

§ 5 A Poetic Dialectic: Labîd ben Rabi'a
and Mallarmé

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I do not have much faith in comparative literature. But I believe in the universality of great poems, even when they are presented in the almost invariably disastrous approximation that translation represents. "Comparison" can serve as a sort of experimental verification of this universality.

My own comparison concerns a poem in Arabic and a poem in French. It forced itself upon me once I discovered the Arabic poem—late, much too late, for reasons to which I've already alluded. These two poems speak to me of a proximity in thought that, as it were, is simultaneously muted and animated by the immensity of the gap that separates them.

The French poem is Mallarmé's *Coup de dés*. Let us briefly recall what we are witness to in this poem: Upon an anonymous maritime surface, an old Master mockingly shakes his hand, cupped over dice, hesitating before the throw for so long that it seems as if he'll be swallowed up before the gesture will have been decided. Then, Mallarmé says:

Nothing, of the memorable crisis-wherein the event might have been accomplished in view of all null human results, will have taken place (an ordinary elevation pours out absence) but the place, some nondescript splashing below as if to disperse the empty act abruptly that otherwise by its falsehood would have founded perdition in these indeterminate latitudes where all reality dissolves.¹

Nevertheless, on the last page of the poem, there arises in the sky a Constellation, which is like the celestial figure or cipher for what (down here) will have never been decided.

The poem in Arabic is one of the so-called pre-Islamic odes, a *mu'allaha* attributed to Labîd ben Rabi'a. This poem too is born in the recognition

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of a radical collapse. From its very first verse, it proclaims: "Effaced, the encampments of days past and days to come."² The poem is born once the return of the storyteller to the encampment meets with nothing but the return of the desert. Here, too, the bareness of the place seems to have swallowed up all existence, whether real or symbolic, that was supposed to have once inhabited it. "Vestiges! All have fled! Empty, forsaken, the land!" the poet says. And: "Places once full, bare places, relinquished at dawn, / Useless ditches, abandoned tow."

But, through a very subtle dialectic that I will refrain from reconstructing, in which the animals of the desert play a central metaphorical role, the poem will move toward the eulogy of the lineage and the clan. It will end by eliciting the figure of the master of choice and of law presented as the one for whom the initial void was destined.

Always, we see the assembled clans call upon
One of us, who cuts talk short and imposes his views,
He vouches the right of those from the tribe,
Sharing out, diminishing or augmenting, he is the sole master
Of choices. Good, and urging all others to be so,
Clement, he harvests the rarest of virtues.

In Mallarmé, there is the master's impossibility of choosing, the fact that, as the poem says: "The Master hesitates, corpse by the arm separated from the secret it withholds, rather than play as a hoary maniac the game in the name of the waves."³ It is from this hesitation that first arises the menace that nothing has taken place but the place, followed by the stellar figure.

For Labîd ben Rabi'a, one begins from the bare place, from absence, from the desert vanishing. One then draws from this beginning the power to evoke a master whose virtue is that of the just choice, of the decision that all can accept.

These two poems are separated by thirteen centuries. For the one, the context is the bourgeois salons of imperial France, for the other, the nomadism of the high civilizations of the Arabian desert. Their languages share no ancestry, not even a distant one. The gap between them is almost devoid of concept.

And yet! Let us agree for a moment that for Mallarmé the Constellation arising unpredictably after the master's shipwreck is a symbol of what he calls the Idea or truth. Let us also agree that the existence of a just master,

who, as the poet says, knows how to provide humans with security, how to confer abundance and longevity upon everyone's share, how to "build for us a lofty home"—yes, let us indeed agree that such a master is also what a people is capable of when it comes to justice and truth. We can then see that the two poems, in and by their gap without measure, both speak to us of a unique and singular question, to wit: What are the relations between the place, the master, and truth? Why must the place be the place of an absence (or the bare place, which is nothing but the taking place of the place), for one to be able to pronounce upon the precise adjustment of justice (or truth) to the destiny of the master that sustains it?

The poem of the nomad faced with the abolished encampment and the poem of the Western man of letters constructing the chimera of an eternal dice throw upon the ocean fill their immense gap as they converge on the question that haunts them both: The master of truth must traverse the defection of the place for which, or on the basis of which, there is truth. The poem must be wagered in the closest proximity possible to the absolute revenge exacted by the indifference of the universe. The master can confer a poetic chance upon a truth only at the point where (perhaps) there is nothing but the desert, nothing but the abyss. Where nothing has taken or will take place. This is tantamount to saying that the master must risk the poem exactly at the point where a resort to the poem seems to have vanished. This is what the ode of Labîd ben Rabi'a says with extraordinary precision. In this ode, the vanished encampment is indeed compared to a "writing eroded by the secret of the stone." A direct correspondence is established between the last traces of the camp and a text written upon the sand:

Of the camp there remains a design bared by the waters,
Like a text whose lines the pen has reawakened.

The poet even declares that the poetic call directed at this absence cannot really find its proper language:

What good is it to call upon
A deaf eternity, with an indistinct language?

It is therefore entirely clear that the ordeal of absence and of the bare place is at the same time that of a probable effacement of the text or the poem. Sand and rain will dissolve and delete everything.

absence
desert
|
nothing
|
taking place

In very similar terms, Mallarmé evokes "these latitudes of indeterminate waves in which all reality dissolves," and since it is a question of the master, the near certainty of a "shipwreck pertaining to man without vessel no matter where vain."⁴

Our double-edged question thus gains in precision: If the defection of the place is the same thing as the defection of language, what is the paradoxical experience that links this defection to the poetic couple of the master and truth?

We possess two versions, or articulations, of this question, one in the French poem, the other in the Arabic ode.

For Labîd ben Rabi'a, the desert experience of the abolished encampment, together with the impotence of language, leads to a restitution of the master—we could almost say to his invocation. It does this in two stages. First, in a nostalgic moment supported by the figure of the Woman—the sole reverie that can measure up both to absence and to the traces that the sand and the rain efface like a text.

Your nostalgia again sees the women leaving,
The palanquins, cotton shelters, curtains,
Fluttering up there, the fine trimmings
On the wooden cradle the shadows envelop.

Then, in a second moment, we witness a long reconstitution of energy, passing through the evocation of the nomad's racing beasts (camel or mare), as well as of the wild creatures they resemble (lions and wolves). It is as though the tribe's coat of arms were to be drawn up on the basis of this evoked energy.

Justice and the master will come to dwell at the heart of this coat of arms. The poetic path of thinking goes from the void to desiring nostalgia, from desire to the energy of movement, from energy to the coat of arms, and from the coat of arms to the master. In the beginning, this thinking situates within the Open the retreat of all things; but it then opens the retreat itself. This is both because things, evoked in their absence, possess an unprecedented poetic energy, and because the master comes to stamp his seal upon this liberated energy. Truth is therefore what a desire is capable of asserting, once it has inhabited and confronted the anxiety of disappearance.

Mallarmé's poem articulates the question otherwise. The empty place is haunted by the traces of a shipwreck, and the master himself has already

been half swallowed up. Unlike in the ode, the master is not a witness looking upon absence. Instead, he is taken up or seized by disappearance. As I have already noted, the master hesitates to throw the dice and comes to equate gesture with nongesture. It is then that Truth arises, like an ideal dice throw inscribed in the nocturnal sky. We should doubtless say the following: It is the retreat of all things, including the Master, that comes first. For the Open to come, the retreat must be such that to act or not to act, to throw or not to throw the dice, amount to equivalent arrangements. This is nothing short of the abolition of all mastery, for, as the ode states in an exemplary manner, a master is one who is the sole master of choice. For Mallarmé, the function of the master is to make choice and non-choice equivalent. In this way, the master supports the bareness of place to the very end. And truth arises, in total anonymity, over the deserted place.

To sum up, we could draw the following provisional conclusions:

1. There is no possible truth save under the condition of a crossing of the place of truth, conceived here as a null, absented, and deserted place. Every truth is imperiled by the possibility that there may be nothing besides the indifferent place, the sand, the rain, the ocean, the abyss.
2. The subject of poetic saying is the subject of this ordeal or peril.
3. The subject can be either the witness of the abolition—the one who returns where all has disappeared—or its transitory survivor.
4. If the subject is the witness of the abolition, he will force language to come alive on the basis of the void—that is, on the basis of the impotence of language—until it arouses the intense figure of the master that he will thereby have become.
5. If the subject is the survivor of the abolition, he will endeavor to make it so that action and nonaction are undecidable, or so that, within the subject, being becomes strictly identical to nonbeing. Only then will the Idea come, anonymous.
6. Thus there appear to be two possible responses to our question concerning the link between the place, the master, and truth:
 - Truth results from the fact that the place—the ordeal of absence and void—first nostalgically and then actively arouses the fiction of a master that would be capable of truth.

—Truth results from the disappearance of the master into the anonymity of the empty place. In brief, the master has sacrificed himself so that truth may be.

After
"place with no
life" *
bareness

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In the first case, the void of the place and the experience of anxiety create a conjunction of the master and truth.

In the second case, the void of the place creates a disjunction between the master and truth: The former disappears into the abyss, while the latter, having become absolutely impersonal, arises, as it were, above this disappearance.

We could say that the force of the second path, that of Mallarmé, lies precisely in separating truth from any particularity ascribable to the master. It is, to speak like a psychoanalyst, a truth without transference.

But this truth entails a twofold weakness.

—A subjective weakness, because we are dealing with a doctrine of sacrifice. All things considered, the master remains a Christian one. He must disappear so that truth may arise. But is a sacrificial master what we require?

—An ontological weakness, because ultimately there are two stages, two registers of being. There is the oceanic, abyssal, and neutral place where the master's gesture is wrecked. And then, above it, there is the sky in which the Constellation emerges, and which is, as Mallarmé's says, "on high perhaps, as far as place can fuse with the beyond."⁵ In other words, Mallarmé maintains an ontological dualism, together with something akin to a Platonic transcendence of truth.

Turning to the poem of Labîd ben Rabi'a, we find its philosophical strengths and weaknesses distributed in a completely different way.

The great strength of this poem lies in rigorously maintaining a principle of immanence. The just master's power of incitement, dwelling at the heart of the coat of arms, is poetically constituted starting from the void place. It is a way of unfolding this "worn writing," this "text whose lines the pen has reawakened," which is experienced by the poet upon returning to the abandoned encampment. We will never have a second stage, another register of being. We will never possess a transcendent exteriority. As the poem says, even the master is "one of us," he does not lie beyond, he is not Mallarmé's Constellation.

Besides, this master is in no respect a sacrificial or paleo-Christian one. On the contrary, he is installed in the just measure of earthly qualities. He is goodness and clemency. Even better, he "regulates the gifts of nature." Therefore, he is attuned to this donation. Because he is immanent, the master invoked by the ode names the measured attunement of nature and law.

But the difficulty is that truth remains captive to the figure of the master and cannot be separated from it. The happiness of truth is one and the same thing as the obedience to the master. As the poem says: "Be happy with the good deeds of the sovereign master!" But can we be happy with what is shared out to us in accordance with sovereignty? In any case, truth remains linked here to a transference unto the master.

We have finally touched on the core of our problem.

Are we summoned to make a radical choice between two orientations of thought? The one, disjoining truth and mastery, would demand transcendence and sacrifice. Within this orientation, we could wish for truth without loving the master, but this wish would have to inscribe itself beyond the Earth, in a place indexed by death. The other orientation would demand of us neither sacrifice nor transcendence, but at the cost of an ineluctable conjunction between truth and mastery. In this orientation, we could love truth without leaving the Earth and without conceding anything to death. But we would have to love the master, unconditionally,

It is precisely this choice, and its impossibility, that I call modernity.

On the one hand, we have the universe of science—not in its thinking singularity, but in the power exerted by its technical and financial organization. This universe sets out an anonymous truth that is altogether separate from any personal figure of the master. Save that truth, as it is socially organized by modern capitalism, demands the sacrifice of the Earth. For the mass of consciences, this truth is entirely alien and external. Everyone is acquainted with its effects, but no one controls its source. In its capitalistic and technical organization, science is a transcendent power to which both time and space must be sacrificed.

Of course, the technical and financial organization of science is accompanied by modern democracy. But what is modern democracy? Simply the following: No one is obliged to love a master. It is not mandatory, for example, that I love Chirac or Jospin. In truth, no one loves them, everybody mocks and derides them publicly. That's democracy. But, on the other hand, I must absolutely obey the capitalistic and technical organization of science. The laws of the market and its goods, the laws of the circulation of capital, are an impersonal power that leave you no free perspective, no genuine choice. There is only one politics, or, as they say, "there is no alternative." Like Mallarmé's master, I must sacrifice all mastery of choice so that scientific truth, in its technical and capitalistic socialization, will follow its transcendent course.

On the other hand, wherever this scientific, capitalistic, and democratic modernity is rejected, there must be a master, and it will be mandatory to love him. This is what lay at the heart of the great Marxist and communist enterprise: It wanted to crush the capitalistic organization of science. It wanted scientific truth to be immanent, controlled by all, shared in popular power. It wanted truth to be entirely terrestrial and not to require the sacrifice of choices. It wanted men to choose science and its productive organization, instead of being chosen and determined by it. Communism was the idea of a collective mastery of truths. But what happened everywhere is that the figure of a master reared its head, because truth was no longer separate from mastery. In the end, to love and want truth was tantamount to loving and wanting a master. And if one failed to love the master, there was always terror to remind you of your obligation to love.

We have yet to move on. We are, if I may say so, between Mallarmé and the *mu'allaga*. On the one hand, democracy, which rids us of the love of the master, but subjects us to the sole transcendence of the laws of the market, thereby eliminating every mastery over our collective destiny, any reality in political choice. On the other, the desire for an immanent and willed collective destiny, for a break with the automatism of capital. But we then have terroristic despotism, together with the obligatory love of the master.

"Modernity" means not being able to choose reasonably in what concerns the relation between mastery and truth. Is truth disjoined from the master? If so, we have democracy. But then truth is entirely obscure. It is the transcendent machination of technical and capitalistic organization. Is truth conjoined to the master? But in this case, it becomes a sort of immanent terror, an implacable erotic transference, an immobile fusion that joins subjective trembling to the state's police power. In any case, whether the master is sacrificed to an anonymous power or whether it demands we sacrifice ourselves for the love of him, it is the possibility of choice that vanishes.

I believe thought must take a step back. A step toward what Mallarmé and the pre-Islamic ode have in common, to wit: the desert, the ocean, the bare place, the void. We must recompose, for our time, a thinking of truth that would be articulated onto the void without passing through the figure of the master: Neither through the master sacrificed nor through the master invoked.

Or again: To lay the foundations for a doctrine of choice and deci-

Sacrifice

✓ sion that would not bear the initial form of a mastery upon choice and decision.

This point is essential. There is no authentic truth save under the condition that truth may be chosen. That, at least, is certain. Indeed, it is the reason why philosophy, ever since its inception, has linked truth and freedom. Heidegger himself proposed that the essence of truth is nothing other than freedom. This is indisputable.

But does the choice of truth inevitably take the form of a mastery?

Labîd and Mallarmé both answer "yes." In order to sustain the ordeal of the empty place and of dispossession to its conclusion, a master is needed. The master of the Arabic ode chooses a natural and distributive truth. Mallarmé's master shows that choice itself must be sacrificed, that we must experiment with the equivalence of choice and nonchoice. Only ✓ then will an impersonal truth arise. Our situation in today's democracy is exactly the same: To choose such and such a president is equivalent to not choosing him. This is because, regardless of the choice, politics will remain the same, commanded as it is by the transcendence of the capitalist organization of science, on the one hand, and the aleatory effects of the market, on the other.

But in both cases there is an initial master who makes the decision about the nature of the choice,

I believe the principal challenge faced by contemporary thought is the following: To discover a thinking of choice and of the decision that would go from the void to truth without passing through the figure of the master, that is, without either invoking or sacrificing the master.

From the Arabic ode we must retain the conviction that truth remains immanent to the place: Truth is not external, it is not a transcendent and impersonal force. But we must not invoke a master.

From the French poem, we must retain the conviction that truth is anonymous, that it arises from the void and is separated from the master. ✓ But the master must neither be made absent nor sacrificed.

The entire question can be reformulated as follows: How can truth be thought, at one and the same time, as anonymous (or impersonal) and nevertheless as immanent and terrestrial? In other words, how can one think that truth may be chosen—in the initial ordeal of the void and the bare place—without either having to become the master of this choice or entrusting the choice to a master?

My philosophy, which assumes the poem as one of its conditions, tries

to answer these questions. Let me now indicate some themes whose consideration I think necessary if we are to resolve our problem.

a) *The* truth does not exist, only truths—the plural is crucial. One will therefore assume the irreducible multiplicity of truths.

b) Each truth is a process, and not a judgment or a state of affairs. This process is de jure infinite, or uncompletable.

c) One will call "subject of a truth" every finite moment within the infinite process of this truth. This means that the subject has no mastery over truth and is at the same time immanent to it.

d) Every process of truth begins with an event. An event is unpredictable and incalculable—it is a supplement of the situation. Every truth, and therefore every subject, depends upon an eventual emergence. A truth and a subject of truth do not derive from what there is, but from what happens, in the strong sense of the term "happens."

e) The event reveals the void of the situation. This is because it shows that what there is now was previously devoid of truth.

It is on the basis of this void that the subject constitutes itself as a fragment of the process of a truth. It is this void that separates it from the situation or the place and inscribes it within an unprecedented trajectory. It is therefore true to say that the ordeal of the void of the place as void ~~of mastery~~ finds the subject of a truth, but this ordeal does not generate any kind of mastery. At the very most, we can say, in an absolutely general fashion, that a subject is the militant of a truth.

f) The choice that binds the subject to a truth is the choice of continuing to be: fidelity to the event, fidelity to the void.

The subject is what chooses to persevere in this self-distance aroused by the revelation of the void. The void that is the very being of the place.

We are thus back at our starting point. For a truth always begins by naming the void, by voicing the poem of the abandoned place. Labîd ben Rabi'a tells us to what a subject is faithful:

Under an isolated tree, up high, on the edge
Of the dunes that the wind scatters into dust,
The evening turns into a cloud of hidden stars.

This is also what Mallarmé tells us:

The Abyss blanched, spread, furious, beneath an incline desperately plane on a wing, its own fallen back in advance from being unable to dress its flight.⁶

* A truth begins with a poem of the void, continues through the choice of continuing, and comes to an end only in the exhaustion of its own infinity. No one is its master, but everyone can come to be inscribed within it. Everyone can say: "No, there is not what there is. There is also what has happened, of whose persistence—here and now—I am the bearer."

Persistence? The poem, forever inscribed and lying stellar upon the page, is its exemplary guardian. But are there not other arts devoting themselves to the fugacity of the event, to its allusive disappearance, to what is *unfixed* in the becoming of the true? Arts subtracted from the *pas* of the master? Arts of mobility and of the "just once"? What are we to say of dance, of these mobile bodies that transport us toward the forgetting of their own weight? What are we to say of cinema, this Deleuzian unwinding of the time-image? What are we to say of theater, in which, night after night, a piece is played, always different but always the same, a piece of which one day—the actors vanished, the sets burned, the director omitted—nothing will remain? It must be said that these are different types of artistic configurations, both more familiar and more pliant than the poem. Moreover, unlike the imperial poem, these configurations *assemble*. Is philosophy as comfortable with these arts of public passage as it is in its link—whether of mortal conflict or allegiance—with the poem?

§ 6 Dance as a Metaphor for Thought

Why does dance dawn on Nietzsche as a compulsory metaphor for thought? It is because dance is what opposes itself to Nietzsche-Zarathustra's great enemy, an enemy he designates as the "Spirit of Gravity." Dance is, first and foremost, the image of a thought subtracted from every spirit of heaviness. It is important to register the *other* images of this subtraction, for they inscribe dance into a compact metaphorical network. Take the bird, for example. As Zarathustra declares: "And especially bird-like is that I am enemy to the Spirit of Gravity."¹ This provides us with a first metaphorical connection between dance and the bird. Let us say that there is a germination, or a dancing birth, of what we could call the bird within the body. More generally, there is in Nietzsche the image of flight. Zarathustra also says: "He who will one day teach men to fly will have moved all boundary-stones; all boundary-stones will themselves fly into the air to him, he will baptize the earth anew—as 'the weight-less.'"² It would really be a very beautiful and judicious definition of dance to say that it is a new name given to the earth. There remains the child. The child "is innocence and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a sport, a self-propelling wheel, a first motion, a sacred Yes."³ This is the third metamorphosis, found at the beginning of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*—after the camel, which is the opposite of dance, and the lion, too violent to be capable of naming as "light" the earth that has begun anew. It should be noted that dance, which is both bird and flight, is also everything that the infant designates. Dance is innocence, because it is a body before the body. It is forgetting, because it is a body that forgets its fetters, its weight. It is a new beginning, because the dancing gesture must always be some-