

**Is it Exact That All Thought Emits A Throw of Dice?****Alain Badiou***Translated by Robert Boncardo & Christian R. Gelder*

We have, in this place, in this theatre, supported several times the textual representation of music.<sup>i</sup> This was the case not long ago — and I remember it fondly — with my own text, *L'Echarpe Rouge*.

What I am going to say here will be a matter of abstraction without music. There will be nothing more than a person speaking: to this day this has been the law of the *Conférences du Perroquet*.

In order to summon up the courage required to propose only a few ornaments, I will seek refuge behind the following thesis of Mallarmé, which is that someone who speaks can on their own become the equivalent of all that music provokes. Mallarmé said this in the following terms: “At the exact moment when music appears better suited than any rite to what is present in the masses, though latent and incomprehensible, it has been shown that there is nothing, in the inarticulation or anonymity of those cries, that jubilation, that pride, and those transports, that can not with equal magnificence — and, what is more, with that clarity that is our conscious knowledge — be rendered by that old and holy elocution; or the Word, when someone proffers it.”<sup>ii</sup>

After all, Mallarmé said this, precisely, in a conference. In doing so he justified once and for all for us that his be *du Perroquet*.

We will also declare it retroactively to be so, thereby submitting ourselves to a very high standard.

On the 11th of February 1890, in Brussels, Mallarmé pronounced in effect a conference on Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. Villiers had died in August 1889. Between he and Mallarmé there had been a profound friendship, forged in the years 1865–1870. It was thus that in 1870, Villiers had come to see his friend in Avignon, where Mallarmé was exercising the noble profession of teaching English in a secondary college, as he did for his whole life. Among the travelling companions of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam was Judith Gauthier, the fanatical admirer of Wagner.

Villiers de l'Isle-Adam is one of the very few writers not to have fled Paris during the Commune. From him we have an accurate and calmly composed account of the Commune, which compensates for the sinister declarations of the petulant and spiteful property owners that Flaubert, the Goncourts, George Sand and Leconte de Lisle revealed themselves to be in the circumstances. Only Hugo, Rimbaud, perhaps Verlaine, and Villiers, rose above the moral debacle and the profound villainy shown at this moment of truth by writers who, masquerading as aesthetes, had taken part in the commercial depravity of the Second Empire. Villiers noted in particular the beauty of Communard Paris, the visible happiness of the passers-by, the feeling that the real inhabitants of the city finally walked its streets.

I would add that Jean Aubry's book, which is appropriately titled *Une amitié exemplaire: Villiers de l'Isle-Adam et Stéphane Mallarmé*, was published in 1941. Let us allow these dates and names to resonate with each other: 1870, the Commune, Wagner, Villiers, Mallarmé, 1941. This interweaving of the worst of history, of intellectual genius, of friendship — I believe that it quite clearly constitutes what we can call the temporal *site* of Mallarmé. He himself referred to it as follows:

We are witnessing, in this fin-de-siècle, not — as it was during the last one — upheavals, but, far from the public square: a disturbance of the veil in the temple, with significant folds, and, a little, its rending.<sup>iii</sup>

Mallarmé, who died in 1898 at the age of 56, could not yet imagine that what the rending of the veil would reveal was the foundational couple of the butchery of 14–18 and the October Revolution; and that thus, as far as the “public square” was concerned, we would not be left wanting. His statement seems perfectly appropriate to our own site, but perhaps the veil, torn once again, will allow us to see, once again, what is completely unknown to us.

Mallarmé began his homage to Villiers as follows:

A man habituated to dream, comes here to speak of another, who is dead.<sup>iv</sup>

*Habituated to dream...* It is a paradoxical definition, because, in the poem entitled “Funeral Toast,” which Mallarmé wrote in 1873 to celebrate Théophile Gauthier, he states as a poetic imperative the prohibition of dream. Thus:

It is the whole domain of our true grove  
that the pure poet’s humble, generous gesture  
prohibits dreams, his function’s enemy.<sup>v</sup>

Let it be said in passing that this poem sketches a different constellation. The collection in which it appears, namely *Le Tombeau de Théophile Gauthier*, includes a sort of passage of which the dead man, this Théophile Gauthier, who knew how to make himself loved by all, is the absent cause: the passage Hugo-Mallarmé. The collection in fact opens with a superb poem by Hugo, the one in which we find the following famous lines that Malraux would later use as a title:

What a wild noise these oaks cut down

For Herakles' pyre are making in the dusk.<sup>vi</sup>

Only the poem by Mallarmé reaches the heights of such an opening. Mallarmé had a powerful and conclusive image of Hugo:

Hugo, in his mysterious task, brought all prose, philosophy, eloquence, history down to verse, and, since he was verse personified, he confiscated, from whoever tried to think, or discourse, or narrate, almost the right to speak. A monument in the desert, surrounded by silence; in a crypt, the divinity of a majestic unconscious idea — that is, that the form we call verse is simply itself literature; that there is verse as soon as diction calls attention to itself, rhyme as soon as there is style. Verse, I think, respectfully, waited until the giant who had identified it with his tenacious and firm blacksmith's hand came to be missing, in order to, itself, break.<sup>vii</sup>

The *passe* from Hugo to Mallarmé is that of the crisis of verse, which immediately opens onto the mystery in letters. What is the French language as a literary language, if verse fails? Mallarmé is the watchman of this question; question that is still being posed today and in terms of which he, Mallarmé, remains an enigmatic anticipation.

The prohibition of dream is certainly a post-Hugolian directive. But how can he who designates in the dream “his function's enemy” present himself as a “man habituated to dream”?

We can shed some light on this question if we ask what *real* is at stake here, which it would be imperative to subtract from dream. It is essential to understand that, at the antipodes of the connection between dream and Nature, in which the Romantic vision had its origins, and which Baudelaire had only half disentangled, since he remained nostalgic for it, Mallarmé holds that, in the epoch of the reign of technology, and of the

accomplishment of Cartesianism in its effective possession, Nature has ceased to be of value as a referent for poetic metaphor: “Nature has taken place; it can’t be added to, except for cities or railroads or other inventions forming our material.”<sup>viii</sup>

I will therefore hold that the real of which the Mallarméan text proposes the anticipation is never the unfolded figure of a spectacle. Mallarmé’s doctrine devotes poetry to the *event*, which is to say to the pure *there is* of occurrence. We have misunderstood the function of the negative in Mallarmé, since we believed we discerned in it a nihilist despair. Certainly — and I devoted a long development in my *Theory of the Subject* to this — we find in him a complete dialectic of procedures of absence. The intelligibility of the most minor of his poems supposes that we carefully distinguish three regimes of negation: *vanishing*, which has causal value, *annulment*, which has conceptual value, *foreclosure*, which has null value.

But this dialectic has only an operative value. It organizes an experience in which, all factuality being subtracted, the pure essence of that-which-takes-place is captured. The Mallarméan question is not: what is being? His question is: what is it “to take place” [avoir lieu], what is it for something “to happen” [se produire]? Is there a being of that-which-takes-place insofar as it takes place? Of course, this question is very close to another, which has often been taken to be central and which is: what is it to disappear? But disappearance [disparaître] is here only the obliquity of appearance [paraître], when what is in play is appearance [l’apparaître].

Mallarmé summons us to think that the touchstone of meaning and of truth lies not in what gives or shows itself, but in that which is, in his words, “sprung from the croup and the flight.”<sup>ix</sup> Can there be, and under what conditions, a thought of what “springs forth” [surgir], a rational nomination of that which can only be counted once, having neither insistence nor consistence? It

is precisely to the *point* of the real that, for Mallarmé, literature is devoted. In this sense it suits him to unburden literature of dream [délester du rêve] and nonetheless to be habituated to it, for this pure point can be grasped only insofar as one undertakes within oneself to *prohibit* dream. It is here that the prohibition, whose material is the dream, commands the impossible, whose equivocation is the real.

In Lacan's terminology, we will say that a prohibition bearing upon imaginary totalization authorizes a symbolic subtraction, from which is fixed a point of the real.

This is why any poem by Mallarmé describes the place of an aleatory event, which we are required to interpret on the basis of its traces. Contrary to what is most often said, poetry is no longer submitted to action. This poetic universe is precisely the Hugolian *passe*, in the sense that it is the reverse of the Contemplations. The meaning, to my mind always univocal, of Mallarmé's text does not result from some symbolic substrate, or from a thematic obsession. In Mallarmé, there is no profound depth. Meaning results from the detection of that which has *taken place* [ce qui s'y est produit], in the text — from the eventual putting-into-play of that which, at the beginning, we have only the décor.

You know of the famous "hermeticism" of Mallarmé, which has led many literary exegetes to gloss, and to the all-too-convenient doctrine of polysemy, by virtue of which a certain entitlement is given to arbitrary interpretations. This "hermeticism" should instead be thought in terms of the category of the enigma, in the sense of a detective novel. This empty salon, this vase of flowers, this eventail, this tombstone, this somber and deserted sea, of what crime, of what catastrophe, of what major lack are they indicative? The greatest interpreter of Mallarmé, the Australian Gardner Davies, entitled one of his books *Mallarmé et le drame solaire*. It is the word "drama"[drame] taken from this title that holds the general value. The sunset is in effect an example of one of

those defunct events, of that appearance-in-disappearance, of which it is necessary to reconstruct, in the heart of the night, the “will-have-taken-place.” But all the poems have a dramatic structure. If, at the beginning of the poem, you have an extremely condensed set of figures — a few objects — then it is according to the same law that determines that, in a detective novel, there can be no more than a few characters, indeed no more than ten, since it is amongst the members of this finite group that *suspicion* has to circulate, and that beyond a certain number it becomes diffuse and insignificant. Mallarméan objects are essentially suspects who are suspected of having supported or hindered a radical action, an event that must be saved on the edge of forgetting. There must be a strictly circumscribed scene such that from the interpretant — from the reader — nothing is hidden. The descriptive protocol of the poem does not go beyond a system of clues such that a single hypothesis concerning what has taken place suffices to give it consistency. A sole deduction on the basis of this hypothesis must allow one to say how, having been abolished, the event will nevertheless fix itself in the décor, becoming thus the eternity of a “pure notion.” And there is no other pure notion than the pure “there is.”

This can also be said as follows: every law is a *law for suspects*. Poetry suspects being of not releasing the event it has put behind bars.

If poetry is an essential use of language, this is not because it is devoted to Presence, to the proximity of being; on the contrary, it is because it submits language to the maintenance of that which, being radically singular, pure action, would without it have fallen back into the nullity of the place. Poetry is the assumption of an undecidable: that of action itself, the action of the act, of which we can only *know* has taken place by wagering on its truth.

Being is that to which knowledge is devoted, the event that from which a truth is woven.

An event does not take place just anywhere. There are what I will call *evental sites*, whose ontological structure is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the essentially paradoxical multiple of the event to occur there. This structure always involves the site lying *on the edge of the void*, in the sense that the terms that compose the site *qua* multiple-presentation are not themselves presented. An evental site is, in a global situation, a multiple which is counted-as-one on the condition that that which belongs to it is not. We can thus demonstrate that the factory is an evental site of modern politics, in the sense that, under the name of *enterprise*, it is presented, but without its workers being presented nor, truth be told, able to be presented. Except that, precisely, the interpretative intervention undertakes, on the basis of the event, to put into circulation a *name* for this un-presentable. The evental site thus conjoins the solidity of the one-multiple with the errancy of the void, which is fixed only in the dialectic of the event and the intervention. In substance: an intervention is that which makes a name from an un-presented element of the site in order to qualify the event of which this site is the site. A poem by Mallarmé is a fictive intervention.

What did not elude Mallarmé was that the status of the workers has to do with the dialectic of the site, the event and the intervention. In the text titled *Conflict* — and for which, at the point at which we find ourselves, is worth the entirety of *Germinal* by Zola — Mallarmé writes the following, making of the sleep of the railroad workers beneath his windows the emblem of a non-presentation, the sublation of which his thought must henceforth devote itself to:

Constellations begin to shine: I wish that, in the darkness that covers the blind herd, there could also be points of light, eternalizing a thought, despite the



sealed eyes that never understood it — for the fact, for exactitude, for it to be said.<sup>x</sup>

Mallarmé, you see, shows that what is at stake is, precisely, that the invisibility of the workers, to which the thought of the intervention is exposed, can be *said*. And he concludes magnificently:

Keeping watch over these artisans of elementary tasks, I have occasion, beside a limpid, continuous river, to meditate on these symbols of the People — some robust intelligence bends their spines every day in order to extract, without the intermediary of wheat, the miracle of life which grounds presence: others in the past built aqueducts or cleared fields for some implement, wielded by the same Louis-Pierre, Martin, Poitou, or the Norman. When they are not asleep, they thus invoke one another according to their mothers or their provinces. But in fact their births fall into anonymity, and their mothers into the deep sleep that prostrates them, while the weight of centuries presses down on them, eternity reduced to social proportions.<sup>xi</sup>

You see that the poet is the *watchman* of the invisibility of the workers.

You also see that it is the words “people” that is drawn from the void of the worker’s sleep, and which, by the intervention of the text, circulates henceforth under the injunction of an eternal value.

More generally, it is necessary to conceive of the poem as an intervention at the outskirts of an evental site, whose fiction it institutes. This intervention aims to detect the event whose name will break with and separate from the void. For this separation between the void and the one, between the site and the unrepresentable, the established order, that of reality, is perpetuated. Yet this separation is an injustice done to being. Poetry is truth

since it proposes a reparative fiction for the injustice done to being. This injustice is that the event is prohibited from being.

With regard to this definition, *Un Coup de Dés...* occupies a general position, insofar as what is at stake in it is the doctrine of the event as such and not its investment in such and such a figure.

I will first read you this text, conscious of thus inviting you to read it for yourself, written as it is for the eye rather than for the ear.

Mallarmé expressly anticipated that his absolute Book be read in public. He saw in these readings an operation at once political and spiritual, which would give the public the representation of that which this public — like the railroad workers from before — held within itself of the invisible. He imagined that this public would be immense. His calculations predicted that, performance after performance, there would a minimum of 480,000 participants, listeners or readers.

He conceived of this operation as a relation to the *crowd*, an essential term for Mallarmé. He said: “In this proof by the crowd through narrations or reciprocity, me, I am a simple reader carrying my copy.”

The Book, having disappeared in the, reading, became its central void. Mallarmé notes: “The Book, same and null, as central, angel.”

To make, by reading Mallarmé’s text, an angel pass by a detachment of the crowd, which this evening you constitute, is to be faithful to his wish.

I note that, on the 27th of January and the 24th of February, Antoine Vitez and myself will, in this very place, set ourselves this same task, without any commemorative reference but by the sole and simple effect of our common admiration for this poetry and this prose, whose status in our language is properly unique.

If I now read *Un Coup de Dés*, then it is as a text of thought, as the greatest theoretical text that exists on the conditions for thinking the event.

*A throw of dice will never  
Even when launched in eternal circumstances,  
from the depths of a shipwreck,  
Though it be/that the Abyss, blanched, spread,  
furious, beneath an incline desperately plane on a wing  
(its own) fallen back in advance from being unable to  
dress its flight, and covering the spurtings, cutting of the  
surges, most inwardly sums up the shadow buried in the  
deeps by this alternate sail, to the point of adapting to  
the wingspan its gaping maw like a shell of a ship, listing  
to starboard or larboard.*

*The Master, beyond ancient reckonings, the  
maneuver forgotten with the age, arisen/ — formerly he  
would grasp the helm —, inferring, from this  
conflagration at his feet from the unanimous horizon,  
that there is readied, tossed about, and mixed, in the  
hand that would clasp it as one shakes one's fist at a  
destiny and the winds, the unique Number which cannot  
be another (Spirit to cast it into the storm, to fold back  
the division and pass on, proudly), hesitates (corpse by  
the arm separated from the secret it withholds), rather  
than play, as a hoary maniac, the game in the name of  
the waves (one invades the head, flows in the submissive  
beard — shipwreck, this, pertaining, to man, without  
vessel, no matter/where vain)/ from ancient time not to  
open up the hand clenched beyond the useless head:  
legacy, amid disappearance, to someone ambiguous, the  
ulterior immemorial demon having, from nullified  
regions, induced the old man toward this supreme  
conjunction with probability. This one (his puerile shade  
caressed and polished and rendered and washed, made  
supple by the waves and removed from the hard bones  
lost among the timbers), born of a frolic, the sea*

*through the ancestor, or the ancestor against the sea,  
tempting an idle chance.*

*(Nuptials from which the veil of illusion sprung  
up, their haunting, like the ghost of a gesture, will falter,  
will fall, madness).*

*Abolish*

*As if, an insinuation simple, in the silence,  
enrolled with irony, or the mystery hurled, howled, in  
some nearby whirlpool of hilarity and horror, flutters,  
about the abyss, without strewing it, or fleeing, and out  
of its cradles the virgin sign.*

*As if, solitary distraught feather, — unless a  
midnight toque encounters, or grazes it, and  
immobilizes on the crumpled velvet by a somber guffaw  
this rigid whiteness; ridiculous; in opposition to the sky,  
too much so not to mark in the slightest detail whoever,  
bitter prince of the reef, wears it (as an heroic headdress  
irresistible but contained by his small virile reason) in a  
lightning flash. Anxious, expiatory and pubescent,  
(mute laughter, that If)*

*The lucid and lordly crest of vertigo invisible on  
the brow scintillates, then shadows a delicate dark form  
standing upright, in its Siren twist, long enough to slap,  
with impatient terminal scales forked, a rock, false  
manor immediately evaporated into mist, which  
imposed a limit on infinity.*

*It was the number — born of the stars — ?*

*Were it to exist (other than as scattered dying  
hallucination)*

*Were it to begin and were it to cease (springing  
up as denied, and closed off when made manifest) at last  
through some thinly diffused emanation*

*Were it to be numbered*

*evidence of a totality however meagre*

*Were it to illumine*

*It would be, worse? no, more nor less, but as  
much indifferently,*

Chance.

*(Falls the feather, rhythmic suspension of disaster, to be buried in the original spray, whence formerly its delirium sprung up to a peak withered by the identical neutrality of the abyss).*

*Nothing, of the memorable crisis or might the event have been accomplished in view of all results null human, will have taken place (an ordinary elevation pours out absence), but the place — some splashing below of water as if to disperse the empty act, abruptly which, otherwise, by its falsehood would have founded perdition, in these latitudes, of indeterminate waves in which all reality dissolves;*

*Except, on high, perhaps, as far as place can fuse with the beyond (aside from the interest marked out to it in general by a certain obliquity through a certain declivity of fires), toward what must be the Septentrion as well as North, a constellation, cold from forgetfulness and desuetude not so much, that it doesn't number, on some vacant and superior surface, the successive shock in the way of stars of a total account in the making;*

*Keeping vigil, doubting, rolling, shining and meditating, before coming to a halt at some terminus that sanctifies it.*

*All thought emits a Throw of Dice.*

*(Note: The text here reproduced is that from the reading, punctuated by my pauses.)<sup>xii</sup>*

In *Un Coup de Dés*, the metaphor for the fact that any eventual site is on the edge of the void is constructed from a deserted horizon hanging over a stormy sea. These are stripped back to the pure immanence of the nothing — of unpresentation — which Mallarmé names the “eternal circumstances” of action. The term by which Mallarmé always designates a multiple presented

within the confines of un-presentation is the Abyss, which, in *Un Coup de dés...* is “spread,” “blanched,” and refuses in advance any flight from itself, “the wing” of its own foam being “fallen back in advance from being unable to dress its flight.”

The paradox of an evental site is that it is identifiable only on the basis of what it does not present in the situation in which it itself is presented. It is only insofar as it makes-one the inexistent multiples in a situation that a multiple is on the edge of the void.

Mallarmé ingeniously presents this paradox by composing, on the basis of the site — the deserted Ocean — a *phantom* multiple that metaphorizes the inexistence of which the site is the presentation. In the scenic frame you have only the Abyss, indistinguishable sea and sky. But out of the “desperately plane incline” of the sky and the “gaping maw” of the waves, there is composed an image of a ship, of its sail and prow, revoked as soon as it is invoked, such that the desert of the site “most inwardly sums up ... a ship [batîment]” that does not exist, being only the figurative interiority of what the empty site indicates, with nothing more than its own resources, the probable absence. Thus the event will not only occur *in* the site, but will do so by summoning that which the site contains of the unrepresentable: the ship “buried in the deep,” whose abolished plenitude — since only the Ocean is presented — authorizes us to announce that action takes place “from the depth of a shipwreck.” For any event, in addition to being localized by its site, produces the ruin of the site *with respect to the situation*, since it retroactively names its interior void. The “shipwreck” singlehandedly gives us these allusive debris of which is composed, in the one of the site, the undecidable multiple of the event.

A fundamental characteristic of the event is that it is ultra-one, in the sense that it is itself the determining element of the multiple that it is. A revolution, a strike, a war, a significant artistic representation — each of these contain their own proper name.

When Saint-Just declared, in 1794, that “the revolution is frozen,” he is certainly referring to a multiplicity of factors, fatigue, terroristic impotence, the weight of the war and military personnel. But he refers to, as being immanent to these terms, and as the ultra-one of their multiple, the revolution itself, which also, insofar as it can be identified within the situation that it itself names, is in a position of self-belonging.

In Mallarmé’s text, the name of the event, internal as it is to its being, will arrange itself on the basis of a debris from the phantom ship, this being a symbol of the fact that the site does not present its own terms. The debris is the captain of the shipwrecked ship, the “master,” whose arm held high above the waves grips between its fingers the two dice that are to be cast upon the surface of the sea. In “the hand that would hold it” there “is readied tossed about and mixed [...] the unique Number which cannot be another.”

That the gesture of throwing the dice is to be performed by the captain, which literally draws from the bare place the shipwreck of an inexistent ship — therefore from the disappearance of a nonbeing — indicates that the name of the event, its circulation on the surface of reality, can in effect only be drawn from the void that borders the evental site. Such is the function of all intervention: to decide that the event belongs to the situation, by drawing from the void which it borders, which is to say from unrepresented terms, the name under which the event will henceforth circulate and propagate its faithful consequences.

Why is the event, insofar as it occurs in the one of the site and on the basis of the “shipwrecked” multiples, which this one presents only in their result-one, a throw of the dice? What does this name signify? This gesture symbolizes the event in general, namely that which, as a pure contingency that cannot be inferred from the situation, is no less a fixed multiple, a number, which nothing can modify as soon as it has unfolded — “folded back the

division” — the sides of its visible faces. A throw of dice conjoins the emblem of chance to that of necessity, to the erratic multiple of the event to the retroactive readability of the count. The event in question in *Un Coup de Dés...* is therefore the production of an absolute symbol of the event. What is at stake in throwing the dice “from the depths of a shipwreck” is to make an event of the thought of the event.

The difficulty is as follows: an event is not itself a term of the situation for which it is an event. This multiple is an ‘ultra-one’, as I have said. Its essence determines that, by a special procedure that I will call the intervention, deciding the belonging of the event to the situation be decided. Considered as a simple multiple, with the recognizably paradoxical property of being self-belonging, the event is *undecidable*. It belongs to the place, or it does not: this undecidability being a matter of principle.

What results from this is that an event whose content is the eventuality of the event (and such is the dice thrown “in eternal circumstances”), can only take the *form* of indecision. Since the master must produce the absolute event (the event that, Mallarmé says, will abolish chance, being the active and fully realized concept of the “there-is”), he must suspend the production from a hesitation that is itself absolute, thereby indicating that the event is a multiple that one can neither know nor see if it belongs to the situation of its site. We shall never see the master throw the dice, for on the scene of action all we have access to is a hesitation as eternal as its circumstances: “The master [...] hesitates [...] rather than play as a hoary maniac the game in the name of the waves [...] not to open up the hand clenched beyond the useless head.” “To play the game,” or “to not open the hand”? In the first case, we miss the essence of the event, since we *decide* in anticipation that it will occur. Likewise for the second case, since “nothing will have taken place but the place.” Between the event annulled by the reality of its visible belonging to the situation and the event annulled by its



total invisibility, the sole representable figure of the concept of the event is the *mise-en-scène* of its undecidability.

Moreover, the entirety of *Un Coup de Dés...* organizes a stupefying series of metaphorical transformations around the theme of the undecidable. From this raised arm, which — perhaps — holds the “secret” of the number, there unfolds, according to the technique that had already summoned the unrepresentability from the oceanic site by superimposing an image of a phantom vessel, a fan of analogies unfolds by which, little by little, the equivalence between the throwing and not throwing of dice is achieved — such is the metaphoric treatment of the *concept* of undecidability.

The “supreme conjunction with probability” that the old man, hesitating to throw the dice on the surface of the sea, represents, is firstly — and as an echo of the initial foam from which the sail of the drowned ship was woven — transformed into nuptial robes (the nuptials of the event and the situation), a frail fabric on the edge of vanishing, which “will falter, will fall,” blown apart by the nothingness of presentation in which unrepresentables of the site are dispersed.

Then this veil, at the moment of disappearing, becomes a “solitary feather,” which “flutters about the abyss.” What more beautiful image of the event, at once impalpable and crucial, than this white feather on the sea, of which we cannot reasonably decide if it will be “scattered” across the situation or whether it will “flee” it?

The feather, at the possible end of its errancy, adjusts itself to this marine pedestal as if to a velvet hat. Then, underneath this headgear where a *fixed* hesitation (“this rigid whiteness”) adjoins “the somber guffaw” of the massivity of the place, who do we see arise but — miracle of the text — Hamlet himself, the “bitter prince of the reef”: that is, exemplarily, this subject of Theatre who can find no admissible reason for deciding if he should, or should not, and when, kill the murderer of his father.

The “lordly crest” of the Romantic headgear with which the Dane adorns himself throws off the last fires of eventual undecidability — it “scintillates then shadows” — and in this shadow where once again everything risks being lost, a siren and a rock arise — poetic temptation of the gesture and massivity of the place — both of which will this time vanish. For the “impatient terminal scales” of the temptress serve only to make the rock, this “false manor,” “evaporate into mist,” which had claimed to impose “a limit on infinity.” Understand this: the undecidable equivalence of the gesture and the place has at this point been refined, on the scene of analogies, by such successive transformations, that a single supplementary image annihilates the correlative image: the impatient gesture of the tail of a siren, which invites a throw of dice, cannot but make the limit to the infinity of indecision — that is to say the local visibility of the event — disappear and thus bring back the original site, which dismisses the two terms of the dilemma, for lack of having failed to establish a tenable asymmetry between them, on the basis of which a rational choice could have been stated. On no discernible rock of the situation is the mythological chance of an appeal disposed. This return to a prior stage is admirably stylized by the reappearance of an anterior image, that of the feather, which this time will be “buried in the original spray”, its “delirium” (the wager of being able to decide an absolute event), having risen up as high as it could, up to a “peak” from where, figuring the undecidable essence of the event, it falls back, “withered by identical neutrality of the abyss.” It will neither have been able to join the abyss (to throw the dice) nor flee it (to avoid the gesture), it will have exemplified the impossibility of a rational choice — of abolishing chance — and in this identical neutrality will have simply abolished itself.

Into this figurative development, Mallarmé inserts his abstract lesson, which is announced on the 8<sup>th</sup> sheet, between Hamlet and the siren, by a mysterious “If.” The 9<sup>th</sup> sheet breaks the

suspense: “If [...] it was the number, it would be chance.” If the event were to deliver up the fixed finitude of the one-multiple that it is, it would not follow that we could have rationally decided its link to the situation.

The fixity of the event as a result, its count-for-one, is carefully detailed by Mallarmé: it would come into *existence* (“it would exist other than as a hallucination”); it would be held within its *limits* (“it would begin and it would cease”), having surged up in its very disappearance (“sprung up and denied”) and closed itself off in its appearance (“closed off when made manifest”), it would be multiple (“it would be numbered”); but it would have also been *counted for one* (“evidence of a totality however meager”). In short, the event would be in the situation, it would have been presented. But this presentation would either swallow it up in the neutral regime of anonymous (“the identical neutrality of the abyss”), allowing its essence *qua* event to escape; or, having no perceptible link with this regime, the event would be “worse/no/more nor less/but as much indifferently/chance,” and consequently nothing there would not have been represented, via the event of the event, of the absolute notion of the “there is.”

Should we thus conclude, in nihilist fashion, that the “there is” is forever groundless [in-fondé], and that thought, devoting itself to structures and to essences, leaves outside of its scope the interruptive vitality of the event? Or even that the power of the place is such that, at the undecidable point of the outplace, reason vacillates and cedes ground to the irrational? This is what the 10th sheet, where it is stated that “nothing will have taken place but the place,” might have us believe. The “memorable crisis,” which the absolute event symbolized in the roll of the dice would have represented and which would have had the privilege of escaping from the logic of the result, would have accomplished itself “in view of all null human results.” This means: the ultra-one of the number would have transcended the human, all-too human, law of the

count-for-one, which demands that the multiple — because the one is not — can not exist, except as the result of structure. By the absoluteness of a gesture, a self-founding interruption would have fused together the aleatory and the count, chance would have affirmed and abolished itself in the ultra-one, “the stellar result,” of an event that encrypts the essence of the event. But no. “Some splashing below” on the sea’s surface, the pure site now devoid of any interiority, even phantasmatic, comes to “disperse the empty act.” Except, Mallarmé tells us, if by chance the absolute event had been able to occur, the “falsehood” of this act (a falsehood that is the fiction of a truth), would have provoked the ruin of the indifference of the place, “the perdition[...] of these indeterminate waves.” Since the event was not able to engender itself, it is necessary, it seems, to acknowledge that the “indeterminate waves” triumph over it, that the place is sovereign, that “nothing” is the true name of that which takes place, and that poetry, as language that seeks to eternally fix that which takes place, is indistinguishable from commercial uses of language in which names have for their vile office to make circulate imaginary links that support a prosperous and vain reality.

But this is not the last word. On the 11<sup>th</sup> sheet, which opens with the promise of an “except perhaps,” there is suddenly inscribed, at once outside of all possible calculation — and thus in a structure which is itself that of the event —, and as a synthesis of all that has preceded, the stellar double of the suspended throw of the dice: the Great Bear (the constellation “toward ... the Septentrion”), enumerating its seven stars and effecting “the successive shock in the way of stars of a total count in the making.” To the “nothing” of the preceding sheet there responds, in the outplace (“as far as place can fuse with the beyond”) the essential figure of number and thus the concept of the event. This event is precisely at once self-engendering [*advenue de lui-même*] (“keeping vigil / doubting / rolling / shining and meditating”) and a result, a

stopping-point (“before coming to a halt / at some terminus that sanctifies it”).

How is this possible? To understand it what must be remembered is that at the end of the metamorphoses in which indecision was inscribed (the arm of the master, veil, feather, Hamlet, siren), we did not arrive at a non-gesture, but rather at the equivalence of gesture (throwing the dice) and non-gesture (not throwing). The feather that returns to the “original spray” was thus the purified symbol of the undecidable, not the renouncement of action. That “nothing” had taken place meant only that nothing decidable in the situation could figure the event as such. By giving precedence to the place over the idea that an event can be calculated to occur there, the poem accomplishes the essence of the event, which is precisely, from the point of view of the place, incalculable. The pure “there is” is simultaneously chance and number, multiple and ultra-one, such that the scenic presentation of its being delivers nothing but non-being because all existents demand the structured necessity of the one. As an unfounded, self-belonging multiple — indivisible signature of itself — the event can indicate itself only as being beyond the situation, even if it is necessary to wager that it has manifested itself there.

Also, with the courage that it takes to hold the gesture in its equivalence to the non-gesture, and the risk of abolition in the site, the reward is the supernumerary emergence of the constellation, which fixes in the sky of Ideas the ultra-one of the event.

Certainly, the Great Bear — this arbitrary number [chiffre], which is the sum of four and three, and therefore has nothing to do with the Parousia of a supreme count that would be symbolized, for example, by the double six — is “cold from forgetfulness and desuetude,” for the eventuality of the event is anything but a warm [chaleureuse] presence. Nevertheless, the constellation, “on some vacant and superior surface,” is subtractively equivalent to all the being of which the event is

capable, and fixes as our task its interpretation, since it is impossible for us to will it.

Furthermore, the conclusion to this prodigious text, the most incisive that exists on the limpid seriousness of a conceptual drama, is a maxim I once gave a different version of in my *Theory of the Subject*. There, I said that ethics comes down to the imperative: “Decide from the point of the undecidable.” Mallarmé writes this as follows: “All thought emits a throw of dice.” Even if “a throw of the dice will never abolish chance,” we should not conclude with nihilism, with the uselessness of action, and even less with the managerial cult of reality and the fictive links it proliferates. For if the event is erratic, and if from the point of view of the situation it cannot be decided whether it exists or not, then we are entitled to wager, which is to say to legislate without law as to its existence. Since undecidability is a rational attribute of the event, the salvific guarantee of its non-being, no other form of vigilance is possible than confronting the event with the anxiety of hesitation and the courage of the outplace. One who wanders on the edge of evental sites, faithful to the vocation of intervening there in order to draw from the void a supernumerary name — some of you here will recognize yourselves in this figure. Mallarmé says to them that they are at once the feather, which “flutters about the abyss,” and the star, “on high, perhaps.”

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<sup>ii</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, “Villiers de L’Isle-Adam,” *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945) 507. Translation from Rosemary Lloyd, *Mallarmé: The Poet and His Circle* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) 225. Translation modified.

<sup>iii</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, “Crisis of Verse,” *Divagations*, tr. by Barbara Johnston (MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007) 201. Translation modified.

<sup>iv</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, “Villiers de L’Isle-Adam,” *Œuvres complètes*, 481.

<sup>v</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *The Poems in Verse*, tr. by Peter Manson (Oxford, OH: Miami University Press, 2011) 107.

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<sup>vi</sup> Victor Hugo, “For Théophile Gautier,” *Selected Poems of Victor Hugo: A Bilingual Edition*, tr. by E.H. Blackmore & A.H. Blackmore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 549.

<sup>vii</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, “Crisis of Verse,” *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, 201.

<sup>viii</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, “Music and Letters,” *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, 187. Translation modified.

<sup>ix</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, tr. by Henry Weinfield (CA: University of California Press, 1994) 79.

<sup>x</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, “Conflict,” *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, 46.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xii</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *A Throw of the Dice*, *Collected Poems*, *op. cit.*, 124–145. We have retained the form of Badiou’s presentation of the poem [TN].