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THE TELL-TALE CONSTELLATIONS

Translated by Christian R. Gelder

Constellations do not exist; there only exist the stars that compose them.¹ This is a lemma of modern science. It is also one of the differential traits that separates the *phusis* of the Ancients from post-Galilean Nature.

That constellations exist follows from the privileged relationship *phusis* has to the gaze. For constellations allow themselves to be seen: in truth, they do nothing but this. A celestial body that no one sees cannot be said to not exist for astronomy today. This is the case for exoplanets. Planets exterior to our solar system escape the most powerful instruments; only calculation restores them and authorizes us to name each of them. However, a constellation no one sees would be a contradiction in terms; by the same token, no name would be assigned to it. An observer is required; he must be in possession of both sight and language; he is the man of Ovid, whose face is turned upwards. Constellations only exist for him and through him. Animals have no use for them, they who see the stars and sometimes use them as a guide. As for the gods who would see them and name them, these gods would be, in a strict sense, anthropomorphic; such were the ancient gods, such is not the Christian God. A new light presides over the birth of Christ — we can argue whether it was a comet or a nova, but it was certainly not a constellation, a recurrent and regular sign. There is a great difference between the Christ child and the child from Virgil's fourth Eclogue: *Jam redit et virgo...*

Man looks at the starry sky and persuades himself that they are assembled into figures. He names these figures. On the basis of myths and tales, Greek or not. Except that, within the dispositif of *phusis*, the *episteme* recognized constellations as objects worthy of it; Eratosthenes can relate the legendary birth of constellations (*Catasterismi*) without ceasing to be the astronomer we know. In the dispositif of modern science, there is nothing like this. Nature is not made for the gaze — it neither hides itself nor shows itself. Visible or not, the stars are real; precisely because they are visible, constellations are imaginary. The patterns they form are nothing other than a representation that a disoriented gaze gives itself in order to suspend, for an instant, an uncontrollable sideration. There is no calculable rule in

these figures, except the pregnancy of some beautiful form; there is no relation between the points that compose it, except the pattern itself; there is no nature, apart from a hazard [*aléa*] that knows no stochastic or statistical law. Nothing, except an avoidance of an indefinite pulverization of the starry sky and its effect of horror. Nothing, except the demand for surveying, which is the same as the demand for language [*langage*] (I do not say “language” [*langue*]): that the sky be no less surveyed than the earth and no less determined by language [*que le ciel ne soit pas moins arpenté que la terre et pas moins langagier*].

To dissipate the constellations in order to count only the stars, the planets or the galaxies, is a decisive gesture. Conserving them for means of practical orientation, such a transaction is deft, but changes nothing at the heart of things (the decision can be traced back, it seems, to Herschel). Taking the Polaris as real and the two Bears as imaginary amounts to affirming something that in no way goes without saying: it is not because something is seen that it must be taken into account; it is not because two things are seen with the same evidence that they must be accounted for in the same manner. The gaze that grasps the Polaris also grasps the Small Bear that includes it and the Great Bear that is next to it; however, this same gaze does not capture the same type of existence all at once. It must, then, be concluded that *phainomena* do not form a consistent class; thus they do not need to be preserved together, but each must be examined one by one, without excluding the possibility that only some are to be preserved and others forever dispelled; they need not be screened according to their qualities — the qualities of stars and the constellations are the same — but according to another screening, which knows nothing of qualities. Reciprocally, the human eye is not the ultimate place of science; it does not determine Nature, since Nature is not a spectacle. The celestial orbs, which no one sees and no one names (and which at best can be calculated), are more effective than the constellations that everybody sees and names.

The constellations disappeared along with knowledge that the greatest had taken to be crucial. A sacrificial gesture is thus accomplished. It is nevertheless constantly denied. The indistinctness of the denominations [*les noms indistincts*] sky, celestial vault, starry sky, and stars cast a convenient veil over this ambiguity. To take just one example, is the starry sky that Kant speaks of constellated or not? The difference is profound and brings with it the question of the moral law. If the moral law in me is the strict analogue of the constellations outside of me, then, like the constellations outside of me, the moral law is nothing more than a picture I fabricate for myself in order to find my way in the deserts of love or the ocean of passions. We willingly conclude that only the passions are real. However, if the moral law in me is the analogue of a star outside of me — say, once again, the Polaris — then it is a real, for which the constellations (various religions, moral percepts, judicial codes) only provide a mnemonic aid. Enlightened Protestantism, like a Small Bear of morality, would give a meaning to the WASP fashion of having Teddy Bears. According to the first reading, Kant touches the real only by turning into Sade; according to the second, Kant touches the real without such an inversion. The prob-

lem is that, without doubt, Kant consists precisely in the impossibility of stopping the pendulum and that, in him, the real incessantly turns into the imaginary and vice-versa.

That the poets encountered this question should not surprise us. After all, poetry in its own memory is circumscribed by constellations — think of the Pleiades, from Sappho to du Bellay. But it was up to the poets of the 19th century specifically to confront the sacrifice demanded by science; among these poets I will distinguish, following Jacques Roubaud, the poets of the sonnet. And among these poets of the sonnet, I will distinguish Mallarmé. I hold that in posing the question of the sonnet, of its laws, of their strict character (a character accentuated by Banville, as Roubaud shows), they all have, in fact, posed the question of science. More precisely, it was because they were solicited by the emergence of the science of Nature in its triumphant form that they perceived themselves as being solicited by poetic formalism. In its artificiality and in its rigor. Conversely, the poet who promoted not mathematized science but history as legend to the summit of possible knowledge was also the most indifferent to the sonnet: Victor Hugo.

The poets of the sonnet encounter number through science and through verse. Do the two paths join or not? This question traversed them all, but each replied to it differently. Sainte-Beuve, an auditor of Lamarck and an admirer of Claude Bernard and of Littré, chose science: poetry will not survive this choice. When Nerval spoke of the “constellated lute” [*luth constellé*], we can certainly understand “constellated” in many ways; but the simplest remains the most certain. It is a question of constellations, in mourning for the star (“my only star is dead” [*ma seule étoile est morte*]). The numbers of verse and of the sonnet grip him suddenly — between twelve and fourteen, the thirteenth — but so does the hatred for the numbers of science. Nerval fights them without mercy, redoubling the Universe with Another Universe, which is added to it and annuls it. For having returned to constellations, he had to return to the ancient knowledges and ancient gods. Swedenborg prevails forever over Newton.

Baudelaire was ignorant neither of Sainte-Beuve nor of Nerval. But he preferred Poe. With Poe, Baudelaire thought he had found at once the science of nature (*Eureka*) and the ideal of a poetic calculus (*The Philosophy of Composition*). There, he also found the conjunction of the constellation and the letter. In *Eureka*, Poe organizes the sky: “we may speak of our Sun as actually situated at that point of the Y where its three component lines unite; and, conceiving this letter to be of a certain solidity — of a certain thickness, very trivial in comparison with its length — we may even speak of our position as in the middle of this thickness.” In *The Murders of the Rue Morgue*, Dupin deals with the constellation of Orion according to the most recent developments of astronomy; only to quote, in the next instant, Ovid (*Fasti*, V, 536) and to comment on the substitution of one letter for another (changing Urion into Orion): *perdidit antiquum littera prima sonum*, “he has ruined the first sound with the old letter.” With Ovid, this is a euphemism; Urion is so-called since he is born from the urine of the gods. An unseemly episode, which the literal modification

has to hide. With Poe, nothing of this is evoked; it is rather, following Bacon's example, a matter of unifying the interrogation of Nature and cryptography.

To this harrowing simultaneity of solicitations, that of science and verse, Mallarmé conferred an expression at once systematic and dramatic. The decision of Nerval is explicitly condemned; confronted by a science that elects the Universe as its object and which accepts no limit to this Universe, it is futile to construct a counter-Universe: the dream, or memory, or madness. Moreover, the facts speak for themselves; it ends badly. By Chimeras (to which Mallarmé systematically opposed the Chimera in the singular) and by an unpleasant suicide: "go hang themselves from the street lamp, laughably"² is the last verse of *Le Guignon*. For those who want to avoid chimeras and ridicule, a differently radical decision is necessary. Verse and, more generally, Letters must constitute a limit to science; let us understand by this the science that dares to take as its object that which is without limits as such — what Mallarmé named in 1869 the "hyperscientific movement".³ The fourteen verses of the sonnet, the twelve feet of the alexandrine, the twenty-four letters of the alphabet, give us access simultaneously to the question of Letters, which are both contingent and necessary, as to the question of nature as man has contemplated it immemorially (the rhythm of the seasons, the regularities of celestial phenomena), and to the question of modern Nature as the place of an unlimited science and technique. Mallarmé calls the Universe, insofar as it could be other than it is and insofar as it is as it is, Chance — at once the contingency of the relation of sound to sense, the contingency of the rules of verse and the contingency of the laws of Nature (the work of Emile Boutroux dates from 1874).

The three questions are then condensed into one: can and must poetry, understood as such, renounce constellations? We know Mallarmé's response: "Nature has taken place, we cannot add to it";⁴ an Other world cannot be added to it — against Nerval again. To not add can also be called to "subtract" or to "except." To discover in the Universe an object that is subtracted or excepted from it is precisely the moment of the constellation: "Nothing / will have taken place / but the place /except / perhaps / a constellation".⁵ Let us understand by this that nothing will have taken place except that which takes place, namely Nature, as the place of science and technique — except the exception that constitutes a limit to it. This is to be connected to: "Constellations begin to shine: [as] I wish that, in the darkness that covers the blind herd, there could also be points of light [...] despite the sealed eyes that never understood it"⁶ ('as' = 'just like' ['comme' = 'tout comme']), as well as to: "One doesn't write, luminously, on a dark field; the alphabet of stars alone does that ..."⁷

Not only does poetry not renounce constellations, but it finds in them its intelligible response. On the condition at least that it recognizes their definitive obsolescence. Precisely because modern science sanctions their disappearance in the name of Nature, it is up to poetry to bear witness to this disappearance, to take note definitely of it so as to constitute it as subtraction and exception: "for the fact, for exactitude, for it to be said".⁸ Only then can it oppose to the Universe a subsistence that is to the Universe what a reverse side is to the right side and as a limit

that is always already breached: “as far as place/ can fuse with the beyond”,⁹ or as the topological projection of an infinite depth onto a surface; or as the transformation of a Universe with neither high nor low into a space with high and low: “some vacant and superior surface”.¹⁰

Speaking to English people marked by their belief (“England [...] cannot adopt a pure science, because of God”),¹¹ Mallarmé could not be more explicit. In *Music and Letters* (a conference given at Oxford and Cambridge in 1894), he describes someone who he calls the “civilised inhabitant of Eden”.¹² “A man can seem entirely oblivious [...] of the contemporary intellectual burden; in order to find out, according to something simple and primitive, for instance the symphonic equation proper to the seasons, a habit of ray and clouds...”. If furthermore “he has saved from the disaster a kind of reverence for the twenty-four letters as they have fixed themselves, through the miracle of infinity, in some existing language”, this man “possess [...] a doctrine as well as a country”.¹³ This civilized inhabitant of Eden [*civilisé édennique*] (I conserve Mallarmé’s spelling), contemporary of science and technique, does not for all that cease to recognize, like Adam before the fall, the constellations: in other words, he does not cease to think in verse: “verse arranged like a spiritual zodiac” [*le vers agencé comme un spirituel zodiaque*].¹⁴ In doing so, he maintains, at the heart of the Universe, the memory of what preceded modern science: the knowledge of the alternations and the constancies of the world.

Mallarmé could remember that, according to certain scholars, the word “season” comes from the Latin *statio*: the position of the Sun in each successive sign of the Zodiac; this etymology is invoked in Littré. It is generally rejected in favour of the origin *satio*, “sowing”, but the question is in no way resolved (see for example Guirand, *Le dictionnaire des étymologies obscures*). Mallarmé had in any case read Milton and was speaking to audience members who had read him; through him, he had formed an idea of Eden, such as the archangel Raphael described its completion to Adam at the twilight of the Sixth Day: “the earth, the air / Resounded, (thou remember’st, for thou heard’st) / The heav’ns and all the constellations rung / The planets in their stations list’ning stood”.¹⁵ Readable in the celestial alphabet, Edenic knowledges are no less readable in the twenty-four letters of the language.

Note the insistence on the number twenty-four. The statement returns several times. My ignorance does not allow me to establish if some researcher has responded to the question: how does Mallarmé arrive at the number twenty-four? He was evidently thinking of the Greek alphabet, which allowed the Alexandrines to count the songs of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. But Mallarmé is speaking of French; now, the French alphabet of the 19th century had twenty-five letters; the “w” is thus not included in it, as it was deemed to be a foreign letter (Brachet and Dussouchet, *Grammaire Française*, 1888, pp. 34-5). Mallarmé, trained in the linguistics of his times knew this better than anyone. A conjecture: having excluded the “w”, like Brachet and Dussouchet, Mallarmé would have taken a supplementary step by excluding the “k” — a purely Greek or foreign letter (see what Littré says of this and, by contrast, the use Leconte de Lisle puts it to). It would be interesting to verify

if Mallarmé used “k” or “w” in the volume of his *Poésies* that was handwritten by him (setting aside proper names like Whistler or Wagner). An initial examination seems to prove that he did not. We could oppose to this the *Vers de Circonstance* (“Mademoiselle Wrotnowska”, *Les Loisirs de la poste*, CVII, or “kyrielle”, *ibid.*, CVIII). In the poems of his youth, which, precisely, he did not reprint in this volume, we find the verb “polker”, to dance the polka (*Contre un poète parisien*). Mallarmé or the hidden lipogram?

Whatever they may be, two letters are missing and their absence restores the right of the constellations. But these latter remain only as a trace, incessantly disappearing. The text of the *Coup de dés* bears witness to this once again: “toward / what must be / the Septentrion as well as North / A CONSTELLATION / cold from forgetfulness and desuetude”.¹⁶ We should not understand this group of epithets as the particularization of a constellation that can be opposed to others that would be neither cold, forgotten, nor obsolete [*désuet*]. In the time of science, every constellation is as such obsolete and doomed to oblivion. The name itself is erased. “The Septentrion as well as North”, the second name crosses out the first. The Septentrion names a constellation: *Septem triones*, the seven oxen; thus the Latins called them the Great Bear and sometimes the Small Bear. Mallarmé, it is true, only ever mentions the first, while the star Polaris belongs to the second; this is because the Great Bear shines for the gaze, and Mallarmé only takes into account its brilliance (“Constellations begin to shine”).

As a (Germanic and no longer Latin) term, the North has nothing sidereal to it. In its objective signification, it emerges from a quite practical and perhaps perfectly earthly determination; Mallarmé, who mentions Jules Verne in *La Dernière Mode* in 1874, had perhaps read *Les Anglais au Pôle Nord* and *Le Désert de glace* (published with Hetzel in 1867 under the general title of *Voyages et aventures du Capitaine Hatteras*). Nonetheless, veering towards the magnetic pole, the needle of the compass knows nothing of either the Polaris or the Bears. Nor do the various lighthouses and beacons know anything more. Mallarmé only mentions them to rule them out: “aside from the interest / marked out to it / in general / by a certain obliquity through a certain declivity / of fires...”.¹⁷

In the time it takes to utter the monosyllable *North*, the constellation abolishes itself, as befits the era of modern science and technique. Yet towards the North, the moment after, such that a subject will find it, in exception to the Universe: “Cold from forgetfulness and desuetude”, certainly, but “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 count in the making”.¹⁸ But why would the subject seek it? For one sole reason: the desire for a total count, supported by the Letters, twenty-four in total, not one more or less. The total count is what remains of the Book of yesteryear. This book makes possible, not everything that exists in the world (“everything in the world exists to end up as a book”,¹⁹ Mallarmé wrote again in 1895; he ceased to believe this in 1897), but rather everything that does not exist there. Or that which exists so as to say that it does not.

Constellations do not exist in the Universe, but nevertheless they shine. Their brilliance makes their inexistence an existence. In a strict sense, this existence has to do only with their brilliance and begins with it; the words “constellations begin to shine” can now be interpreted completely. It is an absolute beginning. This existence, incessantly begun each night, says no to the Universe of science. It says no to Nature insofar as it is not *physis*. The constellations constitute a limit to the infinite Universe and to Nature, instituted by this fact as figures of the Whole: “it cannot be added to.” Likewise, here below the sea constitutes a limit to what exists on earth: “from the Infinite constellations and the sea are separated, remaining reciprocal nothingness in their exteriority”.

How can we not think of Wittgenstein and of his definition of Mysticism: “the feeling of the World as a bounded whole” (*Tractatus*, 6.45)? Mallarmé’s decision calls, however, for another commentary. Leaving Nature in its place is to limit it by science. The science of which Renan said in 1890 that it is the future and which Mallarmé calls “hyperscientific”. In this strategy of the limit, he makes mathematics his ally: “We must study our mathematicians”.²⁰ The number as the limit of modern Nature and science is at once legitimate and possible on one condition: we must recall the genealogy of number. This genealogy brings us back to the constellations: “THE NUMBER/born of the stars”.²¹ Not, therefore, mathematized science, but mathematics. Mathematics in exception to science. Now, the number insofar as it is recalled, is verse.

Notes

1. Originally appeared as Jean-Claude Milner, ‘Les Constellations Révélatrices’, *Elucidation*, Vol. 8-9 (2003), pp. 3-7. I would like to thank Professor Jean-Claude Milner for his generous comments, suggestions and correspondence regarding this translation.
2. Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘The Jinx’, *The Poems in Verse*. Translation and Notes by Peter Manson (Oxford, Ohio: Miami University Press, 2011), p. 17.
3. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Mallarmé in Prose* (New York: New Direction Books, 2001), p. 76.
4. Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘Music and Letters’, *Divagations*. Translated by Barbara Johnson (Cambridge/Massachusetts/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 187.
5. Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘A Throw of Dice’, *Collected Poems*. Translated and with a commentary by Henry Weinfield (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press), pp. 142-143.
6. Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘Conflict’, *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
7. Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘Restricted Action’, *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 216.
8. Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘Conflict’, *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
9. Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘A Throw of Dice’, *Collected Poems*, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
10. Ibid.

11. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Mallarmé in Prose*, *op. cit.*, p. 76.
12. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Music and Letters', *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 186.
13. Ibid.
14. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes I*, Édition présentée, établie et annotée par Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 1998) p. 624.
15. John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 164.
16. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'A Throw of Dice', *Collected Poems*, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
17. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'A Throw of Dice', *Collected Poems*, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
18. Ibid.
19. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'The Book as Spiritual Instrument', *Divagations*, *op. cit.*, p. 226.
20. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Mallarmé in Prose*, *op. cit.*
21. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'A Throw of Dice', *Collected Poems*, *op. cit.*, p. 140.