The genus *Nostoc* (cyanobacteria) is one of five genera in the family *Nostocaceae* of subgroup 4, section *A*, of the oxygenic phototrophic bacteria (5). Descriptions of *Nostoc* species can be traced back more than 200 years before Antonie van Leeuwenhoek described animalcules under his prototype microscope in 1702. To understand why the genus *Nostoc* came to prominence at this time requires the consideration of several facts that have to do with its life cycle. Colonies of many *Nostoc* species, especially *N. commune*, appear in soils as blackened, brittle, nondescript crusts when they are dried, but become conspicuous and swollen as dark blue-green or olive-green masses, with the consistency of firm gelatin, when they are wetted. The extracellular polysaccharide of these organisms is a complex, high-molecular-weight glycain with unique rheological properties (10). The amount of swelling of a rewetted colony is prodigious, and the process occurs extremely rapidly. Anyone who has handled such material is well aware of the often pungent and characteristic earthy smell due principally to trans-1,10-dimethyl-trans-2-decalol, or geosmin (9). Anything that is conspicuous and that has an unusual smell tends to catch people’s attention. The rapid appearance of growths of *N. commune* after thunderstorms led to the common belief during the Middle Ages that such colonies fell from the sky, and these growths were referred to as “Sternschnuppen” (“shooting stars”), “…that which we call a falling star, a kind of gelly or slime found like and through his writings on alchemy and medicine evidently throughout all of the countries of western Europe, where he actively sought out peasants, old wives, and handicraftsmen, knowing that such people often had knowledge well worth acquiring. Paracelsus most certainly had a knowledge of the English and their folk tales, and although he understood and published works in Latin, “he wrote, as he thought, in German, his mother-tongue” (6).

How and why did *Paracelsus* come to invent the word *Nostoch*? One of his especially striking observations provides the clue: “Nostoch... pollution of some plethoricall and wanton Star, or rather excrement blown from the nostrils of some rheumatick planet” (2). This is not the outrageous statement that it may seem; rather, it hides the origin of a word that has, for 500 years, resisted etymological scrutiny. Is not *Nostoch* an ironic play on two words, in true Paracelsian fashion, by an extremely shrewd and very clever man? An Old English word for translation of Chinese literature, and to Noel Krieg for helpful comments.

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