone of Meillassoux's proof is Cantor's mathematical proof of the non-totalizability of number, or the proof of the existence of transfinite numbers:

The argument that allows Meillassoux to posit a radically open miraculous [i.e. absolute] time depends on reference to Cantor's "de-totalization" of every attempt to close or limit a denumerable set of possibilities. A still more absolute lack of mediation, however, seems to characterize Meillassoux's appeal to mathematics as the royal road to the in-itself.<sup>14</sup>

Hallward thus accuses Meillassoux of importing mathematics into philosophy without paying heed to the status of mathematics as such. Even though "No-one denies that every mathematics measurement is 'indifferent' to the thing it measures,"<sup>15</sup> it is precisely this "indifference" of mathematics that should be questioned, because this indifference disappears at the moment that mathematics -- and this is what is at stake in Meillassoux's argument -- *enters* philosophy.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, we should attend to the fact that only a specific axiomatization of Cantor's set theory allows for a "definitive" proof of transfinite sets, and that nothing *within mathematics* favors such an axiomatization. Moreover, as Kurt Gödel has pointed out, any axiomatization necessarily involves a decision that itself is beyond the axiomatic schema.

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Hallward, "Anything Is Possible: A Reading of Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude*," in *The Speculative Turn*, p. 133.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 139. Similar arguments are made by Adrian Johnston, "Hume's Revenge: À Dieu, Meillassoux," in *The Speculative Turn*, p. 105-106, and Ray Brassier et al., *op. cit.*, p. 331-333.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> A similar argument is made, albeit with a different motivation, in Alexander R. Galloway, "The Poverty of Philosophy: Realism and Post-Fordism," *Critical Inquiry* 39.2, Winter 2013, 360ff. E.g., "The point is not that math is unable to discourse about reality. Obviously it can. Rather the point is that one cannot be *neutral* on the question of math's ability to discourse about reality" (p. 362). One cannot be neutral because math's discoursing about reality is precisely something that *only* happens in philosophy. An observation similar to Galloway's -- namely that there is an affinity between speculative realism's depreciation of the human and the logic of capitalism -- can also be located in Reza Negarestani, "Drafting the Inhuman: Conjectures on Capitalism and Organic Necrocracy," in *The Speculative Turn*.

Although Meillassoux is explicit about his indebtedness to Badiou's work for the formulation of this refutation of aleatory reason through Cantor's proof of the transfinite, the relation between mathematics and philosophy, in contrast to Badiou, remains less articulated.<sup>17</sup> This poses an interpretative problem at the moment when we read Meillassoux's "translation" of Cantor's transfinite: "*the (quantifiable) totality of the thinkable is unthinkable*" (AF 104). Whereas in Badiou's case truth is that which is absolute, and something which can only be philosophically grasped by means of a poetic interruption of the mathematically monotonous "planes of boredom," in Meillassoux it is precisely mathematics itself that furnishes the discourse of a philosophical positing of the absolute -- without the Badiouan caveat that philosophy merely "cites" mathematics; thus mathematics drives the speculative argument home. Little wonder then, that the crux of Meillassoux's entire enterprise becomes the formulation of a theory of signification that would differentiate the mathematical from the philosophical, non-mathematical sign -- or reestablish the field in which this differentiation is supposed to take place. And characteristically, he chooses for the latter option.

### The Aporia of the Kenotype

We may approach Meillassoux's theory of signification first by referring to two problematic statements found in the first chapter of *After Finitude*. On the question "What then would be a literal interpretation of the ancestral statement?," he answers: "The belief that the realist meaning of the ancestral statement *is its ultimate meaning* -- that there is *no* other regime of meaning capable of deepening our understanding of it" (AF 14). This is later enforced by the claim that "*an ancestral statement only has sense if its literal sense is also its ultimate sense*" (AF 17). This is a staunchly anti-metaphorical position, suggesting that a statement such as "The accretion of the earth happened 4.56 billion years ago" has no other meaning except for the accumulation of scientific, mathematicized data it somehow represents.<sup>18</sup> Another way for Meillassoux to refer to such meaning are the syntagm "as described," or even simply "sense":

Correlationism will generally maintain [...] that ancestral statements are true in a way [...]. But if it is consistent, correlationism will have to deny that the referents of these statements really existed *described* prior to any human or living species. [...] But this assertion is, of course, a catastrophe, because it destroys the *sense* of scientific statements, which, I insist, just mean[.]<sup>19</sup>

Within the historical categorization sketched out above we may thus conclude that in his philosophy, Meillassoux has found a way of distinguishing signs *more mathematico*. He posits "ultimate meaning," "(ultimate) sense" and "as described" as necessary attributes of absolute statements.<sup>20</sup> But the question remains: what comes first, the proof of the absolute and then statements in which it is articulated, or ancestral statements that furnish the basis for the proof of the absolute necessity of contingency?

The problem that now has to be addressed is how exactly Meillassoux is able to demarcate the mathematical from the non-mathematical sign, because the moments at which he attempts such demarcation in *After Finitude*, it does not withstand close scrutiny. For example, in

<sup>17</sup> Meillassoux indeed claims that his role as philosopher is "to prevent a certain philosophical regime from contesting the sovereignty of those 'disciplines of experience'" (IRR 12). The limit case is here obviously mathematics.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Hallward, *op. cit.*, p. 140. In his reply to Hallward, Nathan Brown argues in defense of Meillassoux that the latter doesn't "stretch [...] his arguments beyond the proper domain of their application" (Nathan Brown, "The Speculative and the Specific: On Hallward and Meillassoux," in *The Speculative Turn*, p. 145). Nevertheless Meillassoux does precisely this when he speaks of the "ultimate sense," a sense (and probably non-sense) that is only available within mathematics itself and nowhere in the sentence he gives us.

<sup>19</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, "Time without Becoming," lecture at Middlesex University, May 8, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Nathan Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

Meillassoux's discussion of the differentiation between primary and secondary qualities, he suggests that

Rather than arguing that mathematics and physics only bear on the *a priori* forms of our experience, I am convinced [...] that one must maintain, like Descartes, that mathematics and mathematized physics give us means to identify the properties of a world that is radically independent of thought. (IRR 18)

In order to keep his access to a proof of a philosophical absolute, Meillassoux needs to be able to distinguish mathematical statements from other statements -- including all his speculative pronouncements. He addresses this issue on several occasions, for example at the end of his lecture "Time without Becoming": "Would it be possible to derive, to draw from the principle of factuality, the ability of the natural sciences to know, *by way of mathematical discourse*, reality in itself, [...] which exists independently of our subjectivity."<sup>21</sup> The possibility of a deriving scientific knowledge from the absolute principle factuality thus depends on the stability of this "mathematical discourse."

This stability, or legibility, of the mathematical sign is what is at stake at the end of Meillassoux's lecture "Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition." In this text he attempts to "obtain a factual derivation that would legitimate *the absolutizing capacity of modern science*" (IRR 18), a derivation that would somehow certify his usage of "absolute meaning" and "literal sense" in previous arguments. He formulates his approach to this derivation as follows:

I will try to exhibit a minimal condition [...] of various contemporary formal languages -- logical as well as mathematical. This minimal condition [...] has to do with our capacity to *think a meaningless sign*. I will then derive this capacity to think a meaningless sign from the principle of factuality, by showing that there is an essential link between this sort of sign and absolutized contingency. (IRR 18)

The meaningless sign, posited as that which differentiates formal from natural languages, thus becomes, in Meillassoux's terminology, a *figure* of the principle of factuality. From an inspection of the axiomatics of set theory he subsequently derives a principle of distinction, namely "that a formal language, unlike a natural language, accords a structural role to the meaningless sign -- at least on a *syntactical* level" (IRR 22). It is indeed well attested that many contemporary mathematical axiomatics no longer define certain signs, but just activate a certain operability in them, through which meaning appears *ex nihilo* by means of certain syntactical operations. This differentiation between the *properties* of signs in formal and natural languages in itself is not problematic, but the way in which we would be able to *recognize* meaningless signs as different from meaningful signs is, especially since it is *in philosophy* that this recognition is supposed to take place: "It is precisely because hermeneutics has access only to the regime of ordinary meaning that it cannot accede to any speculative absolute; only a philosophy capable of thinking formal meaning and its crucial non-signifying aspect can hope to extract it from a thinking of finitude" (IRR 23). Meillassoux therefore seeks *think* formal meaning and formulate "*an ontology of the empty sign*" (IRR 24).

The meaningless sign is the "zero degree" of the sign, neither signifying nor denoting anything, and Meillassoux, in a typical reversal, suggests that any speculative theory of signification should depart from the meaningless sign instead of attempt to incorporate it within existing semiotic frameworks. In taking up the type-token distinction formulated in modern linguistics, Meillassoux suggests that recognizing a meaningless sign means to divide in its (keno)type and actual occurrence. He thus separates the material part (written or spoken trace) of the meaningless sign from the immaterial part (kenotype). This kenotype-occurrence duality (as special variant of the type-token duality) would be different from the regular concept-thing

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<sup>21</sup> Meillassoux, "Time without Becoming." My emphasis. Cf. also Ray Brassier et al., *op. cit.*, p. 330.

duality in the sense that it always, necessarily, implies an infinite number of occurrences -- “the sign *does not at all conceptualize its material basis*” (IRR 28) -- as well as an infinite number of recordings of such occurrences -- “the sign [...] *is not essentially or conceptually linked to the form that it takes for us*” (IRR 28). The question of recognition, however, remains. How to differentiate the two regimes of sameness, finitely repeatable sameness between things and infinitely iterable sameness between tokens.

At this point, Meillassoux has recourse to a “fable” -- not the most neutral of philosophical forms -- entitled “The Fable of the Contented Paleographer.” Meillassoux’s initial observation is a fundamental one. He suggests that on inspecting two rows of marks (IRR 30):

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The shift in recognition between interpreting these marks as a finite repetition of decorative elements or as a sample from an infinite iteration of meaningless signs, we grasp the kenotype, a sign before any signification: “Now, it is precisely at the moment when we flip from the grasping of contingent things to the grasping of the contingency of things [...] that we immediately iterate them without limit” (IRR 35-36). And he concludes:

The grasping of the sign proceeds *from a switching of our mode of apprehension* -- from the ordinary mode of apprehension that grasps certain contingent things, I switch to the semiotic mode of apprehension, that grasps the eternal contingency of this or that thing. This grasping of a facticity other than the empirical [...] makes it possible for me to iterate identically marks brought together conventionally as replicas of distinct type-signs. (IRR 37)

But the shift between the “ordinary” mode and “semiotic” mode is in itself not as clearcut as Meillassoux wants us to believe with his fable. We could point to an entire tradition that exploits this switching of apprehension. Asemic writing, which originally developed from calligraphic traditions in both the East and the West, consists precisely in suspending the difference between Meillassoux’s modes. A paleographer, encountering for example any of Henri Michaux’s *signes*,<sup>22</sup> would never conclusively be able to decide what she is dealing with, iteration or repetition. Moreover, it remains unclear to what extent this shift is different or comparable to experiences of momentary illegibility, for example when a nonsense string of characters in one language suddenly becomes meaningful in another, a relatable experience for anyone operating in multilingual environments.

However, the actual problem, namely the philosophical demarcation between the mathematical and the non-mathematical sign, remains unsolved.<sup>23</sup> This is indeed acknowledged at the end of Meillassoux’s lecture: “How, through what paradox, can we hope that the meaningless sign could not only have a referent, but a (deutero-)absolute referent, more radically separate from us than any correlational apprehension?” (IRR 37). This question specifically tailored to Meillassoux’s line of argument resonates with the general problem of philosophy’s relation to language, as previously formulated poignantly by Derrida: “is philosophical discourse governed - - to what extent and according to what modalities -- by the constraints of language? [...] Has not philosophy always recalled the arbitrariness of the sign in order to posit the contingent and superficial exteriority of language to thought [...]?”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Catherine de Zegher (ed.), *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, New York: Merrell/The Drawing Center, 2000.  
<sup>23</sup> And in that sense Meillassoux is not yet immune from “Rortian refutation.” Cf. Brassier et al, “Speculative Realism,” p. 331.  
<sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Supplement of Copula: Philosophy before Linguistics,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, Alan Bass (tr.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 177-178.



Allow me to insist that this unsolved philosophical problem continues to threaten the entire philosophical construct built on the proof of the absolute, and most immediately the deduction of any of its figures such as the principle of non-contradiction. To put the pending problem in his own terms: he may have succeeded in providing philosophy with a “Real,” but it is the “realism” that remains of dubious consistency.<sup>25</sup>

### From Signification to Symbolization

Considering this aporia, it perhaps doesn't come as a surprise that in his latest work, *Le Nombre et la sirène*,<sup>26</sup> Meillassoux attempts a derivation of another figure of the necessity of contingency, what he calls the *peut-être* -- may-being,<sup>27</sup> through poetry: “Comme ce qui fait, non plus l'être, mais du *peut-être*, la tâche première, et à venir, des penseurs et des poètes.”<sup>28</sup> We have thus come full circle, from an approach to philosophical problems *more mathematico* to an approach which, if anything, is congruent with the best hermetic traditions, including the counting of words and extracting universal meaning from numbers. It is this attempt at a thinking together of the *mos mathematicus* and *mos hermeticus* that Meillassoux's work should be situated,<sup>29</sup> while at the same time radically differentiated from other “realisms.” For, paradoxically, Meillassoux's proof of the absolute is utterly *worthless* in the eyes of anyone actually interested in articulating parliaments of things or weirding the universe.

For in his practice Meillassoux proceeds *by any language necessary*, mathematical or poetical, emptied from any meaning and as meaningful as possible. In this sense, he becomes an advocate of the *power of language*. Any speculative theory of signification should necessarily be *affirmative* of language as such and through Meillassoux's turn from the fable to the poem we grasp that much more than a demarcation between mathematical and non-mathematical signs, it is a matter of intensifying the productivity of both, as well as an investigation of the “great outdoors” of signification that remain unthought, namely the possibility of the undifferentiated coexistence of the mathematical and poetic sign.

Realist philosophers are captured by a disavowal of this power of language itself, a power which, paradoxically, appears in *the very same author that formulates the only proof by which they support their disavowal*. Their incapacity to invent new languages, which goes hand in hand with their disdain for poetry and an absence of any political commitment,<sup>30</sup> thus blinds them to the decision that lies in front of them, a properly philosophical decision: how to unify signification *more mathematico* and *more hermetico* without any mediating term -- that is, without Badiou's citational mode of philosophy.

Allow me to close on a possible avenue how to think this question with the work of Meillassoux. In his as yet unpublished doctoral dissertation *L'Inexistence divine (The Divine Inexistence)*, he develops the concept of “symbolization,” which hurls us back to one of the first formulations of a philosophical theory of signification: ἔστι μὲν οὖν τὰ ἐν τῇ φωνῇ τῶν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ παθημάτων σύμβολα...<sup>31</sup> But for Meillassoux symbolization would not be the throwing together of sounds and the sensations of the soul, or the coherence of signifier and signified in the

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Brassier et al, *op. cit.*, p. 434-435.

<sup>26</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *Le Nombre et la sirène: Un déchiffrement du Coup de dés de Mallarmé*, Paris: Fayard, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Meillassoux, “Time and Becoming”: “I think that ultimately the matter of philosophy is not being or becoming, representation or reality, but a very special possibility, which is not a formal possible, but a real and dense possible, which I call the ‘peut-être’.”

<sup>28</sup> Meillassoux, *Le Nombre et la sirène*, 206.

<sup>29</sup> A similar observation is made in Thomas H. Ford's review of the English translation, *The Number and the Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé's Coup de dés*: <http://www.c-sep.org/en/2013/01/06/quentin-meillassoux-the-number-and-the-siren.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Galloway, *op. cit.*, 365.

<sup>31</sup> Aristotle, *De Interpretatione*, 16a3-4.

sign, but rather an immanent bond, the “*relation of values with the truth of this world [...] The goal of every philosophy must be the immanent inscription of values in being.*”<sup>32</sup> Thus it is philosophy’s principle task to create “symbols,” to invent structures of signification. We can now start to understand why the problem of signification seems to be at the problematic core of Meillassoux’s argument on the necessity of contingency: it is signification (that is, symbolization) *itself* that binds his entire philosophical project together -- the way in which mathematics could say something about a “world radically independent of thought,” the way in which a poem may give us a unique “Number.”

This project (and I must abbreviate here to a perhaps irresponsible degree) consists in articulating a non-metaphysical, “factual Symbol,” which, after the collapse of all previous attempts of philosophy to link being and justice -- the most recent of which was the “historic Symbol” which deposits objective value in history itself and articulates economy as its teleology (DI 201-2) -- would relink being and justice under the immanent necessity of contingency:

The factual proposes a new symbolization, the first *non*-metaphysical one. For this time the symbolization is made possible by seizing the radical contingency of worldly laws: a contingency that allows us to found ontologically the hope of justice even while overcoming the former weakening of justice. Value is inserted into a reality no longer identified with a determinate and perennial substance, but rather with the possibility of lawless change. In this way we do not propose that the world is the best or worst of possible worlds, but that it can *actually* be both the one and the other. Thus, we do not abandon our disquietude in the face of the world, but maintain it as a constitutive element of hope (DI 206).

In the face of this “new symbolization,” the difference between signification *more hermetico* and *more mathematico* vanishes, as both assume a certain form of transcendence. Therefore, the articulation of this Symbol may come about through *any language necessary*, or, perhaps -- to avoid any further attachment to the sign as unit of meaning, through any “fiction.” And it is at this point, ironically, that Meillassoux comes closest in actualizing Heidegger’s dream of the “liberation of language from grammar into a more original essential framework [...] reserved for thought and poetic creation.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, “Excerpts from *L’Inexistence divine*,” Graham Harman (tr.), in Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux*, p. 195. Henceforth, DI.

<sup>33</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” Frank Capuzzi (tr.), in *Basic Writings*, David Farrell Krell, New York: HarperCollins, 1993, p. 218.

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