

# MALLARMÉ, WORD-PAINTER OF COMETS

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**Question:** What is more fascinating than a giant comet?

**Answer:** the *image* of such a comet, when extracted from a matrix-puzzle wherein it was not known to exist.

**Background:** In the November 2001 issue of *Word Ways*, the author published a matrix-puzzle entitled “Transformations of a Text” which was based on an 1894 poem by Mallarmé, the noted French symbolist writer and intellectual.

This matrix consists of 14 double-lines of text in which all the letters have been run together, by removing the spaces that separated them. (Since Mallarmé occupied a very small apartment, it is rumored that he found good use for the extra space(s) he thereby acquired.) Upon inspection, this “run-on” matrix turns out to be basically the same as Mallarmé’s sonnet, *Petit Air I* (Little Tune I), except that the text has been doubled back upon itself—i.e., a backward version of the poem was overlaid atop its forward version (on a line-by-line basis), after the inter-word spaces were removed. The resulting matrix-puzzle is depicted at the end of this article.

**Sketching With Words:** It now appears as though Mallarmé used this matrix as a background or canvas on which to create pictorial and schematic designs, most of which depict spectacular comets of the nineteenth century. In this way, he revised the traditional concept of a poetic image, previously understood as a subjective mental picture, and converted it into a *physically visible drawing* (i.e., a logogram) based on word-fragments in the matrix.

The most recent such portrait to emerge depicts a spectacular comet of March 1843, whose image appears in a contemporary engraving, which Mallarmé apparently used as his source. This comet (a sun-grazer) displayed the longest and straightest tail of any comet in recent memory, which stretched across an enormous expanse of sky like a gigantic billiard cue, or a blackboard pointer. It is estimated that the actual length of the tail exceeded the Earth-Sun distance (93 million miles).

In those days, of course, Paris had not yet become the City of Lights, and so the comet was highly observable after sunset. The view shown in the engraving faces southwest from the Paris Observatory, and includes a highly accurate representation of the comet’s stellar background, consisting mainly of the constellation Orion; for example, one can readily see Orion’s Belt with Rigel directly beneath, just above the comet’s “rod.” At the comet’s far end (the end furthest from the Sun), Sirius appears to be caught in its “beam”, like a deer in a car’s headlights.

**Enter the Matrix:** Now we are ready to find the comet hidden in Mallarmé’s matrix, which will involve turning the matrix on its right side for proper viewing. We begin by connecting, via a ruler or straightedge, three key digrams (pairs of letters) shown in boldface: **oc** (Upper Line 14), **em** (Upper Line 5), and **ét** (Upper Line 2). When these are conjoined, via two parallel lines, the comet’s image begins to emerge (see diagram). These three sequentially-phased digrams were

chosen since they combine to spell *comète*, and since Mallarmé used the same device to represent other comet images hidden in his text.

**Souvenirs d'horizons:** The next step is to draw the comet's horizon line, which is done by comparing Mallarmé's comet against the famous engraving, and placing it in the same attitude; this amounts to rotating the matrix onto its right side. Now, we must locate the Sun, which in the engraving has sunk below the horizon, but toward which the comet directly points. Similarly, in Mallarmé's matrix, the parallel structure we have drawn points to word-fragment *sol* on Lower Line 1, which is just about to set below the horizon; this is because the direction of data flow for the lower line in each line-pair is *toward the right*, while for each upper line it is *toward the left*. Since the comet is composed entirely of upper-line elements, it also means that the comet is *receding from the sun*.

**Half a Head Is Better Than None:** Comet 1843 I, a sun-grazer, displayed certain characteristics typical of this group, including an extremely long tail combined with a relatively small head; Mallarmé summed up this contrast in his line *N'était, très grand trésor et tête si petite* (was not, very great treasure and head so small), which contains nine occurrences of the letter "t". In the matrix, the head is represented by the digram *ét* which, it will be noted, is exactly one-half of *tête*; it is this painstaking attention to detail which provides us with valuable clues that can prove crucial in fathoming Mallarmé's intent.

**The Stellar Background ("Are You Sirius?"):** We begin by locating the three stars in Orion's Belt, represented by three colinear i-dots toward the left of Upper Line 3, Upper Line 4, and Lower Line 5. Directly below (and between) them is Rigel, represented by the second i-dot on Upper Line 4; this originally formed part of the word *oiseau* (bird) on Lower Line 11. Next, we locate Bellatrix, represented by the period that closes the poem's backward version, which can be seen at the upper left corner of the unrotated matrix, or at its upper right corner when turned clockwise. Finally, we are able to locate Sirius, an i-dot in the matrix's lowermost line, which lies at the far left end of the comet's "beam", exactly as in the famous engraving. The arrangement of these six stellar landmarks, as well as that of the comet and the horizon, demonstrates that Mallarmé *consciously imitated* the famous engraving when he devised his matrix's representational scheme.

### Summary and Conclusions:

1. Mallarmé's representational method combines pictorial, schematic and analogic elements with a good measure of wordplay, and often relies on a correspondence with *external artifacts*. This correspondence is never perfect, owing to the inherent limitations of sketching with words, but it is sufficient to *uniquely identify* the entities represented, as well as the historical artifacts associated with them.
2. In addition to Comet 1843 I, the *Petit Air I* matrix contains latent images for several other comets, including Donati's (1858 VI), Tebbutt's (1861 II), and the Great September Comet of 1882 which is portrayed at four stages in its life-cycle.
3. Unknown to his contemporaries, Mallarmé was an expert on comets and was able to view them in both an astronomic and a metaphysical perspective.

We do not know how Mallarmé was able to incorporate all the above-cited images into a single matrix, or how he managed to cram the matrix into a 14-line poem. It wasn't an easy job!

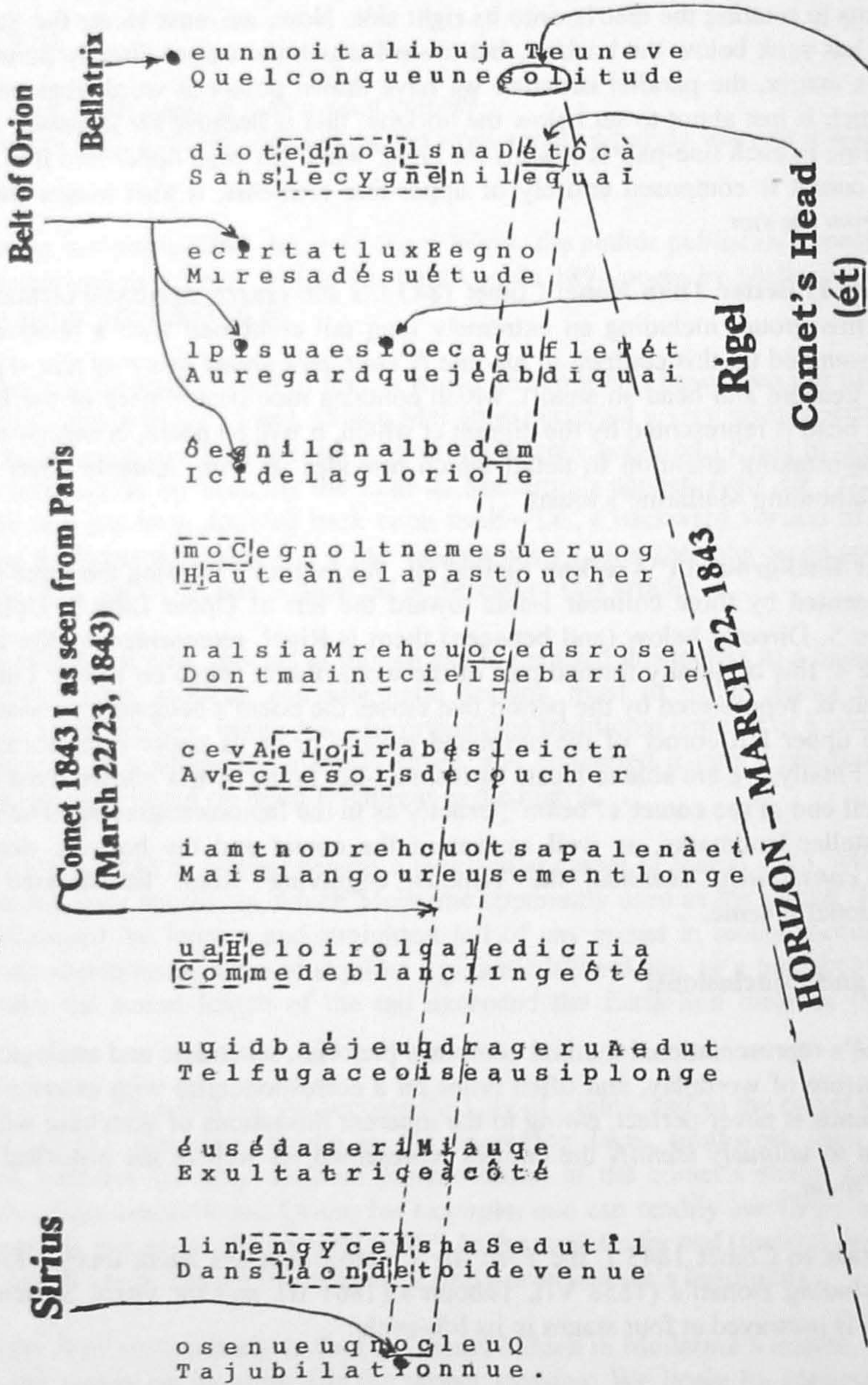
TEXT-REVERSAL MATRIX OVERLAY DIAGRAM ("MOD")

For Mallarmé's Petit Air I (1894)

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Sketching with words: Mallarmé's Matrix-

Diagram replicates a famous engraving



The Sun (sol, in Lower Line 1) is depicted as just about to set (below the HORIZON LINE). Note that the comet's tail properly streams away from sol and toward Sirius.