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# The Unsaid

- on psychoanalysis and number symbolism

My short text can be seen as a continuation of a conversation with Gösta Neuwirth<sup>1</sup> in Freiburg in July 2017. Among other things, the conversation was about Neuwirth's reading of Meillassoux's book of numbers<sup>2</sup>, which is an in-depth analysis of the numerical code in Mallarmé's famous "Coup de dés".

I am particularly interested in the question of the extent to which Meillassoux's interest in Mallarmé's matrix of numbers is related to his critique of the Kantian transcendental, which he expresses in his other book, the notorious "After Finitude"<sup>3</sup>; the question of whether the difference between 'Kant' and Meillassoux can be thought of as the difference between a 'rhetorical' undertaking (of philosophy) that only knows how to 'say', and on the other hand a 'showing' approach as its alternative - an alternative that can articulate the objects (the things) in their givenness on this side of an understanding (only) related to us (our ability to speak, our psychology); in the artistic context, the question of the extent to which articulations of non-rhetorical differentiation - such as numerical codes or calculations of proportions - offer a way out of the transcendental prison.

A few years ago, if not decades ago, I recorded the chirping of cicadas on a warm summer night and transposed it down because my wife could no longer hear the cicadas in real life. Let us now imagine a sound that is completely beyond human perception, well above 20,000 Hz for example, which we would now record and transpose down one or more octaves so that we could perhaps find the signals of bats flying by in the transposition. The answer to the question of whether and in what way the bats were there at the time of the recording, when they were still inaccessible to human perception, could - with respect - serve as a brief summary of transcendentalism. The rigorous Kantian division between the empirical and the transcendental is what Meillassoux rails against. He criticizes the fact that since Kant, the 'thing in itself' has been abandoned in favor of the 'relationship' between us and

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<sup>1</sup> The text was written on the occasion of a symposium to mark the 80th birthday of Gösta Neuwirth - my first composition teacher - at the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz on December 15, 2017. It refers to Neuwirth's compositional and musicological preoccupation with number systems. Two of his writings on this subject, which are eminently important to me but have appeared in very scattered form, can, with his permission, be found on my homepage: [ablinger.mur.at/zettel-goesta-neuwirth.html](http://ablinger.mur.at/zettel-goesta-neuwirth.html)

<sup>2</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren*, Zurich/Berlin: diaphanes, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After finitude. An attempt on the necessity of Contingency*, Zurich/Berlin: diaphanes, 2008.

things. The relationship or "correlation" has been at the center of philosophy ever since, right up to the present day. Meillassoux's fighting concept is therefore "correlationism": "Correlationism consists in the rejection of all attempts to think the spheres of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another"<sup>4</sup>. What outrages him about this rejection is that things can, to a certain extent, only be conceived as thought, that an existing thing only becomes such when it is stated by a human being. Meillassoux criticizes the dependence of the existence of the world on the human ability to perceive; he understands this as a retraction of the decentration of the human being that has already taken place in the Copernican world view and calls it a "Ptolemaic counter-revolution"<sup>5</sup>. Meillassoux sees a way out of such a transcendental "counter-revolution" in the ability to mathematize, in computational access to a world that eludes our sensory data, such as the "dating of objects that are sometimes much older than any life on earth." Meillassoux calls a reality that precedes the emergence of the human species "ancestral". Anzestrality is a crucial pivotal point in Meillassoux's argument; it requires us, for example, to think of a time when there was no thinking. And this is precisely the point at which I am tempted to build a bridge to that other book by Meillassoux: In both undertakings, in Anzestrality and in Mallarmé's numerical analysis, we are dealing with things that 'do not appear' to us, so to speak, and yet are ascertainable and real. For Meillassoux, such calculated observations are even more real than the things that appear to us, since appearance is always dependent on the fragile and susceptible function of our powers of perception and interpretation. And, to draw the bow back to the bats, we can also confidently regard the recording and transposing down as computing power.

Taking a few steps back, I would now like to look at Meillassoux together with a contemporary variant of the correlationism he opposed. Both Alenka Zupančič and Slavoj Žižek have attempted to refute Meillassoux's theses. Such a synopsis thus results in a group photo with irreconcilables. The incompatibility is formed by their different localization of the real. Put simply, Meillassoux seeks the real in mathematics. While the philosophers influenced by Lacan, Zupančič or Žižek, assume the real in psychoanalysis. Both parties are at loggerheads, at least intellectually speaking. Now it "only" remains for me to show that mathematizability and psychoanalysis can be two sides of the same coin - even if perhaps only in art.

Also part of the summer conversation with Neuwirth was a book that I had found in the early 1990s in the St. Lambrecht Abbey

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<sup>4</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *ibid.* 18.

<sup>5</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *ibid.* 158.

Library in Upper Styria. It was about the distillation of the creation dance (song) from the Genesis account of creation. Inexcusably, I have not kept a note of the title or author. But what the author does is that he extrapolates a shorter original text from the biblical text that has come down to us, which thus presents itself as a historically later revision. The precise relationship between the original text and the revision plays a decisive role here, and the code for a clear distinction is incorporated in the text itself, namely in those famous passages to which the expression "biblical age" owes its existence. For example, the following passage: "When Methuselah was 187 years old, he begat Lamech, and after Methuselah begat Lamech, he lived 782 years"<sup>6</sup>: '187' would then be - according to the unfortunately unknown author - the original text, '782' the revision. (At the time, I had only kept a copy of the "Song of the Creation of the World". But to find out whether these numbers refer to the letters, syllables or words, I would of course have to pay another visit to St. Lambrecht Monastery).

What matters to me here is that the sentence from the Book of Books, "When Methuselah was 187 years old, he begat Lamech", does not have the slightest meaning - it does, however, have sense, namely that of providing the key to the reconstruction of a much shorter original text contained in the surface text. I take the difference between sense and meaning from Julia Kristeva's book "The Revolution of Poetic Language"<sup>7</sup>; Kristeva in turn refers to Gottlob Frege. The difference between meaning and sense seems to me to be helpful for understanding art, in which many things cannot be understood through their meaning, but rather through the sense that it can make to articulate something meaningless, or the sense understood as a function: a sign in a picture, a note in a piece can have a clearly describable function, i.e. sense, without us always being able to assign a meaning to it.

THE BEFORE AND THE AFTER. Kristeva also belongs to the circle of philosophers influenced by Lacan, and thus, from Meillassoux's point of view, to "correlationism". Her book, on the other hand, is remarkable in that it is dedicated to the search for a way out of a relentless and comprehensive symbolic order, as represented by Lacan; and the regime of the symbolic order is closely linked to the "mechanics" of transcendentalism, or "correlationism". Kristeva believes that the way out is to be found in art, primarily in literature. The distinction between meaning and sense already points in this direction, as the latter term is precisely about an alternative to or an escape from meaning. From Freud to Lacan, the acceptance of language, the acceptance of meaning, is

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis, 5:22

<sup>7</sup> Julia Kristeva, Die Revolution der poetischen Sprache (The Revolution of Poetic Language), Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp, 1978.

linked to the Oedipal stage. Kristeva attempts to counter this. She seeks the psychological matrix for the outside of the symbolic order, the outside of meaning, which Kristeva envisages, in a "before", a pre-oedipal, infantile stage. I now wonder whether such an alternative to the inexorability and absoluteness of the symbolic order, and thus to a more appropriate understanding of art, cannot also be thought of as an "after", as something that can only come about after we have received "everything", so to speak, after we have traversed the meaning, so to speak, something that can probably only be achieved in a developed, reflected, perhaps a 'post-analytical' stage of culture. And doesn't such a "late form" even correspond to Kristeva's own chronology of sacrifice? First there were the plant sacrifices, then came the animal sacrifices, finally human sacrifices - and only at the end ("as a very late form", as she writes) does "the sacrifice of a god"<sup>8</sup> take place. So only after we have gone through all the other stages can we sacrifice the most comprehensive and at the same time the most abstract thing we have. And only after we have sacrificed this most abstract thing - God - can we find art in a comparably comprehensive sense, art as a form of utterance that is not exhausted in meaning.

AFTER THE SPLIT. So instead of searching for a place "in which the subject is not yet a split unity"<sup>9</sup> a place that Kristeva would like to recognize in the pre-Oedipal stage, I am more interested in thinking of something that knows and endures the split, that does not want to heal or mend it, but does not surrender to the dimension of the split, but rather points beyond it, embraces it to a certain extent and absorbs it without simply allowing itself to be replaced by it; something that is not pre-Oedipal but trans-Oedipal. Kristeva's conception, on the other hand, remains bound to a logical - not necessarily chronological - before, following Freud's or Lacan's example, as her distinction between genotext and phenotext shows. In simplified terms, the genotext is everything that precedes language, makes it possible and pulls the strings in the background during its production, the unconscious of language, so to speak, while the phenotext is what appears and is communicated as spoken or written language.

As a model for a "transoedipal" art, I would now like to touch on two musical genres that are historically far apart but have many cross-connections: serial music on the one hand and the Renaissance music of the Dutch on the other. And of course Gösta Neuwirth was the first to familiarize me with both musical genres, pointing out their cross-connections. What matters to me here is that in both cases, the creation of the

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<sup>8</sup> Julia Kristeva, *ibid.* 84.

<sup>9</sup> Julia Kristeva, *ibid.* 95.

notated, performable and sounding composition, i.e. the "phenotext", is preceded by a matrix which shares some, but perhaps not all, of its characteristics with the genotext. Such a matrix - in the case of serial music the serial order, in the case of the Dutch the symbolic numerical code - is something that to a certain extent encompasses the music that actually sounds, perhaps in the same way that a discourse encompasses and also enables what can take place in it as a conversation. The system is therefore not exhausted by the insoluble division between notation and performance, or between physical sound and psychological experience; rather, the system contains and transcends this division.

(Such a matrix encompassing the 'obvious' composition should by no means be lumped together with the harmonic system of the 18th/19th century. The latter, tonality, is similar to language insofar as it has 'always already' been there independently of what is expressed and becomes form in it, and is by no means - as in the case of the matrix - itself produced by the individual as a sub-level of what appears).

THE MATRIX AND THE UNCONSCIOUS. Musical phenotext, i.e. what appears, and the matrix, on the other hand, relate to each other like the conscious to the unconscious insofar as it is not possible to (directly) deduce the matrix from what is musically revealed. The matrix can only be accessed through an in-depth 'analysis'.

And to switch back to the other mirror side of my discussion: it might already be possible to guess that what represents the important function of analysis here corresponds exactly to what mathematics stands for in Meillassoux's work. And this is also the essential short-circuit that my text undertakes, one that reaches beyond actually incompatible models of philosophy. Analyzability and mathematicizability equally guarantee an escape from "correlationism", they allow us to detach ourselves from what is "said", not to have to cling to meaning, and still discover sense in what is mathematically "shown" or analyzed.

HIDDEN. Incidentally, at the end of Kristeva's book there is a quote from Mallarmé: "(...) ethics or metaphysics is not visible", and Mallarmé adds: "it needs to be hidden in the structure." Does Mallarmé's use of 'hidden in the structure' allude precisely to the numerical structure underlying the "coup de dés" that Meillassoux analyzes? In other words, the unsaid that frames and determines the visible text and, in Mallarmé's view, acquires "ethical" status - and which, incidentally, is completely missed by Kristeva's philosophy of literature.

Of course, my distinction between the hidden and the visible is not about replacing one level with the other. An unconscious can only exist if it is concealed by a conscious. A numerical structure that is effective in the background only acquires its full meaning in the difference to the apparent and sensually perceptible. It is therefore about a perspective that focuses on the in-between, the space that stretches between the expressive surface and the hidden or subliminally effective matrix. Neither level can claim to be or represent the 'whole', neither level can be sufficient unto itself.

What is perhaps piquant about this impossibility is that it not only pulls the rug from under the feet of the supporters of expression music, but also embarrasses their declared opponents, the "positivists" or advocates of a de-psychologized or even "liberated" sound. The "sound as sound", the self-identity of what appears, is just as much an illusion as the older paradigm of a music that finds itself and exhausts itself in expression.

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