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Title:
Scribbled in the Stars: Milton, Keats, Mallarmé

Date:
2024-01-01

Citation:
Boncardo, R., Clemens, J. & Hasted, M. (2024). Scribbled in the Stars: Milton, Keats, Mallarmé. European Romantic Review, 35 (1), pp.111-127. https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2024.2307143.

Persistent Link:
https://hdl.handle.net/11343/352298

European Romantic Review

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/gerr20

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**To cite this article:** Robert Boncardo, Justin Clemens & Meegan Hasted (2024) Scribbled in the Stars: Milton, Keats, Mallarmé, European Romantic Review, 35:1, 111-127, DOI: 10.1080/10509585.2024.2307143

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2024.2307143



Published online: 28 Feb 2024.

EUROPEAN ROMANTIC REVIEW
2024, VOL. 35, NO. 1, 111–127
https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2024.2307143

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group



# Scribbled in the Stars: Milton, Keats, Mallarmé

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**ABSTRACT**

This essay presents three case studies from a modern European poetic lineage, three poetic generations that attended to stars and constellations in the wake of modern cosmological systems within which the stars themselves seemed to turn away from the poets and towards the astronomers. The essay charts a sequence that reaches across literary periods as traditionally conceived, but in each instance the same specifically modern question about poetry's place and meaning recurs. It is a question that the figure of the star—with its singular history as both a poetic and scientific object—both crystallizes and refracts: who is the poet and what is poetry in a universe of empirical knowledge? In what follows, we consider how a pre-Romantic poet, John Milton, a Romantic poet, John Keats, and finally a post-Romantic poet, Stéphane Mallarmé, each grappled with the new sciences' displacement of poetry's pretensions to speak for and with the stars, reordering the creative imagination's relation to the heavens.

What is it that has made the stars twinkle so enticingly for so many poets? According to Thomas Morley, contemporary of Shakespeare, the "darker nights" ignite the poet: "On me shine then anights with your beames brighter," Morley wrote to the stars, "Beames that are cause my hart so aspired, / Fire mounts aloft and they my hart haue fired."[1] Fueling poetic aspiration as well as inspiration, the stars and constellations have appeared at once ubiquitous and strange throughout the history of poetry, preserved from cliché by the poet's fired heart. Unfathomably remote yet communicating an endless array of light messages, star-beams have been intercepted and decoded into all the languages of the world.

Within a few decades of Morley's canzonet to the stars, the rapid dissemination of the discoveries of Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo and others irreversibly altered the cosmos that had previously served as the very emblem of the inalterable. Whether it was the formalization of the law of falling bodies or the extraordinary details revealed by the telescope, the physical displacement of the earth from the center of the cosmos or the flattening of the perfect circular orbits of the planets into ellipses, things were

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going awry for European partisans of inherited knowledges—not to mention for the poor poets. As one classic account puts it: "when Galileo draws the dividing line between the objective truth of nature and the world of fable and fiction, both poetry *and* art are relegated to the latter world" (Cassirer 157). Poets had been foremost among the world's astrophiles; when the new philosophy initiated this terrifying loss of poetic authority it came as something of a betrayal.[2]

John Donne, for one, registered what was at issue. In "An Anatomy of the World" (1611), the famous "First Anniversary" poem, he wrote:

> And new Philosophy calls all in doubt,
> The Element of fire is quite put out;
> The Sun is lost, and th'earth, and no mans wit
> Can well direct him where to looke for it.
> And freely men confesse that this world's spent,
> When in the Planets, and the Firmament
> They seeke so many new; they see that this
> Is crumbled out againe to his Atomies.
> 'Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone;
> All just supply, and all Relation. (237)

While for Morley (and indeed for many other major thinkers of the time, including Giordano Bruno) the stars still emitted cosmic signals that were registered, however obscurely or confusedly, in the bodies and brains of humans, and which were perhaps best interpreted by poets, their last message to Donne instead transmitted only the incomprehensible noise of universal chaos. If Donne acknowledged the world-historical impact made by the discoveries of the new philosophers, effecting a cosmic dissolution which "calls all in doubt," it was only and desperately to seek to reintegrate these discoveries back into received (if hyperbolic) tropes of poetic and personal mourning and thereby effect a kind of limit retrieval at once moral and epistemological.

Over the next four centuries, it would be astronomers rather than poets who would delimit the nature and composition of the stars. Poets could not match the decisive authority of such astrophysical (and unpoetic) definitions of the star as: "a luminous ball of gas that, at some stage of its life, produces energy by the nuclear fusion of hydrogen to form helium" ("star"). Bruno's vision of powerful celestial interests in artistic affairs dissolved in the wake of his own cosmology (Rowland 23, 258), despite the lingering belief that stars like Sirius could influence days lived on earth, a belief still in evidence from tabloids to social media exchanges today. Bruno's philosophical and astronomical dialogs suggested that stars were the centers of far-off systems burning like our sun for planets like our own (Finocchiaro). The displacements this involved entailed that whatever epistemological claims poets might have wanted to make for their verses were no longer even dust on the cosmic winds.

This essay presents three case studies from a modern European poetic lineage, three poetic generations that attended to stars and constellations in the wake of modern cosmological systems within which the stars themselves seemed to turn away from the poets and towards the astronomers. The essay charts a sequence that reaches across literary periods as traditionally conceived, but in each instance of which the same specifically modern question about poetry's place and meaning recurs. It is a question

that the figure of the star—with its singular history as both a poetic and scientific object—both crystallizes and refracts: who is the poet and what is poetry in a universe of empirical knowledge?[3] In what follows, we consider how a pre-Romantic poet, John Milton, a Romantic poet, John Keats, and finally a post-Romantic poet, Stéphane Mallarmé, each grappled with the new sciences' displacement of poetry's pretensions to speak for and with the stars, reordering the creative imagination's relation to the heavens. Where Milton, Galileo's near-contemporary, first registered the challenge that the new sciences posed (thus setting the stage for subsequent poetic treatments of the relation between poetry and the stars), Keats presented an exemplarily Romantic response to this dilemma, reconfiguring ancient stellar tropes in such a way that poets themselves could be figured as the very galaxies of stars at which scientists, such as William Herschel, gazed. Mallarmé, finally, offered a unique solution to the tensions that characterized his predecessors' work by deploying icy constellations to allegorize poetry as a fleeting exception to a universe now devoid not only of God but also, in an important sense, of poetry as well.

## A palinode of stars: John Milton's not-Urania

For Milton, the unsettled status of poetry with regard to the new sciences proved central to the ambitions and composition of *Paradise Lost*. Milton understood that there could be no return to Aristotle and Ptolemy in the wake of the unprecedented cosmic discoveries, except as farce; nor was there any ignoring these discoveries, or even pretending they were merely indifferent to and for poetry. On the contrary, he was only too aware of the challenges that these posed to poetry's epistemological and moral claims. Moreover, the young Milton had been an enthusiastic Baconian, eager for the knowledge revolution and to condemn the idols that had perverted the universities into "old errours" and "Scholastick grosnesse" in "Of Education" (*Complete Prose* 2: 374). Writing of his own studies, Milton detailed his enthusiasm to "become acquainted with some new discovery in mathematics or music, in which I then took the keenest pleasure" ("Second Defence" 4.1.614). Galileo too had been a culture hero for the young Milton, who claims to have visited the sage when on his Italian tour: "There it was that I found and visited the famous *Galileo* grown old, a prisner to the Inquisition, for thinking in Astronomy otherwise then the Franciscan and Dominican licensers thought" ("Areopagitica" 2: 538). These and other reference points delineate Milton's conception of his situation as a revolutionary Puritan, concerned to overturn the false knowledges that had been supported by corrupt Catholicism, and eager to keep up with the barrage of cosmos-shattering novelties pouring into London bookstores from across Europe.

But precisely because he was a revolutionary, Milton found himself in a trilemma. If poetry accepted the claims of the new sciences, then it was epistemologically derivative; if poetry rejected the claims of the new sciences, it was epistemologically risible; if poetry ignored the claims of the new sciences, it was epistemologically irrelevant. Milton would hence have to find some way to challenge or circumvent this trilemma. His solution was ingenious, if risky: he would directly name and confront the new sciences at their strongest points, there locating unclarities and

undecidabilities that would only be able to receive, according to contemporaneous scientists themselves, a poetic resolution.[4]

Milton called his muse Urania—if that is indeed her name. The relevant invocation, perhaps one of the most famous and influential passages in all English poetry, opens Book Seven of *Paradise Lost*:

> Descend from heaven Urania, by that name
> If rightly thou art called, whose voice divine
> Following, above the Olympian hill I soar,
> Above the flight of Pegasean wing.
> The meaning, not the name I call: for thou
> Nor of the Muses nine, nor on the top
> Of old Olympus dwell'st, but heavenly born,
> Before the hills appeared, or fountain flowed,
> Thou with eternal Wisdom didst converse,
> Wisdom thy sister, and with her didst play
> In presence of the almighty Father, pleased
> With thy celestial song. (7.1–12)

This is the only place in the poem where Milton explicitly names his muse—and *catachrestically* names her. Milton is in fact so anxious about such a nomination that he starts by retracting his nomination at least twice: "by that name / If rightly thou are called" he asserts, before immediately adding "The meaning, not the name I call," before embedding this double negation (name-not-name, meaning-not-name-not-name) in a further set of negatives ("Nor of the muses nine, nor"). Retracting one's assertions (or primal baptism insofar as the matter at stake is not just an assertion but a nomination) is self-evidently not the usual mode of an invocation, but a parageneric signature of the palinode.

So what do we know about Urania? Who is she? Why is Milton so anxious about this nomination? And why does he still nominate her? After all, the name Urania was everywhere in seventeenth-century European literature of all kinds, whether poetical or prosaic, political or astrological and most certainly in English poetry of the era where she was invoked by any number of writers, from Cyril Tourneur to Lady Mary Wroth.

Yet if Urania was still easily deployed in the early 1600s as an off-the-rack classical allusion or as a supersessionist Christian muse, the name meant something quite different by the 1650s, when Milton began composing his poem in earnest. If we have a triple received justification for the use of "Urania" as generic convention, learned authority and Christianized principle, we also have a precise reason for its mid-century defection: the matter, means and modes of the new sciences. Urania had become at once the most generic and empty of names and therefore paradoxically almost common, indeed explicitly improper as a name, partially because whatever "she" is could no longer be designated by such in the wake of the sciences which had recently seized priority in the observation and knowledge of the heavens.

It is then no surprise that we also find in *Paradise Lost* a figure and a name functioning as a synecdoche for the powers of these sciences: Galileo. Famously, Galileo is the only contemporary explicitly named in the poem itself (5.262); he appears at least three times, and every time identified with the telescope (1.284–91; 3.588–90; 5.257–66). So

the face-off is decided: Milton and his Muse, Not-Urania or Urania, versus Galileo and his Muse, the Optic Glass. There are a number of consequences.

First, as Harold Bloom noted, Milton uses Galileo to overgo his literary precursors, to literally see more and other than was possible for Homer, Virgil and other epic precursors (133): this is a sense in which Galileo is used "positively" for Milton.[5] Second, note that it is with respect to *Satan* that Galileo is invoked (as he is also at 3.588, and implied in 5.257–66). Third, Galileo is entirely reduced to his relation to the telescope, a technical imaging device, rather than cited for his conceptual innovations; he was, after all, the first to formalize the law of falling bodies, among many other crucial interventions. Fourth, Galileo's discoveries with the telescope, first disseminated in *Siderius Nuncius* (1610), are reduced to his visions of the moon alone, despite Galileo's discoveries of satellites of Jupiter, the rings of Saturn, earthshine and, among other things, a great many more stars than were visible with the naked eye (see Galileo). Fifth, these visions are identified by Milton with occlusions and opacities (above all "spots"), rather than with sparkling new constellations or heavenly vistas. Six, Galileo is thereby integrated into the general machinery of the poem by identifying him with recurrent formations of idolatory, which never extends beyond the realm of appearances as such.

The key point is this: Milton uses Galileo as a synecdoche for science, but a science whose real truth is that of mere technology; in doing so, he overgoes the literary tradition in which Urania is either a pagan or Christian name precisely by affirming the techniques and discoveries of modern science; this, moreover, means that he can now separate in his own work and in a new way "the old" (e.g. prior poets and scholastics) from "the new" (e.g. Galileo and himself). Yet this big advantage over his literary predecessors also puts him at a much more significant disadvantage: whatever he has to say poetically is nugatory in the space of the new science. The new science is not subject to disputation according to the received dictates of the ancients, but to disproof, mathematical and experimental, entering the present as an emissary of futurity.

Milton simultaneously needs both to affirm the epistemological priority of the new sciences and to curb severely their epistemological and ethical extension. Backhanded compliments abound when Milton is not outright dismissive. For example, of those who try to scan God's secrets rather than admire his works, the angel Raphael says to Adam that God

> Hath left to their disputes, perhaps to move
> His laughter at their quaint opinions wide
> Hereafter, when they come to model heaven
> And calculate the stars, how they will wield
> The mighty frame, how build, unbuild, contrive
> To save appearances, how gird the sphere
> With centric and eccentric scribbled o'er,
> Cycle and epicycle, orb in orb. (8.77–84)

Note the word *scribbled*, which designates the maths, the diagrams, the theorizations of such as Galileo, at once (allegedly) poorly- and hastily-formed, promising a false sense that they immediately betray, but which also indicates the crossing-out and covering-over of God's works with an asemic, dissimulating, demonic graffiti. Note, too, Milton's covert-but-only-too-deliberate fudging: if the pre-Copernican

astronomers were notoriously forced to proliferate epicycles to save the appearances, he implies here that the same goes for his own contemporaries; indeed, since Copernicus had maintained circular orbits, he too had had to have recourse to the technique.[6] The word "appearances" is being used doubly equivocally, so to speak: to denominate a particular, deleterious symptom that the apparently opposed Ptolemaic and Copernican systems both share, as well as to encompass the realm of sensible appearances in toto. As Angus Fletcher muses, "one can only wonder whether Milton's late style is not partly an antithetical counterforce raised against the new advances in which the poet himself was participating" (150). It is not Galileo and his telescope but blind Milton and Not-Urania who can really see what's what, beyond the moon, beyond the heavens, beyond the idolatrous occlusions of ordinary sight.

If Milton acknowledges that traditional knowledges have been put into doubt by the new sciences, and that the new sciences indeed simultaneously put their own findings into doubt, these two deployments of doubt are not at all of the same order. For the radical networks of self-identified new scientists and their adherents, doubt is not the occasion for a moral meditation, but the foundation of an entirely new program of cognitive expansion through separation. Such scientific doubt does not suspend us in uncertainty, but paradoxically propels us towards bold new claims supported by ever-stronger foundations, purged of the imaginative fictions of poetry and art.

Yet Milton obviously cannot be a doubter in quite this sense. He doesn't believe that everything has been placed in doubt; yet he doesn't believe that science can be the ultimate arbiter of whatever doubts there might be, either; nor is he for reconciliation, along the lines of a Baroque compromise. In order to retain some epistemological power for poetry, then, he proposes that poetry involves the deployment of radical negations that subtend and exceed those of the sciences. These negations are necessarily non-observational and non-mathematical, insofar as they rescind the very imagery they necessarily supply. What is needed is not a telescope but a Not-Urania:

> So much the rather thou celestial Light
> Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
> Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence
> Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
> Of things invisible to mortal sight. (3.51–55)

Whatever poetic success Milton achieved, it evidently had no effect on the subsequent development of the sciences. Yet *Paradise Lost* nonetheless bequeathed to its Romantic literary inheritors several crucial conditions for radical poetry. First, poetry could not simply ignore the sciences; second, poetry could not compete with the sciences on the latter's terms; third, poetry's powers would therefore have to be linked to its capacities for negation, for affirming doubts, hesitations, obscurities and invisibilities; four, such negations could therefore still be given a cosmological inflection that exceeded scientific knowing. Keats is one of a later generation who would inherit these conditions as a determining condition of their Romantic struggles for poetic priority—if with ambivalent consequences.

## John Keats and the galaxy of poets

In a landmark essay on Keats's "struggle" with Milton in *Hyperion*, Paul Sherwin argues that the latter represented "the voice of an alien age" for the young poet: "Milton's poetry had become a fixed star in the constellation of English literature, so monumental that it could not speak directly to a modern consciousness" (384). This was a consciousness shaped, in part, by the sublime perspectives offered by Herschelian astronomy, which had introduced life-cycles to the stars. Entering "the threatening ancestral space of Miltonic epic" (384), Keats struggled to present a Miltonic resolution to this disordering cosmology, except via his unyielding commitment to poetry's negations. But, as Sherwin observes, Milton had indeed become a fixed star in the constellation of English literature for Keats. And in claiming this stellar figuration of poetic achievement (for he aspired to and posthumously achieved a similar apotheosis), Keats also insisted upon the cosmological and epistemological significance of the imagination.

As Dean Swinford notes, many mythical figures meet "stelliform fates" in the western tradition; of those who are transformed into stars, a "list by no means comprehensive or complete, includes Orion, Aesculapius, Andromeda, Callisto, Arcas, Castor and Pollux, Romulus, and Cassiopeia" (45). Poets have versified these transfigurations so that, for example, to map out the constellation of Ursa Major is also to trace Ovid's account of Callisto's starry metamorphosis. In this section we focus on a separate but related poetic impulse to "stellify" or "place among the stars": occasions where poets project themselves or each other into an astral realm, or when poetic ambition or inheritance is figured in cosmic terms. In particular, we are interested in the way that Keats, his friends, supporters, critics and detractors, conceive of his legacy within a galaxy of poets (a firmament of eternal literary fame) just as Romantic-era science was overturning the concept of stellar permanence and further estranging the stars and constellations from the inhabitants of the earth.

"Stellify" is a poetic word in that it refers to an imaginary process. It is therefore fitting that it arrives in English via poetry, namely the octosyllabic couplets of Chaucer's *The Hous of Fame* (1378–80). In book two, the poet-narrator (styled "Geffrey") fearfully considers one possible fate that may befall him: "Wher Ioves wol me stellifye, / Or what thing may this signifye?" (586–87).[7] What would it signify for a poet to be borne "up, as men rede / To heven" (590–91) though he is neither "Enok, ne Elye, / Ne Romulus, ne Ganymede" (588–89)? Do poets belong among the starry company they have helped immortalize? If brought forward 500 years, this question of legitimacy and signification might be asked of Keats who seeks the very fate that Geffrey fears, and who aspires not to a house of fame, but to the galaxy of poets within which Chaucer had become enshrined.[8]

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the expressions "galaxy of poets," "milky way of poetry" and related variants were used to describe a canonical formation, a corpus collected from across the centuries which was understood in generational terms but stripped of other historical specificities. References to the galaxy of poets were explicit or, more often, implicit, such as when a poet imagined themselves or others "a glorious denizen" of poesy's "wide heaven" (Keats, *Complete Poems* 39). It was an appropriately nebulous concept that suggested, but did not always specify, a chain of

names: Chaucer, Spenser, Sidney, Milton: white male poetic genius transubstantiated.[9] The idea of a galaxy of poets was probably initiated by Jonson's elegy "To the Memory of My Beloved the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare," which entreats its subject to "Shine forth," a "star of poets" (77). Shakespeare's posthumous transformation from the "Sweet Swan of Avon" who had, in life, taken flight "upon the banks of Thames, / That so did take Eliza and our James" into an expansive body, "a constellation" stretching out across the "hemisphere," augurs the way that English nationalism went on to underwrite the aesthetic universalism of the galaxy of poets (71, 73–74, 76, 75).

Keats imagined himself, and has been imagined, as stepping outside of his broken poet's body and into an eternal constellation of poetic achievement. Aboard the *Maria Crowther* bound for Italy, Keats chose to transcribe "Bright star" inside his copy of *The Poetical Works of Shakespeare*, literally entering himself into the English canon under an astral signature. Because Severn's account of Keats's final days memorialized the counterfactual belief that "Bright star" was the last poem that he composed, the sonnet and its central image have circulated as a final poetic declaration. And as the poem is always recalled alongside accounts of Keats's death, the image of a bright star has become tethered to his passing in a way that only reinforces the apotheosis performed in Shelley's elegy *Adonais*. In that text, so central to the mythologizing of Keats, the weak-bodied victim of critical calumny (as described in Shelley's prose preface) is transformed, through rhymed and metered verse, into a firebrand "burning through the inmost veil of Heaven" (55.7).[10] In the final stanza, and amidst imagery hauntingly prophetic—as has often been noted—of Shelley's own drowning, Keats calls to his elegist to join him in the galaxy of poets: "The soul of Adonais, like a star, / Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are" (55.8–9).

These stellar figurations had begun before Keats entered his "posthumous existence" in 1820. Indeed, they appeared at the very beginning of his poetic career. In his review of the 1817 volume, J. H. Reynolds instructed his readers to think about Keats's original talent in terms of a celestial ascendency over other English poets currently in print: "a young man starts suddenly before us, with a genius that is likely to eclipse them all" (qtd. in Cornelius 194). In response, Keats's one-time friend George Felton Mathew stated that he could not "as another critic has injudiciously attempted, roll the name of Byron, Moore, Campbell and Rogers into the milky way of literature" (194). That was not, Mathew hinted, how the metaphor should work: "We do not imagine that the fame of one poet, depends upon the fall of another, or that our morning and our evening stars necessarily eclipse the constellations of the meridian" (203). In "Sleep and Poetry," one of the most significant poems in the collection, Keats attacked the "foppery and barbarism" of a generation of eighteenth-century writers, including Pope (182). They had not, like their English poetic predecessors, made themselves "[h]uge as a planet" able to "roll round / Eternally around a dizzy void" (176–77). They were terrestrial, worldly; they had "sway'd about upon a rocking horse, / And thought it Pegasus" (186–87). While these reproofs scale his expectations of the poetry of others and ambitions for his own, for Mathew, this critique of celebrated names in the English poetic tradition threatened Keats's future stellification: "These lines … levelled at the author of … the Essays and the Satires," he wrote, "will form no sun, no centre of a system; but like the moon exploded from the South Sea, the mere satellite will

revolve only around the head of its own author, and reflect upon him an unchanging face of ridicule and rebuke" (qtd. in Cornelius 206). In defiance of these lines, and in defence of his own glorification of the starry imagination, Keats would go on to write *Endymion*, *Lamia*, the Hyperion poems, "Bright star," and other poems and letters concerned with the stars.

Keats's cosmological poems and in particular, his epics, were interpreted by his contemporaries as attempts in self-fashioning a particular kind of poetic legacy. For example, Brian Bates's evocative reading of the fourteen asterisks added by publishers to the end of *Hyperion: A Fragment* shows that these champions of Keats's verse connected "the potential of Keats's unfinished poem with legends of star poets" and sought to "promote his rising star power in the spectacular light of Apollo's transformation into the sun god of poetry" (268). Some twelve years after Keats's death, John Wilson Croker (whose vicious appraisal of *Endymion* is as well-known as the poem itself) would again disparage the lofty aspirations of Keats's poetry, as well as the whole concept of the galaxy of poets itself. An early review introduced Tennyson, with malicious irony, as "a new prodigy of genius, another and brighter star of the galaxy or milky way of poetry of which the lamented Keats was the harbinger" (81). Tennyson, Shelley and Keats had, like Milton, presumed into "the heavens of heavens" by writing poetry that wove together their understanding of astronomical science and knowledge of cosmological epic (*Paradise Lost* 7.13). The desire to join this tradition for Keats, who occupied a precarious social position, represented a form of self-determination and resistance. It was to transcend the classist or moralizing attacks, worldly bias and pettiness of what Reynolds had called the "Review-shop," and imagine himself into triumph above it all.

References to a galaxy of poets arise alongside the new universal model devised by the modern astronomy that emerged towards the end of the eighteenth century. Shelley, Byron, Smith and Keats were some of the poets educated in this new cosmology. Keats's copy of John Bonnycastle's *An Introduction to Astronomy* (1807) described a firmament of stars indifferent to the inhabitants of the earth. Stars were changeable and so no longer constituting the eternal firmament that had for millennia been thought to embrace the world (298). And, living lives of their own, they were apathetic to human life. "Whoever supposes that they were made only to give a faint glimmering light to the inhabitants of this globe," Bonnycastle explained, "must have a very superficial knowledge of Astronomy … since many of the stars are so far from benefiting us, that they cannot be seen without the use of a telescope" (46). The estrangement had begun in the wake of Galileo, but another blow arrived when, in 1784, William Herschel published a paper that brushed aside thousands of years of stellar cartography and sought to "enforce the necessity of considering the heavens" from a completely different point of view:

> Hitherto the sidereal heavens have … been represented by the concave surface of a sphere, in the centre of which the eye of an observer might be supposed to be placed. It is true, the various magnitudes of the fixed stars even then plainly suggested to us … an expanded firmament of three dimensions; but the observations upon which I am now going to enter still farther illustrate and enforce the necessity of considering the heavens in this point of view … A surface of a globe or map, therefore, will but ill delineate the interior parts of the heavens. (438)

This new firmament of three dimensions could not provide a canvas for the constellations. The celestial sphere was pulled and distorted: the myths, figures, heroes, monsters and symbols were stretched this way and that. It was, perhaps, a desperate reaction, a hopeless attempt to preserve the relation between stars, their stories and the world, but it was within this context that the poets envisioned their own galaxy or milky way encircling the earth.[11] In "The Return to Poetry" (1834), Felicia Hemans imagines being wooed by a "pure majestic star, / Above the poet's world serenely burning" (3–4). It has become, once again, her "true, high quest" to "seek, if ne'er to gain, / The inmost, purest shrine of that august domain" (13–14). This was a "shrine" simultaneously borne out of and dispensing with the findings of contemporary astronomy. The poets aspired to shelter within an eternal and serene sphere of their own making, above the cruelty of the "poet's world." Through a process of self-contradiction, they also used the sublime galactic visions of the chaotic Herschelian cosmology to charge those attempts at epic (such as *Hyperion* and *Prometheus Unbound*) they hoped would gain them entry there.

When Keats wrote "I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death" (*Letters* 1: 394), he voiced an honest self-appraisal of his imaginative powers judged against all he had read in English verse. That Keats was particular about the kind of poets he will be immortalized alongside—that is, English ones—might be considered unnecessarily exacting (given the sweeping immodesty of the statement) or uncharacteristically nationalistic. However, it is possible to see the brand of English nationalism inscribed into Keats's statement as of the ecumenical and universalizing kind if we consider this statement as a reflection of his desire (expressed less ambiguously elsewhere in his letters and poetry) to be among the galaxy of poets. The Eurocentric universalism inscribed into the poet-galaxy figuration culminated in an expansionist claim for Keats and his contemporaries: a claim aligned with, and enabling, the cultural hegemonies of colonialism.[12] In a 1911 article published in the *Westminster Review*, entitled "The Poetry of the South United States," the English Milky Way of poetry can be seen to spiral out, spreading its arms and encircling colonized lands:

> It is an ennobling thought with most Americans, putting us in spiritual contact with the mother country, that a common ancestry can claim many of England's greatest names … the long ages of ancestral honour that lie before even the discovery of America, are ours as well as England's … Chaucer, Spenser, Philip Sidney—many are the names in that ancient galaxy of poets to which we offer the homage due parents from sons. (Morrison 61)

Such anglo supremacist treatments of Keats's aspiration to ascend to the "galaxy of poets" present one unquestionably negative legacy of his self-figuration. In reflecting his poetic achievements in what he himself knew was a now retrograde figure of the cosmos, Keats both obscured his knowledge of Herschelian cosmology and soldered his image to a self-limiting universalism at odds with the substance of his poetic corpus. And there have been, perhaps, further negative consequences to this envisioning of the poet's distance from the world at such interstellar extremes. It may also have shaped Western cynicism about poetry's generative power. As scribblers in the stars, poets thinking and writing in and about our world—both in a past time, as well as now—continue to be perceived as abstracted and estranged, *out there* in an unearthly galaxy far, far away.

## The stellar event of verse: Mallarmé's constellation

Yet Keats's intervention was not without poetic consequences. For if his stellar success was partially due both to his scientific obscurantism and a covert colonizing impulse, perhaps it would be possible for subsequent poets to avoid both these pitfalls. But how? Perhaps by accepting in full the ontological and epistemological authority of the new sciences? Stéphane Mallarmé's 1897 work *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* provides us with one privileged opportunity to answer this question (*Collected Poems* 119–45). There are few constellations in European poetry more famous than the one that unexpectedly arises on the final page of what would turn out to be Mallarmé's final text. Yet Mallarmé's constellation in fact marked a rupture in the tradition we have so far studied, for rather than deploy such a cosmological image to contest the new sciences' attempts to mathematize an infinite, contingent and material universe, Mallarmé used his constellation to analogize a new kind of poetry, one that consciously affirms itself as a pure exception.[13] While writing in a distinct national tradition, Mallarmé's innovation represents a properly epistemological break, and not merely a linguistic one. As an English teacher by trade, Mallarmé was intimately familiar with Milton's and Keats's poetry (as Weinfeld notes in Mallarmé's *Collected Poems* 150).[14] In one veiled and ironic reference to *Paradise Lost*, Mallarmé describes the reader of modern poetry, still steeped in a pre-Galilean cosmology, as a "civilised inhabitant of Eden"; such a reader, he writes in *Music and Letters*, is "entirely oblivious … of the contemporary intellectual burden" that the sciences place on the poet's shoulders (*Divagations* 187). Yet if the poet is to accept the full implications of technoscientific "civilisation," then they must leave Eden (where, as Milton's Raphael proclaims, "the earth, the air / Resounded" and "The heavens and all the constellations rung" [7.560–62]) and think through all of the consequences for poetry of "hyperscientific modernity" (*Mallarmé in Prose* 76).

To see how Mallarmé does this, in this final section we offer a close reading of certain key passages from the final page of Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés*, focusing on the way that Mallarmé describes and poetically enacts his novel constellation. If this section adopts a more formal and less historical approach than the previous sections, then it is for eminently historical reasons: for poetry to properly mark its extra-scientific status, in a context of the undisputed authority of the new sciences, it must close the gap as much as possible between its singular formal resources and the message it conveys—as opposed to contesting the claims of science at a logical or thematic level alone.

The place to begin is with Mallarmé seeming to express the same kind of melancholy that Donne had already felt three centuries prior. For just after the phrase "UNE CONSTELLATION" ["A CONSTELLATION"] appears on *Un Coup de dés*' final page, Mallarmé writes that his constellation is "froide d'oubli et de désuétude" ["cold from forgetfulness and desuetude"] (*Collected Poems* 145).[15] As with Donne, the stars' "Element of fire" has been "quite put out," this time by the fact that constellations are no longer of any use in celestial navigation (for colonial ends, or otherwise) or in any fancy of astrological prediction (237). The rhyme and meter of this line reinforce its elegiac tone and message: it is a beautifully-balanced decasyllable, with four [d] sounds situated on the second and third syllables of each of the line's two hemistichs, and with the line as a whole completed by a fifth and final [d] sound. In a work made up

for the most part of dispersed textual segments of varying lengths, conventional structures of verse return here to suggest that both poetry and constellations belong to the same bygone era.

Yet Mallarmé immediately places a limit on this sense of melancholy: he asserts that as much as the constellation might have fallen into disuse, it still retains a certain power, one that his poem will now define and then enact. As he writes, while the constellation may well be "cold from forgetfulness and desuetude," it is neither so cold nor so forgotten that it does not "énum[érer] / sur quelque surface vacante et supérieure / le heurt successif / sidéralement / d'un compte total en formation." [number / on some vacant and superior surface / the successive shock / in the way of stars / of a total count in the making.] (145). In contrast to the majority of textual segments in *Un Coup de dés*, which are replete with elisions and inversions, these lines have a real grammatical fluidity to them: each segment follows logically from the one prior, and each finds its completion in a subsequent segment. This plays out at the level of grammar in the notion of a "successive" summation of uniform units, which promise to culminate in a "total count"—a well-formed piece of language (145). What is also striking about these lines is their repetition of four five-syllable segments ("le heurt su-cce-ssif," "si-dé-ra-le-ment," "d'un com-pte to-tal," and "en for-ma-ti-on") as well as the appearance of three instances of weak terminal rhyme: "tant," "sidéralement" and "formation." These echoes of traditional verse reinforce the regularity of the grammar, while preparing the reader for the intense concentration of poetic effects that is to come.

If this last section described the constellation, then the next section sees a veritable *enactment* of Mallarmé's constellation, which is thereby rendered indistinct from the textual means by which it is designated. We first find no fewer than five present participles in a row, with the last two linked by a conjunction, which reinforces the grammatical regularity of this section: "veillant / doutant / roulant / brillant et méditant" ["keeping vigil / doubting / rolling / shining and meditating"] (145). These verbs enact the successive illumination of the constellation's word-stars, of which the sequence above had spoken. That the "count in formation" they perform is made up of uniform units is underscored by the repetition of the same verbal form, as well as by the rhyme that this repeated form produces.

What is most important here, however, is that when these verbs are joined to elements of the following segments, two alexandrines are created: "vei-llant dou-tant rou-lant bri-llant et mé-di-tant / a-vant de s'a-rrê-ter à quel-que point der-nier" ["keeping vigil / doubting / rolling / shining and meditating / before coming to a halt / at some terminus that sanctifies it"].[16] That these latent alexandrines end with the word "dernier" ["last"] closes the gap as much as possible between the description of the constellation on the one hand and its enactment on the page on the other. The "total count" that Mallarmé refers to can then be understood as nothing less than the syllable count of these two latent alexandrines. This allows us to establish an equivalence between the mode of existence of a constellation and the mode of existence of a verse: just as an earthbound observer traces a line between individual stars in order to constitute a visual form, so does the reader join together individual words to produce a line of verse. What distinguishes these statements from the older thesis of a play of correspondences between the rhythms of the world and the movements of the stars is that in Mallarmé's universe, neither verse nor constellations

exist as modes of what really is: a constellation is a fiction as it draws together into the unity of a form the infinite dispersion of stars; a verse is a fiction as it conjoins scattered fragments of discourse that contain no immanent guarantee that they belong with one another.[17] Such an insistently fictive correspondence (one could say: such a constellative mode of correspondence) entails that Mallarmé's verse can never be consecrated as the earthly incarnation of a transcendent form. This is why the words "qui le sacre" ["that sanctifies it"] are found *outside* of the two latent alexandrines: their exteriority marks the gap between the effective performance of these lines of verse and the description of the powers imputed to them (145).

In *Un Coup de dés*, verse, like a constellation, exists only as an exception to what is; indeed, its existence remains forever marked by a "perhaps," as in the phrase: "RIEN / N'AURA EU LIEU / QUE LE LIEU / EXCÉPTÉ / PEUT-ÊTRE / UNE CONSTELLATION" [NOTHING / WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE / BUT THE PLACE / EXCEPT / PERHAPS / A CONSTELLATION] (143, 145). The doubt implied by the term "perhaps" here is distinct both from Donne's doubt ("A new Philosophy calls all in doubt") as well as from the epistemic services that doubt performs in modern experimental sciences. Mallarmé's doubt is neither paralyzing like Donne's, nor is it productive in quite the same way as it is for the sciences. For while nothing guarantees that the words making up the two alexandrines cited above do in fact constitute two lines of verse (there is no body of knowledge that can justify our decision to read them in this way) we can still authorize ourselves to produce these verses by way of a radical *decision*. In doing so we don't discover anything about the universe as the sciences might, but nor are we condemned to ruminate endlessly on the same loss, as Donne feared we were. Rather, we engage in an act of absolute creation whereby poetry, freed at last from its struggle for recognition with and from the sciences, finally becomes wholly *self-authorizing*. It thereby also transcends the Romantic figure of the poet-genius. Consider the contrast between *Un Coup de dés* and another poem where a dice throw also figures alongside a treacherous sea voyage. Unlike in Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Mallarmé's poet-captain is definitively dead. The stars that once spun above him no longer punctuate a tale of sin and redemption, but stand alone on "some vacant and superior surface": a poem with neither author nor moral (145). Thus, to return to Keats, if Keats had been compelled to write himself as a poet into the heavens, Mallarmé's constellation, like his poetry, radically constitutes itself, for itself.

## Conclusion

*Un Coup de dés* offers liberation to the poet from the exertions of epistemic struggle. It marks, in a certain sense, a return to the imaginative audacity that produced the opening lines of Thomas Morley's canzonet, which defy all astronomical explanation: "You blacke bright starres, that shine while daylight lasteth / Ah why hast you away when night time hasteth?" Morley's stars, like those of Mallarmé, operate on purely aesthetic and symbolic terms. They are in many ways the opposite of stars: they are black, they flee the night. The shift that has occurred between Morley's time and our own has not simply been towards an ever-deepening divide between the imagined and the real. How then, can we understand it?

Most of us live in a world without stars. Western culture's dominant view of the necessity of stars and our interest in their relation to the world is every night evident from populated places on the Earth. The social environment produced in the long modernity of the past four centuries is one in which starlight has progressively become almost invisible. The electrifying conurbation of earthly lights proceeded, effacing the constellations above and was accompanied by elegies for the stars written by the modernist poets who followed Mallarmé's epistemic break. W. H. Auden remarked that the "stars are dead" ("Spain 1937" 93) and the "stars are not wanted now" ("Stop all the clocks" 13); Hart Crane reported that "There are no stars to-night / But those of memory" ("My Grandmother's Love Letters" 1–2); and when he sought refuge from the world, T. E. Hulme sheltered not in the galaxy of poets but in the "old star-eaten blanket of the sky" ("The Embankment" 6). For post-Romantic poetry it was a case of the stars down to earth indeed.

In the movement from Milton to Keats to Mallarmé, poetry's relation to the stars undergoes a number of essential changes. For Milton, the new sciences dealt only with appearances. As such, and unlike poetry, they were incapable of accessing the truth of God's universe, which was God's own creative power. Yet Milton's sole mode of access to this power was via his poetry's radical negations, emblematized by his muse Not-Urania. This raised the question of whether God's power was but an ever-receding horizon for Milton, as opposed to an effective force like the forces described by modern physics. For Keats, despite being conscious of the de-anthropomorphizing power of the new sciences, the stars remained the most appropriate figure for representing the pantheon of great English poets. The gesture through which he sought to figure his immortality enlisted an outmoded epistemic image—that of a cohesive vision of the cosmos too easily co-opted by colonial universalism. For Mallarmé, finally, poetry came to be identified with the realm of appearances as such.

Indeed, Mallarmé went further and severed this poetic realm from any relation to reality whatsoever, even a dissimulating one. For Mallarmé, reality was now the undisputed province of the sciences, relative to which poetry was a pure exception. In the same stroke, he cut the thread that ties poetry to the past: as we have shown, each time a verse is produced in *Un Coup de dés* it is through an act that has firm grounding in neither knowledge nor tradition. Where the history of poetry's relation to the new sciences seems often to have been one of anxious competitiveness (where it hasn't devolved into strategic ignorance), with Mallarmé it reaches a limit-point whereby poetry becomes purely self-referential or self-grounding. If this result was achieved in a context where the new sciences remained a determining point of reference, as indeed they were for Mallarmé, then it was arguably because, in seeing itself in the broken mirror of the cosmos, such as the new sciences had shattered it, poetry had to turn back on itself and fix for the first time what its properly modern poetic essence might be. Scribbling over a heavens darkened by the lights of modernity, poetry, in its formal constructions of cycle and epicycle, was at least in this sense equivalent, orb in orb, to the true fictions of science.

## Notes

1. Our sincere thanks to Andy Howell (Las Cumbres Observatory, University of California, Santa Barbara) for advising on Morley's context and for his incisive evaluation of the

text, which has informed this essay's reading. Thanks also to Duane Hamacher (University of Melbourne) for his expertise and assistance.

2. See Tita Chico's *The Experimental Imagination*, which presents, perhaps, a more optimistic view of the rejoinder to this threat.
3. Our phrasing here has been suggested by Thomas H. Ford's account of Whewell's coining of the term "scientist." This was, according to Ford, part of a "project of epistemological connection" which "offered an impossible vision, at once from inside and outside, of the modern universe of knowledge" (116).
4. Although the scholarship on this issue is now immense, see Clemens's "Galileo's telescope" for two main reasons here: the first is that it provides bibliographic details of most of the major positions on Milton and science to that date; the second is that it provides more detail than is available here of some of Milton's key rhetorical strategies regarding science.
5. It is striking how often interpreters seem to see Galileo as an essentially positive figure for Milton and his poem, even if the latter is held to quibble with some of the former's terminology and practice. See, for example, Danielson, especially chapters four and five.
6. This is why Lacan remarks that

> What is crucial, as some people have noticed, is not Copernicus, but more specifically Kepler, due to the fact that in his work it does not turn in the same way—it turns in an ellipse, and that already throws into question the function of the center. That toward which it falls in Kepler's work is a point of the ellipse that is called a focus, and in the symmetrical point there is nothing. (43)

7. See also Swinford (45).
8. Use of the word "star" to describe a "celebrity"—a term also first recorded in Chaucer—is a related phenomenon. But the Hollywood star is clearly a derivative of eighteenth-century English stage reviews and advertisements, as well as society notices, which used "star" to describe the brilliance of certain actors or public figures. See, for example, *The True Briton* (22 Feb. 1797): 4a.
9. Here we follow Karen Swann, who posits that to be "among the English poets" entails "stepping into a place that already awaits one's appearance—that is, into culturally salient structures of expectancy" and to be "one in a series" (16) like a star—we argue—in a chain or cluster of stars.
10. See Brian Bates who in this journal recently argued that Shelley closes his poem "by fashioning himself as the next young poet aspiring towards a place in the stars with Keats" (272). In *Adonais*, as Bates notes, Shelley joins Keats with "other star poets who tragically died young before achieving fame, such as Chatterton and Sir Philip Sidney, as well as an established triumvirate of aged giants: Homer, Dante and Milton" (272).
11. The figure of the galaxy of poets, we suggest, is envisioned as an eternal firmament or outdated "concave surface of a sphere" (Herschel 438). The poets are, in this way, bodies replacing the obsolete star-culture of the encircling constellations. Romantic poets do not often imagine themselves into the nebulous galaxies described by Herschel and his fellow cosmologists (though these visions do often infuse their poetry and inform their aesthetic theory). In an important essay Devin M. Garofalo posits that, unlike "the form of the sphere," references to nebulae as "gossamer celestial objects that possess no outline" in fact "turn the workings of analogy haywire … Pushed to the point of failure," Garofalo argues, "analogy inadvertently discerns and asserts a world whose pluriversal configurations of human and nonhuman might inform anti- and decolonial projects" (583).
12. See Wiegand Brothers for analysis of Keats, astronomy and colonialism (89–141). For a discussion of whether the colonial figure Cortez and the planet-discovering astronomer operate as metaphorical equivalents or contrasts in Keats's famous sonnet, see Hasted's "Chapman's Homer."
13. For the best treatment of the relation between Mallarmé's constellation and the universe as definitively described by modern science, see the work of Jean-Claude Milner, from whom

we take some of our bearings. See in particular Milner's "The Tell-Tale Constellations" and Boncardo and Milner's "Un seul nombre."

14. See also Milner (35).
15. Throughout this section, we will use Henry Weinfield's superb translation of *Un Coup de Dés* (144).
16. For an analysis of this and other instances of latent meters in *Un Coup de dés*, albeit one that does not draw the same conclusions as ours, see Murat.
17. Milner reaches a similar conclusion, but without grounding his thesis in an analysis of the poem's meter.

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